

Gulf Arab states to axe oil output by 1m BPD

ABU DHABI, Mar 21: Gulf Arab states are to slash one million barrels per day (BPD) of oil output from April 1, with Saudi Arabia leading the charge aimed at boosting prices. Gulf oil ministers said here, reports AFP.

The Saudi kingdom will chop its own output by 585,000 barrels per day (BPD) as part of an agreement it reached on March 12 with other major producers. Saudi Oil Minister Ali Ibrahim Al Nuaimi announced.

Nuaimi said OPEC members would cut individual quotas by 7.3 per cent and he was joined by his Gulf Arab counterparts in endorsing the agreement in the Hague for a total of more than two million BPD in cutbacks.

The new OPEC quota of Saudi Arabia will fall to 7438 million BPD.

It will be the first time Saudi output drops below eight million BPD since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, when the

Gulf kingdom made up for the absence of Iraqi and Kuwaiti oil from the market.

Nuaimi said he hoped the price of west Texas intermediate would rise to between 18 and 20 barrels "in the near future" and voice "total confidence" that producers would stick to their pledged cuts.

"This decision is backed by the highest authority of every government participating in it," Nuaimi told reporters at the meeting in Abu Dhabi of Gulf oil ministers ahead of an OPEC conference in Vienna starting Tuesday.

Emirati Oil Minister Obaid Al Nuaimi announced his country would cut about to 157,000 BPD from its OPEC quota of 2,157 million BPD, while his Kuwaiti counterpart Sheikh Saud Nasser Al-Sabah confirmed a 144,000 BPD cut.

Qatar is to cut output by 47,000 BPD raising the total of Gulf Arab cuts including Oman to 996,000 BPD.

Qatar's energy minister said

here that oil prices could rise to more than 15 to 16 dollars a barrel if producers stick fully to their pledged cuts in output.

"We must learn the lesson and be realistic," Abdallah Al Attiya said ahead of a meeting of Gulf Arab oil ministers.

"The important thing is not the decision to reduce production, but implementation of this decision," he told the Emirati News Agency.

Attiya hoped that the overall cut of more than two million BPD as announced in the Hague on March 12 by Saudi Arabia and four other major producers would be "shared in a fair manner."

"We must avoid getting into bargaining over a barrel here and a barrel there, because these discussions harm the market," he warned.

The Qatari minister said that if the March 12 accord was "implemented 100 per cent, prices could rise to more than 15-16 dollars a barrel before the end of the year."

Primakov heads to US for funds to keep Russia afloat

MOSCOW, Mar 21: Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov heads to Washington with one very specific and difficult task — securing billions of dollars to help Russia stay afloat, reports AP.

Primakov will, of course, see US President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore to run down a long list of frictions that include Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, NATO expansion and arms control when he arrives Tuesday.

Key issues all. But from Russia's perspective, none matters as much as Primakov's conference with International Monetary Fund chief Michel Camdessus, and the Washington-based fund's verdict on whether Moscow is worthy of a multibillion dollar loan to prop up its thoroughly depressed economy.

"Certainly for Russia, the IMF loan agreement is the most important issue," said political analyst Andrei Pionkowsky. "However, I don't think there will be a clear-cut decision just

A new loan won't save Russia, but the country does need money, and fast.

But critics say his government has merely treated water and has not developed a coherent programme to reverse the economic decline. And the re-

cent political peace has been fraying.

President Boris Yeltsin spent more time in a hospital bed than in his Kremlin office in recent months, and he is increasingly isolated politically.

His approval rating is in single digits and his Communist rivals have set April 15 for launching an impeachment debate in parliament. Yeltsin is expected to survive the challenge, but it will add to a rancorous political atmosphere.

Yeltsin cannot point to any major achievements since his re-election three years ago. He has simply ignored the country's recent economic woes, leaving the entire burden to Primakov.

The president has retained his penchant for firing and reshuffling his staff. But aside from that, little is expected of Yeltsin, who has vowed to remain in office until his term expires next year.

Primakov, meanwhile, sees Russia as a once and future world power that should deal with the United States as an equal.

Workers process stuffed toys at a factory east of New Delhi on Saturday. Indian toymakers are throwing down the gauntlet to market-leader China by building two "toy-cities" to woo foreign manufacturers and that they hope will crack 120-billion US dollars global toy market.

— AFP photo

Russia raises workers' wages

MOSCOW, Mar 21: Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov signed a decree Saturday increasing wages for state workers, a news agency reported, reports AP.

The new rates will take effect on April 1, the ITAR-Tass news agency said.

The report did not say what the new pay scale will be. Government workers' wages have not kept up with inflation since the government stopped propelling up the rouble and defaulted on some debts last August.

It is unclear whether the government will be able to pay the new rates, particularly because it already owes an estimated 11.5 billion roubles (\$800 million) to state workers and pensioners and hasn't had the money to pay salaries and pensions on time for years.

That revenue shortfall was exacerbated by the August financial crisis, as well as by the global crisis in emerging markets and a drop in world oil prices.

Also Saturday, Primakov met with top officials to discuss cutting expenditures on federal bureaucracy in Russia's regions.

Primakov has said that the government employs 300,000 people in the regions and doesn't have the money to pay for all of them. Government bureaucracy in Russia has been bloated for years, but officials have done little to trim it.

Arab stocks close mixed

RIYADH, Mar 21: The Saudi stock market, buoyed by a recovery in oil prices, was the best performer in a mixed week for Arab markets, Bakhre Financial Advisors (BFA) said here, reports AFP.

It said the NCFEI all shares index in the Saudi kingdom rose 3.5 per cent on the week, while the Muscat stock market saw the worst performance, with a 3.0 per cent fall on the week.

The NCFEI, which closed at 1,413.24 points, continues to show a strong bullish sentiment driven by higher oil prices following a March 12 agreement in the Hague to cut world oil output by two million barrels a day, it said.

Other Gulf markets were slightly up. Qatar's DSM index rose 0.6 per cent to close at 131.47, the BSE in Bahrain reached 2,071.16, up 0.1 per cent and the NBAD index in the Emirates also rose 0.1 per cent closing at 3,736.70 points.

But Kuwait's KSE index was a loser, slipping 0.9 per cent to close at 1,509.10 while the MSM in Oman fell to 206.88 points. In North Africa, Morocco's CSE index rose 2.9 per cent to 804.08 points, driven up by blue chips, said BFA. A Riyad-based special institute, in its weekly review of 12 Arab markets.

But Tunisia's BVM index fell 2.8 per cent on profit taking closing at 571.07 point, while the prime general index in Egypt was down 1.0 per cent.

Also among the losers was Lebanon's BL index, which lost 2.5 per cent to close at 709.52 as soldier shares hit a record low.

The AFM in Jordan fell 0.7 per cent to close at 181.87, while the Jerusalem index of the Palestinians closed at 158.84, down 0.6 per cent.

We have also cleared today nine cases in computer software and electronics, some of which are for increasing equity holdings and others for new ventures," he said.

"We have also cleared its through issue of preference shares worth 150 million rupees," the official said.

He said the Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Ltd would hold rest of the equity.

France's FLG group was also allowed to increase its equity in an Indian company to 100 per cent, from 74 per cent, but will need to divest the additional 26 per cent stake in the domestic market within four years, the official said.

The firm will be involved in import, storage and bottling of liquefied petroleum gas, he said.

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NEW DELHI, Mar 21: Ford India feels that the slump in the Indian car market is temporary and it will grow "quite substantially from next year" when it plans to launch a new model here.

Shaken by the abysmally poor sales of its cars, Ford India has chalked up a "long-term strategy to be the leader in every segment" where it operates, top company officials said.

The company, which has invested \$500 million in its two automobile plants in India and plans to bring in another \$300 million, yesterday opened a brand new plant in the outskirts of Chennai where it will be manufacturing an altogether new car, code named C195.

"We feel that the new model will give us a strong base for growth next year and subsequent years. We are learning about the Indian market. I am confident that this market will grow quite substantially from next year. We hope to see sales of 25,000 units of the new car next year," Henry Wallace, Group Vice President of the Asia Pacific Operations of Ford Mo-

reps said.

Workers process stuffed toys at a factory east of New Delhi on Saturday. Indian toymakers are throwing down the gauntlet to market-leader China by building two "toy-cities" to woo foreign manufacturers and that they hope will crack 120-billion US dollars global toy market.

— AFP photo

Cathay pilots go to court over contract changes

HONG KONG, Mar 21: In the midst of a battle over pay cuts, more than 700 Cathay Pacific Airways pilots and flight officers are taking the airline to court to stop it from changing their contracts, local newspapers reported Sunday, says AP.

The pilots and officers are seeking an order barring Cathay and its subsidiary company Veta Ltd. from unilaterally altering air crew work conditions and benefits, the reports said.

"We are not objecting to the change, we would just like it to be negotiated," Captain Ted Pleavin was quoted as saying by the South China Morning Post.

The court action had "nothing to do with the current salary repackaging" discussions, Cathay

spokeswoman Quince Chong told the Hong Kong Standard.

Calls made to Cathay on Sunday were not immediately returned. Spokespersons for the Aircrew Officers Association also were not available.

Their complaints include being permanently on call, the loss of eight days rest out of every 28 day period, and loss of provisions for flight upgrades to first and business class to ensure cockpit crew are well-rested before piloting flights, newspapers report and cockpit crew member salaries by an average 8 per cent in exchange for company stock options.

The pilots' pay dispute comes shortly after Cathay fought a similar battle with its flight attendants, who eventually conceded to management demands that they work more hours in exchange for a pay increase.

Earlier this month, Cathay reported its first annual loss in 35 years. The airline says the financial damage caused by Asia's crisis and Hong Kong's recession is forcing it to trim costs.

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