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Making more tourists aware of AIDS

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - The Government will step up its efforts to increase AIDS awareness among Malaysian and foreign tourists, Culture Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said tonight.

He said the ministry would work closely with the media, tourism and the service sectors to raise the level of AIDS awareness among the tourists and those involved the tourism sector.

He said in 1995, about 6.2 million Malaysians travelled abroad and during the period, 7.2 million tourists visited the country.

Sabbaruddin said there was, therefore, a great likelihood of Malaysians being exposed to AIDS.

He was speaking at the closing of the AIDS Awareness Week at the Dataran Merdeka.

Sabbaruddin said Malaysians travelling abroad were always reminded of the risks they would face if they were involved in unhealthy activities.

He said, considering the growth of the tourism sector and the increased mobility of the people, there was a need to step up efforts by all, including the non-governmental organisations.

He added among the steps that would be taken was enlisting the help of Malaysia Airlines to include a message on AIDS together with other information to passengers.

Sabbaruddin said travel agents and tour operators would also be asked to play their part by displaying messages on AIDS in their buses and warning tourists against engaging in unhealthy activities.

He said his ministry would also look at other means of spreading the AIDS awareness message, including using cultural activities such as dikir barat.

The chairman of the Malaysian AIDS Foundation Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, who is also the president of Malaysian AIDS Council, said the number of AIDS cases in the country was increasing yearly.

She said the average number of HIV cases reported every month had increased by about 130 per cent, from 295 cases a month in 1995 to 383 in 1996.

She added that 83.4 per cent of the 19,019 reported HIV positive people in the country were aged between 20 and 49. So far, about 603 people had died from AIDS.

The more than 1,000 people who attended the closing ceremony were entertained to performances by several artistes, including Ning Baizura, the group Umbrella and dancers from the Taro Dance Theatre.

A procession was also held by about 150 people from the Pink Triangle, MAC and other NGO's and AIDS support groups.

Sabbaruddin later released 603 balloons in remembrance of those who had died from AIDS.

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