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The Desert Locust ravages the Horn of Africa

FAO appeals for scaling up of prevention and control measures to abate crop losses



A scene of the Desert Locust invasion in the Eastern Ethiopia Region @FAO/Mamoon Al Alawi

16 December 2019, Addis Ababa – The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) warns that unless early and sustained measures are taken to control the Desert Locust invasion in Ethiopia and Somalia, the pest will spread to other Eastern African nations, including Djibouti, Eritrea, Kenya, South Sudan and the Sudan.

FAO disclosed that the rapid incursion of the Desert Locust across many regions of Ethiopia has already resulted in significant losses on croplands and jeopardised the livelihoods of smallholder farmers that depend on crops and livestock.

David Phiri, FAO Subregional Coordinator for Eastern Africa and Representative to the African Union and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, warned that the locust is making the bad food security situation worse in the subregion. Its infestation might lead to a considerable drop in agricultural production, and would further exacerbate the existing dire food insecurity and malnutrition in the subregion.

“As the weather seems favourable for the locust breeding, there is a high probability that the locust will continue to breed until March-April 2020, with a high probability of spreading to other Eastern African nations,” said Phiri. “Unless we control the spread, it will greatly affect people and livestock in many parts of the subregion, which is already home to 50 percent of Africa’s food insecure people,” cautioned Phiri.

He finally appealed for development partners to support the ongoing efforts of national governments and relevant institutions, including the [Desert Locust Control Organization for East Africa \(DLCO-EA\)](#), to scale up their operations to prevent the potential disaster.

The Desert Locust situation in the Eastern Africa region remains a serious concern for FAO and national governments, said the Secretary of [FAO’s Commission for Controlling Desert Locust in the Central Region](#), Mamoon Al Alawi, who recently visited the affected areas in the subregion.

“The locust, which migrated from Yemen and Somalia, has swarmed grazing and croplands in Ethiopia, reaching the Afar, Amhara, Dire-Dawa, Oromia, Somali and Tigray regions. There is a high risk that the locust will spread and cause significant impact to neighbouring countries of Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia and the Sudan,” warned Al Alawi.

Country situations and ongoing FAO interventions

Despite major control and prevention operations, substantial crop losses have already occurred in the Amhara and Tigray regions of Ethiopia. The hopper bands – young locust populations moving together – have covered nearly 430 square kilometres and have consumed about 1.3 million metric tonnes of vegetation over a two-month period. The formation of bands is ongoing in the rangelands of the Ethiopian Somali Region; and massive new swarms will arrive from Yemen and Somalia.

In Eritrea, big swarms of immature adults that migrated from Ethiopia, were identified and controlled around Shieb, Gahtielay, Wengebo and Beareze of the Northern Red Sea Coast. Moreover, the swarms of Tree Locust have been detected in Tserona, Mai-seraw, Quatit and Digsa districts of Southern Eritrea.

The Locust has affected thousands of hectares of land in Somaliland, Puntland and Galmudug. Given the current favourable ecological conditions, another generation of the Desert Locust will likely affect the region in 2020. In order to avert this situation, FAO is closely working with the Federal Government of Somalia and partner organizations to embark on major operations of aerial and ground spraying.

The Desert Locust Control Organization for Eastern Africa (DLCO-EA), noted that given the current desert locust situation in the Eastern Africa region, urgent and decisive action is required from all partners. They also indicated that resources must be availed to support large-scale ground surveys, aerial spraying services, provision of chemicals, information dissemination, and further capacity building for control operations.

About Desert Locust

The Desert Locust is the most dangerous of the nearly one dozen species of locusts. It is normally present in the desert areas across 20 countries between West Africa and India, covering nearly 16 million square kilometres. Green vegetation and moist sandy soils are favoured for breeding. A typical desert locust swarm can contain up to 150 million locusts per square kilometre. Swarms migrate with the wind and can cover 100 to 150 kilometres in a day. An average swarm can destroy as much food in a day as is sufficient to feed 2,500 people.

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