

08/11/2002

Suitors aplenty, but Asean must stay selective

Hardev Kaur

TERRORISM, tourism and trade featured prominently at the eighth Asean Summit in Phnom Penh this week. The bombings in Bali and the attacks in Zamboanga raised regional security issues higher up on the agenda.

The Asean leaders wasted no time in dealing with the issue and adopted a declaration on terrorism ahead of the summit. The travel advisories by some developed countries to their citizens not to travel to the region in the aftermath of the Bali attacks were seen as "indiscriminate" and according to many officials "unjustified", especially "in the absence of established evidence to substantiate rumours."

Why is it that these warnings are deemed necessary only after attacks in Southeast Asia and not when similar and frequent attacks take place in the developed North?

There are no travel advisories for US, Ireland, Spain and Australia, but you have them for Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, Laos and Burma.

Some of the capitals issuing the advisories want to have their cake and eat it too. They want to sit at the same table with Asean leaders, want to participate and seek closer co-operation and partnership with Asean, want a share of the economic pie in the region but at the same time do not want their citizens to travel to these countries.

The countries issuing the advisories are themselves "unsafe". This is the consensus not only of the leaders meeting in the Cambodian capital but also of those in the travel industry in the region.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Australia is not safe, especially for Muslims. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, chairman of this year's summit said the advisories "fell into the trap of the terrorists".

"Pick any country in the world and I am sure I can find a dark alley that will get you into trouble," John Koldowski, Managing Director of strategic intelligence at the Pacific Asia Travel Association is reported as saying.

As the outgoing Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino pointed out, Asean had taken measures to deal with terrorism and terrorists even before Sept 11.

More recently Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines signed the Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures to counter terrorism and other transnational crime.

Cambodia acceded to the agreement in Brunei and Thailand in Phnom Penh this week. Brunei is expected to accede to the agreement by year-end or early next year.

The list of activities by the grouping to deal with the international problem is long.

These include:

- \* a Regional Counter-Terrorism Centre to be set up in Kuala Lumpur with assistance from the US. The grouping will build on specific measures outlined in the Asean declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism adopted in Brunei in 2001;

- \* convene an International Conference on Anti-Terrorism and Tourism Recovery in Manila next week; and

- \* a regional conference on Combating Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in Jakarta next month.

Several anti-terrorism measures, including information exchange, co-operation in legal and law enforcement matters, institutional capacity building, training and extra-regional co-operation have been adopted. Asean has done much more to deal with terrorism than most regions and regional groupings.

These efforts are not appreciated and are indeed ignored by developed countries. It is in the interest of the developed world to help Asean members and not generate more fear and fall into the trap of the terrorists.

Trade and businesses, even in this modern world of Information Technology and the Internet, require personal contacts and travel. It is an irony that developed countries on the one hand want closer relations and partnerships with Asean and yet at the same time advise their citizens to stay away from these countries.

Tourism, which is a major revenue earner for Asean members, will undoubtedly be adversely affected by the "travel advisories".

It is estimated that the tourism industry creates annual revenue of about US\$26 billion for businesses in Southeast Asia.

In 1995, it was estimated that Asean tourism receipts were equivalent to almost 10 per cent of exports and five per cent of regional economic activity. International visitor arrivals to Asean in 2001 grew 6.43 per cent compared with the previous year, with some 41 million visitors.

The Regional Tourism Agreement among the 10 members is a landmark agreement aimed at strengthening the tourism industry and enhancing intra-regional travel among members.

The promotion of the region as a single destination will be assisted with the visa exemptions and phasing out of levies and taxes for Asean nationals and harmonisation of visa procedures for international travellers.

This will also help business travellers. The number of suitors lining up to woo Asean is growing, especially in trade as the region has progressed since the 1997 financial crisis.

China kicked off the FTA agreement by signing the "Framework Agreement to Establish Free Trade Area", Japan, India, and South Korea also indicated interest in free trade agreements with the 10-member regional grouping.

The Asean, China, Japan and South Korea links through free trade areas will in fact create an East Asian Free Trade Area, something that developed countries do not want to be left out of.

"It is obvious today that far from being written off, many countries want to have special relations with us," Dr Mahathir said. The "Tiger economies" which had their development thwarted by the financial crisis and were given up as "failed economies" in 1997-1998 are today sought after.

The Asean Free Trade Area, Afta, creates a market of 500 million. The Asean-China FTA will yield a consumer market of 1.7 billion with a gross domestic product of US\$1.5 trillion to US\$2 trillion.

That is not all. Japan, not to be left behind, is seeking to join in. Asean and Japan have a combined population of 590 million, 11 per cent of the world's total, a combined GDP of US\$4.9 trillion and 18 per cent of global GDP.

The addition of South Korea to the Asean, China and Japan FTA equation makes the proposal even more attractive. India too wants to be in as do the Europeans and Americans. The US has proposed the Enterprise of Asean Initiative.

The potential is great and the suitors are many. But Asean must decide its own destiny. It must be united, cohesive and have a clear idea of

where it wants to go.

Severino summed it up when he said: "It is critical for Asean to know its destination and which path will take it there at the crucial crossroads in its record."

It must remain united and not be distracted from its goals in the face of external suitors. The suitors will not be lining up at Asean's door if the grouping is weak and members divided.

It is the unified strength and the potential it offers that keeps suitors knocking on Asean's door.