

OPINION & FEATURES



Photo courtesy of Philstar.com

Another slide in competitiveness

A NEW law aimed at boosting the country's tourism industry is expected to be enacted soon. Though the Tourism Code won't please everyone in the industry, the nation needs to exert additional effort to bring in more visitors. The third annual report on tourism and travel competitiveness, prepared by the World Economic Forum, showed the Philippines sliding five notches.

The results of the WEF survey, which covered 133 countries, are consistent with studies in recent years on national competitiveness in other fields. The criteria for tourism competitiveness included the existence of supportive business and regulatory frameworks for travel as well as the availability of world-class transport and tourism infrastructure. The report also considered the level of development of human and natural resources for tourism.

Not surprisingly, the top 10 countries in the competitiveness report are Switzerland, Austria, Germany, France, Canada, Spain, Sweden, the United States, Australia and Singapore. The Philippines, ranked 86th, is way behind even in Southeast Asia. Malaysia ranked 32nd, Thailand 39th, Brunei 69th and Indonesia 81st. The Philippines ranked ahead only of Vietnam and Cambodia, and both countries are already racing to catch up. Laos and Myanmar were not included in the survey. This year Syria sprinted ahead of the Philippines

at 85th place, up from its 94th ranking last year.

Competition for visitors is expected to be tougher this year amid the global economic slump. The WEF report cited the Philippines' strengths: its rich natural resources and biodiversity, low prices and relatively relaxed visa requirements. Bilateral air agreements were also cited as a plus. But the report said restrictions on foreign investment, difficulties in starting a business and weak protection of property rights hampered the development of the travel industry. Other concerns raised were safety and security, health and hygiene, and the inadequacy of transport, tourism and communication infrastructure.

All those concerns have been raised several times in the past by various business groups. The enactment of a Tourism Code should improve the response to those concerns and raise the country's level of competitiveness in one of the biggest revenue-generating sectors in the world. (*Philstar.com*)

GUEST EDITORIAL

RP's gateway to the world

WHILE the global financial crisis may continue to hover economies of the world, it seems to be sparing so far the Philippines. In fact, we keep hearing about major new investments coming in to the country. For one, I was told, one of the richest man in the Middle East is set to pour in as much as \$1.2 billion in a project to expand the existing Diosdado Macapagal International Airport (DMIA) at Clark Field in Angeles City, Pampanga.

This was disclosed to us by Nestor Mangio, chairman of the board of Clark International Airport Corp. who was the main guest during our regular Tuesday Club breakfast meeting at the EDSA Shangri-La in Mandaluyong City. Mangio excitedly told us about the investment to be made by the Pacifica Avia Group Inc. al Mal Investment of the Al Kharafi Group of Kuwait.

The proposed investment is being considered under a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) agreement following a failed bidding of this project in September last year. After a "due diligence" conducted by the CIAC, he said, the original winning bidder was disqualified when it failed to satisfy the requirements of the project.

As mandated by the BOT law, Mangio cited, the P3-billion project is currently undergoing the so-called "Swiss challenge" system of competitive bidding. This system is where the claims, veracity and global competitiveness of the unsolicited proposals could be put to open test by inviting competitive proposals from other market players. So far though, Mangio noted, the Pacifica Avia offer appears unchallenged.

The Pacifica Avia is owned by the group of Al Kharafi, who is in the list of billionaires around the world. He is engaged in the airport construction business. His construction firm built the Egypt airport city. It has also put up the Dubai airport terminal that has a 120-million-passenger-a-year capacity. It is currently undertaking the construction of an airport over a wide desert in Hah-il in Saudi Arabia.

In fact, Mangio informed us, another Kuwaiti firm, the K Gulf Logistics has already put up cargo sorting and forwarding at the CIAC complex, after having signed in December last year a \$1 billion BOT deal, also over 25 years.

The DMIA is an aviation complex inside the former American military facility known as Clark Air Base. This has been turned into and developed as Clark Freeport Zone. The DMIA is located inside a 2,367-hectare area within the Clark Freeport Zone. Currently as it is, Mangio noted with satisfaction that there are a lot of air traffic at DMIA due to the popular "budget fares" offered by airlines operating its domestic and international flights there like the Cebu Pacific, Tiger Airways, Air Asia, Aseana, Seair and Spirit of Manila.

From the brochures handed out to me by Mangio, it states that full implementation of the master development plan "will transform the DMIA complex into an airport city with an ultimate design of 60 to 80 million passengers per year and a third runway which will allow simultaneous landing and take-off."

Once this project with Al Kharafi goes on stream, the DMIA stands to become the country's newest and biggest international gateway. This would

COMMONSENSE

Marichu A. Villanueva

definitely be a bigger and more modern gateway than the three existing airport complexes in Metro Manila—the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA), the Centennial Airport and the NAIA

Terminal-3.

The huge investment is enough incentive for President Arroyo to go to Kuwait for a reciprocal state visit sometime in April. It will precede her scheduled state visit to Brazil later in June as officially announced yesterday by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

The President was supposed to proceed to Kuwait Sunday from Chang-mai in Thailand after attending there the just concluded Leaders' summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). But due to lack of preparations from the side of the host government, as I gathered, it was postponed for next month.

The forthcoming trip of Mrs. Arroyo is a return gesture to the state visit made in the Philippines in August last year by Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al Mohammad al Ahmad al Sabah. It was during the state visit here in Manila where the Air Agreement between the two nations was signed. When President Arroyo goes to Kuwait, she would bring to the Prime Minister the formal documents to ceremonially signal the effectivity of this bilateral air pact.

I have once visited this tiny oil-rich emirate when I covered the state visit there of former President Fidel V. Ramos. We personally witnessed the very close ties that our country enjoys with Kuwait. The Kuwaiti people acknowledged the help of the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) during the reconstruction period of their war-torn nation after they were invaded by Iraq.

The Kuwait investment to expand and further develop DMIA also stirred excitement for the Federation of Tourism Industries in the Philippines (FTIP), headed by its president, lawyer Alejandra "Dading" Clemente, founder of Rajah Tours. She led the stakeout of industry players at the Senate Wednesday night to push the approval of the long delayed passage into law of the Tourism Code. It was one of the "priority" economic bills of the President that the Senate approved during their marathon session that night when they took up the P11.3-billion poll automation budget.

Behind these two vital legislations is Sen. Richard Gordon who championed the cause of the local tour and travel industry in pushing for the enactment of the Tourism Code of the Philippines. Gordon, who is the erstwhile Department of Tourism (DOT) Secretary of President Arroyo, labored for more than four years into finally getting this Tourism Code approved in Congress. His counterpart in Congress behind this endeavor is Rep. Edgar Chatto, chairman of the House Committee on Tourism.

Given the multiplier effect of the tourism industry to the economy, the FTIP is imploring President Arroyo to sign the Tourism Code into law as soon as possible. The FTIP strongly counts on the Tourism Code, once embedded into law, as one of the best safeguards against the severe impact of the global financial crisis on the Philippine economy.

For a globe-trotting leader, President Arroyo would not drag her foot in making the Tourism Code of 2009 as one of her landmark legacies. (*Philstar.com*)

The flag of patriots

THEY say there is a thin line that separates genius from insanity.

I have also observed that it is a thin line that divides patriots from historical legalists in the same way that some people are confused about Nationalism versus Protectionism.

For several weeks, I along with some friends of mine who consider ourselves as "nationalists" have had our knickers in a twist discussing the legality or illegality of artistically expressing our love for cars and country, by incorporating aspects of the Philippine flag in the same way that American car designers have incorporated their "Stars and Stripes" to their automotive paint jobs.

One thing that can be said about Americans is that they are the epitome of patriotism. They proudly display the Stars and Stripes on flagpoles, windows, entry-ways, and just about any place available including the hood, the roof and the trunk of a Corvette. But their patriotism does not end there. They serve their country at home and abroad, they buy "American" and export American. Why else do you think we have been Americanized!

Clearly patriotism is a state of being—being proud, being in love about your country, the nation and its people. Patriots are proud to say it, proud to declare it and proud to show it. Most importantly it is a way of life. It's not seasonal or occasional like when a holiday like Independence Day or National Heroes Day takes place. Or when you celebrate *Flag Day*.

Actually that's when the debate began. A prominent cabinet member who is also a nationalist was criticized for "debasement, insulting and commercializing" the Philippine flag because a message was printed over a photo of the "flag" which were distributed in poster form all over Metro Manila. Of course the issue died as quickly as it came to life because it was all part of the seasonal or occasional type of patriotism that historical legalists display.

Since then we have noticed a continuing stream of artistic expressions on shirts, jackets, logos etc that are clearly inspired by the Philippine flag as well as a growing expression of nationalism. Instead of containing their nationalistic sentiments to flags and lapel pins a younger generation of Filipinos have been showing their colors in sporting outfits as well as fashion. The most visible being the logo of MTV-Philippines that displays the Philippine "colors".

This of course has raised concerns and the question: what about the law?

Yes, what about the law? Is it about the spirit of the law or the text of the law that should guide us concerning the Philippine flag, patriotic expression, and freedom of expression as well as the freedom of artistic expression? As it stands the traditionalists and the legalists would have us maintain a "flat" rectangular still life symbol of our country. They want a no ifs - no buts adherence to a law that is more about fear than fervor and more about rules than respect.

The situation is very similar to the debate over



CTALK

Cito Beltran

how the Bible should be treated at home and its proper use. The traditionalists have long held the Bible as a "Holy" book and as such, there should be a "special place" for the Bible. In fact in many Filipino homes you will find the Bible placed at an altar alongside different statues of saints, rosaries, dried flowers and unlit candles.

The traditionalists find it very disturbing to see how "Evangelicals" or Christians carry their Bibles everywhere, in their cars, at work, in church, even at the malls. Even more disturbing to the traditionalists is how Christians and Evangelicals underline, highlight, fold, mark, or write notes on their Bibles like College students taking a four-year course. To some it's sacrilegious.

Whether it's the Bible or the Philippine flag, the question that confronts us is should we place these things on altars or special places and turn them into lifeless idols that have no relevance, value or impact in our daily lives? Should they simply be mere symbols?

Torn and tattered flags in the battlefield fought for and held high by bleeding men is far more valuable than a thousand unappreciated banners on a boulevard. A well read and worn bible that has been given life in the hearts of men and women is of greater value than a 100-year old antique that has never been opened or read. A gold leaf leather bound Bible used for display purposes will never heal a wound or save a soul. It simply gathers dust.

I personally think that the concept of "law" and "respect" are contrary to each other. I may follow the law about flags because I fear the law, but the law will not necessarily bring out my respect for the flag or even the law. On the other hand no law will ever be necessary for me to respect the flag if I actually do respect it.

Whatever the socio-political reasons are, it is evident that there is a growing number of Filipinos who are rediscovering their patriotism. They say that when people find themselves as refugees or foreigners in a strange land, they ultimately miss the old country and eventually become more patriotic. The world economic crisis has certainly contributed to a growing trend towards what some call "protectionism" but what is actually "nationalism".

It is ironic that for most of our childhood years, the one thing we Filipinos share is singing the National anthem and showing respect for the country through the flag. We in fact have been raised to love and respect the Philippine flag only to discover that laws have been passed that make loving the flag and showing our innermost passion, artistry and nationalism a crime.

The real crime to me is when people try to stop the few and the proud from showing how much we love the Philippines. (*Philstar.com*)

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