Three sub-counties in Luwero under attack, residents abandon homes, garden

CATERPILLARS ravage Luwero

By Andrew Masinde

By 3:00pm, I am in Bukasa LC1 in Luwero town council. My visit on July 17 is to investigate reports that the village has been invaded by strange caterpillars. However, my three-hour search proves fruitless.

But residents insisted that the caterpillars attack at 7:00pm, so I sit out in the compound of my host.

At 6:40pm, hell breaks loose, one after another, the caterpillars creep out of the nearby bushes, piled bricks, some come out of the grass-thatched houses and others from the cracks in the walls of mud-and-wattle houses.

An army forms and with an invisible commander, they move towards the kitchen, into the houses and some head to garbage dumps.

By 7:00pm, the dark caterpillars had covered my host's compound and the neighbourhood. As I walked along the paths, someone called out: "You have to move with care or you will step on them."

Around the village, everyone is sweeping caterpillars from the houses. Some are lighting fire in the compound to burn those collected, while others prepare to spend the night by the fire.

Residents say the caterpillars have hairs or bristles, which, on contact with the skin, cause itching and burning blisters.



A resident shows off the caterpillars he has collected after sweeping

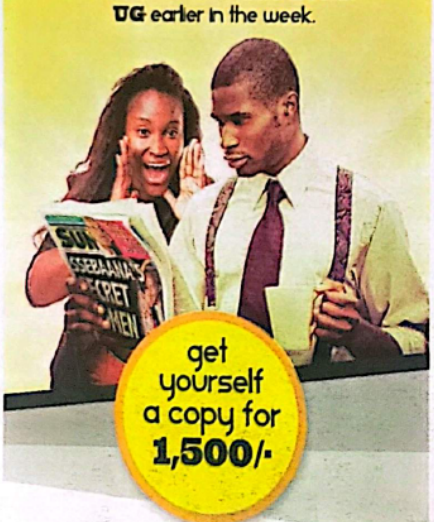


Tito Bawali shows off a caterpillar-infested banana plant

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Victims cry for help

In one home, a-two-year-old baby is in pain as he scratches his left leg whose foot is rotting.

His grandmother, Rebbecca Namatovu, says he was 'burnt' by a caterpillar as he was playing in the compound and since then, the leg has not cured despite frequent visits to hospital.

"He stepped on a caterpillar that burnt his toes, I am a poor woman who cannot afford to take him to the main hospital, I tried the nearby health centres, where I was given some medicine, but there has been no improvement. His toes are rotting," she says.

In another home, Brenda Nalugya, who is sweeping the caterpillars out of her house, reveals that the caterpillars have invaded her garden.

"My cassava is getting spoilt and I cannot weed it because I fear getting 'burnt' by the caterpillars," says Nalugya.

She says a caterpillar burnt her as she was weeding the cassava, so she abandoned the garden.

"Caterpillars are everywhere in the garden, so you cannot walk or touch the ground," she says. We spend the night sweeping caterpillars and sleep during the day. We no longer switch on the lights because the insects are attracted to light," she says.

Nursing her two-year-old grandson, Regina Babirye says: "The child's buttocks were 'burnt' by a caterpillar. She says a few weeks ago, her friend ate a caterpillar while having supper. "Her neck is swollen. She can neither speak nor eat. Her health is deteriorating," says Babirye.

In Nyimbwa sub-county, the road sides, paths and compounds are covered with caterpillars. Like their neighbours, residents also spend the bigger part of the night battling caterpillars.

At 1:11am, I retire to Vincent Okello and Angella Bugya's home to rest, but I fail to sleep. Scared of the caterpillars, I pass the night seated on a bench.

By 6:10am, I am in the gardens hunting for their hiding place. The caterpillars are running into hiding. In the gardens, they are eating banana leaves, while others are hiding under the mulch in the banana plantations. More swarms are eating the cassava stems.

Caterpillars have feasted on banana leaves and what is left are holes, droppings and eggs.

Burning a heap she had gathered, Faridah Nalweyiso says: I have abandoned the garden to caterpillars.

District officials react

On July 17, Andrew Kidda Makubuya, the Luwero district production officer, who acknowledged receiving reports of the caterpillars says: "We thought they were armyworms. If it is a new type of caterpillars, then they are going to act. I will work with the district agricultural officer to ensure that experts are dispatched to investigate the new type of caterpillars.

And Ronald Ndawula, the Luwero district chairman, says: "I was not aware that caterpillars were attacking people. We are going to investigate the reports. Previously, the Government had provided pesticides to deal with the problem, but they were not enough, yet the communities cannot afford the frequent spray of insects.

Agriculture experts speak out

Steven Byantware, acting commissioner agriculture ministry
My department has engaged the National Agricultural Research Organisation to investigate the caterpillars. The outbreak could be as a result of environmental degradation so the creatures are trying to look for places of survival.

Dr John Bahama, entomologist
The type of caterpillars could be a nocturnal species that feeds during the night. We need urgent investigation on them.

Dr Tom Lakwo, senior entomologist, Ministry of Health
Caterpillars have hairs that are toxic and are used as protective gear against predators. 'Burning' people means they are defending themselves. People need to visit the health centres to get treatment. Sometimes the hairs have poison.

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