

## Swine flu, economic downturn hit tourist arrivals: Selja

Swine flu and the economic downturn impacted foreign tourist arrivals in India for a while, but it is picking up again, Tourism Minister Kumari Selja said here Wednesday.

Addressing reporters, she said: 'The impact of the economic downturn was seen throughout the world. Terror attacks and the economic downturn this year saw a decrease in tourist arrivals. We picked up in the middle, but in recent months because of the swine flu there was a downturn. But it is now seeing an upward trend.'

About 479 people in India have died since Aug 3, when the first Influenza A(H1N1) virus death was reported, while over 14,000 people have been infected by the contagious virus in the country.

Speaking at the Economic Editors Conference here, Selja said the growth rate in foreign tourist arrivals during 2008 was only 5.6 percent.

'However, the growth rate for India was higher than that observed for the world (2.0 percent),' she said.

The minister said the government plans to launch various initiatives to attract tourists to India, including developing the Buddhist circuit.

'We have entered into a loan agreement with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for loan assistance to the tune 9,495 million Japanese Yen (Rs.395.63 crore) for the Uttar Pradesh Buddhist Circuit Development Project,' she said.

The move to develop the Buddhist centres at Sarnath, Kushi Nagar, Kapila Vastu, Sravasti and Sankisa would also mean improvement of nearly 74 km of roads, storm water drainage system at Kushi Nagar and Sravasti, she said.

'We are also planning to organise an international meet with all trade and media representatives in Nalanda in Bihar in February next year to showcase India's Buddhist heritage,' Selja said.

She said the Reserve Bank of India has de-linked credit for hotel projects from commercial real estate, thus enabling hotel projects to avail credit at relaxed norms and reduced interest rates.

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