

Hunger in Niger

If you've been reading the news on-line or watching TV lately, it has been hard to miss hearing about Niger.

It's the country where millions are suffering from severe hunger.

In fact, the Government of Niger has estimated at least 2.5 million people don't have enough to eat. Some 80,000 children are at risk of becoming severely malnourished in the country's east and north.

Two things happened last year to trigger the current hunger crisis:

1. Heavy rains that ended earlier than expected
2. Swarms of locusts moved in devouring crops

Niger is a poor, dry, landlocked country along the Sahara desert. Most of its 11.9 million people live off the land. According to estimates, 84% of men and 97% of women grow crops or raise livestock.

Countries like Niger—poor, situated in dry, desert areas, where most of the population mostly lives off farming—are most vulnerable to food shortages.

During last year's rainy season, heavy rains fell across [the Sahel](#) and northwest Africa. But the rain stopped abruptly, causing this year's harvest to be lower than expected. Then the locusts came, destroying part of the harvest.

"So the existing malnutrition, rain and locusts led to the situation we have today," explains Vincent Turbat, World Bank country manager for Niger.

Heavy rains had created conditions for a locust explosion: Four generations of the insects were able to breed in rapid succession. It was the worst locust plague in more than a decade.

Swarms can contain billions of insects, so the locust is a serious threat to both crops and grazing land.

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Last summer people in Mauritania reported that the sky turned brown as locusts descended on the capital, Nouakchott, turning green trees into brown skeletons. Trying to fight back the locust onslaught, residents burned bonfires of tires and trash, while others rattled tin boxes filled with stones.

Locusts can be treated and

This insect can consume its own weight in vegetation every day. A ton of locusts can eat as much food in one day as 2,500 people.

Today, the international community, including the World Bank, is helping Niger fight hunger. The Bank has diverted money from existing projects to help buy cereals to feed people on the brink of starvation.

controlled by pesticides. But it's always important to be careful how much pesticide is needed because these chemicals are harmful to people, farming animals and the environment.

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"We have pockets now where people have no more food and they need to be helped until the next harvest, about mid September," Turbat says.

Other West African countries neighboring Niger also had poor harvests last year. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Senegal also lost crops worth millions because of last year's short rain season and locust invasion.

The international community is keeping an eye on these countries as well.