

24/11/2002

Nations blurring the line between panic and calm

P. Y. Chin

A BUSINESSMAN once asked, "Do you know how to get rich?" "Simple," he answered himself. "There are three ways: Strike first prize in a lottery, marry a rich old lady, or rob a bank."

This reminded me of another businessman who asked, "Do you know how to kill the tourism industry overnight?"

"Simple," he, too, replied himself. "There are two ways.

"One is the Osama way - the violent approach. Pick a target and bomb it. This will frighten the hell out of the tourists and they will disappear overnight.

"The other is the Bush way - a more subtle approach. Just keep issuing travel advisories, putting the fear of God in your citizens and they will not visit these popular tourist destinations."

Either way, it works. The tourism industry in Southeast Asia has suffered a double blow, first by the Osama-inspired bombing in Bali and then by Bush's travel advisories.

(Britain, Germany and Australia have also issued travel advisories to their nationals. Lately, even Japan joined in the fray with a travel ban on its citizens to this part of the world.)

With so many of the major countries advising their nationals not to visit the region, it would appear that such acts are more than just a coincidence.

Many are now questioning whether it is a concerted effort by these countries to destroy the tourism industry in Asean.

It is a very legitimate move for these countries to warn their citizens of the dangers of travelling to countries where indiscriminate bombings are a common occurrence, where foreigners are the target.

The travel advisories could be seen as a "weapon". By issuing such an advisory, the number of its citizens travelling to a particular country or region is reduced considerably overnight.

Travel advisories are not new. The United States has been issuing them to warn its citizens of the dangers of travelling to certain South American and Middle Eastern countries whenever anti-American feelings surfaced there.

Japan too had issued such advisories in the past, though not so much because of anti-Japanese feelings as kidnappings.

Since the Sept 11 terrorist attacks, travel mainly to the United States has been far more "hazardous" for many nationals compared to visiting Palestine.

After going through the hassles of getting a visa to enter the United States, a visitor is then subjected to a humiliating security check upon arrival at the airport.

This has largely deterred many potential tourists from visiting the United States. They prefer to holiday in the Far East, especially the Asean countries.

Could those countries that had issued the negative travel advisories be envious that more tourist dollars are flowing into this part of the world than before?

Those who believe in conspiracy theories would readily say that the countries who have issued the negative travel advisories were out to destroy the tourism industry in Asean.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad voiced his opinion

strongly last week, saying that such advisories "could affect tourism and foreign investments". Already a number of international events scheduled in Malaysia had been cancelled.

Manila and Bangkok, two cities which this writer visited two weeks ago, were in the same dilemma.

In Manila, security checks were tight with police stationed at the entrance of all major hotels and shopping complexes. There were also dogs to sniff out explosives.

Before a hotel guest or shopper could enter the building, he was scanned with a metal detector and subject to a body search. To make matters worse, there was only one entrance to the hotel or shopping complex and one exit.

Vehicles going into the basement car park were scanned with a metal detector and inspected.

In Bangkok, there were no security checks like that in Manila but they suffered the humiliation of that infamous travel advisory the Hong Kong Citibank office issued two weeks ago.

The American banking giant had warned its staff and clients of a possible terror attack by militants linked to Al-Qaeda in Bangkok at last week's biggest festival of the year, Loy Krathong, where Thais gather around waterways to float krathongs (little floats of flowers and candle) for good luck.

The Citibank warnings stated that "law enforcement sources said the extremists might be planning a terrorist attack between Nov 17 and 21".

The warning had the Thai Government fuming mad, as the report would affect the Thai tourism industry. An official probe is underway.

The bank has been accused of having an "ulterior motive", with a government spokesman saying, "It's impossible that Citibank would write this. There might be a political motive."

Some Thais are wondering whether Citibank's warning was pressured by US security agencies, or that Citibank did genuinely believe there was such a threat and did what it did.

But then, should Citibank have acted on its own? What about other large foreign banks operating in Bangkok?

True, after the Bali bombing, the next target could be anywhere. But the people of Asean, and Asians generally, have by and large learnt to live with danger.

Some Asians were reported to have commented after the Bali incident that the probability of getting killed in the bombing would not have been any lesser than getting killed while crossing the road. Death, in both cases, is unexpected.

Hong Kong-based consultancy firm Political and Economic Risk Consultancy polled some 400 participants at an investment conference a week after the Bali bombing and found there was no undue concern over security in the region following the bombing.

Indeed, a Malaysian company chairman who visited Bali two weeks ago found life had returned to normal though in a slightly different way.

"People now avoid crowded areas, especially where there are large numbers of foreign tourists," he said last week.

"Foreign tourists, who are mainly Asians, are returning to Bali in large numbers. The restaurants at hotels are packed with diners."

Life always returns to normal after the dust has settled, following some unforeseen or disastrous events, such as an earthquake, floods, fire or bombings, and even war.

What Asean governments can't accept about these advisories is their credibility. American security agencies that issued such advisories have not been correct before.

Only last week, the White House censured the Federal Bureau of

Investigation for alerting hospitals in Washington, Houston, San Francisco and Chicago to possible terrorist threats.

The White House labelled such warnings as "information with low credibility".

The Singapore Straits Times in an editorial last week said it all: "Nothing will please the terrorists more than to have Western governments panicking and keeping all their citizens at home."