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Tourists can now extend stay up to two years

By William Depasupil, Reporter

A new Immigration policy now allows tourists and other temporary visitors to stay in the country up to two years—and even longer, The Times learned Monday.

Immigration Commissioner Marcelino Libanan, in a memorandum order, announced that foreigners with temporary visitor's visas may extend their stay in the country every two months and up to 16 months without prior approval from the immigration bureau.

After 16 months, Libanan added, a foreigner may still extend his stay by another eight months or up to 24 months if his application is approved by the chief of the bureau's immigration regulation division (IRD).

"Extension of stay after 24 months need the approval of the commissioner," Libanan, in his memo, said.

Libanan's order, which is effective immediately, also directed the BI visa extension office to expedite the processing of all pending applications for extension of stay.

The BI chief decided to issue the new order following a 21-percent rise in the number of tourists who extended their stay in the country during the first semester of the year.

Data from the BI visa extension office showed that from January to June this year, a total of 196,172 applications for extension of stay were approved, compared to 161,984 approved in the same period last year.

It also showed that total tourist arrivals for the six-month period increased by 38,755 to 468,281 arrivals. There were only 439,526 arrivals in the same period last year.

"These statistics indicate that our country is fast emerging as one of Asia's most favored tourist destinations," Libanan said.

The IRD chief, lawyer Gary Mendoza, said the new policy on visa extensions applies to all foreign tourists regardless of their nationality.

Previously, Mendoza explained, foreigners, such as Indians or Chinese, who must secure entry visas to the Philippines, were allowed to extend their stay every month up to a total of six months only.

"Now, any foreigner, regardless of whether he is a visa-required national or not, may extend his stay every two months up to a total of 16 months without getting prior approval from the bureau's management," Mendoza added.