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PUERTO Princesa—WITH the opening of the Cebu-Palawan route via the Philippine Airline (PAL) Express, a government official is optimistic that the two provinces will be helping each other boost their tourism and trade sectors.

Rep. Abraham Mitra (Palawan, 2nd district), though, believes Cebu will be helping Palawan grow more since the latter's "tourist arrivals are not even half that of Cebu (annually) and is lacking in tourism infrastructure."

"While we can be Cebu's access to Malaysia because we are very close to it, I think this partnership would be more on tourism," he told reporters who joined the first leg of the four-day PAL-organized familiarization tour in Palawan Thursday.

PAL Express, the new, low-fares brand of Philippine Airlines, has started servicing a single daily flight to Palawan since May 26.

Mitra described the partnership as a way of attracting potential investors to invest in Palawan, which lists unemployment as its top concerns.

He lamented that there is no strong tie-up between the two provinces even in terms of shipping.

However, he said that the capital city of Puerto Princesa, recently reported about 250 applications for small to medium-sized businesses, such as hotels, restaurants and resorts, promising jobs for the locals.

No jobs

"The biggest employer here is the Provincial Capitol and City Hall, or the government. We have no large industries here (yet). Not that we don't want them but (there is a problem with the) economies of scale. For example, you produce bags here but you don't have a market. In fact, we only have one mall," he explained.

But the close to a million Palawenos take pride in being self-sufficient in rice and being able to maintain its tourist attractions—rain-forests, dive sites, mountains, caves, and beaches—as well as its identity as a nature sanctuary.

Mitra admitted that the province is more on environment protection, hoping to strike a balance between preservation and development.

"I think we (can) try to rub off Cebu with our environmental concerns," he added.

Infrastructure

While it is discouraging mining to improve its terrestrial tourism, Palawan is

anticipating the completion of President Arroyo's plan to cement the roads of the 1.4 million-hectare province as well as establish airports in the towns of Coron and Balabac and improve the existing ones in San Vicente and Puerto Princesa before 2010.

The road, Mitra said, will help ease travel for tourists.

Presently, half of the road going north from Puerto Princesa is "not so good." He said that they would need more than P200 million to pave and maintain roads.

Mitra also explained that there is a need to build at least four airports to cut short the travel time of tourists and get them to their destination quickly. It will also open to Cebu more choices for flights.

"The airport in Coron is being started. The one in San Vicente is already there as well as Puerto Princesa. These three airports will follow international standards. Balabac is in the south. The airport there is privately funded. It is only identified in the State of the Nation Address of President Arroyo but the funding source is private," he said.

Coron's airport is an estimated P2 to P3 billion Korean investment grant while the one in Balabac, which is close to Malaysia, is targeted to attract foreigners, he said.

"The airport in Puerto Princesa, which is in the list of Asian Development Bank-assisted projects, has long been delayed because of bidding problems," Mitra said.