
Interview: Michel Lecoq

Dieldrin best to prevent locust plague

This interview with Michel Lecoq of PRIFAS Acridologie Opérationnelle Ecoforce Internationale, the French organization that specializes in the fight against locusts, was conducted in June by Garance Upham Phau.

EIR: PRIFAS gave a press conference April 12 in Paris, where they discussed the locust threat in Africa. Where are we today with this menace?

Lecoq: What we can say at present is that the menace is not in the least bit strangled. We have the onset of invasion of the desert locust; this is a story that goes back now about a year; there were swarms of locusts that began to appear on the coast of Ethiopia and Sudan, then in what is called a gregarious breeding area of the desert locust. Since then, the swarms have progressively invaded West Africa, throughout the winter and a part of the spring; there were significant swarms in Morocco, in Algeria, in Tunisia, finally in the entire Maghreb region.

We have led an extremely important campaign to fight this, but in spite of it all, there are numerous swarms that have frankly escaped. The counteroperations are presently continuing in the Maghreb, but there are swarms that have already begun a migratory movement toward the Sahel zone. It is probable that a certain number of swarms are going to escape treatment operations in the Maghreb and are going to be reproducing themselves in the Sahel zone. That is why it is necessary to distrust the victory bulletins announced a bit too hastily [last year], since they were claiming to have mastered the situation, when the swarms had simply been abandoned in Ethiopia and Sudan. . . . At the moment, the situation remains relatively critical. . . .

EIR: What is the history of this menace?

Lecoq: Let's say that the last great invasion of our locusts was stopped in the neighborhood of 1961-62; it had begun in 1949-50. Thus, taking off from 1962, a period of remission began during which there were almost no swarms. There had been small beginnings of invasion—in particular in 1968-78—which, at each point were brought under control. This year, and since last year, we have witnessed anew the risk of the onset of invasions, and we are presently in a critical

period. Thus the onset of invasions corresponds to especially favorable rains, abundant over large surfaces in certain regions of the range of habitation of the locust, which are the ranges where this species becomes gregarious. One of the principal gregarious ranges for the locust is the waters that immediately border the Red Sea, from the coast of Arabia and Yemen from one side, to the coast of Sudan and Ethiopia on the other. The favorable ecological conditions for such beginnings of invasions arise, let's say, on average about every 10 years—maybe 8, maybe 15 years.

Currently, the problem is that we are in a critical period: If we apply the means now, we can eventually control this phenomenon, as we did in 1968 or 1978; but, if we intervene too late, if we do not bring the phenomenon under control in this phase of the onset of invasion . . . the invasion will be locked into gear. Two or three years after the onset of invasion, we will have locust populations that are much more gregarious, whose physiological and ecological characteristics have been modified. We also will have some populations that are more resistant; the invasion becomes self-sustaining. . . . So, it is completely fundamental that we be able to control matters in this present critical period.

EIR: Rafink Skaf, former head of the anti-locust operations of the FAO, last March 30 denounced the fact that the United States and other industrialized countries, as well as the FAO, had banned dieldrin.

Lecoq: . . . The debate is currently a bit beside the point, because dieldrin is an insecticide that had been essentially recommended for a preventive effort. It was supposed to be used solely in a desert area, far from cultivation, far from inhabited areas, in order to have rapid control during the onset of breeding and hatching. Because of its long residue, it permits a large desert area to be treated very rapidly, so that the entire contaminated surface can be treated. . . .

Now, the problem is superseded, because we are no longer in a period of preventive effort: We already have the onset of invasion and we have swarms that are presently migrating into populated regions. Hence, we are obliged to use something other than dieldrin. Nonetheless, so long as we don't have a replacement, it would appear reasonable to be able to continue to use at least existing stocks under very strict conditions against the locust in desert areas.

All the other insecticides—malathion, for example—are short-lived. We are obliged, eventually, to treat the same area several times progressively, and as soon as there are successive infestations, we must completely blanket the entire contaminated surface. Finally, this causes a toxicity vis-à-vis the environment which risks being at least equal to dieldrin. In particular, with these [other] insecticides, we are unable to spare the auxiliary animal life. With dieldrin, in contrast, by making only borderline treatments, we were able to spare a great part of the auxiliary animal life, in particular, those organisms which are parasitical or predatory toward locusts. . . .