Leading virologists join together to tackle viruses, leukemia and neurologic disorders

June 17, 2014: The Global Virus Network (GVN) announced today the launch of a Task Force on HTLV, Human T-Lymphotropic Virus (HTLV), the world's first known human retrovirus and only known leukemia-causing virus. Experts from 11 countries*, led by Dr. Robert Gallo, GVN co-founder and scientific director and director of the Institute of Human Virology (IHV) at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Dr. Luc Willems (Research Director, National Fund for Scientific Research at University of Liège) and Dr. Hideki Hasegawa (Director, Department of Pathology, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Japan) are leading the Task Force, which met for the first time last month.

"There are no effective vaccines against HTLV, no antiviral drugs to treat infections, and though there are diagnostic tests for the virus none yet can predict which infected person gets disease," said Dr. Gallo who pioneered the field of human retrovirology with his ground-breaking discoveries of HTLV- 1 in 1980 and HTLV-2 in 1982. "This Task Force is critical as the global community works together to address a problem which in many countries is under-recognized and under-appreciated," he continued.

More than 20 million people worldwide are infected with the virus, of which up to 10% will develop debilitating and sometimes deadly disease. HTLV causes an adult T-cell leukemia/ lymphoma (ATL), HTLV-associated myelopathy (HAM), spastic paraparesis, and other rare illnesses. Signs and symptoms of HTLV infection include motor and sensory changes in the extremities, inflammation in the spinal cord, a spastic gait in combination with weakness of the lower limbs, cognitive impairment, bladder dysfunction and bladder cancer. HTLV, similar to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), also co-discovered by Dr. Gallo as the cause of AIDS, is transmitted through sexual contact, from mother to child via breastfeeding, and through exposure to contaminated blood.