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Call to ease visa rule on communists

By Mary Luk

HONGKONG should follow China's policy and allow more people from the Eastern Bloc to visit the territory, the chairman of the Joint Council of the Travel Industry (JCTI) said yesterday.

Mr Harold Wu said more visitors from Warsaw Pact countries would boost the local travel industry.

The council is an umbrella body which was formed in 1987 to unite the travel industry. It represents all major travel sectors in Hongkong.

The Immigration Department said there was no total ban on Eastern Bloc visitors. Each application would be considered on individual merits, it said.

The department said it would grant visas to Eastern Bloc visitors if Hongkong's economy was to benefit.

Mr Wu, however, said no representative from the Eastern Bloc countries was allowed into the territory for the recent Inter-Tour Expo.

He said this was despite the fact that Eastern Bloc countries had booths at what was the third largest English-speaking trade show in the world.

The council hoped the Immigration Department would allow people from communist countries such as the Soviet Union,

Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, to attend trade exhibitions and conferences in Hongkong, he said.

Last year, tourism boosted Hongkong's economy by \$34 billion. Mr Wu said he expected the figure to top \$40 billion this year.

Last year 5.5 million people visited Hongkong, 24 percent up on 1987.

"Politically, Hongkong has not issued visas to people from Eastern Bloc countries in the past because of China's strained relations with the nations," said Mr Wu.

"But the mainland has recently reviewed its policy of allowing people from these areas to visit its places. Taiwanese can also go to China to visit their relatives.

"Why has the Government stuck with the policy that was laid down decades ago? The Government should consider reviewing it now. In many ways, we believe the Government has been given a higher degree of autonomy than it was before in dealing with the issue.

"At least the Government should consider merits of individual cases which are constructive and contribute to the local economy and industry," said Mr Wu.