



PAKISTAN-CHINA COOPERATION: DEALING WITH LOCUST OUTBREAK IN PAKISTAN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Even as Pakistan deals with the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, it is afflicted with yet another plague of biblical proportions that has taken a back seat to COVID-19 outbreak. Swarms of locusts that invaded Pakistan's agricultural heartland forced the federal government to declare a national emergency, and appeal to international community for assistance in dealing with this menace in February.¹ New swarms are reported to be breeding and forming groups in KPK, Balochistan, and Sindh.²

Insect swarms had made their way to Pakistan from Iran, the south-western neighbor. According to the United Nations, cyclones and heavy rains sparked extraordinary breeding and exponential growth of the locust on the Arabian Peninsula during 2018-19.³ And, from there, it spread to Horn of Africa and Indo-Pakistan border region.

The severity of crisis is such that it has already destroyed standing crops of cotton, wheat, maize, and tomatoes in many villages and towns across Punjab and Sindh. Particularly, Sindh province has been the hardest hit. It has been estimated by Pakistani officials that locust swarms have already

¹ Syed Irfan Raza, "National emergency declared against locusts", *DAWN*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1531824>

² Desert Locust Situation Update, *FAO Locust Watch*, March 24, 2020, <http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/index.html>

³ Locust Watch, "Central & Eastern region outbreaks (May 2018 to present)", Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/archives/1032/2485/2018outbreak/index.html>

affected nearly 30 million acres of farmland during past nine months, and only 300,000 acres of land were sprayed using national resources.⁴ Moreover, locust swarms can fly up to 150 kms a day with the wind, and can eat as much in one day as about 35,000 people. If left unchecked, locust plague will cause extensive damage to cotton and wheat crops which can lead to food scarcity in short-to-medium term. The situation can be challenging for Pakistan facing the twin plagues.

It was in this background after appealing to international community, and international organizations for help, Islamabad turned to China for assistance. Beijing, even in the midst of COVID-19 epidemic, dispatched a team of experts in last week of February. Chinese and Pakistani experts undertook detailed field survey to assess the situation and prepare a prevention and control strategy for dealing with the plague.⁵ Chinese experts announced that a comprehensive assistance package to counter locust outbreak will be prepared and given by Chinese government.

The immediate focus is on preventing breeding of the next generation of locust swarm during the 2020 monsoon season to secure autumn crops. Based on initial survey of 900,000 hectares and visits to Thar district in Sindh, Chinese experts announced that Beijing will provide 50 vehicles that will enable Pakistani authorities to spray 16,000 hectares per day. Similarly, 50 drones will be given to spray and monitor 1333 hectares per hour to combat locust outbreak.⁶ This package will be revised after survey of farmland in Pakistan is completed in coming weeks.

The first batch of locust control materials, including 50,000 liters of pesticides and 15 high-powered machines for spraying arrived in Pakistan on March 10.⁷ Earlier, reports also suggested that Chinese authorities will be sending a 'duck army' (over 100,000 ducks) to fight locust swarms. In 2000, Chinese authorities tackled locust infestation in Xinjiang region by sending 30,000 ducks from Zhejiang province in the year 2000.⁸ Ducks proved to be effective against locusts, as each duck can

⁴ "Chinese experts conduct field survey of locust's affected area" *The Nation*, March 2, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2020/chinese-experts-conduct-field-survey-of-locust-s-affected-area>

⁵ "Chinese experts help Pakistan find solutions for locust swarms", *CGTN*, March 7, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-07/Chinese-experts-help-Pakistan-find-solutions-for-locust-swarms-OEWEtLpKsU/index.html>

⁶ "China assures Pakistan of help in fighting locusts", *DAWN*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1537042/china-assures-pakistan-of-help-in-fighting-locusts>

⁷ APP, "Pakistan receives first batch of locust control pesticide, equipment", *DAWN*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1539621/pakistan-receives-first-batch-of-locust-control-pesticide-equipment>

⁸ Du Qiongfang & Liu Xuanzun, "Chinese experts mull using duck legion to help Pakistan wipe out locust plague", *The Global Times*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1180956.shtml>

eat more than 200 locusts every day. These reports emerged after a Chinese research proposed the idea, but later Chinese and Pakistani experts said ducks were not suited to conditions in Pakistan.⁹

Even as Pakistan and China grapple with COVID-19, this cooperation in dealing with locust outbreak in Pakistan over the past few weeks reflects the priority given by China and Pakistan to their bilateral cooperation even in times of global emergency. The agriculture sector in Pakistan under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework is a crucial component of Long-Term Plan of CPEC. Bilateral collaboration to deal with locust swarms in Pakistan's agriculture heartland will enable experts and governments in both countries to further deepen their cooperation in this field.

⁹ "China will not send ducks to tackle locusts in Pakistan, says expert", *The Guardian*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/27/china-to-dispatch-army-of-ducks-to-pakistan-to-devour-locust-swarm>