

Observer Features

Observer

July 23 Anniversary Special

Wednesday July 23, 2008

Enlightened leadership secures Oman's future prosperity

Oman has risen in the world's esteem as a country that, in many respects, is a model for others to emulate. The Sultanate today is well-regarded as an influential and responsible member of the international community that has prudently utilised its limited oil wealth for the good of its people, and continues to build cooperative ties with its neighbours and countries across the world. Today's progressive, modernising and forward-looking Oman takes its inspiration from the wise policies of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos



His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, Architect of the country's modern Renaissance.



Cooperative and harmonious ties with all countries of the world, most notably with fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos at the GCC Summit held in Doha on December 3 and 4, 2007.

THIRTY-EIGHT years of enlightened leadership, underpinned by far-sighted domestic and foreign policies, continue to yield significant dividends to Oman and its people. These gains are manifest not only in the country's continued economic progress and modernisation, but also in the overall well-being of its people. The latest indicators attest to a robust upward trend in per capita income levels, macroeconomic growth, health, employment generation, and socio-economic development.

The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and Unicef are among a host of international organisations that have provided laudable assessments of the robust improvements being witnessed in Oman across a wide socio-economic spectrum. Crowning all of these accolades is the recent announcement by the renowned think-tank, the Economist Intelligence Unit, maintaining Oman's position as the most peaceful country in the Middle East for the second successive year.

A model

Indeed, Oman has risen in the world's esteem as a country that, in many respects, is a model for others to emulate. The Sultanate today is well-regarded as an influential and responsible member of the international community that has prudently utilised its limited oil wealth for the good of its people, and continues to build cooperative ties with its neighbours and countries across the world.

Today's progressive, modernising and forward-looking Oman takes its inspiration from the wise policies of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, Architect of the country's modern Renaissance. These policies, forged at the dawn of the Renaissance in 1970 when Oman was an impoverished and isolated Arabian backwater, continue to form the bedrock upon which the country's future prosperity will be secured.

There are numerous examples to show that His Majesty's enlightened policies have paid great dividends. The most significant, by far, is the publication in May this year of the annual Global Peace Index (GPI), which rated Oman as the most tranquil in the Middle East. The Sultanate was also ranked 25th in the Global Peace Index — a catalogue of 140 countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, listed according to their peacefulness and covering of a broad range of 24 indicators measuring both internal and external peacefulness of nations.

This enviable ranking was a robust endorsement of the wise policies and benevolent leadership of His Majesty, under whose stewardship over the past nearly four decades, the country has risen to such lofty heights of relative tranquillity. Indeed, peace, reconciliation, mutual understanding, non-interference and cooperation are the cornerstones of His Majesty the Sultan's foreign policy — guiding principles that have secured for the Sultanate lasting peace on its borders and an enduring image beyond as a friendly, tolerant and peaceable country.

Not surprisingly, His Majesty was conferred in March 2007 the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding, the top prize presented by the Government of India to prominent international figures in appreciation of their domestic and international efforts for achieving peace, security, justice and equality. Past winners have included such iconic figures as Aung San Suu Kyi, Yasser Arafat, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa.

His Majesty was cited for promoting "goodwill and friendship among peoples of the world". "The Sultan has emerged as a leader who is much loved and admired not only by his own people but also by the entire region," an official Indian spokesman had declared in announcing the award. His Majesty the Sultan "has completely transformed Oman into a modern and prosperous state," the statement said.

Indeed, the award underlines the worldwide esteem that His Majesty the Sultan enjoys. This universal regard for His Majesty stems from the political, economic and social values set by His Majesty who is a model for those desirous of achieving comprehensive and sustainable development for their nation and their people. The Nehru Award was the latest in the long list of singular honours bestowed on His Majesty in recent years.

Oman has pursued cooperative and harmonious ties with all countries of the world, most notably with fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab world in general. With the Gulf states, Oman has taken vigorous steps to promote a greater integration with the Gulf bloc, at the political, economic, security and social levels.

GCC ties

At the 28th GCC Summit in Doha last December, His Majesty the Sultan joined fellow leaders in discussing avenues for further cementing their brotherly ties. Joining the leaders as a special invitee was Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, underlining the common desire of the GCC bloc for better ties with Tehran.

The Doha summit concluded with a landmark declaration with regard to the creation of a Gulf common market with effect from January 1, 2008. The leaders also agreed on steps to support initiatives towards establishing a GCC railway, and power and water grid, and even explore the potential for civilian nuclear energy to meet the region's escalating energy demands. Muscat will host the 29th GCC Summit this year.

His Majesty continues to extend considerable attention to a host of Arab causes that have long eluded resolution, notably the long-standing Palestinian question. Oman backs the Arab peace initiative in ending Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories leading to the creation of a sovereign and independent Palestine.

The Sultanate has also welcomed initiatives to bring political stability to war-torn Iraq, and has voiced hope that Iraqis of all affiliations and backgrounds rally around a common desire to pursue peace and prosperity for the entire population. In line with this objective, a high-level Omani delegation made a landmark visit to Baghdad in June in an expression of solidarity and support for the Iraqi people. The delegation, led by the Secretary-General of the National Economy Ministry, pledged support for Iraq's reconstruction effort.

Oman also warmly applauded the successful outcome of talks in Doha to end the political stalemate in Lebanon. The Sultanate has been part of a ministerial committee set up under the auspices of the Arab League, which has been interacting with all parties involved in the Lebanese crisis in the hope of nudging them towards a solution.

Keen to foster closer ties with countries far and near, His Majesty travelled to a number of countries for talks with world leaders, while also playing host to several visiting heads of state and high level dignitaries. In February this year, His Majesty received Shaikh Hamdan bin

Zayed al Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister of the UAE, who had led his country's side at the Oman-UAE Joint Supreme Committee meeting.

Underscoring the deep-rooted ties between Oman and the United States, three top-level US personalities visited Muscat during the course of this year, notably Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, and Admiral William J Fallon, Commander of the US Central Command.

His Majesty has maintained a tradition of consulting closely with Arab leaders on a wide spectrum of regional and international issues, offering enlightened counsel and receiving new perspectives and insights. Thus, in March, His Majesty received King Abdallah II of Jordan for talks on issues of common interest. More recently, His Majesty met with the leaders of the UAE and Egypt during a private visit to these brotherly countries.

Bilateral links

His Majesty's government has also keenly pursued efforts to build bridges of friendship and cooperation with all the countries of the world. During the course of the year, Oman established diplomatic links with Andorra and celebrated the opening of its consulate in Belarus. Blossoming relations with Kazakhstan also received a major boost during the year with the visit of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in March. Both sides signed MoUs for cooperation in the fields of science and education, as well as facilitate travel by holders of diplomatic passports.

On the domestic front, His Majesty continued to provide leadership and guidance to his government in the pursuit of the country's continued modernisation and welfare of the Omani people. A major preoccupation for His Majesty's government this year has been the effects of the global phenomenon of rising inflation on the local population. Surging food, commodity, building material, steel and property rental prices prompted His Majesty to order measures to mitigate the effects of these increases on the cost of living of ordinary people.

At the same time, His Majesty issued Royal orders for increases in the monthly wages of thousands of government employees, as well as hikes in payouts to low-income families entitled to social welfare. His Majesty also directed the government ministries and departments concerned to take necessary steps to ensure availability of food staples, and monitor any unwarranted increase in the prices of essentials. Subsidies were announced on flour imports, while the Property Law was amended to curb the spiral in property rents. These initiatives have contributed significantly in stabilising inflationary trends and calming consumer concerns.

Majlises shoulder major role in nation-building

The Majlis Oman includes the Majlis Addawla and the Majlis Ash'shura in an integrated system that provides a platform for effective exchange of views aimed at supporting the government efforts



His Majesty Sultan Qaboos presided over a joint meeting of the Council of Ministers and Majlis Ash'shura at Hisn Ash'shumookh in Manah on February 26. His Majesty the Sultan praised the efforts of the government and the Majlis in shouldering their responsibilities towards the country and its citizens. His Majesty the Sultan gave his Royal directives to members of both the councils to join hands, maintain continuous co-ordination to implement the country's development plans efficiently and utilise all resources to achieve more progress, prosperity and welfare.

THE Majlis Addawla and the Majlis Ash'shura are shouldering a major responsibility in the comprehensive development of the country, serving as the voice of the people. These responsibilities have increased with the social and economic expansion witnessed by the Sultanate, including the population growth and the implementation of a number of major economic projects across the country.

The Majlis Oman (Council of Oman) includes the Majlis Addawla and the Majlis Ash'shura in an integrated system that provides a platform for effective exchange of views aimed at supporting the government efforts. During a joint meeting of the Council of Ministers and the Majlis Ash'shura, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos praised the efforts of the government and the Majlis in shouldering responsibilities towards the country and citizens.

His Majesty the Sultan gave directives to members of both the councils to join hands and maintain continuous co-ordination to implement the country's development plans efficiently and utilise all resources to achieve more progress, prosperity and welfare. Members of the Council of Ministers and Majlis Ash'shura expressed deep thanks and appreciation to His Majesty for his wise directives. They also pledged to take these directives into consideration while shouldering national commitments to achieve welfare for Omani citizens and safeguard the renaissance achievements under the wise leadership of His Majesty the Sultan.

The Majlis members expressed delight with the speech of His Majesty the Sultan before the Majlis Oman and the Council of Ministers. They appreciated the Royal call to intensify joint efforts and enhance co-operation with the state's institutions, especially the Majlis Ash'shura in order to reach common visions that take into consideration the priorities of development and requirements of each stage.

A meeting between the Council of Ministers and the Majlis Ash'shura was attended by His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Isa'ee, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'shura, and members of both councils.

The meeting reviewed a number of issues related to co-operation between the two councils. It looked into mechanisms of activating joint co-operation between the two councils to ensure further progress in serving the future goals of the Sultanate's comprehensive development march.

During the year, the Majlis Addawla set up five panels comprising members with scientific and professional background. An official session of talks between the Majlis Ash'shura and the European Parliamentary delegation was held in Oman. The talks touched on co-operation between the GCC and the EU countries and ways of strengthening them, particularly activation of a free trade agreement between the two bodies. The session touched on a framework of dialogue between the two sides.

The Majlis Ash'shura recently approved the income tax draft law referred to it by the Council of Ministers. Tax reduction on profits of corporates is one of the incentives to encourage local investment and lure direct foreign investments to the Sultanate. The Majlis hailed the initiatives taken by the government, as per the directives of His Majesty the Sultan, to alleviate the impact of inflation.



Dr Yahya bin Mahfoudh al Mantheri, Chairman of the Majlis Addawla, presides over a session of the Majlis in February.

Priorities

The importance of providing appropriate environment and encouraging investments in the Sultanate in non-oil sectors to diversify the sources of income and creating more job opportunities was highlighted by the Majlis members. The Majlis hosted Mohammed bin Nasser al Khusaibi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of National Economy and Chairman of Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (TRA), who spoke on the development of telecommunications services in the Sultanate.

The establishment of TRA in May 2001 was part of a government initiative to liberalise and develop the telecom sector, he said. Since its establishment, the TRA has been implementing a strategic plan to liberalise the sector and introduce competition in a fair and transparent manner, he added.

As part of the attention accorded by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in the importance of continuing meeting between the Council of Ministers and the Council of Oman to maintain co-operation among the state institutions, a joint meeting between the Council of Ministers and the Majlis Ash'shura Office Panel was held at the Council of Ministers in the presence of HH Sayyid Fahd.

He pointed out the government's interest in activating the role of the Majlis and enabling it to shoulder its national commitments in the service of the Royal objectives outlined by His Majesty the Sultan. The council members reviewed a number of issues which enhance co-operation between the two councils to achieve further progress in the development process.

The chairman and members of the Majlis Office Panel expressed appreciation for the interest shown by His Majesty the Sultan to their role in national work. Dr Yahya bin Mahfoudh al Mantheri, Chairman of the Majlis Addawla, hosted Keith Vaz, member of the British House of

Commons and Chairman of the Supportive Committee for Internal Affairs at the House, and his delegation.

Dr Al Mantheri commended the good bilateral relations and stressed the importance of such meetings in enhancing relations and exchanging views on issues of common concern, especially in parliamentary fields. The guests expressed appreciation for the visit and the good opportunity it provided them to meet officials to exchange expertise in parliamentary fields and issues of interest for both countries.

They also commended Oman's progress in various spheres under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. Al Isa'ee also received Vaz. The British officials underlined the importance of increasing co-ordination between the two councils. The Majlis Ash'shura approved a report of the health and social committee on its study of a food safety draft law referred by the government.

The draft law will ensure citizens' health and safety are not endangered by expired foodstuff or foodstuff exposed to improper storage. The Majlis Addawla in a meeting expressed deep thanks and gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos for issuing Royal orders to provide basic food commodities all over the Sultanate, reduce the price of flour and increase the salaries of employees of the state administrative apparatus and social security families.

In defence of the homeland

His Majesty the Sultan took great care in making the Armed Forces a defence body that enjoys high levels of combat abilities. Among the top priorities of the strategy is the diversification of weaponry and the grooming of military personnel to international standards. The SAF never deviates from the pledge proclaimed in its sacred oath of "Faith in All, Loyalty to the Sultan and Defence of the Homeland"



The SAF has been supplied with the latest military equipment, including tanks, armoured personnel carriers, missile launching systems, artillery, fighter and transport aircraft, warships, vessels serving in a variety of services, a full range of telecommunication facilities designed for supporting military action and a network of air force and naval bases.

THE Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) is one of the major landmarks of the Sultanate's blessed renaissance led by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.

The strategy adopted in developing the SAF depends on accurate and comprehensive planning. In this respect, the SAF seeks the assistance of highly qualified personnel who are capable of handling advanced technology that emerges worldwide in the military field.

His Majesty the Sultan took great care in making the Armed Forces a defence body that enjoys high levels of combat abilities. Among the top priorities of the strategy is the diversification of weaponry and the grooming of military personnel to international standards.

The SAF never deviates from the pledge proclaimed in its sacred oath of "Faith in All, Loyalty to the Sultan and Defence of the Homeland". The departments of the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Guard of Oman (RGO) have witnessed continuous modernisation during the years of the blessed renaissance. The development covered all areas of organisation, training and armaments.

The Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF)

The development of the SAF stems from the rationale that loyal soldiers are the foundation for safeguarding the achievements of the renaissance. The SAF has been supplied with the latest military equipment, including tanks, armoured personnel carriers, missile launching systems, artillery, fighter and transport aircraft, warships, vessels serving in a variety of services, a full range of telecommunication facilities designed for supporting military action and a network of air force and naval bases. A project is in place to link the bases together in one uniform command and control system. The aim is to enable the SAF to shoulder its responsibility in the country's defence.

The Royal Army of Oman (RAO)

Thanks to the attention of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, the RAO has become a military force to be proud of. Its infantry brigades and support formations have been supplied with hi-tech weapons. In the meantime, a comprehensive training programme is pursued to ensure proper management of battlefield operations.

While every care is taken to develop formation to perform the role assigned to it, the units have been made to complement each other with a set of fire management, defence tactics and air defence weapons added. As part of the RAO's ongoing development process, a variety of military facilities were added recently in fire management, defence tactics, combat tanks, automatic artillery, reconnaissance vehicles, various types of transport vehicles and personal arms. Modern supply systems and Internet systems were also added.

The Firqah Forces serve as an integrated system. The formation enjoys all sorts of training, service and telecommunication facilities. The SAF also boasts a high-level medical services department serving military personnel within the RAO. Its units are supplied with a variety of diagnostic, laboratory and surgical facilities. Besides offering medical support to the troops, this department helps in evacuation and development operations. The SAF Medical Services School grooms medical staff and distributes them to serve in the different divisions of the SAF.

The Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO)

The capabilities of the RAFO have witnessed great development after the introduction of modern aircraft suitable for combat, transport and interception. The RAFO also boasts a large number of Hawk and Jaguar aircraft. Another qualitative shift in the RAFO's modernisation is the recent purchase of Super Lynx-300 helicopter which operates in support of the Royal Navy of Oman's missions to protect the Omani coast. This comes as part of coordination between the two armed wings, air force and navy.

NH-90 is yet another valuable addition to the RAFO for combat and landing missions, as well as search and rescue operations. This type of aircraft offers support services to citizens in harsh or inaccessible terrain. One of the RAFO's leading projects is Musanaa Airbase which is being designed to receive modern fighter aircraft.

The RAFO gives aerial support to other SAF wings during refresher exercises as well as exercises carried out jointly with the armed forces of other GCC or friendly countries for improving the skills of the SAF personnel. In January 2007, a contract was signed to purchase two Airbus A320-300 aircraft to replace transport aircraft BAC1-11.



The capabilities of the RAFO have witnessed great development after the introduction of modern aircraft suitable for combat, transport and interception. Right: The RNO has become a full-fledged fleet that boasts advanced armament and it merits the respect of all. Its flotilla includes well-known artillery ships, rapid missile launching vessels and ships for support activities, training and hydrographic survey.

The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO)

Due to the Sultanate's strategic position at the gateway to the Arab Gulf — particularly the Strait of Hormuz, which is considered one of the most important water passages in the world, the Sultanate found it necessary to build a modern naval force to guarantee a permanent strong presence around this vital regional location for the sake of safeguarding the country's national, strategic, security and economic interests.

The RNO has become a full-fledged fleet that boasts advanced armament and it merits the respect of all. Its flotilla includes well-known artillery ships, rapid missile launching vessels, and ships for support activities, training and hydrographic survey. The RNO vessels safeguard the secure passage of oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, besides providing naval transport for the SAF units along the Sultanate's coast.

Another important role played by the RNO vessels is the protection of the Sultanate's marine wealth, including fisheries stocks. The RNO signed Khareef project's contract which provides for the building of three naval vessels. The contract, signed with Vosper Thornycroft company of Britain, comes as an advanced step in the modernisation of the RNO to raise its combat potency.

The Said bin Sultan Naval Base is, by international standards, an important naval installation in the region. Its establishment took into account the need to meet the operational, training and logistic requirements of the RNO. The base comprises a set of engineering and maintenance centres.

The naval training centre of the Said bin Sultan Naval Base has been approved as the centre of GCC countries' IT operations due to its ideal performance. The purpose is to reach a basic criterion for the development of the use of computer as a means of all institutions merging into the digital society project.

To reinforce information technology's knowledge among personnel of the RNO and within the context of the overall development of the navy, the International Licence Organisation (GCC region) approved the Naval Training Centre at the Said bin Sultan Naval Base as a professional training institution to help RNO join other state bodies in the digital society transformation process.