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Tourism emerges largely unscathed from Madrid bombings

DOHA (AFP) — Spain's vital tourist industry has not only survived the horrific March bombings in Madrid, but also grown during the first quarter, according to a study released Sunday.

Spain's tourism industry quickly overcame, "the fallout of the attacks that killed almost 200 people, said Jose Luis Zoreda, chief executive officer of Exceltur, a lobby group of 29 of the country's main tourist groups and companies.

"Madrid (tourism) is on the track to a prompt recovery in full," he said, reporting sector growth of between three and four percent at the Global Travel and Tourism Summit in Qatar.

Zoreda said that without the attacks, tourism growth would have been "extraordinarily good", describing the first three months of the year as a "balancing month".

Tourism in Spain had plunged 13% in March 2003 with the launch of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

"The Spanish tourism industry has, for the moment, managed to elude far more successfully than was expected the effects of the events of March 11, particularly when compared with results of other tourists destinations which in the last three years (New York, Bali, Kenya, Djerba, Moscow) have suffered similar disasters," says the report.

"It would seem the effects were concentrated exclusively on the city of Madrid and were only notional in destinations with a greater presence of long-distance tourists.

"In tourist areas of the Mediterranean coast and the Balearic and Canary Islands ... the impact has been negligible," says the business evaluation based on a survey of 1,200 tourist concerns and official statistics.

Only 34.4% noted an effect on sales in the days following the blasts and for almost half of those the impact was less than five percent and that had been recovered by April 8.

Fewer than a quarter suffered losses of more than 10%.

In Madrid, 82% of tourist operators suffered sales losses — 30% of them reported a fall of more 30%. And 82% of accommodation business in the capital suffered a short term sales drop.

Some 61% of Madrid hotel operators had not returned to normal sales three weeks after.

Tourist business stocks had however recovered on the Madrid bourse within days and in some cases surpassed levels prior to March 11.

With 52.3 million tourist arrivals in 2003 — nearly half of them Britons and Germans — the industry accounts for 12% of Gross Domestic Product in Spain and 1.5 million direct jobs.