

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

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15th May- 21th May 2010

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

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SUMMARY

The committee of undersecretaries and chiefs of the departments of census and statistics in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states agreed here on Saturday to provide observations about a blueprint of the common statistical strategy of their departments. Speaking to KUNA after the 24th meeting of the committee, Assistant Secretary-General of the GCC Secretariat for Economic Affairs Mohammad Al-Marzouqi said participants approved most of the items of the document. "The strategy outlines the standards, methodology and mechanisms governing the activities of, and the exchanges among, the census and statistics departments of the six GCC member states," Al-Marzouqi pointed out. "The meeting demanded the concerned department of each country to develop a model of statistics and census programs for subjects such as housing features of the State of Kuwait, environment in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), population of the Kingdom of Bahrain, labor force in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, disability in the Sultanate of Oman and health-care in the State of Qatar," he revealed. In an attack on US policy in the Middle East, former Saudi ambassador to Washington Prince Turki Al-Faisal on Saturday said President Obama had until September to push for a settlement of the Palestinian issue. If nothing happens by then, then the US president has to make "the morally decent" gesture and recognize Palestine as a sovereign independent state, he said. Prince Turki also attacked Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for sending out "confusing signals" on nuclear nonproliferation in the Middle East, describing them as "unacceptable." He also said that the US had lost "the moral high ground" it had acquired after 9/11 in the Middle East because of its "negligence, ignorance and arrogance." Chinese and Arab leaders agreed to develop China-Arab relations and discussed a number of regional issues of common interest at the China-Arab Cooperation Forum that concluded in Tianjin, China, on Friday. As part of the "Declaration of Tianjin," they pledged to establish relationships of strategic cooperation that would focus on comprehensive cooperation and joint development. Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal led Saudi Arabia's delegation to the forum. "The Chinese and Arab sides will achieve their goals through visits on various levels, talks and strategic consultations. They will continue mutual support in core issues related to common interests and boost their cooperation in areas of politics, economics, trade and environment, apart from coordination in international and regional matters," the declaration said. President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan received here at Yasat Island Resort HH Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, who arrived today in a short visit to the country. Present was HH General Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces. Sheikh Khalifa welcomed Shaikh Hamad, stressing growth and progress of the fraternal ties between the two countries in the best interest of two peoples. The two leaders discussed ways to revamp ties in different fields. They also exchanged views on a number of issues of common interests in the regional and international arenas in line with the framework of consultations and continuous coordination between the two leaderships. Vice President of the European Parliament (EP) Ganni Pittella expressed appreciation to Kuwait for its efforts in fostering cooperation among the European Union

(EU) countries and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Pittella's statement came Wednesday evening during a meeting with a delegation from the Kuwaiti Parliament that was headed by MP Ali Al-Diqbasi. Pittella expressed gratitude to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for his efforts to strengthen relations with the EU countries, praising the recent visits of His Highness to a number of European countries. He said that the EU was keen on signing an agreement on free trade with the GCC. The European official also hailed the Kuwaiti Parliament and described it as an active and powerful body. The 63rd Session of the World Health Organisation (WHO) general assembly opened here yesterday. Oman has been appointed as Chair of Delegates Accreditation Committee at WHO meeting in which the Sultanate was represented by Health Minister Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi. Al Saeedi also took part in the 36th extraordinary meeting of the Arab Health Ministers Council and in the meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office. The Sultanate is currently holding the post of Deputy Chair of WHO's Executive Office and Deputy Chair of Programmes and Management Committee. On Thursday, Al Saeedi will chair the Technological Media meeting on chronic diseases and future protection plans. He is also due to meet WHO's Director-General and other health ministers on the sidelines of the WHO General Assembly meetings. The conclusion of the stalled Doha Round of free trade talks is crucial to the recovery from the global financial crisis, World Trade Organization chief Pascal Lamy said on Sunday. "The Doha Round, at this moment of the crisis exiting, is a vitally needed and, to be frank, a very low cost global economic stimulus package," Lamy told participants at an economic forum in Bahrain. "Estimates suggest that the implementation of this round would inject to the tune of \$ 300-400 billion a year into the global economy," he told participants at the Bahrain Global Forum. The Doha Round of talks launched in 2001 were due to be wrapped up in March, according to a target set by the G20 group of leading and emerging economies, but previous deadlines have been repeatedly missed. The negotiations have focused on dismantling obstacles to trade for poor nations by striking an accord that would cut agriculture subsidies and tariffs on industrial goods.

With unemployment levels of nationals in double digits across all Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries despite rapid economic growth over the past decade, the region must make large-scale changes in order to reverse the employment problems of its indigenous workforce, according to a recent report. Titled 'Meeting the employment challenge in the GCC: The need for a holistic strategy', the report by Booz & Company pointed out that all GCC countries faced similar hurdles when it came to their job markets. Lack of employment opportunities for GCC nationals, the need to substitute expatriates with qualified nationals, and populations that generally view vocational jobs as undesirable all these are problems plaguing each country in the region. The report said GCC countries need to shift towards more proactive social and economic policies to upgrade the skills and talents of their workforce. "That is the only way to ensure continued development of human capital in the GCC and meet the demand for employment among nationals." A Saudi Shoura Council member, Abdul Rahman Al Anad, has said that women should be allowed to vote in the next municipal elections. The Shoura on Sunday heard a request from Al Anad, who also asked for Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs, Prince Mansour Bin Mit'eb, to attend a session to answer

questions on the performance of the ministry. Al Anad added a previous request by a housing, water and public facilities committee for mayors of Jeddah and Jizan to attend a Council session to discuss a ministerial report had "turned the Shoura into a regional council". "It would have been appropriate for all the ministry's services to have been properly studied first and not to call the mayors," he said. The Shoura Council approved Sunday amendments to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material with a majority of votes. Sunday's session of the Shoura Council was held under the chairmanship of its Chairman Abdullah Al-Asheikh. Speaking to reporters, Mohamed Al-Ghamdi, secretary-general of the council, said the amendments moved at the session were to ensure total security and technical protection for nuclear installations that provide energy for peaceful purposes. The secretary-general said that the amendment was moved with a clear majority at the Sunday's session. He pointed out that the amendments were considered in the light of the other international conventions against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. He also stressed that amendments were moved to ensure the careful and intelligent use of nuclear energy and nuclear materials not to reach irresponsible individuals, groups and entities. The President, His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in his capacity as Ruler of Abu Dhabi, has issued emiri decree No. 8 of year 2010 appointing new judges and public prosecutors. According to the first article of the decree, three judges have been appointed at the Court of Cassation of the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department (ADJD), 16 judges at the Court of Appeal and 16 judges at the Court of First Instance. The second article named two public prosecution chairmen and five senior prosecutors. The UAE President also issued emiri decree No. 9 of year 2010, appointing a number of assistant judges and public prosecutors. Bahrain is not ready for women in politics, says parliament chairman Khalifa Al Dhahrani. He spoke out after Princess Sabeeka asked the students if they would vote for a well-qualified woman in parliament. The majority in the room raised their hands, while others said they had yet to see women prove their capabilities in the political arena. This prompted Mr Al Dhahrani to say that Bahraini society is not ready for women in politics. "We have to look at our society in a realistic way and I don't believe that it is ready for women in politics. "Our parliament is run by religious factions and blocs, which all support women but I don't think that as a society we are ready for this." But Princess Sabeeka and other panel members interjected, saying Bahrain was not completely run by religious factions. Shura Council chairman Ali Saleh Al Saleh said Islam had given women more power and rights than any other religion.

Inflation risks in the Gulf countries are resurfacing after undergoing a sharp fall in consumer prices from a peak of 11 percent in 2009, Credit Suisse said in its latest issue of Global Investor. Fears of possible inflationary outcome of the recent drastic monetary and fiscal policy measures taken by central banks and finance ministers in response to the global financial crisis have in many quarters kindled fears of possible inflationary consequences. Average inflation in the GCC is estimated at two percent year on year in 2009, after 11 percent year on year in 2008. Analysts see inflationary pressures growing across the GCC. This is based on their assumption that commodities will continue to rise, and their forecast that the dollar will weaken, the report said. Credit Suisse analysts said, however, for most industrialized nations these types of risks remain moderate for now. In the emerging markets, on the other hand, the inflation risks are growing. Should the

dollar hold up, inflation risks will be lower, they contend. "Moreover, while the economic outlook remains positive for the overall region, the gradual recovery most likely will limit domestically driven inflation pressures." Saudi Arabia believes renewable sources could account for up to 10 percent of its power output by 2020 with prices coming down and a regulatory framework in place, an executive from state oil giant Saudi Aramco said. "The proposed target is between 7 to 10 percent of peak electricity generated by renewables by 2020, most likely solar, that represents roughly 5 gigawatts by 2020. Can we achieve that target? It's feasible," said Ahmad Al-Khowaiter, director of new business evaluation department at Aramco. The Kingdom has said it was investing \$ 80 billion to boost power generating capacity to 60,000 MW by 2020. The UAE's Crescent Petroleum has teamed up with Russia's state-run oil producer Rosneft to pursue oil and gas deals in the Middle East and North Africa, Crescent said in a statement yesterday. Rosneft pumps over a fifth of Russia's oil, and is the country's largest producer. Crescent is a privately-held energy firm based in the emirate of Sharjah, in the northern UAE. The two would initially focus on opportunities in natural gas in the Gulf, said Crescent Petroleum Executive Director Badr Jafar. "We have already identified a number of robust opportunities, and we expect to be able to announce our first joint project in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region within the coming weeks," he told Reuters in a written statement. The partnership aims to capitalize on Rosneft's technical expertise and financial strength and Crescent's international operating experience and knowledge of the MENA region. "This agreement creates the framework for the joint pursuit of specific oil and gas exploration and development opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region," Crescent said in the statement. Rosneft Chief Executive Sergei Bogdanchikov signed the deal with Jafar in Moscow on Tuesday. Studies on the viability and cost of a civil nuclear energy project in Kuwait will be ready for decision makers by early next year, a senior official said. Kuwait, the world's fourth-largest oil exporter, is facing rising demand for electricity, especially during the hot summer months, and is looking into nuclear energy as an option to help it meet its needs. "We hope as we see it now, the decision should be by the end of this year, early next year," said Ahmad Bishara, the secretary general of the Kuwait National Nuclear Energy Committee in an interview on Thursday.

GCC

GCC health ministers to meet during WHA session

The GCC health ministers are to hold today their 69th meeting on the sidelines of the World Health Assembly's annual session which kicks off in Geneva earlier today, the GCC general secretariat said in a statement yesterday.

Dr Tawfiq bin Ahmed Khoja, director-general of the executive office of the Council of Health Ministers for GCC States, said the meeting aims to approve a number of topics discussed by the executive body of the GCC in its 72nd meeting held in Riyadh last month.

Dr Khoja noted that the ministers would discuss a number of topics, including investment

in health care, control of diabetes, the Board of Nursing Specialization of the GCC and the GCC Centre for Disease Control.

GCC unemployment 'needs policy change'

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"The meeting demanded the concerned department of each country to develop a model of statistics and census programs for subjects such as housing features of the State of Kuwait, environment in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), population of the Kingdom of Bahrain, labor force in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, disability in the Sultanate of Oman and health-care in the State of Qatar," he revealed.

GCC to lead Mena growth: World Bank

The economies of Gulf oil producers are projected to sharply rebound by about 4.4 per cent in 2010 to spearhead growth in the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) on the back of strong oil prices, the World Bank has said.

In a 20-page study on regional economies, the Washington-based World Bank estimated Mena's real GDP growth at about 4.4 per cent in 2010, while growth in all oil exporters in the region was put at 4.3 per cent. The projected growth for the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) this year is far higher than the 0.8 per cent rate recorded in 2009, while that of Mena is also nearly double the 2009 growth of about 2.2 per cent.

"The Middle East and North Africa region is recovering from the financial crisis along with the global economy. Growth in 2010 is expected to be 4.4 per cent regionwide, driven by domestic absorption as well as a positive contribution from external demand," it said.

Inflation risks in Gulf countries reemerging

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Gulf to scrap duties on steel, cement

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) finance ministers have agreed to recommend that all customs duties be scrapped on reinforced iron bars and cement in trade between member countries, GCC Secretary General Abdul Rahman Bin Hamad Al-Attiyah said on Saturday.

Speaking to the media, Al-Attiyah said the GCC finance ministers agreed unanimously that there should be no duties on these commodities between member states. The agreement has been included in the recommendations of the GCC finance ministers

in their meeting in Riyadh Saturday. The recommendations will be submitted to the Consultative Meeting of the GCC leaders in Riyadh on Tuesday.

YEMEN

Yemen marks 20 years of fragile unity

Yemen on Saturday marks 20 fragile years of unity amid growing separatism in the south, an on-off conflict with Shiite rebels in the north, and a growing Al-Qaeda presence. “Yemen unity is now a serious concern for all its neighbours as well as, predictably, for the Yemeni government,” said Neil Partrick, a visiting international relations lecturer at the University of Westminster in London.

The conflict with Zaidi rebels also drew in Saudi Arabia, and Al-Qaeda seems to have located the perfect hideaway in Yemen’s lawless zones, sparking a US-backed military campaign by government forces. These are among the “many challenges” facing the government, Partrick said.

Yemen launches operation to free hostages

Yemeni security forces have launched an operation to release two Chinese oil workers kidnapped by separatist militants, a Defence Ministry website said on Monday. The website, quoting the governor of Shabwa province where the men were kidnapped, called on the kidnapers to “quickly release the hostages unconditionally and surrender themselves to security forces”. It gave no details of the operation.

A government official told Reuters that negotiations “are still ongoing” but that “at the same time, troops are being prepared to move into the area”. Details over the number of hostages and who employed them have been unclear since the kidnapping on Sunday.

Two killed as Yemenis clash over water rights

Two people died in a southern Yemeni village where the military intervened to end a dispute over water rights, underscoring tensions sparked by a looming water crisis in the impoverished state. Twenty homes were damaged and unarmed residents were forced to flee Shara’ab, in the southern province of Taiz, during the eight-day standoff. A soldier and a local gunman were killed and four other people were wounded in the violence, which ended on Thursday after a deal between the authorities and local leaders.

A regional official said the clashes were sparked by anger over new government regulations on well drilling. “The people have resisted,” the official said. “This province suffers from a severe water crisis. Our ground (water) wells are almost depleted.”

SAUDI ARABIA

International Front

Arab world needs solidarity: Prince Khaled

Makkah Gov. Prince Khaled Al-Faisal, who is also chairman of the Arab Thought Foundation (ATF), opened on Thursday a workshop to mark the Foundation's 10th anniversary in Beirut.

Prince Khaled told the workshop he lamented the lack of unity and progress in the Arab world, claiming countries in the region were becoming almost isolated islands with feeble bridges to connect them, while their rate of development was at the bottom of the international scale. "Like any Arab, I find the distance between our Arab world and the world of advanced knowledge and technology growing," Prince Khaled said.

Kuwait FM to chair GCC ministerial meeting in Jeddah

Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah will preside over the 115th ministerial session of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), due in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Sunday. The session gains additional significance as it follows the GCC consultative summit meeting, held here on Tuesday, GCC Secretary-General Abdulrahman Al-Atiyyah told reporters here on Wednesday. "The ministerial meeting, coinciding with delicate circumstances being undergone by the Gulf region, is scheduled to probe a range of regional political and security issues and review the march of GCC joint action," Al-Atiyyah added.

Saudi King, Blair discuss the stalled peace process

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud received here yesterday Tony Blair, the former British prime minister and special envoy of the international quartet on the Middle East, and the accompanying delegation.

During the audience, they discussed the stalled peace process and international efforts to achieve just and comprehensive peace in the region according to international legitimacy resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

King Abdullah, Albashir review Saudi-Sudanese relations

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud received a telephone call from Sudanese President Omar Hasan Albashir. During the call, they reviewed Saudi-Sudanese relations and current developments.

Saudi Prince calls on Obama to push for Middle East settlement

In an attack on US policy in the Middle East, former Saudi ambassador to Washington Prince Turki Al-Faisal on Saturday said President Obama had until September to push for a settlement of the Palestinian issue. If nothing happens by then, then the US president has to make "the morally decent" gesture and recognize Palestine as a sovereign independent state, he said.

Prince Turki also attacked Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for sending out "confusing signals" on nuclear nonproliferation in the Middle East, describing them as "unacceptable." He also said that the US had lost "the moral high ground" it had acquired after 9/11 in the Middle East because of its "negligence, ignorance and arrogance."

Arab, Chinese leaders agree to boost ties

Chinese and Arab leaders agreed to develop China-Arab relations and discussed a number of regional issues of common interest at the China-Arab Cooperation Forum that concluded in Tianjin, China, on Friday. As part of the "Declaration of Tianjin," they pledged to establish relationships of strategic cooperation that would focus on comprehensive cooperation and joint development.

Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal led Saudi Arabia's delegation to the forum. "The Chinese and Arab sides will achieve their goals through visits on various levels, talks and strategic consultations. They will continue mutual support in core issues related to common interests and boost their cooperation in areas of politics, economics, trade and environment, apart from coordination in international and regional matters," the declaration said.

BDO holds Saudi talks

BDO KSA hosted the first BDO Middle East Conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. It was attended by more than 30 partners and top officials from member firms around the Middle East, Asia, South Africa and Europe. The conference provides an opportunity for direct interaction and exchange of opinions among key personnel from the different offices of BDO.

"I am pleased to report that this year's event has been an overwhelming success, providing an excellent networking opportunity and helping to generate new ideas that will help to drive our business forward," said BDO Middle East partner Jawad Habib Jawad. "The aim is to strengthen relationships and put past performance and future plans in perspective. The work we have accomplished here will do much to improve the performance of BDO," he added.

Social Front

Women to teach boys at primary level in Saudi Arabia

Education Minister Prince Faisal bin Abdullah has said that women would be employed to teach boys at the public primary school level but that the Kingdom would not introduce mixed classrooms. "Female teachers can do a better job in teaching primary students as they can understand these children better than male teachers," the minister said while speaking on Saudi Television's "Good Morning" program on Wednesday.

Prince Faisal did not say when women would be appointed to teach boys, but he did say his ministry hopes to introduce physical education courses at girls public schools "in the near future." Currently, only boys have physical education and sporting clubs in Saudi public schools. The minister said he hopes to change that by introducing sports clubs in girls schools.

Enforce anti-smoking rules strictly, demands Kafa

All segments of society should join hands to fight the dangers of smoking, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Othaim, Chairman of the Tobacco and Narcotics Combat Charity Society (Kafa), said here Tuesday. The word Kafa means "enough" in Arabic.

At a press conference here, Sheikh Al-Othaim highlighted the role of the media and said its positive contribution would help to eliminate this serious health hazard. "We realize how important the media is in spreading awareness about this dangerous habit. Otherwise, our efforts will be useless," he said. According to recent UN reports, there are now 185 million smokers in the world, with 150,000 in Saudi Arabia.

Call to form anti-graft panel in Saudi Arabia

The National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) has called for the creation of an 'Honesty and Anti-corruption Commission' linked to the Council of Ministers, to monitor government projects. In a statement issued recently, it said the commission should play a supporting role for other supervisory bodies to protect the state's funds and eliminate corruption.

The society has lauded Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's order and decisions aimed at fighting corruption. It also welcomed the King's order that all those who were involved in Jeddah's flood disaster should face prosecution.

Voting right for Saudi women demanded

A Saudi Shoura Council member, Abdul Rahman Al Anad, has said that women should be allowed to vote in the next municipal elections. The Shoura on Sunday heard a request from Al Anad, who also asked for Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs, Prince

Mansour Bin Mit'eb, to attend a session to answer questions on the performance of the ministry.

Al Anad added a previous request by a housing, water and public facilities committee for mayors of Jeddah and Jizan to attend a Council session to discuss a ministerial report had "turned the Shoura into a regional council". "It would have been appropriate for all the ministry's services to have been properly studied first and not to call the mayors," he said.

King Hamad praises AGU's key education role

His Majesty yesterday hailed the Arabian Gulf University's role in preparing GCC students and ensuring quality training, pledging to continue backing scientific research. He was speaking as he was awarded an honorary PhD degree in humanities.

"The AGU graduates are assuming their duties competently in different medical specialties", he said. He also paid tribute to Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud for his directives to build a medical city affiliated with the AGU.

Saudi Shoura Council approves changes to nuclear safety convention

The Shoura Council approved Sunday amendments to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material with a majority of votes. Sunday's session of the Shoura Council was held under the chairmanship of its Chairman Abdullah Al-Asheikh.

Speaking to reporters, Mohamed Al-Ghamdi, secretary-general of the council, said the amendments moved at the session were to ensure total security and technical protection for nuclear installations that provide energy for peaceful purposes. The secretary-general said that the amendment was moved with a clear majority at the Sunday's session. He pointed out that the amendments were considered in the light of the other international conventions against the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

He also stressed that amendments were moved to ensure the careful and intelligent use of nuclear energy and nuclear materials not to reach irresponsible individuals, groups and entities.

Saudi minister favors special focus on educating youth

The Minister of Islamic Affairs, Endowment, Call and Guidance, Sheikh Saleh Bin Muhammad Aal Al-Sheikh, recently raised concerns about the danger of some preachers becoming involved in sedition and extremism because they do not have a true understanding of Islam. He said that he first raised these concerns about two decades ago. He said it was necessary to enlighten young people about the jurisprudence (Fiqh) of intentions (Al-Maqassid) and the principles defining corruption (Al-Mafasid) in Islam. This is to ensure these people follow a moderate path in religion.

Advice and reconciliation, Aal Al-Sheikh added that special mention must be made of those who are trying to bring deviants onto the right path. This was the work done by scholars, on an individual and group level, to seek reconciliation and to give advice to those who have involved themselves in violence and organized armed confrontation.

Economic Front

Saudi inflation at 10-month peak

Saudi inflation climbed to a 10-month peak of 4.9 per cent in April, data showed on Sunday, as global harvest concerns kept food prices up in the import-reliant kingdom. Price pressures are seen rising again this year as oil exporters recover but inflation is expected to stay in low single digits across the Gulf. Inflation in the kingdom stood at 4.7 per cent year-on-year in March, down from a record high of 11.1 per cent in July 2008. Analysts polled by Reuters expected an average inflation of 4.4 per cent this year.

Month-on-month, the cost of living in the world's largest oil exporter edged up 0.3 per cent, after a 0.5 per cent rise in March, state news agency SPA said, quoting the government data. "We were expecting a lower year-on-year inflation for April but there is a gradual build up," said John Sfakianakis, chief economist at Banque Saudi Fransi Credit Agricole Group. "This leads us to conclude that inflation for the year will average 4.7 per cent against an earlier forecast of 4.3 per cent," he said.

Saudi Arabia sees surge in solar energy output

Saudi Arabia believes renewable sources could account for up to 10 percent of its power output by 2020 with prices coming down and a regulatory framework in place, an executive from state oil giant Saudi Aramco said.

"The proposed target is between 7 to 10 percent of peak electricity generated by renewables by 2020, most likely solar.that represents roughly 5 gigawatts by 2020. Can we achieve that target? It's feasible," said Ahmad Al-Khowaiter, director of new business evaluation department at Aramco. The Kingdom has said it was investing \$ 80 billion to boost power generating capacity to 60,000 MW by 2020.

Jeddah port ranked among world's best

The Jeddah Islamic Port (JIP) has been ranked as one of the most important international ports as regards the handling of goods, ports wages, data services, tackling of problems and implementation of international standards. The recognition has come from Shippingchina.com, a website specialized in the shipping industry and the classification of international ports. This development comes in line with a referendum conducted for the sixth successive year in the shipping sector including exporters and importers as well as research centers in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Saudi travel & tourism market rises 10% in Q1

Prospects for travel and tourism industry in the Middle East and Africa region as a whole look promising in the first quarter of this year, as evinced in an increase in RevPAR (revenue per available room) - a ratio commonly used to measure financial performance in the hospitality industry.

Experts looking at the downturn in the Middle East hotel sector now regard it as an adjustment rather than a market crash. "The forecast for the coming year is good," one senior hotel executive noted. "Airline arrivals in the region are showing positive growth of around 15 percent, tourist arrivals are showing growth of between five and nine percent, GDP in the region is forecast to grow by 4.5 percent and the signs for 2010 are excellent." As a result, many hotel operators have drawn up strategic blueprints aimed at increasing their market share, with some announcing plans to build new hotels in the region.

Saudia gets first Airbus 330 Monday

As part of its modernization plan, the national carrier Saudi Arabian Airlines (SAA) will receive Monday its first new Airbus 330 at the French city of Toulouse.

The plane is the first of the eight 330s that SAA plans to acquire to add to its 70-aircraft Airbus and Boeing fleet to better serve its domestic, regional and international operational goals. "This new Airbus 330, which has a capacity of 36 seats in horizon class and 262 in economy will be a great addition to the airline. It can help us implement our current and future marketing and operational plans," Abdullah Al-Ajhar, SAA's Assistant Director for Public Relations, said.

Facebook Front

Controversial Facebook page blocked in Saudi Arabia

The Communications and Information Technology Commission has blocked a controversial Facebook page that lampoons the Islamic ban on depicting the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Facebook as well as groups protesting the page and calling for a Facebook boycott remain accessible in the Kingdom.

The page — entitled "Everybody Draw Muhammad Day!" — is based on a cartoon by Seattle-based illustrator Molly Norris. The cartoon (which does not depict the Prophet) called for May 20 to be a day to "water down the pool of targets" by having people draw their own images. It was a reaction to a Brooklyn-based group calling itself Revolution Muslim suggested that violence "will likely happen" against Parker and Stone and provided the address for the show's production facility in California.

For her part, Norris recently issued an apology and clarified that "a stranger to me" took her cartoon and created the controversial Facebook page. On Thursday, the artist's

webpage offered a link to the “Against Everybody Draw Muhammad Day” Facebook page, which is accessible inside the Kingdom.

UAE

International Front

UAE to provide six helicopters to Saudi

Abu Dhabi Aviation, the largest commercial helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft operator in the Middle East, will provide six helicopters to the Saudi Red Crescent Authority on a leasing arrangement. These six helicopters — four Bell 412 and two AW 139 — will serve as air ambulances providing support to the Saudi Emergency Medical Services programme, a Press release from Abu Dhabi Aviation said here on Tuesday. An agreement to this effect was signed by Nader Ahmed Al Hammadi, Managing Director, Abu Dhabi Aviation and Dr. Rasheed Al Eid, CEO, Saudi Red Crescent Authority in Abu Dhabi, the release said.

Khalifa receives Emir of Qatar

President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan received here at Yasat Island Resort HH Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, who arrived today in a short visit to the country. Present was HH General Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces.

Sheikh Khalifa welcomed Shaikh Hamad, stressing growth and progress of the fraternal ties between the two countries in the best interest of two peoples. The two leaders discussed ways to revamp ties in different fields. They also exchanged views on a number of issues of common interests in the regional and international arenas in line with the framework of consultations and continuous coordination between the two leaderships.

UAE making efforts to curb human trafficking

A delegation from the Ministry of Interior has toured the Czech Republic, Britain and France to gather insights from their best practices in combating human trafficking and organised crime. The UAE delegation exchanged expertise and experiences with government officials, human rights defenders and fighters of human trafficking and organised crime in the three European countries.

Colonel Saeed Al Rashidi, Director of Administration of Follow up of Foreigners and Violators and head of the delegation, said the tour of the three European nations was aimed at getting first-hand information about measures to reduce instances of human trafficking.

Khalifa urges envoys to leverage UAE's stature

Four new UAE ambassadors to Ethiopia, Australia, Montenegro and Uzbekistan were sworn in before the President, His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan at Al Bateen Palace. Shaikh Khalifa directed the new ambassadors to work sincerely to enhance the UAE's position at the international level.

“While opening up to the world, the government and people of the UAE are building bridges of friendship and cooperation with different peoples of the world, thus enhancing the country's standing and respect at all domains,” the President said, affirming the UAE's sincere desire to boost its relations with various countries of the world in political, economic, cultural and educational fields for building strong joint base of cooperation that serves mutual interest and promotes understanding and interaction.

The President added that the UAE foreign policy is based on firm principles through its commitment and respect to the UN Charter and international laws.

UAE, Italy discuss military cooperation ties

UAE Air Force, Air Defence Commander Staff Major General Pilot Mohammed bin Suwaidan Saeed Al Qamzi, received yesterday in his office at the General Headquarters of UAE Armed Forces Italian Chief of Air Defence Forces Pilot Giuseppe Bernardis and the delegation accompanying him. The meeting was attended by senior UAE and Italian Air Forces and Air Defence officers. It discussed military cooperation ties and ways to boost them. The meeting also tackled a number of issues of common interest.

Social Front

UAE ministry releases guidelines for special needs education

All teachers and therapists working with students with special needs must have relevant qualifications and will need a teaching permit by the Ministry of Education for inclusion in schools across the UAE, according to the recently announced guidelines. Schools will also be permitted to charge parents for the special education services they provide but after obtaining consent of the ministry. The general guide book on the provision of special education programmes and services in public and private schools was launched by the Ministry of Education on Thursday.

Noura Ibrahim Al Marri, Director of Special Education at the ministry said implementation of the rules and finer details on integration in private schools will happen next year. “We now have a framework on how special education needs should be incorporated ,” Marri, said. The ministry has already incorporated the inclusion policy in 10 public schools and is targeting 110 government schools in the next three years.

UAE President appoints judges and prosecutors

The President, His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in his capacity as Ruler of Abu Dhabi, has issued emiri decree No. 8 of year 2010 appointing new judges and public prosecutors.

According to the first article of the decree, three judges have been appointed at the Court of Cassation of the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department (ADJD), 16 judges at the Court of Appeal and 16 judges at the Court of First Instance. The second article named two public prosecution chairmen and five senior prosecutors. The UAE President also issued emiri decree No. 9 of year 2010, appointing a number of assistant judges and public prosecutors.

Woman is UAE's first ambassador to Vatican

A mother of six who has been appointed as the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) first ambassador to the Vatican yesterday presented her credentials to Pope Benedict XVI. The pontiff welcomed Hissa Abdulla Ahmed Al Otaiba and recalled how diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the UAE had "only recently been established" in 2007. Benedict praised the "openness" of the UAE towards foreign workers, some one million of whom are Christians, including many Catholics from the Philippines.

"I would like to note here with satisfaction that there are several Catholic churches (in the UAE) built on lands donated by the public authorities," Benedict said. "Freedom of worship contributes significantly to the common good and brings social harmony to all those societies where it is practiced," the pontiff added.

Organ transplant law a life-saver, say experts

Doctors and other residents have welcomed the UAE Health Council's approval of the laws governing organ transplant and most are confident that its abuse can be contained.

In many countries where transplants are legal organ trafficking is reported, and influential people have been found to be involved, but this is no cause for apprehension here, it is widely felt. Residents are delighted that human organs will be available. Till now, due to absence of clarity in governing laws, people had to travel to foreign countries for transplants.

"This law was much-awaited as patients have to travel to foreign destinations in Eastern or Western countries to get organ transplants," said Dr B.R. Shetty, CEO of the NMC Group. "This is a life-sustaining move for plenty of people in the UAE." Dr Shetty added, "We have experienced a dire need for liver, kidney and eye transplants. Now it can be performed here and help save hundreds of lives."

UAE intensifies fight against pollution

The emirate will become the first in the UAE to comply with a federal mandate requiring all bags and packaging materials in the country to be made of biodegradable materials by 2013.

Factories and commercial outlets found violating the local decree face hefty fines of as much as Dh50,000, reflecting Ajman's strong commitment to raising its environmental standards and echoing a growing national movement towards more efficient waste management strategies. Uncontrolled waste has clearly become a serious threat to the safety and well-being of the country's residents and its environment, and local governments are responding by introducing their own unique programs.

"It can be difficult to maintain a balance between progress and environmental responsibility. The Middle East does not want to sacrifice natural wealth in favour of economic gain and is now very active in exploring solutions to environmental issues such as incremental waste. The key to adopting a winning strategy on waste is to promote region-wide, focused dialogues to determine the full extent of environmental threats and the best ways to handle them," said Eng. Hassan Makki, Director of Waste management Department at Dubai Municipality.

Economy Front

UAE Crescent, Russia Rosneft team up for energy, gas deals

The UAE's Crescent Petroleum has teamed up with Russia's state-run oil producer Rosneft to pursue oil and gas deals in the Middle East and North Africa, Crescent said in a statement yesterday. Rosneft pumps over a fifth of Russia's oil, and is the country's largest producer. Crescent is a privately-held energy firm based in the emirate of Sharjah, in the northern UAE.

The two would initially focus on opportunities in natural gas in the Gulf, said Crescent Petroleum Executive Director Badr Jafar. "We have already identified a number of robust opportunities, and we expect to be able to announce our first joint project in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region within the coming weeks," he told Reuters in a written statement.

The partnership aims to capitalize on Rosneft's technical expertise and financial strength and Crescent's international operating experience and knowledge of the MENA region. "This agreement creates the framework for the joint pursuit of specific oil and gas exploration and development opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region," Crescent said in the statement. Rosneft Chief Executive Sergei Bogdanchikov signed the deal with Jafar in Moscow on Tuesday.

UAE to import more gas from Qatar, Iran: official

Delays in the major Shah gas project is forcing the UAE government to look at Qatar and Iran for gas imports, an Emirates General Petroleum Corp official said yesterday.

“The Shah delay is forcing the UAE to pay higher international prices for gas and import more from Qatar and Iran,” said Khalid Malallah al-Awadi, gas operations manager at Emarat, a federal government associated firm. He added gas demand in the UAE will average 7.5bn cu ft for 2010 and rise 6% to 7% annually. It will hit 15bn cu ft by 2020 compared to the 6.5bn cu ft seen in 2009. “For 2009 we were 0.5bn cu ft short on supply compared to demand and we are still seeing strong demand growth,” he said.

Aussie state Queensland wooing UAE investments in renewable technology

A four-member delegation from Queensland state of Australia visited the UAE to further strengthen bilateral relations in trade and investment with the Abu Dhabi government in particular and other emirates in general.

The visit was under a memorandum of understanding signed between the government of Queensland and the Abu Dhabi government six months ago for cooperation in a range of areas which include education, vocational training and investments in human resource development. The purpose of the recent visit was to prepare ground for further enhancing the bilateral relationship in trade and investment. Currently, Queensland is wooing investments into the renewable energy sector.

Stephen Robertson, Minister of Natural Resources, Mines, Energy and Minister of Trade in Queensland, held a meeting with Dr Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, CEO of Masdar, and explored possibilities of attracting UAE investments in renewable technologies in Australia. Talking to Khaleej Times, Robertson said: “We are trying to share the challenges and attract funds to the renewable energy sector. Renewable technology is an area where Queensland is enhancing its knowledge, experience and investments.”

KUWAIT

International Front

Kuwait, Iran sign memo for parliamentary cooperation

Kuwait's National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Kharafi and Iranian Parliament Speaker Dr. Ali Larijani signed a memorandum of understanding on Thursday, to boost parliamentary cooperation between their two countries.

The memorandum stipulates the exchange of popular and parliamentary visits, as well as increasing cooperation between parliamentary committees, namely the political, security,

economic, legal, educational and cultural committees. It also underlines the importance of exchanging views on regional developments, and support for Muslim causes, including the Palestinian cause.

Kuwaiti MPs visit Italian Parliament

The Kuwaiti side of the Kuwaiti-Italian parliamentary friendship committee visited the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) and the Senate of the Republic (upper house) of the Italian Parliament here on Thursday.

The Kuwaiti delegation, led by Member of the National Assembly Ali Al-Deqbasi, toured the historic Palazzo Montecitorio before holding talks with Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputy Stifani Stefano. The talks, attended by Kuwait Ambassador to Italy Sheikh Jaber Du'ajj Al-Ibrahim Al-Sabah, focused on ways to further enhance the friendly ties between the Kuwaiti National Assembly and the Italian Parliament.

Kuwaiti-Indian relations "strong in all sectors": KRCS chairman

Kuwaiti-Indian relations are strong at all areas due to the keenness of both states to develop relations, said Chairman of the Board for Kuwait Red Cross Society (KRCS) Barjas Al-Barjas on Thursday. This came during Al-Barjas's meeting with an Indian media delegation visiting Kuwait. "Relations between Kuwait and India are historic and ever-growing, and the presence of a large Indian community in Kuwait is evident that the people of both countries coexisted and worked together in harmony," stated Al-Barjas.

Kuwaiti Amir always supportive of Lebanon's stability

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri stressed yesterday His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's continuous support of Lebanon's stability and causes.

Al-Hariri was speaking after meeting with HH the Amir at his residence in Beirut. " His Highness the Amir is ever keen on supporting Lebanon's stability," he said, also praising the Amir's "historical" stances in support of Lebanon during wars and crises. He also expressed gratitude for HH the Amir's efforts in boosting joint Arab work. Thanking the Amir for his current visit, he said it is testimony to strong brotherly relations between the two countries and peoples.

EP praises Kuwaiti efforts to stress ties among parliamentarians

Vice President of the European Parliament (EP) Ganni Pittella expressed appreciation to Kuwait for its efforts in fostering cooperation among the European Union (EU) countries and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Pittella's statement came Wednesday evening during a meeting with a delegation from the Kuwaiti Parliament that was headed by MP Ali Al-Diqbasi.

Pittella expressed gratitude to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for his efforts to strengthen relations with the EU countries, praising the recent visits of His Highness to a number of European countries. He said that the EU was keen on signing an agreement on free trade with the GCC. The European official also hailed the Kuwaiti Parliament and described it as an active and powerful body.

Kuwait, Lebanon sign deals

Kuwaiti and Lebanon signed here Tuesday a number of cooperation deals with the presence of His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and President Michel Suleiman. Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah and Lebanese Minister of Information Tareq Mitri signed a deal on bolstering cooperation on the media sector. Kuwaiti Minister of Finance Mustafa Al-Shimali as well as Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigrants Ali Al-Shami signed two deals to bolster cooperation within the economic and commercial sectors.

Kuwait keen on strengthening ties with Iran - Al-Kharafi

Kuwait parliament speaker Jassem Al-Kharafi said here Tuesday Kuwait was keen on fostering ties with Iran in all fields. Speaking to reporters shortly after arrival in Tehran, Al-Kharafi said he was very happy to visit Iran to further cement bilateral ties. "We are keen on seeing more coordination regarding our parliamentary and political affairs specially amidst the sensitive regional circumstances," he said. Al-Kharafi hoped to hold "fruitful" talks with Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani.

Kuwait-Syria relations 'deep-rooted'

Syria cherishes a lot of love and affection toward Kuwait "represented by the Amir, government and people" Syrian vice-president Dr Nagah Al-Attar said here yesterday, hailing the deep-seated ties between Kuwait and Syria, describing them as "historic ones", especially in the cultural decade-age domain.

No Arab can disregard the Kuwaiti cultural endeavors and books that spread all over the Arab world through a collection of distinctive cultural magazines and at their forefront Arabi magazine, the World of Thought magazine and the Arab theater magazine, besides the Kuwaiti cultural, literary and theatrical movement," Al-Attar added. She also expressed her admiration for the distinctive level of daily Kuwaiti newspapers and Kuwait's keen interest in protecting the Arab and Islamic heritage through the special attention paid by Sheikha Hafsa Al-Sabah, asserting the important role played by KUNA and its pioneering cooperation with Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). Further, Al-Attar hailed the efforts of H.H. the Amir of Kuwait in boosting joint Arab action in political, economic and cultural fields, deeming the visit paid by H.H. to the Syrian capital of Damascus as a new boost to the bilateral relations.

Kuwait, Russia FMs discuss regional and international issues

Kuwait's Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah held talks Sunday with Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov on regional and international issues of mutual concern, as well as to prepare for His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah's visit to Russia. Speaking to KUNA before concluding his visit to Russia, Sheikh Mohammad said the visit of the Amir of Kuwait was "important" because Kuwait was the rotating President of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab Economic Summit. His Highness Sheikh Sabah "carries files, problems and concerns of the State of Kuwait, the GCC and the Arab world in general," said the Kuwaiti foreign minister. He said his talks with Lavrov touched upon the mega development plan in Kuwait, economic reforms and possibilities of contribution of Russia to the development plan. "there is a noticeable optimism by the Russia side to know the details of these (development) plans," said Sheikh Mohammad who noted that Russia and Kuwaiti officials would meet to discuss these plans.

Social Front

Tahous set to grill PM over pollution

Opposition lawmaker Khaled Al-Tahous is highly expected to carry out his threat and file a request to grill the prime minister today over pollution in Umm Al-Haiman and the alleged failure of the government to apply the law. Tahous last week set Monday the date to file the grilling request if the government does not withdraw the licences of several factories in the region which have been blamed for highly toxic emissions responsible for high pollution levels.

The government has only shut several factories temporarily on the basis of the environment law which does not stipulate immediate closure until the factory owners are given sufficient time to comply with environment guidelines. Tahous issued no statement on the issue yesterday, telling reporters that he will fulfill his promise. He did not elaborate amid reports that he is under strong pressure from other MPs to delay the action.

Kuwaiti protesters demand Jassem be released

Kuwait's general prosecutor ordered that ailing writer Mohammad Abdulqader Al-Jassem be detained for 21 days on charges of instigating to overthrow the regime, his lawyer and family said yesterday. They said the health condition of the top Kuwaiti writer, who is on hunger strike and has refused to take heart medication, has deteriorated, and that he was rushed to hospital from the prosecutor's office. Later yesterday, more than 200 Kuwaitis staged a sit-in outside the Palace of Justice to urge the general prosecutor to release Jassem whom they described as a "prisoner of opinion".

Jassem, 54, was arrested on Tuesday and started a hunger strike late Wednesday in protest at the accusations he faces. He is accused of instigating to overthrow the regime, undermining the status of HH the Amir and instigating to dismantle the foundations of

Kuwaiti society, and he faces a life term if convicted on any count, the lawyer said. The lawsuit against Jassem was filed by the minister of the Amiri Diwan, Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad, the elder son of HH the Amir, he said.

Economy Front

Kuwait-held eco. summit a platform for Arab integration: Sheikh Ahmad

Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Sabah on Thursday stressed that last year's Kuwait-held Arab Economic, Development and Social Summit represents a first step towards Arab integration. Sheikh Ahmad, also Minister of State for Development Affairs and Minister of State for Housing Affairs, made the comment to KUNA during his attendance of the Arab Economic Forum held in the Lebanese capital. Sheikh Ahmad stressed the need to follow up and support the success of recommendations set forth by the Kuwait-held summit adopted by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Development of government performance ongoing: Kuwaiti minister

A minister stressed on Thursday that the development of government's work systems and performance was ongoing as part of the state's development plan. Communications Minister and Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Dr. Mohammad Al-Busairi was speaking as he opened the new center for government services in Al-Jahra Governorate, Government Mall.

He said the government was making keen effort to improve the performance of all its bodies and to develop services. Opening government service centers, called "Government Malls," was an initiative made to develop performance standards and level, he stressed. They are part of the e-government projects that were listed in the development plan, he said.

Kuwait's nuclear energy viability study results set

Studies on the viability and cost of a civil nuclear energy project in Kuwait will be ready for decision makers by early next year, a senior official said. Kuwait, the world's fourth-largest oil exporter, is facing rising demand for electricity, especially during the hot summer months, and is looking into nuclear energy as an option to help it meet its needs. "We hope as we see it now, the decision should be by the end of this year, early next year," said Ahmad Bishara, the secretary general of the Kuwait National Nuclear Energy Committee in an interview on Thursday.

Kuwaiti ministry issues report on high food, building materials cost

The Minister of Commerce and Industry revealed that the ministry is ready to answer for the high cost of food items and building materials at the next Cabinet meeting. Ahmad

Al-Haroun added that 1.5 million citizens and domestic workers benefit from the ration card provided by the ministry, reported Al-Rai.

He said that the ministry's answer was based on a study comparing the price of food and building materials locally to their prices in the international and regional markets. He pointed out that the government is specifically concerned with the cost of building materials because if a citizen gets a loan from a saving and lending bank the government has to provide the citizen with subsidized building materials, enough to build a house on a 400 square-meter plot.

The report shows that the prices of some goods in Kuwait are cheaper than similar goods in neighboring states, and vice versa, he said. The prices differ due to the nature of the markets and the affects of economic variables on those markets, he explained.

OMAN

International Front

Fahd, Indian minister review ties

His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received here yesterday A K Antony, Defence Minister of India. HH Sayyid Fahd reviewed the growing deep-rooted bilateral relations with India which has flourished further during the Omani renaissance. They also discussed bilateral co-operation and current regional and global developments, besides efforts of the Omani-Indian Joint Committee in reaching the set goals to enhance relations.

Oman-India military co-operation panel's recommendations cleared

Sayyid Badr bin Saud al Busaidy, Minister Responsible for Defence Affairs, received at Bait Al Falaj here yesterday A K Antony, Defence Minister of India, who is currently visiting the Sultanate. Sayyid Badr and Antony held a session of official talks during which they reviewed bilateral relations and exchanged views on other matters of common concern. The talks also touched on co-operation between the ministries of defence in the two friendly countries.

Sayyid Badr and Antony approved the recommendations of the Oman-India Military Co-operation Committee which concluded yesterday. The talks were attended by Lt Gen Ahmed bin Harith al Nabhani, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces, Mohammed bin Nasser al Rasbi, the Defence Ministry's Under-Secretary, the Indian Defence Minister's delegation and the Indian ambassador to the Sultanate.

Oman to chair WHO committee

The 63rd Session of the World Health Organisation (WHO) general assembly opened here yesterday. Oman has been appointed as Chair of Delegates Accreditation Committee

at WHO meeting in which the Sultanate was represented by Health Minister Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi. Al Saeedi also took part in the 36th extraordinary meeting of the Arab Health Ministers Council and in the meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office.

The Sultanate is currently holding the post of Deputy Chair of WHO's Executive Office and Deputy Chair of Programmes and Management Committee. On Thursday, Al Saeedi will chair the Technological Media meeting on chronic diseases and future protection plans. He is also due to meet WHO's Director-General and other health ministers on the sidelines of the WHO General Assembly meetings.

Oman's ministerial panel to draft rights reports

A workshop on the mechanism of drafting national human rights reports began at the Diplomatic Institute at the Foreign Ministry here yesterday under the auspices of Ahmed bin Yusuf al Harthy, Foreign Ministry's Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs. The two-day event is organised by the Foreign Ministry in collaboration with the office of the UN High Commission for Human Rights. Al Harthy said the Council of Ministers has set up a ministerial panel headed by Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah, Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, with membership of ministries tasked with drafting the Sultanate's Report on Human Rights in line with Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Oman, Egypt review the regional and international developments

His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, received here yesterday Medhat Kamal Abdulraouf al Qadhi, Ambassador of Egypt to the Sultanate, who handed over to him a written message from Dr Ahmed Nadhif, Egyptian Prime Minister, dealing with bilateral relations and means of enhancing co-operation between the Sultanate and Egypt. The meeting reviewed ongoing joint efforts to cement ties within the context of the great attention accorded by the wise leaderships of the two countries, in addition to developments in the regional and international arenas.

Economy Front

Oman to open tourism offices in several countries

In a new major push to attract tourists, Oman plans to set up representative offices in several countries soon. The first to open will be in Moscow, Tourism Under-secretary Mohammed bin Hamoud Al Toobi said, adding that the target markets would be Russia and the neighbouring countries. "We also plan to open tourism offices in China, Japan and India as part of our intensified efforts to woo holidaymakers to the sultanate," he further said. He was talking to reporters at the opening of 'Oman Travel Market 2010' (OTM) here on Monday.

Oman-US panel on FTA

A workshop on “Optimising business opportunities in the Oman-US Free Trade Agreement” opened at Muscat InterContinental Hotel yesterday under the auspices of Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry for Commerce and Industry. US Ambassador to the Sultanate Dr Richard J Schmierer, gave a speech describing the FTA as a historical achievement in the Omani-US ties. He pointed out that, as per the FTA standards, the Sultanate has become more competitive at the regional and international levels.

The Sultanate has taken drastic measures to ensure protection of intellectual property rights and increase transparency of systems and privatisation of government-owned sectors. Such efforts will definitely lead to further growth in the Omani economy, Schmierer added. He hailed the economic growth witnessed by the Sultanate under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. The Sultanate’s commitment to free trade standards has encouraged foreign investors and promoted the Sultanate as a special investment destination, said Schmierer.

BAHRAIN

International Front

Bahrain suspends Al Jazeera

Bahrain has suspended local operations of Qatari broadcaster Al Jazeera and barred a crew from travelling to the Gulf Arab state, accusing the channel of flouting press rules. “Bahrain has temporarily frozen the office of the Qatari Al Jazeera Satellite TV Channel for breaching the professional media norms and flouting the laws regulating the press and publishing,” the official Bahrain News Agency said, without giving details. Officials at Bahrain’s Ministry of Information either declined to comment or could not be reached.

Bahrain-US ties hailed

Bahrain's crucial role in promoting Middle East stability was underlined last night as His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander, met top US leaders. He held key talks with Vice-President Joe Biden at the White House and Defence Secretary Robert Gates at the Pentagon. The US Vice-President praised the kingdom's instrumental role in reinforcing peace in the Middle East and the Gulf, and credited HRH the Crown Prince with strenuous efforts in this regard. The proximity talks between the Palestinian Authority and Israel with the US mediation and support came under the spotlight.

Social Front

Jobs for Bahraini graduates 'top priority'

Labour Minister Dr Majeed Al Alawi yesterday received representatives of leading industrial companies and discussed co-operation to promote training and employment of university graduates. He stressed the important role of the private sector, particularly big firms, in spurring growth and spearheading the national economy. He also highlighted their efforts to achieve the required rate of Bahrainisation, stressing the ministry's drive to preserve the rights of the national workforce.

Society not ready for women in politics: Bahrain parliament chairman

Bahrain is not ready for women in politics, says parliament chairman Khalifa Al Dhahrani. He spoke out after Princess Sabeeka asked the students if they would vote for a well-qualified woman in parliament. The majority in the room raised their hands, while others said they had yet to see women prove their capabilities in the political arena. This prompted Mr Al Dhahrani to say that Bahraini society is not ready for women in politics. "We have to look at our society in a realistic way and I don't believe that it is ready for women in politics. "Our parliament is run by religious factions and blocs, which all support women but I don't think that as a society we are ready for this." But Princess Sabeeka and other panel members interjected, saying Bahrain was not completely run by religious factions. Shura Council chairman Ali Saleh Al Saleh said Islam had given women more power and rights than any other religion.

Political role of Bahraini women in focus

Bahrain University students will have the opportunity to discuss their views on Bahraini women's participation in the political arena tomorrow. The event, which is organised by the Supreme Council for Women (SCW) in co-operation with the university, is aimed at exploring their ideas of the political system in Bahrain. The seminar will be held under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, wife of His Majesty King Hamad and chairwoman of SCW. It also aims to learn about the student's opinions on women's participation in politics and inform them of their role in building and leading the future of the country.

Bahrain Cabinet hails Parliament's achievements

The achievements of the fourth session of the second legislative term and the constructive co-operation between the executive and legislative powers were hailed yesterday. The Cabinet, chaired by His Royal Highness Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, also took pride in the landmark achievements since the bicameral system was established as a cornerstone of the reform project initiated by His Majesty King Hamad.

"The Government spared no efforts to build bridges of co-operation between the executive and legislature in line with His Majesty's orders," Cabinet Affairs Minister

Shaikh Ahmed bin Ateyatala Al Khalifa said. HRH the Premier extended thanks to all ministers and officials for their co-operation. "This made more landmark achievements possible for Bahrain and its people," he said.

Economy Front

Bahrain boosts ranking in global trade index

Bahrain has been ranked 22nd in the Enabling Trade Index (ETI) 2010, improving its last year's ranking by two places. The ETI, published yesterday by the World Economic Forum, assesses countries across the globe on the institutions and policies they have in place to enable trade. A total of 125 countries were ranked according to their performance across four areas: market access, border administration, transport and communications infrastructure, and the business environment. Bahrain's improved ranking was based on a strong performance across a number of key areas. and technology.

Bahrain also ranked highly in terms of the quality of its port infrastructure (17th), its airport infrastructure (20th) and regulatory environment (25th). Economic Development Board (EDB) chief executive Shaikh Mohammed bin Essa Al Khalifa welcomed the improved ranking, "Bahrain has always been a trading nation. We continue to focus on improving ease of trade, both with our neighbours in the GCC and Middle East as well as with global trading partners in Europe, the Americas and across Asia," he said.

Bahrain eyeing entry into 'cloud computing'

Bahrain is all set to move quickly into the "clouds", a top IT industry professional predicted yesterday. Microsoft Corporation applied innovation director Ruediger Dorn said there is a will and a lot of interest in Bahrain to move on to the next level - that of "cloud computing" - in the very near future. "There have to be some decisions on where Bahrain 'cloud' servers will be but there are several options open," he told the GDN on the sidelines of the IT Expo, being held at the Bahrain International Exhibition and Convention Centre. "Bahrain's expertise in the IT field is well-known and it is time to take it further," he said.

Bapco pioneering use of solar energy

With the aim of introducing solar energy. Negotiations are ongoing with overseas companies about installation of such facilities at Bapco and all of the country's petroleum sector facilities, a senior official revealed. Delivering the keynote speech at the Energy Evolution Middle East Conference at Bahrain Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Spa yesterday, Oil and Gas Affairs Minister and National Oil and Gas Authority (Noga) chairman Dr Abdulhussain Mirza said the government department was pioneering the use of renewable energy across the country.

"Solar energy modules have been installed at Bapco facilities and these are being tested now," he said. "The results so far have been very encouraging and positive. We have already opened negotiations with Japanese firms on the possible applications and installation of solar energy generating modules for petroleum sector facilities and these should bear fruit soon."

Bahrain 'setting global standards'

Adhering to international economic standards and regulations is crucial to Bahrain's economic growth, a conference heard yesterday. Bahrain and the rest of the international community need to follow similar economic standards, apply the same policies and maintain the same regulations to ensure continued growth, said Finance Minister Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Khalifa.

"Bahrain is a financial centre which adheres to international standards, which should be applied in all developing countries, especially those who face challenges in the aftermath of the global economic crisis," he said. "We need to make sure we have a level playing field because it will result in financial stability."

QATAR

International Front

Darfur peace talks resume in Doha later in May - Al-Mahmoud

HE the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Mahmoud said yesterday that the Darfur peace negotiations would resume in Doha before the end of this month. The minister was speaking after holding talks with the Sudanese government negotiating team headed by Dr Amin Hassan Omar. The talks were attended by the UN and African Union envoy for peace in Darfur, Gibril Bassole. The minister said that discussions centred on the agenda of the coming negotiations. Invitations would be sent to the parties concerned, including the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), to start negotiations soon, he said.

Qatar, Luxembourg discuss bilateral ties

HH the Heir Apparent Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani receiving the Grand Duke of Luxembourg Guillaume Jean Joseph Marie. Talks dealt with bilateral ties and means of further boosting them in various fields. Later Grand Duke Guillaume and his accompanying delegation left Doha, concluding three-day official visit to Qatar.

Qatar and Brazil sign agreements to boost ties

Qatar and Brazil yesterday held a session of talks, at the Emiri Diwan chaired by the Emir H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

A red-carpet welcome ceremony was accorded to the Brazilian President on his arrival at the Emiri Diwan. The session was attended by the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabor Al Thani, a number of ministers and the Ambassador of Qatar to Brazil Anwar Nahas.

The talks dealt with bilateral relations and means of enhancing them besides a number of regional and international issues of mutual concern. Following the talks, the Emir and the Brazilian President held a bilateral meeting, attended by the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

Qaradawi urges Palestinian factions to join hands for resistance

Prominent Islamic scholar Sheikh Yousuf al-Qaradawi has urged the Palestinian factions to unify ranks and launch a “jihad” on Israel, while dismissing the peace process in the Middle East as pursuing a “mirage”. In his Friday sermon, Sheikh Qaradawi described the 62nd anniversary of what he called the “state of the Zionist enemy” as “a painful experience that is unforgettable”.

“Tomorrow Israel will complete 62 years of its existence. This is the anniversary of the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe) which Muslims and Arabs should never forget. Some people do not even know that 62 years ago Israel had not even existed. There were only a few thousand Jews in Palestine then,” he told a congregation at the Omar bin Al Khattab mosque.

About the Middle East peace process, Qaradawi, who is the chairman of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, raised doubts about efforts to work out a “peaceful solution”, saying that only resistance would ensure the return of the Arab lands usurped by the Jewish state.

Darfur rebels deny resuming Doha talks

A Darfur rebel group that suspended peace talks with Khartoum after alleged armed clashes denied yesterday a UN mediator’s claim that it would resume the Qatari-brokered negotiations.

Ahmed Hussein Adam, a spokesman with the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) said his group was leaning towards quitting the negotiations altogether. “We are still suspending our participation in the negotiations, and we are closer to withdrawing from the negotiations in Qatar,” he told AFP.

Doha conclusion is key to global recovery: WTO

The conclusion of the stalled Doha Round of free trade talks is crucial to the recovery from the global financial crisis, World Trade Organization chief Pascal Lamy said on Sunday. “The Doha Round, at this moment of the crisis exiting, is a vitally needed and,

to be frank, a very low cost global economic stimulus package," Lamy told participants at an economic forum in Bahrain. "Estimates suggest that the implementation of this round would inject to the tune of \$ 300-400 billion a year into the global economy," he told participants at the Bahrain Global Forum.

The Doha Round of talks launched in 2001 were due to be wrapped up in March, according to a target set by the G20 group of leading and emerging economies, but previous deadlines have been repeatedly missed. The negotiations have focused on dismantling obstacles to trade for poor nations by striking an accord that would cut agriculture subsidies and tariffs on industrial goods.

Qatar among the safest to live in: WEF

Qatar is one of the safest countries in the world to live in although it needs to do much when it comes to removing hurdles to doing business. The country ranks third in the world in terms of providing physical security to its people (both nationals and expatriates), behind only Finland and Iceland and much ahead of its GCC neighbours. This is the gist of the 'Global Enabling Trade Report 2010' released by the Geneva-based World Economic Forum. The report ranks countries based on various indicators.

Qatar Emir, Syrian President hold talks

HH the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani held a session of talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the Emiri Diwan yesterday. The talks were attended by HE the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor al-Thani. The discussions dealt with bilateral relations and means of enhancing them in all fields in addition to a number of regional and international issues of common concern.

Economy Front

South Korean firms urged to invest in Qatar

Qatar has called on South Korean companies to participate in its energy projects and also to invest in its growing power generation and water desalination sector.

"We invite Korean companies to bid for every energy project in Qatar, from the upstream through the downstream sector," Abdullah Hussein Salatt, Senior Advisor to Deputy Premier and Minister of Energy and Industry, H E Abdullah bin Hamad Al Attiyah told a seminar yesterday. "We would also like to see more Korean investment in the Qatari power generation and water desalination sector, which is experiencing huge growth," he said in his opening remarks at the first Qatar-Korea Joint Seminar on Technical Energy Issues.

No 'serious proposal' to export surplus power: Qatar

Qatar has yet to receive a “serious proposal” to export power to its neighbours in the region, HE the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Energy and Industry Abdullah bin Hamad al-Attiyah said yesterday.

Addressing a press conference on the sidelines of the inauguration of the Mesaieed Power Station, the Deputy Prime Minister said power projects, including the Ras Girtas Power Station and Mesaieed Power Station, will provide the country with a surplus of electricity from next year. Qatar is expected to have more than 500 megawatts (MW) of spare power capacity this summer which it could export.

QP signs gas deal with Shell, China

Qatar Petroleum (QP), in association with Shell and China National Petroleum Corporation, will jointly explore for natural gas in Block D, which covers an area of 8,089sq km, both onshore and offshore Qatar and is located close to Ras Laffan. Qatar, represented by QP, signed an Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement (EPSA), with Shell and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in Doha last night.

The total term of the EPSA is 30 years and starts with a five-year “first exploration period” followed by a 25-year development phase. During the exploration period, Shell and CNPC will implement a “work programme”, including exploration, technical studies, 2D and 3D seismic acquisition, processing, re-processing and interpretation, and drilling a number of exploration wells to the pre-Khuff formation. Shell, as the operator, will hold a 75% equity share with CNPC holding the remainder in the JV project.

Qatari minister blames oil price slide on eurozone woes

Qatar's Deputy Premier and Minister of Energy and Industry HE Abdullah bin Hamad al-Attiyah yesterday blamed the uncertainty over eurozone debt problems for the volatility in the oil market and the slide in crude prices. “The uncertainty, especially in Europe, the bailout (for Greece), and the euro (dropping value)... all those put a lot of pressure on the economy and oil prices,” al-Attiyah told reporters on the sidelines of an economic forum in Bahrain. “It is volatile. There is uncertainty, and we are watching with nervousness,” he said after oil prices tumbled to a three-month low on Friday. “Oil prices are not reflecting demand and supply,” he said, adding that it was “very difficult to predict” their movement.

Qatar and Malaysia sign MoU on \$ 5bn investment

Qatar's sovereign wealth fund plans to invest \$ 5bn on projects including energy and real estate in Malaysia, according to a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed yesterday by both countries.

A joint committee will be set up between the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) and 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB), a Kuala Lumpur-based wealth fund, to explore

potential ventures, a joint statement said. “The MoU will include investing in the energy sector and a strategic real estate development in the Klang Valley,” the joint statement said.