Current situation

The current Desert Locust outbreak is the worst in 25 years. It is not only affecting the Horn of Africa, but has spread as far east as India and Pakistan. The situation is far worse than initially anticipated and has been exacerbated by cyclone Pawan.

Desert Locust breeding is ongoing in Somaliland, Puntland and Galmudug (Mudug). An estimated 70,000 hectares of land has been invaded by hoppers and breeding adults. So far, the Locust population has been confined to rangeland/grasslands (in the north). Once they mature the locusts are expected to migrate in swarms and move south towards the Ethiopian border area of Somaliland as well as Jubaland, Southwest State and Hirshabelle. These swarms will be at their most destructive stage and pose a very severe risk to Deyr season food and fodder production.

Mating adults, hoppers and swarms have been detected in Northwest Somalia (between Bulhar and Silil). Hoppers and immature adults were reported on the Northwest plateau and a swarm was detected between Burao and the Ethiopian border. Late instar hopper bands were also reported south of Bossaso, south of Las Anod (near the Ethiopian border) and in Galmudug (near Galkayo). More swarms are likely to form along the Northwest coast and plateau, which may migrate to Djibouti, Eastern Ethiopia and Southern Somalia.

Crop and pastures have already been damaged in Somalia and Ethiopia impacting negatively on agropastoral and pastoral households.

Impact of cyclone Pawan

Exceptionally high rainfall and recent cyclone Pawan has exacerbated the situation, as increased precipitation supports the development of new generations of Desert Locusts.

Rains resulting from the cyclone have created conditions conducive for breeding. Moist sandy or sandy/clay soil (to depths of 10-15 cm below the surface) is the perfect breeding grounds (bare areas for egg-laying and green vegetation for hopper development). Such conditions are expected to persist over the next three months.

If measures are not put in place to control breeding, winds on the northern side of the cyclone could carry Desert Locust swarms from the Northwest and adjacent areas of Northern Ogaden south towards Southern Ethiopia, Southern Somalia and Northeast Kenya.
Forecast

During December, above-normal seasonal showers are likely to be received in the spring breeding areas of Southwest Pakistan, Southeast Iran, on the Somali Plateau and in Ethiopia’s Northeast and Ogaden regions. Red Sea winter breeding areas will be wetter than normal during the same period in Eritrea and Yemen. The winter breeding area (Northwest Somalia coast) and spring breeding areas (Somalia interior and Eastern Ethiopia) are expected to receive above normal rains followed by normal to below normal rain in early 2020 (information provided by the World Climate Service).

Due to this favorable ecological conditions, coupled with the presence of parental populations and the impact of cyclone Pawan, more swarms will likely develop in Ethiopia and Northern Somalia. If left unattended, they will spread to Northeastern Kenya, adjacent areas in Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Breeding will continue on both sides of the Red Sea.

Impact on food security in Somalia

Desert Locusts are transboundary pests with the ability to spread over large areas causing massive damage to vegetation. Outbreaks occur periodically but are complex to predict. When not managed at the place of origin or breeding ground, they can lead to loss of up to 100% of food and fodder crops.

A typical Desert Locust swarm can contain up to 150 million locusts per square kilometer. Swarms migrate with the wind and can cover 100-150 km a day. An average swarm will destroy enough to feed 2 500 people for one year.

Climatic conditions in 2019 have been extremely difficult for rural populations. Somalia has experienced climatic shocks for eight back-to-back agricultural seasons since 2016. Rural households are therefore struggling to produce and access enough nutritious food. It is estimated that 6.3 million Somalis are acutely food insecure (IPC 2-4) through December 2019. Desert Locust outbreaks are further threatening staple food crops and pasture.

Ongoing efforts

Thanks to DFID-funding, FAO is closely working with Ministries of Agriculture and partner organizations on surveillance and control efforts in the north to prevent spread to the south. To date, FAO has facilitated surveys covering over 20 000 hectares in Puntland and Somaliland. Twenty Ministry of Agricultural Development staff have been trained on the application of bio pesticide in Somaliland where spray operations have just started.

Additional support required for Somalia

As we are approaching the middle of the “winter” breeding season and with the favorable ecological conditions, the Desert Locust population is expected to continue to grow in the North. Over the next six months, more than 100 000 hectares will require some form of direct control intervention if the situation is to be brought under control. The operation in Somalia now needs to provide immediate institutional, infrastructural and technical investments for larger scale operations in 2020 and beyond. For this initial response, FAO requires an additional USD 3 million.

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