

China offers farmers cash to give up wildlife trade



The sale of wild animals for food has now been banned in China

Revenues from breeding reached 10 billion yuan in 2018

AFP | Beijing

Farmers in China are being offered cash to quit breeding exotic animals as pressure grows to crack down on the illegal wildlife trade that has been blamed for the coronavirus outbreak.

Authorities have for the first time pledged to buy out breeders in an attempt to curb the practice, animal rights activists say.

China has in recent months banned the sale of wild

animals for food, citing the risk of diseases spreading to humans, but the trade remains legal for other purposes -- including research and traditional medicine.

Two central provinces have outlined details of a buyout programme to help farmers switch to alternative livelihoods.

Hunan on Friday set out a compensation scheme to persuade breeders to rear other livestock or produce tea and herbal medicines.

Authorities will evaluate farms and inventories and offer a one-off payment of 120 yuan (\$16) per kilogram of rat snake, king ratsnake and cobra, while a kilogram of bamboo rat will

fetch 75 yuan.

A civet cat -- the animal believed to have carried Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) to humans in another coronavirus outbreak nearly two decades ago -- would fetch 600 yuan. Neighbouring Jiangxi province has also released plans to help farmers dispose of animals, as well as financial aid.

The state-run Jiangxi Daily newspaper reported last week that the province has more than 2,300 licensed breeders, mostly rearing wild animals for food.

Their stock is worth about 1.6 billion yuan (\$225 million), the report said.

Both Jiangxi and Hunan border Hubei, the province where the coronavirus first emerged in December.

Animal rights group Humane Society International (HSI) said Hunan and Jiangxi are "major wildlife breeding provinces", with Jiangxi seeing a rapid expansion of the trade over the last decade.

Revenues from breeding reached 10 billion yuan in 2018, it said.

HSI China policy specialist Peter Li told AFP that similar plans should be rolled out across the country.

But he cautioned that Hunan's proposals leave room for farmers to continue breeding exotic creatures as long as the animals are not sent to food markets.

The province's plan also does not include many wild animals bred for fur, traditional Chinese medicine or entertainment.



Hollywood producer 'ready to testify' against Malaysia ex-PM

Kuala Lumpur

A producer of Hollywood hit "The Wolf of Wall Street" is willing to testify against his step-father, Malaysia's disgraced ex-leader Najib Razak, over a massive graft scandal, a court heard Tuesday.

The news came just days after charges were unexpectedly dropped against producer Riza Aziz, who was accused of illegally receiving huge sums from Malaysian sovereign wealth fund IMDB.



Riza Aziz, one of the producers of 'The Wolf of Wall Street'

Billions of dollars were looted from the fund and spent on everything from a yacht to art in a huge fraud that purportedly involved Najib and his cronies.

Najib lost power in 2018 in large part due to public anger at the IMDB scandal, and has since been put on trial.

Riza's charges were shelved in exchange for him agreeing to hand over more than \$100 million in assets to Malaysia, but there was widespread anger that he had escaped a jail term.

There was a new twist in the drama on Tuesday, however, as one of Najib's trials resumed at the Kuala Lumpur High Court following a lengthy break due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Riza Aziz has indicted his willingness to give evidence for the prosecution in the case," lead prosecutor Gopal Sri Ram told the court before proceedings began.

The case is the most significant of several that Najib, who denies wrongdoing, is facing.

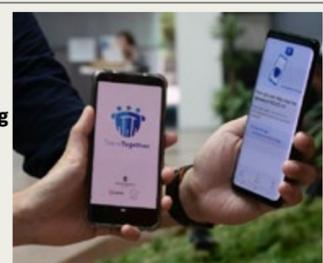
News in brief

Eight Afghan soldiers were killed on Tuesday while repelling a fierce Taliban attack on Kunduz, a strategic city in northern Afghanistan that had briefly fallen to the militants twice in the past, officials said. Taliban fighters attacked several government posts on the outskirts of the city at around 1:00 am, a defence ministry statement said, triggering heavy fighting. "With the support of air force their attack was repelled," it said, adding the fighting lasted for several hours. Defence Minister Assadullah Khalid, who visited Kunduz later on Tuesday, said the Taliban had "suffered big losses". "Unfortunately, we have also lost eight brave soldiers," he told reporters.



Hong Kong on Tuesday extended anti-virus measures limiting public gatherings until June 4, a move that means an annual vigil marking the Tiananmen crackdown will likely not take place for the first time in 30 years. The candlelight vigil usually attracts huge crowds and is the only place on Chinese soil where such a major commemoration of the anniversary is still allowed. Last year's gathering was especially large and came just a week before seven months of pro-democracy protests and clashes exploded onto the city's streets, sparked initially by a plan to allow extraditions to the authoritarian mainland.

Singapore has apologised to more than 350 people who contracted COVID-19 for accidentally sending them a text message saying they had tested positive again, the health ministry said. A technical glitch led to the message being sent out at the weekend, the ministry said late Monday, adding that no confidential information was revealed. A follow-up message was sent to the 357 people affected pointing out the mistake and "to apologise for any inconvenience and anxiety caused", it said in a statement. "We have since reviewed our processes to ensure that a similar error will not recur," the ministry added.



Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin returned to his duties on Tuesday after recovering from the coronavirus, as total infections approached 300,000 and officials said new cases were dropping off. President Vladimir

Putin signed a decree reinstating Mishustin as the head of government, nearly three weeks after the prime minister announced on television he had tested positive for coronavirus. Mishustin checked himself into hospital and his deputy was named interim prime minister, but he continued to participate in meetings via video-link wearing a suit and tie. The 54-year-old former tax chief was appointed prime minister in a surprise government shake-up earlier this year but had little time to make an impact before the coronavirus pandemic hit.

British lawmakers yesterday heaped fresh pressure on the government for its handling of the coronavirus outbreak, calling its testing regime "inadequate" in the early stages. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been criticised for his initial response to the global pandemic, and has faced weeks of pressure about the availability of tests for the virus. The country has seen 34,796 deaths -- the second-highest toll in the world behind the United States -- and 246,406 cases, according to the latest figures. But despite a recent surge in daily tests and the expansion of eligibility, MPs on a parliamentary committee said: "Testing capacity has been inadequate for most of the pandemic so far."



A 74-year-old immigrant who had pleaded to be released from a detention facility in California for fear of contracting COVID-19 died by suicide at the weekend, officials said on Monday. Choung Won Ahn, who suffered from diabetes, hypertension and heart ailments, was found dead late Sunday at the Mesa Verde Detention Facility located in Bakersfield, some two hours north of Los Angeles.

Barber in Secunderabad, India



A barber wearing a facemask attends a customer at his roadside stall after the government eased a nationwide lockdown imposed as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Secunderabad the twin city of Hyderabad, India.