

Will Covid-19 create a ‘lost generation’ in Asia?

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN

Job offers have been rescinded, life plans are disrupted. The economic fallout from Covid-19 has raised the prospect of a lost generation in Asia. Will the young people of Singapore and the region find new paths to achieve their dreams?

Tailor Vikas Kumar, 25, from India’s eastern state of Bihar, had ambitious plans for the next two years.

After chalking up seven years’ experience at a textile firm in Mumbai, earning about 25,000 rupees (\$\$450) a month, he had planned to strike out on his own and start a small tailoring business.

He had also wanted to upgrade his mud and straw hut in Bihar, which houses his parents, wife and two children, into bricks and mortar.

But the pandemic waylaid these plans. The lockdown imposed by the Indian government in March prevented him from going to work, forcing him to return home in May.

His savings of 100,000 rupees have all been used up now, to ensure that his family survives this difficult phase, leaving no spare cash for rebuilding.

Work has not resumed fully enough at the textile firm to convince Mr Kumar, who was paid by the day, to return to Mumbai. Neither are there opportunities for someone like him - his family does not own farming land - back at his village.

“This year has been wasted,” laments Mr Kumar, who has put his plans on hold till 2022.

His story of how the pandemic disrupted life plans and undermined financial security is one that is experienced by young people across Asia.

With most economies in the region still reeling from the fallout of the pandemic, fears are mounting over the prospect of the creation of a “lost generation” in Asia - home to more young people than any other region.

This lost generation may be scarred economically, socially and psychologically by the far-reaching effects of the coronavirus crisis, which has been more consequential than past crises due to the unprecedented extent of its impact, experts say.

Social distancing measures have not only dealt a blow to businesses, but also taken a toll on individuals’ mental well-being and disrupted global supply chains.

Unemployment rates among young people have also seen a bigger increase than that those for adults, preliminary data from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicates. For unemployment data, the ILO defines youth as those aged 15 to 24.

Young workers must also contend with



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With no smooth transition to the job market, young adults may find it hard to embark on marriage or parenthood, says an expert.

“wage scarring effects”, with research indicating that those who find employment after recessions may have to deal with a lasting negative impact on their productivity and wages, said the ILO.

This may have an impact on the life trajectories of a younger generation, warns Professor Jean Yeung, founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore.

Without a smooth transition into the job market, it can be difficult for youngsters and young adults to embark on other significant adulthood events, such as marriage, parenthood or setting up their own households, she adds.

“The longer the current crisis lasts, the harder it is for the youth to recover from its negative impact. With no effective interventions, they could very well become a lost generation.”

Such fears are palpable in Japan, where an

expert panel at the country’s labour ministry has urged efforts to support new graduates to avoid another “employment ice age”. This refers to the period after the burst of the asset-price bubble era of the 1980s, in which fresh graduates could not find any jobs and were stuck in a vicious circle of irregular dead-end contract unemployment.

Due to Covid-19, the number of people who graduated from university or high school without finding a job in Japan is expected to increase rapidly in 2021, from 20,000 in 2020, though no estimates for next year are available.

According to an August report by the ILO on youth unemployment in Asia-Pacific, the unemployment rate for those aged 15 to 24 in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam increased from the fourth quarter of 2019 to the first quarter of this year.

This was a more significant increase than that for the unemployment rate for adults aged 25 and above in these countries.

And more than 100 million young workers in Asia and the Pacific - nearly one in two young workers in the region - are also employed in sectors experiencing a hit to their economic output due to Covid-19, based on preliminary estimates for 2020, notes the ILO. These sectors include accommodation and food services, and wholesale and retail trade.

While youth in Asia are worried about their job prospects, many fresh graduates and young workers are tempering their expectations or settling for temporary jobs or traineeships while holding out for better opportunities.

The UN Population Fund has also projected that birth rates will continue to drop in many higher-income countries, and climb in many poor and middle-income nations, where it says pandemic-driven disruption in access

to contraception may lead to millions of unplanned pregnancies.

This trend is borne out in Japan, where the number of reported pregnancies nationwide fell 11.4 per cent between May and July compared with the same period last year, due to rising of economic pressures from the outbreak. Women typically report their pregnancies within their first trimester.

On the other hand, 77 per cent of 1,754 married women who were surveyed in Indonesia have been pregnant during the pandemic, according to a survey by market research firm Populix, conducted from Sept 3 to Sept 10.

In developing countries, a surge in birth rates may snowball into wider inequality gaps, while developed countries like Japan, Singapore and China may face a tightened labour supply if birth rates continue to fall due to the crisis, observers have noted.

Housing markets in Indonesia, China and Malaysia have also been hit, though some prospective home owners still find opportunities.

In India, for instance, more millennials are looking into buying a house, given that they are spending the majority of their time in their houses in the Covid-19 era, says Mr Ankit Kansal, the managing director of property brokerage firm 360 Realtors.

Whether these economic and social trends will curb the potential of Asia’s economies, which is expected to contribute roughly 60 per cent of global growth by 2030, will depend on how long the pandemic drags on and the quality of government intervention measures to mitigate the crisis’ impact.

More training, internships and mentoring opportunities must be provided to young people, and vulnerable groups, such as lower-income families, need more protection, says Prof Yeung.

In Singapore, more than 117,500 jobs and training and attachment opportunities have been created for local job seekers.

The Chinese government has also been taking steps to discourage firms from retrenching workers, notes OCBC Bank head of Greater China research Tommy Xie.

Mr Xie is still optimistic that the technological changes that have been hastened by the pandemic will bring about new opportunities for the young. “Youth can take more paths to success compared with the older generation, such as by capitalising on social media,” he says.

Adds OCBC economist Wellian Wiranto: “If the global economy can get back to some kind of normalcy by the end of next year, we probably still have a chance of reverting back to (pre-pandemic) potential growth levels.”

India to double Bangladeshi rice bran oil import

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India’s import of rice bran oil from Bangladesh is set to double in the current financial year 2020-21, said BV Mehta, executive director of Solvent Extractors’ Association of India.

Import of rice bran oil from Bangladesh have already hit 60,000 tonnes during April-October this year compared to total 75,000 tonnes during 2019-20, Mehta added.

“With the peak season of rice bran processing starting post-Diwali (November 14) as it is the harvest season for paddy, we

expect that total imports of rice bran oil during 2020-21 fiscal would go up to 1.5 lakh tonnes,” Mehta was quoted in Pune city by The Economic Times today.

Unlike palm oil, which was earlier being re-routed into India via Bangladesh to avail a duty advantage, rice bran oil originates in Bangladesh and its import is covered by the South Asian Free Trade Agreement.

Rice bran oil is one of the fastest-growing among edible oils and its import is increasing over the past four years, Mehta said.

India produces about one million tonnes of rice bran oil.

Engineering consultants start work for Matarbari port dev project

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The engineering consultant team appointed for the development of Matarbari deep-sea port in Moheshkhali started its work yesterday.

The Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) on September 23 signed an agreement with Japanese firm Nippon Koei Joint Venture (JV) Company Ltd for the engineering and consultancy services of the

Overseas Coastal Area Development Institute of Japan (OCDI), Japan Port Consultants (JPC) and a Bangladeshi firm Development Design Consultants Ltd.

The team will be responsible for the design work, tender assistance and construction supervision of the project, said Hiroshi Otani, team leader of Nippon Koei Co Ltd, at a press conference at the port building yesterday.

Also, the team would provide

construction supervision for the marine and civil works.

The package 2 includes services for the procurement of cargo handling equipment and port operation vessels.

The detail design would be conducted between November 2020 and June 2021. The schedule for completing tender assistance is from July 2021 to June 2022, and the construction supervision from July 2022 to December 2025.

The project director, Md Zafar Alam, who is also the member (administration) of the CPA, said they hope the team would be able to complete the works before the schedule.

CPA Chairman SM Abul Kalam Azad said the project is a fast-track initiative of the government and is an outcome of the concept of the Big-B, the Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt, jointly announced by the prime ministers of Bangladesh and Japan.

The project aims at strengthening the port logistics capacity of the country by constructing a new commercial port and a port connecting road with the national highway, thereby contributing to the acceleration of logistics with neighbouring countries.

Initially, the construction of a coal jetty was planned for a 1,200MW coal-fired power plant in Matarbari. When the Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica) started the project to construct the coal jetty, it saw the potential of a commercial port.

The Matarbari Port will be developed in two phases.

In the first phase, a 300-metre multi-purpose terminal with a backup area of 29.15 acres will be constructed by June 2025. A 460-metre container terminal with a backup area of 50 acres will be built within December 2025.

Once constructed, the container terminal of the port would be capable of providing berthing facilities to big container ships with a draft limit of 18 metres and capacity to transport 8,000 to 10,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) of containers, the CPA chairman said.

In the multi-purpose terminal, large cargo vessels which can transport 80,000 to 100,000 tonnes of cargoes would be able to berth, he said.

Currently, ships with as high as 9.5-metre draft can berth at the Chattogram port.

Privacy activist files complaints against Apple’s tracking tool

REUTERS, Berlin

A group led by privacy activist Max Schrems on Monday filed complaints with German and Spanish data protection authorities over Apple’s online tracking tool, alleging that it allows iPhones to store users’ data without their consent in breach of European law.

It is the first such major action against the US technology group in regards to European Union privacy rules.

Apple did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

The Californian tech giant says it provides users with a superior level of privacy protection. The company had announced it would further tighten its rules with the launch of its iOS 14 operating system this autumn but in September said it would delay the plan until early next year.

The complaints by digital rights group Noyb were brought against Apple’s use of a tracking code that is automatically generated on every iPhone when it is set up, the so-called Identifier for Advertisers (IDFA).

The code, stored on the device, allows Apple and third parties to track a user’s online behaviour and consumption preferences - vital for the likes of Facebook FB.O to be able to send targeted ads that will interest the user.

“Apple places codes that are comparable

to a cookie in its phones without any consent by the user. This is a clear breach of European Union privacy laws,” said Noyb lawyer Stefano Rossetti.

Rosetti referred to the EU’s e-Privacy Directive, which requires a user’s prior consent to the installation and use of such information. Apple’s planned new rules would not change this as they would restrict third-party access but not Apple’s.

Apple accounts for one in every four smartphones sold in Europe, according to Counterpoint Research.

The claims were made on behalf of an individual German and Spanish consumers and handed to the Spanish data protection authority and its counterpart in Berlin, said Noyb, a privacy advocacy group led by Austrian Schrems that has successfully fought two landmark trials against Facebook.

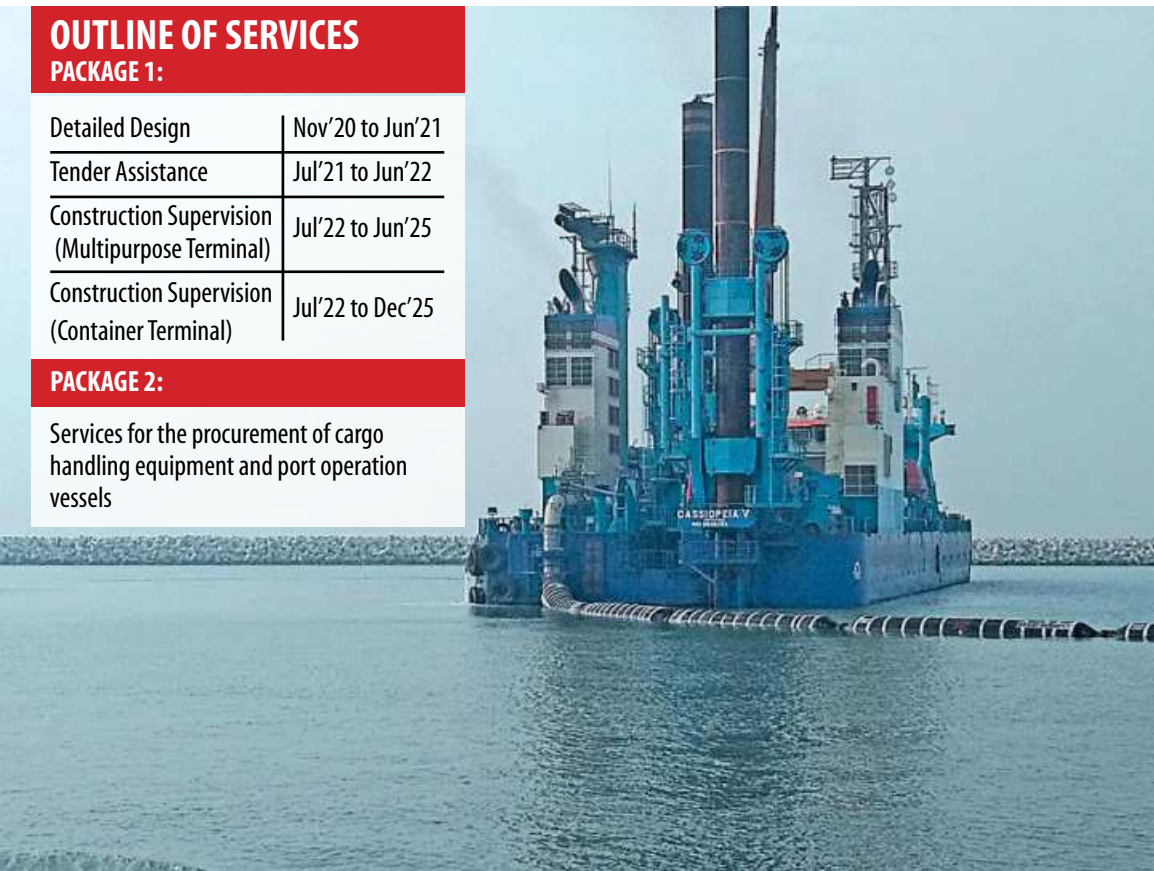
In Germany, unlike Spain, each federal state has its own data protection authority.

Both authorities did not immediately reply to requests for comment.

Rossetti said the action was not about high fines but rather aimed at establishing a clear principle whereby “tracking must be the exception, not the rule”.

“The IDFA should not only be restricted, but permanently deleted,” he said.

National data protection authorities have the power to directly fine companies for breaching European law under the e-Privacy Directive.



Matarbari Port Development Project.

Nippon Koei was selected as the top-ranked consulting firm to render engineering related services with a negotiated contract price of Tk 234 crore.

The consultant team also includes

technology transfer to the CPA, he said. The team consists of 30 experts from Japan, 18 from Bangladesh and 21 supporting staff, all of whom are Bangladeshi nationals.

The project is divided into two packages. The package 1 includes design, tender assistance and the

Otani said the team hopes it would use the latest technologies from Japan, such as strut structure for jetty, seismic base isolation system for quay gantry crane, a special method for corrosion protection, and maintenance-free plant system.