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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL
NEWS MONITORING REPORT
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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

Human Rights Front

Bahrain will investigate allegations by the Human Rights Watch group that interrogators are again using torture in the Gulf Arab country after a lull of several years, the foreign minister said on Wednesday. Human Rights Watch said in a report on Monday that detainees in three cases mostly linked to protests in 2007 and 2008 in Shi'ite Muslim villages had been beaten and abused during interrogations.

Kuwait is fully committed to international human rights legislation, with any human rights violations that take place in the country being an "individual" matter that will be tackled as such, said a cabinet member.

Freedom of Expression

Bahrain has been accused of stifling political debate after a series of high-profile seminars was allegedly cancelled because authorities deemed them too sensitive. The KitSon, a Paris-based non-governmental organisation, was planning to hold monthly debates in Bahrain to address a variety of topics. Its first dinner-debate on March 8 was due to focus on GCC counter-terrorism, but organisers have been told that local laws prevented it from taking place.

Labor Front

The government of *Oman* will extend the amnesty deadline of March-end granted to overstaying expatriates to leave the country without paying fines. This will facilitate the repatriation of the large number of expatriate workers who have registered themselves in their respective diplomatic missions in Oman.

Social Front

A *Saudi* appeals court upheld a verdict against an airline sales clerk sentenced to five years in prison and 1,000 lashes for boasting on a television programme about his sexual exploits. In the

meantime The Shoura Council approved on Sunday a proposal requesting a full report of the rights and duties of the members of the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Haia). The Shoura's Islamic Affairs and Human Rights Committee presented the proposal last week after listening to an annual report by the Haia's umbrella, the General Presidency for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

International Front

US President Barack Obama's charm offensive on Muslim states comes to a weekend forum in Qatar, where he will send a video message and his chief diplomat will give a speech, organizers said Thursday. Obama will deliver his message to the seventh annual US-Islamic World Forum in the Qatari capital.

GCC and EU officials held a meeting here Tuesday to discuss ways of activating the cooperation agreement. *Meanwhile* GCC Secretary General Abdulrahman Al-Attiyah categorically rejected Sunday the International Criminal Court's (ICC) accusation of Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir of genocide in Darfur. The ICC took the decision while the Arab League and African Union (AU) were making progress in the Darfur peace talks in the Qatari capital, Doha, Al-Attiyah said in a statement.

In *Saudi Arabia*, the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) has said that no complaints have been received from Saudis concerning tightened security inspections and searches at US airports.

Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon denied apologizing to a senior *Saudi* diplomat before a rare public handshake between officials of the two states. Prince Turki al-Faisal had said he shook hands with Ayalon at a security conference in Munich, but only after the Israeli apologised for actions Turki objected to giving Turkey's ambassador a public dressing down. However, Ayalon said it was not true he said sorry to Turki. "Everyone who was present at the conference knows there was no apology from the deputy minister to the Saudi prince," said a statement from his office. To those who did not take part in the conference we suggest they check the video recordings to verify what really happened.

In *UAE*, Dubai would seek the arrest of Israel's prime minister if it found evidence intelligence service Mossad was behind the killing of a senior Hamas official, its police chief was quoted as saying in a newspaper report. Hamas has blamed Israel for killing Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh, one of its top military commanders, in a Dubai hotel last month. Israel has declined to comment.

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed stressed on the strength of ties between Bangladesh and *Kuwait* in all fields, during her visit to the state.

Economic Front

Bad managers, lack of adequate investment in scientific and technological research initiatives, near-absence of technical and vocational training for local manpower and the private sector

ignoring manufacturing ventures are hurting the diversification effort in the GCC. These are the major challenges in steering the Gulf economies away from their dependence on hydrocarbon resources, experts said at a key conference. Banks in the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economy are expected to return to profit growth in 2010, benefiting from higher oil prices and a sharp recovery in regional economies because of expanding public spending and rebounding confidence, analysts said.

The *Saudi Arabian* insurance industry has emerged as one of the fastest growing insurance industries across the world. While the global economic crisis has severely hit other industrial sectors, the insurance industry posts 25-30 percent annual growth rate on the back of compulsory insurance lines, research report. In addition to this Saudi Arabia's defense ministry will for the first time allow local firms to bid to supply basic materials excluding arms with the long-term goal of encouraging a domestic military industry, officials said.

In *UAE*, Abu Dhabi is spending more on infrastructure development than any other capital in the six-nation Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), said a senior municipality official. Giant infrastructure projects are being undertaken in the city and its suburbs in line with Abu Dhabi Vision 2030.

Oman and Iran signed the minutes of the consultative meeting of the Joint Technical Committee regarding implementation of memorandum of understanding on tourism.

Renewable Energy Front

Massive renewable energy projects undertaken by the UAE and other Middle Eastern countries could turn them into solar energy exporters along with their large hydrocarbon exports, according to a veteran Arab energy analyst. "After oil, Arab countries could start exporting solar energy.

Oil and Gas

Global demand for crude oil this year is expected to rise by 170,000 barrels per day (b/d) to reach 86.5 million b/d, an increase of 1.8 percent over 2009 levels, due largely to a pick-up in the world economies, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in a report.

Saudi Aramco has concluded supply deals to purchase up to 7.14 million barrels of gas oil for delivery in 2010 from private trading firms and international oil companies, industry sources said.

Yemen Turmoil

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh has issued a directive on cessation of hostilities against the Shiite Houthi rebels in the northwestern part of the country. The presidential decree was announced in a press release after Saleh presided over a meeting of the higher security

commission tasked with the implementation of the government's six-point ceasefire proposal accepted by the Houthis.

Yemen's Shia rebels said Saudi warplanes intensified attacks on northern Yemen on Tuesday, and that the insurgents had surrounded a Yemeni paratroopers unit.

DETAILED REPORT

GCC

International Front

GCC, EU officials discuss activation of cooperation deal

GCC and EU officials held a meeting here Tuesday to discuss ways of activating the cooperation agreement. GCC Secretary General Abdulrahman Al-Attiyah, addressing the meeting, said this important meeting was the first of a kind in the history of cooperation relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the European Union (EU). He said the meeting aimed at placing a comprehensive plan to activate the cooperation agreement. Al-Attiyah said the six GCC states were keen on further developing relations with the EU via the activation of the cooperation agreement. The GCC chief hoped the action plan would create a new method of cooperation between both blocs.

GCC rejects ICC's genocide charges against Sudan's Bashir

GCC Secretary General Abdulrahman Al-Attiyah categorically rejected Sunday the International Criminal Court's (ICC) accusation of Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir of genocide in Darfur. The ICC took the decision while the Arab League and African Union (AU) were making progress in the Darfur peace talks in the Qatari capital, Doha, Al-Attiyah said in a statement. He called for giving a chance for the implementation of the high-level AU delegation, headed by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, to achieve peace, conciliation and justice in Darfur. Al-Attiyah said the ICC should keep a distance from politics in order to serve justice and international law. The ICC General Prosecutor, he added, should instead take necessary "moral and legal" measures towards the Israeli blatant human rights violations against the unarmed Palestinian people, particularly in Gaza Strip, as well as the crimes in Abu Ghuraib prison in Iraq. He called on the international community and the UN Security Council in specific to avoid double-standards.

Economic Front

Bad management stifling GCC diversification

Bad managers, lack of adequate investment in scientific and technological research initiatives, near-absence of technical and vocational training for local manpower and the private sector ignoring manufacturing ventures are hurting the diversification effort in the GCC. These are the major challenges in steering the Gulf economies away from their dependence on hydrocarbon resources, experts said at a key conference here yesterday. The debate was on 'Meeting the Challenges of Diversification in the GCC' at a conference entitled 'Qatar Economic Development' that kicked off at the Four Seasons Hotel. The two-day event held by the General

Secretariat of Development Planning (GSDP) concludes today. “Management can be a tool of success, but in our Arab world, the GCC in particular, the managers follow a methodology which doesn’t advance diversification,” said Dr Saleh Sulaiman, from the College of Management, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia. The experience of certain GCC countries in their diversification drive has failed and they are now retrieving the projects they launched with so much fanfare earlier, Sulaiman added. Higher education in the region does not focus on stimulating research initiatives among students and does not encourage the growth of their intellectual capacities. Talking of the diversification effort in Abu Dhabi and the UAE in general, Ahmed Abu Ghaida, from Abu Dhabi Economic Development Department, said the accent in Abu Dhabi was on increasing the ratio of oil to non-oil sector’s growth in as far as their contribution to the GDP was concerned. He said by 2030, the oil sector’s contribution in Abu Dhabi is planned to be 40 percent while the majority share (60 percent) is to be had by the non-energy sector.

Economic revival, improved oil prices to boost GCC bank profits

Banks in the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economy are expected to return to profit growth in 2010, benefiting from higher oil prices and a sharp recovery in regional economies because of expanding public spending and rebounding confidence, analysts said. After five successive turbulent quarters in the aftermath of the global fiscal tremor, more than 150 banks in the GCC states will likely perform better than in 2009 as they push ahead with plans to gradually reopen their tight lending taps, they said. Although credit growth in the region, hit by the global crisis and debt default problems, is still slow, lending is anticipated to begin picking up in the following months as banks are likely to be enticed by a better economic environment, growing domestic demand and a consolidation in their financial position because of heavy provisioning. But experts believe that banks will remain relatively cautious and their recovery will be slow on the grounds that provision-taking will continue. After dipping to around \$ 60 (Dh220) a barrel last year from highs of \$ 95 a barrel in 2008, oil prices are projected to rebound to an average of \$ 76 per barrel this year. This should ally with an increase in public expenditure to spur on growth and encourage banks to lend. Figures by the Saudi American Bank Group (Samba) showed that oil prices at \$ 75 a barrel this year, would be nearly 20 per cent higher than in 2009 while government spending is already higher by two per cent as compared with the 2009 expenditure in the UAE, 3.7 per cent in Saudi Arabia, three per cent in Kuwait, 18 per cent in Qatar, six per cent in Oman and around two per cent in the kingdom of Bahrain.

GCC exports to Japan fall 48% in 2009

A sharp decline in oil prices combined with lower crude supplies to depress exports by the UAE and five other Gulf countries to Japan by nearly 48.5 per cent in the first 11 months of 2009, according to official Japanese data. The decline reversed several years of rapid growth in their exports to the largest importer of Gulf oil and sharply narrowed a trade surplus enjoyed by the six-nation Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) with Japan for a long time. Japan's exports to the six members also plunged by around 37.6 per cent because of the recovery of the US dollar, lower demand in the region, a fall in global prices, and a steady growth in trade between the GCC and China. From around \$ 136.69 billion (Dh501.65bn) in the first 11 months of 2008, exports of goods by the 29-year-old Gulf alliance to the southeast Asian industrial giant plummeted to nearly \$ 70.55bn in the first 11 months of 2009, showed the figures released by the Japan External Trade Organisation (Jetro).

Inter- GCC Relations

Saudi Arabia, Qatar keen on bolstering economic relations

The Saudi-Qatari Economic Forum affirmed here Monday that both nations were keen on developing ties within the economic sphere as a step reflecting solidarity amongst GCC states. Saudi Arabia and Qatar both called for the increase of commercial exchange and economic ties for the benefit of both countries. GCC Secretary General Abdulrahman Al-Attiyah affirmed in his speech to the forum that the Saudi and Qatari leadership were setting their goals for a better economic and financial cooperation amongst countries in the region. The GCC's most outstanding achievement was to increase commercial exchange amongst Gulf states to USD 27 billion, an increase of 20 percent within the last decade, said Al-Attiyah who also shed light on the joint GCC market which is an equally important achievements. The commercial exchange between Qatar and Saudi Arabia reached USD 1.9 billion in 2008.

Renewable energy

Arab states may become solar energy exporters

Massive renewable energy projects undertaken by the UAE and other Middle Eastern countries could turn them into solar energy exporters along with their large hydrocarbon exports, according to a veteran Arab energy analyst. "After oil, Arab countries could start exporting solar energy," said Nicolas Sarkis, Director of the Paris-based Arab Petroleum Research Centre (APRC), which acts as an adviser to the 10-nation Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries. "The development of solar energy is rapidly becoming a priority of energy policies pursued by most countries in the Middle East and North Africa, whether oil and natural gas producers or not," Sarkis wrote in the APRC's monthly magazine, Arab Petroleum and Gas. He said that in non-oil Arab countries, the growing interest being shown in solar power and other renewable energy sources is dictated not only by the deterioration in their energy deficits and the insufficiency of their indigenous fossil fuel resources but also by environmental imperatives and the technological progress that characterises the development of renewable energies. As for the large hydrocarbon exporting countries in the Arab World, the exploitation of their huge potential in the area of solar energy reflects a dual concern to protect the environment and prepare the post-oil era, he said.

UAE

Highlighting solar projects and other renewable energy developments in the region, Sarkis said the UAE has emerged as a pioneer in this sector. "Abu Dhabi has emerged as a pioneer with its famous Masdar initiative, the largest clean energy development programme going ahead anywhere in the world, with investments of more than \$ 22 billion (Dh80.7bn)," he said.

Saudi Arabia

"Another very significant example is Saudi Arabia. The fact that it is the world's leading oil-exporting country has not prevented it from deciding to invest in the development of solar energy," Sarkis said. Under the terms of an agreement signed last June, Saudi Aramco and the Japanese refining company Showa Shell are to develop a pilot solar power plant that will have a capacity of 10 MW and is due to come on stream in 2011. Another 20 MW solar power plant is

due to be built at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, along with a center devoted to photovoltaic technology.

Oil and Gas

Global oil demand set to rise again in 2010 -- IEA

Global demand for crude oil this year is expected to rise by 170,000 barrels per day (b/d) to reach 86.5 million b/d, an increase of 1.8 percent over 2009 levels, due largely to a pick-up in the world economies, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in a report published Thursday. The IEA said that its estimate for 2009 demand was 84.9 million b/d, which represents a drop of 1.5 percent over the previous year and was explained by the economic downturn due to the international financial crisis and its effect mainly on industrialized nations. Emerging economies have proven more resilient to the crisis, which has provoked a drop in economic output in major nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) area, which comprises the world's most industrialized countries. For 2010, the IEA said in its "Monthly Oil Market Report" that oil demand growth will be "entirely in non-OECD countries," an indication that the economic recovery will be gradual in that zone. The Paris-based agency also remarked that "robust International Monetary Fund (IMF) projections for Gross Domestic Product (GDP) are partly offset by a higher price assumption and persistently weak OECD oil demand" thus the call for more crude supplies will be less than could be expected. On the supply side, the IEA noted that global oil supply fell 45,000 b/d in January, with higher OPEC output offset by a drop in non-OPEC production.

Yemen Turmoil

Yemen's ceasefire takes force midnight

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh has issued a directive on cessation of hostilities against the Shiite Houthi rebels in the northwestern part of the country as of 12:00 a.m. Thursday-Friday. The presidential decree was announced in a press release after Saleh presided over a meeting of the higher security commission tasked with the implementation of the government's six-point ceasefire proposal accepted by the Houthis. The commission, consisting of members of the House of Representatives (lower house of the parliament) and the Shura Council (upper house), will make field inspections to verify the Houthis' commitment to the ceasefire and the mechanism of its implementation. Today's meeting focused on the practical procedures to be made by the commission to enforce the truce agreement, the statement said. The move aims to stop the bloodshed and restore peace in the troubled region and prepare for the return of the internally-displaced people to their homes. It will prepare the ground for the reconstruction of the war-ravaged areas, thus serving the national interests, according to the statement. President Saleh called on the political forces to shoulder their responsibilities for protecting the country's security and stability and put the higher national interests above their own partisan interests, it pointed out. The Yemeni government and the Houthis agreed to form four joint panels on the enforcement of the truce on the ground; first in Sufyan and Al-Gauf; second in Al-Malaheeth; third in Saada; and fourth in the border areas between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The six points of the truce include; first complete cessation of hostilities, reopening of roads and erasing landmines; second withdrawal of Al-Houthi fighters from the areas they took hold of and abstaining from interference in the affairs of the local government; third retrieval of the civilian

and military equipment to the governments of Yemen and Saudi Arabia; fourth release of all Yemeni and Saudi civilians and military personnel captured by the rebels; fifth abidance by the Yemen constitution and laws; and sixth abstention from any hostile act against Yemen's northern neighbor.

UAE's Haiti aid reaches Dh26m

The total emergency aid contributions made by UAE-based charity organisations to victims of the Haiti disaster have reached Dh26.4 million, according to the report by the UAE Office for the Coordination of Foreign Aid (OCFA) to UN Financial Tracking Service. OCFA was established by a federal government mandate in 2008 to support the nation's delivery of foreign humanitarian and development aid worldwide. The latest aid figures reported by OCFA to the United Nations Financial Tracking Service — a global, online, real-time database of humanitarian funding needs and contributions (www.reliefweb.int/fts) — include consignments of food items, potable water, medical supplies and non-food-items such as tents and blankets, as well as, access to aid and medical personnel. In addition to recording UAE aid donations to the UN, the Office for the Coordination of Foreign Aid is also providing charity organisations in the UAE with 'Situation Reports' that highlight on-ground developments and track the flow of aid from the UAE, helping identify gaps and ensuring maximum efficacy of committed resources. "The Office for the Coordination of Foreign Aid is closely monitoring the humanitarian situation in Haiti in order to assess the victims' needs as they emerge, and communicate aid requirements with UAE-based donor organizations keen to support relief efforts. Our 'Situation Reports' also provide updates on the flow of emergency supplies to enable the best allocation of all available resources," said Hazza Mohammed Falah Al Qahtani, director general of OCFA.

Yemen rebels say Saudi Arabia steps up air attacks

Yemen's Shia rebels said Saudi warplanes intensified attacks on northern Yemen on Tuesday, and that the insurgents had surrounded a Yemeni paratroopers unit. Saudi Arabia was drawn into a five-year conflict between the Yemeni government and the rebels in November ago when the rebels seized some of the kingdom's territory, prompting Riyadh to launch a military offensive against them. Separately, a mediator signalled possible progress in efforts towards a truce between government forces and the rebels. Al Jazeera television quoted the unnamed mediator as saying the government had agreed on rebel representatives joining committees that are to oversee the implementation of a ceasefire. It gave no further details. Yemen said on Saturday it had handed the rebels a timetable for implementing the government's ceasefire terms, a week after rejecting a truce offer from the insurgents because it did not include the promise to end hostilities against Saudi Arabia. The rebels said on their website that Saudi warplanes carried out 33 air strikes on Tuesday on northern Yemen, up from nine on Monday, and that Saudi forces fired 120 missiles. The rebels said two of the air raids were in support of the surrounded Yemeni paratroopers, and that the planes had also tried to drop supplies to the elite troops.

KRCS sends aid to displaced people in Yemen

The Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) on Friday dispatches a land convoy of urgent aid supply to victims of Yemen's latest internal events, it was announced here on Thursday. KRCS Chairman Barjes Al Barjes said the mission came in response to directives of His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah who instructed the council of ministers to render human assistance to Yemen. KRCS volunteers would accompany the convoy

which is comprised of six trucks loaded with 80 tons of relief supply, said Barjes. KRCS is to coordinate its efforts with Kuwait's Ambassador in Sanaa Salim Al-Zamanan and concerned Yemen authorities including the Yemeni Red Crescent Society, he added. Two dispatches have been sent by the KRCS to Yemen last October for displaced people there.

Yemen agrees to end war with Shi'a rebels

Yemen agreed with northern Shi'ite rebels on Thursday to end a war that has raged on-and-off since 2004 and drew in neighbouring Saudi Arabia. A truce was to begin at midnight (2100 GMT), a Yemeni official said. The Yemeni government, simultaneously battling a resurgent al Qaeda and southern separatists in addition to the northern insurgents, has been exchanging proposals with the Shi'ite rebels in recent days to end the conflict. "The ceasefire is going to be in effect at 12 midnight," the official told Reuters. There was no immediate response from the rebels, who complain of social, religious and economic discrimination. Yemen said last week it had handed rebels a timetable for implementing the government's ceasefire terms, a week after rejecting a rebel truce offer because it did not include a promise to end hostilities with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arab

Social Front

Saudi court upholds jail verdict against sex braggart

A Saudi appeals court upheld a verdict against an airline sales clerk sentenced to five years in prison and 1,000 lashes for boasting on a television programme about his sexual exploits, media reports said on Tuesday. The Jeddah court confirmed an October 7 verdict against Mazen Abdul Jawad, who landed in hot water after appearing on a programme called "Bold Red Line," the Okaz daily said. He had been charged and convicted of offensive behaviour under the strict shariah Islamic laws of the conservative Saudi kingdom. During his July television appearance on the Beirut-based Lebanese Broadcasting Corp (LBC) programme, Abdul Jawad boasted about picking up women, having sex and using sexual aids. The show outraged Saudi conservatives, who pressed authorities to take action against Abdul Jawad and others involved in the show. Three friends of Abdul Jawad who appeared on air with him received two-year prison terms and 300 lashes each. Abdul Jawad's lawyer, Sulaiman al-Jimaie, had argued the case was marred by numerous procedural errors.

Shoura to study rights, duties of Haia members

The Shoura Council approved on Sunday a proposal requesting a full report of the rights and duties of the members of the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Haia). The Shoura's Islamic Affairs and Human Rights Committee presented the proposal last week after listening to an annual report by the Haia's umbrella, the General Presidency for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Committee member Zuhair Al-Harhi said the requested report should specify the roles of Haia members so that the Shoura Council can understand fully the organizational structure of the religious police force. According to Shoura member Salem Al-Gahtani the purpose of the report is to get into writing the role of each Haia member. Shoura member Khalil Al-Brahim said the report would establish bylaws that would

make Haia members accountable for any indiscretions and would help reduce incidents that occur due to actions by individual Haia members acting on their own.

International Front

Saudi Arabia tops Arab world's aid givers

Saudi Arabia tops the list of aid-granting countries in the Arab world, giving away \$ 5.7 billion and accounting for 81.1 percent of the total aid given by the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD) in 2008. Kuwait-based AFESD granted \$ 7 billion in assistance, which was mostly given as loans and non-refundable gifts to poor countries for development of infrastructure, housing and small establishments. The aid granted by AFESD was 97.2 percent higher than in 2007. Kuwait contributed \$ 568 million, the United Arab Emirates' share was \$ 561 million, Qatar gave \$ 171 million and Sultanate of Oman \$ 25 million. The ratio of developmental assistance to the gross national product in Saudi Arabia is 1.2 percent while the average ratio in the fund's member countries was 0.7 percent in 2008. The share of the Islamic Development Bank reached 33.8 percent and Saudi Developmental Fund 5.7 percent in the aid programs.

Israel minister denies saying sorry to Saudi diplomat

Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon on Sunday denied apologising to a senior Saudi diplomat before a rare public handshake between officials of the two states. Prince Turki al-Faisal had said he shook hands with Ayalon at a security conference in Munich, but only after the Israeli apologised for actions Turki objected to giving Turkey's ambassador a public dressing down. However, Ayalon said it was not true he said sorry to Turki. "Everyone who was present at the conference knows there was no apology from the deputy minister to the Saudi prince," said a statement from his office. To those who did not take part in the conference we suggest they check the video recordings to verify what really happened.

Saudi urges firm stance on Israel after handshake

The Saudi government on Monday urged a firm stance by the international community regarding what it called threats by Israel against Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinians. "(The cabinet) appeals to the international community on the need for a rigorous position about these (Israeli threats) and to step up efforts to end the continuous inhumane Israeli practices against the Palestinian people," the cabinet said after its weekly meeting chaired by King Abdullah. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, responding to Syria's accusation Israel was pushing for a war, said earlier this month that Damascus would be defeated and President Bashar al-Assad would lose power in any future conflict. Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak earlier said that "the absence of an agreement with Syria could lead to armed conflict that could develop into all-out war". Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reassured Syria that Israel sought peace after Lieberman's remarks.

EU Parliament welcomes hosting of Yemen-conf. in Riyadh

The European Parliament welcomed Wednesday the outcome of the international meeting on Yemen that took place on 27 January in London, including the announcement by the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council that he will host a meeting of Gulf and other partners of Yemen in Riyadh on 22-23 February 2010. In a resolution adopted today, the EP called for an

international drive to prevent the current crisis escalating, and to help build a unified, stable and democratic Yemen. It expressed deep concern about the long-standing and growing presence of al-Qaeda, and the deteriorating security, social and economic problems in Yemen, which could destabilise neighbouring countries. The EP resolution called on the Yemeni government to "refrain from discrimination against any ethnic or religious groups in the country and to take account of the common interest of all its citizens in its policies." The EP called for an immediate ceasefire and a halt to violence in the country, and called on the Yemeni authorities to step up their efforts to ensure the release of six European hostages being held on its territory. The resolution called on the EU to assist the US and Yemen "in repatriating or resettling Yemenis held without charge at Guantanamo, including the 40 Yemenis that the US Administration had already cleared for release".

No complaints about US security: NSHR

The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) has said that no complaints have been received from Saudis concerning tightened security inspections and searches at US airports. Saleh Al-Khathlan, NSHR Vice President, said that the organization's position on the issue was clear. "The NSHR disapproves of the measures as they do not serve human rights around the world given that US authorities have singled out certain countries to be targeted by the measures, among them the Kingdom," Al-Khathlan said. He said the next annual report from the group would include new fields of concern, and was pleased that the previous report had been looked at carefully by the relevant government bodies. He also spoke of the NSHR's upcoming plans. "We will be organizing a symposium on consumer rights and we will also be launching soon the first human rights library, with approximately five thousand books pertinent to the field," Al-Khathlan said.

Saudi King calls for sympathy with poor in Islamic world

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia called on Saudi and Qatari businessmen Sunday to spread merits of sympathy with the poor in the Islamic world. King Abdullah, in a speech while receiving members of the Qatari businessmen delegation led by Sheikh Khalifa bin Jasssem Al-Thani, said relations between Riyadh and Doha were solid in all domains. Sheikh Khalifa, Chairman of the Qatari Chamber of commerce, commended the Saudi economic boom. Saleh Kamel, President of the Council of Saudi chambers of commerce, commended King Abdullah's inter-Arab conciliation initiative which he launched during the Arab Economic summit in Kuwait in January 2009.

Environmental Front

King Abdullah to open environment forum

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah will open the three-day first Saudi environment and sustainable development event being held at the Jeddah Hilton from March 7-9, according to its organizer Presidency of Meteorology and Environment (PME). Crown Prince Sultan, deputy premier and minister of defense and aviation and Prince Turki bin Nasser, president of the PME, are also supporting the event. With climate change on a worldwide agenda, a number of sponsors are supporting the event, including GEMS-Utileco, the National Commercial Bank, SAES-Enviro, CH2M Olayan, Philips Electronic, Haif Company AES International and Riyadh Techno Valley.

Renewable Energy Front

Saudi Arabia turns to solar power

Saudi Arabia is turning to solar energy. The Saudi government and its agencies, in cooperation with the Riyadh-based King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), have begun building a desalination plant using solar power. The plant will have a capacity of 10 megawatts and a reverse osmosis plant that uses developed technologies in the field of solar energy. Prince Turki bin Saud bin Mohammed, KACST vice-president, said that the solar energy scheme will reduce the cost of producing desalinated water and of generating power for use in the Kingdom, an oil-dependent nation which has also launched a national energy efficiency programme. He said there was a need to promote solar energy projects in the Kingdom and the Gulf as these nations are planning and executing huge industrial, residential and manufacturing projects. Prince Turki said solar power could be a valuable resource and an addition to the energy portfolio of the Kingdom where most of the more than 40 gigawatts of electricity that is consumed per year is generated by fossil fuels.

Economic Front

Saudi insurance industry one of fastest growing worldwide

The Saudi Arabian insurance industry has emerged as one of the fastest growing insurance industries across the world. While the global economic crisis has severely hit other industrial sectors, the insurance industry posts 25-30 percent annual growth rate on the back of compulsory insurance lines. According to our new research report "Saudi Arabia Insurance Market to 2012", protection & savings and health insurance are the fastest growing insurance lines in the Kingdom, with health insurance accounting for around 44 percent of the overall insurance market as of the end of 2008. Besides, long-term growth of the insurance industry primarily depends on the performance of protection and savings insurance, owing to low penetration of life insurance in the country. The protection and savings insurance premium is expected to grow at a CAGR of around 55 percent over the forecast period (2009-2013).

Saudi banks' overseas investments soar by 75%

Saudi Arabia's banks boosted their investments abroad by a record high of nearly 75 per cent through 2009 to counter slackening credit demand at home and the absence of government bonds, official figures showed. The combined foreign assets of the 12 commercial banks in the world's oil powerhouse swelled by nearly SR47.45 billion (Dh46.5bn) at the end of 2009 to boost their overseas investments to one of their highest levels, showed the figures by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (Sama) yesterday. But their foreign liabilities dipped by about SR13bn and the decline was mainly in due to foreign banks and branches abroad. From about SR64.8bn at the end of 2008, the banks' total investments abroad leaped to SR112.3bn at the end of 2009, Sama said in its January banking bulletin. The overseas investments at the end of 2009 were the highest in more than 10 years and one of their highest levels in the Saudi banking history. The figures showed they were almost six times their level at the end of 2003. The surge in such investments boosted the banks' collective foreign assets to one of their highest levels of around SR210.9bn.

Saudi lets local firms bid for military tenders

Saudi Arabia's defence ministry will for the first time allow local firms to bid to supply basic materials excluding arms with the long-term goal of encouraging a domestic military industry, officials said. The move, which will open a field that was reserved for foreign manufacturers, will first involve some 15,000 items that range from plastic to pipes, covers for jet engines and batteries, Colonel Attiyah Al Maliki said at a meeting with businessmen in Riyadh's chamber of commerce late on Saturday. Saudi authorities expect the move — backed by assistant Defence Minister Khaled bin Sultan — to encourage foreign suppliers to partner with Saudi peers and set up shop within the kingdom so that they can continue to qualify as suppliers. The defence ministry created a Central Committee for Local Industrialisation which comprises business leaders and defence officials to “develop local capabilities, ensure speedy deliveries and reduce costs”, Colonel Maliki said.

Oil & Gas

Saudi concludes deals for term gas oil supply

Saudi Aramco has concluded supply deals to purchase up to 7.14 million barrels of gas oil for delivery in 2010 from private trading firms and international oil companies, industry sources said yesterday. The world's top oil exporter, which typically steers away from longer-term supply contracts as it strives for fuel self-sufficiency, has already agreed to buy nearly 5 million barrels of gas oil with four firms. Swiss based trading firm Vitol, oil major British Petroleum, Kuwait's Independent Petroleum Group (IPG) and Japan's Itochu Petroleum will each supply about 1.19 million barrels to Aramco, sources said. Aramco also has the option of purchasing an additional 595,200 barrels from each respective company, under the individual deals. These deals will run from March through December, traders said. The price on the deals was concluded at a premium of \$ 2 to Middle East benchmark quotes on a 0.5 percent sulphur basis, cost and freight (CFR). Last year Aramco concluded its term deals at a premium of around \$ 2.70.

UAE

Geo-strategic Front

Dubai may seek Israeli PM's arrest over Hamas leader's death

Dubai would seek the arrest of Israel's prime minister if it found evidence intelligence service Mossad was behind the killing of a senior Hamas official, its police chief was quoted as saying in a newspaper report. Hamas has blamed Israel for killing Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh, one of its top military commanders, in a Dubai hotel last month. Israel has declined to comment. Police in the United Arab Emirates have said they suspect a foreign “criminal gang” of killing Al-Mabhouh in his hotel room, and are looking into the possible involvement of Israel's spy agency. Dubai's police chief, Dahi Khalfan Tamim, told The National daily that the head of the Israeli government would be held personally responsible if Mossad were implicated. “Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, will be the first to be wanted for justice as he would have been the one who signed the decision to kill Al-Mabhouh in Dubai. We will issue an arrest warrant against him,” he told the newspaper.

Economic Front

UAE, UK set to increase bilateral trade by 60%

In an effort to strengthen commercial ties, the first UAE-UK financial services working group meeting was held in Abu Dhabi to increase the bilateral trade by 60 per cent from £7.5 billion to £12 billion in 2012. The discussion follows up on the UAE-UK Joint Economic Committee held last October in London. Mohammed Ahmed Bin Abdul Aziz Al Shihhi, Director General, UAE Ministry of Economy, and Alderman Nick Anstee, Lord Mayor of the City of London, led the meeting, accompanied by the British Ambassador to the UAE, Edward Anthony Oakden, other government officials and British businessmen. Al Shihhi described the meeting as 'highly productive' and an excellent way to break down any challenges and increase the investment opportunities between the two countries.

UAE's inflation hits 9-year low

United Arab Emirates inflation hit a nine-year low of 1.5 percent in 2009, in line with forecasts, as prices returned to a downward path in December due to a fall in the household category, preliminary data showed yesterday. The global financial crisis ended an oil- and real estate-fuelled boom in the Gulf Arab region, depressing consumer prices from record peaks set in 2008, with some countries such as the UAE experiencing temporary deflation in 2009. The Gulf country's consumer prices fell 0.4 percent on an annual basis in December, after an increase of 0.17 percent in November, data from the National Bureau of Statistics provided to Reuters showed. On the month, prices in the world's third-largest oil exporter decreased 0.7 percent in the last month of 2009, after rising 0.4 percent in November, the data showed. The bureau said the decline in the key household category, which accounts for 39 percent of the inflation basket and includes rents and energy costs, was behind the December fall, while food prices edged up slightly. It did not give details. The second-largest Arab economy, which saw four months of consecutive price declines before November's rise, registered record annual inflation of 12.3 percent in 2008.

Analysts polled by Reuters expected an average inflation of 1.5 percent for the full year of 2009. Inflation is forecast to accelerate to 2.5 percent this year as the economy recovers from the last year's downturn. "What we are expecting in 2010 is a low single-digit inflation ... but probably higher than in 2009," said Giyas Gokkent, head of research at National Bank of Abu Dhabi. "You will not get the same downward pressure that rents were contributing in 2009 or at least not to the same degree and then food prices might put some upward pressure," he said.

UAE still attractive business hub

After an interesting year of global economic uncertainty, the UAE, still one of the world's strongest emerging markets has survived the credit crunch and continues to stand strong. Regional focus groups with key industry buyers held by The Office Exhibition, the only one of its kind in the Middle East that opened in Dubai on Tuesday, proved that the region is still a hub of business potential with Dubai and Abu Dhabi continuing to be hives of activity. Due to market demands, the event has seen some recent changes and now has additional product categories offering not only furniture and interiors but also office technology and consultancy solutions. Speaking to The Gulf Today at the event, the exhibition director, Sinead Bridgett said that a team that included medical experts, yoga practitioners and physiotherapists got together to

decide on a set of simple and light exercises and movements that employees can do at work, while sitting on their chair, known as Deskercise.

Abu Dhabi tops GCC capitals in spending on infrastructure

Abu Dhabi is spending more on infrastructure development than any other capital in the six-nation Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), said a senior municipality official. Giant infrastructure projects are being undertaken in the city and its suburbs in line with Abu Dhabi Vision 2030. The municipality is currently engaged in executing infrastructure projects worth Dh19 billion and has spent more than Dh20bn on major roadworks in the past three years, Abdulla Al Shamsi, Acting Executive Director of the Municipal Infrastructure and Assets Sector, told Emirates Business. "Abu Dhabi is seeing major growth in infrastructure projects such as roads and bridges," he said. "This year we are executing projects valued at Dh19bn. Plans for the infrastructure sector over the next three years include huge projects and a budget that is bigger than the budget of projects currently being executed. "I firmly believe Abu Dhabi is the biggest spender on infrastructure among capital cities in the GCC, we work with massive financial support. This underlines that Abu Dhabi should enjoy the best infrastructure in the Arab region, which will help to attract foreign investment and prevent any problems that Abu Dhabi could otherwise face in future, whether involving roads, maintenance or facilities."

Dubai Islamic Bank net profit declines 31 per cent in 2009

Dubai Islamic Bank's (DIB) net profit fell by 31 per cent for the year 2009 due to enhanced provisioning for impairment, the bank said on Thursday. The Shariah-compliant bank reported a net profit of Dh1.2 billion for 2009, compared to Dh1.73 billion in 2008, down by 30.63 per cent. This decline is primarily due to the conservative and prudent approach adopted by the bank in continuing with the policy of enhancing provision for impairment from Dh520 million in 2008 to Dh818 million in 2009, the Dubai-based bank said. "As the global economy emerges from a phase of severe disruption and unprecedented volatility into a period of recovery, Dubai Islamic Bank is now uniquely positioned to further contribute to the continued economic growth and diversification of the UAE and wider region," said Mohammed Ibrahim Al Shaibani, Chairman of the bank. Listed on the Dubai Financial Market, the stocks made an intra-day high of Dh2.60 and closed over 5 per cent up at Dh2.44 on Thursday. The board of directors of the bank proposed a cash dividend of 20 per cent. Customer deposits soared to Dh64.2 billion by the end of 2009, compared to Dh62.6 billion at the end of 2008.

BAHRAIN

Drug Trafficking

Drug traffickers using Bahrain

Iranian drug traffickers are using Bahrain as a transit point on smuggling runs to the Far East, it emerged yesterday. Dozens of Iranian travellers have been held by Malaysian authorities in recent months, after allegedly being caught red-handed with illegal narcotics. Six Iranians have been arrested this week alone for allegedly possessing methamphetamines, having arrived on four separate flights to Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). "Those detained came from Tehran and made transit stops in Bahrain and Dubai," said Selangor state police narcotics

department head Nordin Kadir. The suspects, who face death by hanging if convicted of drug trafficking, are probably catering to a rising demand for methamphetamines among Malaysian drug users, Mr Kadir added. One of the men arrested this week reportedly had sewn eight packets of drugs into his jacket, but none of the suspects has yet been officially charged. So far this year, 41 Iranians have been held for allegedly smuggling nearly 90kg of methamphetamines - worth up to \$ 6.5 million (BD2.45m) - into Malaysia. This compares to only 24 Iranians detained for similar offences in the whole of last year.

Human Rights

Ban on debate series rapped

Bahrain has been accused of stifling political debate after a series of high-profile seminars was allegedly cancelled because authorities deemed them too sensitive. The KitSon, a Paris-based non-governmental organisation, was planning to hold monthly debates in Bahrain to address a variety of topics. Its first dinner-debate on March 8 was due to focus on GCC counter-terrorism, but organisers have been told that local laws prevented it from taking place. British Ambassador Jamie Bowden and French Ambassador Yves Oudin were among those expected to take part, along with UN representative to the international Terrorist Finance Tracking Programme Jean-Louis Bruguière and World Policy Institute Middle East Project director Dr Alon Ben-Meir. However, the entire series has been shelved after Bahrain authorities refused to give it the go-ahead. The KitSon founder Elisa Kitson told the GDN yesterday that she had still not been given any reason for the decision, despite earlier receiving assurances from senior officials at the Interior and Foreign ministries.

Bahrain to probe torture claims by rights group

Bahrain will investigate allegations by the Human Rights Watch group that interrogators are again using torture in the Gulf Arab country after a lull of several years, the foreign minister said on Wednesday. Human Rights Watch said in a report on Monday that detainees in three cases mostly linked to protests in 2007 and 2008 in Shi'ite Muslim villages had been beaten and abused during interrogations. The U.S.-based watchdog said interrogators had suspended detainees from the ceiling and abused them with beatings and electric shock devices. "The government will now be examining the allegations raised within the report and its findings to ensure that Bahrain continues to meet international best practice in support of human rights," Foreign Minister Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmed al-Khalifa said in remarks carried by the official Bahrain News Agency. Bahrain, home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, is ruled by a Sunni Muslim dynasty but has a majority Shi'ite population that complains of discrimination in jobs and services. Human Rights Watch had said that before the three cases documented in its report, there had been no evidence of mistreatment of detainees in Bahrain between 2001 and 2006.

Economic Front

Bahrain playing major role despite downturn

Bahrain's importance as a regional financial centre may have benefited from the economic downturn last year. That is one of the conclusions of a report on the kingdom by international real estate firm, CB Richard Ellis. "Bahrain's reliance on the financial sector as one of the key components of its economy gave rise to some concern especially given the problems faced by the

global banking sector in general," said Bahrain-based senior director of research and consultancy at the firm Mike Williams. "However, with a couple of notable exceptions, these concerns appear to have been allayed. "It is estimated that the economy contracted by somewhere between 0.1 per cent and 1pc in 2009 which means that with improving global economic conditions and rising oil prices, the economy is thought likely to enjoy modest growth during 2010. "As a result of the surprising robustness of Bahrain's economic performance during the past year despite its reliance on financial services, its position as the premier banking centre in the region is likely to have been enhanced rather than diminished. "Although there continue to be problems in the real estate and construction sectors, with sales transactions coming almost to a standstill, parliamentary approval of additional funding for current and future infrastructure projects has been secured," he said. "General economic circumstances in Bahrain remain extremely positive, with the highly publicised problems of neighbouring Gulf economies and real estate markets generally avoided," he added.

KUWAIT

International Front

Bangladeshi-Kuwaiti ties strong - Sheikh Hasina

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed stressed Tuesday on the strength of ties between Bangladesh and Kuwait in all fields. Speaking to KUNA on the sidelines of her visit to the country which began on Monday, Sheikh Hasina said, "Our relation with Kuwait is warm, cordial, and brotherly. Our two peoples share common customs, traditions, values, and overall common faith." She stressed that "Bangladesh attaches special importance to its relations with Kuwait as it is a tested partner in our development efforts." "Kuwait stood by our side in our hours of crises," she said, adding, "We thankfully acknowledge hosting of huge number of expatriate Bangladeshis who are working for the benefits of both our countries." She pointed out that the views of the two countries are the same on most issues that confront the various international fora. "Our Peacekeeping troops are proud to have their contribution during the war to liberate Kuwait. Our Defense personnel are working shoulder to shoulder with their brothers in Kuwait. All these factors laid the foundation for close, fraternal, and extremely satisfying relations that exist between our two countries," she highlighted. Bangladesh's Prime Minister said that efforts are needed to expand trade relations with Kuwait. "Presently bilateral trade heavily favors Kuwait due to our huge imports of petroleum and related products. We would definitely want to improve upon our export performance," she said.

Geo-Strategic Front

UN urges Kuwait, Iraq to mend ties

The Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged Kuwait and Iraq to redouble their efforts to achieve 'visible' progress in the recovery of Kuwaiti missing persons and property. He said that such progress would help Iraq get out from under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. While some initial positive results were achieved during the last reporting period, no further progress has been made in the recovery of Kuwaiti missing persons or property," Ban told the Security Council in his quarterly report on the activities of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), of which KUNA obtained an advanced copy. He said his High-level Coordinator Gennady Tarasov visited

Iraq and Kuwait last month and reiterated to both Iraqi and Kuwaiti officials the "need to achieve practical results in this regard." "I would like to renew my call on both countries to redouble their efforts in the coming months to achieve visible and significant progress in the search for missing Kuwaiti persons and property, including its archives," Ban said in his report. Ban also welcomed the decision by the Kuwaiti Council of Ministers to contribute \$ 974,000 to a project sponsored by UNAMI and the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) aimed at enhancing the capacity of the Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights in mass grave excavation and the identification of missing persons. Ban said that his special envoy for Iraq Ad Melkert recently visited Iraq where he discussed with High-Level officials "outstanding issues between Iraq and Kuwait, in connection with relevant Chapter VII provisions." He added that Melkert then visited Kuwait in late January to discuss with High-Level officials UNAMI's mandate to promote regional cooperation.

Human Rights Front

Human rights violations 'individual' issue: Kuwaiti minister

Kuwait is fully committed to international human rights legislation, with any human rights violations that take place in the country being an "individual" matter that will be tackled as such, said a cabinet member on Tuesday. Rashid Al-Hammad, the Deputy Prime Minister for Legal Affairs and State Minister for Justice, Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, said that the isolated incidences of human trafficking discovered in the country do not warrant being described as a "phenomenon," asserting that only a limited number of such cases have been detected and that these are being dealt with appropriately by the relevant authorities. Al-Hammad made his comments during official talks with the head of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) standards department, Cleopatra Henry, which were held at the awqaf ministry building, reported Al-Watan. The minister told Ms. Henry that Kuwait is making great efforts to improve the situation of its bedoon (stateless) residents in the areas of employment, education and general treatment. He explained that action on the issue had been delayed by discussion of other pressing issues, including the recently passed disability rights legislation.

Economic Front

Blogosphere views mixed on govt bonus, bedoons

The online Kuwaiti community expressed their dissatisfaction toward unverified reports concerning a potential salary bonus for Kuwaiti nationals and some expats working in the public sector. The news, reported three days ago by a local Arabic newspaper, alleged that the government is considering putting this idea into action and will soon announce a decision on the matter. The newspaper also reported that, if approved, the government may take action as soon as the beginning of the new monetary year. Internet discussion groups and blogs on Kuwait National Network forums criticized the news, and demanded that the government concern itself with more development programs. Government officials have not yet verified the news. While it is speculated to be just a rumor, many citizens noted that prices are rising gradually. A blogger wrote in a recent post "if you see the soaring prices at co-ops you'll certainly question whether something is going on or not. I don't know if we, the citizens, should be happy for us or for the merchants who will definitely benefit from this bonus. If it is true, then we do have a problem.

Oman

Labor Front/Human Rights Issues

Oman Extends Amnesty Deadline for Overstaying Expats Expatriates

The government of Oman will extend the amnesty deadline of March-end granted to overstaying expatriates to leave the country without paying fines. This will facilitate the repatriation of the large number of expatriate workers who have registered themselves in their respective diplomatic missions in Oman. As a special gesture to deal with the large volume of applications, the ministry of manpower office would also remain open on Thursdays to process the papers of Indians, who form a sizeable chunk of overstayers. This assurance was given by Manpower Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Abdullah Al Bakri to India's Minister of State for External Affairs Dr Shashi Tharoor who is on a four-day official visit to the Sultanate. Tharoor disclosed that he had discussed the plight of overstaying Indian workers with Bakri, who assured him that all possible measures would be taken to ensure that everyone who genuinely wanted to return home was given a fair chance. Oman's ministry of manpower presently is clearing about 500 applications per day of the illegal and overstaying workers, whose number is estimated to be close to a 100,000. The Indian embassy itself has received around 20,000 names of people who want to take advantage of the amnesty granted by the Oman government following amendments to existing labour regulations which forced companies to recruit only expatriates on valid work permits. This had rendered hundreds of expatriates, mostly blue collar workers, jobless as well as penniless. Considering the volume of applications, it would be almost impossible to send even those who do register their names before the end of March. The original amnesty period is February 1 to March 31. In another significant move which could cheer up the working class expatriates, Tharoor revealed that the ministry of manpower had promised to look into the issue of lifting the two-year ban on re-entry of workers whose passports were stamped with the 'deported' status.

Economic Front

Boost to Oman-Iran tourism ties

Oman and Iran yesterday signed the minutes of the consultative meeting of the Joint Technical Committee regarding implementation of memorandum of understanding on tourism. From the Omani side the minutes were signed by Salim bin Oudai al Maamari, Director-General of Tourism Promotion, Ministry of Health, and from the Iranian side by Sayyid Ridha Musawi, Tourism Affairs Assistant to the president of the Iranian Heritage, Culture, Handicraft Industries and Tourism organisation. The implementation programme agreed includes exchange of statistical data, research and tourism expertise, encouraging private investors, joint tourism promotion and encouraging cruising and medical tourism.

Qatar

International Front

Obama heads for Qatar to boost ties with Muslims

US President Barack Obama's charm offensive on Muslim states comes to a weekend forum in Qatar, where he will send a video message and his chief diplomat will give a speech, organizers said Thursday. Obama will deliver his message to the seventh annual US-Islamic World Forum in the Qatari capital, which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will attend Sunday with other senior US officials, The Brookings Institution said. The gathering organized by the think-tank's Saban Center for Middle East Policy and Qatar's foreign affairs ministry brings "leaders from across the Muslim world for an intensive three-day dialogue with key US officials, societal leaders and policy experts," Brookings said. "With President Obama determined to turn the page in America's relations with Muslim communities around the globe, this year's Forum will examine how to craft more robust partnerships that can help repair the deep divisions our societies," Brookings President Strobe Talbott said in a statement.

Qatar-Nato ties reviewed

HE the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor al-Thani holding talks with Deputy Secretary-General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) Claudio Bisogniero in Doha yesterday. They reviewed ties between Qatar and Nato.

Sudan hails Qatar's efforts for Darfur's peaceful settlement

Sudanese Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha lauded yesterday the continuous Qatari efforts to achieve the comprehensive settlement in Darfur. In a joint press conference held with Arab League's Secretary General Amr Mousa in Cairo, Osman stated that Darfur's stability will curb the anti peace movements in the region. For his part, when asked about his view on negotiations's between the Darfurian movements and its impact on Darfur's development process, Amr Moussa said that the Doha negotiations is moving on as it led to a visible light at the end of the tunnel, referring to the talks now underway between the government and the armed factions in Doha. He added this is the task by the League and the Qatari mediation as part of the Arab-African initiative.