

The rising number of desert locusts presents an unprecedented threat to food security and livelihoods in the Horn of Africa, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization said on Wednesday.

“This has become a situation of international dimensions that threatens the food security of the entire subregion,” Qu Dongyu, director general of the FAO said last week.

Desert locusts—the most devastating of all locust species—can consume their weight in food each day. Swarms potentially containing hundreds of millions of insects each can travel over 90 miles a day; a swarm the size of Manhattan can consume as much food in a day as the population of the New York tri-state area, said FAO locust expert Keith Cressman. Some swarms are far bigger.

If the outbreak isn’t controlled and conditions remain favorable for breeding, it could reach 30 countries in Africa and Asia, the U.N. said.

“This is a more serious emergency than we had earlier anticipated,” said Guleid Artan, the climate prediction director at East Africa’s Intergovernmental Authority on Development. “More locust swarms are entering northern Kenya daily and at this rate they could soon spread into Uganda and South Sudan.”

Extreme weather is behind the infestation, according to the U.N. East Africa experienced abnormally heavy rains late last year, flooding regions that are normally semiarid. Such conditions are favorable for locust breeding, which can grow substantially if not disrupted—a challenge in cash-strapped countries contending with insurgencies and other security challenges. Continued breeding in some areas is already deepening the crisis.

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Swarms entered Kenya in late December from Somalia, where security challenges had left a large breeding area uncontrolled. When the swarms crossed the border, relief officials said, residents in the Kenyan county of Wajir started shouting, whistling and drumming to scare the insects away.

The efforts forced the initial swarm to retreat. But a day later, larger swarms returned, clouding the sky. Police units fired tear gas and bullets but the locusts didn’t disperse. Locusts have continued to spread; this week, the swarms moved to around 90 miles east of the capital, Nairobi, alarming the region’s corn and fruit growers, local officials said.

The U.N. estimates that 23.6 million people in the region are already facing food shortages due to rains, insecurity and now locust infestation. Some 8.4 million people