

Zim splurges cash to manage international perception

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Zimbabwe has splurged an undisclosed amount of money to bring in tourism agents from international markets as it battles to counter renewed Britain and US travel warnings.

The travel warnings, which sparked fresh fears of a renewed crisis in the country's tourism sector, could significantly affect tourist arrivals.

At least 42 buyers from the UK, Sweden, Lithuania, Russia and China, among other countries, have been invited into the country for the A'sambeni Travel and Tourism Expo running concurrently with the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair (ZITF), which opened Tuesday April 22, 2008 in Bulawayo.

The government, through the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA), is meeting the buyers' flight and living expenses under its perception Management Program.

"We hope that they will portray the country as a safe tourist destination to counter the negative publicity mainly from the Western media when they go back home," said the ZTA public relations officer, Salome Chari.

The UK issued a warning discouraging its citizens against travelling to Zimbabwe, citing the volatile political environment spawned by the suppression of presidential election results from the recent elections. Robert Mugabe is believed to have lost the election to the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

This has triggered a political crisis and international concern around the Harare regime, which is now battling to secure a run-off on the basis that none of the candidates secured the 51% majority required by the constitution to allow for the declaration of a victor at the polls.

The tension has unsettled players in the tourism industry, whose margins have come under pressure from low receipts due to dwindling tourist arrivals because of the economic and political crisis in the country.

ZTA chairman and chief executive of the African Sun group, Shingi Munyeza, said government had engaged sector players after realising the current impasse was taking a toll on the sector.

He indicated that the Minister of Environment and Tourism Francis Nhema "was so sensitive that he realised that there was a huge void after the elections and decided to engage us", but Nhema urged industry players "not to be distracted by the political process".

“...let the political process take its path and let the industry do its job as usual,” he said after meeting the buyers.

It is not clear how the program is being funded given that Zimbabwe is facing acute foreign-currency shortages.

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