Crisis. Caterpillars have destroyed several acres of crops in the district. Most farmers cannot purchase the prescribed pesticides because of the high prices.

Fear of famine looms in Luweero as caterpillars destroy crops

BY DAN WANDERA
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LUWEERO. Caterpillars have invaded Luweero eating several acres of crops, causing fear among residents that famine could strike the district.

According to the district entomology department, there are three types of caterpillars ravaging the district. They include the tailed green, the fall armyworm and the black hairy caterpillar. The most destructive to crops is the armyworm.

The black caterpillars have multiplied and spread from the gardens and pushes to homesteads. They produce a poisonous substance when touched, causing infection on the skin.

Farmers in the district are now fearful of going to their gardens because of the black caterpillars.

Ms Annet Nakiwala, a resident of Nakigoza village in Luweero Subcounty, says one of her children developed an infection after coming into contact with the black hairy caterpillars.

"We have struggled to get medicine to cure the infection after my eight-year-old daughter who developed an infection on her right arm," Ms Nakiwala laments.

"Our efforts to reach out to the concerned government departments are yet to yield positive results at a time when the caterpillars now pose a health risk. We have examples of farmers who have been affected by the black caterpillars," Mr Joseph Sserugo the district vice chairperson, laments.

He continues: "This could be a serious blow to the food security campaign because the farmers are at the same time battling the fall armyworm."

The district entomologist, Mr Henry Lule, says the substance released by the black hairy caterpillar is irritating to the skin and develops into a bacterial infection on the particular part of the human body which has come into contact with the caterpillar.

"The district has already registered complaints from farmers in more than five sub-counties. The black hairy caterpillars are scary to the women and children. We are investigating and are in contact with other government departments to ascertain the damage and number of people affected," he adds.

Mr Sserugo says: "You can imagine a situation where the women, who form more than 70 per cent of the workforce in the farming sector, abandon the garden work for fear of the caterpillars. This should not be taken lightly because the farming industry employs the biggest percentage of the population in Luweero District."

He adds that the government only provided a limited amount of pesticides to demonstrate to farmers how to eradicate the armyworms.

Mr Sserugo says the armyworms have destroyed several acres of maize in the district, adding that most farmers cannot purchase the prescribed pesticides because of the high prices.

"Our technical staff played their role of sensitising the farmers. The sub-counties which were most affected by the fall armyworm include Kikyusa, Butuntumula, Zirobwe, Kamira, Luweero and Katikamu. Several of our farmers complain of the high cost of the recommended pesticides for spray of the fall armyworm which forced several farmers to turn to the use of cheaper pesticides not recommended," he adds.

Dr Andrew Kidda Makubuya, the district production manager, says some of the farmers have resorted to using paraffin, among other substances, to try to eradicate the caterpillars in vain.

Ms Sarah Kataike Ndobooli, the Operation Wealth Creation programme director for policy and planning, says the fall armyworm has spread to more than 50 districts.

"Government is weighing many options, including finding ways of ensuring that the recommended chemicals for spraying the fall armyworm are available on market. It is true that the chemicals are still expensive for our farmers," Ms Kataike says.

She continues: "Government is weighing all options to ensure that farmers get the chemicals at a subsidised rate. We are all rallying to have the chemicals sold at gazetted retail agro shops to avoid cases of adulteration."

Dr Richard Molo from the National Agriculture Research Organisation, says efforts are underway to find biological means to fight the caterpillers.

He explains that their campaign is to develop a system where residents can eradicate the caterpillars without destroying the eco-system through application of chemicals.

Luweero District Entomology Department explains that the increased number of caterpillars in Luweero and the neighbouring districts is partly due to the sudden change and imbalance in the eco-system which has seen the migration of birds from these areas due to human activities and change in weather patterns.

"We have noted the disappearance of birds in many parts of Luweero yet these birds feed on caterpillars. You hardly see birds flying around because most trees have been cut down while forest areas are now bare. The dry spell which hit this area between 2015 and 2016 spilling over to 2017 had a significant effect," Mr Lule observes.

Early this year, Luweero District registered the loss of more than 200 acres of maize gardens in different parts of the district.

Government responded by sending a team of experts who identified the destructive caterpillar as the fall armyworm, which had been reported in several other countries, including Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

In March 2017, the ministry of Agriculture recommended particular chemicals for farmers to fight the armyworms, including Striker and Dudu fenos.

"Battling the fall armyworm and the black hairy caterpillars could prove very expensive to our farmers. Government should ensure that the farmers access the chemicals at a reduced rate since the provision of providing free chemicals has been ruled out. We also need to guard the farmers against individuals who could try to take advantage of their plight to sell adulterated chemicals which do not help," says Mr Ronald Ndaula, the district chairperson.



Sensitisation. Luweero District agriculture officer Sarah Namubiru (2 left) instructs farmers on how to spray pesticides to fight fall armyworms in Kakabala Village, recently. PHOTOS BY DAN WANDERA

Voices



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"We are investigating and are in contact with other government departments to ascertain the damage and number of people affected,"
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Damage. A maize plant destroyed by armyworms



Tormentors. Black hairy caterpillars.

CamScanner