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Thais Rail Against Russian-Owned Businesses

By Roland Oliphant

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Hundreds of protesters on the Thai island of Phuket, a popular destination for Russian tourists, on Monday expressed displeasure with "Russian-owned" businesses, accusing them of undercutting local competitors and taking jobs from native-born workers, the Phuket News reported.

Russians have made inroads into the taxi, restaurant, and laundry businesses, where they charge lower prices, badmouth locals and are magnets for lucrative Russian-speaking tourists, the protesters said. One complained about the practice of advertising tours at restaurants.

"So how can we keep living here? I have to do something to protect the rights of the local people," another told the local newspaper.

The protesters, in the resort town of Bang Tao, focused their ire on the Alex Tour company, mobbing the storefront of the business and smashing its sign. They held placards and chanted

"Alex Tour, get out!" "Russian business, get out!" and "[Make] Bang Tao Russian-mafia-free!"

It was later reported that Alex Tour had closed indefinitely.

Tensions had been simmering for weeks. At a rowdy town hall meeting earlier this month, locals also accused Russians of scaring away other European tourists.

But Alexander Kolesnikov, a Russian who has lived on Phuket for the past five years, said some of the anger was misplaced because many businesses that employ Russians are actually Thai-owned. Furthermore, competition among drivers of taxi and auto rickshaws is legal, he said.

A local official who met with protesters Monday evening said he understood they were most frustrated with Thai companies illegally hiring Russians without work permits.

Santi Udomkiratak, the honorary Russian consul in Phuket, said another meeting will be held soon to try to find a solution.

That meeting will involve him, tourist police, immigration police and provincial officials. But he insisted that no one has a right to complain about legally operating businesses.

Vitaly Anopov, the Russian Embassy's press attache in Thailand, said the apparent outbreak of anti-Russian sentiment in Phuket did not represent a threat to Russian travelers.

"The protest wasn't against Russian citizens. It was against businesses that are allegedly undercutting the local market," he said by telephone from Thailand. "There was no connection to Russian tourists, and thankfully no one was injured."

Russians involved in the tourist business in Thailand acknowledged some tensions between tour agencies but dismissed complaints about taxis as sour grapes.

"For Thai tour operators, there is a bit of a problem because they don't have enough Russian-speaking guides, which is why Russians hire their own translators, and maybe some Thai tour operators are a bit upset about that," Vitaly Kiselyov, vice president of the Thai-Russia Chamber of Commerce said by telephone from Bangkok.

"But taxi drivers?" he continued. "That's pretty funny because I happen to know there is quite a big local taxi mafia there who rip off tourists."

About 1 million Russian tourists visited Thailand last year, making them one of the largest nationalities to travel to the country. Kiselyov, whose chamber's work is overwhelmingly dedicated to the tourist industry, said that number is expected to grow 15 to 20 percent this year.

"All the big Russian tour operators have offices in Thailand and operate through their branches in Bangkok, Phuket and so on," he said.

Smaller tour operators do exist but are finding it difficult to compete against the giants, he said.

Kiselyov said he had not been contacted by any of his members regarding the protests, but after the Moscow Times brought it to his attention, he said he would look into it.

Staff writer Jonathan Earle contributed to this report.

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