

Horn of Africa and East Africa face coronavirus and locust swarm

Jean Shaoul
27 March 2020

Just as the coronavirus takes hold in Africa, threatening the impoverished continent's entire population, a serious outbreak of locusts is spreading across parts of East Africa and into the Horn of Africa. The outbreak poses an unprecedented threat to food security in some of the world's most vulnerable countries.

Cases of the coronavirus virus have been reported in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti, with most countries closing their borders, banning international flights, imposing shelter at home orders and lockdown.

As most African countries lack the means to test suspected cases, World Health Organisation (WHO) director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has warned that official numbers are probably an underestimate of the scale of infection. He said, "Probably we have undetected cases or unreported cases. In other countries we have seen how the virus actually accelerates after a certain tipping point, so the best advice for Africa is to prepare for the worst and prepare today."

Endemic poverty, the lack of adequate health infrastructure in working class areas, in the overcrowded shanty towns, slums and the countryside—as well as in the refugee camps (home to 18 million refugees, 26 percent of the world's refugee population), where "social distancing" is an impossibility—and the prevalence of AIDS and tuberculosis together signal a humanitarian catastrophe for the region and the continent as a whole.

This crisis is now magnified by the hugely dangerous increase in locust swarm activity that broke out in January in Kenya, its worst such invasion in 70 years. After periods of exceptionally prolonged and heavy rain following a dry spell, the insects, approximately the length of a finger, fly together in millions to take advantage of the suddenly abundant food supply, devouring crops, destroying grazing plots and threatening food production and local economies. This year's swarm was triggered by the Indian Ocean Dipole, a naturally

occurring but increasingly frequent phenomenon due to climate change that has caused extreme drought in Australia and led to torrential rain in East Africa.

At least one swarm measuring 60km (37 miles) long and 40km (25 miles) wide in Kenya's northeast—three times the size of New York City—has been reported.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), desert locusts, the most dangerous of locust species, can, with the aid of the wind, travel up to 150km (95 miles) in a day and eat their own body weight in greenery. A swarm just one kilometre square, equal to 40-80 million insects, can eat as much food as 35,000 people in a day.

Some 80 percent of the population in the Horn, a region long synonymous with famine, conflicts and refugees, relies on agriculture for subsistence, meaning that the consequences will be devastating for the already vulnerable population. Moreover, under the right conditions, locusts can multiply 20-fold in three months. According to the science journal *Nature*, widespread breeding is in progress and new swarms of locusts are forming in the region with Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia facing the biggest risk, although Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda are also affected.

Nature points out that swarms have crossed the Red Sea to Yemen and Saudi Arabia and even reached Iran, Pakistan and India, threatening the food supplies of 20 million people later this year as well as the destruction of grazing for livestock.

As Keith Cressman, FAO Senior Agricultural Officer in the Plant Production and Protection Division, explained, "The new generation swarms will coincide with the planting season in the East African region, which normally starts at the end of March and early April."

Farmers will not be able to plant or will delay planting, which will affect harvests. Cressman fears that by June the desert locusts will have increased their numbers

400-fold, with terrible impacts. It cost a massive \$600 million to bring the situation under control in the last upsurge in 2003-5.

Last month, the FAO said the desert locust hopper bands were destroying tens of thousands of hectares of crops and grazing land in North East Africa, creating a dangerous situation for the region and eastern Ethiopia in particular. This prompted Somalia and Pakistan to declare a state of emergency. One swarm has even reached the eastern boundaries of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has not seen a locust invasion since 1944 and is still grappling with a civil war and Ebola and measles outbreaks.

Control of locust swarms depends upon the use of chemical pesticides and naturally occurring fungal spores, which require aerial spraying that is costly and reliant upon infrastructure and access to the areas where the locusts congregate.

The measures being taken across the region to control the coronavirus pandemic, particularly airport closures and reduction or suspension of international flights, have wreaked havoc with supply chains, hampering the fight against locusts. This has served to heighten the threat to food security as well as relief efforts at the worst possible time.

With few flights operating, airlifted cargo fell by 14 percent between January and February in Kenya alone. The cost of shipping pesticides has risen threefold and the delivery of pesticides and equipment has been delayed. According to the FAO, the delivery of eight helicopters and pesticides to East Africa will be delayed, while European and Australian experts are considering how to provide remote help to the fight, given that they cannot travel.

Cyril Ferrand, the FAO's Eastern Africa Resilience Team Leader, said, "The fight against an already critical desert locust outbreak is getting harder." The infestation in East Africa continues to present "an unprecedented threat to food security and livelihoods, especially as the cropping season begins."

In January, the FAO issued an appeal for \$76 million to help combat the locust outbreak that elicited less than half of the required amount even as the crisis escalated. The FAO has now upped the call to \$138 million. The World Food Program (WFP) estimates that without it, the cost of responding to the impact of locusts on food security alone would be at least 15 times higher.

The UN has warned that some 6.5 million people in South Sudan—more than half of the population—could be

in acute food insecurity at the height of this hunger season (May-July). Cyril Piou, an expert with the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development, warned that whereas locust outbreaks typically lasted about two years, without preventive systems they will last longer, happen more frequently and spread further. He said, "We are all linked in some way, what is happening somewhere else affects us all."

The response to such disasters must extend across national borders. As with every other social problem—including ever-widening social inequality, accelerating climate change and the heightened threat of war—the locust swarms are a global problem that requires an international solution that must not be held hostage to the non-existent largesse of the capitalist governments and the corporations and banks they represent.

Riven by national divisions and the scramble for geopolitical power, they are incapable of any systematic or planned response to the threats facing humanity, be they locust plagues, infectious disease or extreme weather events and climate change. They will only contribute if they can use "aid" to extract concessions favourable to themselves.

The science, technology and productive capacity exists to solve these great social problems and, under a rational and coordinated democratic planning of the world economy, rapidly improve the living standards and quality of life for the world's population. But only the international working class, through the unified struggle for world socialism, can achieve this goal.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact