



Marble statues that were made in Sagyin are displayed for sale in a shop



Marble carvers who work for Kyi Khaing work at a workshop

Many of the several thousand villagers in Sagyin earn a modest living from the marble mines

Carving Buddha in Myanmar village 'blessed' with marble bounty

Reuters | Sagyin, Myanmar

The fine white dust that shrouds much of his northern Myanmar village also covers sculptor Chin Win as he leans over a half-finished Buddha statue.

"We are blessed to carve Buddha," he said at his stone workshop surrounded by the seven white hills that give Sagyin village its name, which means "marble" in Burmese.

For generations, artisans in this part of Buddhist-majority Myanmar have carved out a living from the marble, fashioning

mostly colossal Buddha statues to be sold in the nearby city of Mandalay or exported to neighbouring China and Thailand.

Many of the several thousand villagers here earn a modest living from the marble mines, hauling the slabs down the hill, carving them into statues, or exporting them overseas.

Burmese marble, which ranges from pure white to bluish grey, is prized for its hardness and texture. A 45-tonne slab can sell for \$40,000. In Sagyin, specks of the stone are used for everything from brushing teeth to washing clothes.

"We grew up breathing the dust," said Chin Win, 35, who has been carving statues since he was 11 years old. "We use it as toothpaste, for soap powder, lipstick."

'Not safe'

The stone used to be chiselled by hand. Now, much of the work is done with machines.

"I was born in this village and for generations this is what we have done: the men work on

marble carving and the women work in the marble mines or polish the marble statues," said 25-year-old Mya Lay, in a house fashioned from dry bamboo sheets, with a floor made of marble chippings.

For years, she has walked down from the mines from morning till sunset carrying large marble slabs on her head, laborious work for about \$3.50 per day.

"If I could I would leave the

village and find a job in the city," she said, adding that she wanted a better life for her daughter.

Some fear the clouds of dust that cloak the village could make them sick. Inhaling marble dust in other contexts has been linked to silicosis, a serious lung disease that can be deadly.

Few workers wear masks or other protective clothing, and several nursed rasping coughs, although they said the coughing could also be the result of smoking.

Kyi Khaing, a workshop owner, said most residents are too poor to worry about their health.

"I think the marble dust is not safe, but most people here only focus on survival, rather than their healthcare," he said.

New challenges

A bigger worry is the impact of the novel coronavirus, which

originated in China late last year and has since spread globally, infecting more than 10.4 million people.

Myanmar has reported only 299 cases of the virus, and six deaths, but trade with China, which buys most of Sagyin's statues, has been hit.

The closure of the border between the two countries has meant Kyi Khaing, 49, has been unable to export his wares.

"The finished products are just sitting still," he said. "I haven't been able to deliver them anywhere. The buyers stopped coming as well."

Still, Kyi Khaing thinks some things in Sagyin will remain constant.

"I believe until I die we will still have marble here," he said. "Anywhere you dig, there are marble stones."



A finished marble statue of a Buddha is left near Irrawaddy River to be transported by boat to a buyer



Burmese marble, which ranges from pure white to bluish grey, is prized for its hardness and texture. A 45-tonne slab can sell for \$40,000



Marble carvers carve a statue of a Buddha

Confusion, resistance as Indonesian capital starts single-use plastics ban

Reuters | Jakarta

Confusion reigned in malls and markets in Indonesia's capital as a new ban on single-use plastics in one of the world's biggest ocean-polluting nations failed to gain much traction.

Despite repeated announcements over loudspeakers and signs and banners forbidding single-use plastic bags, it was business as usual at one Jakarta market, where shoppers and vendors were unsure what they should use instead.

"I'm confused and also my buyers are even more confused," said Hadi, a vendor, who like many Indonesians uses only one name. "I sell fish and there is nothing I can use except plastic bags."

Plastic bags of all sizes and colours were openly in use all around the ageing Lenteng Agung traditional market on the second day of the plastics ban.

Shopper Khairani said she backs the ban but only if there are viable alternatives.

"With fish and chicken,



A worker wearing a face shield and protective mask use a tote bag to replace plastic at a supermarket in Jakarta

you cannot use anything other than plastic," she said, carrying two plastic bags in each hand.

"So we reduce our use of unnecessary plastic, but that does not mean there are no plastic bags (in use) at all."

Indonesia's plastics problem is an acute one, with the archipelago nation ranked second behind China for its volume of plastics that end up in the seas.

Together with the Philippines and Vietnam, those countries make up more than half of ocean

plastics.

"It's a good idea to reduce plastic bag usage, but it needs to be more intensely communicated to encourage people to bring their own bags," said shopper Farhan Ahmad.

The new regulation requires shops and stalls to provide environmentally friendly bags on pain of written warnings, hefty fines, then suspension or rescinding of permits.

"The rules are only two days old," said meat seller Novi Yanti. "We can't do it right away, it takes time."