Beijing puts squeeze on migrant workers, shutting down their basement homes

BEIJING — By day, Mr. Ding Renshou, 25, inhabits a small, inoffensive apartment on a quiet street in the northwestern part of this sprawling metropolis. By night, he becomes one of the millions of migrant laborers who work here, earning barely enough to survive in this city of 18 million people.

Ding’s basement home, a small,简单的空间, sits in a residential area of Beijing that is rapidly being transformed into a commercial zone. The government has decided to close the unlicensed housing units in the area to make way for a new, modern shopping mall.

According to statistics released by the Beijing Municipal Commission for Urban Development, there are some 9 million illegal migrant workers in the city. These workers, who are mainly from rural areas of China, provide cheap labor for the city’s booming economy.

But life is anything but easy for these workers. They live in narrow, cramped spaces, often sharing a room with several others. They work long hours, often for minimum wage, and have little or no benefits.

The government has been cracking down on these illegal migrant labor camps, citing safety and sanitation concerns. But the workers say they have nowhere else to go.

Ding, like many others, worries about his future. "I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose my job," he says. "I can’t afford to live anywhere else."