

World Tourism Day, 27 September 2015
THE BITTER IRONY OF “1 BILLION TOURISTS – 1 BILLION OPPORTUNITIES”

Statement of the Tourism Advocacy and Action Forum (TAAF)
Prepared by the Tourism Investigation & Monitoring Team

This year’s World Tourism Day theme ‘1 Billion Tourists – 1 Billion Opportunities’ sounds like a slogan for an advert to entice consumers to buy a product like a laundry detergent or hamburger. The UNWTO invites us to celebrate 1 billion tourist arrivals per year and the seemingly unlimited growth of the travel and tourism industry; it is hoped that by 2030, almost 2 billion people will have embraced the tourist lifestyle.

The UNWTO’s party could not take place at a more inconvenient time as the world is experiencing an acute humanitarian crisis with more people being displaced than at any time since World War II, according to the UNHCR. As the UNWTO cheers the one billion people officially counted as tourists, there is no appreciation of countless other ‘irregular tourists’ who are forced to travel because they have become homeless in their homelands due to war, civil strife, loss of livelihoods, environmental destruction and climate change impacts.

Although governments, tourism officials and businesses consider convenience, connectivity and mobility, health and safety for travellers as priorities, there are few legal and safe travel routes for the disadvantaged migrants and refugees who are seeking to reach destinations where they can rebuild their lives free of war, destitution and persecution.

While countries in the South have opened up and created a welcoming culture for vacationers, residential tourists and business travellers, many rich countries in the North are now implementing measures to combat the supposed threat of ‘illegal immigration’. The ‘irregular tourists’ are increasingly criminalized, facing xenophobia plus policies of isolation and deterrence in destination countries.

Formerly open or lightly patrolled borders are closing. Israel has built a ‘Separation Wall’ (also dubbed as ‘Apartheid Wall’) that violates Palestinians’ right to freedom of movement. The United States, Europe and Australia are also fortifying their borders, sometimes with barbed wire fences and heavily armed police and military forces. The result is that the conventional travel industry is supplemented with a burgeoning multi-billion dollar industry – that of human trafficking, which puts migrants’ and refugees’ lives at risk.

The notion of the Mediterranean Sea as a popular holiday heaven is rapidly eroding as it has become the world’s deadliest maritime migration route, with ships full of refugees capsizing and people, many of them children, drowning almost on a daily basis. There is now a state of exception in Europe. National governments have even begun to ‘temporarily’ suspend the Schengen agreement - the treaty that gives most EU citizens the right to travel freely across European borders - with the argument that the influx of migrants and refugees poses a “serious threat to public policy or internal security.”

The militarization of borders has devastating consequences for human rights. Reports are mounting about callous - and in some cases illegal - actions of authorities, which include denying entry to, arresting, summarily rejecting and returning refugees, using disproportionate force against migrants and refugees. For instance, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein recently strongly criticized the Hungarian government for breaching international law, saying the country’s harsh measures

are “an entirely unacceptable infringement of the human rights of refugees and migrants. Seeking asylum is not a crime, and neither is entering a country irregularly.”

How these developments will affect the global travel and tourism trade is unpredictable at this point. But in the face of millions of displaced people being forsaken, the UNWTO’s mantra of tourism’s potential for poverty reduction and sustainable development is a great travesty.

Given this situation of utmost emergency, the UNWTO must stop acting like a PR agency for the travel and tourism industry and genuinely work for the common good of humanity as deemed appropriate for a UN body. It is unreasonable and immoral to talk about ‘1 billion opportunities’ including livelihood opportunities for the poor, while disregarding all research and scientific data that reveal tourism’s vast opportunity costs, including displacement, dispossession and impoverishment of people(s) particularly in the developing world.

An impartial and sincere review of tourism is long overdue to explore the question: tourism offers opportunities for whom? Victor Hugo’s saying "The paradise of the rich is made out of the hell of the poor" appears perfect to describe tourism in a world of growing inequality and receding human rights.

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