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Frontliners in tourist trade too must play a role to promote State

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ON Dec 20, the State Government will hold a post mortem of the Visit Terengganu Year and draw a comparison with the success, or failure, of a similar campaign held in 1992 and the years when no such campaigns were held.

In 1992, the first time that the VTY was held, Terengganu was exposed by promoting its culture and natural attractions, especially the islands and lakes. The campaign attracted more than 500,000 visitors.

Last year, which was a non-VTY year, the State registered more than one million tourists arrivals.

This year, a VTY campaign was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad amidst much fanfare. More than 50 events of national and international interests were lined up.

Under this VTY, aspirations ran high. Terengganu sought to promote its culture, traditions and natural escapades via closed-circuit television at airports, and also through publications distributed overseas.

A target of two million visitors was set for 1997. But as the year draws to a close the State has recorded only about 700,000 visitors.

Clearly this VTY - with all the campaigning and promotions, and with more than RM5 million spent to provide the necessary facilities and to hold events - has failed to achieve its target.

The weather cannot be blamed; it was fine throughout the year, even during the wet season. Thus the environment was right for visitors to "Find Yourself in Terengganu" - the slogan for the VTY. So what went wrong?

Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad made no mention about the failure to achieve the two million visitors target at last week's State Assembly sitting. But he did say that that target would be achieved by 2000.

Revising targets and making it more realistic to conform with the "small" budget for the tourism sector is more practical rather than making a forecast that seeks to impress but which will cast doubts on and dent the State Government's image when the target cannot be achieved.

Wan Mokhtar however did mention that the VTY was a success, but the success he was referring to was probably with regard to the improved capabilities of the respective agencies in organising events.

There was no doubt that throughout the year, the VTY secretariat headed by the State Tourism, Culture and Arts Committee had done a splendid job, as far as organising events was concerned.

The agencies were efficient and showed that they had come a long way from when the first VTY was held in 1992.

The post mortem scheduled for Dec 20 may uncover the weaknesses in this year's VTY campaign. But, even without the post mortem, it is obvious that the failure of the VTY to achieve its target of two million visitors was due to the poor support given by the frontliners in the tourism industry.

The frontliners are the hotels and chalet operators, entrepreneurs such as foodstall operators and traders, public transport operators, and the travel agents.

The State Government had often stressed the important role these frontliners play in supporting efforts to promote the tourism industry, which is becoming a major contributor to the State's economy after oil and gas, and the manufacturing sector.

It was observed that most hotels and chalets depended on "market forces" rather than making efforts to promote their facilities. They depended too much on the State Government's promotion campaign.

As State Culture, Arts and Tourism Development Committee chairman Datuk Aziz Awang had said during a recent meeting: "The Government is not a business entity. We can help the private sector to promote the State but it is up to the private sector to follow-up."

His statement was a clear indication that those involved directly or indirectly in the tourism sector were too dependent on the Government for support and were too concerned about making as much profit in the shortest time possible without giving back something to ensure a steady growth in the sector.

An example was the promotion of Tasik Kenyir. The State Government and the Central Terengganu Development Authority had spent a substantial sum on basic infrastructure and transportation to bring visitors to the lake.

All these facilities have little impact on attracting visitors if support is not forthcoming from the private sector.

"We have approved applications to companies interested in building hotels and chalets in the lake area but the progress in building these infrastructures had been slow.

"They are waiting for a clear sign that profit can be made from the investments. It seems like a chicken and egg situation but you cannot expect the Government to build hotels or chalets at the lake to prove that investing in Tasik Kenyir is profitable," said Aziz.

Reliable public transport, especially taxis, is still a problem in Terengganu and the poor service makes it difficult for visitors to go to the destinations that have been promoted by the State Government.

These are among the problems that must be addressed by the State Government and its agencies if they want Terengganu to be an attractive tourist destination.

Next year has been declared as the "Sports and Recreation Year" with some RM7 million to be spent to upgrade the infrastructure facilities at the existing tourist spots.

No target on the number of visitors has been set, which can only mean that the tourism industry in Terengganu may face some setbacks. This time the Government is being realistic and aware of the potential effects of the current economic problems.

But with Kelantan launching its Visit Kelantan Year, Terengganu may benefit from some spillover of tourists visiting Pulau Perhentian and Pulau Redang.

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