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Rise in tourist arrivals sign of recovery

THE huge increase in tourist arrivals during the first two months of the year needs to be sustained if it is to have any positive impact on the sector. The authorities say the bigger numbers are a sign of economic recovery, but it must not be forgotten that economic recovery will also depend on these authorities' ability to continue drawing the visitors for the remaining months of the year.

Tourism is one of the biggest industries in Malaysia and is also one of the most seriously hurt by the regional economic crisis. Despite several major tourism-related events held in the country last year, including the Commonwealth Games and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting, Malaysia received only 5.2 million tourists last year, 23 per cent off the official goal to bring in 6.8 million visitors. There were 6.2 million tourists in 1997, the year of the crisis, 13 per cent down from the previous year. The two months of hefty inflow of tourists, if sustained, could put Malaysia back to the pre-crisis state, when tourist arrivals were consistently above 7 million.

Much depends on the ability of the authorities and the private sector involved to project the right image of the country to targeted markets. Apart from the economic problems which have affected the players in the industry, tourism also took a beating as a result of gross misrepresentation of facts about the country and also our own failure to correct or counter the negative and distorted reports in the foreign media. Foreign tourists had been put off by negative and often inaccurate reports on haze and epidemic, street demonstrations and political instability. Even a severe downgrading of sovereign ratings by global agencies like Standard & Poors and Moody's Investors Service could scare some people, as they would make comparisons between Malaysia and other countries with similar or worse ratings. Clever advertisement campaigns and promotions could go some ways to try and draw the tourists, but more than the usual commercials are needed to neutralise the negative propaganda.

The industry has been very fortunate that it has the help of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to counter the negative and distorted reporting on Malaysia. His high-profiled speeches on Western propaganda receive wide coverage and attention in the media in many countries. The reports on Dr Mahathir telling Malaysia's side of the story would have reached a lot of those potential tourists who had been fed with horror stories about the region and Malaysia. On that score, several Cabinet ministers on road tours abroad have also contributed towards this end. For more effect, though, the government offices in foreign cities need to be more pro-active and very aggressive in putting the record on Malaysia straight. Unfortunately, these offices representing the country overseas are rarely streamlined for the tasks. In some major cities, for example, the high commission adopts a different approach from that of the tourism office or investment promotion outfit. One does not know what the other is doing sometimes. And even if it does, it does not extend the kind of help that would add potency to a particular approach.

It makes sense to coordinate the efforts of the various offices in foreign cities, not just among themselves but also with representatives of the private sector. In Johannesburg or Cape Town, for instance, Malaysia has offices run by its national carrier, diplomats, investment officials,

and scores of business interests. If everyone contributes towards a campaign promoting Malaysia as a tourist destination, it is not only more economical for everyone but also more effective. Such a drive must be motivated from here at home. The relevant authorities may want to initiate a gathering of companies and other government agencies with presence in foreign cities to brain-storm for a common approach. The ministries that are key in this initiative would be the Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and the Foreign Ministry.

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