

# RESTORING THAILAND'S TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE IN THE WAKE OF THE RECENT POLITICAL CRISES: A FEW PROPOSALS

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## **Abstract**

*As is now well understood, the tourism industry is in a crisis as the result of successive political uncertainty and associated violence. Compounding that issue are external crises, such as the global economic meltdown and H1N1 virus (Swine flu) which followed earlier crises of Avian Flu, and mad cow disease. To deal with such calamities, tourism planning and crisis management methodology have been developed but less effectively applied. This is the case with Thailand that has recently been badly affected by negative and sometimes less-than-accurate reports in the popular press and international media on its political crises: crises or disasters? This is a fine delineation but as this paper shows, a distinction between disasters and crises needs to be made as these words are often used interchangeably when in-fact they are unique. This paper further argues adoption of DESTCON; a scale for classifying crises and disasters. To this end, it proposes adoption of DESTCON as a recognized ranking scale for crises. If media, embassies, and all tourism authorities adopted this scale to accurately inform tourists of the nature and severity of conditions at the site of crises, much of the spin would be removed and much less damage done by sensationalizing the news. This paper concludes with a number of suggestions to more effectively overcome the effects of the current crisis and urges interested parties to continue the discussion and debate.*

**Key words:** *Tourism Crises, Tourism Disasters, DESTCON.*

## **Introduction**

To simply state that the December 2008 and April 2009 political crises have dealt a blow on Thailand's tourism destination image would sound like an understatement given the magnitude of the post-crisis damages inflicted upon the country. How much damage has been inflicted? With only six weeks having elapsed since the most recent crisis erupted, it is too early to quantify their actual current impact. However, if history is a guide, revisiting the statistics on an earlier political crisis; that of May 1992, will help to put the few figures available on the recent crises into perspective.

Suraphol Srirakul, the President of the Thai Travel Agents recently reported that "the number of foreign visitors had fallen 31 percent in the first four months of the year," further adding: "But all major markets including Japan, China,

the United Kingdom, South Korea and Russia have seen falls between 23 and 40 percent." (Sritama, 2009,1) In May 1992, the Thai Hotels Association had estimated that the average occupancy rate among its member hotels in Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiangmai was between 30 and 35 percent, compared to the normal low season level of 50 to 55 percent (Asia Travel Trade, 1992, pp 8-9). The similarity of the figures lends credence to the latest statistics; all the more as a drop in international arrivals of 30 percent year-to-date has also been reported (Sritama, 2009). Furthermore, on a recent visit to Pattaya, this writer drove around the city at night and noticed that most night spots were deserted. The hotel where we stayed had less than 100 guests for a hotel with 870 rooms. Clearly, Thailand's tourism image has been severely impacted and the tourism sector materially damaged across the board with airlines, hotels, shopping and transportation equally affected. And, adding insult to injury, it is all taking place in the midst of a severe global economic crisis

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already adversely affecting Thai tourism and growing concerns over the H1N1 virus.

In light of all these figures, the temptation is therefore almost irresistible for this author to refer to these crises as disasters. Yet, although using such a term to describe the aftermath of the political upheavals would be fitting and not sound hyperbolic, it would, by the same token raise semantics issues. Indeed, the terms 'crisis' and 'disaster' should not be used interchangeably as, in the context of tourism, their implications differ. As a matter of fact, it is particularly critical to distinguish them when it comes to assessing the severity of a crisis/disaster and managing it.

After elaborating on this distinction in part one, this paper will focus on crisis/disaster management planning. Endorsing some of the findings articulated in Beirman's *Restoring Tourism Destinations in Crisis* (2003) and Laws', Prideaux' and Chon's, (eds.) *Crisis Management in Tourism* (2007), part two will thus consider some of the most salient characteristics of crisis management planning. Part three will then propose a method for assessing the level of severity of a crisis.

The two most recent political crises are only the latest in a series of crises and disasters that have caused a down-turn in Thailand's tourism sector. This paper will then look at recent developments in Thailand with a view to exploring how a disaster can precipitate a crisis and vice-versa. Finally, given the persistent deterioration of Thailand's tourism destination image, it will consider a range of possible solutions to restore it. In addition to Beirman's and Laws', Prideaux' and Chon's publications mentioned above as sources for proposed solutions to the current woes in tourism, Hall's *Tourism and Politics* (1994) and Glaesser's *Crisis Management in the Tourism Industry* (2003 and 2006) were also tapped.

### ***1. Crises versus Disasters***

Firstly, even though the popular press frequently uses the terms 'crisis' and 'disaster'

interchangeably, it is necessary to distinguish between them as, in the context of tourism, their connotations differ.

The word 'crisis', which derives from the Latin word *decision*, itself borrowed from the Greek word *krisis*, comes from *krinein*, to *decide*. As its Latin and Greek roots unequivocally show, deciding about something or someone is clearly at its core, either as a triggering event or as a way of resolving it or both.

Defining a crisis as "a crucial stage or turning point, especially in sequence of events or a disease," the Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus further suggest that any such decision is to be made at a "crucial stage or turning point" (Sinclair, 2000). Moreover, by referring to it as "an unstable period especially one of extreme trouble or danger" (Ibid.), the Thesaurus adds the notion of danger and instability to that of a critical decisional time (Sinclair, 2000).

Two more quotes will further fine tune the definition in the context of tourism: crises are "periods of great uncertainty in which predictability and control are lost or severely diminished" (Moreira, 2007 p. 52). They are also "the possible but unexpected result of management failures that are concerned with the future course of events set in motion by human action or inaction, precipitating the events. These low probability and high impact situations (Weik, 1988; Pearson and Clair, 1998) are associated with critical changes and threats of destruction (Glaesser, 2003)" (as cited in (Moreira, Ibid.)). Of particular relevance to this paper is the latter notion of management failure, a reference to management crisis, which we will explore subsequently, and to the fact that a crisis is a situation in which there is a dominance of the internal origin of the initial events.

A disaster, on the other hand, whose name derives from the Greek *astro*, a star, is defined in the Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, as "an occurrence that causes great distress or destruction" (Sinclair, 2000) and as a situation where an external and unpredictable catastrophic change is associated with a low degree over the

evolution of events.” In short, whereas the origin of a crisis is predominantly internal, that of a disaster is essentially external.

The fact is that in both cases, the final consequences depend on the pre-crisis or pre-disaster vulnerabilities (Moreira, 2007 p.53). In the end, it all comes down to the level of awareness and preparedness of the destination. The less prepared a destination, the more vulnerable it will be to a crisis or a disaster, hence the need for crisis management.

Table 1 below summarizes these various differentiating considerations.

**Table 1:** Crises versus Disasters: Differentiating Criteria

<i>Differentiating Criteria</i>	<i>Crises</i>	<i>Disasters</i>
Dominant origin of the initial events.	Internal	External
Frequency of occurrence	Higher	Lower
Events Time Line	Prolonged	Brief
Forecast Potential	Higher	Lower
Degree of Control over the evolution of the events	Higher	Lower
Reaction Time Frame	Preceded by a period that allows decision and action	Immediately before or only after the initial events
Impacts and Consequences	Lower	Higher

Source: Moriera, Pedro, 2007 *Aftermath of Crises and Disasters: Notes of An Impact Assessment Approach*, in Laws Eric, Bruce Prideaux and Kaye Chon, 2007. *Crisis Management in Tourism* CABI Publishing p.53.

Having thus distinguished crises and disasters, it remains to see how a crisis or a

disaster can be best handled either at the national or community level.

## **2. Crisis Management Planning**

It should be noted first that whilst some governments prepare for crises and disasters, others do not. Crises can thus be allowed to run their own courses (management by doing nothing) where resources such as medicine, health-care services, money, skilled people or equipment are scarce or locally unavailable. When people have to fend for themselves, delay in overcoming the crisis will extend and the recovery time and increase the cost and may result in a crisis becoming a disaster. Moreover, during the extended recovery time, business as usual is impractical, adding an opportunity cost to the immediate loss. A recent tragic event in Myanmar, the early 2008 huge tidal surge in the wake of cyclone Nargis, provides a compelling case in point: Even though this Act of God wreaked havoc on many areas and caused heavy human losses, the government of Myanmar left its citizens to largely fend for themselves and, more regrettably, blocked international aid efforts to bring relief to its citizens (USAID, 2009; Broman, 2009).

Some government and private-sector organizations however, have begun to adopt a proactive approach to crisis management, i.e. they have started to anticipate both disasters and crises, prepare detection and warning systems, and establish recovery action-plans. They have also sequestered and mobilized resources so as to be in a position to manage disasters and crises when they occur. In short, they have engaged in crisis management.

It goes without saying that crisis management requires planning. Still, whether as a consequence of ignorance, internal resistance, community-based conflicts, and/or cost (Quarantelli, 1998) or political will (Hall, 1994),

it appears that many tourist destinations have failed to establish an adequate level of disaster and crisis planning (De Jong, 2003). In such

destinations, most authorities and relevant stakeholders continue to lack crisis/disaster management capabilities, flexibility and confidence to deal effectively with unexpected, complex and critical situations (Faulkner, 2001, Santana, 2003). And, even in cases where some organizations may have put formal crisis management plans into place, the level of preparedness often still remains insufficient; such plans being generally reactive and designed to address limited professional objectives, rather than incorporating the priorities of the wider community.

The most recent political crisis in Thailand, which will be subsequently considered at length, fits into this category. Only after the crisis, were the police shown undergoing advanced crowd control techniques, as employed abroad and viewable in any TV street protest coverage such as, for example, the London street protests during the recent prime ministerial meetings in the wake of the U.S.-led financial crisis.

Experience suggests that publicized images of incompetence, negligence, instability and inefficiency in times of adversity, can exacerbate and/or prolong crisis conditions (Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre, 2001). Thus, preparedness will not only minimize human and material losses, it will also go a long way in limiting potential public relations damages.

There are, of course, countries whose governments are well prepared for crisis or disasters. This is, for example, the case of Japan where preparedness to the irregular occurrence of earthquakes is monitored by various departments of the Japanese government that ensures that citizens of all ages and organizations are thoroughly prepared for these disasters. To that end, disaster plans are regularly practiced so that when a disaster occurs, every citizen will know instinctively how to respond and recovery time will be minimized, reducing thereby the likelihood of an ensuing crisis.

Another such example, one closer to home, is

that of Phuket where, two years after the tsunami had hit the island, an evacuation drill simulating that required of a tsunami was held. No preparedness drills, however, have since been publicized probably for fear of alarming tourists. In Phuket, as in some other tourist destinations, regular drills have proven to be successful in reducing the impact of disasters and mitigating ensuing crises. This is particularly true in the case of massive and devastating earthquakes such as that which occurred in Kobe on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1995 (Science Daily, 2005).

Basing his findings on the widely-acknowledged work by Fink 1986, (p.20), Keown-McMullan, 1997, (p.9) and Weiner and Kahn, 1972, (p.21) and further refining their crisis management theory, Faulkner (2001) identified the following key crisis management characteristics:

1. A triggering event, which is so significant that it challenges the existing structure, routine operations or survival of the organization.

2. The situation becomes characterized by fluid, unstable, dynamic situations (Fink 1986 p.20).

3. The managerial environment is one of high threat, short decision time and includes elements of surprise and urgency.

4. There is an element of inability to cope among those directly affected.

5. A turning point when decisive changes, which may have both positive and negative connotations, are imminent (in Laws, Prideaux and Chon, 2007, p.9).

In this list, two of the six elements of the Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental model (PESTLE), a model often used in Strategic Management (Thompson and Strickand, 1999), have been identified by this author, namely, political and economic factors. The PESTLE or PEST model is particularly useful to managers in organizations seeking to identify solutions to

complex problems through identifying the multiple factors at play in a given situation and where resources fall short of requirements to address the problem at hand.

Concomitant to the problem of the level of preparedness of a tourist destination to a crisis/disaster is that of its level of severity. Raising this issue begs the question of how to assess the level of severity of a crisis/disaster, which, in turn, begs that of its relevance. We will first address the assessment issue and propose a scale before expounding on its usefulness.

**3. Assessing the Level of Severity of a Crisis: DESTCON a Proposed Five-point Scale**

When misfortune descends upon a tourist destination – or any area hit, for that matter - the very first step is to accurately classify it, as either a disaster or a crisis. Such a classification has to be based on mutually-acceptable criteria and requires that all communication then clearly abide by that classification unless there is a change in the nature of the issue. This will necessitate both consensus and responsible reporting on a wide scale by all media participants.

Classifying an event as a crisis or a disaster, while necessary as a first step, will not, however, in and of itself provide any information as to its level of severity. Quantifying the severity of the crisis or disaster identified should thus be the second step. The greater the scale and scope of a crisis or disaster, the greater the resources needed to overcome the impacts; hence, the need to know its magnitude. Currently, however, the tourism industry lacks a scale on which to rank crises. Which criteria should then be applied?

In the absence of any standardized, globally-accepted means of measurement, it has been suggested that the tourism industry adapt to tourism crises/ disasters the five-point scale used as a basis by the global armed forces to rate the status of military readiness in times of threat to a nation’s security (Beirman 2003, p.19). Known as Defense Readiness Conditions, (DEFCON), this scale could then be renamed, as Beirman

suggests, the Destination Confidence Scale (DESTCON) and applied to both crises and disasters (Ibid, p.19).

The DEFCON scale is based on five points, ranging from 1 to 5, and ascending from DEFCON 5 (normal peacetime readiness) up to DEFCON 1 (maximum force readiness). A comparable scale is relevant to identifying the status of a destination condition. The DESTCON scale would be as follows (Table 2):

**Table 2 – DESTCON Five-point Scale**

DESTCON 5	Normal marketing conditions.
DESTCON 4	Normal increased intelligence and strengthened marketing measures.
DESTCON 3	Increase in marketing readiness, above normal readiness.
DESTCON 2	Further increase in marketing readiness, less than maximum readiness.
DESTCON 1	Maximum crisis marketing readiness.

Source: Moriera, Pedro, 2007 Aftermath of Crises and Disasters: Notes of An Impact Assessment Approach, in Laws Eric, Bruce Prideaux and Kaye Chon, 2007.Crisis Management in Tourism CABI Publishing p.5.

Each scale level would indicate that the following destination conditions are met:

- DESTCON 5: Minimal perceived threat to the marketability of the destination.
- DESTCON 4: Isolated problems within the destination: for example, crimes, low level political disturbances that may require avoidance of specific areas but have minimal impact on the overall marketability of the destination. Africa could be a case in point. Another might have been the recent April 2009 political incidents in Bangkok. As will be discussed subsequently (section 4, supra), the latter, however, also meets some critical DESTCON 3 conditions.
- DESTCON 3: There are major problems with identifiable regions in the destination. These problems are well publicized and present a credible threat to tourists in those areas. Threat/s includes major crime event/s, outbreaks

of terrorism, a localized natural disaster or an epidemic. Major problems in a neighboring destination may impact on the marketability of the major destination. The series of political coups in Fiji might fall within this category.

- DESTCON 2: A crisis of this magnitude places large parts of the country at/or under imminent threat of war or destruction from a natural disaster. This stage includes wide spread terrorism, natural disasters, diseases or widespread disorders in which the safety of tourists is under measurable threat. As a result, the governments of source markets will caution heightened levels of concern or insist on complete avoidance. Recent examples of destinations in this category include Croatia, Egypt, and Sri Lanka when the crises wherein were at their worst.

- DESTCON 1: A crisis of this magnitude not only threatens the marketability of the destination but also has widespread global or regional repercussions on tourism. In most instances, this involves a major act of war or terrorism, which draws in many nations. The September 11, 2001 attack on New York City and Washington D.C. most closely corresponds to this level of crisis. The crisis in New York triggered crises in other countries heavily reliant on US tourism and trade (Beirman 2003, pp.19-20).

It is suggested that all crises and disasters can be accommodated by the DESTCON scale. It is also recommended that to remove the media hype and deliver a trusted assessment of the situation, this scale ought to become a commonly-accepted global standard. Its application, however, may lead to perverted results.

There could be some instances, in which a crisis situation would exist according to either one of the definitions outlined above yet the government at the site of the crisis may well downplay the level of severity by muting the response. And, as a consequence, little attention may be drawn to the situation as a *crisis*.

National governments through their embassies generally attempt to overcome this by releasing travel advisories to their nationals not to travel to destinations experiencing crisis. The popular press also publicize those advisories, however, they rarely publicize when those advisories are lifted. One such example of downplaying a crisis is South Africa and its dealing with its crime rate. Although South Africa's tourism authorities cannot be said to ignore the serious crime rate in the country given its magnitude, they treat it, however, more as an avoidable tourist hazard than as a crisis, thus diffusing crime as a threat to the viability and appeal of the destination. Clearly, this is not the way a responsible government should treat its citizens or visitors from abroad (Beirman, p.24). The recent complaints by members of the Egyptian Football team, who were robbed following their Confederations Cup Win over Italy, reinforce this perception as two South African Sunday Newspapers downplayed the story, quoting police sources who alleged that the players had befallen foul of light-fingered female consorts at an impromptu victory party (Hurd, 2009)

Another obstacle, apart from the absence of an agreed scale for assessing disasters or crises, is the level of media exposure and its impact on how to qualify an event. Media attention will indeed influence the distinction between a tourist hazard and a crisis, and even the DESTCON rating. The level of exposure may not be related to the severity of the crisis or disaster but be more related to political sensitivities (Hall, 1994). "For instance, with the international media intensively covering the United States, Britain and the Middle East, events in those areas are often subject to intense coverage and wide spread media dissemination. Terrorist attacks in Israel are one such example. Conversely, there was, until recently, relatively little international media attention given to terrorists in Sri Lanka unless it occurred in or near the capital, Colombo, or impacted directly on tourists and

foreign nations” (Beirman 2003, p.21).

However, with the Sri Lankan army making a final push to conquer the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) forces, as this paper is being prepared, the region has finally captured the attention of the world’s media. This is due in no small part to the hundreds of civilians who have lost their lives and the many more who have been wounded whilst tens of thousands have been displaced from their homes. In short, the scale of this crisis and the level of casualties are now such that it is bound to receive global media exposure.

A major factor determining the shifting status of a problem from a background *hazard* to a *crisis* impacting on international tourism is the international political impact of the issue. When terrorism in Turkey, Sri Lanka, or the Philippines is restricted to an isolated localized crisis, far away from major cities and tourist centres, it is largely ignored internationally. However, when terrorist attacks target foreign tourist infrastructures, then the matter becomes an international incident. (Freyer and Schroder, 2004 in Beirman, 2004)

In light of all these considerations, this researcher strongly recommends that the World Tourism Organization (WTO) promote adoption of the DESTCON Scale (Table 2, supra) by national governments and regional and national tourism authorities to better inform tourists of likely crises, so that fully informed decisions as to whether or not to depart or embark on a journey can be made from an informed and ethical perspective, rather than just from a profit-based perspective.

#### ***4. Can a Disaster Precipitate a Crisis and Vice-versa?***

Having distinguished, compared and contrasted both crises and disasters, one might consider at this juncture whether, a disaster may lead to a crisis and vice versa. Take Thailand, as a case in point. It is a fact that some disasters originating outside of Thailand have led to crises in Thailand (Litvin and Crotts, 2007). One such

disaster that instantly comes to mind is the December 26, 2005 tsunami; a case where a sub-sea volcanic eruption in the Indian Ocean close to Indonesia, caused a Tsunami which impacted Thailand and several other South East Asian nations. There was no tsunami early warning system in South East Asia at that time and although the tsunami was detected by the Pacific Ocean Tsunami Warning System Monitoring Station in Hawaii, there was no formal communication and warning system in place in South East Asia to alert those about to be affected. The fact that it occurred on the Boxing Day public holiday also exacerbated the communication problem as most people were sleeping off their Christmas festivities.

One person who immediately became aware of the impending tsunami was John Gray, a long term resident of Phuket. However, he was largely unsuccessful in making the local authorities aware of the impending disaster and resorted to a lone approach to alerting friends and urging them to escape to higher ground.

Soon after, however, the Thai Government, realizing the severe economic impact to Thailand’s destination image and tourism industry quickly established a tsunami local detection and warning system. Two years later, in 2007, an integrated tsunami warning system was developed and deployed for the Indian Ocean region funded by South East Asian governments (Rice, 2005). During that time the initial impact of the Tsunami disaster played out to a crisis for the Phuket tourism industry. (Semone, 2007, Campiranon and Scott, 2007 and Cooper and Erfurt, 2007)

The tsunami was devastating and dealt a significant blow to the tourism sector in the six Thai coastal provinces affected. The high number of western tourists who were victims was largely profiled in the international media. At the same time, media discussion highlighted the widespread recognition of the importance of tourism for the local Thai economies and for improving the welfare of the local people. As a result, the importance of tourists returning to the

local region was emphasized and tourism promoted both internationally and domestically to minimize the crisis resulting from the initial disaster as defined earlier in this paper (see page 1) (Rice, 2005).

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) anticipated losses of 4 million Baht per month across the six affected provinces (*The Bangkok Post*, 2005). This loss was expected to adversely impact the overall economic growth of Thailand to the extent that the economic growth forecast for 2005 was cut from 3.6 percent to 5.6 percent. Apart from the community costs associated with the loss of life and the scale of the human tragedy caused by the enormous natural disaster, the business community perceived that the impact would only be a short-term adversity in certain sectors. Moreover, there was a general feeling that economic growth in Thailand would unlikely to be affected beyond one year (Ibid.). With this feeling of confidence participants set about re-establishing their businesses. The government pledged and delivered vital aid and through diplomatic channels arranged for past U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush (senior) to visit the region to encourage locals and attract charitable donations from abroad.

With the diversity of local and external problems repeatedly impacting upon the performance of the tourism sector, it became increasingly apparent that both the Thai government and international and local business investors needed to apply more sustainable development strategies for managing the risk of disasters and crises (Hall, 1994).

The recent political unrest in Bangkok also provides compelling examples of how, conversely, a crisis can precipitate a disaster.

A few months after Prime Minister (PM) Samak Sundaravej had been forced to resign (on September 12, 2008) and replaced by Khun Somchai Wongsawat, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), so-called "Yellow Shirts," (Montlake, 2009) occupied the main Bangkok International Airport ((Suvarnabhumi International Airport), in an effort to bring an

end to his tenure as PM. The airport was closed for nine days and the occupation ended when PM Somchai stepped down on December 2, 2008 after the Thai Supreme Court declared the previous election to have been tainted by vote buying (Taylor, 2009, Makinon, 2008). Air traffic resumed within 2-3 days after the protesters left.

In the meantime stranded passengers were offered departing flights out of Sattahip (a disused Air Force base) about 140 miles from Bangkok. Tourists in other parts of Thailand who could delay their departure were offered free hotel accommodation and meals for an extended stay (<http://www.ctva.ca>).

A new coalition government was formed in the ensuing weeks and Khun Abhisit Vejajiva (Khun Abhisit), appointed PM. Not long after, the opposition United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), so-called "Red Shirts," (Montlake, 2009), took to the streets to force PM Khun Abhisit to resign. On April 11, 2009, the hotel where an ASEAN Prime Ministerial Meeting was scheduled to be held, located 135 miles east of Bangkok, was overrun by a small number of Red Shirt protesters, leading to the cancellation of the meeting and evacuation of the visiting Prime Ministers by helicopters.

Some Red Shirt protesters also overran the Interior Ministry and nearby areas in Bangkok. As violence escalated, PM Abhisit called on the army to restore order and within 48 hours order was restored.

As mentioned in the introduction, these events have dealt a blow on the Thai tourism industry across the board, a sector already hard hit by the global financial crisis and the H1N1 virus, forcing the TAT and the industry to come up with coping strategies.

With only seven weeks having elapsed since the most recent incidents took place, it is too early, however, to determine how the Thai tourism industry will respond apart from some quick short-term fix that such as offering promotional hotel rates to international regional

or local tourists. Several hotels that had earlier had loyalty programs but had discontinued them during prosperous times have since restored them to boost local tourist participation. And should occupancy rates remain low, more discounts and incentives are to be expected.

How do the political crises rank on the DESTCON scale? Revisiting Beirman's (2003) edited volume, which considers various political, natural and humanitarian crises and disasters and rate them, will help to map out an answer.

Part II of the book contains five chapters, each being a case-study of a particular terrorist or politically violent act. Each is set in a particular country and each case describes the incident and suggests a DESTCON ranking and discusses what actions were taken to overcome the particular tourist crisis. Two political coups in Fiji in 1987 and 2000 were described to illustrate how DESTCON apply and a ranking of 3 assigned.

Part III describes a series of cases involving natural disasters and a DESTCON ranking was assigned (DESTCON 2) and how they were addressed from a tourism perspective.

Part IV describes cases of epidemics - appropriate now as we are under attack by H1N1 virus (DESTCON 2), whilst parts V and VI, cover crime and the war on terrorism respectively, with both ranked as DESTCON 1.

Clearly, the recent political agitation in Bangkok ranks as DESTCON 3. Both crises were major problems in identifiable areas. And the April 2009 agitation was a credible threat to tourists in the small parts of Bangkok where violence had spread. Though there was no physical intimidation *per se* during the December 2008 airport occupation, commotion between the two factions involved in the stand-off could have erupted at any time. The potential for health hazards was also high. And the risk of seeing violence escalate and spread to other parts of the city was there as well. In addition these events were highly publicized, domestically and abroad - and in some cases over-reported. But most importantly, given the large number of

tourists stranded all over the country - and at the airport itself, in an undoubtedly much less comfortable environment - and, in spite of the government's endeavors to mitigate damages, both events seriously impacted on the marketability of Thailand as a major tourist destination: hence, its current woes and its efforts to reestablish itself as a highly desirable, predictable, and safe heaven.

As mentioned earlier (section 3, *infra*), on the surface, it appears as if the December 2008 and April 2009 events should be ranked as DESTCON 4 situations, characterized among others by isolated problems within the destination, such as low level political disturbances, that may require avoidance of specific areas. However, while the issue of whether or not the unrest should be considered 'low level disturbances' arguably remains debatable, the substantial drop in the number of tourists visiting Thailand, well-below average occupancy rate in most hotels, and large discounts offered in many places clearly indicate that the impact on the overall marketability of Thailand is hardly minimal, a DESTCON 4 factor, but on the contrary quite substantial. In short, since Thailand's image and its ability to market itself as a tourism destination of choice have been hurt, the crises cannot be ranked as DESTCON 4 situations.

What can 'the land of smiles' can do to regain its international standing as a prime destination? Another reliable way to identify the various options available, in addition to those already considered in this paper, is to review how other countries, facing similar crises, responded to similar situations and analyze their responses in the Thai context.

### ***5. Possible Actions to Boost Thai Tourism***

Twelve major feasible initiatives have been identified:

1. Implement a number of tourism development areas as a mechanism for encouraging investments: - Thailand has been encouraging investments in hotel construction

for the past several years. The development of a large scale casino complex (such as has recently been undertaken in Singapore) would be an option but successive Thai governments have shied away from this as it competes with the State Lottery and is contrary to Buddhist principles of not encouraging gambling.

2. Adopt a pro-active approach to securing additional investments in hotels and resorts outside of Thailand: - Thai investors could partner with owners in the Middle-East or with near neighbours in Myanmar, Kampuchea, Lao and Vietnam. This could augur well for the future and reduce exposure to the purely Thai location. A current research project recommends cross-border self drive tourism, whilst the Royal Thai Government has launched proposal for several cross-border rail links. Earlier The Dusit Thani Hotel group had a number of overseas properties however these were sold during the Thai Economic crisis of 1996 (Pavida, 2004, p.21).

3. Initiate investment in neighboring countries to rehabilitate hotels which are in dire need of up- grading to the latest standards: - Many years ago, The Railway Hotel in Hua Hin was fully renovated and sold by The Royal Thai Railways department to The Central Pattana Group- a private Thai business group heavily involved in retailing and property development. The renovation retained turn-of-the-century (1900's) décor and remains a draw-card for both local and international visitors. This approach could be repeated in neighboring countries by Thai investors.

4. Simplify investment procedures for domestic and international investors and abolish withholding tax: - Thailand has followed this route through the Thai Board of Investment, but it is suggested that these be reviewed again. Procedures can always be streamlined.

5. Increase the TAT staffing, budget and scope: - The TAT, being part of the Government bureaucracy is very set in its ways and needs to transform itself and be bench-marked against the best in the world.

6. Increase the budget of The Thai Visitors Bureau: - Funding methods need to be reviewed and the most effective chosen for prompt implementation.

7. Encourage closer linkages between the Pacific Area Travel Organization and the TAT to broaden the ASEAN basis of Tourism in Thailand: - Our near neighbors are accustomed to Thailand having coups and political change and less likely to stop traveling here than are overseas visitors.

8. Prepare World Heritage Sites within the Kingdom better: - Thailand already has six World Heritage sites (UNESCO, 2009). However, the country does not appear to promote them well. A lot could be learnt and applied from Countries such as Italy, France, U.K., Egypt, and Israel. A new heritage tourism package could be developed either solely in Thailand or inclusive of sites in neighbouring countries (a sensitive subject when one recalls the recent political problems between Thailand and Kampuchea over the Kao Preah-Vihear World Heritage temple site (Real Cambodia, 2009).

9. Legislate and enforce minimum standards for the diving industry and regulate the operation of duty free stores: - The latter has already been completed here through a tender process. The former would however benefit from scrutiny and possible review as irregularities and corruption of the principal Duty Free appointee King Power was uncovered and prosecuted at the Suvarnabhumi International Airport during 2008 (*The Nation*, 2007).

10. Broaden the vocational base of the Thai tourism educational system: - To coin the vernacular of a distinguished academic and manager in tourism "we are training too many chiefs and not enough Indians." Lessons can be learnt from other disciplines such as nursing, where graduates are able to seek well-paid employment in Thailand or abroad and educational institutions are able to offer courses to a larger number of students than is feasible at the undergraduate or graduate level. This would

require establishment of training hotels within universities and accreditation of the programs. The Salaya Pavilion Hotel which is part of Mahidol University at Salaya is a case in point serving the undergraduate population whilst the Le Cordon Bleu culinary school of the Dusit Thani Hotel and The Imperial Cooking School of the Imperial Foods Group are two examples within the private sector which focus on vocational skills.

11. Innovate new tourism packages such as the Thai Traditional Holistic Health package recently launched by the Rose Garden Resort at Sampran near Bangkok: - Other opportunities lie in areas of streamlining travel packages involving: jungle trekking; river rafting (as currently promoted in Malaysia); hot air ballooning (popular in Australia, South Africa); floral tours (popular in Australia, Holland, Japan, and in the recent past in Chiangmai via the well-attended Royal Interflora campaign); Buddhist meditation tours; cross-border via self-drive and other options. The State Railway Authority of Thailand recently opened the first of several links to provinces not serviced by rail within Thailand and to neighboring countries. Vintage train excursions, popular in Europe, the U.S. and Australia, offer another untapped opportunity. The TAT announced plans to increase foreign group wedding ceremonies and tours on an annual basis (Sritama, (3) 2009).

12. Revitalize the regional cruise industry: - Many years ago Thailand had a small locally-owned cruise fleet, which, however, failed due largely to being under funded and equipped with old inefficient vessels. The cruise industry based in Florida is currently over equipped and operates at a loss. Local entrepreneurs ought to tap that industry for vessels and revitalize the ASEAN cruise industry to include China (where a cruise industry is just getting started), India – where 300 million people now constitute the middle class. Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific islands which are already participating in an established Pacific cruise industry.

No doubt other medium and short term tourism development solutions are feasible. What is patently clear though is that to overcome the current crisis, a bold recovery plan is essential and, although these could be derailed by any one of a number of factors, it is imperative to proceed. As Harold S Geneen, IT&T President and CEO, once put it, one must not after all, fall prey to “paralysis by analysis” (brainyquote.com). Those factors include:

- The global economic downturn in the major inbound tourist destinations.

- A rapid decline in the currencies of the principal source countries. This requires adoption of a more flexible approach in pricing and collecting payment for tourism products.

- Failure to resolve the underlying issues dividing the country into red and yellow shirt sectors within society and combining them into a unified Thai requirement to have an elected (rather than an appointed) government free of corruption and vote buying; and the need for the government to contribute more effectively to the poorer elements in Thai society (a major achievement by Taksin which was largely funded by vote buying. However, both the One Product One Tambol (OTOP) and The Thirty Baht Medical Scheme were steps in the right direction. This populist approach is a glaring contrast by the Democrat programs which have historically focused on benefiting big business, in the belief that benefits will “trickle down” to the poor. If we care to look at the stimulus packages of many other countries in the world today we can see where and why such “trickle down” programs do not work. (Note: The term “Trickle Down Economics” was attributed to Will Rogers a movie actor and social critic during the great depression 1929- 1937 (McElvaine, 1993)

### ***Conclusion***

In the last decades, Thailand has not been spared. The tourism sector was well on its way to economic recovery following the 1996 Asian Financial Crisis when along came the Bird Flu in

2004 (Abbott and Pearson, 2004) and SARS also in 2004 (Fouchier et al, 2004), both of which, though, were dealt with promptly and had little foothold in Thailand due to the countries innate skills in the Biological Sciences. Then came the Tsunami; a rare event indeed. But again, with the help of international donors and the Thai ability to act in a coordinated and timely way, that meant the crisis lasted for less than a year. This nevertheless does not remove the fact that an accurate and objective perception of crisis will remain tenuous unless the DETSCON scale or another mutually acceptable measure is accepted and implemented worldwide. All the more as, in today's digital world of instant communication, news – and bad news – quickly go around the world, often distorted, sensationalized, or over-reported. An objective determination on the five-point DESTCON scale will go a long way in remedying much of these media-coverage issues. It will also put travel advisories issued by embassies into perspective.

While the adoption of a DESTCON scale and improved crisis management planning will contribute to mitigate damages, avoiding future crises, however, will also require in the case of Thailand a political willingness from all those involved to compromise and reach consensus. This is one of the most pressing problems facing the country; one which even in a contracting economy and a harsh business environment, should not be left aside. To paraphrase a speaker at a recent Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA) meeting “*The problem is a Thai problem and will be resolved by them, in their own way and in their own time.*” (Koldowsky, 2009) This writer had often thought this over the many years he has lived in Thailand but has never articulated it so well. At stake is the destination image of Thailand.

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