

FARMING

increased incidences of diabetes in

Devastating wilt disease threatens banana farmers

In the last few weeks, there have been fears that the devastating banana disease — bacterial wilt — has crossed into Kenya from Uganda.

A team of scientists conducting a survey in Western Kenya region has now confirmed these fears — the disease is indeed, in the country.

It wipes out whole fields in weeks as happened in Uganda. A farmer in Osipata village, Chakol division of Teso District, Mr David Osili who noticed it in April, has already lost 90 per cent of his crop. A report on the survey by Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (Kari), says symptoms of bacterial wilt include shrivelling and wilting of the male



Jessca Mbaka, a plant pathologist, empathises with a farmer who has lost his entire crop to the disease PHOTO/COURTESY

flower bud, and pre-mature ripening of bunches, which develop a reddish brown colouration and are inedible. The leaves of the infected plants also become yellow and wilt.

These symptoms are similar to those of fusarium wilt but when the banana pseudo stem is cut across, the characteristic yellow ooze like mucous distinguishing the two, it added.

“The disease spreads very rapidly and entire banana fields can be wiped out within weeks hence causing food insecurity and loss of income in the affected areas,” the report says.

According to the team leader Jessca Mbaka, a plant pathologist at Kari-

Thika, the disease was first spotted on a farm near a road in Teso District. Visits to other farms revealed that it had spread to a radius of 10 km within two divisions in the same district.

She said if prompt measures are not taken, the disease would wipe out all the banana fields in the Western Province and spread to other parts of the country.

“In both cases the disease was on two banana varieties Pisang Awak better known as Kayinja, mainly used for brewing in Teso and Bokoboko, cooked when ripe,” she added.

Mbaka said the team noted that the disease is transmitted by insect

pollinators while visiting flowers to collect nectar, by contaminated tools during farm operations, animals moving across the fields and infected planting material. She added that the bacteria can also survive in plant residues, banana peels and leaves used sometimes for packaging.

Mbaka suspected that the initial inoculums (bacteria) could have come from infected banana peels or leaves dropped by the roadside.

The survey was conducted by Kari, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture and the Rural Energy and Food Security Organisation.

— BONIFACE MWANGI