

Report #112
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

International Front

Around \$2.1 million raised by the *Kuwaiti* embassy in Washington will help build 60 schools and educate 20,000 people in Pakistan and Afghanistan, an activist has said. The amount, collected by the embassy at its annual gala "Journey for Peace" held last week in cooperation with the Kuwait-America Foundation will be used by the Central Asia Institute to build schools, mainly for girls, in the remote regions of the two countries, Kuwait News Agency said.

Kuwait has denied a media report claiming that it had instructed the interior ministry not to allow Iranian citizens to enter the country. "The report is untrue and lacks credibility," the interior ministry said, according to Kuwait news Agency. "There have never been verbal or written orders banning the issuance of entry or visit visas to Iranians."

In **Bahrain**, a society dedicated to resisting the normalisation of ties with Israel has urged the upper chamber of the bicameral parliament to endorse a draft law to criminalise contacts with Israelis.

Iran's ambassador to Bahrain on Tuesday denied media reports that Iran's Revolutionary Guard was involved in the money-laundering unveiled by Manama on Friday. "We strongly deny all claims about an alleged involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in the operations," Hossein Amir Abdollahian said.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva will arrive in Bahrain on Tuesday on a two-day working visit. According to reports, Vejjajiva said his mission in Bahrain was to improve economic ties and show harmony with the Islamic world, as Thailand struggles to handle a six-year separatist insurgency in its largely Muslim southern provinces.

In **Qatar**, Barwa & Qatari Diar Research Institute (BQDRI) and France-based Dubosc Associates have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to collaborate on creating a "sustainable built environment" and "encourage the adoption and application" of Qatar-specific green building practices.

Some 25 percent of electricity generated by the Chubu Electric Power Company in Japan is fuelled by imported Qatari liquefied natural gas (LNG), according to Chubu Electric Power's Doha Office General Manager. Keiichi Yoneyama said yesterday that 7 percent of Qatar's total exports to Japan go to Chubu, noting "relationship between Qatar and Chubu is very important." "We started importing LNG from Qatar in 1997 then totaling 2.5 million tons per year.

A cargo ship has been hijacked by Somali pirates off the coast of Oman, according to European Union Naval Force (EU Navfor) on Wednesday. "The Bermuda flagged British Virgin Islands owned cargo ship MV Talca has been hijacked," a spokesperson for the EU Navfor told Gulf News.

Political Front

In **UAE**, The agency charged with protecting Abu Dhabi's strategic assets such as oil rigs and power stations will expand its operations to cover the entire UAE, a senior official said yesterday.

The website of His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, received 17,500 visitors on the 2010-2010 Education Strategy opinion poll page.

A **Kuwaiti** conservative MP is putting pressure on the government to ensure that the Open University would not tolerate mixed education. "I want to know about the measures and steps taken to segregate between boys and girls in the classrooms and the various facilities at the Open University," MP Jama'an Al Harbash said in a question he submitted to Dr Moodhi Al Humood, the education minister.

Hours before a crucial confidence vote by the Kuwaiti parliament in the information minister, Kuwaiti media speculated that most of the MPs would rally behind him. "I am

confident that Shaikh Ahmad Al Abdullah will ride the confidence vote by getting 24 votes against 22 calling for his dismissal," MP Abdul Rahman Al Anjari said. Conservative Kuwaiti MP Mohammad Al Hayef has requested the interior minister to "honour his pledge on the duties of policewomen", saying that there would be a quizzing on the matter. "We have read media reports about Kuwaiti policewomen and their role as combat women," Al Hayef said in a statement. "This new role clashes with the interior ministry's pledges on employing policewomen only in positions and places where they are really needed."

Stunned *Bahrainis* were on Friday seeking information and answers in the aftermath of the arrest of a sitting minister, the first since Bahrain became independent in 1971. Still reeling under the dramatic developments around Al Wefaq and the ire it drew from some MPs and media people for its perceived faux pas at its annual general assembly and the subsequent onslaught on the British ambassador to Bahrain for his alleged interference in Bahrain's domestic affairs, Bahrainis were not ready for the news that a minister who enjoyed the full trust of the leadership would be detained on charges of alleged money laundering. On the other side the minister has denied involvement in a money-laundering scheme, saying that reports of his arrest and interrogation were not true and lacked credibility. Addressing visitors to his weekly majlis (open house), Mansoor Bin Rajab, a state minister without portfolio, said that he had been summoned by the interior ministry to answer questions about his ministry staff.

Social Front

It looks a serious challenge for Arab countries. One-third of the educated, ambitious, creative and employed Arab youth, who form the bedrock of their countries' future prosperity, would like to leave their home countries permanently if they were given the opportunity. A recently released Gallup report says, "The findings suggest that a country's greatest assets ... are its most mobile, underscoring the potential effects of brain drain in the region."

In *Saudi Arabia*, as part of expansion work on the Haram Mosque in Makkah, residential and commercial buildings and real estates on a total area of 1,500 sq. metres will be expropriated. This area, consisting of eight various sites, will be added to the southern courtyard of the holiest mosque in Islam, close to its main entrance of King Abdul Aziz Gate. On the other side, Prominent Saudi scholars slammed a recent call by another scholar to demolish the Al Haram Mosque and reconstruct it in a way that would prevent the mingling of men and women during circumambulation (Tawaf) and prayers. They agreed in unison that this was a ridiculous call by a scholar, who had no authority or jurisdiction to do so. While ridiculing the call, Shaikh Abdul Mohsen Al Obaikan, adviser to the Royal Court, said such individual opinions should not be taken into consideration and must be rejected outright.

It was a startling voice of protest at a startling venue. Covered head-to-toe in black, a Saudi woman lashed out at hard-line Muslim clerics' harsh religious edicts in verse on live TV at a popular Arabic version of "American Idol." Well, not quite "American Idol": Contestants compete not in singing but in traditional Arabic poetry.

About 38 per cent of Saudis using Facebook are women, according to a researcher working in the media field. Fawzia Al Shadadi said there are 231,000 Saudis using the social networking website as of December 2009. "More women are turning to social networking. There is a growing trend among Saudi young women to have a wide circle of friends to express their feelings without revealing their original name," she said.

In *UAE*, The membership of Dubai Press Club (DPC) has expanded to include media professionals from all platforms, including broadcast and online media instead of only print, as part of its new initiative.

British expats are sending their children back home for education after feeling "let down" by Dubai schools. They said the trend is growing, even though authorities have initiated checks on schools here to lift standards. Only four out of over 200 schools examined by The Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) were rated 'outstanding' in the first round. The Abu Dhabi Food Control Authority fined three outlets and issued warnings to eight more during extensive inspections conducted at restaurants, cafeterias, fast food outlets and others in Al Ain to check if they were adhering to the rules governing the use of cooking oil.

The number of fines issued to Dubai Metro passengers has dropped to 121 in February compared to 183 in January, a sharp decline of 34 per cent.

Residents who have not obtained an ID card will not receive services from the Ministry of Interior (MoI) (apart from visa issuing and renewal) or licensing services of police departments in all emirates.

A move by four *Kuwaiti women* to open a diwaniya (open house) for men and women in Al Jahra has sparked negative reaction among Kuwaitis. In announcing the opening of the diwaniya on Sunday, the four women said that it would be used to discuss women's issues and rights in Al Jahra, an area located 30 kilometres north west of Kuwait City.

Human Rights Front

A recent survey showed that most of the people in the kingdom oppose *Saudi* women working as housemaids. The outcome of the survey, released on Monday, showed that nearly half of those interviewed for the survey are of the opinion that Saudi women should not be allowed to work as housemaids. "However, 35.5 per cent is of the view that they can work as maids under strict conditions. Only 12.3 per cent of those, who took part in the survey, are in favour of employing Saudi women as housemaids. The survey was conducted among some 3,000 Saudis and expatriates in the kingdom by the Saudi Center for Statistical Studies.

In *Bahrain*, Abdullah Al Durazi, the activist who resigned from his position as secretary general of a society following row with members over a press statement, is back at the helm of Bahrain's oldest human rights organisation. With the deadline for the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) board elections ending on Saturday evening, and no candidate signing up his or her name to compete against Al Durazi, he is the de facto new secretary general for the new two-year term.

Turmoil and Terrorism Front

A *Yemeni* court on Tuesday sentenced a leading member of a southern separatist movement to 10 years in prison, a move that could further heighten tensions between secessionists and the government. Violence between Yemeni security forces and southern separatists protesting against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh worsened this month. On the other side, Yemen risks a sustained separatist insurgency in the south, scene of increased tit-for-tat violence, unless it seriously addresses grievances of southerners who say their region is neglected by the state. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who a week ago declared that Yemen's separate war with Shi'ite rebels in the north was over, has offered dialogue with opponents in the south. But there is little evidence so far of a rush to the negotiating table. "If the escalation continues it will be a big, big problem.

Saudi state media announced on Wednesday the arrest of over 100 members of Al Qaida cells that were plotting attacks on oil facilities in the kingdom. The arrests came just a day after the US had warned of Al Qaida plans to attack ships off Yemen's coast.

There is no evidence that *Kuwaiti* charity groups are involved in terrorist activities, the social affairs minister has said.

Environment

Sayyid Fahd Bin Mahmood Al Said, Oman's Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, has underlined the need for efforts to address challenges facing the water sector in *GCC* states. During his meeting with the participants of the 9th Gulf Water Conference on Monday evening, the senior Omani Minister said that Oman accorded top priority to water resources development, considering it as the cornerstone of sustainable development. He stressed the importance of co-operation among all in order to develop this vital resource.

Economic Front

Saudi shares rallied for the sixth week in a row, backed by strong gains of the petrochemical and banking sectors. The Tadawul All-Share Index (TASI) gained 1.24 percent last week, to close at 6,756.98 points. In terms of sectors, the market on a weekly basis only saw negative sector closes in four separate sectors ranging from -0.13 percent by the Media and Publishing to -0.76 percent by the Agriculture & Food Industries sector. Otherwise, all other sectors closed the week with gains. Weekly sector gains ranged from 0.27 percent in the Multi-Investment to a gain of 3.03 percent in the Transport sector, the Jeddah-based Financial Transaction House (FTH) said in its weekly market commentary.

The industrial cities development projects in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia within the past two years alone have increased the total size of the industrial cities from 42.5 million square meters to 71 million square meters - a 67 percent increase on the total of the previous 40 years' developments, Dr. Tawfig bin Fawzan Alrabiah, director general of Saudi Industrial Property Authority (Modon) said.

The *United Arab Emirates*, in a call made at the United Nations, has urged the international community to overcome political and financial obstacles that prevent full implementation of the 'Monterrey Consensus and Doha Declaration on Financing for Development'.

Dubai debt insurance costs rose yesterday as doubts surfaced about the emirate's ability to fund its share of a \$ 9.5 billion plan to repay creditors of its struggling Dubai World conglomerate. On Thursday Dubai unveiled its proposals to repay lenders to Dubai World in five to eight years and fully repay two bonds issued by its property developer unit Nakheel. The \$ 9.5 billion plan includes \$ 5.7 billion previously lent by wealthy neighbour Abu Dhabi, with the remaining \$ 3.8 billion coming from Dubai's own "internal resources".

Oil and Gas

Qatar does not plan to cut output in a bid to support global gas prices, Minister of State for Energy and Industry Affairs H E Mohammad Saleh Al Sada said. Major pipeline gas exporter Algeria plans to ask other big gas producers to stop flooding markets with extra spot natural gas deliveries when they meet next month.

Oman has made significant gains in cutting down on the flaring of natural gas, the World Bank has revealed in a recent report detailing global trends in gas flaring and venting. Natural gas volumes flared by the Sultanate declined from 2.5 billion cubic metres (bcm) in 2005 to 2.2 bcm in 2006.

DETAILED REPORT

GCC

GCC states facing major water crisis

Sayyid Fahd Bin Mahmood Al Said, Oman's Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, has underlined the need for efforts to address challenges facing the water sector in GCC states. During his meeting with the participants of the 9th Gulf Water Conference on Monday evening, the senior Omani Minister said that Oman accorded top priority to water resources development, considering it as the cornerstone of sustainable development. He stressed the importance of co-operation among all in order to develop this vital resource. Al Said laid emphasis on activating mechanisms, raising environmental awareness on how to protect water resources against pollution and misuse. The conference participants were unanimous in their opinion that there was a huge gap between demand and supply of water and the problem needed to be addressed on urgent basis, with a joint effort. A large number of water experts from more than 25 countries, 300 delegates and 17 companies and agencies are taking part in the conference that ends on Thursday. "The supply-demand imbalance is aggravated by the lack of water management policies and strategies," said Professor Waleed K Zubari, Chairman of Conference Scientific Committee, in his address during the Conference at the Muscat Inter-Continental Hotel. "The situation needs immediate attention because the

implications are not only for the future development of these countries, but also for the sustainability of their economic and social achievements,” he cautioned. He added that escalating water demand due to population increase and agricultural policies caused the supply-demand imbalance. Zubari also said that all possible water resources were being exploited in the region resulting in huge stress on groundwater resources. An exhibition titled ‘Water Technology Exhibition’ is also organised on the sidelines of the conference in which 17 companies and agencies have showcased new technologies for water utilities, conservation and desalination.

YEMEN

Southern Yemen separatist leader jailed for 10 years

A Yemeni court on Tuesday sentenced a leading member of a southern separatist movement to 10 years in prison, a move that could further heighten tensions between secessionists and the government. Violence between Yemeni security forces and southern separatists protesting against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh worsened this month. The judge at a court in Sana'a said in his verdict that Ahmad Bamuallim, a former parliamentarian, had been calling for an "armed insurrection" and spreading "division and hatred". North and South Yemen united in 1990, but many in the south — home to most of Yemen's oil industry — complain northerners have seized resources and discriminate against them. Bamuallim said in court he would not appeal the verdict.

"This verdict is invalid and was issued by a court that is itself invalid, and this will not prevent me from continuing my peaceful struggle," he said. In the southern port of Aden, a court handed a 15-month jail sentence to Ali Al Saidi, a retired general, for "threatening national unity", a judicial official said. Sana'a has come under international pressure to end a northern war and focus on fighting Al Qaida.

Yemen risks secessionist insurgency in the south

Yemen risks a sustained separatist insurgency in the south, scene of increased tit-for-tat violence, unless it seriously addresses grievances of southerners who say their region is neglected by the state. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who a week ago declared that Yemen's separate war with Shi'ite rebels in the north was over, has offered dialogue with opponents in the south. But there is little evidence so far of a rush to the negotiating table. "If the escalation continues it will be a big, big problem. It will be a war," Yemeni analyst Nasser Arrabyee said, but added he was optimistic Sanaa would strike a political power sharing deal to prevent further armed conflict. Sanaa came under international pressure to quiet domestic unrest and focus its fight on Al-Qaeda, a bigger global threat, after the group's Yemen-based arm claimed responsibility for a failed December bomb attack on a US-bound plane. But the president's limited offer for dialogue with the south has come hand-in-hand with a security crackdown and arrests campaign that left a trail of dead and wounded on both sides in recent weeks even as violence elsewhere in Yemen fades. Security forces continue to occasionally fire on often provocative anti-government demonstrations. In one case, a protester was shot dead while trying to remove a Yemeni flag from a government building and replace it with a separatist one. Deaths of protesters have typically sparked clashes, easily ignited in a heavily armed society where many civilians carry arms and state control is weak. The unrest has often targeted northerners,

and northern-owned businesses have been set aflame. Exiled southern politician Ali Salem al-Beidh, who briefly led a secessionist south Yemen in 1994, said Sanaa was turning its sights on the south after ending the northern war. "What we fear is that they will push us from the path we have chosen, the peaceful path. Citizens will be forced to defend themselves. When you see a tank in front of your house, what do you do?" Asked if an armed movement would emerge, he said: "We are not thinking of this, and we don't have an army." North and South Yemen united in 1990, but many in the south home to most of Yemen's oil facilities-complain northerners have seized resources and discriminate against them.

MOVE TOWARD INSURGENCY

There have already been signs, such as recent ambush-style attacks blamed on separatists that have killed at least five people, that the southern conflict is becoming more and more like an insurgency and less a peaceful protest movement. The protest movement, while not unified behind a single organisation, has been sophisticated in its approach, and wants to maintain the peaceful non-violent nature of its protest, analyst Abdul-Ghani al-Iryani said. "But given the fact that the government has been non-responsive, I think they or some elements within the movement, have chosen to use violence in certain areas. And the pattern over the period of say the past two years ... has been escalating," Iryani said. The increase in violence in different areas has been uniform, which tells you there is a nucleus of planners who are quite sophisticated. And I wouldn't be surprised if they happen to be outside of the country," he added. A Yemeni court on Tuesday sentenced a separatist leader to 10 years in prison. The judge said Ahmad Bamuallim, a former parliamentarian, had been calling for an armed insurrection. Western countries and neighbouring Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, fear Al-Qaeda is exploiting instability in impoverished Yemen to launch attacks in the region and beyond. Saleh has placed limits on an offer for talks with the south, saying he would only speak with pro-unity elements, not secessionists. But the southern movement has no single leadership, and Sanaa would need to deal with a collection of disparate leaders, often with similar but not identical agendas. Diplomats say previous talks offers have not been followed by concrete action to address southern complaints that Sanaa neglects the southern region and treats southerners unfairly, including in property disputes, jobs and pension rights. A southern war could be averted if Sanaa takes steps to resolve key differences and makes progress on power sharing, with a national unity government or by naming more southerners to key roles in local government and security forces. "It will be very difficult and a long process ... In the coming weeks there will be nothing. In Yemen we don't count by weeks, we count by years," analyst Ali Seif Hassan said. Iryani hoped outside players such as the wealthy Gulf Cooperation Council, which Yemen hopes to join, could use its weight to press for a solution, and maybe play a mediating role.

SAUDI ARABIA

International Front

Expectations low ahead of meeting

Analysts and political observers here expressed little hope as leaders of the 22-member Arab League countries have gathered for an annual summit in the Libyan city of Sirte. They attributed this mainly to the strained relations between Libya and some of the Arab states. "This will lead to abstention of a number of Arab leaders," they said. A number of major issues and challenges facing the Arab world will be discussed prior to approval of the Sirte Declaration. Speaking to Gulf News, the analysts noted that the 23rd summit is being held at a time when the Arabs are facing a major challenge posed by Israel in the occupied territories. "The differences of opinion among the Arab leaders vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue, especially the intransigence of the hawkish Jewish government to continue setting up of colonies in occupied East Jerusalem, may weaken the Arab unity efforts at the summit," they said, adding that the summit will be a major boost for the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who will hold the presidency of the Arab League for the first time since he took power about 40 years ago.

Social Front

Compensation fixed for Haram Mosque's southern courtyard expansion

As part of expansion work on the Haram Mosque in Makkah, residential and commercial buildings and real estates on a total area of 1,500 sq. metres will be expropriated. This area, consisting of eight various sites, will be added to the southern courtyard of the holiest mosque in Islam, close to its main entrance of King Abdul Aziz Gate. Demolition work will begin after compensation has been disbursed, said the chairman of the Committee of Projects for the Expansion of Haram Courtyards. Committee chairman Abbas Qattan said that owners of the expropriated real estates will be given compensation ranging between 450,000 and 550,000 Saudi riyals per square metre. Qattan said that among the sites to be demolished are the Ajyad Hospital, bus station of Saudi Public Transport Company, and the site near Dar Al Tawhid Intercontinental Hotel. More than 1,000 properties in the northern and western areas, including Shamiya and Shubaika, have already been demolished in the first phase. "The new expropriated area will be used for the construction of new toilets for men and women, pedestrian tunnels, and some other utility and service projects for the pilgrims and visitors to the Haram Mosque," he said. Abbas Qattan disclosed that construction works of the expansion of the northern courtyard of the holy mosque have begun. Compensation amounting to a total of SR 40 billion are being distributed to owners of properties that were expropriated for the expansion of the north and western courtyards. Hundreds of buildings in the northern Gaza area are being demolished as part of the second phase of demolition. The expansion project, which will change the face of Haram area, was ordered by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in January 2008 at a cost of SR 10 billion. The expansion will facilitate the accommodation of an additional 500,000 worshippers by creating more prayer space on the northern and northwestern parts of the mosque, and would cover an area of 370,000 square metres.

Saudi woman blasts clerics in TV contest poem

It was a startling voice of protest at a startling venue. Covered head-to-toe in black, a Saudi woman lashed out at hard-line Muslim clerics' harsh religious edicts in verse on live TV at a popular Arabic version of "American Idol." Well, not quite "American Idol":

Contestants compete not in singing but in traditional Arabic poetry. Over the past episodes, poets sitting on an elaborate stage before a live audience have recited odes to the beauty of Bedouin life and the glories of their rulers or mourning the gap between rich and poor. Then last week, Hessa Hilal, only her eyes visible through her veil, delivered a blistering poem against Muslim preachers "who sit in the position of power" but are "frightening" people with their fatwas, or religious edicts, and "preying like a wolf" on those seeking peace. Her poem got loud cheers from the audience and won her a place in the competition's finals, to be aired on Wednesday. It also brought her death threats, posted on several Islamic militant web sites. The three judges gave her the highest marks for her performance, praising her for addressing a controversial topic. That, plus voting from the 2,000 people in the audience and text messages from viewers, put her through to the final round.

Facebook draws Saudi women fans

About 38 per cent of Saudis using Facebook are women, according to a researcher working in the media field. Fawzia Al Shadadi said there are 231,000 Saudis using the social networking website as of December 2009. "More women are turning to social networking. There is a growing trend among Saudi young women to have a wide circle of friends to express their feelings without revealing their original name," she said. Fawzia made these remarks in a working paper on Issues of Saudi women on Facebook in a seminar entitled 'Electronic media and issues of the younger generation' at King Saud University on Monday. The seminar was part of the cultural activities of the ongoing Saudi National Heritage and Culture Festival (Janadriya Festival). The theme of this year's festival is "One world and different cultures." As many as 11 prominent researchers from the US, Germany, Italy and some Arab countries are presenting working papers at the seminar.

Saudi scholars reject call for demolition of Al Haram Mosque

Prominent Saudi scholars slammed a recent call by another scholar to demolish the Al Haram Mosque and reconstruct it in a way that would prevent the mingling of men and women during circumambulation (Tawaf) and prayers. They agreed in unison that this was a ridiculous call by a scholar, who had no authority or jurisdiction to do so. While ridiculing the call, Shaikh Abdul Mohsen Al Obaikan, adviser to the Royal Court, said such individual opinions should not be taken into consideration and must be rejected outright. They were commenting on the recent controversial remarks of noted preacher Yousuf Al Ahmad, a former professor of Islamic jurisprudence at Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. Taking part in a TV programme, he said that mixing of men and women during Tawaf around the Ka'aba was against Islam, and that the expansions carried out during the Ottoman era and the rule of King Saud at the Al Haram Mosque should be demolished, adding that it would create more room for pilgrims who come for the Haj and Umrah. Talking to the satellite TV channel Bidayah (beginning), he said the mixing of men and women during Tawaf is haram. "This engineering solution will give women privacy and keep them away from cameras that film them and show them on satellite channels," he said. Yousuf Al Ahmad also expressed the same view in an interview with the electronic newspaper Anaween. He said: The Holy Ka'aba was

demolished and reconstructed earlier. What is preventing us from demolishing and rebuilding it once again in a way that avoids the mingling of men and women?

Terrorism Front

Saudi Kingdom thwarts terror plot

The Saudi security forces have thwarted a terror plot to attack vital oil installations in the Eastern Province, said a senior security official. He said that two terrorist cells comprising 11 Saudis and a Yemeni were planning attacks on Ras Tanura, 70km north of Dammam, and the residential compound of its employees. Two security stations, including the headquarters of the Special Emergency Forces, were also on the terrorists' hit list. The official said that crack down on terrorists was in full swing across the Kingdom. And, he added, the forces are promptly acting on all available information. He said that the forces have also seized seven machine guns from an area in the Nufud Desert in Qassim on Wednesday. He said that a terror plot to attack oil installations in the Eastern Province was not the first of its kind as the Kingdom's forces had earlier foiled similar attempts a number of times. The official said that the terrorists were also planning attack on the intelligence headquarters in Khafji in 2008 through a cell code-named the "Oil Cell". "That Oil Cell was one of five cells dismantled by the security forces in 2008 during which 520 terrorists were arrested." He said that the members of that cell detained by the Kingdom included seven Mauritians. All of them, he added, were university graduates. He said that one of them –holding Masters' degree- had entered the Kingdom with a driver visa so as to freely move in the Kingdom. The official admitted that Al-Qaeda in Yemen through its operatives in the Kingdom was devising plans to launch a series of attacks on the Kingdom's vital oil installations in the Eastern Province especially during the time when the Kingdom's forces were fighting infiltrators in the border region. But the vigilant Saudi security forces thwarted the organization's evil plots, he said.

Human Rights Front

Saudis should not work as maids: Survey

Respondents want national women to find jobs in other sectors

A recent survey showed that most of the people in the kingdom oppose Saudi women working as housemaids. The outcome of the survey, released on Monday, showed that nearly half of those interviewed for the survey are of the opinion that Saudi women should not be allowed to work as housemaids. "However, 35.5 per cent is of the view that they can work as maids under strict conditions. Only 12.3 per cent of those, who took part in the survey, are in favour of employing Saudi women as housemaids. The survey was conducted among some 3,000 Saudis and expatriates in the kingdom by the Saudi Center for Statistical Studies. The survey was held at a time when a controversy was raging in the kingdom with regard to allowing Saudi women to work as housemaids. Some of the people are of the view that the housemaid sector, which is dominated by foreigners, especially those from Asian countries, shall be taken over by Saudi women in a phased manner. They say that this gradual transition shall be enforced under strict

conditions, such as restricting work during day time and not spending night at the employer's house.

Economic Front

Saudi stocks to rally further

Saudi shares rallied for the sixth week in a row, backed by strong gains of the petrochemical and banking sectors. The Tadawul All-Share Index (TASI) gained 1.24 percent last week, to close at 6,756.98 points. In terms of sectors, the market on a weekly basis only saw negative sector closes in four separate sectors ranging from -0.13 percent by the Media and Publishing to -0.76 percent by the Agriculture & Food Industries sector. Otherwise, all other sectors closed the week with gains. Weekly sector gains ranged from 0.27 percent in the Multi-Investment to a gain of 3.03 percent in the Transport sector, the Jeddah-based Financial Transaction House (FTH) said in its weekly market commentary. With regards to individual company movement, the top gaining companies for the week were MMG (Mohammad Al-Mojil Group Company) and RIBL (Riyad Bank), which saw weekly gains of 6.11 percent and 5.94 percent respectively. The biggest declining companies were Al-Sagr Cooperative Insurance Co. and Middle East Specialized Cables Co. (MESC), which saw weekly loss of -4.08 percent and -3.96 percent respectively, the FTH said. "TASI last week hit a strong resistance area which could trigger profit-taking moves," Abdul Hamid Omari, member of the Saudi Economic Society, said. He attributed the continuous gains scored by Saudi shares over the past weeks "to fresh liquidity entering the market and a conviction on the part of traders that the Saudi market will preserve its steadiness" in the coming period. Omari expected Saudi shares to rally further in April against predictions of good results in the first quarter of the year. Saudi Basic Industries Corp. (SABIC) did not have any major news affecting the price as the results are expected early next week that will determine the direction of the stock as well as have its influence on the TASI. During the week, the stock gained 2.35 percent and closed for the week at SR98.00. The value of traded shares fell slightly to SR16.29 billion last week compared to SR16.36 billion in the previous week. Arab stock markets gained momentum last week, buoyed by a \$ 9.5 billion support from the government of Dubai to the debt-saddled Dubai World conglomerate, recovering oil prices and investors' optimism over the first quarter results, financial analyst said Friday.

Saudi industrial cities achieve major growth

The industrial cities development projects in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia within the past two years alone have increased the total size of the industrial cities from 42.5 million square meters to 71 million square meters - a 67 percent increase on the total of the previous 40 years' developments, Dr. Tawfig bin Fawzan Alrabiah, director general of Saudi Industrial Property Authority (Modon) said. In 2009, Modon established four new industrial cities: Jeddah Second, Al-Kharj, Ar'ar and Jazan. Further, in the beginning of 2010, Modon initiated the establishment of Sudair Industrial City, which is the Kingdom's Second in the list of 2010 "Top Projects", along with the Dammam Second expansion. Modon's achievements in the establishment and development of new industrial cities reflects the Authority's response to increased requests for industrial lands as a result of its on-going pursuance of the National Industrial Strategy. Modon's success

with the industrial cities projects also entailed establishing new services and utilities. The Authority's construction of new infrastructures is based on the BOT (build, operate, transfer) system - an accepted means of securing private-sector involvement in infrastructure projects. These projects include the following: high-speed connectivity in the cities; district cooling projects; water networks and water treatment; security services; commercial complex projects and residential compounds projects; plus the current industrial cities infrastructure rehabilitation projects. As a result of its development projects, Modon is continuing to receive investor applications and land requests. Moreover, its ongoing developments offer a variety of options to local, foreign and GCC investors to invest in a range of opportunities in the industrial, commercial, residential or service sectors.

UAE

International Front

Umm Al Quwain ruler to represent UAE at Arab League summit

On behalf of President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE will be represented at the Arab League summit with a delegation headed by His Highness Shaikh Saud Bin Rashid Al Mualla, UAE Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Umm Al Quwain. The Arab summit's 22nd two-day session will commence on Saturday in Surt, Libya.

Political Front

Strategic assets to come under protection shield

The agency charged with protecting Abu Dhabi's strategic assets such as oil rigs and power stations will expand its operations to cover the entire UAE, a senior official said yesterday. "The Critical National Infrastructure Authority (CNIA) will, in the next phase, extend its infrastructure protection across all the seven emirates," said Brigadier Shaikh Ahmad Bin Tahnoun, chairman of CNIA. Shaikh Ahmad did not give a time-frame, but said "we are waiting for the higher authorities to give us an order to take over other facilities across the UAE". Shaikh Ahmad also spoke of the authority's plans to have an air wing to conduct air surveillance of the country's vital facilities. He was speaking to reporters after Lieutenant General Shaikh Saif Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, opened a school for training coast guards, taken over by CNIA last year. Located at Sadr Port in Taweelah, around 80km off downtown Abu Dhabi, the school was established to train Emirati coast guards on how to operate and take command of interceptor vessels, search and rescue as well as other operations related to naval vessel protection. When they graduate, the guards will be assigned to help protect the emirate's vital assets and infrastructure and support the security forces. They are receiving training in security procedures, self-defence, driving and manoeuvring, IT, first-aid and English at the school. "The goal behind this school is to provide a perfect learning environment with the latest technologies for our employees without having to send them abroad for training," Shaikh Ahmad said. He added that the Coast Guard School is a model to be followed in marine training. "It was designed and established

along international standards and equipped with modern technology, adopting the best practice." Shaikh Saif reviewed the school's facilities and the training services provided. He also inaugurated two high-speed interceptor vessels, manufactured in the UAE. Established in 2007, CNIA oversees strategic assets in Abu Dhabi such as power and water stations and oil and gas facilities. CNIA has taken control of more than 70 vessels from the Abu Dhabi Coast Guard and Marine Police, and it placed a Dh460m contract for 34 interceptor vessels.

Mohammad's poll site gets 17,500 visitors

The website of His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, received 17,500 visitors on the 2010-2010 Education Strategy opinion poll page. Visitors also interacted with the Ministry of Education's goals and initiatives as the opinion poll period was extended until the end of March. Humaid Mohammad Obaid Al Qutami, Minister of Education, said Shaikh Mohammad's thoughtfulness in inviting the public to give their opinion on the ministry's strategy is a historical transformational point in the educational process.

Social Front

Dubai Press Club aims to expand membership base

The membership of Dubai Press Club (DPC) has expanded to include media professionals from all platforms, including broadcast and online media instead of only print, as part of its new initiative. A special category, family membership is also on offer, Mariam Bin Fahd, Executive Director, Dubai Press Club, said at a press gathering yesterday. The DPC announced the launch of a comprehensive new membership programme, extending special privileges to various categories of members. The new categories include Practising Membership for journalists working in the print, broadcast and online media; Affiliate Membership for media professionals in the media departments of government organisations, diplomats, freelance journalists and public relations professionals; Visiting Membership for journalists visiting the UAE for a short period; Photographer Membership for photographers, and Student Membership for media students. Mariam said: "The new membership programme reflects qualitative changes, as the framework of the membership is expanded to include media professionals from all platforms. Lecturers and media students, PR professionals and media consultants in governmental bodies and private companies related to the media industry, are also covered in our comprehensive membership programme." She said the membership offers extensive services, including priority to members to participate in training programmes, workshops, events and other major initiatives organised by Dubai Press Club throughout the year.

Now boarding: Brit expats send kids back home

British expats are sending their children back home for education after feeling "let down" by Dubai schools. They said the trend is growing, even though authorities have initiated checks on schools here to lift standards. Only four out of over 200 schools examined by The Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) were rated 'outstanding' in the first round. The bureau's results also showed that over 25 per cent of Dubai students go to

'unsatisfactory' schools. Findings from the second inspection cycle are expected to be out in May. British woman Gail Thompson said she sent back her dyslexic son to a school in the UK because she felt Dubai schools were not 'concerned' enough. "His learning difficulty meant he needed support. Sadly, Dubai doesn't provide that adequately," she said. "Schools are in a mad rush when it's time for inspections. But they need to change their whole dynamics. I've been pulled to the side and told he [my son] wouldn't be able to achieve in class.

Could Gulf News be easily called the best in the region?

Shaikh Ahmad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Managing Director of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Zayed Foundation for Charity and Humanitarian Works, is missing after a glider plane crashed into a lake in Morocco. The pilot was rescued in good condition, but the search for Shaikh Ahmad is continuing.

Three outlets fined, eight warned for violation of cooking oil rules

The Abu Dhabi Food Control Authority fined three outlets and issued warnings to eight more during extensive inspections conducted at restaurants, cafeterias, fast food outlets and others in Al Ain to check if they were adhering to the rules governing the use of cooking oil. The inspectors from the Authority were divided into five groups consisting of three inspectors each, who covered Al Jimi, Khalifa Road, Al Jimi Mall, the Industrial Area and other locations. The inspectors found 38 outlets, which were previously fined for violations, adhering to the rules and regulations completely. Mohammad Jalal Al Reyaysa, Director of Public Relations and Communications at the Authority said the continuous efforts of the inspectors had produced remarkable results as shown by the level of adherence to rules and regulations seen in Al Ain today.

Dubai Metro violations drop 34% in February

The number of fines issued to Dubai Metro passengers has dropped to 121 in February compared to 183 in January, a sharp decline of 34 per cent. "The number of fines has reduced as the Metro passengers in Dubai are gradually becoming aware of the dos and don'ts while riding the trains," noted Ramadan Abdullah, Director of the Rail Operations Department at the Dubai Roads and Transport Authority (RTA).

Identity card to be mandatory for range of services in UAE

Residents who have not obtained an ID card will not receive services from the Ministry of Interior (MoI) (apart from visa issuing and renewal) or licensing services of police departments in all emirates, a senior official told Gulf News on Thursday. All residents in the UAE should produce the ID card with immediate effect, said Dr Ali Al Khoori, acting director general of Emirates Identity Authority (EIDA). Except for issuance and renewal of residence visas, the ID card has been made mandatory for other services such as driving licence applications and vehicle registrations. This also applies to the renewal of vehicle registration, applications of certificates of good conduct from the police, licensing of private security companies, issuance of arms licenses and certificates from civil defence authorities to certify that safety and security conditions are met at office facilities, the official explained. The official explained that the ID card should be produced for driving licence applications, vehicle registration and renewal in all emirates

including Dubai, where the Roads and Transport Authority is responsible for these services. "We have communicated this decision to RTA which will take it into account," Al Khoori said.

Economic Front

UAE urges the international community to overcome political and financial obstacles to support development

The United Arab Emirates, in a call made at the United Nations, has urged the international community to overcome political and financial obstacles that prevent full implementation of the 'Monterrey Consensus and Doha Declaration on Financing for Development'. In a statement made by H.E Ambassador Ahmad Aljarman, Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates Before the General Assembly at the 'High Level Meeting on the Follow- up to and implementation of the outcome of the 2002 International Conference on Financing for Development and the 2008 Review', the UAE, reaffirmed that the outcome of Monterrey Consensus 2002 and the Doha Declaration of 2008 form the international integrated mechanism for the financing of development and poverty eradication in the world, and provide a comprehensive method to confront the growing challenges facing the world in this area such as the current global economic and financial crises. "We stress the need for international cooperation in this area in all forms including the cooperation between developed and developing countries, South-South cooperation and trilateral cooperation. We emphasize the importance of overcoming the political and financial barriers that impede the full implementation of the Monterey outcomes and that the economic crisis should not cause a decrease or cancellation of development assistance which developed countries have committed to the developing countries", Aljarman said. He continued: "In the UAE, we will continue our cooperation with the international community to combat this crisis while we continue to fulfill our national commitments and development programs along with our international commitments and assistance to developing countries to help them achieve the internationally agreed development goals". Aljarman said that the United Arab Emirates was able to contain the impact of the global economic slowdown through effective policies and quick actions such as precautionary financial measures that enabled us to continue mobilizing the national resources and implementing the development strategies while focusing on the development of human resources and implementing the strategies of economic diversification, expanding the production bases and the exploitation of oil revenue to establish the infrastructure necessary to launch the development of other economic sectors.

Dubai debt insurance costs rise amid funding doubts

Dubai debt insurance costs rose yesterday as doubts surfaced about the emirate's ability to fund its share of a \$ 9.5 billion plan to repay creditors of its struggling Dubai World conglomerate. On Thursday Dubai unveiled its proposals to repay lenders to Dubai World in five to eight years and fully repay two bonds issued by its property developer unit Nakheel. The \$ 9.5 billion plan includes \$ 5.7 billion previously lent by wealthy neighbour Abu Dhabi, with the remaining \$ 3.8 billion coming from Dubai's own "internal resources". But concerns about where Dubai would get the money helped push

Dubai debt insurance costs back above 400 basis points, while the 2015 bond issued by the Dubai Department of Finance fell half a point. "The terms are pretty positive, but now focus has shifted to the cash flow of Dubai government," said Okan Akin, RBS emerging markets analyst. "The \$ 3.8 billion is supposed to be funded by the government, but this represents 40 percent of the Dubai government's revenues for 2009. "The action will increase government borrowing going forward. Dubai, which stunned markets last November with plans to delay repaying \$ 26 billion in Dubai World debt, quickly ringfenced key assets such as ports operator DP World in a bid to protect them against claims by creditors. Asset sales will be on the cards to raise cash, though officials said there was no immediate need for such a move. "Assets inevitably will be disposed of at the right time, at the right value, at our choosing," said Aidan Birkett, Dubai World's chief restructuring officer. But some asset sare already being quietly shopped around or put on the auction block.

KUWAIT

International Front

Kuwait raises \$2.1m to build 60 schools in Pakistan, Afganistan

Around \$2.1 million raised by the Kuwaiti embassy in Washington will help build 60 schools and educate 20,000 people in Pakistan and Afghanistan, an activist has said. The amount, collected by the embassy at its annual gala "Journey for Peace" held last week in cooperation with the Kuwait-America Foundation will be used by the Central Asia Institute to build schools, mainly for girls, in the remote regions of the two countries, Kuwait News Agency said. It was the largest contribution given to the institution in the past 17 years, Greg Mortenson, founder and Executive Director of Central Asia Institute, was quoted as saying. Mortenson, the author of the bestseller "Three Cups of Tea", has helped build over 135 educational institutions for over 38,000 children in Central Asia. "It is very important that we have schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan and that we have reading, writing, arithmetic, social studies and five languages, including Arabic and English," he said. "We teach the children how to read, write and understand Arabic so the children can then read the Holy Koran which states that all people should have a quest for knowledge," said Mortenson, a 2009 Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Efforts to expand access to education in Pakistan and Afghanistan have been paying off, he said. "In 2000, there were 800,000 children in school, mostly boys. But today, in 2010 there are 8.4 million children in school, including 2.5 million females." "We can drop bombs, we can put in troops, we can put in electricity, we can put in roads, we can put in computers, but if we do not educate girls, nothing changes in a society," he said, according to KUNA.

Kuwait denies barring Iranians from entering country

Kuwait has denied a media report claiming that it had instructed the interior ministry not to allow Iranian citizens to enter the country. "The report is untrue and lacks credibility," the interior ministry said, according to Kuwait news Agency. "There have never been verbal or written orders banning the issuance of entry or visit visas to Iranians." The ministry said it was "implementing the vision of the Emir and the instructions of the interior minister to facilitate the entry of various nationalities in order to transform

Kuwait into a financial centre." Kuwaiti daily Al Alem Al Yawm on Sunday reported that the interior ministry had given verbal instructions to bar Iranian visitors and tourists from entering the country. "The orders were not time specific and called for not issuing visas to Iranian visitors or tourists and to applying strict measures on work visas," the paper said, quoting unnamed sources. The ban claim coincided with news of the unveiling of a money-laundering scheme in Bahrain amid reports that Iranians and a Kuwaiti woman were alleged involved in the operations. Kuwait has the largest number of Iranians on the Arabian Peninsula. The Iranian community is the third largest in the northern Arabian Gulf state behind the Indian and Egyptian communities.

No evidence of terror funding from Kuwait charity groups

There is no evidence that Kuwaiti charity groups are involved in terrorist activities, the social affairs minister has said. "I have recently discussed terror sponsoring and funding with a delegation from the US Department of Treasury and with Deborah K. Jones, the US ambassador to Kuwait," Mohammad Al Afassi said. "I asked the US officials to provide me with any evidence should they have suspicions about a Kuwaiti charity organisation in any terror-related activity," he was quoted as telling Al Rai daily. Al Afassi said that his ministry was monitoring the expenditures and bank accounts of the charity groups.

Political Front

Pressure not to allow mixed colleges in Kuwait

A Kuwaiti conservative MP is putting pressure on the government to ensure that the Open University would not tolerate mixed education. "I want to know about the measures and steps taken to segregate between boys and girls in the classrooms and the various facilities at the Open University," MP Jama'an Al Harbash said in a question he submitted to Dr Moodhi Al Humood, the education minister. "We want to make sure that the new university fully complies with the 1996 law promulgated by the parliament and which governs higher education and private schools on separation between sexes," the MP said. Conservative MPs have been exerting pressure on the education officials not to allow colleges and private schools to have mixed classes, arguing that they would be against local traditions and values.

Kuwait information minister faces no-confidence vote

Hours before a crucial confidence vote by the Kuwaiti parliament in the information minister, Kuwaiti media speculated that most of the MPs would rally behind him. "I am confident that Shaikh Ahmad Al Abdullah will ride the confidence vote by getting 24 votes against 22 calling for his dismissal," MP Abdul Rahman Al Anjari said. "We expect two MPs to abstain from the voting," he said in remarks published by Al Shahed daily. Al Horriya newspaper reported preparations by MPs who supported the minister to celebrate the "positive voting outcome" while Al Sabah highlighted quotes that the majority of the MPs would not support "those keen on taking the nation into crises." Shaikh Ahmad has been accused by some conservative parliamentary blocs of leniency towards television stations that had allegedly targeted national unit after a private channel beamed a talk show that Bedouins said was derogatory and doubted their patriotism. The minister took

the station off the air and legal action was launched against its owner; however, disgruntled Bedouins who make up almost half of the population and are heavily represented in the parliament have pushed for the questioning of the minister. Shaikh Ahmad, who is also in charge of the oil portfolio, was grilled last week and faces today the no-confidence voting. The government has openly rallied behind the minister and has repeatedly expressed confidence that he would be supported by the parliament.

Kuwait minister survives no-trust vote

Kuwaiti lawmakers split on decision

Kuwait's information and oil minister barely survived a no-confidence vote held by lawmakers in parliament yesterday. Twenty-three MPs voted against a motion submitted by 10 lawmakers to oust Shaikh Ahmad Al Abdullah Al Sabah, while 22 voted in its favour and three abstained. The minister was last week accused by the 10 lawmakers of failing to deal with media that endeavoured to target national unity and cause social divisions. The charges were made after a private television station beamed a talk show in which hosts allegedly denigrated certain tribes and said that many Bedouins broke the law by holding dual citizenship. Several rallies staged by Bedouins and others sympathetic to their cause called for government action against the station in a bid to preserve national unity. The station was taken off the air and legal procedures were launched against its owner. However, MPs last week pushed for the grilling of the information minister and their move split the parliament vote. Faisal Al Mislim, the first MP to take the floor yesterday morning, called for a vote of no confidence in the minister. He said that the failure of the government to assume its legal and constitutional responsibilities had resulted in "the deviation of some media." "MPs have a significant duty to ensure that people respect the constitution. Abuses of the constitution are in fact abuses of the state," he said. MP Marzouqi Al Ganem, the second MP to take the floor, said that the minister had failed in carrying out his duties. "It seems that the minister applies the laws according to his personal moods. A sect has been portrayed as traitors in the local media," Al Ganem said. "What is important is that the nation survives, and not the minister," he argued as he called for the ousting of Shaikh Ahmad. The charges against Kuwaiti Information and Oil Minister Shaikh Ahmad Al Abdullah Al Sabah were made after a private television station beamed a talk show in which the hosts allegedly accused Bedouins of breaking the law by holding dual citizenship. Several rallies staged by Bedouins and their sympathisers called for action from the immediate action government to ensure national unity. The station was then taken off the air and legal procedures were instituted against its owner. However, MPs last week pushed for the grilling of Shaikh Ahmad but their move split the parliament on how to vote.

Social Front

Kuwait interior minister under fire for allowing policewomen to use guns and join combat forces

Conservative Kuwaiti MP Mohammad Al Hayef has requested the interior minister to "honour his pledge on the duties of policewomen", saying that there would be a quizzing on the matter. "We have read media reports about Kuwaiti policewomen and their role as combat women," Al Hayef said in a statement. "This new role clashes with the interior

ministry's pledges on employing policewomen only in positions and places where they are really needed." On Tuesday, Kuwaiti Emir Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah attended the graduation ceremony of the second batch of policewomen from the Sa'ad Al Abdullah Academy for Security Science. Newspapers, the following day, ran large pictures of black-clad policewomen in action and carrying guns, a highly unfamiliar sight in Kuwait. Several Kuwaitis welcomed the new role for women, with bloggers praising their courage "to favour genuine action over shopping trips" and their dedication to the country. However, Al Hayef insisted that the new role for Kuwaiti policewomen was ridiculous and required prompt intervention from senior officials. "We want the minister to put an end to this ridiculous situation that he is watching day after day. We will not allow this to go on and he must respect the pledges he made before the parliament more than one year ago, particularly regarding policewomen's Islamic dress," Al Hayef said. The MP, a Salafi, last week took Kuwaiti officials to task for allowing the participation of a women's football team in an Asian championship in Abu Dhabi, saying that they were eroding Islamic tenets and undermining Kuwaiti values. Al Hayef was also a strong opponent of the participation of women in politics and firmly opposed the presence of unveiled women MPs in parliament.

Three Asians killed in Kuwait apartment block fire: report

Three Asians died in an apartment block fire in a Kuwait City suburb that started in a basement used to store cosmetics and perfumes, the state news agency KUNA reported on Saturday. Three firemen were injured in fighting the blaze, along with four other Asian expatriates, whose nationalities were not given. A fire service spokesman, Khalil al-Amir, said the victims were all residents of the apartment block, whose basement was being used for storage without the proper safety precautions. Asian labourers and families account for more than two-thirds of the oil-rich Gulf Arab state's 2.35 million foreigners, vastly outnumbering one million Kuwaiti nationals.

Educated Arab youths keen on emigration

It looks a serious challenge for Arab countries. One-third of the educated, ambitious, creative and employed Arab youth, who form the bedrock of their countries' future prosperity, would like to leave their home countries permanently if they were given the opportunity. A recently released Gallup report says, "The findings suggest that a country's greatest assets ... are its most mobile, underscoring the potential effects of brain drain in the region." Entitled The Silatech Index: Voices of Young Arabs, the report concluded that 31 per cent of the 16,000 people interviewed who already work full-time expressed their desire to emigrate permanently, compared with 17 per cent who are not in the workforce.

Worrisome scenario

380m population of Arab countries

2,000 people targeted in face-to-face interviews

21 member nations of Arab League covered by poll

What do you think is the reason behind the growing inclination to emigrate? Are government policies to be blamed for the brain drain? Or does the West still offer better opportunities for growth?

Mixed diwaniya elicits criticisms in Kuwait

A move by four Kuwaiti women to open a diwaniya (open house) for men and women in Al Jahra has sparked negative reaction among Kuwaitis. In announcing the opening of the diwaniya on Sunday, the four women said that it would be used to discuss women's issues and rights in Al Jahra, an area located 30 kilometres north west of Kuwait City. "This diwaniya is the first of its type in Al Jahra and will be open to all those with interest in women's rights. Men and women from Al Jahra and other areas are welcome to attend the monthly open house," Qatsha Al Shimmari, who calls herself "Om Sultan", told Al Watan newspaper. However, the announcement was promptly attacked by conservative residents of the area who saw it as a "blatant violation of the area's traditions." "This is a crazy idea. You cannot have men and women in a diwaniya, particularly in Al Jahra," said "Frustrated", a blogger who was commenting on the news. "As member of the Shimmari tribe, I want to distance ourselves from this circus." A woman under the name of "Kuwaitia" said that no woman would want to enter a diwaniya where she will have to mix with men.

What is a diwaniya?

Diwaniya, known as majlis in other Gulf countries, usually takes place in the evening in a special room that is usually separate from the rest of the house. It has traditionally been a men's realm with those present sitting around on soft benches or cushions, conversing casually, smoking, nibbling light food and drinking tea or coffee. Relatives and friends come and go throughout the evening while the host offers hospitality to all his guests and entertains them. In recent years, Bahraini women activists launched the idea of a majlis for women and gradually men were allowed alongside women to attend lectures. However, the idea of mixed majlises has yet to be implemented.

BAHRAIN

International Front

Bahrain lawmakers urged to endorse Israel anti-contact Bill

A society dedicated to resisting the normalisation of ties with Israel has urged the upper chamber of the bicameral parliament to endorse a draft law to criminalise contacts with Israelis. "With the end of the current parliamentary term weeks away, we urge the Shura Council to take up the draft law submitted by the lower chamber on criminalising cooperation with the Zionist entity," said Abdullah Abdul Malek, the spokesman of the Bahrain Society for Resisting Relations with the Zionist Enemy. "Failure to address the issue now means that the draft law will be dropped since it cannot be transferred to the next parliament's term," he said in a statement. The lower chamber in October approved legislation penalising contacts with Israel. According to the Bill, "whoever holds any communication or official talks with Israeli officials or travels to Israel will face a fine and/or a jail sentence of up to five years." The MPs said that the move aimed at blocking possible steps to hold talks with Israeli officials or delegates who take part in events in Arab countries. In an unprecedented and far-reaching op-ed piece in The Washington Post in July, Crown Prince Shaikh Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa wrote that Arabs should convey their points of view and explain their peace initiatives by communicating directly with the Israeli media, the main source of information for Israelis.

Bahrain activist at helm of human rights society

Abdullah Al Durazi, the activist who resigned from his position as secretary general of a society following row with members over a press statement, is back at the helm of Bahrain's oldest human rights organisation. With the deadline for the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) board elections ending on Saturday evening, and no candidate signing up his or her name to compete against Al Durazi, he is the de facto new secretary general for the new two-year term. Al Durazi resigned last month after he questioned references to alleged torturers in a report on the human rights situation in Bahrain prepared by the New York based Human Rights Watch. Even though he actively participated in the research and drafting of the report, Al Durazi one day after the publication of the report said that he did not agree with all the interior ministry names mentioned by the co-authors. His comment was badly received by activists and political societies that had hailed the report as conclusive evidence of the "revival of torture" in Bahrain. Interior ministry officials disputed the findings and accused HRW of rushing to publish the report without including their views, while the foreign minister said that Bahrain would look into the allegations. "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," Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmad Al Khalifa said. "If, during the course of this examination, it can be established that any events have occurred that are not in accordance with the law and international conventions, then these matters will be passed to the appropriate authorities to allow necessary action to be taken." The society said that Al Durazi spoke in his personal capacity and that his views did not represent them.

Calls in to prolong school days in Kuwait, Bahrain

The education ministers of Bahrain and Kuwait have called for prolonging the school day to help improve learning standards. In Kuwait, Moodhi Al Humood said that extending the day would help students gain greater insights into the curriculum and hone their learning skills. "One of the solutions to help enhance students' aptitudes is to extend the school day," she said. "Kuwait has one of the shortest school days in the world and that is not helping us move forward." The minister said that her strategy to improve educational levels was based on boosting the skills and adaptability of the teachers and ameliorating the curriculum. "We will work on a better qualification of the future teachers at the university and we will follow by a professional training using modern systems and methodologies," she said. The teachers' association will be a crucial partner in improving standards despite divergences with the ministry over some issues, the minister said in an interview with Kuwait Television. "We have launched a programme that covers all education levels to shift from a traditional way of learning to a modern one that integrates information technology in the curriculum," she said. "We want to achieve the highest competitive levels in our schools and we are working closely with competent authorities." Al Humood warned against the proliferation of private tutoring, saying that there was a need to combat the phenomenon. "It seems that private lessons have become the rule, not the exception. We need to tackle the issue by opening schools in the afternoon to help the less able students," she said. In Bahrain, Majed Al Naimi, the education minister, said

that extending the school day had become a necessity to help the ministry improve the curriculum and boost the students' skills.

Money-laundering: Iran denies Revolutionary Guards' role

Iran's ambassador to Bahrain on Tuesday denied media reports that Iran's Revolutionary Guard was involved in the money-laundering unveiled by Manama on Friday. "We strongly deny all claims about an alleged involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in the operations," Hossein Amir Abdollahian said. "We also strongly reject allegations about a role for the Revolutionary Guards in the scam as baseless and lacking credibility," he told Bahraini daily Al Wasat. The envoy said that the accusations levelled against former state minister Mansoor Bin Rajab concerned Bahrain. The alleged implication of the Revolutionary Guards was reported in Bahraini and Kuwaiti media covering the developments of the case brought by the Bahraini authorities against a senior official for his alleged role in an international money-laundering scheme. The official was arrested on Thursday and released following a brief quizzing. An interior ministry statement said that his activities had been monitored since early 2009. The ministry did not name the official on Friday, but online forums promptly identified him as Minister of State Mansoor Bin Rajab. Bin Rajab on Friday evening denied any role in the alleged operations and insisted that he was innocent and that he would resume his duties following the weekend. However, he did not attend the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday and missed a weekly gathering hosted by the prime minister, also on Sunday. His non participation in the cabinet meeting fuelled speculation that he was in a delicate situation. Media reports said that Bin Rajab was implicated in an international scheme that also involved nationals from other Arab countries and Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Amounts varied from BD12 million (\$31.6 million) to BD 80 million (\$211 million), according to newspapers. Wary of wild speculations, the public prosecutor urged the media to shun rumours and to wait for the exact information that the competent authorities would provide. On Monday, King Hamad sacked Bin Rajab who had become the first minister in the Arabian Gulf to be arrested and interrogated. But while Bahraini media on Tuesday downplayed news about the case and gave a subdued coverage, Kuwaiti media highlighted the alleged involvement of a Kuwaiti woman in the scheme and her attempts to cash a multi-million dollar cheque in relation with the money-laundering operations. Two more Kuwaitis had a role in the scheme, the papers said. According to the reports, a Bahraini man and an Egyptian national were also involved in the operations and sought to cash the cheque in a Lebanese bank, but eventually left Beirut after they felt they would be arrested.

Thai prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to visit Bahrain

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva will arrive in Bahrain on Tuesday on a two-day working visit. According to reports, Vejjajiva said his mission in Bahrain was to improve economic ties and show harmony with the Islamic world, as Thailand struggles to handle a six-year separatist insurgency in its largely Muslim southern provinces. Abhisit, his country's 27th prime minister, is scheduled to meet King Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa and Prime Minister Prince Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa to discuss ways to strengthen economic relations and follow up the setting up of a Thai product distribution centre in Bahrain. Vejjajiva, 45, plans to meet Bahraini businessmen and to explain the ongoing situation in Thailand to Thai citizens. Prior to flying to Bahrain, Vejjajiva will visit

Brunei. He said he decided to proceed with the foreign tour as "both the countries are important and a visit to Brunei is long due." However, he said that he would be monitoring the "situation" at the weekend, when anti-government protesters would stage a rally in the capital Bangkok. Abhisit has indefinitely postponed his visit to Australia and New Zealand planned for March 13-17 because of the anti-government rally by the red-shirts, Thai media said.

Political Front

Money laundering scandal grips Bahrain

Stunned Bahrainis were on Friday seeking information and answers in the aftermath of the arrest of a sitting minister, the first since Bahrain became independent in 1971. Still reeling under the dramatic developments around Al Wefaq and the ire it drew from some MPs and media people for its perceived faux pas at its annual general assembly and the subsequent onslaught on the British ambassador to Bahrain for his alleged interference in Bahrain's domestic affairs, Bahrainis were not ready for the news that a minister who enjoyed the full trust of the leadership would be detained on charges of alleged money laundering. Although the interior ministry statement about the arrest on Thursday evening mentioned an official, Bahrainis learned from the country's various online forums that the man held by the security authorities was State Minister Mansoor Bin Rajab. "We are shocked by the arrest because we are not used to the idea of a minister being arrested. We really do not know how to think because it all novel to us," said Tariq, an accountant. "I still hope that he can clear his name because we are rather used to seeing him in a leading position and as a leader of a religious community centre," he said.

Bahrain's efforts to fight money laundering: Speech by the Interior Minister

The Kingdom of Bahrain has been aware of the dangers of money laundering as a result of economic and financial activity internationally and locally. This activity has resulted in the appearance of illegal money which is trying to find new ways to gain legitimacy. The Kingdom has initiated many steps to combat this menace. Bahrain was the first country in the Gulf to issue a special decree to check money laundering and terrorist financing. This became Law by Decree No. 4 for 2001, which laid down the legal principles and framework to ensure the disclosure of any suspicious financial activity. The Kingdom has set up a committee to formulate the policies to ban and combat money-laundering and terrorist financing. It has representatives of the Ministry of Interior, other parties concerned as well as the Unit to Combat Money Laundering & Terrorist Financing, which follows the Ministry of Interior as it is considered to be the authorized specialized unit to implement the law. The security strategies aim to consider all the challenges in the field by actively confronting the menace within the legal framework for which there is Law No. 54 for 2006, an amended version of Law by Decree No. 4 for 2001 regarding banning and combating money laundering, terrorist financing and transferring money across borders illegally. This brings together all the necessary penalties to achieve the appropriate deterrents for these crimes. With the amendment the Kingdom has affirmed its commitment to international resolutions on combating terrorist financing, especially to the UN Security Council Resolution 1373 of September 20, 2001. The Kingdom of Bahrain has been chosen to be the headquarters of the Middle East & North Africa

Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF). As regards the Kingdom's distinguished efforts to combat money laundering and terrorist financing and its cooperation with the parties and organizations concerned, both at the international and regional fronts, there has been support for the sincere steps Bahrain has taken at the financial and economic levels as it is considered to be the centre of commercial investments and a major financial centre both internationally and regionally."

Bahraini minister denies involvement in money-laundering scheme

A Bahraini minister has denied involvement in a money-laundering scheme, saying that reports of his arrest and interrogation were not true and lacked credibility. Addressing visitors to his weekly majlis (open house), Mansoor Bin Rajab, a state minister without portfolio, said that he had been summoned by the interior ministry to answer questions about his ministry staff. "I was called in by the Criminal Investigations Directorate and not by the Public Prosecution and they asked me a few questions before I went back home," Bin Rajab said. "They were very fine with me and treated me well. When I returned home, I resumed my daily routine and here I am opening my majlis for my regular visitors," he said. However, when pressed to say whether he would be attending the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, the minister said that it would be up to the country's leaders to decide on the issue. He also denied a report that he felt uneasy during the questioning and that a nurse was rushed to his side, saying they were rumours. "You can look at me. I am in good condition and I never felt unwell," he said. According to Al Ayam daily, the minister was released on the grounds of his health. Bin Rajab refused to comment on the status of the director of his office who was also questioned by the authorities on the alleged charges of money-laundering and which, according to reports, amounted to more than 12 million Bahraini dinars (Dh116.3 million). "I do not know anything about his questioning and you should ask him about what happened to him," he said. The director said that he had been called in as a witness.

Another official implicated in Bahrain corruption case

Mansour Bin Rajab, a Bahraini Minister of State without portfolio, has refused to comment on the status of a director in charge of his office who was questioned by authorities on charges of money laundering, which according to reports, amounted to more than 12 million Bahraini dinars (Dh116.3 million). "I do not know anything about his questioning and you should ask him about what happened to him," Bin Rajab said, addressing visitors to his weekly majlis (open house). A media report said that security authorities had asked Bin Rajab and the director not to communicate with each other throughout the investigation. According to Al Ayam daily, the director could be charged with money laundering, covering up money laundering operations, cooperating with a foreign organisation and divulging information to a foreign country. Under Bahrain's laws, money laundering charges carry a sentence of up to 15 years. The director, however, insists that he had been called in as a witness. Quoting unnamed sources, Al Ayam said that the money laundering operations extended to Bahrain, Kuwait, Dubai, Iran and some European countries and that one woman had been arrested in Kuwait in relation to the scheme. Bin Rajab, who was smoking throughout the meeting, refused to comment on whether he had received any call from senior officials following the publication of the reports on his interrogation.

Bahrain money-laundering scandal includes other Gulf countries: report

The money-laundering scheme busted by Manama on Friday is not confined to Bahrain, but also includes other countries in the Gulf, according to a Kuwaiti newspaper. "Kuwait is one of the countries covered by the network of those involved in the operation and already one Kuwaiti woman has been interrogated about her role in laundering money," Al Watan reported on Monday. According to the paper, the money-laundering operations were for the benefit of Iran's Revolutionary Guards who are using new channels to launder money following international sanctions on their assets. "Iran has a two-fold strategy in the region: Getting closer to decision-makers and using local merchants keen on swift lucrative deals," the paper said. "As Kuwait is a fertile ground for both components of the strategy, it is expected that many Kuwaiti merchants and business people are involved in money-laundering operations. One woman has already been questioned on the issue," according to the report. Al Watan said that the name of the 45-year Kuwaiti woman was mentioned in the Bahraini investigations of the money-laundering case in which Minister of State Mansoor Bin Rajab and the head of his office are allegedly involved. "The Bahraini security forces alerted their Kuwaiti counterpart who summoned the woman and confronted her with a cheque that a Bahraini suspect said belonged to her," Al Watan said. "However, the woman denied having any role in the scheme or knowing anything about the multi-million dinar cheque. She said that she had met the Bahraini man at a café and exchanged phone numbers with him as friends."

The newspaper on Sunday reported that the money-laundering scheme included funneling money from the sale of narcotics from Columbia, Azerbaijan and Eastern China through the Bahraini minister to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Official denies Kuwait charity groups involved in terrorism

There is no evidence that Kuwaiti charity groups are involved in terrorist activities, the social affairs minister has said. "I have recently discussed terror sponsoring and funding with a delegation from the US Department of Treasury and with Deborah K. Jones, the US ambassador to Kuwait," said Mohammad Al Afassi. "I asked the US officials to provide me with any evidence should they have suspicions about a Kuwaiti charity organisation in any terror-related activity," he was quoted as telling Al Rai daily. Al Afassi said that his ministry was closely monitoring the expenditures and bank accounts of the charity groups. "At the same time, the foreign ministry is monitoring how the funds are distributed and spent abroad and is making sure that they go to deserving beneficiaries," he said. US Deputy Treasury Secretary Neal Wolin visited Kuwait last month "to discuss the global response to the economic crisis." In June 2008, The United States Treasury Department froze the assets of a Kuwait-based charity for allegedly supporting and funding Al Qaida. The action was taken against Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) for providing financial and material support to Al Qaida and Al Qaida affiliates. RIHS has also provided financial support for acts of terrorism, the Treasury said. However, the accusation that the charity was funding terrorist activities was rejected by Kuwait as "unfounded".

Bahrain minister in spy racket?

The Bahraini minister at the centre of an international money-laundering scam is alleged to have been confronted by the police with pictures of sensitive Bahraini military installations that had been sent to Iranian security sources, a local newspaper reported. "Bahraini security staff presented to Mansoor Bin Rajab, the state minister, and to the head of his office an electronic device containing pictures of sensitive military locations that had been sent to Iranian security contacts," Al Bilad newspaper said on Monday. The sending of sensitive pictures to a foreign security agency is one of four charges facing the head of the office, the paper said. Other charges are money-laundering, protecting money launders and illegally obtaining money. An interior ministry official refused to give further comments, saying that the probe was continuing and he could not provide information. Bin Rajab did not attend the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, but the ministry offices were open, although they had no computers after the security authorities took them for further scrutiny as part of their investigation. His non-participation in the cabinet session reinforced the growing accusations that he was involved in the scam despite his confident assurances on Friday to visitors to his majlis (open house) that he was innocent. According to Al Bilad, the questioning of the minister during his brief detention focused on a Kuwaiti woman, a Sudanese national who visited Bahrain several times and was in Manama two weeks ago, and a Bahraini citizen, a daily visitor of the office of the minister, but who has not been seen lately. Kuwaiti daily Al Watan on Monday said the money-laundering scam unveiled by Manama on Friday was not confined to Bahrain, but also included other countries in the Gulf and beyond.

Bahrain former minister denies role in money laundering

Former state minister Mansoor Bin Rajab reiterated his innocence after the public prosecutor officially charged him with money laundering, committing illegal acts involving money laundering operations and hiding the nature of those activities. He faced seven hours of interrogation on Tuesday. "We have denied all the charges and there is no single evidence against us," Bin Rajab said when he left the public prosecution building later. "I am one million per cent innocent. The evidence presented by the public prosecution has nothing to do with me, but rather with other people. I repeat that I have no link with foreign parties and I do not have assets that have been frozen," he said, surrounded by his five lawyers. Bin Rajab was also interrogated on Thursday and sacked as state minister on Sunday. He said that he was in high spirits and that he did not suffer from "interrogation effects". "As for claims that this case is politically motivated, you should ask those who are behind it. I am innocent and I have no link with money-laundering operations or with Iran's Revolutionary Guards," he said. The former minister, who has been released on house arrest, is due to appear again before the prosecutor on Wednesday afternoon. Investigation into the case reveals that the money laundering scheme has spanned countries and involves several people. The public prosecutor said that Bin Rajab, 55, was being interrogated after investigations revealed he was involved in several money laundering activities in Bahrain and overseas. "In one operation, he is suspected of striking a deal with a Gulf woman to get a commission for helping her transfer and cash a cheque issued by a European bank and worth six million euros gained from trafficking in drugs and smuggling weapons," said public prosecutor Ali Al Buainain. "The accused opened an account in an overseas bank with the help of other suspects from Arab countries." Bahrain had been working closely with other countries to

gather further evidence about the suspects' criminal activities in money-laundering, he said. Bin Rajab's lawyers said he is innocent. "None of the accusations leveled at our client had the solid evidence of a crime. He has no link with any of the charges and all the talk about this case is pure speculation and has nothing to do with facts," the five-member defence team said. "The accusations do not reflect the reality on the ground. What has been published by the media is a gross exaggeration and the existing evidence cannot be attributed to Mansoor Bin Rajab," they said. The lawyers said that Bin Rajab has been implicated in the case without any evidence and that his dismissal as state minister aimed to ease legal procedures. The defence team, comprising two women, said that three people in Bahrain who were mentioned in the investigations could be summoned by the public prosecutor. The team said that their client was not "in any way involved in the cheque," an increasingly important piece in the case.

Bahrain king appoints Shaikh Abdullah as personal representative

Bahrain's King Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa has appointed his son as his personal representative. According to a royal order published by Bahrain News Agency, Shaikh Abdullah Bin Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa is appointed personal representative of the king. Shaikh Abdullah will represent the king in missions in Bahrain and abroad. He will set up an administration within the Royal Court structure, the order said.

Shaikh Abdullah, the second son of King Hamad, is the Governor of the Southern Governorate and President of the General Commission for Protection of Marine Resources, Wildlife and Environment.

Bahrain minister sacked for money laundering

Bahrain's King Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa on Monday sacked the state minister who is at the centre of a money laundering probe. "King Hamad issued Decree 11/2010 dismissing State Minister Mansour Bin Rajab from his position," Bahrain News Agency reported Monday. The dismissal is with immediate effect, the decree said. According to the Bahraini constitution, ministers are nominated and dismissed by the king and, unlike MPs, do not have any immunity. Bin Rajab, a former member of the upper chamber (Shura Council) and minister of agriculture and municipalities in 2006 and minister of state since 2008, was arrested on Thursday evening, but allowed to go home following interrogation. A brief statement from the interior ministry said that an official had been detained following investigation into money laundering operations. The ministry did not name the official and said that it had been monitoring the case since early last year.

Bin Rajab lawyers reject recorded evidence

The second session of the interrogation of a former state minister charged with involvement in money-laundering operations has ended after his lawyers said that he needed to rest. The five-member legal team said that the quizzing would be resumed on Thursday afternoon amid expectations that it would last up to ten days. Former state minister Mansoor Bin Rajab was interrogated for almost seven hours on Tuesday evening and six hours on Wednesday evening. The lawyers who said that their client, former state minister Mansoor Bin Rajab, on Wednesday denied all charges leveled against him and disputed the veracity of recordings played by the public prosecutor as evidence of his alleged involvement in "criminal activities." "The recordings cannot be considered

evidence. Some are them are fabricated, while others are unclear, more like noises," the lawyers said late on Wednesday evening at the end of the six-hour interrogation session. More recordings are expected to be played by the prosecution. The legal team said that a senior official be summoned to help shed light on the money-laundering scheme, arguing that he is well aware of the operations. However, the lawyers refused to publicly identify the official. The legal team said that the authorities should lift the travel ban imposed on Bin Rajab, de-freeze his assets and unblock his banking account to have access to his salary. "Since the source of his salary is the government, it would be absurd to block it under the claim of the money-laundering implication," the lawyers said. Bin Rajab denied any link with a six-million-euro cheque at the centre of the investigation and that alleged accomplices, including a Kuwaiti businesswoman, sought to cash in Bahrain and Lebanon. He also rejected claims that he was given BD30,000 by a stateless man living in Kuwait to help him and his family obtain the Bahraini nationality. Amal, the Kuwaiti woman who said that she wanted to start a business in Bahrain with the help of Bin Rajab, is still being quizzed for an alleged role in the money-laundering activities. Kuwaiti daily Al Watan daily said that the police found a euro 300,000 cheque in her car and are questioning her about its origin and purpose. However, Amal said that she was not aware of its existence and could have been planted there to implicate her, the paper reported, as the mystery about the characters and developments of the scheme deepens. Ali Jennati, Iran's ambassador to Kuwait denied an Iranian involvement in the money-laundering scandal unraveling in Bahrain and Kuwait, saying that the Revolutionary Guards did not need to launder money.

Questioning of Bin Rajab continues

The second session of questioning for a former state minister charged with involvement in money-laundering operations has ended after his lawyers said that he needed some time to rest. The five-member legal team said that the questioning would resume yesterday afternoon, amid expectations that it would last up to 10 days. Former state minister Mansoor Bin Rajab was interrogated for almost seven hours on Tuesday evening and six hours on Wednesday evening. Bin Rajab denied all charges levelled against him and disputed the veracity of recordings played by the public prosecutor as evidence of his alleged involvement in "criminal activities." "The recordings cannot be considered evidence. Some of them are fabricated, while others are unclear, more like noises," his lawyers said late on Wednesday evening at the end of the six-hour interrogation session. More recordings are expected to be played by the prosecution. The legal team called for a senior official to be summoned to help shed light on the money-laundering scheme, arguing that he is well aware of the operations. However, the lawyers refused to publicly identify the official. The legal team said that the authorities should lift the travel ban imposed on Bin Rajab, release his assets and allow him access to his banking account. Iran: 'No information' Ali Jennati, Iran's ambassador to Kuwait, has denied there was any Iranian involvement in the money-laundering scandal unravelling in Bahrain and Kuwait, saying that the Revolutionary Guards did not need to launder money. Media reports said that the Revolutionary Guards were the ultimate beneficiary of the multi-million-dollar laundering scheme unveiled by Bahrain last week. "We have no information on this case, and we have not received anything from Bahrain or any other country," Jannati said.

Bahrain imposes gag on reporting Bin Rajab case

Bahrain's public prosecutor has imposed a gag order on media reporting on the money-laundering scheme unveiled last week and in which a former state minister is allegedly involved. The gag was issued on Thursday evening as Bin Rajab and his legal team were at the third session of gruelling interrogations on his alleged role and links in the operations that seemingly spanned several countries and involved many people from various nationalities. The case was revealed one week ago by the interior ministry in a statement that said that a Bahraini official had been arrested in connection with money-laundering operations and that the official's activities had been monitored since early 2009. The ministry did not name the official, but within hours online forums revealed that he was Mansoor Bin Rajab, the former agriculture and municipalities minister and subsequently state minister without portfolio. Bin Rajab who was released opened his majlis (open house) on Friday and told his visitors that he was innocent and that his name would be cleared quickly. He said that he was leading a normal life and that he would resume his duties after the weekend. However, Bin Rajab did not take part in the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, fuelling speculation that he under investigation. On Sunday evening, he was sacked by King Hamad Bin Eisa Al Khalifa as state minister with immediate effect. The dismissal was understood in Bahrain as a green light to carry on with the investigation. Under the Bahraini constitution, ministers are appointed and dismissed by the king and, unlike members of parliament, have no immunity. Bin Rajab, who had a five member legal team present with him, was interrogated on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evening and would be quizzed once more on Sunday. His lawyers said that the interrogations could last ten days. The former minister throughout the investigation denied any involvement in the money-laundering operations and claimed that he was innocent. At one time, his lawyers said that they wanted the prosecutor to summon a senior official, whose name or position they did not wish to divulge to the people, for testimony. Bin Rajab is the first minister in the Arabian Gulf to be prosecuted for alleged criminal activities while still in office. His arrest, sacking and interrogations sparked a media frenzy in Bahrain, Kuwait and other Arab counties and the widespread dissemination of reports, quoting local and foreign sources, that incriminated Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and plot characters mainly from Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt and Lebanon. The public prosecutor said that there had been inaccurate and speculative reporting by the media and that the gag had become a necessity to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the investigation. The former ministers' lawyers, ostensibly pleased with the gag, said they had requested the ban on the first day of investigation. They have been repeatedly saying that their client was innocent and that there no solid evidence against him.

QATAR

International Front

Institute in green pact with French architect

Barwa & Qatari Diar Research Institute (BQDRI) and France-based Dubosc Associates have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to collaborate on creating a "sustainable built environment" and "encourage the adoption and application" of Qatar-

specific green building practices. The MoU was signed by Eric Dubosc, a renowned French architect and founder and chairman of Dubosc Associates, and Dr Yousef Mohamed al-Horr, BQDRI chairman & managing director here yesterday. The main objective behind the MoU is “to demonstrate BQDRI’s commitment to sustainable development in Qatar and the region” and for Dubosc Associates to “participate in supporting international initiatives towards a sustainable build environment”. The two have jointly stated their objective to co-operate in motivating the application of Qatar Sustainable Assessment System (QSAS) for a better living environment that maintains the balance between Qatar’s economic, environmental and national identity. They also agreed to contribute to research and development of sustainable and advanced built-environment studies. The MoU will focus on establishing a platform for joint research and developing educational programmes and tools in areas related to sustainable built-environment in tie up with reputable educational institutions. “We wish to set up a school of architecture in Doha with Dubosc support. We wish to involve other Qatari institutions in the project,” al-Horr said. Dubosc said: “The MoU with BQDRI will allow Dubosc Associates to venture into the GCC market and take the lead in addressing strategic issues related to Qatar’s energy and water efficiency policies, reduction of carbon emissions, minimisation of ecological impacts, and high indoor environmental quality.

Saudi foundation, UNOP sign deal to

The King Khalid Foundation (KKF) in Saudi Arabia yesterday signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP) to promote mutual co-operation for achieving the UN’s Millennium Development goals.

The MoU was signed by Princess Banderi Abdul Rahman Al Faisal, KKF director and Amir Dossal, Executive Director of the UNOP on the sidelines of the World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists which opened here yesterday. The partnership seeks to use smart philanthropy as a vehicle to promote peace and development. Established by the family of the late King Khalid of Saudi Arabia, KKF is a leading philanthropic institution aimed at improving social and economic development in Saudi Arabia.

Energy seminar highlights Qatar-Japan relationship

Some 25 percent of electricity generated by the Chubu Electric Power Company in Japan is fuelled by imported Qatari liquefied natural gas (LNG), according to Chubu Electric Power’s Doha Office General Manager. Keiichi Yoneyama said yesterday that 7 percent of Qatar’s total exports to Japan go to Chubu, noting “relationship between Qatar and Chubu is very important.” “We started importing LNG from Qatar in 1997 then totaling 2.5 million tons per year. The imports gradually increased and we also use some spot LNG from Qatar with the total reaching now 5 to 6 million tons per year.” He said Chubu is now expanding the capacity of LNG reservoir and connecting three LNG terminals by gas pipeline for the flexible operation of LNG terminals and power plants. Preparation for lean gas from Qatargas II has completed by expanding the berth for Q-Max and Q-Flex gas carriers and new LNG Combined Cycle Plant- the 2,380 MW Joetsu Power Plant- will start operation in two years, while a new large solar power plant starts operation next year. Yoneyama was speaking at the 3rd Qatar-Japan joint seminar on Technical and Economic Energy Issues which opened here yesterday. The event was organised by Qatar Petroleum (QP) and the Institute of Energy Economics of Japan in conjunction with the

Joint Qatar-Japan Economic Committee. Dr Naji Abi-Aad, Media and Research Strategist, QP Board of Directors said that this is the third joint energy seminar between Qatar and Japan and the main objective is to enhance energy cooperation between the two countries. The event was intended to acquaint participants from Japan about Qatar's energy potential, especially in natural gas and also to introduce to participants from Qatar to new energy technologies from Japan, he said. "Japan's energy market is extremely important for us because Japan is Qatar's largest trade partner and not only in terms of energy," said Abi-Aad. He added that the two previous Qatar-Japan seminars-one of which was held in Doha in February last year and the other in Tokyo, Japan in December also last year- led to new joint developments in many fields

Palestinian issue at critical stage: Qatari PM

The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabor Al Thani yesterday chaired the meeting of the Arab peace Initiative Committee which was held this evening at the "Ouagadougou" compound in Serte. The meeting was attended by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The Emir H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani will arrive today in Libya to take part in the 22nd Arab summit meeting due to open today in the city of Sirte. The Prime Minister expressed deep appreciation for the great efforts which has been exerted by the ministerial committee of the Arab peace initiative, expressing the hope that the committee's meeting would contribute to pushing forward the peace process despite the frustration and the difficulties surrounding it. Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem underlined that the Palestinian problem is passing through a critical stage where Islamic sanctuaries have been subjected to desecration, confiscation, Judaization and threat to their entity. He said the Israeli decisions to confiscate lands, build more settlements, construct 1600 new housing units in East Jerusalem, build the Al Kharab synagogue, include the Ibrahimi Mosque and the Bilal Mosque in the list of Israeli heritage and to continue excavations and demolition in holy Jerusalem give evidence that Israel is rejecting all attempts aimed to revive the peace process. The Prime Minister said the committee expressed its unequivocal and decisive rejection of such practices and measures as well as all the Israeli settlement projects which aim at changing

Social Front

Fight against racism urged

The crusade to make racism to books of history is only possible through a united fight with collective contribution of governments, organisations and individuals, the chief of a Middle East organisation against racial discrimination said yesterday. "On this International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, I urge everyone to join hands for this crusade", said Dr Naseer Homoud, Goodwill Ambassador and Director of Middle East office for the Inter-governmental Institution for the use of Micro-algae Spirulina against Malnutrition (IIMSAM). In a statement issued on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that falls today, Dr Hamoud said the Day aims to increase awareness of the harmful effects of racism on an international scale. "By recognising the importance of this day, IIMSAM demonstrates its commitment to fostering respect, equality and diversity." "Whether it's in the workplace, the schoolyard or elsewhere, racial stereotypes and prejudices impose a cost on all

society,” said Dr Homoud. IIMSAM has firm stand against racial discrimination to ensure that all people across the globe can make a strong contribution to a productive economy and a cohesive society, he added. The commemoration of March 21 as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is an opportunity to renew our personal commitment to overcome all forms of racism and discrimination and to show that we respect, accept and celebrate the cultural diversity of the whole world. Expressing his concern over prevailing racism in some part of world Dr. Homoud said racial discrimination denies its victims the most fundamental of all human rights – the right to equality. Further racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance are insidious, corrosive and sometimes explosive forces that devastate the lives of many individuals and, if left to fester, can undermine societies as a whole. They present a threat to security and often feature among the root causes of violent conflict. Speaking on the relevance of observing the Day Dr Homoud said new forms of racism have taken shape in the wake of globalization, the formation of multi-ethnic societies and the fight against terrorism affecting in particular ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants, refugees or asylum-seekers. He added: “We strongly condemns all forms of racism, racial discrimination, intolerance and discrimination and urges states to adopt effective measures to combat the symptoms and causes of racism and discrimination and to effectively guarantee the freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief to all without distinction.

School organises event to create anti-racism awareness

racism through education yesterday. The programme was organised by Student Council President Sara A Al Derham and the Academic Council Neama Abdul Mohsen, with the full support of the Operator Principal Najla Al Thawadi and School Principal Suzan K Al Muhannadi. They invited 12 different schools in Qatar to attend in small groups of five each comprising students from grade one to four. The Qatari National anthem was sung at the programme followed by a brief welcome speech for the elementary students. The speech dealt with historical personalities like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the idea being to create awareness about the evils of racism. The speech told the children of the privileged role they can play since they are the purveyors of change in the future. The children enjoyed the programme by participating in activities like a mini talent show, writing contest, poster contest and debate competition. Dr Jasser from Islamic Studies was the guest of honour at the programme.

Online registration for census

People keen to fill in the Population Census 2010 form online can register their names with the Qatar Statistics Authority (QSA) soon. The registration form will be available on the website of QSA from April 20, a day before the census begins. But before that, the QSA will through the email addresses of those who opt for online registration for the census, will provide guidelines on how to fill in the census form. The preliminary registration service has evoked good public response, says Sheikh Hamad bin Jabor bin Jassim al Thani, QSA President. The QSA in collaboration with Qtel and Vodafone will send messages via mobile phones to the people highlighting the necessity of online registration. The online form will contain space for details like name, identity card (ID) number, e-mail address, and home electricity number to be used as basic data. The online

registration will be besides the data being collected by QSA enumerators for the 2010 census. A direct phone line and the QSA website will be available for public to make enquiries regarding the census. A public awareness drive will be launched about the census soon. A special survey will be conducted immediately after the census for data verification and their quality. The first preparatory phase of the 2010 General Census of Population, Housing and Commercial Establishments began successfully and field work continues until month-end. In the second phase forms will be delivered to families and they will be required to fill in details like their names, ID card numbers, date of birth, educational status and occupation. The population census starts from April 21, 2010. Heads of families should provide full information to enumerators about themselves and every other person who lives with them in the house most of time, including relatives, children, housemaids and drivers. They should also provide information about people who are staying with them and have no independent housing as on April 20, 2010.

Five women arrested for begging

Law enforcement agencies have arrested five women accused of begging which is banned by law in the country. The arrested women arrived here from overseas on the pretext of marketing 'unimportant goods'. The real purpose of their visit was, however, to seek alms. According to a press statement issued by the Ministry of Interior yesterday, the arrests were made by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). CID sleuths on patrol duty near the gold souq area in Al Ghanim locality of the city became suspicious when they saw two women. They kept a track and discovered that they were begging. However, seeing the police patrol, the duo tried to escape and that's when they were rounded up with help from policewomen. Another woman was arrested while she was seen begging in the 'Deira Market', whereas another two were rounded up for begging on the pretext of selling copies of a religious book 'Azkar'. They were seeking alms from shopkeepers in a commercial complex in Bin Omran area. The arrested women, according to the interior ministry release, admitted during interrogation that they arrived here to market 'unimportant goods' while the actual purpose of their visit was to solicit financial assistance from philanthropists. The arrested women are all Arab nationals and have been referred to the competent authorities so appropriate charges are filed against them to put them on trial. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has, meanwhile, urged the public not to fall prey to beggars and inform the ministry immediately if anyone is seen seeking alms. The information can be passed on phone numbers: 4714220 and 4823455.

Political Front

Budget draft reviewed by Advisory Council

Qatar is all set to unveil its largest budgetary estimates for the next financial year (2010-11) by the month-end. The Advisory Council has discussed the draft of the estimates and will soon be forwarding its recommendations to the State Cabinet. The Economic and Financial Committee of the Advisory Council conducted the study on the estimates. The Minister of Economy and Finance, H E Yousuf Hussein Kamal, and Undersecretary at the Ministry, H E Khalaf Ahmed Al Mannai, attended a meeting of the Advisory Council

yesterday and explained the finer points of the budgetary estimates to its members. The meet was presided over by Chairman H E Mohamed bin Mubarak Al Khulaifi.

Economic Front

\$30bn invested in '09: PM

The Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), the country's sovereign wealth fund, invested \$30bn last year and is expected to match the same amount this year, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabor Al Thani said. Speaking at a joint news conference here yesterday with visiting Bulgaria's Prime Minister Boiko Borissov, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem said, "Only in 2009 we made \$30bn investments and we are thinking to invest the same amount this year." Prior to the news conference Qatar and Bulgaria signed an agreement for the avoidance of double taxation and prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to taxes on income. The agreement was signed from the Qatari side by the Minister of Economy and Finance, H E Yousuf Hussein Kamal and the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Miladenov Nickolay. The two countries also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the field of energy. The agreement was signed by State Minister for International Cooperation, Member of Cabinet and Acting Minister of Business and Trade, H E Dr Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah and Bulgarian Minister of Economy, Energy and Tourism. Qatar and Bulgaria agreed to set up a joint company that will explore investment opportunities in agriculture, energy and infrastructure projects. Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem said the two sides did not discuss the amount Qatar is expected to invest in Bulgaria, but "Qatar is ready to invest as long as there is a good return for both sides," he said. "I cannot give a figure, but I can mention that we are very serious about these projects," he said. Asked whether the two sides discussed the possibility of constructing a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Bulgaria, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem said, "If we are thinking about another terminal, that will need a lot of technical and financial studies and see who the end-user of the gas is. At the moment this is under study in Qatar and I don't think anything will happen before one or two years in this respect. Bulgaria is one of the countries in our list for such a project but it depends on the end-users and the quantity required."

France's capital markets are open to Qatar investment: French PM

French Prime Minister Francois Fillon welcomed yesterday Qatari investment into France's capital markets. Speaking in a conference in Paris about investing in Qatar, the French prime minister said he hoped that in return for French investment, the Qatar government's investment policy will include "strategic sectors of common interest" such as energy and the food and automotive industries. HE the Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor al-Thani said in a French newspaper interview at the weekend that French and Qatari companies could team up to invest in assets in other countries. The Qatari prime minister also confirmed that Qatar is in talks to take a stake in French state-controlled nuclear group Areva SA's capital, but stressed the process is still at the negotiating stage. Fillon also said yesterday that French companies must increase their share in foreign investments in Qatar and that he hopes Qatar and France can work together towards peace in the Middle East.

Oil and Gas

Qatar not to curb gas output: Minister

Qatar does not plan to cut output in a bid to support global gas prices, Minister of State for Energy and Industry Affairs H E Mohammad Saleh Al Sada said. Major pipeline gas exporter Algeria plans to ask other big gas producers to stop flooding markets with extra spot natural gas deliveries when they meet next month. But Qatar, the world's biggest liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter, plans to keep up production and sees the market recovering in a few years anyway. "Our projects are long term, between 20 and 25 years, and they are linked to oil prices," he said in response to a question on Algeria's view that major gas exporters should reduce supply of spot gas deliveries to support prices. "We cannot reduce the quantities contracted," Al Sada said. "We are ramping up (production)... We believe that in the coming two or three years there will be a shortage of gas and we believe demand will increase and that is why we decided to invest in gas to supply the world." Spot LNG prices tumbled last year to around \$ 4 per million British thermal units from record highs of around \$ 22 per mmBtu in 2008. Demand is recovering and new importers emerging, but large rises in output capacity will likely keep the LNG market oversupplied for the next few years, analysts say. Qatar, whose economy relies heavily on gas sales, sees long term sales growth beyond the current glut of gas. "We want a 100 years of steady production without a need for expansion or drilling. We are not a short term investor," he said, adding that the Gulf country would not make a decision on whether to raise output at its North Field until 2014/15. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabor Al Thani said Qatar would raise its LNG production capacity to 77.4 million tonnes per year by 2011 from 56 million currently. But Al Sada said Qatar was "at the peak" of its investments in the energy sector. "That is why we need a fair price for gas," he said. Asked about Qatar's oil production following the completion of an expansion at the Shaheen field, Al Sada said the country would raise its capacity to one million barrels per day "in the next two years" from current output of 800,000 b/d. Al Sada also said that \$ 80 per barrel was a "fair price" for oil and that anything above that level would be detrimental to the recovery of the global economy. "Oil prices hovering around \$ 80 a barrel is good

OMAN

Social Front

Ship carrying Sri Lankan, Filipino, Syrian crew members hijacked off Oman coast

A cargo ship has been hijacked by Somali pirates off the coast of Oman, according to European Union Naval Force (EU Navfor) on Wednesday. "The Bermuda flagged British Virgin Islands owned cargo ship MV Talca has been hijacked," a spokesperson for the EU Navfor told Gulf News. It said that MV Talca was heading from Sokhna in Egypt to Busheir in Iran when it was hijacked on Tuesday. "It had already passed through the International Recommended Transit Corridor, which is patrolled by warships and maritime patrol aircraft from EU Navfor, Nato, Combined Maritime Forces and other navies," EU Navfor told Gulf News in an email statement. Twenty-three of the crew are from Sri Lanka, one from the Philippines and one from Syria. Prior to the hijacking of

MV Talca, a UAE-owned and Panamanian-flagged cargo ship, MV Al Mezaan, en route to Mogadishu, was attacked by pirates off the Somali coast. The attack was thwarted, however.

Seminar on water held in Muscat

A senior faculty at the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has urged residents of Oman to value water as good as their money. "When it comes to wasting, people have to equate water with money in our pockets," Dr. S.A. Prathapar, Director of Water Research Centre and Dean of the College of Agricultural & Marine Sciences, said during a seminar to mark the World Water Day 2010 Monday. The seminar - "Clean water for a healthy world" - was organised by the Water Research Centre and the Department of Soil, Water & Agricultural Engineering at SQU. Dr. Prathapar underscored the importance of not wasting water in the backdrop of millions of people lacking access to clean water across the world. Rashid Al Abri from the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources gave a presentation on water resources in Oman. Saif Al Khamis from the Ministry of Agriculture spoke about "how poor agricultural practices affect water quality". Students from various high schools attended the seminar. After the presentation, the students were invited for a tour over water analysis labs and SQU grey water and grey water treatment units. Every year, 1,500 cubic kilometres of wastewater are produced globally. While waste and wastewater can be reused productively for energy and irrigation, it usually is not. In developing countries 80 per cent of all waste is being discharged untreated, because of lack of regulations and resources. Population and industrial growth add new sources of pollution and increased demand for clean water to the equation. 'Clean Water for a Healthy World' is the theme of World Water Day 2010 by United Nations. The goal of the campaign is to raise the profile of water quality at the political level so that quality considerations are made alongside those of quantity.

Oman hosts country's first Twitter festival

Over 100 Tweepers, members of social networking website Twitter.com, will join over 200 cities around the world to host its first "Twestival" on Thursday. As a unique confluence of land, water and air, OmanTwestival 2010 promises to stand out among all Twestival. Participants will meet at the Twestival held on sea, on board the world's fastest catamaran. "We are delighted to support Oman Twestival 2010 by providing Oman's tweeps a unique choice of venue onboard our world-class catamaran. We would also like to celebrate this global event as a tribute to Oman's maritime legacy," said Mehdi Al Abduwani, Chairman of National Ferries Company. "As an active corporate social media participant in Oman, Oman Air is glad to be a part of Oman Twestival 2010. The event will go a long way in placing Oman on the global stage while giving a huge fillip to social media in Oman," said Mohammad Mubarak Al Shikely, General Manager Marketing of Oman Air. "Twestival is a community gathering of the members of the twitter community- an event held on the same day of the year across several cities of the world synchronised in the real world, and Oman is hosting this event for the first time," said Sangeetha Sridhar, an organiser of the OmanTwestival. Twestival 2010 supports education through Concern Worldwide, a non-government humanitarian organisation that reaches to out-of-school children. Concern's education programs currently reach over 700,000 people in 25 countries across the regions of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

The first global Twestival was held on 12th February 2009 across over 202 cities with the cause of providing clean water. It managed to raise over \$250,000 for Charity – Water to provide more than 55 wells in Uganda, Ethiopia and India.

Twitter members raise 1,350 Omani riyals for charity

Over 120 Tweeps, members of social networking website Twitter.com, from over 200 cities around the world, gathered in Oman as the country hosted its first "Twestival" to raise 1,350 Omani riyals for charity. "We had a live streaming of the two and half-hour meet for the global audiences to watch the activities of Tweeps in Oman," said Sangeetha Sreedhar, one of the main organisers of the Twestival. "It was a unique confluence of land, water and air, as we went on world's fastest catamaran ferry 'Hormuz for the OmanTwestival,'" enthused Omani Tweep Badar Al Hinai, a key member of the community involved in organising the Twestival. "It was a perfect opportunity to put faces to the members we communicate with in the virtual world, it was meeting members in the real world," said Omani Tweep Riyadh Al Balushi, who goes by the name of Bluechi on Twitter. Twitter members met for nearly three hours during which an Omani duo entertained them with a fusion of Omani instrument Oudh and western guitar. "Twestival is a community gathering of the members of the Twitter community– an event held on the same day of the year across several cities of the world synchronised in the real world, and Oman has hosted this event for the first time," pointed out Sangeetha. Twestival 2010 supported education through Concern Worldwide, a non-government humanitarian organisation that reaches to out-of-school children. Concern's education programs currently reach over 700,000 people in 25 countries across the regions of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. The first global Twestival was held on 12th February 2009 across over 202 cities with the cause of providing clean water. It managed to raise over \$250,000 for Charity – Water to provide more than 55 wells in Uganda, Ethiopia and India.

Oil and Gas

Oman puts brakes on natural gas flaring

Oman has made significant gains in cutting down on the flaring of natural gas, the World Bank has revealed in a recent report detailing global trends in gas flaring and venting. Natural gas volumes flared by the Sultanate declined from 2.5 billion cubic metres (bcm) in 2005 to 2.2 bcm in 2006. During 2007 and 2008 flared volumes remained level at 1.9 bcm, the World Bank report said, citing satellite observation data. This downward trend in flared volumes, in the face of rising natural gas production, has been hailed as a reflection of Oman's determination to rein in natural gas flaring and to commercialise the resource instead. The Sultanate is preparing to host the 1st Middle East Forum on Flaring Reduction and Gas Utilisation during May 10-11, 2010. The two-day conference, which will be held at Al Bustan Palace InterContinental, is being organised by The World Bank's Global Gas Flaring Reduction (GGFR) programme, in collaboration with Oman's Ministry of Oil and Gas. Curbing natural gas flaring, which is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions responsible for global warming, is a key objective of the forum. Oman is currently placed 17th in a ranking compiled by GGFR of the world's top 20 gas flaring countries. The Sultanate figures just behind the United States (ranked 15th)

and China (ranked 16th) in the listing of the world's biggest gas flarers. Russia tops the ranking with flared natural gas volumes estimated at 40.2 bcm in 2008, the latest available data released by GGFR. Also included in the Top 20 ranking are Nigeria, Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Kazakhstan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Angola, Qatar, Uzbekistan, Mexico, Venezuela, Indonesia, Malaysia, Canada and Kuwait. Significantly, flared gas volumes in the Sultanate are projected to decline dramatically over the coming years in line with the government's pursuit of a zero-flaring strategy. All the major gas producers have already adopted steps to progressively reduce gas flaring and bring the resource to market instead. Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), which accounts for the lion's share of natural gas currently produced in the Sultanate, has already made significant strides in reducing flaring from within its Block 6 concession. Through a series of gas conservation measures, the company aims to harness tens of billions of cubic metres of natural gas that would otherwise be flared. In its Natih field for example, PDO has installed advanced well controllers that help reduce the flaring of gas associated with oil production. At the Fahud field, gas flaring has been reduced to virtually zero following the upgrade of the gas-compression control system. Similar control improvements at the north Oman condensate stabiliser has also led to the recovery of significant volumes of gas per day that would otherwise have been flared. Occidental of Oman has also implemented a major Flare Reduction Project in its Block 9 concession in northern Oman — one of several initiatives by the company to improve the recovery of natural gas and bring it to market rather than flare or emit it into the atmosphere.