

'A PLAGUE OF LOCUSTS IS A LOGISTICAL NIGHTMARE'

Africa has been hit by a plague of locusts of Biblical proportions. *Resource* spoke to Arnold van Huis of the Laboratory of Entomology. 'To successfully control a plague, you have to kill 90 to 95 per cent of the population.'

HOW DOES SUCH A PLAGUE START?

'Desert locusts normally live a solitary life. If there is more vegetation available for them to eat due to favourable weather conditions, the locusts reproduce faster. If that is followed by a dry period, the areas with vegetation shrink and the locusts are then concentrated in those places. Another reason why locust populations become concentrated is if they encounter a barrier such as mountains or the Red Sea. Once they are crowded together, the locusts become gregarious, meaning they give up their solitary habits and start swarming.'

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF SUCH SWARMS?

'A locust eats its own weight in plants, about two grams, every day. A ton of locusts, which

would only be a small part of a swarm, can consume the food of 2500 people in a single day. One swarm can cover 100 square kilometres and advance at a rate of 100 to 150 kilometres a day. And wherever they go, they also lay eggs — about 200 per female. In this way, the population increases by a factor of 10 every few months.'



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HOW CAN YOU COMBAT A PLAGUE LIKE THIS?

'It's difficult. Pesticides are the only method. To successfully control a plague, you have to kill 90 to 95 per cent of the population. A couple of pesticide-spraying planes won't be enough. What is more, many of these countries do not have the capacity or know-how. It's a logistical nightmare. The best scenario is for the weather conditions to change — for it to get colder, for example.'

COULD SUCH A PLAGUE APPEAR IN THE NETHERLANDS, FOR INSTANCE DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE?

'No. There are only four species of locusts in Africa that can swarm. Those swarming species are not found in the Netherlands. I don't find it plausible anyway that climate change causes the swarming. We had five such plagues before 1963 and two since. If it was related to climate change, I would expect the number of plagues to increase.' **tl**