

# '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**