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Agents seek a refund reprieve

Directive good, but insurance, consumer education needed

By Prudence Lui, Mimi Hudoyo, Linda Haden and Sirima Eamtako

HONG KONG/SOUTH-EAST ASIA A new directive by Hong Kong's Travel Industry Council (TIC) to free outbound agents of the obligation to refund air/train/cruise fees to clients in the event of a force majeure (*TTG Asia e-Daily, June 16*) is being seen as only half the solution by agents in other markets.

Similarly faced with an increased occurrence of disasters, agents in South-east Asia would like to see the same directive in their markets, but one that encompasses not just transport but all suppliers.

As well, agents are calling for a consumer education campaign of the agent's role and position, and of the need for travel insurance that will better protect consumers and themselves.

Even though financial protection through a number of commercial insurance schemes exists for travel agents when they become insolvent, the same cannot be said when extraordinary events occur.

TIC, for instance, pointed out that when political unrest broke out in Egypt in February, Hong Kong agents were left to deal with refund claims from 1,500 disgruntled group tour travellers. TIC chairman, Michael Wu, said even though

airlines eventually forked out the refunds, agents still lost some HK\$2 million (US\$257,000) because some of the local hotels and groundhandlers refused to return the deposits.

"Why should agents have to shoulder the responsibility and risk?" he asked.

Indonesia Airline Ticketing Agents Association (ASTINDO) chairman, Elly Hutabarat, said airlines usually returned deposits, but problems arose if there were disputes on the interpretation of a disaster as a force majeure.

"I remember the problems agents faced with groundhandlers during Iceland's volcanic eruption. And in all fairness, groundhandlers too might have spent money on hotels, transportation, etc.

"So the best way is to work with insurance companies. Indonesia should have a similar directive, but ASTINDO is going to approach insurance companies to see if they have policies to cover this issue."

She added: "Agents should not bear the responsibility of things which happen beyond their control. Consumers should be aware of the agent's position and role."

Agreeing, Margaret Loh, managing director of Airrelated Travel in Singapore, said: "It is the airlines and

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Hutabarat: Insurance



Good things take time

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