

WORLD

India's rural poor struggle in crisis

One of the world's biggest lockdowns affects jobs, food supplies, making survival difficult

By **MANOJ CHAURASIA**
in Patna, India
For China Daily

A judge was shocked when a 16-year-old boy was brought to him in India's Bihar state on a charge of theft. The boy told the court he had snatched a purse from a woman shopper in the locality to buy food for his widowed mother and younger brother who had hardly eaten for days.

The family lives in a village in Nalanda district.

As Indians observe one of the world's largest lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19, supplies have been disrupted and many villagers are battling hard for survival with food scarcely available to them.

After his father died recently, the boy somehow eked out a livelihood for his family. "I used to work in roadside hotels, someone's field or as a daily wager but the lockdown robbed me of all my sources of income. My family was on the brink of starvation and hence I was compelled to commit the theft," the boy told the judge earlier in April. His act was caught on CCTV footage.

After hearing the boy the judge not only acquitted the teenager of the theft charge but also directed the local officials to provide food, clothes and the benefits of other welfare schemes to his family.

"As directed by the court, we have provided food, clothes and cash and are also trying to give them benefits of welfare schemes. Right now the family lives in a thatched hut," local block development officer Pridarshi RP said over the phone.

For many poor villagers with few savings, the nationwide lockdown enforced from March 25 and extended to May 3 has cost them their jobs among other things.

State-run Food Corporation of



Homeless people line up for free food distributed by police officers during the lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus in Gauhati, India, on Monday. The economic costs of the lockdown have continued to mount in the country of 1.3 billion people. ANUPAM NATH / ASSOCIATED PRESS

India chairman DV Prasad told the media that "there is absolutely no need to worry as far as availability of wheat and rice is concerned in any part of India".

Additional grain

According to the Federal Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, the Indian government has decided to provide additional grain for three months from April to June to 800 million poor people. "The government of India will bear the entire cost on account of such distribution," said Abhay Kumar, Under Secretary to the Department of

Food and Public Distribution.

Yet transport difficulties remain a hurdle in some areas.

In Bhojpur, another district in Bihar, angry villagers stole bags of grain from a government-run ration shop in mid-April and assaulted the dealer who refused to give them free rations as announced by the government.

"We have been told some villagers plundered grain from the ration shop. We have registered a case against nine persons and are conducting raids to nab them," local police official Jyoti Kumari said.

In the district of Siwan, police have arrested five hungry villagers

for stealing grain from a mini truck. In Kota city in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, a video went viral on social media showing men, women and children on bikes chasing a truck carrying wheat flour bags on a deserted road, and 10 people were detained.

A Bihar government official said they have taken serious action. "We have initiated action against 267 public distribution shop dealers so far," Bihar's information and public relations secretary Anupam Kumar said.

The Bihar government has announced free rations to 16.8 million ration card holders and also

credited 1,000 rupees (\$13) to the bank account of every poor person left jobless by the lockdown or stuck in various parts of India. In Jharkhand state, the state government has opened hotels to provide food to the poor.

Local media reported that in more than a dozen states, nongovernmental organizations provided meals to more people than what their respective state governments did during the past weeks.

Across India, there were 29,435 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 934 deaths by Tuesday morning, the country's health authorities said.

Ramadan bazaars go online in SE Asia

KUALA LUMPUR — For 15 years, Siti Zabedah Abdul Wahab's family food business has sold murtabak, a pan-fried bread stuffed with meat, at Malaysia's popular Ramadan bazaars, which open for just one month a year.

But this year, Murtabak Mami Murtabak Sultan started taking orders on WhatsApp and Facebook weeks before the Muslim fasting month began on Thursday, as authorities across Southeast Asia called off Ramadan bazaars due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"This is the first time we are selling online, so we wanted to start early to make sure our customers can find us," 38-year-old Siti Zabedah said.

Ramadan is traditionally a lucrative time for food vendors in Muslim-majority countries, with more people going out for late-night meals after breaking their fast at sunset.

But the global virus outbreak has led to widespread curbs.

Malaysian authorities have imposed a partial lockdown until mid-May and called off Ramadan bazaars. They are usually attended by packed crowds and feature hundreds of stalls selling food for iftar, or the fast-breaking meal.

Digital platforms

The movement curbs have forced thousands of street hawkers and vendors to embrace digital platforms, mirroring a shift in neighboring Indonesia, where roadside businesses enjoy a sizable online presence.

"In Indonesia, you can order pretty much anything you want on an app," said Rosli Sulaiman, president of the Malaysian Malay Hawkers and Small Traders Association.

"Here we have to do a bit more educating as most vendors are used to just being on the street. Going online or dealing with cashless transactions will be something new for them."

Malaysian hawkers have been badly hit by the curbs, with estimated losses of about 50 million ringgit (\$11.5 million) for nearly 100,000 traders.

To soften the impact, several companies have developed e-bazaar platforms to help Ramadan traders partner with delivery companies and reach more customers online.

"It's going to be a steep learning curve but ... we have no choice," Rosli said.

Many small food businesses, however, prefer marketing directly to customers on social media as they do not earn enough profit to share with delivery firms.

Dozens of Ramadan bazaar groups have popped up on Facebook, where sellers can offer cash-on-delivery services to customers closest to them.

Virtual bazaars have also been set up in Singapore, which canceled Ramadan markets last month.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Calls for unity as attempts to politicize pandemic condemned

By **WANG XU** in Tokyo
and **REN QI** in Moscow

Countries should not politicize the coronavirus but instead join hands in fighting the pandemic, a veteran Japanese politician said.

Tadatomo Yoshida, secretary-general of Japan's Social Democratic Party, made the remarks in a written interview with China Daily.

"The virus has no borders and the battle against it entails difficult and arduous work. Rather than selfishness and chauvinism, what's required is the unity and cooperation of all countries," he said.

"I am in strong opposition to COVID-19 being used for political gains or self-interest. All countries should work together, increase

trust and develop good friendships amid difficulties like this.

"China successfully avoided mass infections and deaths on a larger scale from COVID-19 due to its rapid and positive response — the building of hospitals in just 10 days shocked many."

Yoshida said it is in everyone's interests that China is sharing the information and experience it has gained in combating the disease.

While the crisis had led some countries to pursue their own self-interest, the ties between China and Japan have been enjoying a boost, he said.

In Russia, similar calls have been made for international cooperation, rather than scapegoating, in the fight against the novel coronavirus.

In an interview with Russia's Channel One on Saturday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the United States had blamed China for the outbreak of what became the pandemic, and even demanded compensation from China accompanied by threats. That is wrong, Lavrov said.

In an interview on April 14 that also addressed such accusations against China, he said: "It is completely unacceptable. Don't judge others by yourself. We hear these sort of statements, first and foremost, from our Western colleagues."

Lavrov said China has been making every effort to help other countries and share its experience in combating the coronavirus.

Leonid Slutsky, chairman of the

International Affairs Committee of Russia's State Duma, lower house of parliament, said: "The US continues to preach savage egoism amid the coronavirus pandemic. In a situation when people's lives are at stake, such methods look even more cynical."

"We all must show solidarity in the face of the threat rather than pointing fingers at each other looking for a guilty party."

He noted that China itself is a victim of the outbreak.

Dmitry Suslov, deputy head of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies of the National Research University Higher School of Economics, said US President Donald Trump's assertion that Chi-

na must bear responsibility for the pandemic is merely campaign rhetoric ahead of the presidential election in November. It is a ploy aimed at reducing the pressure on the White House over Trump's own miscalculations in his response to the virus, he said.

Suslov pointed out that during the initial stages of its reaction to the pandemic, the US proceeded in a clumsy way and did not introduce restrictive measures in time.

He said US officials are seeking to shift the public focus away from the Trump administration's mistakes, which hampered the efforts against the virus in the crucial earlier period.

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International Education Column

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