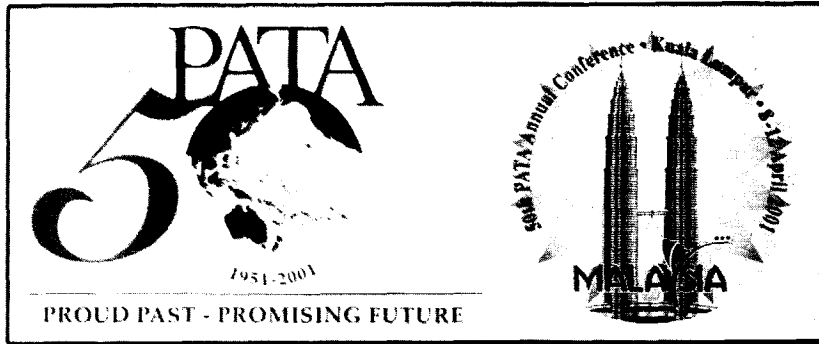


Flexible travel regulations

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Encouraging more tourists to visit Malaysia, says Dr Mahathir



PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government will continue to accommodate requests to ease travel regulations to attract more tourists to Malaysia.

He said it had always been responsive and sensitive to problems faced by tourists pertaining to the matter prompting steps to be taken to overcome it from time to time.

Commenting on complaints relating to stringent visa regulations, he said he was aware of the matter.

"If you do have a problem, please inform us so that we will take care of it," he said, adding there were times when staff on the ground did not report the matter.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference after opening the 50th Pacific Asia Travel Association annual conference at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia used to allow Chi-

nese tourists to travel in groups only but now it had relaxed conditions on them.

"Now the Chinese are more affluent, they want to travel on their own. Now individuals can come. That's the response to the complaints we received," he said.

He said Malaysia had no intention of making it difficult for tourists to visit the country.

On tourist arrivals for this year, Dr Mahathir said an average of one million tourists were recorded each in the first two months of this year.

He said if the figure remains, there would be 12 million tourists which would be very good. Last year, he said, the country recorded 10.2 million tourists.

According to him, tourist arrivals would not be affected by the economic slowdown in the United States as not many Americans come here.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would instead encourage regional tourism

as there was huge potential in the region, citing the 200 per cent growth in the number of Indian and Chinese tourists to Malaysia last year.

"It's a very huge market. India has one billion people and China 1.3 billion," he added.

To a question from a foreign journalist on cultural and religious

sensitivities which may affect tourist arrivals, the Prime Minister said it only affected a small group of people with extreme views.

"But by and large, Malaysians have been very tolerant. We have been living in a multicultural society for a long time," he added.

Meanwhile, he said, passenger arrivals at the Kuala Lumpur In-

ternational Airport in Sepang had shown an increase despite the move by four foreign airlines to stop its flights there.

Replying to a question, he said, the increase in passenger arrivals was due to other international airlines increasing their flights into KLIA. He said the Government was willing to meet them.