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Mahathir-Tourists

16 MILLION MALAYSIANS HOLIDAYING ABROAD, SAYS MAHATHIR

TUARAN (Sabah), Aug 30 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the number of Malaysians going abroad for holidays have reached 16 million people, 80 per cent of the country's 20 million population.

However, the Prime Minister said, the number of foreign tourists who visited Malaysia and stayed at least 24 hours was only about seven million while another 14 million foreigners came for shorter visits.

He said the number of Malaysians visiting foreign countries was high when compared to only 13 million of the 120 million Japanese population who go abroad to spend their holidays.

"This creates a slight problem due to the outflow of funds which causes an unhealthy balance of payment," he said when opening Shangri-La's Rasa Ria holiday resort at Dalit Beach, about 40km from Kota Kinabalu.

However, he said, the government was not going to stop Malaysians from going abroad for holidays since "this is probably a sign that Malaysia is prosperous and its people can afford to spend".

"If they don't travel overseas, our airline companies will lose out. We close one hole but open another," he said.

The resort opened by Dr Mahathir today is the third in Tuaran, after Sabandar Bay and Mimpian Jadi holiday resorts. Among the main tourist attractions in this district are the long and clean beaches.

The Prime Minister said the tourism sector contributed US\$4 billion (about RM10 billion) to the country's economy while the hotel sector was growing at a rate of two new hotels being built every month.

He said the government is stepping up promotions in the hotel sector.

"Previously, the government did not have a special ministry for tourism because, at that time, we only gave scant attention and there were no funds allocated for promotions. Now, we have all that," he said.

He said the government also wants to attract tourists who could stay longer and could afford to spend hundreds of ringgit daily.

"Sometimes, there is a difference of opinion between certain parties and the government. They say the lower income group should also benefit from the hotel industry and, as such, small and cheap hotels must be built," he said.

Such hotels do not generate much income, he said.

However, the government would continue to encourage the building of three-star hotels like the Seri Malaysia Hotel chain for the benefit of those in the medium income bracket.

He said luxury hotels also provided job opportunities and everybody benefited from such hotels.

"Therefore, don't accuse us of wanting only certain people to benefit from luxury hotel projects," he said.

Dr Mahathir expressed confidence that Sabah can progress through its tourism sector although its timber resources were depleting.

"The presence of Orang Utans in Sabah is also a tourist attraction in the state," he said.

Also present were Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee and other state and federal ministers. -- BERNAMA

MOK TS