

Locust situation heads towards a plague, FAO warns

Reinforcement of control operations requires \$9 million

23 February 2004, Rome - The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) launched today an appeal to donors for \$6 million urgently needed to support desert locust control operations in Mauritania and another \$3 million for Mali, Niger and Chad, in order to prevent the early stages of the current upsurge from developing into a plague.

In its appeal, FAO indicates that the locust situation continues to deteriorate in the western and northern areas of Mauritania, and in the Western Sahara.

Exceptional rains last summer initiated locust breeding over wide areas, and an even more exceptional rainfall in October 2003 in these areas, allowed further generations of locusts to breed sufficiently to produce swarms. Those that escape control are likely to move into Algeria and Morocco within a matter of weeks or even days, where a further cycle of breeding may take place in spring.

According to FAO, "swarms that are not sprayed will move south in June/July and, if this year's summer rains are good, a plague affecting the whole of the Western Region (West and North-West Africa) could follow. A rapid reinforcement of control operations is needed now to try to break this cycle of events."

Mauritania mobilized its own resources to carry out intensive control operations since October 2003. FAO provided some support both from its own resources, from the FAO Commission for Controlling the Desert Locust in the Western Region and from a United States grant.

As the extent of the locust population became apparent, Algeria and Morocco came rapidly and effectively to Mauritania's assistance. They have provided qualified staff, vehicles, pesticides and light aircraft with an estimated value of more than \$2 million.

This assistance has been organized within the framework of the Commission.

Nevertheless, large populations of desert locust are still present as swarms and hopper bands, covering an estimated 500,000 hectares in Mauritania and the Western Sahara.

With a movement of swarms to the north being imminent, Algeria and Morocco have to keep their remaining resources ready to eliminate any threat to their own agriculture. In Mauritania, resources are running out, threatening to halt further operations, while ecological conditions continue to be favourable for breeding.

"If control operations have to slow down or be interrupted, more locusts added to those already there, could contribute to eventually transforming the current situation into a plague", warns FAO.

The Red Sea coast

A locust outbreak is also in progress on the Red Sea coast in Saudi Arabia where swarms are forming. Despite intensive control operations, some of these are expected to move into the central interior of the country where a further generation of breeding could occur in the spring.

It is possible that a few swarms could reach adjacent areas in Jordan, southern Iraq and Western Iran later in the spring.

Additional international assistance is now urgently needed to fund locust surveys, control operations and technical coordination during the next few months.

Control operations and external assistance are being coordinated by FAO's Locust Group. The Group receives information and data from national locust units carrying out field surveys and control. It analyzes this information with meteorological, remote sensing and historical data and issues forecasts, alerts and special warnings.

A desert locust is a grasshopper that modifies its behaviour and appearance in response to environmental conditions. It is normally found in the solitary phase at very low densities in the desert in about 20 countries between Mauritania and India.

When rainfall creates favourable breeding conditions, the locusts can multiply rapidly, concentrate and gregarize. This means that they act collectively, forming swarms of adults and marching bands of hoppers (wingless immatures).

Swarms are highly mobile, flying many hundreds or thousands of kilometres between summer, winter and spring breeding areas.

When the locusts find ideal conditions in a sequence of seasonal breeding areas, upsurges can develop and lead to rapid multiplication and increasingly large swarms. If an upsurge is not controlled, a plague can occur in which swarms invade countries outside the traditional breeding areas. Crop damage by swarms can be devastating.