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Asia America's friend not foe

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THERE is no panic but Malaysia's multi-million ringgit tourism industry is clearly apprehensive. Foreign holiday-makers who had planned trips here are cancelling their bookings by the thousands, scared off by travel advisories issued by the United States and some other Western countries warning their citizens to avoid Southeast Asia after the Oct 12 Bali bombings.

Among other countries that posted similar warnings are Australia, Canada and Germany, all major sources of high-spending tourists to Malaysia.

Monthly tourist arrivals have dropped by between 100,000 and 300,000 since the advisories were issued, according to a news report quoting Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir.

If the trend continues, the bottom will fall out of the higher-end tourism industry, hitting hard the big city hotels, in-bound tour operators and many others downstream who have just begun to see better times after suffering the twin blows of the economic downturn and thick haze from forest fires in the late 1990s.

This year, tourist arrivals since March had been averaging one million a month. Officials were predicting an increase to more than 15 million in 2003.

In ringgit terms, the tourism industry generated RM24.22 billion in foreign exchange in 2001.

The Malaysian Association of Tours and Travel Agents (Matta) has reportedly called for the establishment of a crisis management team to handle the situation.

Matta and the Association of Hotel Employers have also compiled statements by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Malaysia's stand on the terrorist issue to use them to allay the suspicions of tourism players in foreign countries.

We will need to do much more. We must work closely with the Government to establish an effective, accurate and up-to-date information flow to target countries.

The countries that issue the travel advisories remain unrepentant despite sharp criticism by the affected countries. The US said that as a democracy it is duty-bound to warn its citizens to avoid visiting certain places as they risk being targeted by terrorists.

It refused to disclose the source of the information that prompted the warnings. Australia, which lost about 100 of its citizen in the Bali massacre, is descending into belligerence.

Prime Minister John Howard was quoted in the Press on Dec 2 as saying Australia is prepared to launch pre-emptive strikes against terrorists in neighbouring Asian countries, sparking outrage in the region.

The Philippines has also hit out at Australia and Canada for closing temporarily their embassies in Manila on Nov 28 by citing an undisclosed specific and credible threat.

The travel warnings are simplistic speculation. An incident in one country does not automatically lead to the re-enactment in another on the basis of geographical proximity and some superficial similarities.

The Malaysian Government has always acted pro-actively in security matters and drew foreign condemnation for its action.

Potential troublemakers are identified and detained before they could commit mischief. It is a policy that is supported by the majority of

Malaysians because the effect is visible.

Where is this irrational fear leading the US? Its blind pursuit of a hated enemy is endangering its own long-term political and business interests. Since 1997 accumulative investment from the US amounted to RM27.3 billion in 228 approved projects in Malaysia.

In 2001 the US was Malaysia's largest trading partner with total trade amounting to RM113.7 billion, accounting for 19.9 per cent of Malaysia's trade. That kind of business relationship, by any normal measure, is worth protecting.

Asean governments are frustrated and disappointed by the insensitive treatment especially since they have co-operated fully with the Western countries in the US-declared war against terrorism after Sept 11, 2001.

The whole world was horrified by the terrorist attacks and responded with sympathy and assistance.

Most countries understood and approved the American-led military campaign in Afghanistan to destroy the al-Qaeda terror network blamed for the Sept 11 carnage.

But the US failed to capitalise on the international goodwill it received to forge a global coalition against terrorism and now seeks to expand its anti-terror war to Iraq, which it accuses of secretly manufacturing weapons of mass destruction.

US President George W. Bush has announced his goal of toppling Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, defying international opinion and law.

The world is suddenly faced with a rampaging military superpower. Like the shoot-em-up cowboys of the American Wild West, some Americans are hollering to ride posse anywhere and everywhere.

They alone will decide the good guys and stomp on the bad.

In war as in any human enterprise, it makes sense to muster the support of as many allies as possible. That way, you reduce the number of your enemies, and better protect your rear and flanks.

The war against terrorists of every colour and creed is a just campaign and Malaysia together with most other countries has given its full support and co-operation to it.

Malaysia recognises that terrorism in the 21st century is a global peril.

But this war is like no other. It has no frontline. The enemy has no face and no base. The menace can strike anywhere, anytime.

The US must realise the futility of fighting an unconventional enemy with conventional weapons and tactics. It must concede the limitation of its security forces to defend every American everywhere.

It must acknowledge the role of friendly nations and it must learn the wisdom of experience. If it continues to shoot at the wrong targets, this war will consume generations.

America and the Bush Administration must reach out to heal the wounds of the world. The deaths, sorrows and pains should be mourned but the world and America should move on.

America and the Americans have given much to the world in terms of economic growth, scientific knowledge, generous aid and above all, firing the imagination of millions as the land where dreams do come true.

The US needs to look no further than Malaysia for a lesson in victory over terrorism. Malaysia defeated a dangerous terrorist movement through adopting a development programme that won hearts and minds, and removing the conditions and root causes that bred recruits for the insurgency.

In Dr Mahathir, too, the US has a unique ally who can help push the cause of peace.

A modern, progressive Muslim, Dr Mahathir is one of the most successful national leaders in world history. His energy, administrative and

political leadership and vision have propelled Malaysia from a primary commodities producer to the threshold of developed nation status in two decades. He is widely known in both the developed and developing world and hugely admired in many countries.

Dr Mahathir can carry the message of peace to the world from a position of credibility, supported by his record of consistency and achievements and the legacy that is Malaysia today.

His leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which will hold its Summit meeting in Kuala Lumpur in February 2003, and the Organisation of Islamic Conference, whose leaders will also be meeting in Kuala Lumpur in October 2003, places him in an exceptional position to play a key role in events that will shape the world in the coming years.