

Worm from India hits Sri Lankan farmers

The fall armyworm, first detected in October, has affected 50% the maize crop

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After coping with successive droughts in the past few years, Sri Lanka's maize farmers are now battling a tiny but powerful enemy - the fall armyworm.

According to the Agriculture Department, the fall armyworm - from the moth species and known by the scientific name *Spodoptera frugiperda* - is said to have come from India, carried by strong winds across the Palk Strait. First detected in October, it has spread to many districts, threatening tens of thousands of farmers.

Affected by drought

"The fall armyworm has affected nearly 50% of the crop. Farmers who harvested their crop in time escaped severe damage, but those who suffered the drought and hence delayed their harvesting have been



A farmer in Karnataka's Chikkaballapur, whose maize crop was affected by fall armyworm last year. ■SUDHAKARA JAIN

hit more," W.R.W. Weerakoon, Director-General of Agriculture told *The Hindu*.

Dominating headlines in Sri Lankan media, the fall armyworm has acquired the local name *sena* (army) worm, as it comes in big groups and attacks crops, particularly maize. Maize is among the top seasonal crops produced in Sri Lanka,

harvested in the island's two seasons of cultivation - the 'Maha' and 'Yala', linked to the two monsoons. Government data shows that in 2017, nearly two lakh metric tonnes of maize were cultivated across some 50,000 hectares.

An insect that is known to be native to tropical and subtropical regions of the Amer-

icas, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the species is said to have travelled east to other tropical regions. In recent months, fall armyworm infestations were reported in different parts of India, including Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Gujarat.

The crop attack in Sri Lanka has assumed national significance, dominating Parliament debates this week. While Leader of the Opposition Mahinda Rajapaksa slammed the government for inadequate measures to tackle the problem, Agriculture Minister P. Harrison said that the issue was being given high priority, with a special task force under President Maithripala Sirisena looking into swift responses. Officials said a sum of LKR 250 million had been set aside to compensate affected farmers.