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## **UNWTO STATEMENT ON THE SITUATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS IMPACT ON TOURISM**

**Madrid, Spain, 21 July 2006.-** UNWTO shares the concerns of the world community, about the situation in Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories, commiserates with grieving families and hopes for a speedy stabilization of the situation.

The Middle East has been the fastest growing region for tourism during the past decade and this sector has become a vital part of the socio-economic fabric of the region as well as an important component for the livelihoods of its people.

While International tourist arrivals worldwide grew at an annual average of 4%, the average growth rate of arrivals in the Middle East during this period was 11%, and the volume of arrivals to the region almost tripled, leaping from 13.7 million in 1995 to 39.7 million last year. Receipts from international tourism (measured in local currencies at constant prices) have followed a similar pattern, growing from US\$9.8 billion in 1995 to US\$ 28.6 billion in 2005.

In Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, as well as in some destinations in Egypt (Cairo, Alexandria and along the Red Sea coast) the driving force of tourism growth has come from the intra-regional market especially from the Gulf countries.

During the first month of this year, main destinations in the region with data available posted outstanding double digit results. Lebanon, which is now relying on tourism as a central pillar of its economy, posted a +37% growth rate in the first quarter of the year and almost full occupancy in its hotels. Israel too was experiencing similar levels of growth (+25%) and expectations of double digit increases for the whole year. Other neighbouring countries – notably Egypt and Jordan – had very bullish expectations and major destinations in the gulf also positive results (click here for results: [doc1](#), [doc2](#), [doc3](#), [doc4](#)).

The overall problem for tourism in the area with the current situation are compounded by the destruction of basic infrastructure and the absence of normal transport and communication facilities, service and information channels. There is as yet not foreseeable timeframe for a return to normalcy.

All this is now subject to the political evolution and we are watching carefully the results of the diplomatic initiatives and the mission of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's envoy as they could contribute to the very needed rebound of the tourism activity.

At this point the primary issue for our sector is the safety of tourists and their rapid repatriation from risk zones. This is being undertaken by States following diplomatic and emergency response procedures – travellers, people planning travel to the conflict region and families should contact their embassies and consulates for specific advice.

The current conflict will certainly impact dearly on Lebanon and Israel but, at this stage, it is difficult to assess the extend to which it will finally affect inbound tourism to some of the major destinations of the region, which may well continue to experience predicted strong growth. Other developments may still take place but it is important to note that, at this stage, the major tourism monuments and attractions are untouched even if neighbouring infrastructures used by the visitors have been damaged in some areas.

It is to be noted that the region has a proud history of resilience to external shocks and an enormous capacity for recovery from crisis situations. Conflicts and tensions have slowed down growth but have not produced significant decreases in overall volumes of flows. We have repeatedly seen months with substantial drops in arrivals that were followed by flows bouncing back quickly and strongly once stability re-emerged.

UNWTO Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli said: "This is yet another example of where tourists and the tourism industry are hostage to global events beyond their control... we will work closely with our members to help those who are suffering and to rebuild the tourism economy."

UNWTO maintains close contacts with the Governments of the countries concerned. It has offered to provide support to tourism administrations, as appropriate in these very difficult circumstances and will help in all recovery programmes.

Safety and security is indeed an element that weighs heavily in tourism policies of countries and destinations in the region. It undoubtedly constitutes a concern that should be addressed from a broader risk assessment and management perspective, beyond strictly speaking security measures. In this context, one week ago we announced the creation with Microsoft of a UNWTO Emergency Response System with a dedicated portal to provide better information and support in similar situations in the future.

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