

# Locusts threaten food supplies in North West Africa

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A plague of locusts is affecting a wide area of the Sahel region of North West Africa. The countries most affected are Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Niger, but recently the threat has spread towards southern areas of Algeria, Burkina Faso and has affected some of the Cape Verde islands over 500 kilometres off the Senegal/Mauritania coast.

A warning that such a plague was a possibility was sounded in June this year. Swarms of locusts were then being reported in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Spain had sent insecticide-spraying planes to Morocco at that time because it feared the possibility of swarms making their way to Europe over the Mediterranean.

According to United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) expert Clive Elliott, this was a remote risk. However, he predicted that it was possible the locusts could survive and move back to the Sahel area later in the year. He said that if summer rains arrived in the breeding grounds, "We would expect that by the end of 2004 that a full-blown plague will have developed."

This has now happened. A heavier than usual rainy season in 2003 in the Sahel and northern Africa led to a population boom of the locusts. There were locust plagues in the 1940s and 1950s which lasted 10 years or more and affected 65 countries. The last African plague, affecting 40 countries, lasted from 1986 to 1989.

Locusts are about six centimetres long and weigh around two grammes. Normally they are solitary, green-coloured and avoid contact with each other. But if food becomes abundant, their numbers increase rapidly and they cannot avoid contact. A switch occurs in the locusts; they become black and yellow in colour and begin to swarm. According to Professor Stephen Simpson of Oxford University, this swarming

behaviour is induced in new offspring by a chemical being added to the foam that surrounds newly laid eggs. This behaviour switch and exponential rise in numbers leads to the plagues currently being seen.

According to Professor Simpson a swarm of locusts can consume in a day the amount of food consumed by the inhabitants of London in a week. It is estimated that so far four million hectares of land have been infected by the locusts—with Mauritania accounting for half of the area affected.

Swarms of locusts are on the move. One in Mauritania this week was reported to be 70 kilometres in length. Swarms have hit the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, three times. Whilst they are merely a nuisance in the city, getting in people's hair, 80 percent of Mauritanians' livelihoods depend on the land. In the south of the country entire harvests have been wiped out by the locusts.

The FAO are monitoring the situation and report that the locusts are now beginning to move out of the Sahel region, as all available vegetation has been consumed. They are moving westwards. Hopper bands (collections of the larval stage of the locust) have been reported in the north of Burkina Faso and eastern Chad, but swarms will soon begin to develop. Commenting on the situation in Mauritania, an FAO official told the BBC that a new generation of the locusts was maturing, bringing with them the threat of an all out famine.

The FAO, based in Rome, had put out requests for donations to fight the locust swarms, but by mid September had only received US\$4 million. This has now reached nearly US\$15 million, with pledges of a further US\$40 million. The FAO estimates it will need US\$100 million to tackle the locust plague. FAO Director General Jacques Diouf has called for more urgent support. Clive Elliott, an FAO senior officer,

said “more support is urgently needed to protect crops and pasture and extend locust control activities, in particular transport and spraying planes but also helicopters.”

The FAO first warned of the danger of a locust threat in October 2003, but the warnings went unheeded. James Wolfensohn, the World Bank chief, admitted the lack of response, saying, “I personally think we should have been more aggressive on locusts and the world should have been.” The Bank has belatedly advanced US\$12.5 million to the seven countries of the Sahel affected by the locust plague.

Lack of equipment and finance severely limits the response to the locust swarms. In Mali, the traditional methods of smoking out the locust, beating them with sticks and cloth is all that is available. The only technological assistance is the use of suitcase radio transmitters used to inform and coordinate the people in the Timbuktu area of the country. A confidant of the Malian presidency was reported saying, “If the locusts invade the rice paddies, it’s over for the country.”

So far Mauritania has been hardest hit by the locust swarms, with 40 percent of the crops destroyed. It had suffered years of drought, but the good rainfall this year has brought the locusts in its wake. The south has been most affected and the young men had left the countryside to flock to the capital to take up whatever low paid work is available. Most of those living on the land do so as subsistence farmers and attacks by locust swarms leave them with no alternative but to eke out a living in urban areas.

A mayor in the Trarza area of Mauritania told a visiting Oxfam official, “This year we believed our people would be pulled out of the vicious circle of poverty. But then, here we are invaded by uninvited destructive visitors likely to shatter our hopes.”

According to a BBC report, Environment Ministry officials in the south-east area of Mauritania did not have enough money to finance car journeys to investigate initial reports of sightings of the locust swarms.

US-based NGO World Vision reports experts saying that this locust plague could be worse than that of 1987, which led to a US\$300 million loss in food production. It warned that a million people could be left short of food.



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