

SAUDI ARABIA IN FOCUS

WEEKLY PUBLICATION OF THE
INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE
ROYAL EMBASSY OF SAUDI ARABIA
IN WASHINGTON, DC

FEBRUARY 15, 2005

TERRORISM

SAUDI ARABIA CONDEMNS MURDER OF HARIRI IN BEIRUT

The Council of Ministers issued a statement on February 14 strongly condemning the explosion in Beirut that led to the killing of former Prime Minister of Lebanon Rafiq Hariri and a number of his companions, and to the injury of many others. The Cabinet offered condolences to the families of the victims and to the Lebanese people, affirming the Kingdom's absolute rejection of such terrorist acts, which target innocent people and promote the spread of chaos and destruction.

ELECTIONS

RIYADH'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS GO SMOOTHLY

On February 10, 2005, about 80 percent of the 150,000 people registered turned out to vote in Riyadh Province for 104 open seats on the 38 municipal councils. Voting went smoothly, and no violations were reported that could nullify any of the polling. The names of the winners in Riyadh City, where there were 646 candidates for the 7 open seats, were announced on February 11. The remaining seven members of the 14-member council will be appointed by the government, in accordance with the municipal councils system. Results for the rest of the province were announced February 13.

Minister of Interior Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz has refuted media allegations of improper influencing of voters, pointing out that candidates ran as individuals, not as representatives of any group or religious trend.

Meanwhile, registration centers open February 15 in Makkah Province, continuing up to Wednesday, March 16, 2005, for the upcoming municipal elections there.

SAUDI-U.S. RELATIONS

CROWN PRINCE RECEIVES MESSAGES FROM PRESIDENT BUSH

Crown Prince Abdullah received a telephone call on February 14 from U.S. President George W. Bush, congratulating him on the success of the recent Counter-Terrorism International Conference in Riyadh, and on the municipal elections in Riyadh Province. A message from President Bush was also delivered to him by U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Oberwetter, marking the 60th anniversary of the historic 1945 meeting between King Abdulaziz and President Franklin Roosevelt on the Suez Canal in Egypt.

EXTREMISM

MWL URGES MODERATION, WARNS AGAINST EXTREMISM

Secretary-General of the Muslim World League (MWL) Dr. Abdullah Al-Turki, in a message on the occasion of the new *hijrah* year of 1426, which began on February 10, urged Muslims to address mankind's current pressing problems, and to impress on young people the moderate teachings and values of Islam. The Islamic faith, he declared, urges its followers to take a moderate approach in all matters of life, and has prohibited all forms of extremism.

ECONOMY

KINGDOM'S COMMERCIAL BANKS THRIVING

The initial public offering (IPO) begins February 21 for Saudi Arabia's newest commercial bank Al-Bilad, with half of its 60 million shares at \$13.4 per share, the other half going to various Saudi banking firms. Al-Bilad, Saudi Arabia's 11th commercial bank, and with a capital of \$0.8 billion, is expected to start operations mid-2005 and have 30 branches by the end of the year. These branches will replace the 200 offices of the eight money exchanges that merged to form the bank.

Meanwhile, the existing ten commercial banks in Saudi Arabia have posted combined profits of \$3.9 billion for 2004, a 59.7 percent rise over their 2003 performance. The National Commercial Bank (NCB), the Kingdom's largest in terms of capital, reflected a growth rate of 17.2 percent. This was the lowest of the ten, with Al-Jazeera Bank registering a high of 101 percent, and the others - Samba Financial Group, Arab National Bank, Al-Rajhi Banking and Investment Corporation, Saudi British Bank, Banque Al-Saudi Al-Fransi, Saudi Investment Bank, Riyadh Bank and Saudi Hollandi Bank - ranging from 24 to 74 percent.

* * *