

COVID-19



CHERIAN GEORGE

A shop assistant waits for customers in Hong Kong.

The virus is causing a lot of fear. People are travelling less, and some have stopped going to work. ANNABELLE LIANG explains how this has affected the everyday lives of many people.

COVID-19 has been in the news. There are daily reports of people who have been infected by it and some have even died. But, the virus has killed fewer people than many things we are less alarmed about, like the flu and car accidents. It is worrying mainly because it is an unknown, so we are not sure if it will get a lot worse. COVID-19 has affected even people who do not have the disease, by interrupting their normal activities such as travel and work.

Tourism hit

Fewer people have been visiting countries such as Singapore that are affected by COVID-19. Singapore has also banned people arriving from China unless they are Singapore citizens or permanent residents. China accounts for a fifth of Singapore's tourists, according to *Bloomberg*.

"The main cry that I'm hearing is 'help' right now from the entire tourism industry," said Keith Tan, chief executive of the Singapore Tourism Board. "There's lots of **anecdotal** evidence of business drying up, but that's not surprising given how much China contributes to our visitor arrivals," he shared.

Large businesses are not the only ones hit. Tour bus operator Remaesh Krishnan said his takings have fallen

from \$100 to \$10 a day. "We rely (on tourists) for 70 per cent of our business. Only 30 per cent of our business is local. I don't want freebies. I just want more jobs," the 50-year-old told *The Straits Times*.

Vejayan Santhirasegaran, who is also a tour bus operator, has tried looking for delivery jobs. The 46-year-old hasn't had any luck. COVID-19 is different from the swine flu outbreak in 2009, he noted. "That time, our earnings



were enough to weather the downturn. But, not now," Mr Santhirasegaran said.

Toy production stalled

Star Wars fans had a peek at a new character in November. "Baby Yoda" ↑ appeared at the end of the first episode of *The Mandalorian*, a Disney+ series.

Toys were set to be in stores later this year. This could change if COVID-19 keeps up and stops people from working.

Hasbro, one of the toy's makers, is headquartered in the United States. But, it manufactures toys in China. "We are working to **mitigate** the impact of our manufacturing partner factories being closed longer than anticipated," said Deborah Thomas, its chief financial officer. The company has pushed back other toy shipments, Ms Thomas said. It is planning to move half of its supply chain out of China.

Jim Silver, an industry expert, expects shortages if things are not normal by June or July. He runs the review website Toys, Tots, Pets & More. "(COVID-19) would affect production of Baby Yoda and just about every other toy that is made overseas," Mr Silver told CNN.

Pilgrim ban

Last month, foreign pilgrims were banned from Muslim holy sites in Mecca and Medina. Citizens and residents were banned days later. The sites were sterilised and reopened on March 6, Saudi Arabia's state television network *Al-Ekhabriya* reported. It is not clear if foreigners are allowed to return.

The ban is a great disappointment for pilgrims. It also affects those who

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

The World Health Organisation believes COVID-19 could continue to spread. "It's false hope to say, yes, that it will disappear like the flu," said Mike Ryan, executive director of its health emergencies programme.

Scientists are still finding a way to stop the virus from spreading. They hope to do that through a vaccine that would work like one for the seasonal flu.

earn a living from pilgrimages, such as businesses in Mecca, Medina, and other parts of the world.

Indonesia has more than 1,000 travel agents that cater to pilgrims. Nusa Travel sent 60 people to Saudi Arabia in February. It has not sent any in March yet. "We respect the Saudi policy, but hope that they don't apply it **indiscriminately**," managing director Amirul Hasan told the *Nikkei Asian Review*. "Why don't they do the screening like they do with meningitis? Those infected can't go in, but those who aren't should be allowed to enter," Mr Hasan said.

Fashion freeze

Xuzhi Chen always looks forward to the Shanghai Fashion Week that takes place twice a year. "Store buyers come from all over China and the world to our showroom and place orders for their shops," the fashion designer said. This year is hardly business as usual. The show's March edition has been postponed due to the virus.

Based in London, Mr Chen shifted all production to China in 2017. Now, he is facing a delay in supply. "At the moment, we'll have no products to sell and we could miss Fashion Week in Europe," Mr Chen told the *BBC*. "Even when the factories reopen, not all of the workers will return immediately, so we're not sure they'll be working at full capacity," he said.

Mr Chen is trying to stay positive. He is thinking about starting an e-commerce platform and expanding his brand online.

VOCAB BUILDER

anecdotal (say "e-nek-do-tel"; adjective) = based on personal accounts rather than research.

mitigate (say "miti-gay't"; verb) = reduce; make something bad less severe.

indiscriminately (say "in-dis-kri-mi-net-lee"; adverb) = randomly, without showing judgement.