

'US slowdown won't hit tourism'

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KUALA LUMPUR: The United States economic slowdown will not affect the country's tourism industry as Malaysia has been focusing largely on regional tourism, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

He said Americans contributed to only a small number of tourists here and traditionally tourists to Malaysia were from India and China.

"Our visitors are from the region so the US economic downturn will not affect us much," he said.

He said tourist arrivals from the two countries which had each grown by 200% last year, would continue to be the main focus for tourism promotions.

"There are one billion people in India and about 1.3 billion in China. So there is still plenty of opportunity for us to tap the market," he told re-

porters after launching the 50th Pacific Asia Travel Association (Pata) annual conference at Putra World Trade Centre yesterday.

Some 2,000 delegates and media personnel from 55 countries are attending the conference themed *Proud Past — Promising Future*.

Dr Mahathir attributed the tremendous growth of tourists from India to the many flights to India and the Indian government's willingness to increase landing rights.

Pata chairman M.P. Bezbaruah who was also present, said he did not expect the region to suffer from the US economy as most of the countries had overcome the problems they faced in the previous economic downturn.

"As you can see, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, and China are doing very well so we don't expect the industry to go down. They are doing all right," he said.

Earlier in his speech, Dr

Mahathir said many believed that eco-tourism might represent the world's best hope for saving the fragile eco-systems.

"By establishing a lucrative business that provides an opportunity for tourists to visit and see some of the truly wild places on earth, including the tropical rainforests, the environmentally-sensitive travel and tourism companies are helping to preserve part of mankind's natural environment," he added.

Dr Mahathir said that in 1999, Malaysia registered a total of 7.93 million arrivals and earned US\$3.24bil (RM12.3bil) in revenue — the highest ever in the history of the industry.

He said the encouraging growth for 1999 continued to be experienced in 2000, with Malaysia achieving a new record of 10.22 million tourist arrivals.

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