

Small businesses suffer as China virus shuts communities

AFP, Beijing

Wang Li's guesthouse sits a stone's throw from the Great Wall, an idyllic setting for a weekend getaway. But in these uncertain times of the new coronavirus, Wang and her family are the only occupants.

The 35-year-old woman now spends her days disinfecting Yingfangyuan Farmhouse and its empty restaurant near Beijing, as millions of people across the country stay home, either under government orders or out of caution.

As the virus claims more lives and infects thousands of people every day, it is also taking a toll on the country's small businesses that rely on spending from China's growing middle-class.

"We used to be able to have up to 10 tables of guests a day during this period," she told AFP. "There is no one now." While she usually earns around 10,000 yuan (\$1,400) during the Lunar New Year holiday, her business was closed this year.

"We rely on this for our livelihood. We can only wait for the epidemic to pass," she said, noting that she will face problems if the situation persists for more than two months.

"I don't have other (backup) plans." Across Beijing's rural outskirts, guesthouses, restaurants



A woman wearing a facemask as a preventative measure, looks at empty supermarket shelves, which used for stacking paper towels, in Hong Kong on February 5.

and tourist attractions have been deserted for almost two weeks.

The Great Wall and Ming dynasty tombs remain closed and people are urged to stay home -- with many working remotely even after the Spring Festival break ended.

Many bus and train services have been suspended across the country, and central Hubei province, the epicentre of the outbreak, has effectively been locked down.

Supermarkets are struggling to sell their food as families have enough after stocking up for holiday

gatherings that have not been held -- in line with officials' advice. At the Shijihualian Supermarket in Heishanzhai village, boxes of Lunar New Year goods, including food items such as persimmons, remain stacked and unsold.

"They are bought as gifts, but people have not been visiting their relatives this year," said its shopkeeper surnamed Yang.

"With no relatives to host this year, it will take time for them to deplete their supplies." With analysts warning that the virus

could cut into the country's already slowing economy, China's central bank has urged financial institutions to continue stepping up support for small and micro enterprises.

But this has not stopped business owners from fretting over an uncertain future.

Adding to the isolation of rural communities, villages have closed themselves off from "outsiders" in a bid to ensure the new coronavirus, which has claimed more than 900 lives, stays out.

Bright red banners proclaiming the importance of epidemic prevention drape across the entrances of villages, and masked volunteers stand guard at each entry point.

Residents who would have typically returned to work in cities after the Spring Festival break are still in their hometowns as well.

In the Heishanzhai village north of Beijing, there are blockades on roads leading into its residential areas. "We stopped allowing people in from the second day of the Lunar New Year," said Zhang Xinao, a 25-year-old volunteer manning one of the entrances.

"We also disinfect the entire village every day in the mornings and afternoons," he told AFP, as another volunteer walked around spraying a can of disinfectant.



US-Bangla eyeing to make Sylhet more accessible

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In 2019, the number of domestic travellers using the airline increased 10 per cent to about 20 lakh. US-Bangla also operates flights to and from Kolkata, Chennai, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Guangzhou, Muscat and Doha.

Despite the recent coronavirus outbreak in China, the airline still maintains its route to Guangzhou.

"Many Bangladeshis stuck in China want to come back. We cannot close our doors when people are in danger," Ahmed said.

The number of people killed by the virus

rose by 97 last Sunday, the highest number of casualties in a day, taking the total death count in China to 908.

"The necessary safety measures have been taken to prevent the spread of coronavirus and I personally went to China few days earlier to boost the crew's mental strength," he added.

Monirul Haque Joarder, director for flight operations of US-Bangla; Moshliq Azam, head of training; Musa Mollah, director of administration; and Md Kamrul Islam, general manager-public relations, also spoke on the occasion.



CASHING IN ON CRICKET MANIA

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As the specific tree logs required to make cricket bats were not available in Dhaka at the time, Bepary returned to his village where the wood was available. After that, he began to craft cricket bats for commercial purposes in 1992. The bats were sent to Khan's shop in Dhaka, where they would be sold regularly.

Following Bepary's example, a cottage industry of 200 has sprouted in Nesarabad that is minting Tk 15 crore every year.

The factories can be found at the Uribuniya, Binna, Khejbari, Jilbari and Katakhalii villages under Balodia union, said local businessmen.

According to various cricket bat producers, the business began to spread widely in Nesarabad upazila from 1997, after Bangladesh won the ICC Trophy, the qualification tournament for the 1999 Cricket World Cup, in Malaysia.

Following Bangladesh's victory, the demand for cricket bats rose suddenly as did the people's love for cricket, they said.

To make cricket bats, ideally light wooden logs are needed. In Bangladesh's case, the most suitable wood for the purpose was Gewa wood, which is found in the Sundarbans.

At first, the logs were widely used but after the government banned the cutting of Gewa trees in the mangrove forest, producers switched to kadam (burflower-tree) and hog plum logs, which are very low in quality. Generally, bats of nine different sizes are made. The prices range from Tk 200-250 depending on size, said Maksudur Rahman, owner of a cricket bat factory at Jilbari village.

The production of cricket bats has created working opportunities for more than 2,000 people, both male and female, in the upazila, said Mizanur Rahman, who owns another

factory in the village.

Factories produce anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 cricket bats each season, which is a six-month period beginning in November, according to Rahman.

The cricket bats made in Nesarabad are sold at almost every corner of the country.

Initially, producers would send incomplete cricket bats to Dhaka, where they would be burnished and decorated for sale. Now, the entire process is handled by the local factories. These days, workers use the bat's frames using different types of motorised machines. Previously, they would have to do all the work by hand as electricity was not available in the area before 2000.

The industry has provided job opportunities for hundreds of people in Nesarabad. With many having mastered the technique of cricket bat making, new factories are opening up often.

Women have also benefitted as the factories provide a source of income. It is now commonplace to see women put the finishing touches on the bats, such as the burnish and logos. Women working at the factories earn between Tk 200-250, said Runu Begum of Jilbari village.

"This helps them support their families." However, businessmen have conceded that using poor quality wood has led to the production of lesser quality bats.

"We have the capacity to make high quality or even international standard cricket bats," said Md Mostofa Kamal, an owner of a bat factory at Jilbari village. But for want of quality willow, they are unable to do so.

To get higher quality logs, the government needs to lend its support.

"Only then will the factories be able to produce high-standard bats," he added.

Light engineering to help diversify export basket

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A study by the project shows that the business productivity of light engineering workshop owners increased by 29 per cent after the intervention of the project.

Around 500 people received training and support facilities to start their own businesses. Of them, 223 were female.

Approximately 9,865 youth received apprenticeship-based training, 98.65 per cent of them were placed in jobs.

Some 5,182 light engineering workshop owners received technical upgrade training. Besides, 5,289 workshop owners received training on fair work conditions and health and safety at work.

Around 700 market committees received gender awareness and access to finance training under the Brac project.



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