

SAUDI ARABIA IN FOCUS

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FOREIGN POLICY

Kingdom brokers deal between Syria and the UN

Saudi Arabia helped broker a deal between Syria and the United Nations concerning the questioning of five Syrians about the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz said in an interview published November 27 by Arab-language newspapers Asharq Al-Awsat and Al-Hayat.

King Abdullah said he suggested to French President Jacques Chirac and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that the five Syrians be interviewed by UN investigators either in Switzerland or Austria instead of Lebanon. He sent National Security Council Secretary-General Prince Bandar bin Sultan to Paris and Damascus to negotiate the agreement.

In the wide-ranging interviews, King Abdullah also said that he anticipates it will take five years to restore stability in Iraq. While the Kingdom will not interfere in Iraqi internal affairs, the King said, he has encouraged Iraqi tribes to steer clear of the violence. On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, King Abdullah stressed the importance of caution and understanding in dealing with both sides.

King Abdullah sharply criticized Al-Qaeda terrorists and noted that the Kingdom's successful campaign against terrorists remains ongoing. "I don't say that we have uprooted terrorism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, because that needs a lot of time and effort." King Abdullah also called for enhanced international cooperation to combat terrorism.

The monarch also emphasized the strong Saudi-US relations as well as his friendship with President Bush.

FOREIGN AID

Kingdom gifts computers to Sri Lanka

Saudi Arabia has gifted Sri Lanka with computers for use in 50 schools affected by the December 2004 tsunami. Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Sri Lanka Mohammad bin Mahmoud Al-Ali presented the gift on November 28 as part of the ongoing aid provided by the Kingdom to Sri Lanka after the tsunami.

ENERGY

Saudi Aramco allocates \$4.8 billion for new oil refinery in Yanbu

Saudi Aramco has allocated \$4.8 billion to set up and operate a new oil refinery in the Kingdom's western region of Yanbu, according to a November 24 statement by the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu. The project, at the Yanbu Industrial City on the Red Sea coast, will vastly increase Saudi Arabia's refining capacity. The new refinery will have a capacity of 400,000 barrels per day (BPD) of petroleum products, and will create some 750 jobs. It is expected to be completed by the end of 2007, the statement said.

EDUCATION

New Development Plan to establish seven universities

Seven new universities will be established in Saudi Arabia as part of the Eighth Five-Year Development Plan, according to a statement published November 24 by the Ministry of Economy and Planning.

The Plan for 2005-2010 – which was approved by the Council of Ministers November 21 – will also privatize 20 state-owned corporations and expand women's participation in development activities by 30 percent. In addition, the Plan is intended to move the Kingdom towards a knowledge-based economy and develop its mining and tourism sectors.

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