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PM to hold talks on tourism woes

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Tourism industry leaders will meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad next week to discuss the impact of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the war in Iraq.

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents honorary secretary general Datuk Mohd Khalid Harun said the meeting would seek ways to sustain the industry's growth.

"The tourism industry is really going through a very difficult time. First it was Sept 11, then the Bali bombing, then the war and now SARS.

"Despite the gloom, the industry should be able to pull through and sustain (growth) at the end of the day," he said.

Speaking after his talk on "An Overview of the Tour and Travel Industry", Khalid said that the SARS epidemic has made it necessary for Malaysia to adopt an effective crisis management ability.

Infrastructure such as equipment and professional medical teams would have to be deployed to screen travellers and visitors, thus ensuring a balance between the need to contain the epidemic and the need to sustain tourism growth.

For this year, the target for tourist arrivals is 15 million although not very long ago the Government stated that Malaysia should strive for 23 million tourists.

Tourist arrivals in Malaysia have seen tremendous growth in the past five years, generating RM67 billion in revenue.

Khalid also suggested setting up a centre to monitor inbound and outbound visitors, and also to publish an index to convey this information to the general public.

The index, he said, would help the industry players as well as the Government to monitor the growth of the industry.