

CCA calls for justice on World Tourism Day 2005

Tourism is the one of the most important industries in many Asian countries and the fastest growing industry in most of them. In 1997 there were more than 90 million international visitors to the countries of East and South-east Asia (WTO 1998). Current projections by the indicate that by 2005 out of a global total of more than 90 million international visitors one third will arrive at Asian destinations. These figures do not take into account domestic tourists - for example, while the China National Tourism Administration reported that China received 47 million overseas visitors in 1995, there were an estimated 290 million domestic tourists. In Indonesia, prior to the economic 'melt-down' which began in 1997, there were almost 4 million overseas visitors, but more than 50 million domestic tourists. Tourism is here to stay and it is wishful thinking to hope it will go away despite the many problems that accompany tourism.

We in Asia are asked to believe in the 'mantra of tourism'- that when investment in tourism grows, our economies will expand, and wealth will spread. The scales of profits from the industry make it tempting to believe that. The facts-on-the-ground are in stark variance with that claim. The phenomenon of leakages of tourism income quite often means that something like 30% remains in the origin of the tourist. All inclusive packages make certain that most of the income stays back in the country of origin- and the receiving country is compelled to accept packages which leave them disadvantaged. Meanwhile, the investments made in the tourism industry are heavily exempted from conditions normally imposed on local business enterprises.

This is why we are prompted to ask the question: Who benefits from tourism? Certainly, not the people. The challenge that follows then is to focus our attentions in the task of democratising tourism- putting in the hands of the people so that they will benefit in economic terms. Above even that, the people must have the right to protect themselves and draw the lines beyond which a tourist cannot cross. It is not the right of a tourist to have on demand a 'sex partner' who he/she can buy off just to satisfy their sexual whims and fancies, to abuse a child who is vulnerable, to disregard and abuse the local cultures of people, to wantonly destroy nature, disturb the normal patterns of wild life, or violate the fragile eco-systems of coastal communities and small islands.

On the 27th September, we will observe World Tourism day. For us as

Asian Christians, it should be an opportunity to look at the victims of tourism- the women who are prostituted, the children so ruthlessly disused by paedophiles, the workers especially those in the informal sector, and in the lower rungs of the tourism enterprises who are overworked, and underpaid.

The call to Christians is to challenge the injustices of tourism, stand by the victims, and seek to transform the conditions that leave them oppressed and exploited. From the Christian Conference of Asia, I call on our churches to observe this day as a time of reflection about what tourism truly is meant to be? Is it the luxury that only the rich are entitled to as a way of recreation and leisure? Is this not a time to consider how we can make possible a world where all people share the fruits of prosperity in equitable proportions and can find ways to enjoy God's manifold gifts and joys equally?

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16).

Prawate Khid-arn
General Secretary