*The View from Europe*
*By David Jessop*

# Thinking the unthinkable

Hardly anyone now questions the central importance of tourism to the Caribbean, the benefits it brings, or its long term role in economic development. As a sector, it is one of the few which if sensitively enabled can compete globally and advantage almost every nation in the region.

Today it is accepted that the industry underwrites most Caribbean economies, that Governments and electorates depend on tourism to provide employment, that the industry provides substantial income through taxation that supports social and infrastructural spending, and that in its periphery, it creates demand for goods and services from everyone from farmers to junior physicians, lawyers and accountants.

For all these reasons it is vital that visitors, whether they are from the region or overseas, are able to experience in an untroubled manner all that the region has to offer; and thankfully, almost all Caribbean visitors have a peaceful, happy and enjoyable experience, feel secure and leave with the sense that the world's most tourism dependent region is safe.

Unfortunately, there are others in the world that would now not have it that way; who would see through attacking tourism destinations, economies and visitors, an opportunity to directly or indirectly reach those in North America and Europe who they hate.

Although any discussion of security in relation to tourism is sensitive, it is clear that the subject may have to become more of an issue globally that Governments and industry professionals, including those in the Caribbean, need to consider closely.

Up to now, most regional discussions have been focussed on the thankfully rare occurrence of crime against visitors. While tourists are not a special case and all crime against residents and visitors alike is abhorrent, it is now widely accepted by Governments and the police that crime against visitors requires addressing separately in relation to tourism and image, so as to avoid serious damage to any Caribbean nation's economic development.

Unfortunately, the world is now entering a new and dangerous phase in which fanatics are prepared to act across borders in any way that might damage those who they believe they are at war with, or against those who do not believe their extreme interpretation of a religion, which like others, encourages universal values, including care, charity, respect, and modesty.

Although the focus in the media is on the Middle East, individuals perpetrating atrocities, and the potential threat to aviation and cities in North America and Europe, what has happened in tourism destinations such as Kenya provides a clear indication of the threat terrorism poses in its broader international impact on tourism.

As with the Caribbean, Kenya has placed emphasis on developing its tourism product to the level at which has come to underpin its economy, bring in much needed foreign exchange and result in demonstrable economic growth. However, during the course of the last year this situation has gone into reverse with the prospects for its tourism industry and the overall economy now looking decidedly bleak. Despite initial denials by public sector tourism officials that were subsequently

contradicted by its tourism industry, it is clear that visitor arrivals on both the Kenyan coast and for safaris have contracted dramatically.

This is because fundamentalist groups operating in parts of Africa have attacked areas close to popular Kenyan tourist destinations and formally issued a warning to foreign visitors: 'Kenya is now officially a war zone and any tourists visiting the country do so at their own peril'. As a consequence many governments have issued travel advisory notices against all but essential travel there and visitor arrivals have gone into a steep decline.

While thankfully there are no known group of this kind active in the Caribbean – not least because of the absence of contiguous borders, the region's proximity to the United States, and the consequent involvement of many agencies in the region and overseas that work together to ensure that this remains so – what has happened in Kenya points to the vulnerability of any tourism dependent economy to the threat of insecurity, let alone the actions of fanatics.

Addressing the issue of crime and tourism, let alone security, is understandably avoided as there is always the danger that by drawing attention it dissuades visitors from booking a perfectly safe and happy vacation.

Last year, however, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in a report on Caribbean Human Development, provided a reason why the issue cannot be avoided. It noted that the region's now heavy dependence on the tourism sector had created new vulnerabilities. Potential tourists, it suggested, were alienated by perceptions of violence and criminal activity and searched for other locations where there was no threat to personal safety.

Tourism's continuing ability to prosper should be seen to a much greater extent to represent a key component in every Caribbean nation's long-term strategy and the defence of its economic security. For this reason for example, many of the costs associated with it, such as physical security at cruise ports or airports, should not be seen, as is sometimes the case in the Caribbean, as being for others to meet, but instead as central to the region maintaining its own viability.

Events in Kenya also suggest that tourism as an industry needs a more joined up global approach, a deeper understanding of how security issues relate to tourism, better knowledge of the impact and timescales over which events can touch the industry, and an understanding of whether there is more that might be done in the form of joint responses, crisis management and planned recovery.

There are few easy answers to the problem that face some destinations in Africa, let alone in parts of the Middle East where tourism is at an end or in serious decline; but there is a case for governments, the industry and their international interlocutors to spend time developing contingency planning.

It will not be good enough to react on an ad hoc basis if an event or its genesis is shown in some way to have been facilitated within the region, be connected to one of its citizens, or to have touched it. All Caribbean governments and the industry need to be prepared to think the unthinkable.

David Jessop is the Director of the Caribbean Council and can be contacted at
david.jessop@caribbean-council.org
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