

# Forging a world travel pact

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

During the past decade, negotiators have scraped away many tariffs and trade barriers that interfered with the smooth operation of the world economy. Although these cleanup efforts remain ongoing, it is not too soon to plan new projects of cooperation among governments. One high priority should be a multilateral pact on travel and tourism.

The logic of travel talks parallels the logic of trade talks. Left unchaperoned, politicians will adopt policies to shift burdens to foreigners and to grant benefits to vested interests. Although such policies are hard to correct internally, they are amenable to a multilateral solution.

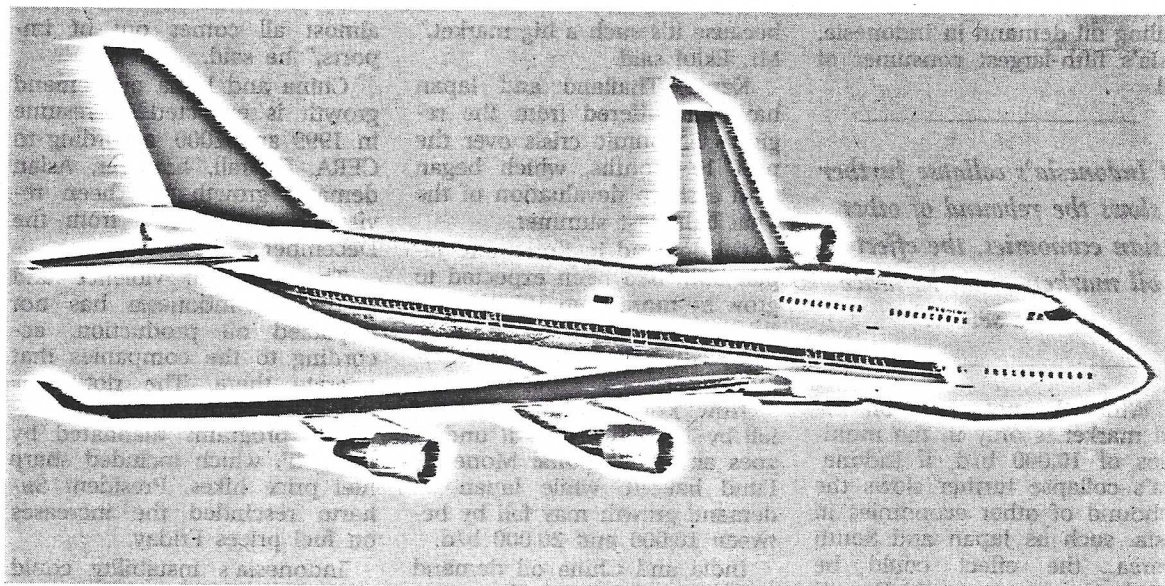
Just as trade agreements rationalize national policies to promote the free movement of products across borders, a new international travel agreement could promote the free movement of business travelers and tourists.

Negotiations on international travel are not a new idea. In 1920, a League of Nations conference proposed numerous travel reforms, such as a uniform passport, the abolition of exit visas for non-nationals, and a maximum fee for visas.

In 1963, the U.N. Conference on International Travel and Tourism recommended that local currency be convertible back to one's national currency and that tourist fees be abolished. While these conferences were partially successful, they did not create a travel regime. What's needed now is an ongoing forum for negotiating international travel rules.

Like the trade regime, a new travel regime ought to impose disciplines on governments, not the public. Travel policies should be tested against the trade law standards of "national treatment" and "nondiscrimination." In the same way that the trade regime reduces tariffs, the travel regime should seek to reduce travel taxes and frontier delays.

The first place to start is to establish minimum standards



for border inspections. Governments should be responsible for making sufficient staff available so that queues for immigration and customs inspections are limited to, say, 10 minutes. The entry card should be harmonized to seek only necessary information and to delete irrelevant queries like age and birthplace.

Additional disciplines are needed for airports. Departure and arrival fees should be limited to covering airport costs. Such fees should not be used as general revenue. Travelers who are merely transiting the airport should not be required to pay any fee (as they are in Singapore). In addition, there should be mutual recognition of security checks. Thus, passengers coming off one plane and getting on another should not be reinspected (as they are in London Heathrow).

Just as the trade regime has rules against export bans, the travel regime needs rules against embarkation bans. The U.S. government's ban on trips to Cuba is a prime example of a policy that should be forbidden by international law. It is one thing if the U.N. Security Council imposes a travel ban on a scofflaw country. But it is quite another when a government reduces the liberties of its

own citizens in order to gratify politically powerful interests.

Governments ought to be able to bar visits by aliens who pose a threat to public order. But governments should renounce the right to bar aliens for other reasons. For example, the U.S. Helms-Burton Act would exclude the spouse of a director of a corporation that "traffics" in property confiscated by Cuba 38 years ago. The rationale for this law is not that the spouse threatens public order, but rather that the exclusion will pressure foreign corporations to change their practices.

International rules are also needed to prevent governments from taking advantage of tourists. Fees for visas should be abolished. Public museums and sites should be prohibited from charging more for foreigners than for nationals. Restrictions on using "unlicensed" guides should be recognized as a local content rule and disciplined accordingly. In addition, governments should commit themselves not to impose registration requirements on unsuspecting tourists (as occurs in Portugal).

Initiating travel talks would not require the creation of a new international organization. Rather, such negotiations could

be carried out by existing organizations working together. The World Trade Organization can focus on the needs of business travelers by building upon its Uruguay Round decision on the "Movement of Natural Persons." The World Tourism Organization, established in 1970, can focus on fair treatment of tourists.

Negotiating a travel agreement will not be easy. As with any international rule making, governments may be hesitant to give up national "sovereignty." That's why the participation of civil society will be critical to putting pressure on governments to abjure protectionist practices. Groups like the International Chamber of Commerce, Consumers International and the International Touring Alliance should be given formal advisory roles.

A strong travel regime will engender both economic and political benefits. The economic gains will come from eliminating costly barriers. The political gains will come from showing the traveling public the fruits of internationalism.

Steve Charnovitz directs the Global Environment & Trade Study at Yale University.