

Locust situation in northwest Africa is very worrying

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26 May 2004, Rome -- The locust situation in northwest Africa is very worrying despite intensive control activities, FAO warned today.

"An upsurge is under way in the region," the UN agency said.

FAO called upon Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal to prepare intensive survey and control operations against possible desert locust swarms arriving from the north and invading crop-producing areas in the Sahel.

Many breeding spots

"Locusts are breeding in thousands of spots over large areas south of the Atlas Mountains stretching from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia to western Libya," said Clive Elliott, senior officer of the FAO locust group.

"Hoppers are forming bands and are at the last stage before they become adults. Swarms are likely to start forming from the end of this month. The winds are expected to carry a substantial number of locust adults and swarms south to the Sahel Region in West Africa where they could start to arrive in southern Mauritania, northern Senegal, Mali, Niger and Chad in about mid June," Elliott said.

Small swarms have already started forming in northern Mauritania, and localized damage to millet, sorghum, date palms and vegetables has been reported.

Race against time

A total area of 2.1 million hectares has been treated with insecticides since October 2003 in Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

"Despite intensive control operations on the ground and by air, it is very difficult to find and treat all of the locust infestations in the vast and often remote desert areas," Elliott said.

"Control teams are doing their best, but it is a race against time. In addition to the swarms that move south into the Sahel, it is possible that some swarms could move east into western Sudan," he added.

Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal should immediately start preparing and equipping teams for field surveillance and should be prepared for control operations in those areas that receive the first summer rains and where the swarms may appear, FAO said.

Resources for sprayers, vehicles, pesticides and training should be mobilized. FAO is taking steps to assist affected countries and several donors have also offered their support.

FAO is encouraging best practice methods to reduce risks to health and the environment. At the same time, FAO is promoting increased use of environmentally friendly biological control.

However, a locust upsurge of the dimensions seen this year can only be controlled by using insecticides.

Avoiding a plague

More than \$40 million have been spent since October 2003 on locust control operations. Most funds were provided by locust-affected countries.

International donors such as the European Commission, Italy, Norway, Spain and the United States have contributed more than \$5 million so far.

A recent FAO emergency appeal for an additional \$17 million has been launched to assist countries in eliminating hopper infestations and swarms. It has received some responses from donors but time is running out.

"If these funds are not made available quickly, it is possible that the whole region will be subjected to a full-scale plague by the end of 2004," Elliott said.

The last desert locust plague, in 1987-1989, took several years and more than \$300 million before it was brought to an end.

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Related links

- **Desert locust information service**
<http://www.fao.org/NEWS/GLOBAL/LOCUSTS/Locuhome.htm>