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TACKLING THE LOCUST ATTACK

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

May 25, 2020-Monday
-°C

Humidity
-

Wind
-

Metro cities - Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata

Other cities - Noida, Gurgaon, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Bhopal , Chandigarh , Dehradun, Indore, Jaipur, Lucknow, Patna, Ranchi

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While India battles the coronavirus pandemic, four Indian states — Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Gujarat — are also confronting another challenge — a desert locust attack. Sixteen out of 33 districts of Rajasthan are battling the scourge; Madhya Pradesh has reported one of the worst attacks in 27 years in the Nimar-Malwa region; and, Punjab and Gujarat have warned farmers that they could be the next. Reports say that swarms are threatening to touch the Rajasthan-Haryana border, and then could move into Delhi. The current round is the second such attack; the first one was from December to February. India was then moderately successful in tackling the problem, with states deploying teams to spray organophosphate to kill locusts.

The desert locust is one of 12 species of short-horned grasshoppers; its swarms can travel up to 130 km in one day. Each day, a locust can eat its own weight — about two grams of fresh vegetation. This means that they not only devour valuable standing crops, but can also devastate livelihoods of those associated with the agricultural supply chain. The Food and Agriculture Organization has warned that the locust attack could lead to a major threat to food security. Locust attacks are not new to India, but earlier they used to leave India by November. But the swarms stayed on till early February this year. This, scientists said, was because of the climate crisis. In 2019, the monsoon started six weeks ahead of time (first week of July) in western India. It also lasted till November, instead of the usual September/October cycle. Extended rains created breeding conditions and also produced natural vegetation on which locusts feed. The May attack has been attributed to a series of cyclones in the Indian Ocean that hit a sandy area in the Arabian peninsula, providing hospitable breeding conditions for locusts.

Current global challenges — the coronavirus pandemic, increasing intensity of cyclones (as Amphan has shown), the locust attacks in Africa, Iran, Pakistan and India — demonstrate the perils of environmental degradation and the need for international cooperation to fight trans-border challenges. India has proposed a trilateral response in partnership with Pakistan and Iran to combat the desert locust wave. This is positive, and must be a template to deal with environment-related challenges.

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