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Wheat killer detected in Iran

Dangerous fungus on the move from East Africa to the Middle East

5 March 2008, Rome - A new and virulent wheat fungus, previously found in East Africa and Yemen, has moved to major wheat growing areas in Iran, FAO reported today. The fungus is capable of wreaking havoc to wheat production by destroying entire fields.

Countries east of Iran, like Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, all major wheat producers, are most threatened by the fungus and should be on high alert, FAO said.

It is estimated that as much as 80 percent of all wheat varieties planted in Asia and Africa are susceptible to the wheat stem rust (*Puccinia graminis*). The spores of wheat rust are mostly carried by wind over long distances and across continents.

“The detection of the wheat rust fungus in Iran is very worrisome,” said Shivaji Pandey, Director of FAO’s Plant Production and Protection Division.

“The fungus is spreading rapidly and could seriously lower wheat production in countries at direct risk. Affected countries and the international community have to ensure that the spread of the disease gets under control in order to reduce the risk to countries that are already hit by high food prices.”

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has informed FAO that the fungus has been detected in some localities in Broujerd and Hamedan in western Iran. Laboratory tests have confirmed the presence of the fungus. Iran said it will enhance its research capacity to face the new infection and develop new wheat varieties resistant to the disease.

Ug99

The wheat fungus first emerged in Uganda in 1999 and is therefore called Ug99. The wind-borne transboundary pest subsequently spread to Kenya and Ethiopia. In 2007, an FAO mission confirmed for the first time that Ug99 has affected wheat fields in Yemen. The Ug99 strain found in Yemen was already more virulent than the one found in East Africa.

Contact:
Erwin Northoff
Media Relations, FAO
erwin.northoff@fao.org
(+39) 06 570 53105
(+39) 348 252 3616

A virulent wheat fungus is spreading rapidly.

Related links

Global Rust Initiative

Ethiopia and Kenya had serious wheat rust epidemics in 2007 with considerable yield losses.

The Borlaug Global Rust Initiative (BGRI), established to combat wheat rusts around the world, will support countries in developing resistant varieties, producing their clean quality seeds, upgrading national plant protection and plant breeding services and developing contingency plans. The BGRI was founded by Norman Borlaug (known as "the father of the Green Revolution"), Cornell University, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry areas (ICARDA), the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and FAO.

Disease surveillance and wheat breeding is already underway to monitor the fungus and to develop Ug99 resistant varieties. However, more efforts are required to develop long term durable resistant varieties that can be made available to farmers in affected countries and countries at risk. FAO urged countries to increase disease surveillance and intensify efforts to control the disease.

Contact:
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Media Relations, FAO
erwin.northoff@fao.org
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(+39) 348 252 3616

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