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Deadly Maize Disease Threatens Food Supplies in Kenya

This is the VOA Special English Agriculture Report.

Officials in Kenya are attempting to deal with a deadly disease attacking maize crops. Some Kenyan farmers say the disease has reduced crop production by as much as sixty percent.

Last September, farmers in Bomet reported that a disease was destroying their maize or corn. The disease is called "maize lethal necrosis." It makes the plant turn yellow and dry up. By January, researchers found that the disease was spreading across the country's south and into central and eastern Kenya.

Paul Omanga is a crop production officer with the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization. He says a study in July found that maize lethal necrosis had affected more than sixty-four thousand hectares. Up to eighty percent of the crop was ruined. The FAO official warned that if the disease is not controlled, it would have a major effect on maize production in Kenya.

Muo Kasina is a researcher with the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute. He is working with others to fight the disease. But he says there is no known way to treat it.

KASINA: "The problem is we do not have the experience at all with this disease in Kenya. So for me, I really have no idea at all what I expect to see in the future." (:12)

Researchers are investigating whether maize lethal necrosis is spread by insects or in seeds. When they know that, they may be better able to fight it.

The FAO's Paul Omanga says he and others are telling farmers about the importance of crop rotation. But he says farmers must take more extreme action if they suspect the disease has infected their crops.

PAUL OMANGA: "Another one is ensuring that, in affected fields, you destroy all the plants. You can even burn them or make fodder for livestock. The stems, the leaves, you make fodder for livestock. But you should not leave those affected plants to stay in the field because the virus will remain in that to infect another crop." (:31)

Paul Omanga says he is concerned about Kenya's food stability.

OMANGA: "This is causing some concern because maize is the staple food and any threat to maize production is a threat to food security in Kenya."

America's Agency for International Development says the poorest Kenyans spend twenty-eight percent of what they earn on maize.

And that's the VOA Special English Agriculture Report. You can find links to three recent FAO reports about food security in Africa on our website, voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Bob Doughty.

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