

Joint Tourist Visa to Boost East African Tourism despite Conflicts

Tensions over the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have proven to be an obstacle to East African integration. Members of the East African Community include Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, but only three of these countries have signed the recent agreement for a joint tourist visa – Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda.

The Heads of State of each of these countries made the decision six months ago, with Rwanda to lead the transition, and the agreement was signed on August 2. The joint visa was subsequently announced at the World Travel Market Expo in London.



The agreement by the three EAC countries is intended to introduce a single tourist visa from January 1, 2014 for visitors to any of these countries. The joint visa can be obtained at the country of entry, where the travelers will only be required to pay the single fee of \$100. Under this system, each country would receive \$30, while \$10 would be contributed to technical operations. A single tourist visa will make it easier and more affordable for tourists, who presently have to pay for separate tourist visas for each of the EAC countries they enter. The current fee for a single entry tourist visa is \$50 for Kenya, \$30 for Rwanda and \$50 for Uganda.

Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda are popular destinations for their wildlife, and the move to a joint tourist visa is intended to attract more tourists to the region. A joint visa system will also add value to the countries' tourism sector products, open up joint trade and marketing opportunities, and showcase the diversity of the East African region.

It has been suggested that Tanzania's reluctance to go along with this agreement is due to the DRC conflict and the opposing allegiances of the East African countries. Rwanda and Uganda are suspected of lending their support to the M23 rebels, while Tanzania is supporting the Congolese army. Tanzania's recent involvement during August in the United Nations Stabilisation Mission to remove the M23 rebels from the position they held 15km north of Goma resulted in the death of two Tanzanian soldiers.

Another soldier was killed on October 26 in a conflict between the Congolese army, UN special brigade

and M23 rebels, a campaign which pushed M23 forces out of the eastern DRC districts of Kiwanja, Rutshuru, and Rumangabo. The president of North Kivu's civil society organization, Thomas d'Aquin Mwiti, said that these Tanzanian soldier casualties would strain relations between Tanzania and countries believed to be supporting the conflict in the DRC.



However, there are conflicting opinions about why Tanzania is refusing to get involved in the tourist visa agreement. An economics lecturer from the Rwanda Tourism University College, Diogene Musoni, claims that Tanzania has a greater commitment to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) than to the EAC, and that there are other reasons for their reluctance toward economic integration. But a spokesperson at the Tanzanian Ministry of Tourism commented that Tanzania places equal importance on the EAC as it does on the SADC.

Also, the Tanzanian Minister for the EAC, Samuel Sitta, expressed that Tanzania would resist a speedy integration because they believed it would not be sustainable. He also said that Tanzania shares the interests of the three EAC countries who had signed the tourist visa agreement, but said that their action in signing the agreement without Tanzania was an attempt to isolate the country.



The Burundian government shares a similar view, claiming that the signing of the visa agreement should not have been made without the consensus of all EAC member countries. On the other hand, the Rwandan Minister for the EAC, Jacqueline Muhongayire, stated upon signing the agreement on August 2, that they were not leaving out Burundi and Tanzania, and it was open for them to sign once it suited them.

Plans to introduce a single visa were put on hold since 2006 because of security issues and a lack of infrastructure in some EAC countries. Now, the acting director of Burundi Tourism National Office, Denise Nijimbere, states that the key issues causing disagreement are the pricing and revenue sharing. But the President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, said that a single visa is necessary to collectively boost tourism to the region, and expressed hopes that all member countries would implement the system by

the end of 2014.

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