

On My Mind
12/19/03

Last week's column mentioned a survey of Korean tourists, and wondered if a similar survey of Japanese tourists had ever been taken, or reported. Such a survey was indeed taken, and reported, but frustratingly enough, neither the agency responsible for the survey, nor the reporter who wrote about it, let me know. I only found it because I was searching back issues of the papers for something else.

The survey of Japanese tourists, though taken in July, was reported in mid-November. That survey showed that, as was true of the Korean tourists, "more than 50%" of the Japanese were satisfied with the safety of the CNMI, the cleanliness of its beaches, and the ease of getting around the island. More than 50% of the Japanese were also satisfied with the quality of the shopping, unlike the Koreans, 28.3% of whom were unhappy with the quality of the shopping.

About a third of both the Japanese and the Korean tourists expressed disappointment with the variety and quality of night-time tours. As had the Koreans, the Japanese respondents also expressed unhappiness about the cleanliness of local streets and restrooms. Both groups were dissatisfied with the price of travel to the CNMI. Reports of the survey also indicated that while the Japanese were dissatisfied with the price of things in the CNMI, the Korean tourists were dissatisfied with the variety of the shopping.

Perhaps the Marianas Visitors Authority should spend a little more of its time, effort and money persuading residents of the importance of clean streets, beaches and restrooms, and a little less on soliciting more potentially dissatisfied tourists. To improve the situation, more people need to be made aware of, and to support the idea, that tourist satisfaction means more money in their own pockets, and that they have a personal stake in the cleanliness of the island.

The surveys, being done for the MVA by Market Research & Development, are funded by the U.S. Department of Interior.

###

I read with horror the account, in the *Pacific Daily News*, that U.S. forces in Iraq are now copying tactics used by the Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and are using checkpoints and the isolation of whole villages in the fight against Iraqi insurgents. While perhaps innocent-sounding in the abstract, in reality the effect of such harassment, particularly as practiced by the Israelis, can be brutal.

In their application of checkpoints at arbitrary street crossings, village borders and the like, Israeli soldiers often force travelers to strip, to surrender their documents, to sit for hours awaiting clearance to proceed. Vendors are told to leave their trucks behind, forcing them to unload and carry their goods to the other side of the crossing, and reload the goods on someone else's vehicle. Even ambulances and students are held up at checkpoints - for no reason other than to harass the Palestinians.

Also used by the Israelis are curfews, restricting Palestinian villagers to their houses for days and weeks on end. Both children and adults who disobey are shot at - and often killed - even if they need medical attention, or want to help someone lying wounded in the street, or simply want to take out the trash.

The Israelis, in building walls around areas to "protect" compounds of illegal Israeli

settlers in the West Bank or Gaza, indiscriminately bulldoze homes and cars and whatever else gets in the way so as to leave a cleared area around the walls of concrete and barbed wire. The Palestinians are not compensated for the destruction of their homes, the loss of their possessions.

All this is reported in "Occupied Voices," a book of interviews with Palestinians put together by a Jewish-American PhD student who wanted to provide a means for allowing Palestinians to speak for themselves, rather than be so grossly misrepresented in the American media. "Again and again, the media appeared to condemn Palestinian violence and justify Israeli retaliation, validate Israeli suffering and blame the Palestinians for all that befell them," writes Wendy Pearlman. "Palestinian civilians trapped under closure and curfew were berated for putting Israel under siege, yet denied the chance to describe the misery of their own lives," she writes.

That the rest of the world, and the U.S. in particular, ignore such brutal treatment of Palestinian men, women and children, and do or say nothing to stop Israel's lawless behavior, is tragic. Moreover, the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel's Sharon has prohibited thousands of religious devotees - Christian as well as Islamic - from traveling to Bethlehem and Jerusalem at the height of the holiday season - or any other time.

Now, according to the *PDN* story, U.S. forces have been meeting with Israeli experts to discuss urban warfare and "Israel's lessons from its grueling three-year fight against Palestinian militants" - and against innocent Palestinian women, children, families, and non-militants.

But as reported in Pearlman's "Occupied Voices," the indignities, deprivations, harassments and willful killings the Palestinians are suffering at the hands of the Israeli militants have only strengthened the Palestinians' resolve to continue fighting for a life - and a country - of their own.

That's the lesson the U.S. forces should take from the situation in Israel: degradation and defilement will not win friends - or wars.

###

The role of the Commonwealth Ports Authority in the Sugar Dock project - agreeing to submit the application for channel dredging and dock reconstruction to the Coastal Resource Management office in its own name rather than through the name of the developer to save the developer the corporate costs involved - is questionable at best. But it is totally consistent with the CPA's arrogant attitude toward the people of the CNMI.

The CPA insisted on obtaining clear - and permanent - title, locking in its control of Sugar Dock, rather than leasing it from the Public Land Authority. Similarly, CPA is insisting on obtaining clear and permanent title to the land between the port and the Army Reserve Station, in effect forever taking that land out of the public domain as well.

CPA has been pushing the legislature to allow it to put poker machines at the Rota and Tinian airports - and to do so without having to pay licensing and related fees. CPA is also pushing the legislature to lift the present restriction on the sale of alcohol at hotels and the Saipan International Airport to allow unlimited sale of alcoholic beverages at the airport; til 4:00 a.m. at hotels - all for the "benefit" of tourists.

And what about local residents, the people of the CNMI? Is any of this of benefit to them? No. It merely enriches CPA, allowing it to pay its officers higher salaries, underwrite more trips, squander more money.

###

Short takes:

The stories of guns going off to celebrate the capture of Saddam Hussein raise the question: why are so many guns still in the hands of the Iraqi? Maybe the U.S. should focus more on weapons of destruction - never mind the "mass" part.....

#

A cautionary note: The CNMI now stands out among so-called U.S. flag territories because it has a unique relationship with the U.S. that the others do not. Once the CNMI gives up its Resident Representative to the U.S. for a non-voting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, that distinction will be much more difficult to discern, to explain, and to maintain.

#

The original illuminated sculptures along Beach and other roads on island were based on designs submitted by school children in an MVA-sponsored contest a few years ago. The designs were transformed into welded rebars by former airport Field Operations Manager Felix M. Sablan, and are lit by light ropes imported from Guam, according to Frank A.H. Tudela of MVA, who was kind enough to supply me with the information. While originally under the aegis of the Visitors Authority, responsibility for the sculptures' installation and maintenance has now been turned over to the Division of Parks and Recreation within DLNR. The sculptures are sponsored by various island businesses.

#

In keeping with the season, may the blessings of the holiday be with you.

(The writer is a librarian by profession, and a long-term resident of the CNMI. To contact her, send e-mail to <ruth.tighe@saipan.com>)