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Economy

Tourism forum cites need to upgrade quality of local facilities

AN INDEPENDENT BODY that will monitor and assess the standards of facilities like hotels and resorts, as well as increased spending for promotion and streamlining business processes are needed in order to improve the competitiveness of the country's tourism industry.

Speaking at the start yesterday of the two-day National Tourism Dialogue in Makati City, German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) corporate manager for private sector promotion Uwe Sturmman said that there is a need for stricter implementation of standards of facilities to attract more tourists to the country.

"Countries will always be compared. It has been noted that hotels [here] are relatively expensive, but the beds are not comfortable and the bathrooms do not work. What we need is quality standards that will force people to operate their facilities," he said.

He said that the creation of an independent body whose staff will check in as guests in these facilities can serve as a check if standards imposed by the government are being implemented.

Tourism Secretary Joseph H. Durano said in a text message yesterday that while an independent body to assess compliance of facilities to standards is an option, local government units (LGUs) are a more practical option since they are the ones that issue business and building permits.

"The Department of Tourism will work with the LGUs to come up with a national standard and build the capacity of LGUs to assess and enforce such standards," he said.

Mr. Sturmman said that increased spending on the promotion of the country as a tourist destination will also help in enticing more tourists to visit the country.

"The Philippines should do more to advertise and to promote the country's destinations and identity," he said.

Mr. Sturmman said other countries in Southeast Asia had more tourist arrivals than the Philippines due to the priority they gave to promoting their industries. "[Tourism advertisements of] Malaysia and Thailand, for example, are always seen on CNN," he said.

He noted that the Philippines has lagged behind its Southeast Asian neighbors with just 3.139 million tourist arrivals in 2008. In the same year, he said, Malaysia recorded 22.052 million tourist arrivals, Thailand had

14.932 million arrivals and Singapore, 9.171 million.

National Association of Independent Travel Agencies Chairman Robert Lim Joseph said in the same event that while increased spending for promotion of the tourism industry could help increase the number of tourists in the country, it should be done gradually to ensure that the country will have the capacity to provide service to all tourists. "Apart from increased spending on promotion, there should also be a long-term plan on infrastructure that should be in place so that the country can accommodate all the tourists that will be visiting the country."

The government, he said, should also cut red tape by minimizing the steps needed for tourism investors to register.

The two-day national tourism dialogue is being held to consolidate suggestions for the implementing rules and regulations of the Tourism Act of 2009 that is currently being prepared by the Tourism department. The tourism law which, among others, grants incentives to tourism investments, was signed by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo last May. — **Louella D. Desiderio**

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