

UK supercomputer to combat Africa's worst locust outbreak in decades

- A supercomputer funded by UK aid is helping countries in East Africa to tackle devastating locust outbreaks by tracking the insects' movements around the continent
- The computer based in Kenya uses data to predict where the locusts will move to and develop early warning systems so communities can prepare
- In addition, new UK aid to the UN will help stop the insects destroying the livelihoods of millions of people

Climate experts in East Africa are using a UK-funded supercomputer to combat the continent's worst locust outbreak in 70 years, which is robbing people on the brink of starvation of much-needed food.

The supercomputer based in the regional climate centre in Kenya (ICPAC) uses satellite data to track dangerous locust swarms which in just one day can travel nearly 100 miles and consume the amount of crops that would otherwise feed 35,000 people.

The innovative technology – supported by UK aid and the UK Met Office – also produces extensive weather forecasts to predict the high winds, rainfall, and humidity that provide ideal breeding conditions for locusts so climate experts can predict their next destination. By improving early warning systems we are helping charities and African Governments to take rapid action to protect vulnerable communities.

The UK is also providing £5 million to an emergency UN appeal to help vulnerable communities in Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Tanzania use this data to prepare for the arrival of locusts. This support will fund surveillance of the locusts and the spraying of aerial pesticides to kill the insects, protecting 78,000 hectares of land.

The locust infestation – driven by longer rainy seasons and extreme weather – has already destroyed hundreds of thousands of hectares of vegetation in East Africa. This is decimating the livelihoods of farmers and worsening the humanitarian crisis in East Africa where close to 25 million people are on the brink of starvation.

International Development Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan said:

“The devastating locust outbreak in East Africa has paralysed communities that are already facing the daily threat of starvation.

“Through UK aid and British expertise, we are helping to track, stop and kill dangerous swarms of locust to help millions of people fighting for survival.

“With rising temperatures and increasing cyclones driving these infestations, Britain is stepping up to help vulnerable communities prepare for and adapt to the catastrophic impacts of climate change.”

UK aid to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has already helped protect 73,000 hectares across East Africa, supplied almost 290,000 litres of pesticides and trained 600 people to carry out surveillance to stop the locust spread.

On top of this, UK aid is helping vulnerable communities cope better with extreme weather by improving access to clean water, and providing drought-resistant seeds, farming tools and nutrition packs to families.

Notes to editors

- The supercomputer is being provided through the Department for International Development's Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa (WISER) programme, in collaboration with the Met Office and the Africa Climate Policy Centre.
- The £35 million programme will run from 2015 until 2021 and will:
- Help to build Africa's resistance to climate change by implementing new policies and practices to plan for extreme changes in weather.
- Work to improve the quality of weather and climate information by bringing together experts and support its use on the continent.
- Provide expertise to improve climate forecasting ability and strengthen Africa's response to climate change.
- UK aid will support the UN FAO Regional Emergency Appeal for the locust outbreak in East Africa. The FAO has initially asked donors worldwide for a total of £104million of funding of which the UK will contribute £5million.
- To fight this infestation, the UN Central Emergency Reserve Fund (CERF) has released £7.5 million to the FAO which has the skills and expertise in locust control to coordinate the response. The UK is the largest donor to CERF.
- With UK aid backed funding, the FAO is spraying pesticides on the ground and by air to prevent further damage to crops and protect livelihoods. The FAO is also working with governments in Africa, to train experts to manage future outbreaks and to conduct research to better understand the swarm.