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Asean-Tourism

ASEAN LEADERS SIGN TOURISM AGREEMENT

By: Tham Choy Lin

PHNOM PENH, Nov 4 (Bernama) -- Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his fellow leaders in Asean today inked a pact to ramp up regional tourism efforts after blasting foreign governments for indiscriminately advising their citizens to avoid Southeast Asia.

The Asean Tourism Agreement would, among others, ease travel arrangements for Asean nationals among member countries including phasing out travel levies and taxes, besides harmonising visa procedures for international visitors to the region.

In a joint declaration vowing their determination to combat terrorism, the leaders had asked foreign governments not to indiscriminately issue advisories against travelling to Southeast Asia but instead support Asean's counter-terrorism measures.

The warnings had intensified after the Oct 12 bombing incident in Bali that killed 186 people, mostly foreign tourists and the arrest of terrorist suspects by countries in the region.

But several Asean officials included the grouping's Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino noted that Western governments had not reacted in the same manner after the Sept 11 attacks in the United States or in the hostage drama by Chechen rebels in Moscow more recently.

Asean leaders are naturally upset as the tourism industry is a crucial sector in their economies and had played a strong role in their recovery from the financial crisis.

Tourist arrivals were up by 17 per cent in the first half of 2001 and surpassed the pe-1997 crisis record of 31 million tourists. But the flow was dampened after the Sept 11 tragedy.

Tourism was also targeted as a key to boosting the economy of Asean's newer and poorer member countries, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

Under the tourism pact, the leaders pledged to reduce trade restrictions to create a more attractive investment environment for both the public and private sectors. Smart cards for frequent travelers and business was also encouraged

Asean countries also agreed to open up their air services progressively and encouraged cooperation among regional airlines.

Addressing safety and security concerns, the agreement also provided for stepped-up cooperation and information-sharing on immigration matters among law-enforcement agencies.

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