

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL
NEWS MONITORING REPORT
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30th January – 5th February 2010
PRESENTATION DATE: 10th February 2010

Following news monitoring report is based on the important political, social, economic and Geo-strategic events occurred in Gulf Cooperation Council States along with a Comprehensive summary of the report.

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SUMMARY

GCC

Expert says closing gender gap in enrolment and degree choices should be priority with emphasis on job training. Economists and scholars on Tuesday shared views on a roadmap for an education system that can meet labour market requirements across the GCC region.

A senior Iranian military official told Gulf States yesterday not to squander money on US missiles, boasting that Iran can render them useless, and the state news agency IRNA reported. Tehran had on Wednesday slammed plans by the United States to beef up defences in the Gulf against potential Iranian missile attacks, with the Islamic republic insisting it posed no threat to its neighbours.

Kuwait's immigration bureau has directed to not allow maids into the country unless their sponsors had the approval from the police. Kuwaitis and residents in the past could send the visa and the plane ticket to the recruited helper without resorting to a manpower office. The new measures, according to unnamed sources, aims to ensure that the maids had a police clearance from their home countries.

Labor Front

In *Bahrain*, A plan to replace the current sponsorship scheme or kafala system is under study by the cabinet. The Ministry of Labour has made a proposal to the cabinet laying out the framework for a new employment system for expatriates, a cabinet source told Gulf News on condition of anonymity. The plan is currently under discussion and no decision has been made yet on approving it, said the source, refusing to divulge details of the proposed system. A leading *Bahraini* lawmaker has expressed "tremendous concerns" that claims about Al Qaida in Yemen threats to world security would turn out to be as baseless as the ones made about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. "Al Qaida in Yemen has been given incredibly impressive proportions which it does not deserve," Adel Al Mouawda, an MP representing Al Asala, said.

Human Rights Front

A *Bahrain* women's rights group has stepped up pressure to make the citizenship issue among the top priorities in the application of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

UAE remained in 2009, as in the year before, at third place in press freedoms among Arab states, following Kuwait and Lebanon, according to the Index. The UAE took a major step backward in press freedom last year. That is according to the latest Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, and confirmed by prominent media personalities in the country.

Health Issues

Oman's Health Minister, Dr Ali Bin Mohammed Bin Moosa, told 84 elected Shura members that the country's health services were under pressure and the ministry had plans to open more hospitals to cope with it.

International Front

Qatar and Iran are expected to sign agreements in oil and gas industry, tourism, investments and other important fields to boost their economies.

GCC

GCC needs to create an attractive job market for young citizens

A top UAE official yesterday said growth patterns that create jobs for a majority of unskilled workers have to change if strategies to tackle unemployment and population imbalances in GCC countries are to succeed. "Our economic pattern creates jobs for the majority of foreign, unskilled workers, while excluding citizens from the labour market," Minister of Labour Saqr Gobash Saeed Gobash told the 15th annual conference of the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research in Abu Dhabi. "The construction sector, for instance, contributes 8.6 per cent to gross domestic product (GDP), but employs 47.5 per cent of the foreign manpower."

GCC must tackle unemployment

Wide range of reforms needed, says Dean of the Higher College of Technology in Oman. Participants listen to the keynote address by Jeremy Rifkin, President of the Foundation on Economic Trends, US, on the opening day of Education and the Requirements of the GCC Labour Market annual conference on Monday in Abu Dhabi. GCC countries must address unemployment, which is threatening social and economic stability, academics and officials said at a regional conference on education and labour market on Monday. Dr Obaid Mohammad Al Saeedi, Dean of the Higher College of Technology in Oman, said all government and private sector bodies should join forces with educational and training institutes to tackle unemployment which poses "a real threat to socio-economic stability and balance". He was speaking to Gulf News on the sidelines of the annual conference of the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies (ECSSR) and Research.

Education roadmap for GCC region discussed

Expert says closing gender gap in enrolment and degree choices should be priority with emphasis on job training. Economists and scholars on Tuesday shared views on a roadmap for an education system that can meet labour market requirements across the GCC region. During the 15th Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) annual conference yesterday, Dr Lynn A. Karoly, a senior US economist, said education helps increase the productivity of human capital and that equality of education is the key word. Closing the gender gap in enrolment and degree choices should be a priority for the GCC countries, with emphasis on job training programmes.

Iran tells Gulf States not to buy US missiles

A senior Iranian military official told Gulf states yesterday not to squander money on US missiles, boasting that Iran can render them useless, the state news agency IRNA reported. Tehran had on Wednesday slammed plans by the United States to beef up defences in the Gulf against potential Iranian missile attacks, with the Islamic republic insisting it posed no threat to its neighbours. "Installing anti-missile Patriot missiles is a new trick to empty the pockets of rich Persian Gulf countries," said General Hassan Firuzabadi, the joint chief of staff of Iran's armed forces. "Patriot missiles can be rendered ineffective by simple tactics, and I advise the regional countries, especially Islamic states, not to waste their money on these missiles which have not worked anywhere," he said. US President Barack Obama's administration is reportedly placing ships with missile-targeting capabilities off Iran's coast, and anti-missile systems in at least four Gulf states — Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. US ally Bahrain acknowledged on Wednesday that Gulf military defences were being upgraded but urged Iran not to see them as plans for attack. The moves come as Iran remains locked in a standoff with the West over its nuclear programme, which many world powers believe is masking a weapons drive.

Iran has vehemently denied this. Iran has carried out frequent war games in the Gulf and paraded an array of home-grown missiles over the past years. It has threatened to hit Western targets if Iranian nuclear sites come under attack by the United States or Israel — its two arch-foes which have never ruled out the military option to thwart the atomic drive. An Iranian Revolutionary Guards official also said on Wednesday that Iran had developed anti-armor weapons which can combat US Apache helicopters and armored tanks.

Changes in recruitment of maids to the GCC

Kuwait's immigration bureau has directed to not allow maids into the country unless their sponsors had the approval from the police. "No domestic helper should be allowed to enter Kuwait without proper documents from a local manpower agency proving that they have endorsed him or her," Al Shahed daily reported on Wednesday. Kuwaitis and residents in the past could send the visa and the plane ticket to the recruited helper without resorting to a manpower office. The new measures, according to unnamed sources, aims to ensure that the maids had a police clearance from their home countries. However, several nationals and expatriates have complained that the new procedures are forcing them to pay "astronomical" sums to manpower offices, the paper said. Around 700,000 women, mainly from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the Philippines, are employed in

Kuwait as full-time live-in domestic workers. In October 2009, Indonesia stopped sending domestic helpers to Kuwait, citing "concern over abuse." The ban sparked furore in the northern Arabian Gulf country, and Fadhil Ashkanani, the head of the Kuwaiti Union of Domestic Labour Offices (KUDLO), said that it was "an insult to Kuwait as it tarnishes the country's image concerning the treatment of domestic workers." However, Saudi embassy officials in Sri-Lanka, Nepal, Cambodia, and Vietnam said that they were not aware of any likely ban on maids from the countries. An official from the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) said that complaints of abuse reported by female migrant workers were increasing. "Some of them have complained that they are subjected to physical abuse and harassed due to delayed or nonpayment of salaries, and made to work till late hours," the paper quoted the official as saying. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait are the main markets for over 800,000 Sri Lankan maids.

UAE

Human Rights

Expert highlights challenges faced by Arab media

In some ways, the situation is getting better. Last year, for instance, there was a welcome fall in the levels of violence against the media. The easing of the political violence in Iraq and Palestine has helped. There has also been progress to eliminate national laws that criminalise journalism. Some countries — Sudan and Jordan — have taken small steps forward, but in Bahrain, Iraq and the UAE, important new laws are held up in the parliament. In general, there is stagnation and journalists remain trapped in a vice of political influence. They are victims of sectarianism and often work in appalling social conditions. In short, the Arab media scene is largely unchanged, and that's very bad news. Governments and the international Arab world organisations remain deeply suspicious of independent journalism. There are new attempts to control the internet, which reflects a political mind-set that is out-of-date and cannot survive the online world and its demands for free expression. We need to allow more opinions and voices and insist on an ethical and professional practice. People need help to find reliable and useful information. What they don't need is more propaganda. Arab states are not opening themselves up to the opportunities that modern media provide and as a result there is too much friction in relations between states and independent media. This has got to change.

UAE press under pressure over the last year

UAE remained in 2009, as in the year before, at third place in press freedoms among Arab states, following Kuwait and Lebanon, according to the Index. The UAE took a major step backward in press freedom last year. That is according to the latest Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, and confirmed by prominent media personalities in the country. Two publications faced suspension for content they published, the control over the flow of information from government entities was tightened with the introduction of official spokespersons, and the financial crisis left local newspapers struggling to compete with foreign publications for fair and objective coverage. Despite that, the UAE remained in 2009, as in the year before, at third place in press freedoms among Arab states, following Kuwait and Lebanon, according to the Index. Seventeen places down from 2008, the country is on par with Uganda at 86. While media

personalities hailed certain small steps taken to improve transparency and enhance the role of the media in the country, they lamented the setbacks as having overshadowed the developments.

Labor Front

Proposed scheme to replace sponsorship system under study

A plan to replace the current sponsorship scheme or kafala system is under study by the cabinet, a cabinet source told Gulf News. The Ministry of Labour has made a proposal to the cabinet laying out the framework for a new employment system for expatriates, a cabinet source told Gulf News on condition of anonymity. The plan is currently under discussion and no decision has been made yet on approving it, said the source, refusing to divulge details of the proposed system. The statement follows remarks made by the president of the Emirates Human Rights Authority, Abdul Gaffar Hussain, on Wednesday that the Ministry of Labour is expected to approve "a new system to replace the sponsorship system" by year's end. "I have spoken to the Minister of Labour and he presented to me an alternative system which is very good," said Hussain, describing it as "much more civilised" than the current "backward system".

Taxi drivers decry long hours, low pay and endless deductions

A group of taxi drivers has filed a complaint against a transport company for making them work long hours and for docking their salaries and commission to pay for the cost of their visas, labour cards, medical test among others. The taxi drivers told Gulf News their company, Metro Taxi LLC, had set their salaries at Dh300 as stipulated in their labour contracts. The amount includes all allowances. "We are paid by commission and we have to make between Dh1,200 and Dh7,500 otherwise we will be fined Dh200," a taxi driver said. The drivers said they are forced to work 12 hours a day without days off. Drivers can earn a maximum of Dh4,200 but most of which they pay back to the company to cover certain expenses.

Women jobseekers boost private sector

Emirati women have increasingly started looking to the private sector for employment opportunities in the Oasis City and more than 150 of them have landed jobs with non-governmental companies. The gradual change has been brought about by Al Ain Mustaqbal project, an initiative of Abu Dhabi Tawteen Council (ADTC), which has been facilitating a bigger role for women in the private sector since October 2009. The project has had a positive impact on jobseekers, the private sector and the local community, the preliminary findings of a study have shown. Research conducted by the Emirates Foundation Tawteen Programme showed that out of 235 jobseekers' families interviewed, the vast majority (89 per cent) acknowledged that their knowledge of the private sector had improved due to their daughters' experiences. "A promising 87 per cent of Al Ain families interviewed would consider permitting their family members to work in the private sector taking into account the opportunities available in non-traditional work environments," said the research report.

SAUDI ARABIA

International Front

Saudis call for retaliatory security checks for passengers from US

The newly introduced measures call for intensified checks and full-body scanning of air travellers, especially to and from 14 countries including Saudi Arabia. Outraged at the humiliating "extraordinary" security checks of Saudis at various US airports, several Saudi citizens urged the authorities to take retaliatory measures through introducing similar checks for passengers coming from the United States at Saudi airports. As part of a protest against the US move, they also demand suspension of sending Saudi students to the US for higher studies, and transferring a portion of Saudi investments, designed for the US, to some other countries. The newly introduced measures call for intensified checks and full-body scanning of air travellers, especially to and from 14 countries including Saudi Arabia. Moram Abdul Rahman, a Saudi woman writer living in Britain, noted that it is painful that Saudi Arabia is the only country among the Arab allies of the United States that was included in the list.

Saudi Arabia's initiative to bridge civilizations lauded by UN official

The world has been challenged by King Abdullah's initiative to continue to build bridges between civilizations and cultures, according to UN High Representative of the Alliance of Civilization (AoC), Jorge Sampaio, the former president of Portugal. Sampaio said this during a lecture he delivered at the headquarters of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) here Wednesday. The lecture was attended by a number of officials from the Saudi ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture and Information, the World Health Organization and the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Speaking on how best to proceed in the quest for interfaith dialogue and international understanding, Sampaio said, "I think we have to take into account various levels of opinion. One of course is the level of the representatives of the churches or the faiths involved. Others are the points of view of intellectuals and cultural organizations." He added that it is important to avoid cultural misconceptions. "I don't think when you have a statement or the expression of an expert opinion coming from one society that it necessarily represents that society," said Sampaio. "I always say that this does not represent the society, it represents the particular man or woman expressing a particular point of view. We have to understand this and be attentive so that misconceptions do not arise."

Human Rights

Saudi court to the rescue of couple forced to separate

A Saudi couple forced to divorce on grounds they were not from equal tribal backgrounds has been reunited by a new court created as part of judicial reforms. The marriage of Mansour Al Timani and his wife Fatima Azzaz was annulled after Azzaz's half brothers persuaded judges at a first instance court in 2006 that Al Timani's tribal background was not prestigious enough for his wife's family. The case drew international criticism from human rights groups, but a new cassation court, created under reforms instituted by King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, has said the couple may be reunited. The couple's lawyer,

Ahmad Al Sudairi, said it would take two days for it to be implemented. Saudi Arabia has no law against child marriage, and clerics and religious judges justify the practice based on Islamic and Saudi tradition.

Saudi minister unaware of disparity in salary

Saudi Arabia's Assistant Minister of Education for Girls' Affairs, Dr Noora Al Fayezi, has vowed support for the ongoing pay parity drive for almost 100,000 female teachers with their male counterparts. "Dr Noora promised us that she would stand by them and follow up the matter personally [with] all possible legal channels," Halima Al Sameeri, a member of the Humanitarian Women Teachers Campaign (WTC) delegation, who met the minister on Wednesday, said. Six delegates from the WTC met with Dr Noora in Saudi Arabia to discuss their demand to be treated equally with male teachers, in terms of salaries.

Terrorism

Militant used bomb, made by Pakistani, in attacking Saudi minister

A top Yemeni government official made stunning revelations that a Pakistani explosive expert was responsible for manufacturing the bomb that was used by an Al Qaida suicide bomber in his failed bid on the life of Saudi Arabia's Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, at his palace in Obhur, north Jeddah, on August 27 last year. According to Ahmad Al Maseeri, governor of Yemen's Abyan province, the Pakistani expert, who made the explosive capsule used by the militant, was himself killed late last year, after being blown up by his own explosive device. Prince Mohammad bin Nayef who is the security chief in charge of leading the Kingdom's war on terror, had a miraculous escape with minor injuries when a most wanted Saudi militant Abdullah Hassan Tali Al Asiri, who concealed the explosives in his anus, blew himself up in front of the minister in a Ramadan night gathering. Posing as a well-wisher, the militant virtually exploited the generosity and compassion of the prince toward women and children by convincing him that Wafa Al Shahri, wife of Saeed Ali Al Shahri, who is the deputy chief of Al Qaida in the Arabian peninsula, and her three children, who had left the country illegally and leading a miserable life in Yemen, want to return home. He blew himself up while the minister was making a phone call with a militant, who was purportedly willing to surrender.

Al Houthi rebels must start implementing conditions for ending war, says official

A senior official of the Yemen ruling party said that military operations against Al Houthi rebels would only stop after rebels start implementing the six conditions set by the government. The rebels must not deal as a group independent from the Yemeni state, Tarek Al Shami, spokesman of the ruling party, said on Tuesday, following a new rebel announcement accepting all conditions to peace, including not attacking Saudi Arabia. "The rebels must realise that they are Yemeni citizens, and they must deal within the framework of the state not as an independent group," Al Shami said. Al Houthi rebels said in a statement on Tuesday that they would swap the "prisoners" with Saudi Arabia, while the Yemeni government demands them to hand over the "kidnapped" Yemeni and Saudi people. "If there is a willingness to have peace, this issue can be resolved through

an exchange of prisoners," said the rebels in their statement. They also said their announcement of withdrawal from Saudi territories last week was a signal that they would not like to attack the Saudis any more.

KUWAIT

Women make up 17% of Kuwait's labour force in private sector

Women make up 17 per cent of Kuwait's labour force in the private sector, a study has indicated. However, Kuwaiti authorities said they wanted to boost the figure through measures that will foster women's economic and political empowerment. The study commissioned by the social affairs and labour ministry said seven per cent of the jobs in the judiciary, military and diplomatic sectors were held by women. Quoting from the study, Kuwaiti daily Al Qabas said Kuwait has four NGOs to promote women's rights and interests. Women in the northern Arabian Gulf state last year made history when four of them were elected to parliament, the highest figure in a Gulf country. Kuwait also has women ministers. However, the state needs to address the issue of allowing Kuwaiti women to pass on their nationality to their children, the study said. Under the current legislation, only Kuwaiti fathers can give the Kuwaiti nationality to their children, a right that is denied to Kuwaiti women married with foreigners. Another challenge, according to the study, is that Kuwaiti women are not included in the housing scheme that gives them the possibility to own houses built by the government.

Kuwait denies visit visa can be turned into residence visa

A Kuwaiti social affairs and labour ministry official has denied media reports claiming that visit visas can be turned into work permits. "There is no truth to the reports that family visit or tourism visas can be changed to residence permits," the unnamed official was quoted as saying by Al Siyassah daily on Tuesday. "Such a possibility is confined to business visits provided that the visa holder has an advanced qualification. The condition is to ensure strict limits on the number of unskilled and marginal labourers in the country". A Kuwaiti daily last week, quoting immigration sources, said that Kuwait would start applying the new visa-swapping measures on Sunday. According to the report, immigration officers were getting ready to implement the new policy allowing visitors to change their visas to residence visas. The only condition for the transfer, according to the report, was clearance from security officers. However, Arab Times, quoting immigration officials, on Tuesday said that the "the Kuwait Immigration Law has not changed as many have claimed."

Kuwait to ease visa requirements for Georgians

Kuwait is mulling allowing Georgian nationals to enter the country without a visa and staying up to 90 days, Kuwait News Agency (Kuna) reported. The decision was announced during the visit of Georgian Interior Minister Ivan Merabishvili to Kuwait City where he reviewed with his Kuwaiti counterpart, Shaikh Jaber Al Khaled Al Jaber Al Sabah, on ways to bolster cooperation to combat terrorism and organised crime.

New entry rules set for domestic workers

Kuwait's immigration bureau has ordered officials not to allow domestic workers into the country unless their sponsors had approval from the police. "No domestic helper should be allowed to enter Kuwait without proper documents from a local manpower agency proving that they have endorsed him or her," Al Shahed daily newspaper yesterday quoted officials as saying. In the past employers could send a visa and plane ticket to the recruited helper without resorting to a manpower office. The new measures, according to unnamed sources, aim to ensure maids had police clearance from their home countries. However, several employers have complained that the new procedures are forcing them to pay "astronomical" sums to manpower offices, the paper reported. Around 700,000 women are employed in Kuwait as live-in domestic workers. In October 2009, Indonesia stopped sending domestic helpers to Kuwait, citing "concern over abuse". The ban sparked anger in the Gulf country, and Fadil Ashkanani, the head of the Kuwaiti Union of Domestic Labour Offices, said that it was "an insult to Kuwait as it tarnishes the country's image concerning the treatment of domestic workers". Saudi Arabia last July passed a new anti-trafficking law that set prison sentences of up to 15 years for forced labour in a bid to tackle the issues in the sector. Riyadh is also said to be stopping the recruitment of housemaids from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Cambodia and Vietnam for alleged failures in the recruitment process.

Kuwait will not be used to launch attacks on any country, says Speaker

Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al Khorafi said that Kuwait would not allow the use of its territories to launch attacks on other countries, Kuwaiti media reported on Friday. "I have not been informed or even heard of this request," Al Khorafi answered when asked about Western reports claiming that the US has requested Kuwait that it would use its territories as launch pad to attack other countries. However, Al Khorafi said that US anti-missile Patriot batteries have been stationed in Kuwait since the Iraqi invasion in 1990 and are there for purely defensive purposes. A Kuwait test of the batteries one month ago was "part of the regular and normal procedures, not due to the latest developments in the region," US Ambassador to Kuwait Deborah K. Jones reportedly told the Kuwaiti daily Arab Times. "We have a long-standing relationship with Kuwait, as well as a cooperation defense agreement that goes back to around 20 years. It is only natural that we regularly discuss our defensive systems as a whole," Jones said. "There are no emergencies behind the exercises we conducted about a month ago on the Patriot batteries that are here in Kuwait and which Kuwait is operating effectively," Jones said.

BAHRAIN

International Front

Singapore's minister Goh Chok Tong to visit Bahrain, Oman

Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong will arrive in Bahrain on an official three-day visit on Tuesday, marking 25 years of diplomatic ties between the two countries. Tong, Singapore's prime minister from November, 1990 until August, 2004, will also visit Oman on February 1. Singapore media said that Goh, who played a leading role in

developing relations with the Middle East, was visiting Oman and Bahrain "to renew his ties with the leaders of the two countries, update himself on recent developments and strengthen bilateral political and economic links." In Bahrain, Goh is scheduled to hold talks with the country's leaders and to explore Islamic financing products. In Oman, Goh will be the guest of honour at the launch of "The Jewel of Muscat", a reconstructed replica of a ninth century Arab dhow or sailing boat that will sail from Oman in mid-February and reach Singapore in July, Channel News Asia reported. It will then be permanently displayed as a personal gift from the Sultan of Oman to Singapore. Oman-Singapore trade has grown from \$674 million in 2008 to just over \$710 million last year.

Bahrain official wary of claims about Al Qaida threats in Yemen

A leading Bahraini lawmaker has expressed "tremendous concerns" that claims about Al Qaida in Yemen threats to world security would turn out to be as baseless as the ones made about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. "Al Qaida in Yemen has been given incredibly impressive proportions which it does not deserve," Adel Al Mouawda, an MP representing Al Asala, said. "It seems that the new dimension is being used by the US and subsequently by Britain to achieve their hegemony over the region, including regional and international waters. I am singularly afraid that the whole Al Qaida issue and threats would end up like the alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction," the Salafi leader said in a statement on Tuesday. Al Qaida should be condemned for its crime against humanity, but the superpowers had played a major role in boosting its capabilities, he said. "Despite its crime against humanity, Al Qaida has benefited from the moral boost it got following the inhuman abuses by leading world powers in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Al Qaida was able to get clear and strong arguments that it used to engage in violent acts," said Al Mouawda who heads the foreign affairs, defence and national security committee in the lower chamber. Options to fight Al Qaida should not include resorting to US intervention and the use of plane for random bombarding of areas that invariably results in the death of innocent women and children, according to Al Mouawda. The conservative leader blasted the conference in London last month as a suspicious move by foreign forces to target Yemen's security, stability and unity.

Bahrain foreign minister defends US missile deployment in the region

Bahrain's foreign minister and a senior official have defended their country's right to protect itself and insisted that Iran should not see the missile shield deployment as a measure to attack any country. During a press conference with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington, Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmad Al Khalifa on Wednesday said that the protections measures have been in place for decades, but are now being improved, without seeking to threaten anyone. "We're not seeing anything new, nobody's sabre-rattling here, nobody is being belligerent to anyone in the region. It's just a purely defensive measure for the benefit of the whole world, for the region being so important to the whole world," Shaikh Khalid said. The US administration on Monday said that it boost the protection capabilities of its Gulf allies by upgrade defence possibilities in the region. Iran immediately poured scorn on the decision, and Ali Larijani, the parliament speaker, dismissed the American missile shield as an American "puppet show" and a new political ploy to pave the way to increase its military strength in the region.

Political Front

Controversial MP drops from Bahrain election race

A vociferous lawmaker who has often waded into controversy with his peers and state officials said that he would not be running for a third term this autumn. "I would like to retire and devote myself to religious causes. I have had my share of parliamentary action and would rather now focus on working on religious matters, but as a private citizen," Mohammad Khalid, representing the Islamic Menbar, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, said. The MP said that the decision to quit the parliament was taken without pressure from any sources, denying claims that Al Menbar had informed him that he would be replaced. "It was my decision and there was no interference from whosoever. I will continue to serve Al Menbar, but from a different angle," he said. Reports circulating in Bahrain said that Mohammad Khalid, known as Bu Ammar, would not be allowed to represent the society as a result of his numerous standoffs with officials in the country and his aggressive stance towards Saudi Arabia that caused them embarrassment. The MP last year led a movement to exert pressure on the Saudi authorities to free Bahraini Islamists held in Saudi Arabia on security-related charges. One of the detainees was a former Guantanamo prisoner who was released by the US following several public demonstrations and rallies in which Mohammad Khalid, played a major role. The Bahraini detainees have repeatedly claimed their innocence.

Human Rights Front

A Bahrain women's rights group has stepped up pressure

A Bahrain women's rights group has stepped up pressure to make the citizenship issue among the top priorities in the application of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). "Temporary solutions or measures in addressing this critical issue and alleviating the suffering of Bahraini woman married with foreigners are not enough and will not help lift the ban on passing on the citizenship," Wajeeha Al Baharna, the coordinator of the national campaign for citizenship, has said. "There is an urgent need to amend Article Four of the Bahrain Citizenship Law in lines with Bahrain's constitution and CEDAW to empower Bahraini women to get their rights as full citizens without any discrimination or bias," she said in a letter to the Women and Children Committee in the upper chamber, lobbying for greater support. Under the law, Bahraini women do not have the right to transmit citizenship to their children, a clause that has left several children born to Bahraini mothers and non-Bahraini fathers without the Bahraini citizenship and the social, economic, and civil rights associated with it. In July last year, the government endorsed a resolution from the lower chamber of the bicameral parliament to extend government fee exemptions to children of Bahraini women married to foreigners. The exemptions included fees for government-provided education and health services and for renewing residence permits. The move was welcomed as a "positive step" by the Bahrain Women Association, coordinator of the citizenship campaign. However, activists said that the failure of amending the citizenship law and the inability of Bahraini women to transmit their citizenship meant that their sons and daughters had "painfully limited options" in opportunities for employment, scholarships, housing, and political participation.

Oman

Social Front

Health services under pressure in Oman

Oman's Health Minister, Dr Ali Bin Mohammed Bin Moosa, told 84 elected Shura members that the country's health services were under pressure and the ministry had plans to open more hospitals to cope with it. Responding to the query by a member during his interaction with the Majlis Ashura members on Tuesday, the health minister agreed that there was a long waiting period for patients in some cases. "The waiting problem is a reality because the health centres and clinics have to deal with more than 3,000 cases a day," he told the elected house. He added that some of the treatments were available only at a few centres. "We have only one centre - the cardiology centre in Royal Hospital (in Muscat) - for open heart surgery," he pointed out in reference for the long waiting list for cardiology related cases. He revealed that the ministry had decided to set up another Royal Hospital. "We hope to complete work on the new Royal Hospital within two years," he added. Moreover, he added, that the cardiology department at the Sultan Qaboos Hospital in Salalah would also be set up. Responding to a query on extending timings of the local health centre clinics, the minister said the health clinics were providing only primary health services. "There is no need for extending their (health centres) timings because there are other hospitals to deal with emergency situations," Dr Ali added. Doctors at the Consultant level are given permission to work with private clinics besides the government hospitals, a practice that was questioned by one of the members. Dr. Ali said that the permission given to doctors and consultants to work in the private sector was aimed at providing better health care in the private sector. "There is a shortage of doctors and medical staff and it is an international phenomenon," he stressed, adding that the WHO has declared five million vacancies of medical staff across the world. He reiterated that the medicine prices in the country were on par with the other GCC countries.

Health services under pressure in Oman

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QATAR

International Front

Qatar, Iran to sign key agreements

Qatar and Iran are expected to sign agreements in oil and gas industry, tourism, investments and other important fields to boost their economies, Al Rayah newspaper said. During his visit to Tehran on Tuesday, Qatar's Crown Prince Shaikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani will also discuss bilateral relations and is expected to meet Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadenejad and other officials. Iran's ambassador to Qatar Abdullah Sahrabi told a press conference on Sunday that the Chief of Staff of the Qatari Armed Forces Major General Hamad Bin Ali Al Attiyah and the Iranian defence minister will sign a military agreement. The agreement will focus on the mechanism of cooperation between armed forces of the two countries, exchange of experts and maritime cooperation, the Arabic daily said. Sahrabi said Qatar, Iran and Bahrain had reached an initial agreement on the maritime boundary issue. However, they will later set a date on when to sign the agreement. The agreement will include a map of the borders of Qatar, Bahrain and Iran," he said. Sahrabi also added that the two countries are likely to sign a security agreement during a planned visit of the Iranian Interior Minister Mustafa Mohammad Al Najjar to Doha.

Economic Front

Firms that fail in Qatarisation to face fine

A fine of 100,000 riyals will be imposed on companies that fail to implement the Qatarisation plan, according to a draft law which is in the final stages of approval. Committees and teams will be appointed to investigate, detect and report any violations, Qatar's Arabic daily Al Rayah reported. The investigative teams will check the employees' status and records and the status of employment criteria followed by companies. They will later implement plans designed to support the Qatarisation drive. The Qatarisation plan with specific activities to support manpower requirements to meet the target of companies came into effect in June 2000. The new law will help Qataris secure key jobs in governmental and private companies, especially in medicine, accounting, law and business administration fields where they are most needed, the newspaper said. It will also increase Qatarisation in the private sector by 20 per cent, the daily added.