

Crop-destroying armyworm 'major threat' to world farming: NGO

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A crop-destroying caterpillar native to the Americas is "spreading rapidly" in Africa and threatens farming worldwide, the Centre for Agriculture and Bioscience International (CABI) warned on Monday.

Two species of the fall armyworm, which can devastate maize production, have been found in Ghana, and could spread to Asia and the Mediterranean, according to the Britain-based not-for-profit group.

"This is the first time it has been shown that both species or strains are established on mainland Africa" CABI chief scientist Matthew Cock said after analysis was conducted in the group's labs.

"Urgent action will be needed to prevent devastating losses to crops and farmers' livelihoods," he said.

Essential for food security in large parts of Africa, maize is particularly vulnerable to the larvae, which

attack the crop's growing points and burrow into the cobs.

Maize or corn accounts for almost 70 percent of total cereal production in southern Africa according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, with a large percentage grown directly for home consumption.

The pest is also known to have caused major damage to other economically important crops including rice, soybean and cotton.

The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has announced an emergency regional meeting to be held on February 14-16 in Harare, Zimbabwe after the pest was also identified in southern Africa.

"Preliminary reports indicate possible presence (of the pest) in Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe" FAO subregional coordinator for southern Africa, David Phiri, said in a statement last week.

Zambia has already spent \$3 million (2.8 million euros) in an attempt to control the [pest](#) that has affected approximately 130,000 hectares (320,000 acres) of crops.

But the FAO emphasised that the full extent of the damage there and in other affected countries is yet to be established.

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