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DOMINICAN TOURISM SUFFERS FROM BAD PUBLICITY OVER HOTEL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Up to 200 (mostly British) guests at the Bahia Principe San Juan Hotel in the province of Espaillat fell ill on the weekend of 4-5 August, with symptoms of diarrhoea and vomiting. The source of the illness remains unclear.

The problems was highlighted in the UK in the British broadcast and print media with extensive coverage in articles in the Times and the Sun

Ministry of Public Health officials identified food infected with staphylococci bacteria as the cause of the illness. But Tourism Minister Felix Jimenez and Public Health Minister Bautista Rojas Gomez claimed that the gastroenteritis outbreak was likely to have been caused by a virus known as norovirus brought in by one of the tourists staying at the resort. The virus comes from cold climates, and is not endemic to the Dominican Republic or the Caribbean, say local officials. If this was the case it is unclear how it subsequently spread so rapidly.

The Bahia Principe hotel is the subject of a lawsuit brought by UK holidaymakers who suffered gastric illnesses in June. In July 2005, UK tourists threatened to sue tour operators after falling ill in a string of hotels in the Dominican Republic. One year later, more than 100 UK tourists fell sick at the Hotel Riu Bachata in the Dominican Republic due to a stomach bug.

However, a Thomas Cook spokeswoman told *Times Online* on 8 August that illness in the Dominican Republic was no higher than other destinations. "In a normal sized property we would get a certain level of people, say five in 500, who report illness to our reps, which can be due to the hot weather, food, drink or something else. Cases of illness in the Dominican Republic are no higher than anywhere else." she said. A statement issued by First Choice corroborated this: "The Bahia Principe San Juan in the Dominican Republic, which benefits from an independently managed advanced hygiene programme, has had no more cases of illness than other large all inclusive properties in the Spanish Caribbean".

The Association of British Travel Agents confirmed that the Dominican Republic "did have a problem seven or eight years ago because it was a newly developed tourism destination and it couldn't handle the numbers of tourists". But spokesman Sean Tipton added that the country has made "massive steps in hygiene and is now comparable to first world countries."

IN BRIEF

- The Dominican Customs Agency (DGA) is undertaking an audit of the Shell oil company to determine whether the company altered fuel import prices. The company manages the country's only refinery Refidomsa in a 50-50 venture with the government. The DGA has warned that it would take "the pertinent measures to protect the tax interest of the State with respect to alterations in the declarations of hydrocarbon shipments". The government has accused Shell of defrauding the country of "tens of millions" of dollars by keeping gasoline and diesel prices artificially high by altering invoices to increase the shipping cost of imported crude destined for the 35,000 b/d refinery.
- The Ministry of Tourism has authorised the construction of a five-star 1,000-room health resort in Canoa, Barahona. As part of the project, 2,300 acres in Canoa, Barahona will be leased for 99 years, at a cost of US\$850,000. Of this amount, the Ministry of Tourism will manage US\$500,000 for infrastructure investments in the area and US\$350,000 will be distributed to 52 farmers who live on lands where the hotel will be built. The lease contract still requires congressional approval.

- The Dominican Republic must invest US\$3.21bn to reduce the number of people who do not have regular access to potable water and basic sanitary services by 50% before 2015, according to a study by the Environment Ministry, the United Nations Programme for Development and Germany's Cooperation Agency. Some 1.56m people lack access to water via an aqueduct. And, in 2005, 400,000 did not have access to basic sanitary services.
- Health Department inspectors are visiting various stores across the Dominican Republic to seize toys made in China for the giant toy makers, Mattel and Fisher-Price. It is suspected that the paint used may be lead-based.
- The Dominican Republic's consolidated public debt declined by US\$94.2m - minus 1.1% - in the second quarter of the year, to US\$8.33m, according to Treasury Minister Vicente Bengoa. This is equivalent to 25.4% of the country's GDP.
- Drug trafficking transactions are at an all-time low, according to the National Drug Control Department (DNCD). There are reports that West Africa is now replacing the Caribbean as a trafficking hub between South America and Europe.
- The Indian government has officially announced the appointment of Fernando Gonzalez Nicolas as its Honorary Consul in the Dominican Republic. In 1990, he founded the Consorcio Comercial del Caribe, a firm that promotes trade and international investment. He is a board member of the Dominican Association of Exporters (Adoexpo) and the Santo Domingo Chamber of Commerce. He also co-founded the Dominican Agribusiness Council (JAD) in 1984 and the British Chamber of Commerce in the Dominican Republic in 1987. In 1991, he was appointed Honorary Vice Consul for the UK and was awarded an MBE by Queen Elizabeth II in 1996.

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