

Briefing on the Locust Invasion in East Africa

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Tomorrow (10 April), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to have a briefing on the locust invasion endangering food security of millions of people in the East Africa region. The briefing is expected to take place through electronic exchanges. It is envisaged that the PSC will consider the written briefing from Workneh Gebeyehu, the Executive Secretary of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD).

The PSC previously held sessions on the impacts of climate change induced whether events including El Nino and the cyclones that affected in the Eastern and Southern Africa coasts. Thus, the 558th session of the PSC was dedicated to "The impact of EI Nino on Peace, Security and Stability in Africa and the Humanitarian Consequences". Under Article 6(f) of the PSC Protocol, it is envisaged that one of the functions of the PSC covers humanitarian action and disaster management. It is within the framework of these foundations that tomorrow's remote briefing is being held on the locus invasion.

Before the novel coronavirus (COVID19) became the global emergency that has taken the center stage in policy processes across Africa, as in other parts of the world, the largest locust invasion threatening the food security and livelihood of millions of people has already been under way in the East Africa region. In his address during the opening of the AU Summit on 9 February, AU Commission Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat remarked in passing on the threat posed by the locust invasion in East Africa. The AU along with FAO organized the first ministerial meeting for the Desert Locust affected

countries on 7 February 2020. This was followed by IGAD Heads of State and Government Summit.

The locust invasion has been spreading rapidly across this region since December 2019. Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia remain the most heavily impacted, with bands of hoppers and swarms of adult locusts devouring vegetation in multiple areas; mature desert locusts continue to breed in all three countries as of early March. According to reports of World Food Program (FAO), locust infestations have also intensified in Djibouti, Eritrea, and Sudan in recent months due to increased rainfall and the arrival of desert locust swarms from other affected countries. Other countries feared to be affected by the infestation include South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania.

The scale of the invasion and the attendant impact is unprecedented in recent decades. It is reported to be the worst infestation in 70 years. It is reported that the swarms are extremely large. In North-Eastern Kenya, one swarm was measured to be 37 miles long and 25 miles wide. The swarms, which can contain as many as 80 million adult locusts, travel up to 80 miles each day. Just a small swarm of the insects can eat as much food as 35,000 people daily.

The invasion has already adversely impacted communities in affected parts of the countries concerned. Things can get worse. The fear is that the number of locusts could grow up to 500 times before drier weather arrives if the efforts of countries including the aerial spraying is not able to bring the swarms under control. According to the FAO, the longer the locust outbreak continues in an already environmentally fragile region with existing food security problems, the higher is the risk of famine. This is particularly the case in conflict affected areas.

Even without the locust outbreak, some 25 million people in East Africa already faced high levels of food insecurity. It

is pointed out in Gebeyehu's briefing note that 'one major concern is that the new infestation will lead to significant crop losses in areas previously affected by droughts and floods as it will increase vulnerability among the affected households.' IGAD's chief also warns that '[a]ny spread to major producing areas could cause more significant impact in the region. Under the worst-case scenario, FAO estimates that there would be approximately 2.5 to 4.9 million additional caseload of food insecurity or worse.' In an appeal to the world for mobilizing \$76 million to end the locust plague, the FAO Director warned that inaction will affect 13 million people 'devastated by the loss of their crops and livelihoods'.

The crisis has become a major issue in the affected countries. Highlighting the gravity of the threat posed by the locust invasion, Somalia declared a state of emergency. Aerial spraying of pesticides is the most effective way of controlling the locust swarm. Countries in the region have tried to use both ground and aerial spraying of pesticide. As pointed out in Gebeyehu's briefing note, these operations have faced various challenges. These challenges include the size and speed of mobility of the swarms, their coverage of areas not easily accessible and security issue arising from presence of Al Shabaab. Of contemporary concern is the impact of measures announced by various governments to prevent escalation of COVID-19 pandemic including disruption of surveillance control operations, and deployment of control experts and equipment and delayed supply of pesticides and equipment, including aircrafts.

Given the regional scale of the outbreak, there a need not only to support the efforts of affected countries for containing the spread of the infestation but also for a regional coordination and approach. It is here that the role of the regional body IGAD becomes critical.

While the threat that the locust invasion presents to the food

security and livelihood of millions of people in the region deserves attention in its own, as a phenomenon induced by climate change, it should also be addressed in relation to the thematic focus of the PSC on climate change and its various peace and security and humanitarian impacts in Africa.

The expected outcome of the remote briefing is a communique. This is expected to cover various issues including measures for enhanced response for the infestation most importantly enhanced continental and international support for desert locust surveillance and control operations. In this respect, apart from mobilizing resources and support for such operations, the PSC may call on affected countries to coordinate their responses and in collaboration with IGAD provide the required cooperation to ensure that the impact of COVID19 measures are limited to the absolute minimum. In areas affected by Al Shabab, the PSC may call on cessation of hostilities and provision of access to those areas for undertaking the operations for controlling the locust in those areas. Given the impact of the infestation on the livelihood and food security affected communities and the humanitarian crisis it poses, the PSC may call for provision of humanitarian assistance and urge member states of the AU and the international community to heed the appeal of the FAO for mobilizing the funding necessary for the operation to stop the plague. The PSC may also urge the need for enhancing continental action for dealing with the multifaceted manifestations and impact of climate change and the non-military threat that this locust invasion poses to the development, peace and security of affected countries.