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Dangerous wheat-killing fungus detected in Iran – UN

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5 March 2008 –A dangerous new fungus with the ability to destroy entire wheat fields has been detected in Iran, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported today.

The wheat stem rust, whose spores are carried by wind across continents, was previously found in East Africa and Yemen and has moved to Iran, which said that laboratory tests have confirmed its presence in some localities in Broujerd and Hamedan in the country's west.

Up to 80 per cent of all Asian and African wheat varieties are susceptible to the fungus, and major wheat-producing nations to Iran's east – such as Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – should be on high alert, FAO warned.

"The fungus is spreading rapidly and could seriously lower wheat production in countries at direct risk," said Shivaji Pandey, Director of FAO's Plant Production and Protection Division.

He urged the control of the rust's spread to lower the risk to countries already impacted by high food prices.

Iran has said that it will bolster its research capacity to tackle the new fungus and develop wheat varieties that are rust-resistant.

Called Ug99, the disease first surfaced in Uganda and subsequently spread to Kenya and Ethiopia, with both countries experiencing serious crop yield losses due to a serious rust epidemic last year. Also in 2007, FAO confirmed that a more virulent strain was found in Yemen.

The agency appealed to countries to bolster disease surveillance and step up efforts to control it.

The Borlaug Global Rust Initiative (BGRI) – founded by Norman Borlaug, Cornell University, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the Internatioanl Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and FAO – will continue its work in assisting countries develop drug-resistant wheat varieties, upgrading their plant protection measures and creating contingency plans.

For analysis see F, William Endahl's feature article.

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