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Alter Eastern Bloc visa rules warns group

By William Cheung, Sunday Standard

HONGKONG would lose out to rival competitors Taiwan and South Korea in tapping potential markets in Eastern Europe if the Government did not change its "antiquated policy" on visitors from the region, warned the electronics industry.

Charles Chapman, executive director of the Hongkong Electronics Association, yesterday said that the present restrictive government policy on visitors from the Soviet Union and the East Bloc had created a hurdle for local businessmen trying to do business with companies in those countries.

Chapman said he was "totally baffled" as to why the Government did not catch up with changing times and speed up the visa issuing process.

Taiwan, South Korea and even Macau have been quick to react to political changes behind the Iron Curtain.

The Macau government recently signed a co-operation protocol with the Soviet Union which allows a Macau company to go into partnership with Moscow.

"I wouldn't have questioned the (restrictive) policy five years ago," said Chapman.

"But now that businessmen from the Soviet Union and other East Bloc countries can come to Shenzhen, why not let them into Hongkong?"

The Government has maintained that restrictions have been relaxed and that it is constantly reviewing its policy on visitors from the region.

Chapman called on the Government to explain the rationale for maintaining its present policy.

"If they've got damn good reasons, I'll shut up," he said.

He said the long wait, which sometimes takes up to six months for a visa, would discourage potential buyers from coming to Hongkong and encourage them to go to Taiwan or South Korea instead.

Because Eastern bloc countries are not allowed to set up a consulate office here, it is time consuming for local businessmen trying to obtain visas to travel to these countries, he said.

Visas for the Soviet Union and other East Bloc countries have to be ob-

tained through their respective embassies either in Beijing or in Bangkok.

"The biggest problem (for Hongkong businessmen trying to do business with East European countries) is 'access'."

Chapman said the East European market had great potential as more and more Hongkong traders were venturing into the area.

He said since the Government would not take the initiative to provide easy access for businessmen from the region, local traders would have to go there.

"If Mohammed can't go to the mountain, the mountain would have to come to him."

His association is jointly organising an electronics industry trade mission to Eastern Europe with the Hongkong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) in May.

Chapman said they may go on a second trip later this year if the mission, the first for a specific trade to the region, proved successful.

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First delegation on the way

THE FIRST trade delegation from the Eastern Bloc to be allowed into Hongkong arrives next week.

Capitalising on the territory's newly-relaxed attitude toward Iron Curtain traders, a five-man mission from Hungary will be exhibiting at the Hongkong International Food Fair. They are representing the trading co-operative Hungarofex and will be promoting sales of goulash, juices, jams and canned food. The mission was hastily arranged following the ousting of Hungary's communist regime at the end of last year.

Food Fair spokesman CS Lee said yesterday: "We hope this sets a good precedent for the future. It has traditionally been difficult to market East European products here because of the visa restrictions.

"But the recent changes in countries over there have obviously influenced Hongkong's decision to relax restrictions." Hongkong's Trade Development Council arranged the visas and Lee added: "I hope the trend will continue. We want to encourage more two-way trade."

Hongkong's Immigration Department insists policy is constantly under review, although recent relaxations are still considered too little and too late in trade and tourism sectors. Eastern Bloc nations and companies are not permitted to open offices here but businessmen are allowed in.

The five-day fair, which has attracted more than 120 exhibitors from around the world, starts on Wednesday and is open to the public next weekend.