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Global Tourism Industry Bouncing Back

ANWAR FARUQI

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DOHA, Qatar - The global travel and tourism industry should grow by nearly 6 percent this year, showing it has bounced back from the effects of terrorism, war and the SARS epidemic, industry experts said Sunday.

The industry, which employs more than 8 percent of the world's work force, is poised to grow at 4.5 percent annually over the next decade, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council.

The council told a tourism conference of 800 delegates that it projected a combined growth of 5.9 percent for all travel-related industries this year, bringing the industries to an aggregate income of \$5.5 trillion.

During the past three years, the industries have been hampered by the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and an epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, in Asia and Canada.

But countries were learning how to entice tourists to return after such setbacks, WTTC chairman Vincent A. Wolfington said.

"Travelers will travel even when they know there is a risk of terrorism, as long as they feel that countries they are traveling to are on top of it, and trying to minimize the risks," said Wolfington, speaking on the sidelines of the two-day conference that ended Sunday.

"The trend we have seen since 9/11 is that with each incidence of terrorism, the rebound and the resilience of the economy has been quicker."

Delegates from Turkey and Spain confirmed his point, saying their economies had taken only weeks to recover from recent terror atrocities.

Jose Luis Zoreda, who runs Exceltur, which represents the Spanish travel industry, said 80 percent of firms in Spain have reported that they recovered within a month from the March 11 train bombings that killed nearly 200 people.

"Despite the events of March 11, our tourism forecasts for 2004 remain unchanged," said Zoreda. Spain receives some 53 million tourists a year, making it the No. 2 destination in the world after France.

The deputy undersecretary at the Turkish Ministry of Tourism, Ali Alp, said his country had also had recovered quickly from suicide bombings that killed 62 people in Istanbul in November.

But while countries such as Spain and Turkey have the resources to recover quickly, poorer nations such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Morocco have not bounced back as fast from terrorist attacks.

At the conference, a frequent target of criticism for failing to invest in tourist promotion was, strangely enough, the government of the world's richest country.

Douglas Baker, deputy assistant secretary for tourism at the U.S. Department of Commerce, said he had virtually no promotion budget to attract foreign travelers.

"The U.S. has historically never promoted itself as a tourist destination," Baker said. He added that the Congress had allocated about \$15 million to promotion, but later redirected the money to other priorities.