Desert Locust Crisis: Appeal for rapid response and anticipatory action in the Greater Horn of Africa (January–July 2020)

30/01/2020

At a glance

11.9 million people experiencing severe acute food insecurity in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia

485 000 ha of land targeted for rapid locust control in the three countries

80 000 households targeted for rapid livelihoods protection and recovery support in the three countries

USD 70 million required by FAO for rapid response and anticipatory action in the three countries from January to July 2020

The worst desert locust outbreak in decades is underway in the Greater Horn of Africa, where tens of thousands of hectares of cropland and pasture have been damaged in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia with potentially severe consequences for agriculture-based livelihoods in contexts where food security is already fragile.

Highly mobile and capable of stripping an area’s vegetation, swarming locusts can cause large-scale agricultural and environmental damage.

Even a very small locust swarm can eat the same amount of food in one day as about 35 000 people. This can be especially devastating in countries facing food security crises, where every

gram of food produced counts towards alleviating hunger.

In addition to the 11.9 million people already experiencing severe acute food insecurity in the three countries, the desert locust crisis poses a potential threat to the food security of another 20.1 million people (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification [IPC] Phase 2).

Intensive ground and aerial control operations are urgently needed (in addition to diligent surveillance) in order to detect and reduce locust populations, prevent more swarms from forming and avoid the spread to even more vulnerable areas, such as South Sudan. If locust swarms continue unhindered, this will have serious implications on crop production in the upcoming main season across the entire region.

Efforts must also be made to protect the livelihoods of farmers and livestock holders – ensuring they have the inputs they need to restart production and have access to much-needed cash to meet their immediate food needs.

It is also critical to ensure that if damage is done to crops and pastures, anticipatory actions can be undertaken to safeguard livelihoods and promote early recovery at the scale needed.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) urgently requires USD 70 million to support rapid control actions and take measures to prevent a deterioration in the food security situation and protect livelihoods.

Crisis overview

Current situation

Despite control efforts, a serious and widespread desert locust outbreak is threatening crops and pasture across Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya. According to experts in the region, this is the worst outbreak in over 25 years in Ethiopia and Somalia and the worst observed in over 70 years in Kenya.

The situation has rapidly deteriorated in January as weather conditions have been unusually conducive to the spread of the pest. After Cyclone Pawan made landfall in early December 2019, flooding across the Horn of Africa created favourable breeding conditions for desert locust.
These conditions will allow breeding until June 2020 and could lead to 500 times more locusts, with the formation of large numbers of swarms.

The desert locust is considered the most destructive migratory pest in the world as it is highly mobile and feeds on large quantities of any kind of green vegetation, including crops, pasture and fodder. A typical swarm can be made up of 150 million locusts per square kilometer and is carried on the wind, up to 150 km in one day.

Even a very small, 1 km2 locust swarm can eat the same amount of food in one day as about 35 000 people. A single large swarm in Kenya was recorded with an area of 60 km by 40 km; a swarm of that size can consume the equivalent amount of kilocalories in one day as millions of people. This can be especially devastating in areas where food security is poor and, where every gram of food produced counts towards minimizing gaps in a family’s food consumption.

The desert locust represents an unprecedented threat to food security and livelihoods in the

region and has the potential to become a regional plague that could lead to further suffering, displacement and potential conflict. Unless sustained measures are taken to control the invasions in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia, the pest will spread to other East African countries, in particular South Sudan and Uganda.

Ethiopia

Over 2 350 km2 of land has been affected so far in Ethiopia. Some cropping areas in Amhara and Tigray have already reported substantial crop losses, which is likely to have a direct impact on food security in the affected areas. As the locusts move, livelihoods and food security are at risk in the southern and southeastern areas of the country. While aerial control operations are taking place, additional support from FAO is required not only to control the desert locust outbreak, but also to support the livelihoods of the most vulnerable people in the affected areas.

Kenya

In Kenya, dozens of desert locust swarms have arrived from Ethiopia and Somalia on a nearly daily basis since the end of December 2019. To-date, about 70 000 ha of land has already been infested. As they move into the centre of the country, the pest outbreak poses a risk to agricultural livelihoods. Agropastoral communities in the north are particularly vulnerable as they are only just recovering from a prolonged drought. Aerial control operations began early, though the capacity of the country to respond to the rapid multiplication and formation of dense swarms requires FAO support for both control operations and livelihoods interventions.

Somalia

Desert locust swarms bred in the north and have moved mainly to insecure areas in the central and southern parts of the country, invading livestock pasture and threatening the staple food crops in Somalia’s breadbasket, where severe food insecurity is recurrent. Up to 180 000 ha require control interventions, including remote, insecure areas where control capacity is limited. FAO support is therefore urgently needed to back government efforts to survey, control and monitor the pest, and deliver time-sensitive livelihood and food security assistance to the most vulnerable.

Regional livelihoods and food insecurity implications

In the Horn of Africa, climatic events have been increasing in severity and frequency, and aggravated by climate change, desertification and land degradation. With consecutive years of poor rains, dry spells and drought, some households have had limited recovery between shocks – particularly those dependent on agriculture for their food and income.

Most of the areas in the region worst affected by desert locusts are currently facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or Stressed (IPC Phase 2) outcomes, with conditions likely to continue through May 2020. An estimated crisis poses a potential threat to the food security of at least 32 million people (IPC Phase 2 and above) in the three affected countries.

Multiple years of poor rains, and recent flooding in late 2019, have resulted in widespread food insecurity, with severe acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 and above) currently affecting 6.7 million people in Ethiopia,3.1 million in Kenya and 2.1 people in Somalia.

While the current desert locust outbreak is rapidly developing, its effects on food availability and

food security are not yet being felt on a large scale – meaning that there are limited food security impacts for the ongoing lean season across most of the Horn of Africa. Ongoing desert locust impact assessments across the affected countries will provide additional information in the coming weeks on impacts caused to crop production, pasture and livelihoods so far.