

YEAR IN REVIEW - OMAN

As the new year begins, GulfWire has asked Dr. John Duke Anthony to look back over 1999 and summarize what he regards as significant developments in individual GCC countries overlooked or down-played by the general media.

John Duke Anthony

As 1999 began, the Sultanate of Oman faced the rather bleak prospect of receiving greatly diminished revenues from its modest exports of energy owing to the price of oil having plummeted to below ten dollars a barrel. However, along with other oil-exporting nations, Oman benefited substantially from the doubling of oil prices that followed the production cutbacks in March led by Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Mexico, and Iran.

In addition, the natural gas sector of the country's economy continued to flourish. Long-term supply contracts to Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand that were confirmed during the year practically assured the substantial loans which financed the construction of Oman's massive natural gas export facilities at Sur, on the Sultanate's Indian Ocean littoral, will be re-paid as early as 2004.

Oman also neared enactment and implementation of the few remaining economic reforms required to facilitate its admission into the World Trade Organization, which, when finalized, will enhance considerably the Sultanate's attractiveness in the eyes of foreign investors.

Simultaneously, Salalah port, in the southernmost province of Dhufar, is increasingly viewed by international shipping lines as the premier site for off-loading cargo bound for the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and areas elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. In the near future, Salalah is also expected to serve as a new hub for transshipment of container cargoes destined for Australia, China, Egypt, Lebanon, South Africa, and New Zealand. Barely six months after its winter 1999 opening, the port's facilities were already booked solid for the next year and a half.

On the political front, Oman continued to expand the extent of popular participation in government. Sultan Qaboos appointed 40 members to a new Council of State. The new body, like the older Consultative Council, which continues and whose future members will be elected by direct vote of the citizenry, advises the government on matters of public policy.

The new council is comprised of former ambassadors, judges, ministers, and military leaders as well as representatives from business, academe, and other sectors. Six of its members are women.

In another related first for Oman and its fellow members in the Gulf Cooperation Council - Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE -- the Sultanate appointed its first woman ambassador.

In addition, several steps were taken to implement further provisions of the country's Basic Law. Promulgated by Sultan Qaboos several years ago, the law

seeks to prepare the ground for Oman's evolution in the direction of a constitutional monarchy.

Among such steps taken during the year under review was the broadening -- as witnessed by supportive pronouncements of the Council of State and the Consultative Council, respectively -- of the national base of popular consensus on how best to delineate a division of authority among the country's administrative, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

Chief among the initiatives launched in this regard was an effort to establish an Omani High Court. Such a court would be apart from and above the three existing court systems that administer the country's Shari'ah (Islamic), criminal, and civil law.

In what would be a first among Arabian Peninsula countries, the new court would be empowered to resolve legal and jurisdictional conflicts between ministries, settle constitutional issues, and try administrative officials accused of corruption or other violations of the public's trust.

In foreign policy, Oman continued to play a highly effective behind-the-scenes role of moderation and mediation on matters involving Iraq, Iran, and the Arab-Israeli peace process. The Sultanate also became the first country in the Arabian Peninsula to have demarcated all its international borders.

In recognition of Oman's major contributions to diplomacy and conflict resolution in one of the world's most strategically vital regions, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, in a special ceremony in Washington, D.C., bestowed upon Sultan Qaboos an International Peace Award.

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