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FOOD AND
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ORGANIZATION
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UNITED NATIONS

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Excellency,

I wish to bring to your attention the locust upsurge which is presently taking place in west Africa, in particular, in Mauritania. This is of serious concern to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), given that the locust situation continues to deteriorate in centre, west and north of that country (Desert Locust winter/spring breeding areas). Furthermore, it could evolve into a major plague affecting the whole of the western region (west and north-west Africa) unless there is rapid reinforcement of control operations. This upsurge is taking place when the EMPRES (Emergency Prevention System for Transboundary Animal and Plant Pests and Diseases) programme, which has been operational in the central region (the Red Sea area) since 1997, has not yet become fully operational in the western region.

In Mauritania, large populations of Desert Locust are present as swarms and hopper bands. As at the beginning of February, the infestation is reported to cover at least 500 000 hectares in Mauritania and western Sahara. Despite intensive control operations carried out by the Government of Mauritania since October 2003, with the help of FAO and with major bilateral assistance from Algeria and Morocco, the resources remaining immediately available are insufficient to combat the scale of infestation. The main constraint is the lack of pesticide. Ecological conditions continue to be favourable for breeding in Mauritania and the western Sahara, and there is a high-risk another generation will be produced. If control operations have to slow down or be interrupted because of lack of resources, another generation of locusts added to what is already there, could contribute to transforming the upsurge into a plague. This will make it highly likely that an invasion of neighbouring countries will occur during the next months, followed by a re-infestation of the front-line Sahelian countries during the summer rainy season of 2004. All these locust movements will constitute a major threat to agricultural production and food security in the region.

To limit the extent of the risk and given the damage already reported in crops and date palms, the reinforcement of the control resources in Mauritania through international donor assistance is urgent. The Minister of Rural Development and the Environment, with the support of the FAO Representation in Mauritania and of the EMPRES western region programme, has established an Emergency Steering Committee to which donor representatives are invited. FAO has already contributed to the operational costs through its own Regular Programme resources, as has the Commission for Controlling the Desert Locust in the Western Region (CLCPRO). The United States has provided funds from its emergency grant which is operated by FAO. An Emergency Technical Cooperation Project is under preparation following a request for assistance to FAO from the Mauritanian Government. Intra-regional solidarity has been quick to provide extra qualified staff, vehicles, sprayers, pesticides and aircraft both for spraying and transport. An international assistance is now necessary to cover additional purchases of pesticides and equipment and to fund the operational costs of locust surveys, support teams for aerial spraying and to ensure the technical coordination of the operations. Based on the available information, FAO's Plant Production and Protection Division (AGP) estimates that about US\$6 million are needed to support control operations in Mauritania. In addition it is estimated that further US\$3 million are needed to support operations in Chad, Mali and Niger.

I would be most grateful if you would transmit to the appropriate authorities in your country, our serious concerns about the locust situation and its probable worsening in west Africa, particularly in Mauritania and the western Sahara, together with our urgent request for assistance to complement what has already been provided for the control campaign.

I look forward to your rapid and positive response.

Accept, Excellency, the assurance of my highest consideration.

Henri Carsalade
Assistant Director-General
Technical Cooperation Department