

Famine risk for millions in second locust wave

May 28 2020, by Nelson Mandela Ogema , Fiona Broom



A desert locust outbreak has been raging in East Africa since October 2019.
Credit: [FAO/Giampiero Diana](#)

A second wave of desert locusts in Africa and Asia is threatening famine for millions as critical resources are directed towards the COVID-19 crisis, scientists warn.

Desert locusts are already swarming in East Africa and breeding in Iran

and Pakistan, as well as Yemen, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) says.

The outbreak, which has been raging since last year, has so far placed around 20 million people at acute food insecurity in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania, according to the FAO.

Swarms have "been damaging crops and pastures and crippling communities in the Greater Horn of Africa, Arabian Peninsula and Southwest Asia" since October, explained World Resources Institute climate programme research analyst Tina Huang.

However, without action the [locust](#) population "could grow 400 times larger by June 2020 and spread to new areas, disrupting [food supply](#), upending livelihoods and requiring substantial resources to address", the [World Bank](#) says.

The level of threat in West Africa could also change significantly in the next few weeks based on rainfall, winds and the locust situation in Arabia and East Africa, the FAO says.

"Investments in preparedness and anticipatory actions should be immediately and quickly scaled up to face this potential threat," its latest situation update says.

It warns that swarms risk migrating to summer breeding areas in India and Pakistan, as well as Sudan and parts of West Africa, including the Sahel and Chad.

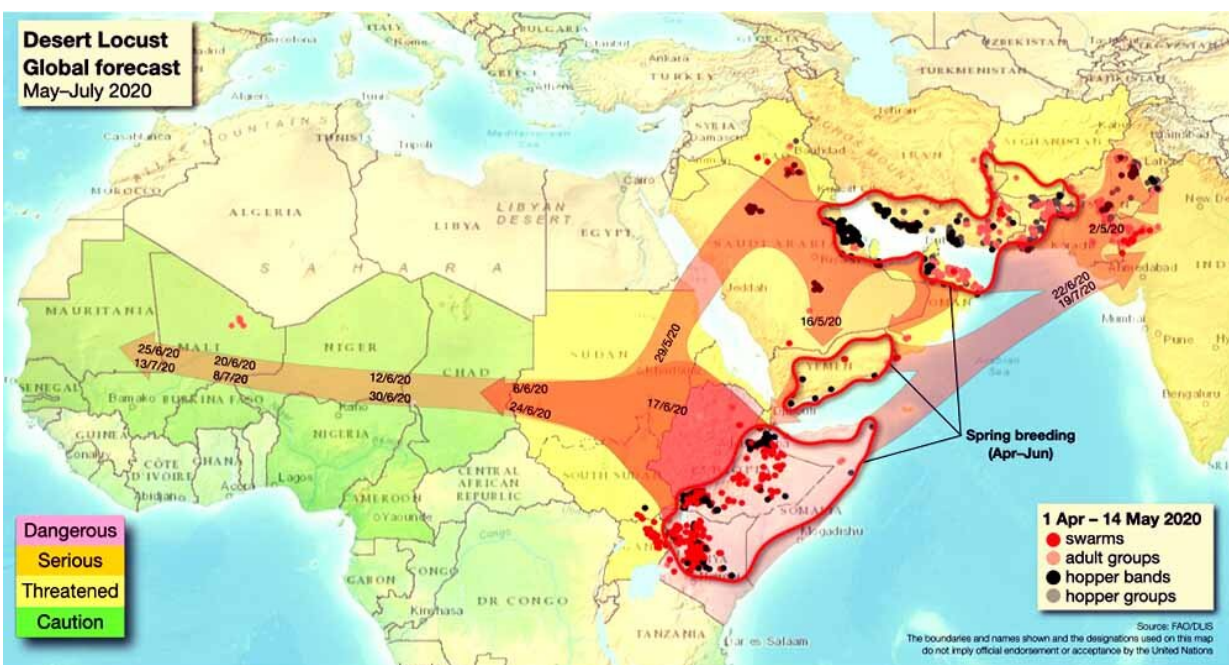
On top of the global COVID-19 emergency, Yemen is also facing multiple crises from violent conflict and disrupted health systems, while flooding in East Africa has killed about 300 people and displaced half a million, according to the Red Cross.

Daniel Otaye, an associate professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at Kenya's Egerton University, says countries in East Africa seem unprepared to deal with a second wave of locusts.

"Policymakers in Sub-Saharan Africa should be strongly advised not to forget the locust outbreak amid [the] COVID-19 outbreak," Otaye says.

"The two challenges should be fought concurrently."

The World Bank estimates that, in Africa alone, more than 90 million hectares of cropland and pasture are at risk from the second wave, with damages and losses reaching US\$9 billion.



FAO desert locust global forecast May-July 2020. Credit: SciDev.Net

In East Africa, pesticide shipments to the worst-affected areas have already been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The biggest challenge we are facing at the moment is the supply of pesticides and we have delays because global air freight has been reduced significantly," says Cyril Ferrand, the FAO's resilience team leader for East Africa.

Kim Kariuki, engagement director at the Busara Center for Behavioural Economics in Kenya, says a second wave of locusts could exacerbate already-disrupted global supply chains.

"This would have untold effects on food security ... leaving smallholders even more vulnerable than before and jeopardising the economic outlook for recovery in the affected countries," he explains.

The World Bank says repercussions will go beyond the economy and could last generations.

"When affected households and families struggle to meet basic needs such as food and shelter, nutrition, healthcare, and education may be neglected, hindering long-term health and development, especially of children," the organisation says.

"Studies of past locust plagues found a notable decrease in school enrolment in affected areas as well as evidence of stunting in infants and children."

Action plans

Otaye says governments in the region have diverted resources to control COVID-19, to the neglect of fighting the locust invasion.

But Keith Cressman, the FAO's senior locust forecaster, tells SciDev.Net efforts to control the locust outbreaks are ongoing.

"So far, more than 240,000 hectares have been treated with chemical pesticides or biopesticides across the East Africa region and 740 people have been trained up to conduct ground locust control operations," he says.

Stephen Njoka, the director-general of the Desert Locust Control Organisation for East Africa, says the organisation is working with national governments and the FAO to control the locusts from the air and on the ground.

"However, the new generation hoppers are now of age and very voracious," he says.

Provided by SciDev.Net

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