

National League for Democracy
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Statement No 10/05/11

Burma is one of the largest countries in South East Asia and offers a sweeping variety of tourist attractions. Monuments of historical interest are to be found in the ancient cities of Sri Kestra, Pagan, Mrauk-U, Mandalay and Pegu. Much of the landscape of the country is dotted with pagodas great and small. The Shwedagon dominates the skyline of Rangoon with its golden splendour while the Kyaikhtiyo stupa perched on a gigantic, precariously balanced rock and attracts many pilgrims and sightseers to the Mon State in the southeast. In the Kachin State at the northernmost region of the 2000 km long country rises the loftiest peak in South East Asia, 19,400 foot high Mt. Khakaborazi capped throughout all seasons by a glacier that feeds into the Irrawaddy. This most celebrated of rivers in Burma wends its way through the heart of the country until it disperses on the delta as myriad waterways that finally empty into the sea. There also exist lesser known rivers that can compete with the Irrawaddy for biodiversity and sheer scenic beauty in rivalry to the rivers are ecological dreamlands such as Phongamrazi and Alaungdaw Kathapa, wild life reserves which have been recognized as ASEAN National Heritage Parks. Other sites that would be of particular interest to eco-tourists are the wild life reserves at Indawgyi Lake, Inle Lake and Moe Yun Gyi Lake. These reserves harbour an impressive range of species of native fauna and flora including rare orchids, and are also favourite resting stations of migratory birds. Burma also boasts an extensive coastline along the Indian Ocean adorned with white sand beaches unspoilt by overdevelopment. The northwest, north and east of the country are rimmed by the Chin Hills, the easternmost tail of the Himalayas and the Shan plateau. There is an uncommon beauty to these regions which are home to many ethnic people and which still largely remain off the usual tourist beat.

In spite of such an abundance of attractions, Burma received only 200,000 visitors during 2009-2010. The numbers are expected to rise to 300,000 for 2011 but compared to the average annual figures for Thailand (14 million), Vietnam (4 million), Cambodia and Laos (2 million each), it is obvious that the Burmese tourist industry is lagging far behind those of its neighbours. Considering that Japan continues to attract 300,000 tourists a month in spite of the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear leakage, tourism in Burma might be said to be still at a rudimentary stage.

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The successful development of the tourist industry in Burma depends not only on service providers such as travel agents, tour operators, tour guides, hotels and guest houses and transport companies but also on the cooperation of the tourists themselves. It is essential to strike the right balance between commercial and societal consideration although such a balance is often difficult to achieve in a developing country like Burma. While tourism could enhance the economic life of the people of the host country by creating new jobs, bringing in hard currency and raising the standard of living, it could also have negative consequences if environmental issues are ignored and the meeting of different cultures and social values are not approached with sufficient sensitivity.

Whole communities in Burma have been harmed in the interests of the tourist industry. Local populations have been displaced, often without due compensation or satisfactory relocation, to make way for the construction of hotels and other tourist facilities. To be uprooted from ancestral villages often means the loss of livelihoods as well as homes. To make matters worse, forced labour is used for some construction projects. The net result is economic hardship exacerbated by the abrupt breakdown of a traditional way of life and gross violation of basic human rights.

Large numbers of imperceptive and uncaring tourists could undermine the social, cultural and moral structure of local communities. The danger lies not only in conscious misconduct on the part of visitors but also in well meaning but injudicious behaviour. While the callous expectation of sex tourists present an obvious evil, thoughtless practices such as the indiscriminate distribution of money or gifts that have made habitual beggars of children in some communities do not receive enough attention. The genuine development of a country requires the promotion not only of the standard of living but also of self respect and self reliance in the people.

An issue of paramount concern is the destruction of the environment and the disruption to the biosphere caused in the process of the development of infrastructure aimed at attracting tourists. The clearing of forests to build hotels, holiday resorts, restaurants, access roads and golf courses should be prohibited by law. The disposal of garbage sewage and other waste matters should also be strictly regulated.

Currently, the very survival of Inlay Lake, famed as much for its beauty as for the unique way of life of its water dwellers is seriously challenged. Deforestation has caused soil erosion landslides, sedimentation and climate change, causing the surface area of the lake to shrink by half over the last thirty years. Uncontrolled use of fertilizers and pesticides for the floating gardens, undisciplined discharge of waste chemicals from weavers and smiths and the disposal of untreated sewage and waste water from hotels and restaurants have polluted the lake so badly some of the rare species of fish are near extinction. As the water is no longer potable, the local people who have lived off the lake for centuries are now obliged to get their drinking water from distant sources. The climate has changed so precipitously the whole ecological system has been upset to the extent that the development potential of the tourist industry itself is threatened. It is no longer permitted to open new hotels, inns or restaurants.

The National League for Democracy boycotted "Visit Myanmar Year" (1996) to draw attention to human rights violations, to the monopoly by the military regimes and its cronies of the most

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lucrative components of the tourist industry, and to cultural, social and environmental damage consequential to preparations for the expected hordes of visitors. Now, fifteen years on, the human rights record has not improved in Burma and in spite of the efforts of the International Labour Organization, forced labour can be found in many parts of the country. Such abuses can be stopped only through appropriate political measures and not, as some hope, by an influx of foreign visitors. Many of the bigger tourism related businesses are still owned by members of the families of those in government or their cronies; the claim that a large percentage of the industry is in private rather than in government hands overlooks the crony factor. A worldwide awareness of ecological concerns has led to greater caution with regard to the despoiling of the environment but the damage done to historical monuments by fast, superficial renovations that ignored the need to preserve authenticity and uphold aesthetic values remain as a sad reminder of an irresponsible drive to attract tourists. Nor is there much evidence at present of responsible, informed moves to preserve historical monuments in consultation with experts in the field.

The economic straits in which the people of Burma find themselves today call for a review of the policy of the NLD with regard to tourism. The challenge is to reap the benefits of a vibrant tourist industry that would give a much needed boost to the economy while keeping negative consequences to a minimum information on which travel agencies, hotels and other facilities are free from government affiliation, from social exploitation and from human rights violations could be provided for prospective visitors by travel agencies and human rights organizations. Positive discrimination in favour of businesses engaged in effective outreach programmes and environmental conservation should be encouraged.

Among tourism related enterprises is the production of traditional arts and crafts. The promotion of quality goods that encourage the preservation of time honoured techniques and designs while stimulating innovation and experiment would be beneficial economically as well as culturally and artistically. Shoddy souvenirs are inevitable but discriminating buyer would not be slow to give their custom to superior products.

The NLD would welcome visitors who are keen to promote the welfare of the common people and the conservation of the environment and to acquire an insight into the cultural, political and social life of the country while enjoying a happy and fulfilling holiday in Burma.

As per the decision of the meeting of the Central Executive Committee (CEC),
the National League for Democracy (NLD) held on 19.5.11,

CEC
NLD

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