



# DESERT LOCUSTS: A SIMMERING CRISIS

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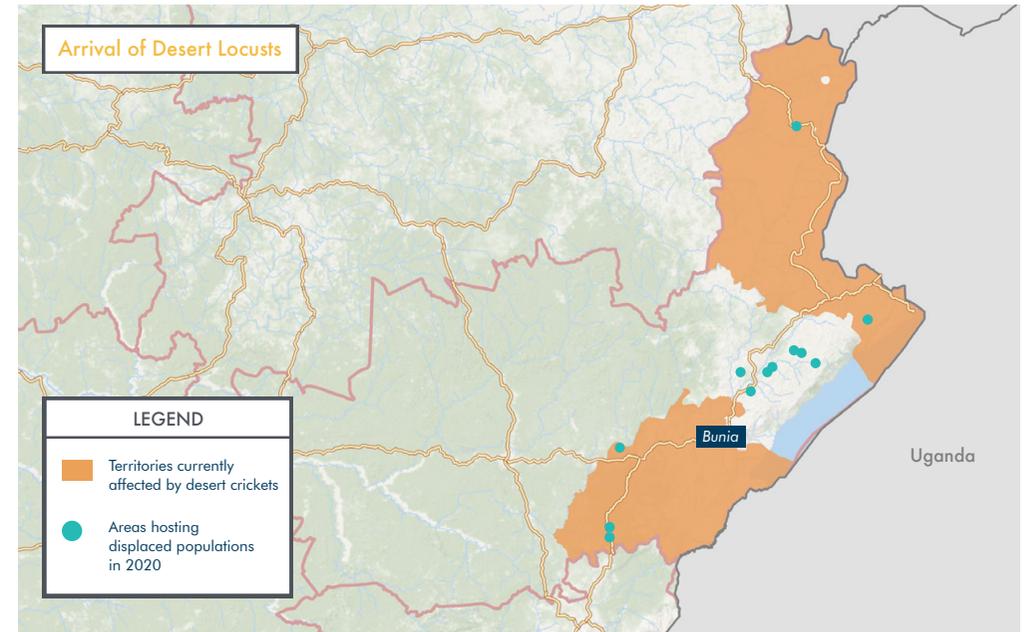
## OVERVIEW

The current locust swarm appeared in East Africa in late 2019. By February 2020, locusts had appeared in the territory of Aru, Ituri. Seven of Aru's nine chiefdoms are currently affected by these locusts, more than 3,700 km<sup>2</sup>. Recently, these swarms have spread to the territories of Mahagi and Irumu, and sightings have been reported near Bunia. They may also be present in Djugu.

The arrival of locusts will worsen an already worrying food security situation in Ituri, which hosts refugees (Aru) and is subject to intercommunal violence (Djugu and Mahagi) and attacks by armed groups (Irumu and Mambasa). The southern part of the province (still free of locusts) is still responding to the impact of the Ebola epidemic and recently registered cases of COVID-19.

An invasion of mature locusts will be devastating for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The combination of a poor harvest season due to climate factors, lack of access to fields due to persistent insecurity, and poor road infrastructure for the transport of goods has already had a negative impact on food security in Ituri, North, and South Kivu. It should also be noted that provinces across the DRC are interdependent and events in one province can easily affect other nearby provinces. Given the role of the east in supplying food to the rest of the country, the crisis could have national repercussions.

By the end of February, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) had requested \$138 million to help the governments of eight countries anticipate the response to locust swarms, \$62 million more than its original request at the end of January. By early March, the FAO had received a total of \$40 million to respond to locusts in the five countries initially impacted.



## IMPACT OF LOCUST SWARMS

Desert locusts are considered one of the most dangerous migratory insects<sup>1</sup> because of their ability to move quickly over long distances, their rapid breeding rate, and their severe impact on crops and livelihoods. An adult desert locust consumes its own weight - about 2 grams - in leaves daily. When locusts move in swarms, consumption can reach up to five tons per hectare of vegetation.<sup>2</sup>

The current swarm in Ituri should reach maturity in the month of May.<sup>3</sup> As April is sowing season, crops are so far unharmed. With the rainy season in March and April, the locusts will have been able to breed and may spread further. Harvest season will likely arrive at the same time as the locusts reach maturity, with enormous potential damage to agricultural produce.

## AREAS & CROPS AFFECTED

In the areas mentioned above, food crops sown in April, such as maize, sorghum, beans, potatoes, cassava, groundnuts, vegetables, fruits, vegetables, etc., may be the first to be affected due to the tenderness of their leaves.

Cash crops, such as coffee and cocoa, will come second because locusts are commonly found in shrubs. Livestock will also be affected as locusts consume their pastures. The crops commonly harvested in June are corn, peanuts and apples and will also be affected.

The harvest from Ituri feeds other provinces and agricultural produce

is exported to neighboring countries (South Sudan and Uganda). Cities linking Kinshasa to Ituri, via Kisangani, will likely see the most interruptions: Komanda, Mambasa, Nyanya, Bafwasende, Bandaka, Bandundu, Isangi, etc. In addition, exports of sorghum, groundnuts and beans to Uganda and South Sudan could be disrupted, affecting farmers' incomes and food security.<sup>4</sup>

The locusts benefit from strong winds for migration;<sup>5</sup> the populations of North and South Kivu are already reportedly concerned about the potential arrival of locust swarms in their provinces. Like Ituri, these provinces also host large populations of IDPs in addition to local populations already struggling with food security.

*The current swarm in Ituri should reach maturity in the month of May. Harvest season will likely arrive at the same time as the locusts reach maturity, causing great damage.*

## CONSEQUENCES

Ongoing conflicts in Ituri will lead to further population displacement in the coming months. As a result of multiple previous displacements caused by armed conflict, some parts of the province had missed the growing season, negatively affecting agricultural production.<sup>6</sup> This has been compounded by floods and landslides on arable land over the last three agricultural seasons. The

fear is that expected above average rainfall will lead to an increase in the locust population,<sup>7</sup> exacerbating the existing risk factors of a food crisis. These prolonged limitations in harvest and food distribution will have an impact on vulnerable populations in the east, subjecting them to a reduction in the quality and quantity of meals.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Michel Vassal cited in "Hommes et criquets : une drôle de lutte !" CIRAD. Communiqué de presse, 25 October 2011. [Here](#)

<sup>2</sup> "Criquets Pèlerins." Larousse Encyclopedia. [Here](#)

<sup>3</sup> "Criquet pèlerin - Mise à jour." Food and Agricultural Organization. L'observatoire Acridien, 28 April 2020. [Here](#)

<sup>4</sup> Bolakonga Ilye et al. "Filiers Agricoles en République Démocratique du Congo : Maïs, riz, bananes, plantains et pêche." Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. October 2017. [Here](#).

<sup>5</sup> "Criquets Pèlerins." Larousse Encyclopedia. [Here](#)

<sup>6</sup> "Récoltes de la saison A inférieures à la normale au Centre-est du fait qu'une pluviométrie excessive: Février à Septembre 2020" Famine Early Warning System Network. 26 March 2020. [Here](#).

<sup>7</sup> "The main ecological factor favoring the extension of the breeding grounds is rainfall. Between 50 and 1,000 millimetres of annual rainfall is needed for the eggs to develop under good conditions." (Larousse)

The decline in agro-pastoral production will have a negative impact on much of the DRC's rural population in the east, who will see their incomes decline and will therefore have less money to pay for health, education, and other basic services. Although primary education is free, families still have to cover the cost of school uniforms and materials. Healthcare is also at risk of deteriorating due to poverty and famine, which will increase the rate of malnutrition in families unable to access food.

The implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures across the DRC led to the isolation of Kinshasa, the halt of all commercial air travel, and the isolation of major cities in North and South Kivu (Beni, Butembo, Goma and Bukavu). It also led to an increase in food prices. This price increase makes sufficient quantity and quality of food unaffordable for many families and will be exacerbated by locusts, leading to a decrease in supply while demand remains stable or increases. In addition, humanitarian aid is likely to be affected, impacting IDPs in the east who have no access to food outside humanitarian assistance. The continued Ebola outbreak, with new confirmed cases identified in Beni in April, shortly before the end of the epidemic was set to be declared, will require two different responses to two different epidemics in a region already devastated by armed conflict.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Mercy Corps, recommends the following actions be taken to respond to this swarm and prevent a food crisis in the longer-term:

- Tackle existing locust swarms to prevent growth and set up mitigation measures
- Identify potential humanitarian corridors for the transfer of essential goods and services to vulnerable populations in case prevention measures do not work
- Rehabilitate agricultural feeder roads to improve movement of agricultural goods from unaffected to affected areas
- Collaborate with the development sector, strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus, to build resilience through seed distributions and agricultural support for affected community to re-establish agricultural activities