



CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my

No. 26 - 23 March 2020

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A WUHAN IN THE MAKING?

The Chinese government may have closed down the wet market in Wuhan where the coronavirus is believed to have originated. But in the heart of Bangkok, a "Wuhan in the making" continues to operate as usual at Chatuchak Weekend Market, where trade in wild animals has taken place for years.

As the number of Covid-19 infections in Thailand grew, the market was yesterday disinfected by officials from the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, in a bid to prevent the spread of the virus in this and other areas of the city.

However, the illicit trade in wildlife there is yet to be cleaned up.

Apart from being a hotbed of potential virus transmission, this section of the market is also a hub for illegal businesses selling wild animals smuggled from across the world. Many are species protected by law.

A report earlier this month by Australia's 60 Minutes news programme revealed that wild animals such as serval cats from Africa, fennec foxes from the Sahara, and snakes, monkeys, lizards and tortoise species are presented in cages for sale at Chatuchak Market.

It was not the first time that this notorious trade has been exposed by the media.

Chatuchak Market is just one of many venues that serve as transit points for cross-border trade in illegal wildlife.

Wild species are trafficked from other countries such as Malaysia and Laos via Thailand, before ending up in wet markets in China and Vietnam where they are slaughtered for food.

In the first half of this month alone, Traffic, an organisation working to combat the illegal trade, documented several cases of protected wild animals being sold alive or dead at markets in Indonesia, Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos and Vietnam.

Earlier in 2018, the same organisation exposed a thriving online trade in wild animals in Thailand. Traffic's investigation revealed that 1,521 live animals had been advertised for sale on 12 Facebook groups in Thailand in the space of less than a month. Among them were species not protected by Thai law, largely because they are not native to Thailand.

Even if wild animals are not slaughtered onsite for sale, caging them for sale in fresh markets presents a potential source of virus transmission.

Public health experts point out that animals caged and sold in wet markets are extremely vulnerable to catching and passing on viruses to humans as a result of stressful living conditions that weaken their immune systems.

The trade is still thriving because of two key reasons: legal loopholes in the 1992 Wild Animal Protection and Conservation Act and lax law enforcement.

Last year, the country adopted an amended version of the law, which strengthens enforcement by making possession of protected wild species punishable.

But, according to counter-trafficking experts, the law still allows the farming of dozens of species on the protected list.

This opens a huge loophole for traders who sell either bred or trafficked wild animals, to acquire permits for breeding these species and then present these documents to authorities whenever their businesses are inspected. This is how the wildlife trade is run at Chatuchak Market.

It is time that Thai authorities committed to rooting out trafficking and trading of wild animals. The rapid spread of Covid-19 should serve as a wake-up call that this trade not only endangers wildlife, but also poses a threat to humans.

This article was published in the *Bangkok Post (Editorial Column)* dated 21 March 2020.
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