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Locusts in Africa: Locust disaster in West Africa

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Exceptional rains in the summer of 2003 initiated locust¹ breeding over wide areas in West Africa, and an even more exceptional rainfall in October 2003 in these areas allowed further generations of locust to breed sufficiently to produce swarms. Those that escaped control in Mauritania and western Sahel moved into Algeria and Morocco where a further cycle of breeding took place in winter and early spring of 2004.

Today, the situation continues to deteriorate in West Africa where summer breeding is in progress over a large area of southern Mauritania, northern and central Senegal, in the Sahel and in the north of Mali, in western Niger, in northern Burkina Faso and probably in Chad. Numerous hopper bands are forming and maturing rapidly in these countries. New generations of winged adult locusts are emerging in southeastern Mauritania and new swarms are beginning to form. This will also occur in the other countries in the coming weeks. Consequently, a substantial number of swarms are expected to form in September. There was one unconfirmed swarm report in Darfur, Sudan but the situation there is likely to be less serious than in West Africa.

Locust swarms can vary from less than one square kilometre to several hundred square kilometres. There can be at least 40 million and sometimes as many as 80 million locust adults in each square kilometre of swarm.

A Desert Locust adult can consume roughly its own weight in fresh food per day (about two grammes every day). A very small part of an average swarm (or about one tonne of locusts) eats the same amount of food in one day as about ten elephants or 25 camels or 2 500 people.

Significant damage has been reported in the affected countries as locusts are destroying pasture, date palm, cereal and vegetation crops, severely affecting the livelihoods of farmers and nomads and reducing the availability of food on the market while prices rise. The food security, humanitarian and socio-economic consequences

¹ 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. The last desert locust plague, in 1987-1989, took several years and more than US\$300 million to bring to an end.

have yet to be fully quantified but will be daunting. To gather more information, a crop and food supply assessment mission across nine countries will be undertaken in October by CILSS (Centre International pour la Lutte contre la Sechesse Sahelien), FAO and WFP.

For a variety of reasons, it is very difficult to find and treat all of the desert locust infestations: infestations occur in remote and inaccessible locations over an extremely large area (16-30 million km²), resources for locust monitoring and control are limited in some of the affected countries, basic infrastructure (roads, communications) may be undeveloped and it is difficult to maintain a sufficient number of trained staff and functioning resources during the long periods of recession in which there is little or no locust activity. In addition, organizing and implementing control operations in which the pesticide must be applied directly onto the locusts while they are young and before they take to the air constitutes a significant logistical challenge.

Despite warnings issued by FAO since October 2003 of the likelihood of an upsurge and of the consequences of not stopping the outbreak early, the international community has responded very late and the cost of control is now spiralling as predicted. A locust upsurge of the dimensions seen today can only be effectively controlled by extensive use of large quantities of pesticides, but also requires spraying equipment, including airplanes and vehicles, effective methods of communication in remote areas, and personnel.

Control operations are underway in all of the affected countries but they are hampered by insufficient resources as the countries exhaust the funding available. FAO has called on donors to provide US\$100 million to support affected countries in their battle to control the widespread locust outbreaks. Drawing the attention of the international community to this unfolding disaster has been cumbersome, but is now gathering momentum. To date, the international community has responded by pledging US\$37 million, which includes contributions channelled through FAO as well as bilaterally to the affected countries. However, response is delayed by the slow disbursement of the pledges made. Thus, of the US\$19.2 million pledged to FAO, only US\$4.5 million have been received to date. Together with the US\$5 million of FAO's own resources, the total available funding of US\$9.5 million is being used to coordinate the international assistance, procure pesticides and equipment such as sprayers, protective clothing, vehicles and flying hours, and to organize their delivery to the affected areas.

This matter is brought before the IASC-WG to alert the members to the scope of the current disaster, but also, more importantly, to highlight the very real risk of an even greater disaster next summer. Although the funds for control operations are now beginning to flow to FAO and to the affected countries, the window of opportunity to limit the level of the plague next year has become appallingly small. If control measures are to be effective this year, they must take place in time to disrupt the last breeding cycle in the Sahel, i.e. in October, which, given the short time available and the enormous area affected, is a near-impossible task. After this time, the swarms will move north, towards the countries of north Africa, where they will breed over the winter and return, in even greater numbers, to the Sahel region in spring and summer of 2005.

FAO is seeking the assistance of its IASC partners to help advocate to the international community for additional resources to be made available for the control measures that will inevitably be needed on a massive scale in the coming months, if not years. FAO also wishes to encourage UN and NGO partners with activities in the affected region to adjust their programming to take account of the likelihood of extraordinary humanitarian needs as farmers and pastoralists lose their crops and their pasture, and as the population at large faces significantly reduced availability of locally produced food.

Proposed Actions by the IASC-WG members:

- * Use all opportunities to advocate with donors for the timely provision of funding to combat the locust plague.
- * Take account of the locust infestation and its humanitarian consequences in the affected countries in the programming and planning of assistance during the coming year.

Prepared by: FAO, September 2004