Africa Report by Mary Lalevée

Locusts could cause 'catastrophe'

Ten years of economic crisis have left Africa without the means to fight a potential plague of Biblical scope.

Four varieties of locusts and a variety of grasshopper are threatening millions of hectares of cropland throughout Africa, reported the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization on May 15. It is the first time since the 1920s that four species of locust simultaneously threaten the continent. FAO Director General Edouard Saouma stated, "This new invasion cycle must be averted at all costs if it is not to become the plague that we foresee." He called on the FAO experts to prepare an action plan to fight the threatened plague.

The four species of locust are the desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*), the African migratory locust (*Locusta migratoria*), the red locust (*Nomadacris septemfasciata*), amd the brown locust (*Locustana pardalina*). The Sahel region is threatened by the Senegalese grasshopper (*Oedaleus senegalensis*).

According to the FAO, the grasshoppers laid their eggs over vast areas of the Western Sahel at the end of the 1985 rainy season. Some 10-15 days after the start of the 1986 rains, in May, the young hoppers will emerge and attack sprouting cereal crops, particularly millet and sorghum. Messaoud Ould Boulkeir, minister coordinator of the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control on the Sahel, stressed to a special meeting of donor and recipient countries on May 7 that it was necessary to "act quickly to avert a new tragedy." The program to fight the grasshopper threat is estimated to cost $10-12 million, and includes providing insecticide dust to farmers early in the season, and later motorized and aerial spraying to protect ripening crops by destroying grasshoppers that have migrated.

A major effort has already been made in Mali to fight the infestation, but, reports the FAO, not all the grasshoppers could be killed, and the survivors laid huge numbers of eggs. At the start of the rainy season, which begins in May, grasshoppers at densities of up to 125 per square meter are expected to hatch over large areas.

A detailed program to fight the locust threat is still being worked out by the FAO. The areas threatened include virtually all of Africa: The desert locust reappeared after the return of the rains, starting in Mauritania, and later in Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Egypt. The African migratory locust widely reproduced itself in the central and eastern plains of Sudan in the rainy season. Swarms of locusts moved south and east, reaching the coast of the Red Sea, northern Ethiopia, northern Uganda, and northwest Kenya. Manifestations of the migratory locusts exist in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, and South Africa, where swarms have penetrated as far as Cape Town, which was not reached during the last major plague of 1928-42.

The red locust threatens central and southern Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique. Swarms of the insects were reported in Kenya at the end of April for the first time since 1937. The brown locust is threatening 300,000 square kilometers in South Africa, and swarms had reached Botswana at the end of February.

The damage such swarms can do was illustrated in a report published by the Centre for Overseas Testing and Research in London, in 1974, *The Locust Menace*. A study had been made of a plague of locusts that hit Somalia in 1958. A locust consumes its own weight in food each day, two grams. One single swarm over Somalia, measured from the air, covered an area of 1,000 square kilometers. As there are usually 40-80 million locusts in a single square kilometer, this one swarm included at least 40 *billion locusts*. The swarm would require over 80,000 tons of food per day—enough corn to feed 400,000 people for a year.

Unchecked, the locusts could cause famine of Biblical throughout Africa, which is just recovering from years of drought.

Organizations do exist in Africa to fight locusts, such as the Desert Locust Control Organization for eastern Africa, and the International Red Locust Control Organization for central and southern Africa, and similar bodies in western Africa. But lack of funds and equipment means they are unable to provide the insecticide, equipment, and fuel for dusting the crops. The International Red Locust Control Organization for central and southern Africa has spent its entire 1986 budget in the first trimester of the year, and its stocks of pesticides are completely exhausted.

Over the last 10 years, cutbacks in government expenditure enforced by the International Monetary Fund, and the general breakdown in infrastructure, have meant that African governments simply do not have the means to fight this plague. Emergency measures are needed to stop catastrophe.