ETHNIC CONFLICTS AND GEOPOLITICS: COVID-19 AUGMENTED CHAOS VERSUS EFFORTS TO RESTART TOURISM SECTOR

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Abstract

By 2019, the Travel and Tourism sector was growing sustainably while compared to any other industry in the world. With a contribution of US$8.9 trillion to the world's GDP (10.3% of global GDP), and accounted for around 330 million jobs (1 in 10) worldwide (Neufeld, 2020: WTTC, 2020a). But, the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019 dramatically changed the entire scenario worldwide. As of now, the global pandemic effects will take the travel and tourism sector back to 20 years (Richter, 2020). Reports of UNWTO and WTTC forecasted 121 million direct tourism jobs in risk and a decline of around 80% in international tourist arrivals in the year 2020 (UNWTO, 2020a; WTTC, 2020b). Many studies have discussed that the COVID-19 lead worldwide travel restrictions, international sanctions and economic crisis, boosted ethnic conflicts and geopolitical tensions at local and international level. This article elaborates on trends of the global travel and tourism sector before and since the COVID-19 pandemic concerning the ethnic conflicts and geopolitics happening around the world. The present research article is based on the reports of UNWTO, WTTC and other national bodies besides the scholarly writings contributed by Burke, Chetcuti et al., Polo, Seyfi et al., Wilkinson et al., Jawabreh, Mostafanezhad, Timothy and Rowen. Authors have also attempted to review the news and views that appeared in the print and electronic medias. And whatever the issues and trends were noticed have been elaborated in the present research paper supported by statements on recent measures by government or non-government agencies to restart the tourism sector.

Keywords: *Geopolitics, ethnic conflicts, COVID-19, rethink tourism*

The Boom and Bust.

According to the World Bank (2020) report, during 2019 alone, the service sector has contributed about 61.2 per cent to the global GDP. Correspondingly, in the same year, Travel & Tourism sector's direct, indirect and induced share on global GDP is around 10.3% with a growth per cent of 3.5 %, and a total of US$ 1.7 trillion visitor exports included of 6.8% of total exports, 28.3% of global services exports (WTTC, 2020a). Counties like the US (1.8 trillion), China (1.58 trillion), Japan, Germany, Italy, UK, France, Spain, Mexico, and India ranked top in terms of the T&T sector's contribution to GDP (Neufeld, 2020). Moreover, this sector ensures around 330 million jobs, consists of 1 in 10 jobs around the world, with more opportunities for women, youth, minorities and indigenous

communities (WTTC, 2020a; 2020c). Things changed dramatically by December 2019 with an uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 reported in Wuhan, China (Liu, 2020). By March 2020 WHO declared the COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) as a global pandemic (WTTC, 2020c). And of course, it created a lot of chaos in every sector including the T&T, most compelling evidence by WTTC (2020c) gives that in March 2020, 39% of countries have closed their borders for non-citizens and non-residents. As the COVID-19 infection rate kept doubled around the world by April 2020, 100% of tourism destinations were compelled to introduce travel restrictions and new emergency sanctions to control the spread of the virus (UNWTO, 2020a). Complete or partial border closure to tourist, destination-specific travel restrictions, suspension of flights, visa bans, domestic or local travel bans, quarantine rules and special medical requirements made humans immobile (UNWTO, 2020c). More specifically travel restrictions have been imposed in 100% of African, Asian and the Pacific and the Middle East destinations, 93% of European and 92% of American tourist destinations (UNWTO, 2020c). In the early stage itself, the reports of UNWTO (2020a), OECD (2020), and WTTC (2020c) forecasted that international tourist arrivals could drop by around 80% in 2020. which further reflected in the T&T sector with zero demand, mass revenue decline, high costs, furloughs, job loss, and bankruptcy (WTTC, 2020c). These circumstances made a forecast of 121 million jobs loss and a loss of $3.4 trillion in global GDP by the T&T sector alone (UNWTO, 2020a; WTTC, 2020b; 2020c). Richter (2020) from the World Economic Forum quoted that "COVID-19 could set the global tourism industry back 20 years". The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) expressed thatthree in four workers of the tourism sector in Asia and Pacific countries are engaged in informal jobs. which don't guarantee any

job security or they are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 lead crisis happening now.

Contemporary Issues and Geopolitical Tensions

Just like all the other crises, this current pandemic has impacted negatively on the economy, society, and environment. Over and above valuing the monetary losses, efforts are to made to dive deep into tangible and intangible social impacts happening in the communities too. Many researchers have reported different field shreds of evidence of sudden growth in conflicts and geopolitical tensions around the world since the COVID-19 outbreak (Burke; Chetcuti et al.; Polo; Seyfi et al.; Wilkinson et al., 2020). The sources of these ethnic conflicts can be political, social, economic and religious, which is already deeply rooted before and further boosted during COVID-19 (Burke, 2020; "Ethnic conflict", n.d.). Doesn't matter it is Rohingya genocide, Kurdish–Turkish conflict, Sri Lankan Civil War or Communal conflicts in Nigeria, all of these had negatively impacted the growth and image of the local tourism projects or any related international destinations in one or another form ("Ethnic conflict", n.d.). Even before the current global pandemic, many western countries have imposed restrictions on travelling to and from a few Middle East countries by considering the risk of social or ethnic conflicts (Jawabreh, 2020). Not only the civil wars of Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria affected tourism growth in the Middle East, but also it is affected by how the foreign media framed the region negatively by reporting only wars and conflicts (Butler, 2019; Jawabreh, 2020). It is indeed that even a piece of single fake news on disputes will create a negative image for any tourist destination forever. On top of ongoing ethnic conflicts around the world, COVID-19 have made new grounds for food scarcity, broken healthcare system and administration, gender and race discriminations, domestic

violence and mass unemployment (Burke; Bentley; Chetcuti et al., 2020). Few examples underlined by Burke (2020) are 1) how few extremist groups in the Middle East are using the pandemic crisis to spread the propaganda and promote new recruitments. 2) how Bangladesh and Malaysia rejected recent Rohingyan boats amid the fear of COVID-19 spread and resulted as the death of many migrants in the sea. 3) How India's online and physical attack on minorities by claiming a particular community as the only reason for the super spread. Polo (2020) stated that the world becomes more socially unrest, violent and less democratic than what was before the detection of global pandemic (COVID-19). The case is even worse for many countries where the existing conflicts have already made the citizens not to trust authorities, and fewer options to implement any centralized command or control approach to reduce pandemic spread (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

In the same fashion, new geopolitical tensions have developed as countries announced emergency border closures, travel restrictions or bans, international sanctions, strict visa regulations, lockdowns, quarantine rules and other measures for the sake of controlling pandemic spread (EU Parliament; Seyfi et al., 2020). Even before the global pandemic, geopolitics have negatively impacted the growth of numerous tourism destinations, it was mostly by the geopolitical tensions between countries in the West, Middle East, and Asia (Bremmer, 2020; Butler, 2019; Rowen, 2016; Timothy, 2019). Conflicts on the South China Sea between China, Philippines and Vietnam, land disputes between China and India for Kashmir/Ladakh are a few examples of local geopolitics in Asia (Timothy, 2019). Report by TIME (Bremmer, 2020) states that both the US and China are using economic tools like international sanctions, export control and boycotts to acquire more geopolitical power. At the same time, China's political decisions like the Passport War of 2012 on Hong Kong and Taiwan had negatively impacted the peaceful grounds of tourism activities within the region (Rowen, 2016). Besides, the role played by the tourism sector for implementing the state's geopolitical programs of Chinese authorities and how tourism has been used as a tool for crafting foreign policies and territorial projects are also issues affecting the industry. In the same manner, US's tourism is being affected by its restrictions on citizens' visit to countries like Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen (Seyfi et al., 2020). To an extent, the current geopolitical anxieties on tourism are affected by primaeval race geographies and recent developments of geo-economic relations (Mostafanezhad et al., 2020). Belt and Road or One Belt One Road is a global infrastructure development initiative of China, which promises a new platform for extending their geo-economic relations to become a global power (EU Parliament, 2020). In respect of the recent COVID-19 lead global economic crisis, more geopolitical tensions have emerged between global powers, nations or regions (EU Parliament; Mostafanezhad et al.; Seyfi et al., 2020). Many countries have adopted Travel Bubble initiatives to reopen the borders and resume controlled travels between predetermined countries or regions. According to the report of Wego (2020), as of May 2019 itself, China and South Korea lifted travel restrictions by linking them. By the end of October 2020, the EU has relaxed travel restrictions with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Rwanda, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Uruguay. Similarly, India has initiated new bilateral travel arrangements with more than 21 countries. Nevertheless, there exist uneven political geography of sanctions and policies to achieve political goals (Seyfi et al., 2020).

Rethink and Restart the Tourism

Although the COVID-19 has created immense chaos in the tourism sector, gradually it became a platform to rethink and restart the tourism sector. Worldwide travel bans and freezing of tourism activities stricken governments, trade organizations, industry experts, entrepreneurs, policymakers, tourism researchers and other stakeholders to rethink travel activities and interaction with nature, climate and economy. As recovery measures from a pandemic crisis, the sector needs to focus on the sustainable and responsible model of travel experiences that ensures the safety of host communities, travelers and other direct stakeholders. As part of recovery plans, the investment packages must follow models that promote economic empowerment of local communities, decent income and benefit distributions, more carbon-neutral practices and inclusive developments. UNWTO (2020d) recommends drafting recovery policies which create decent job opportunities for youth, women and vulnerable communities. It also highlighted five points of the road map to transform tourism during and post COVID-19 lead crisis. The first and foremost is to build confidence by strengthening partnerships and solidarity between destinations and stakeholders with an inclusive approach of protecting livelihoods. The second one is to facilitate a better business environment and investment opportunities for local travel SMEs, domestic tourism destinations and niche tourism markets. Applications of advance innovation, digitalization of the tourism ecosystem, and enrichment of the tourism workforce by updated digital skills come as the third point of road map to transform tourism. The next two points are on fostering sustainability and green growth in addition to coordination and partnerships to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It also includes people-oriented policy making beside the involvement of government, development partners and other international financial institutions. Some of the best recovery models that have already been adopted around the world to restart the tourism industry include

a) Egypt's postponement of tourism stakeholder's dues.

b) Bulgarian government initiatives for covering the insurance payments owed by the tourism employers. c) suspension of tax payments for travel business in Italy. According to WTTC (2020c), 80% of the tourism sector is an account for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs). And they are intensively affected by the global pandemic. Netherland's Corona Bridging Loan and Portugal's Mezzanine are some of the unique government initiatives for boosting travel startups/SMEs to survive and recover from the hard-hit of the global pandemic lead crisis. Bangladesh's Committee for Crisis Management and Malaysia's Tourism Recovery Action Council (TRAC) is working on tackling problems and designing recovery plans within various areas of the tourism sector. The best part of these initiatives is that it has created a new platform to rethink existing tourism models and recommend new models to fasten the recovery process sustainably. Other promising initiatives are ICAO's Council Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART), UNWTO's Global Tourism Crisis Committee. Besides its representatives of stakeholders from government agencies and private sector, alongside WHO, ICAO, ILO, IMO, WBG, OECD, ACI, CLIA, IATA and WTTC are helping to rethink and restart tourism activities around the world. UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories and One Planet Network Sustainable Tourism Programme further ensures the tourism sector to achieve SDGs in the process of the post-COVID-19 recovery. WTTCs initiatives to restart travel sector includes 'Safe Travels Protocols and Stamp', 'Together in Travel' social media

campaign (#TogetherInTravel), '100 million jobs' with G20 nations and constant industry update meetings with Airports Council International (ACI), Cruise Lines International Association(-CLIA), Duty-Free World Council (DFWC), International Air Transport Association (IATA), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), U.S. Travel Association (USTA) and World Economic Forum (WEF).

Rapid progress has seen the transformation of the tourism sector to use technological innovations like biometric initiatives which ensure seamless, safe and hygiene journey experience to everyone. According to WTTC (2020a), the use of biometric technology will reduce boarding time by 66% from 45 minutes to 15 minutes. As the global pandemic demands more touch-free travel experiences and social distance options, the policymakers and travelers are adopting the use of biometric technologies for travel booking, documentation, security clearance, boarding and more. Henceforth, the tourism sector won't get any better opportunity than the current pandemic crisis to upgrade airports, public transportations, destination centres, front offices, checking points, verification and payment systems etc. with international standard biometric solutions. Even though digitalization has existed in the tourism sector for many years, Post COVID-19 is forecasted as an era of digital boom. The rise of virtual tourism and contactless travel experiences remains the most happening trends. Additionally, these trends are demanding new skills in tourism and hospitality workers. To achieve digital skills, one has to eliminate the digital divide in many developing and least developed countries. An early 2011 study by Amadeus (2011) on

the travel trend of 2020 has highlighted the consumer trends towards tourism products of health and wellbeing. And the same trends have multiplied many times because of the global pandemic hit. COVID-19 has also made more tourists plan trips accordingly by including activities of health and wellbeing. Now the tourists are rethinking themselves to choose wellness tourism and health tourism destinations instead of mass tourism destinations. The governments, tourism departments, trade organizations, local communities and other primary stake-holders have started to create participative policies to boost wellness and health tourism to ensure the fast recovery of the tourism sector. Another important aspect is that the tourism sector plays a significant role in connecting counties and communities together for peace and mutual prosperity. The more people travel and interact with other people, the more they understand and accept each other which further helps to reduce the gap created by prejudice, tensions, and conflicts (Sonmez and Apostolopoulos, 2000). Restarting tourism with more confidence and cooperation will decrease the chaos that existed before the global pandemic and augmented during the crisis. Not to mention that more oil nations have started to invest in the service industry like tourism as a future economic source compared to earlier traditional fossil fuel industries (Becken and Friedl, 2018). The same will bring a positive outlook towards the environment and a new boom of cultural exchange in the Middle East region with the help of the tourism sector. Before the pandemic, in 2019 countries like United Arabs Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have shown a good competitiveness power in the tourism sector compared to any other Middle East countries (Nazmfar et al., 2019). Recent policies introduced by the UAE to boost relationships and connect more destinations are giving a new ray of

hope for world peace and prosperity.

Looking Ahead

Ethnic conflict and geopolitics have affected the tourism sector even before and during the COVID-19 lead crisis, and the same trend will continue in one or another way for many tourism destinations. To put it another way, tourism has to be used as a tool to create world peace, better social inclusion and to reduce the negative impacts of ethnic conflict and geopolitical tensions. Despite all chaos made by the global pandemic crisis, the tourism sector will recover to its boom stage again. The essence of the restarting activities must be surrounded by environmental responsibility, technological advancements in business and consumer needs. As mentioned earlier the tourism sector won't get any better chance than the global pandemic to rethink their products and services. The tourism sector has to rethink and redesign activities according to the next trends of 'tech-savvy travelers and experiential holidays. Hotels and restaurants have to digitize every single process to reduce the cost, to create a new experience and to ensure safety, security and hygiene. Using cloud technology in property management systems hotels can ensure better performance with less cost. Likewise, SMEs can improve brand image by utilizing user-generated contents and peer to peer platform celebrities to attract their niche market. The study observes a high demand for wellness, health, sports, extreme and other experiential tourism products. Experiential holidays demand every activity from planning to post-tour reviews as designed as more experienceable. The new consumers are demanding smart pay systems, non-contact services, and smartphone-controlled room facilities along with high-end activity-based trips. Thus, it is essential to combine both aspects of tech and experience while designing any components of a tour

program. It is difficult to arrive at any specific conclusions about post-COVID-19 trends in the tourism sector. But, surely, most of the travel trends will emerge either due to the digital boom or the desire for experiential travel.

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