

Speech by Commissioner for Tourism at International Conference on Revitalization of Tourism and Confronting Crisis (English only) (with photos)

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Following is a speech by the Commissioner for Tourism, Miss Au King-chi, at the International Conference on Revitalization of Tourism and Confronting Crisis at Chengdu, China today (November 16) (English only):

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very honoured to join you today to share with you some Hong Kong experience. Indeed, the challenges faced by the people in Sichuan today are far greater than those ever addressed by us.

Members from different walks of life in the Hong Kong community have joined the rescue and recovery efforts in Sichuan since the earthquake. We feel deeply for the people of Sichuan and have enormous respect for them. They are doing everything they can to help themselves while retaining their positive attitude towards life.

"Adversity precedes growth" - how very true. To draw a lesser parallel, Hong Kong faced the unprecedented challenge of the SARS outbreak in 2003.

Speakers today have spoken, and, I reckon, will speak, on the SARS experience.

In the next few minutes, I will share with you how our city reinvigorated tourism after SARS in that year from the Hong Kong perspective.

The outbreak of SARS in February 2003 had a global impact. Within five months, more than 8,000 people from different parts of the world were infected.

In Hong Kong, the first patient died of SARS on 4 March. More than 1,700 people were infected and 299 people died in the ensuing four months.

Travellers were avoiding this part of the world during the SARS outbreak, especially after April 2, 2003 when the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued a travel advisory on Hong Kong.

Visitor arrivals in April fell by 65 per cent. Hotel occupancy dropped to a historical low of about 20 per cent.

In one day in May, our otherwise popular Ocean Park only received 18 visitors.

The Government adopted a three-phased approach to relaunch the economy.

First, the "response" phase to contain the epidemic. Second, the "reassurance" phase to reassure the local and international community that SARS had been contained and that Hong Kong was safe. The last phase was the "recovery" phase to promote Hong Kong as a place worth visiting for business and leisure.

With Government measures and concerted community efforts, the epidemic was finally under control by late May.

We recognised the need for independent and international endorsement. We invited WHO officials to visit our city to inspect health control measures and facilities and provide the reassurance.

The WHO removed its travel advisory on Hong Kong on May 23. It dropped Hong Kong from the list of areas with local SARS transmission on June 23.

June 23, 2003 - that was a day to remember.

Hong Kong was back!

Well before the SARS outbreak was officially over, we had started to formulate an extensive recovery plan.

Our Chief Executive announced on April 23 a US \$1.5 billion worth economic relief package. Of which, US \$130 million was for measures to re-launch the economy, including our tourism industry.

We celebrated the clean bill of health issued by WHO by rolling out a Global Tourism Revival Campaign on June 23.

Our priority was to lift the mood of our people by bringing in community support at all levels.

Let me mention a few examples. The local business community organised a highly successful "We Love Hong Kong" campaign to encourage our people to get out and enjoy themselves.

The Government invited renowned movie directors to produce short movies on Hong Kong to boost people's morale and confidence.

The smiling faces were back. There was a strong sense of purpose and unity among the people in Hong Kong. The whole community was fully committed to providing the warmest hospitality to every visitor we received.

The Government launched a "Hello from Hong Kong" campaign. We invited everyone in town to send postcards to their family and friends overseas.

Our telephone network operators provided free IDD call time for people to call their friends and contacts overseas.

Cathay Pacific, Dragonair and other airlines serving Hong Kong sponsored over 28,000 free trips to Hong Kong. Joining the sponsorship were all major hotels and other sectors of the travel industry. Such cooperation was unprecedented in an otherwise fiercely competitive industry.

Importantly, our recovery efforts had the firm support of our central government in Beijing.

Premier Wen flew from Beijing to join us in celebrating the sixth anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region on July 1.

We signed a Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (commonly known as CEPA) with the Mainland of China in June 2003. CEPA was an important driving force in fostering co-operation between the two places in all aspects of trade.

One of the liberalisation initiatives under CEPA was the "Individual Visit Scheme". This scheme allows residents of selected Mainland cities to visit Hong Kong on their own, rather than as part of a packaged tour group. In the second half of 2003, over 660,000 Mainland visitors came to Hong Kong under this Scheme.

Local and national efforts were essential but not enough, especially given Hong Kong as an international city. We leverage our overseas network to generate publicity and restore travellers' confidence.

The overseas offices of our government, the Hong Kong Tourism Board and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council launched coordinated and targeted marketing platforms for our source markets of trade and investment, exhibitions and conventions and, of course, tourism.

Indeed, "seeing is believing".

For the rest of 2003, the Hong Kong Tourism Board invited about 600 travel media guests, and almost 2,000 travel trade representatives from 17 different source markets to visit Hong Kong to see for themselves.

When economic activities started to recover their vigour, our visitors returned.

We were most grateful to our international friends for their vote of confidence. They were ready to join in our recovery efforts, as we are doing for Sichuan today.

The international community offered many opportunities for Hong Kong to host international conferences and exhibitions, mega events, prestigious sports tournaments, and arts and cultural programmes after June 2003. Among these, I have to say that the UNWTO hosted a conference in Hong Kong on "International Co-operation for Tourism Development under a New Paradigm".

People in Hong Kong deeply appreciated these international efforts. You helped put Hong Kong back on the international map.

It was a great boost for us.

How did we assess the effectiveness of our revival campaign? Let's review a few key indicators.

When Hong Kong was hard-hit by SARS, visitor arrivals dropped significantly by 65 per cent in April and 68 per cent in May 2003.

We were fortunate to be among those having the quickest rebound in the region, and eventually recorded a 6 per cent growth in the second half of 2003, compared to the same period in 2002.

Hotel occupancy rocketed from 17 per cent in May to 93 per cent in November 2003.

For the whole year, we received 15.5 million visitors, a slight drop when compared with 16.6 million in 2002.

We were ready to showcase the true Hong Kong vibe to our visitors once again. And in 2004, the year after, we received more than 21 million visitors, and arrivals have been on the rise since then.

Let me re-cap some of the salient aspects of our post-SARS recovery efforts.

First, resilience of our own people. Their "can-do" spirit helped revive tourism remarkably, and make visitors feel welcome.

Second, close partnership between private and public sectors. Tourism recovery relies on the collective efforts of all economic sectors and all members of the community. The Government alone cannot do such a splendid job. Equally true then and today - visitors come to Hong Kong to experience our living culture. So everyone matters, every act counts.

Third, we could not have recovered so quickly without the unfailing support of our own country. With Mainland China as our hinterland, and with our own strengths as an international financial and commercial centre, Hong Kong emerged stronger as one of the most preferred city destinations for visitors in the region. We have been enjoying more trade, more investment, and more tourism benefits.

Last but not the least, we could not have made it without international endorsement and support, like that by the UNWTO, as well as our joint promotion efforts with our friends overseas.

Ladies and gentlemen, I firmly believe that, with our collective efforts, together with the great character and spirit of the people of Sichuan, this region and its community will ride through difficult times and have an even brighter future.

And we should never stop learning from the past. As Chairman Shao and Dr Rifai reminded us this morning, we should remain vigilant of the impact of the global financial crisis. Indeed governments and tourism industry should begin putting our acts together for a recovery programme to ensure that we will emerge stronger as the economy recovers from this crisis.

Thank you very much.

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