

## News in Brief

## West Concerned About 'Gas OPEC'

Representatives of the world's leading gas producers discussed Iranian-Russian proposals for greater cooperation.

According to The Guardian, ministers and experts from the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) met in Tehran on Tuesday amid speculation that members are considering an OPEC-style club for gas producers.

The Iranian oil ministry's website said the two-day meeting considered a Russian "charter" that would include proposals for an international forum on gas prices and a supply network.

The idea of an OPEC-style body for gas producers has caused concern in the US and the EU on security of supply and price issues. Russia has the world's largest gas reserves, with Iran the number two.

However, Iran's Deputy Oil Minister Ali Kordan said a gas producers' group would protect the interests of producers and consumers. "This organization will act as a policy-making organ and member countries can discuss such issues as the exchange of technology and reducing production costs," he told his ministry's website. "The opposition to the establishment of such an organization is completely political in nature."

Some industry experts argue that it would be difficult to replicate OPEC in the gas industry. Many gas contracts are established on a long-term basis rather than traded on the spot market like oil.

## Businessmen to Visit Bahrain

A delegation of Iranian businessmen led by the head of Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines, Yahya Al-e Eshaq will visit Bahrain from May 3-6.

According to IRNA, vice chairman of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines, Alaeddin Mir-Mohammad Sadeqi noted that Iran and Bahrain have had friendly relations for decades, calling for strengthening of bilateral ties in all fields.

Trade between Iran and Bahrain has increased eight-fold from \$20 million to \$170 million in recent years.

"During the four-day visit, the Iranian delegation will discuss establishment of a joint Iran-Bahrain bank, construction of a five-star hotel in Mashhad and launching Manama-Mashhad air services," Mir-Mohammad Sadeqi said.

Given the high quality of Iranian-made products, he stated that the Persian Gulf littoral states have voiced their willingness to purchase Iranian goods.

He also noted that Iranian and Bahraini investors have expressed their readiness to construct hotels in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad and the northern parts of the country.

He listed foodstuff, fruits, vegetables, iron ore, carpet, iron and steel bars, nuts and live animals as the main exports to Bahrain.

Referring to a plan to establish an Iran-funded tomato paste factory in Bahrain, he noted that the issue will be discussed in the upcoming meeting.

"Lowering customs duties and easing visa issuance process will be brought up for discussion in the meeting," Sadeqi concluded.

## Trade With UAE Tops \$12b

Trade between Iran and United Arab Emirates exceeded \$12 billion in the Iranian year to March 19.

Announcing this at the monthly meeting of Iran-Dubai Commercial Council on Tuesday, Hossein Soltaninia, an advisor to commerce minister, said that oil and gas constituted 75 percent of Iran's export to the UAE while the rest were non-oil goods, reported IRNA.

Soltaninia, who doubles as the manager of the national project on organizing Iran's cultural, trade and economic relations in the Persian Gulf zone, noted that the project aims to boost the country's economic power and security.

Strengthening national sovereignty, developing infrastructures and creating an atmosphere for competitive economy are the plan's objectives, he added. To implement the plan, a center was set up in Qeshm Island, Hormuzgan province last year.

Speaking at the same gathering, secretary of the High Council of Free Trade-Industrial Zones, Mahmoud Salahi expressed the high council's readiness to fully cooperate with Iranian traders residing in the UAE. "The ground is prepared for Iranians residing in the UAE to transfer capital to the country," he said.

Salahi further noted that the FTZSC is ready to invite Iranian businessmen to visit the free trade zones adding that the difficulties facing investments have been removed and the bureaucracies also have been eased.

Referring to the increase in the number of Norouz (Iranian new year) vacationers to the free trade zones, he announced that over 600,000 visitors came to the said regions during March 25 to April 6.

He further noted that Iran's Free Trade Zones Organization can establish hotels and the other recreational facilities in the region.

## e-Banks Planned



The establishment of e-banks will not only reduce manpower costs but also will lead to the development of Iran's banking system.

Central Bank of Iran has expressed readiness to issue permits to establish two e-banks in the year to March 2009, disclosed CBI deputy governor for modern technologies.

Mohammad-Hossein Mehrani told IRNA that Iranian experts are currently involved in preparing necessary grounds for the proposed banks. Once operational, e-banks will offer banking services both within the country and abroad, he said.

e-banks would have no branches and their activities will be conducted from headquarters, he added.

The establishment of e-banks, he said, would not only reduce manpower costs but also lead to the development of Iran's banking system. e-banks capitalize on the latest IT technology with emphasis on settlement services. Electronic banking means 24-hour access to cash through automated teller machines (ATMs) or direct deposit of paychecks into current or savings accounts.

Use of electronic techniques in the banking system is one of the sections of policy making-supervising package of CBI in the year to March 2009, Persian daily 'Sobh-e Eqtasad' quoted the CBI deputy as saying.

Operations of the two proposed banks would be in electronic form, he elaborated. "Since these banks would not have any physical branches and all operations will be conducted electronically; no human force will be involved and everybody could have equal access."

Underlining that permits for e-banks could also be issued for the private sector, he said, "There are a number of applications for setting up such banks and we are creating the framework."

He further disclosed that the infrastructure of banking operation would undergo change. In addition, CBI has received offers to use cell phone system in this project, the official pointed out.

CBI has emphasized on launching the center for controlling and su-

perising transactions by promoting the use of credit cards, facilities for electronic payments and e-money.

Mehrani referred to digital signature as one of the other programs envisaged under the CBI supervising-policy-making package. Electronic signature would facilitate trade, enabling the verification of the client's identity.

CBI will supervise the implementation of e-banking guidelines, he said, explaining that the articles of association for e-banking have been ratified and would become binding in the year to March 2009.

Credit cards are to be issued for customers as an identity and all applicants could have a credit card in the initial stage, Mehrani pointed out.

To promote the culture of e-banking, customers would have to pay banking charges for physical referral to banks, he said. This is while, no charges would be imposed in the e-banking system, he added.

The banker put the number of utility bills issued during a two-month period as follows: about 50 million for fixed phones and cell phones, 22 million for electricity, 18 million for water, 10 million for gas and seven million for wastewater. These bills should be paid electronically, he underlined, noting that it would have a direct impact on the use of banknotes, travelers' checks and paychecks.

The government has announced that the number of ATM and Point-of-Sale (POS) cards will reach 12 million by the end of the Fourth Five-Year Economic Development Plan (2005-2010).

Thousands of ATMs are currently linked to domestic e-banking network, known as Shtab.

Fast system cooperation with other countries would be expanded, Mehrani concluded. CBI plans to expand these systems to cover African and the Far East Asian.

## Gilan Exports Grow

Export of goods from Gilan province increased by 26 percent during the first month of the Iranian year (March 20-April 19).

According to IRNA, a supervisor at the provincial customs office noted that some 44,699 tons of commodities, worth of \$24.1 million, were exported from the province during the period.

Gholamhossein Nohi said that the main export items were fresh fruits, nuts, agricultural products, industrial products, construction materials and minerals.

He listed Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, UAE, Armenia, Turkey and Iraq as the main export markets. "Some 206,807 tons of goods, worth \$147.6 million, were imported via provincial customs office during the same period," he said.

Meanwhile, over 1.1 million tons of commodities were transported by the Caspian Sea Shipping Company during the Iranian year to March 19. Announcing this, the company's managing director noted that the number of ships owned by the company rose to 10 with the acquisition of new vessels last year.

Jamshid Khalili cited the financial constraints as the main problem hindering the development of shipping activities in the Caspian Sea.



## Loans for Cement Projects

Bank of Industries and Mines will make financial facilities available for eight giant cement projects as a move to check inflation, create new jobs and increase production, said the bank's managing director.

Once the projects are inaugurated, cement production capacity would increase by 10 million tons, Mehdi Razavi told IRIBNews.

Highlighting the long-lasting impacts of credit for infrastructural projects, he said that Bank of Industries of Mines is responsible for supplying the funds.

Bank of Industries and Mines has only 40 branches nationwide, the banker said, pointing out that each province has a branch.

With 0.2 percent of the staff of banking system and 0.04 percent of the entire bank's branches across the country, this bank pays about 10 percent of all the banking facilities extended to customers, Razavi underlined.

As per Article 44 of the Constitution, this bank would remain under state control, he concluded.

