

Tourism is Another Casualty of Gulf War

by Robert Slagt

The global tourist industry has been crippled by the Gulf war. The Eastern Mediterranean has become a virtual no-go zone, few Americans dare venture to Europe and the livelihoods of tens of thousands of workers dependent on tourism are threatened.

TOURISM around the world not just in the Middle East has been crippled by the war in the Gulf. While some may find it frivolous to talk of tourism when there is a war going on, the crisis is having a debilitating effect on one of the biggest businesses in the world.

Travel bookings to all destinations, including Europe, the Caribbean and East Asia are down by 10 to 15 per cent compared to this time last year. And the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean have all but dropped off the holiday map.

Gulf related losses by tour operators have so far been comparatively low because the first nine months of 1990 took tourism revenue to record levels. But if the conflict is a long one, it could take years for the industry to regain lost business.

Until now, 1986 had been the nightmare year for the tourist industry in Europe and the Middle East. A series of attacks scared off American tourists wary of becoming terrorist targets.

First came the hijack of the cruise ship Achille Lauro off the Egyptian coast in October 1985. This was followed by the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque in March 1986 and the US air attack on Tripoli in April. The nuclear fall-out from the Chernobyl disaster shortly afterwards was another factor in keeping Americans away from Europe.

It took two years before American tourists dared to venture to Europe again in any numbers. The Lockerbie crash of December 1988 appeared to be the last in a series of major disasters, and tourism picked up quickly again in 1989. Until the invasion of Kuwait, 1990 looked set to be a record year.

The Gulf war has now heightened concern about retaliatory terrorist attacks on civilian targets around the world and increased tensions

between Muslims and Christians. Already, Western European airports are being turned into military fortresses with security check delays averaging two hours.

Bookings on tourist flights from the United States to Europe have plunged by 60 per cent since November and may soon be virtually non-existent. British Airways, among many other major airlines, has suspended all flights to the Gulf area, among them destinations such as Jeddah, Oman and Dubai.

Tourism prospects in the Eastern Mediterranean are even bleaker. A vital source of income for the economies of Egypt, Israel and Cyprus, the tourism industry has nearly ground to a halt.

Ari Zurel of the Israeli Tourist Office said bookings for January 1991 were 40 to 50 per cent lower than the previous year. After the beginning of hostilities, they will have dropped to nil.

Although revenues for the 1990 are only four per cent lower than 1989, Zurel estimated the loss for the Israeli tourist industry at about \$250 million - and that estimate came before the outbreak of war.

"A good year would make us about \$1.5 billion," he said. "One can say we have already lost most of the winter season, of which cruises from a substantial and very lucrative part. Summer tourism is less profitable."

In Egypt, the picture gets worse. Bookings started to drop immediately after the invasion of Kuwait, with August

1990 bookings down by 40 per cent from 1989. The current situation is so bad that the Egyptian Tourist Information Centre has stopped its advertising campaigns altogether.

According to the Egyptian Tourist Office the loss for the Egyptian economy is estimated at \$1.5 billion on an expected revenue of \$3.5 billion. As for the months ahead, clients are enquiring, but not booking.

The Middle East Travel Centre, a tour operator in London, has received just two bookings for Cairo since Friday January 11. Until September, bookings had been at a normal level, but they have dropped considerably since. December bookings were 65 per cent below 1989 levels, and bookings are virtually non-existent for the months ahead.

For many tour operators that cover the Eastern Mediterranean, 1990 had been a record year. Until August, and for some operators, even October, it had promised to be even better.

Michael Malatouma of Cyprus Travel London Ltd. says his business has been seriously affected by the Gulf crisis, although business for the year was 25 per cent higher in 1990 than 1989.

The slump of recent months was gradual, but he says, January has meant a drop of 80 to 90 per cent. The situation reminds me of 1974 when I took over this business. After starting to work on July 8 the Turks invaded Cyprus a week later. I was in big trouble right away, as I am now.

"All the tour operators I know are nowhere near to normal figures. But people are still going, and we have some bookings for March."

There seems to be some optimism among tour operators about the length of conflict. For representatives from Turkey, Morocco and, to a lesser extent, Tunisia, there still is some hope left.

Salami, a press officer at the Turkish Embassy in London said: "If the war drags on it will affect tourism, especially in the south-east of the country. But places like Istanbul are very far away from the fighting."

The British Foreign Office has advised its citizens on holiday or residing in Israel to leave the country, while Egypt,

Cyprus and Turkey are considered as safe enough.

Travelers to Tunisia and Morocco have been warned against "disturbances, particularly in cities," but leaving the country is not considered necessary.

However, tour operators have jointly decided to take no chances and are evacuating all holidaymakers. While the Moroccan Tourist Office says that statistics on the effects of the war "will not be available until March" and "campaigning is going on as normal," their Tunisian colleagues appear to be more realistic.

Since the crisis started they have lost about 30 per cent of tourism revenues, while visits to the Britain dropped by 20 per cent. At the moment, the Tourist Office says "all we know is that the country is safe," but the Tunisian situation has been muddled by the killing in Tunis on January 15 of two senior Palestine Liberation Organisation officials close to Yasser Arafat.

The crisis began in August, but it was the beginning of the war that dealt the death-blow to tourism.

"Until that point it was still reasonable, but at the moment people are growing more reticent," says Russell Amerasekera of Thomas Cook, one of Britain's largest travel agents.

"Thanks to the two exceptionally good previous years, the downturn hasn't been major up till now. But large losses all depend on the war outcome. And nobody knows how long it will last." -GEMINI NEWS.

ROBERT SLAGT graduated in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam and worked at the European Commission in Brussels. He is currently studying for a Masters in International Journalism at London's City University.



Civil Servants Test Bhattarai's Patience

by Jan Sharma

NEPAL'S new democratic government is facing one of the toughest challenges—this time from civil servants.

Civil servants, who recently formed the Nepal Civil Servants Association (NCSA) and asked for salary hikes, paralysed ministries and departments last December 18 by refusing to work.

Western tourists waited for several hours to buy stamps. Mails in the foreign post office were disrupted. There was no work done in any government office.

The interim government, installed by King Birendra last April following the popular pro-democracy movement, has accused the NCSA of sabotaging the delicate transition to democracy by playing at the hands of revivalist forces.

The new government is in the middle of preparing for the country's first free elections, scheduled for May. The law and order situation has deteriorated. Political meetings of various mainstream opposition parties have been attacked and members of even the ruling Nepali Congress have been beaten.

The on-going Gulf crisis has added a serious element. The economic growth rate, which was 4.5 per cent during the former one party regime, is headed for sharp decline. The rate of inflation, officially claimed at 12 per cent, is much higher.

The International Monetary Fund is asking for austerity measures, new taxes, and better tax collection. Finance Minister Devendra Raj Panday

with his sagging popularity is reluctant to propose unpopular measures in an election year.

"Most of the problems will be solved once a single party returns to power," said Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai who heads the coalition government. As president of the Nepali Congress, he looks confident of coming back to power.

But the challenges are

monthly salary hardly enough for a week. They have sympathy but what is surprising is the timing when the country is preparing for the first free polls in 30 years.

The prospects for an early pay hike are slim as the state coffers are empty. The new leaders have blamed this for the mismanagement of the national economy under the previous regime.

ahead by observing a one-hour pen down strike on December 13. The next day, the strike lasted for two hours. Since mid-December, they tied black arm bands and observed four-hour "pen down" strikes. This will go on with demonstrations and rallies.

"We are ready to solve the problems through talks peacefully," the NCSA said in a press statement urging all civil ser-

The current unrest is the result of failure to punish corrupt officials

enormous for Mr. Bhattarai who spent most of his life fighting for democracy and human rights. One of his main problems is that he does not have the team of competent colleagues to steer clear of the mess left by the previous regime.

These he needs both on the home and economic fronts. His colleagues are not in the grip of the situation, critics say.

Last December 12, the NCSA launched a 10-day protest program. In response, employees tied black arm bands and observed a "pen-down" strike by attending offices but refusing to work.

One of the two major demands has already been met by the government: the official recognition of the union on April 20. The tricky demand—the salary hike—may not be met.

Civil servants have legitimate claims for a salary hike as they bring home a redundant

Ministry of General Administration urged civil servants to be "disciplined" and continue their service to the nation. The strike was called a violation of the legal code of civil service unanimously agreed by the NCSA.

"(The government) is determined to provide maximum facilities to the civil servants in accordance with the ability of the country's financial position. However, the government would not at present be able to take heavy financial burden due to the weak health of the economy," the Ministry of General Administration has stated.

Authorities had casually assured that a decision on the salary hike would be taken "within 15 days of the promulgation of the Constitution." The promulgation was made last November. But there was no positive sign in the direction. The civil servants went

to continue with the pre-planned program until the government takes "positive steps."

"This is utterly illegal," said chief secretary Lok Bahadur Shrestha. "The issue is getting politicised."

Many fear Mr. Shrestha and his like are instigating conspiracies to destabilise the Bhattarai interim government to make room for the return of disgraced functionaries from the previous regime.

Mr. Bhattarai has not scored much in dealing with the problem. Some Western diplomats are surprised that the most powerful prime minister in Nepal's history, as he has often been described, lacks firmness expected of him to deal with the issues.

The current unrest among civil servants is the result of Mr. Bhattarai's failure to punish corrupt officials. There are reports that instead of punishing them, political parties in

power are patronising them as "dedicated and efficient."

"Look at what they have done to President (Hussain) Mohammed Ershad" in Bangladesh within a few days. We have this new government for a few months already," complains a young dissident in the ruling Nepali Congress party.

A 12-member Coordination Council to look into the problem has not been of much use. It met the NCSA but failed to reach an agreement to end the unrest.

"The civil servants should be impartial, incorrupt and politically neutral," Mr. Bhattarai said. "If bureaucracy were to remain determined and dedicated to selfless service, there would not have been such mismanagement and corruption as was witnessed during 30 years of the (one-party) era when civil servants were exploited politically."

The Nepali bureaucracy was formally shaped with the enactment of the Nepal Civil Service Act of 1957, on the eve of the first free election in the Himalayan kingdom. There are now 137,000 employees in government and corporation services.

"We will explore all conciliatory avenues before embarking on unpleasant and harsh measures," warned Nepali Congress spokesman Basu Rimal. "No government can excuse the civil servants engaged in indiscipline and undesirable activities under the instigation of reactionary forces."

—DEPTHNEWS ASIA

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Why Invite Further Blood

And so the horror has begun. No one can say how the war in the Gulf will unfold or when it will end. It could well trigger an unpredictable chain of devastating clashes that will march across the desert and change the course of history in the region.

It need not have happened. There was only a pocketful of time between the Jan. 15 deadline and the commencement of the attack but there were still a few precious moments. Saddam Hussein should have pulled back from the brink. He still can pull out of Kuwait. He should if he wants to be a good Arab. He is not fighting a just war around which the Arab world can rally, but a war that will divide the Arab Middle East and sow new enmities and divisions. He should do that as a loyal Iraqi, and preserve what a stroke of statesmanship what is left of a situation that was so much his to avoid.

The world has largely given up on the man from Baghdad. Is he still sane? Does he understand what is at stake? If so, there is still time to stop it.

—Los Angeles Times

Let there be no gloating or euphoria over early successes; rather, as we watch this conflict unfold, let there be a sober assessment of the lessons of history, and a resolve not to repeat the mistakes that led to the war.

—The Baltimore Evening Sun

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Expectations

Sir, By and large, the widespread agitations across the country staged by the opposition parties quadrilaterally, highlighted by the loss of lives and properties in the uprising and sharply reacted by the government pleading constitutional values, have finally been a successful attempt to end the autocratic regime armed with coated democracy. Popular mandate extraordinary has proven one more time that popularity overpowers arm strength which is a cornerstone for democracy. History of this nation recorded mass upheavals before. At this time new expectations

for a sound life are likely to energize the people to optimistically look forward to, regardless of who enters the Powerhouse. But not long past since, if new stands root in the old issues, "Old Gold" may be something for everyday to ponder over and so continues the "never ending story" of Bangalee struggle containing the right lesson yet to be learnt.

M. Rahman, Zila School Road, Mymensingh.

Prison reform

Sir, The recent unrest in the prisons and the clashes of prisoners with the prison authorities had attracted the attention of all

the people. No changes are made in any system or organisation in our country unless a great furor is made about it. The condition in our prisons is reportedly inhuman and intolerable.

The jails were built in British time and since then nothing has been done to increase the capacity of accommodation though the number of inmates kept increasing. In fact overcrowding a cell for thirty people, thrice that number of people are kept.

Due to slow processing of cases a lot of people wantonly suffer while they might be acquitted finally.

The diet and medical facilities are also not up to standard. Imprisonment in itself is a great punishment and along with other conditions it doesn't have to be so inhumane that inmates accumulate hatred for the society. Rather prison should be a place where a prisoner can be reformed and regret his previous

sins, and can again become a useful member of the society. Although not all are alike, yet I feel prison conditions should be given a thought to.

Sharmin Rahman Dhanmondi Dhaka

Ambulance service needed

Sir, In Dhaka though market-places and video-shops have mushroomed in recent years but essential amenity like ambulance service has remained primitive. The Suharwardy Chest and Cardiovascular Disease Hospital does have this service and it is at the disposal of its patients. Another organization which gives this service is the Fire Brigade. The private clinics only cater to their patients. So in an emergency people have to fall back on private or on hire transport which may be difficult as well as expensive to obtain at say an odd

hour like middle of the night.

I think it would be lucrative for the government and also a great service to the general public if government started such a service which will be open twenty-four hours and which people can use at a reasonable price. This can be started by a private organization also. It will mean earning money and also giving people a very useful service.

Parveen Choudhury Comilla.

Super-markets and hawkers

Sir, Amongst other things which have changed the facade of our capital, is the mushroom growth of super-markets. It is indeed a good sign, as it solves locally the many problems facing the consumers. It offers a variety of products, where to choose from.

Dhaka localities dwellers did not have such a wide-range of things to select their favourite items from earlier. Besides, it also gives the city a more colourful and decorative look!

However, one thing continues to baffle me, and that is the growing number of street vendors. With the growth in the number of super markets, their number has registered an influx. Is there any link?

Personally I do not have anything against them, as they also have to make a living. And there is nothing as difficult as that in a city like Dhaka. I must mention one thing, they do cause problem to the pedestrians, as they generally sit on pavements, primarily meant for people to walk on.

Naimur Rahim Farmgate, Dhaka.