Strange disease attacks banana plantations

Farmers in Rukungiri urge Naro and other authorities to quickly come to their aid.

BY RONALD KABANZA

A strange banana disease has ravaged plantations in Rukungiri District, causing panic and distress among farmers.

The disease attacks banana fingers and bunches, causing premature ripening of the bunch, and when cooked, the affected bananas are tasteless.

This disease comes at a time when farmers in the district are recovering from the effects of the banana bacterial wilt that destroyed their plantations and left them with losses.

Mr Benson Tayebwa, a resident of Bugangari and a farmer, said the signs of the disease are different from banana bacterial wilt, which has challenged them for years.

"The disease affects banana fingers and bunches, leading to the premature ripening of the banana," he said.

Mr Tayebwa added: "We are counting losses because we used to collect a lot of money from selling bananas. There is a ready market. We don't know what to do, we are only asking the government to come to our rescue before the situation gets out of hand."

Mr Johnson Mwesigwa, another affected farmer, said the government needs to act faster before the disease affects the whole district.

"Samples from the affected gardens should be taken for testing, and the extension workers should stop sitting in the office but come down and sit with us if we are to fight this disease completely," he said last Wednesday.



An affected banana bunch in farmer Emmy Rubondo's garden in Buyanja Sub-county, Rukungiri District. PHOTO/RONALD RUBANZA

EXPLANATION

"This disease is like banana wilt but this one attacks banana fingers and bunches and it eventually results into premature ripening of the bunch and makes the banana tasteless when cooked," said Mr Onek Pius, the Rukungiri District production officer, last Wednesday.

Ms Mary Mbabazi, a banana vendor in Rukungiri Central Market, told *Daily Monitor* that farmers sold bunches at a much lower price before the disease broke out.

Nowadays, farmers sell them expensively.

"Previously, we could make some money. When buying from a farmer, a small banana could cost Shs8,000, and we sell it between Shs10,000 and Shs12,000 or sometimes above. A medium bunch bought at Shs15,000 would be sold at Shs20,000, and a large one bought at Shs20,000 would be sold at Shs25,000. But now, small bunches cost between Shs10,000 and Shs15,000," she said last Wednesday.

Ms Mbabazi added: "The farmers have increased prices and there are no bananas in their plantations. So, the government should intervene and save us because we are going into a time that may affect us both financially and in terms of food security."

The Buyanja Sub-county chairperson, Mr Emmy Rubondo, and also an affected farmer, said he started receiving complaints about the same disease two months ago. Since then, he has been engaging extension workers at the sub-county, but they have failed to control the spread of the disease.

"As a sub-county, we have already made a report to the concerned district office, and I think very soon the district agricultural department will come out because they are aware of the disease outbreak," he said.

Mr Rubondo said before the outbreak, he was selling more than 70 bunches of bananas per week, but currently, he collects between 20 and 30 bunches weekly, which has affected his income.

The Rukungiri District Production Officer, Mr Pius Onek, said the disease spreads quickly.

"We are lucky that the National Agricultural Research Organisation (Naro) has already taken samples of crops from the affected gardens, and we hope for a solution from the samples taken," he said last Wednesday.

Mr Onek added that cutting down the affected trees and planting new ones at the moment is the most realistic solution. "The disease is not only in Rukungiri but countrywide, so farmers are advised to cut down all the affected trees and plant new ones as the government looks for an immediate solution to the problem," he said.

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