

## Locust Attack

### Why in news?

Swarms of locusts are being sighted early in India and in areas not historically associated with such sightings.

### What are locusts?

- The desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria*) is a short-horned grasshopper.
- **Solitary phase** - In “solitary phase”, these winged insects are safe.
- They become dangerous only when their populations build up rapidly.
- Close contact in crowded conditions trigger behavioural changes.
- **Gregarious phase** - They enter the “gregarious phase”, by grouping themselves into bands and forming swarms.
- They travel great distances (up to 150 km daily), while eating up every bit of vegetation on the way.
- If not controlled at the right time, these insect swarms can threaten the food security of countries.
- At present countries in the Horn of Africa such as Ethiopia and Somalia are witnessing one of the worst locusts attacks in the last 25 years.

### When are they sighted in India?

- The first swarms were sighted along the India-Pakistan border on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2020, months [ahead of the usual time of arrival](#).
- Agriculture Ministry’s Locust Warning Organization (LWO) reported the first sightings in Rajasthan’s Sri Ganganagar and Jaisalmer districts.
- In India, locusts are sighted normally during July- October along the Pakistan border.
- In 2019, parts of Western Rajasthan and Northern Gujarat reported swarms that caused damage to growing rabi crops.
- These were the first swarms reported in India since 1997.

### Why are locusts seen in urban areas?

- **Sightings** - Locusts are being seen in areas not historically associated with such sightings.
- These areas include urban areas of Rajasthan including Jaipur, Madhya Pradesh’s Gwalior, Morena and Sheopur.

- Also, stray swarms are seen in Vidharbha region of Maharashtra's Amravati, Nagpur and Wardha.
- **LWO** - K L Gurjar, Deputy Director of LWO, said there being no crops in the fields, the locusts have moved across states attracted by green cover.
- The swarms were aided by high-speed wind and thus they made their way to Jaipur.
- At present, there are 3 to 4 swarms in Rajasthan, another 2 or 3 in Madhya Pradesh.
- From Madhya Pradesh, a group has migrated to Maharashtra, which is not very difficult to control.
- **FAO** - A senior locust forecaster of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization said the locusts have started moving in search of food.
- In early-April 2020, the spring-bred swarms from Pakistan started arriving in Rajasthan.
- As this is before the monsoon rains, they found dry conditions.
- They continued to move east in Rajasthan looking for green vegetation for food and shelter where they will mature and lay eggs with the onset of the monsoon.

### **What led to their early arrival?**

- This can be traced back to the **cyclonic storms Mekunu and Luban** that had struck Oman and Yemen respectively in 2018.
- These turned large deserts tracts into lakes, facilitating locust breeding that continued through 2019.
- Swarms attacking crops in East Africa reached peak populations from November, 2019.
- They built up in southern Iran and Pakistan since the beginning of 2020, with heavy rains in East Africa in March-April enabling further breeding.

### **What can it mean to crops in India?**

- At present, chances of crop damage are low given that farmers have already harvested their rabi crop.
- The bigger problem will come once the present swarms breed.
- An adult female locust lays 80-90 eggs thrice in her three-month life cycle.
- If left uncontrolled, a swarm can grow exponentially to 40-80 million locusts per square kilometre.
- The locusts will start laying eggs after the monsoon starts and continue breeding for two more months.
- The newer generations may rise during the growth phase of kharif crop.
- In May 2020, Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar chaired a meeting to take stock of the situation.

- Control involves **spraying insecticide** on locusts' night resting places like trees using drones.
- India has also put an order of 60 specialised insecticide sprayers with the UK, with India already having 50 such machines.

**Source: The Indian Express**

