

UNWTO Conference on “Tourism: a Catalyst for Development, Peace and Reconciliation”

Passikudah, Sri Lanka, 11 -14 July 2016

Marketing and rebranding of post-conflict destinations

**Comments by Imtiaz Muqbil, Executive Editor, Travel Impact Newswire,
Thailand**

Ayubowan, Vanakam, Sawasdee Khrab, Namaskar, Good Morning and As-Salaamualaikum Warahmatullah Wabarakatohu.

My profound and sincere thanks to everyone UNWTO and Sri Lanka for organising this very historic conference and for giving me a chance to be a part of it. It is the first time in Asia and probably the world that such an event is being organised. Thank you very much for all the warmth and hospitality.

I have only eight minutes and I intend to honour that out of respect for my fellow speakers and you the audience.

Let me begin with a few words about me which will explain why this slide will remain on the screen all the way through my presentation.

I am a Muslim, born in India, also known as Hindustan, the land of the Hindus. I studied in a Christian missionary school and now live in Buddhist-majority Thailand. Hence, I move seamlessly across the cultures of religions which would cover 90% of the world's population. I have visited the holy spots of all the major world religions -- Varanasi, Amritsar, Bodhgaya, Lumpini, Makkah, Madinah, Jerusalem. These were not tourism visits. I went because I have long been in pursuit of the spirituality that comprises the cultural and heritage DNA of Asia and the Middle East. I also felt it important to ensure that I am always ready for the final trip everyone will eventually undertake, for which we will need no reservations, visas nor passports. Yesterday, the gentlemen from Sarvodaya (Dr Vinya Ariyaratne, General Secretary, Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka) mentioned the importance of spirituality. Just a few minutes ago, Peter (Peter Wong, Executive Chairman, China Chamber of Tourism, China) mentioned the primary purpose of all religions is to promote peace. To me, visiting these holy spots has been the most spiritually uplifting and peaceful experience of my life.

Professionally, I study revolutions. I have lived and worked in both the Middle East and in Asia which have seen more than their fair share of revolutions. I am now writing a history of the Asia Pacific tourism industry to share my recollections of nearly 40 years of covering this immensely important sector. I am privileged to have visited Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and many other such places, when there were no tourists in sight. I have watched them go from killing fields to trading fields. I was sitting in Colombo when the Central Bank got blown up. I have been to other Asian flashpoints, such as the border areas between the Koreas and between Pakistan and India.

In all these places, I have tried to understand what disrupts the peace, and why and how conflicts start and what happens next.

Ladies and gentlemen, the role of the media in peace and conflict issues cannot be understated.

Two very important comments yesterday were made by the European Member of Parliament from Hungary (Dr. Ujhelyi Istvan, Vice Chairman of the Transport & Tourism Committee) and UNWTO Secretary General Dr Taleb Rifai. The European parliamentarian said, *"All the conflicts, wars are created by political decision-makers."* Dr Taleb said: *"The world is facing deficits of equality, knowledge, technology but the most critical deficit is the deficit of tolerance."* If you link those together, you will see that both are referring to man-made conflicts. Creating intolerance is a prerequisite and forewarning of war and conflict. Both are created by political decision-makers.

My job as a journalist is to expose these political decision-makers who promote intolerance and foment conflict. But I am just a small fish in a big ocean. Today, journalists in many mainstream media covering peace and conflict issues have lost sight of two very famous dictums that warn about the interlinkage between the creation of intolerance and the fomenting of conflict.: The first dictum: *"In times of war the first casualty is truth"*. The second: *"A lie repeated often enough becomes the truth."*

I like to think that I am still at the forefront of alerting readers to these dangers and deceptions. My job is to challenge conventional wisdoms, to ensure that you, the public, are protected from liars. We are not the business of winning popularity contests. Last year alone, more than 70 journalists were killed. When intolerance is confronted and truth triumphs, peace prevails. In Asia, the Vietnam war is a shining example of that.

Let me now turn to the theme of the session and conference.

We are an industry that sells dreams for a living. We often tend to live in a dream world. In the real world, I would say it is unrealistic to believe that there is ever going to be global peace, no matter how many billion tourists we create. One reason for that is because the industry of death is far bigger than the industry of peace. Just took at the global military budgets and you will see that there is much more shareholder value and return on investments in selling arms and ammunition. The global military-industrial complex will never allow peace to prevail. Never. If one war ends, another will start.

That brings into the question the whole concept of the relationship between peace and tourism. It is true that Peace helps promote Tourism – after peace prevails, all destinations boom. Sri Lanka and Cambodia are just two examples. With the support of PATA CEO Mario Hardy, I recently wrote an entire paper for PATA proving that. It is available on the PATA website. But it is debatable whether Tourism contributes to Peace. Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey and even my own home country, Thailand, are examples. Thailand gets 30 million visitors a year, but is in today what could be best described as a state of fragile peace.

The best example which proves my claim occurred on 04 November 1995 when Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who won a Nobel Peace prize for signing a peace agreement with the Palestinians, was shot dead by a young Israeli terrorist. I remember that catastrophe well. I was there in Tel Aviv at that time. That act of Israeli terrorism also killed the Middle East peace process. A study of terrorist assassinations over history will show that most peacemakers were shot or killed by one of their own. These are the people who feed the deficit of intolerance, and unfortunately, some of them succeed. If there is peace in the Middle East, it will open up one of the biggest travel movements in history. But will the global military establishment allow that to happen? The Middle East is one of its greatest profit centres.

Let me end with a few words about Sri Lanka.

As I mentioned, this is a historic conference, the first of its kind. And here are two tips on how to capitalise it and give it some well deserved traction. How many of you have heard the phrase “**first mover advantage**”? In fact, Sri Lanka has what I would call the “**last mover advantage**”. By far the most important quote of the conference came from Minister John Amaratunga. He said: “*We have learnt our lessons*”. You have learnt the value of peace. I commend all those who are today involved in a different kind of war – the war on those who would seek to disrupt this peace.

For tourism, the best way of doing that would be to follow up what Dr Taleb Rifai said: Integrate tourism and peace into the policy and planning process. And this is another opportunity to exploit the last mover advantage. The United Nations has three ready-made tracks for the travel & tourism industry as a whole to sign up with. The first is the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the second is the Alliance of Civilisations, and the third and most important, in my opinion, is the outcome of the recently convened World Humanitarian Summit. This last event was not just about humanitarian efforts. It was a deeper look at the value of human life.

Let me just repeat them: the UN SDGs, the Alliance of Civilisations, and the World Humanitarian Summit.

These are all readymade templates, awaiting action. Just read through all the publicly-available speeches, statements and reports, and go for it. In fact, many of the recommendations are already being actioned in Sri Lanka at a local level. Linking them to the UN agenda will globalise these achievements, and give them the global attention they deserve. This will make Sri Lanka the first country to do this and move the entire industry beyond just jobs and economic growth.

Finally, I want to show you a fine example of how Sri Lanka has learnt its lessons (show copy of Sri Lankan Airlines inflight magazine with story on Ramadan).

Once more, thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this historic event, and my warmest congratulations to UNWTO and the people of Sri Lanka for making this happen.

Istuti, Nanri, Shukran Jazilan, Khob Khun Khrab, Dhanyabad and Thank You.