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Friday, July 31, 2009 8:14 PM

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Closure of former refugee camp stirs protest

Fadli , The Jakarta Post , Batam | Thu, 07/30/2009 12:56 PM | The Archipelago

The Association of Indonesian Tour and Travel Agencies (Asita) in Batam, Riau, has voiced protest over the government's plan to close a former Vietnamese refugee camp on Galang Island, arguing that it is a popular tourist attraction for both domestic and foreign visitors.

Chairman of the association, Kamsa Bakri, told The Jakarta Post on Tuesday that his group was disappointed with the plan to shutdown the former Vietnamese refugee camp.

"Closing the former camp is equal to lowering the wages of Batam tour operators.

"The government should further develop the area as it is still a place of interest for both domestic and foreign visitors," said Kamsa.

He added that his association would object to the planned closure because it would reduce the time visitors would spend holidaying in Batam.

The former Vietnamese refugee camp is one of the tourist attraction most frequently visited on the island, he said.

"We are also against the ban on promoting the former refugee camp abroad because promoting it is an important part of attracting tourists from abroad," said Kamsa in a press conference during the ASEAN Small and Medium Scale Enterprise Expo.

Batam city's chamber of commerce head, Nada Faza Soraya, said her office expected the government and all related parties to recognize the important and different interests of the former refugee camp.

For tour operators in Batam, the place is important as an tourist attraction, which can be marketed to both domestic and foreign visitors.

Tourists operators have no intentions of exploiting the gloomy past of the Vietnamese government, Nada said.

"We are not interfering with the country's political issues. For us the site is quite beneficial as an unusual tourist attraction. I believe the site has quite a high historical and humanitarian value," Nada added.

Batam Industrial Development Authority (BIDA) spokesman, Dwi Djoko Wiwoho. told the Post on Wednesday that the former camp would be restricted to public visitors and would no longer be widely promoted as a tourist attraction.

"There has been criticism from the Vietnamese government regarding the site," he said.

Exposing the place, Dwi said, highlighted the dark history of the Vietnamese.

"An initial step "in responding to the criticism" is to no longer call the site a former Vietnamese refugee camp. It could just be called a refugee camp. That's it," he said.

Dwi, however, declined to say when the closure of the site would occur.

The former Vietnamese and Cambodian refugee camp is now almost 30 years old and is still well maintained.

The camp once accommodated 250,000 refugees and is located 50 km southeast of Batam.

The central government handed over the management and maintenance of the 80-hectare refugee camp to BIDA in January 1997.

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