

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 AP.

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 enshrining the agreement in the Hague to 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 bin Saif Al-Nasser announced his country would cut about 157,000 BPD from its OPEC quota of 2,157 million BPD, while his Kuwaiti counterpart Sheikh 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 Attia 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.

Attia 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 Pionkovsky. "However, I don't think there will be a clear-cut decision just yet."

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

Millions of Russians are growing poorer, businesses and industries are crippled. The country faces 17.5 billion dollars in foreign debt payments this year, but it can pay only half that at most.

The big crunch could come as soon as May, when several billion dollars of debt come due.

Russia has already missed several large debt payments, and further defaults may scare away remaining foreign banks and investors, dealing an additional blow to Russia's muddled attempts to build a functioning market economy.

Primakov has been widely praised for giving Russia political and economic stability since becoming prime minister in the wake of Russia's financial collapse last August, when the government defaulted on some debts and devalued the ruble. Primakov guided Russia through a calm winter despite dire warnings of food shortages and social unrest.

But critics say his government has merely treaded 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.

Iraq wants OPEC to stabilise oil prices

BAGHDAD, Mar 21: Iraq's Oil Minister Amir Muhammed Rasheed said on Saturday he would ask an OPEC meeting scheduled in Vienna on Tuesday to work for stabilising world oil prices, the Iraqi news agency INA reported, says Reuters.

"Iraq would urge (the organisation) to take active measures to stabilise oil prices and put an end to the deteriorating oil market as a result of the American administration's policy pursued by Saudi Arabia," INA quoted Rasheed as saying before departing to Vienna.

Rasheed said in press remarks published last week that Iraq would ask the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' meeting to cut production by 2.5 million barrels per day (BPD) and that OPEC's biggest producer Saudi Arabia should take the entire cut.

The minister said an agreement of key oil producers to cut daily output by more than two million BPD should boost de-

pressed prices but called on top producer Saudi Arabia to make most of the cut itself.

At an emergency meeting in the Hague last week, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Venezuela, Mexico and Algeria drew up a plan for 10 members of OPEC and non-OPEC Mexico and Oman to trim output.

Baghdad has recently stepped up its public criticism of Saudi Arabia, blaming it for the deterioration in world oil prices.

Saudi Arabia raised its own production by more than two million BPD in 1990 when Iraqi oil exports were barred under the economic embargo imposed by the United Nations after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Iraq is allowed now to sell 5.26 billion dollars worth of oil under UN auspices every six months to buy food and medicines but argues that low oil prices and damaged infrastructure make it unable to reach that target.

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 propping 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 (\$500 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, Bakheet Financial Advisors (BFA) said here, reports AP.

It said the NCFE 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 NCFE, 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 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 NEAD 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 Riyadh based specialist institute, in its weekly review of 12 Arab markets.

But Tunisia's BVX 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.



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 wide open. — 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 Vela 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.

Pleavin filed the writ of summons at the High Court on behalf of 704 members, or two-thirds, of the pilots and officers in the Air Crew Officers Association.

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 court action had "nothing to do with the current salary repackaging" discussions, Cath-

ay 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.

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.

China's trade surplus with EU rises by 61 pc

BEIJING, Mar 21: China's trade surplus with the European Union increased by 61 per cent in 1998 to 7.44 billion dollars (6.46 billion euros), Chinese Customs Statistics released today said.

In 1997, the Chinese surplus totalled 4.62 billion dollars, according to the General Administration of Customs report published in the official China daily, reports AP.

China's exports to Europe rose 18.1 per cent to 28.15 billion dollars in 1998, while imports rose 7.9 per cent to 20.71 billion dollars, in 1997, exports grew 20.1 per cent and imports rose by 3.4 per cent.

The EU is China's third biggest trading partner after Japan and the United States.

It took 15 per cent of Chinese exports last year, against 13.6 per cent in 1997, when China

shifted its trade focus towards the west, as the regional economic crisis hit Asian trading partners.

Total Chinese exports grew by just 0.5 per cent in 1998, after 20.9 per cent growth recorded in 1997.

The EU was also the second biggest foreign investor in China, after Hong Kong, in the first 10 months of 1998, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation said.

On Wednesday, China said its trade surplus with the United States, a source of friction between the two countries, rose 28 per cent in 1998 to 21.02 billion dollars.

The figure is lower than that used by the US government, which says the surplus was higher than 60 billion dollars last year.

ROK steel exports to US to fall by 20 pc

SEOUL (South Korea), Mar 21: South Korea's steel exports to the United States will decrease by 20 per cent this year due to increasing domestic demand and a stronger currency, a government official said Thursday, reports AP.

Last year's increase in steel exports was largely due to a weak economy and South Korean won, Minister of Commerce and Industry Park Tae-young said in a meeting with US Deputy Trade Representative Richard Fisher.

Fisher, who arrived late Wednesday night for a 24-hour stay, met Park and other Seoul officials.

Fisher explained to south Korean officials that the US Trade Representative's office is facing increasing pressure from US congressional leaders to address the steel issue.

Exchange Rates

American Express Bank Ltd foreign exchange rates (indicative) against the Taka to clients.						
Currency	Selling TT & OD	Selling BC	Buying TT Clean	Buying OD Sight Export Bill	Buying OD	Transfer
US Dollar	48.7300	48.7700	48.3100	48.1570	48.0850	
Pound Sg	79.8587	79.9243	78.1559	77.9084	77.7919	
Deutsche Mark	27.5363	27.5589	26.5456	26.4616	26.4220	
Swiss Franc	33.4661	33.4936	32.7060	32.6024	32.5537	
Japanese Yen	0.4197	0.4201	0.4087	0.4074	0.4068	
Dutch Guilder	24.4390	24.4690	23.5597	23.4851	23.4500	
Danish Krona	7.1980	7.2039	7.0301	7.0078	6.9973	
Australian \$	31.2231	31.2469	29.9619	29.8670	29.8223	
Belgian Franc	1.3351	1.3362	1.2870	1.2830	1.2810	
Canadian \$	32.4975	32.5242	31.5648	31.4646	31.4178	
French Franc	8.2104	8.2171	7.9150	7.8899	7.8781	
Hong Kong \$	6.3007	6.3059	6.2215	6.2018	6.1925	
Italian Lira	0.0278	0.0278	0.0268	0.0267	0.0267	
Norway Kroner	6.3285	6.3337	6.2214	6.2017	6.1925	
Singapore \$	28.6142	28.6377	27.7007	27.6130	27.6717	
Saudi Rial	13.0287	13.0394	12.8460	12.8053	12.7862	
UAE Dirham	13.3040	13.3150	13.1167	13.0751	13.0556	
Swedish Krona	5.9555	5.9604	5.8755	5.8569	5.8481	
Qatari Rial	13.4224	13.4334	13.2302	13.1883	13.1686	
Kuwaiti Dinar	165.5793	165.7153	153.5601	153.027	152.849	
Thai Baht	1.3028	1.3038	1.2871	1.2830	1.2811	
Euro	53.8564	53.9006	51.9188	51.7543	51.6769	

Bill buying rates						
TT Doc	30 Days	60 Days	90 Days	120 Days	180 Days	
48.2112	47.9074	47.5048	47.1023	46.6997	45.8945	
US Dollar London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR)						
Buying	Selling	Currency	1 Month	3 Months	6 Months	9 Months
48.0650	48.7300	USD	4.84	5.00	5.14	5.28
48.0650	48.7300	GBP	5.4375	5.3437	5.3125	5.25
Cash/TC	Cash/TC	Euro	2.93	2.93	2.90	2.90

Exchange rates of some Asian currencies against US dollars						
Indian Rupee	Pak Rupee	Thai Baht	Malaysian Ringgit	Indonesian Rupiah	Korean Won	
42.365/42.465	50.190/50.260	37.420/37.520	3.7999/3.8001	8850/8925	1210/1220	

Amex notes on Sunday's market
The supply of USD remains steady, and USD continues to be supported at the 48.65 level from the market makers. The USD/BDT rates ranged between 48.65 and 48.66. The call market continues to be liquid, which has kept the rates locked in the 6.5%-7.5% level, however, the most of the transactions were done at 7% on Sunday.

The dollar extended its losses and crawled near the day's low against the yen by late Tokyo on Friday as a persistent rise in Japanese stocks continued to help draw yen-buying, especially from foreign investors.

A belief among foreigners that the Japanese economic outlook was turning brighter attracted them to the yen, for the purpose of buying Japanese assets. But the market lacked the energy by late afternoon to pull down the greenback decisively below 117 yen, as Japanese operators were cautious about going overly short ahead of the three-day weekend.

US investors, including a large pension fund, were detected buying yen to purchase Japanese stocks. Speculative operators rode on such yen-buying, pulling the greenback lower. The market expects Japan monetary authorities to remain quiet about the recent yen rise against the dollar as long as it does not hurt stock prices.

Sterling heads into weekend on a firm note against the Euro having spent Friday's European session taking direction from moves in euro dollar. GBP was blown around by a firmer US dollar on Friday with most traders content to hold their fire ahead of a clutch of domestic economic data due out next week. The Sterling slipped less than half a cent lower against the USD in early European trade before levelling out and trading in a tight range.

Elsewhere, the euro remained largely unchanged against the dollar, but stayed on a weak bias against the yen. At 0647 GMT, the Euro stood at \$1.0965/70 against \$1.0977/82 in late New York.

In the New York session closing the majors were traded against US \$ at 117.10/20 JPY, 1.7940/48 DEM, 1.4661/71 CHF, Euro at \$1.0897/02 and GBP at \$1.6278/88.

Shipping Intelligence

Chittagong Port						
Berth position and performance of vessels as on 21.3.99						
Berth No	Name of vessels	Cargo	Port call	Local agent	Date of arrival	Leaving
J/1	Esco Virgo	GI	King	Runlow	2/3	22/3
J/2	Vitality Kruchina	Race (P)	Viza	SMSL	22/2	22/3
J/3	Hill Plenty	Rice(G)	Bank	Ancient	15/2	23/3
J/4	Grigory Kovalechuk	Urea	-	USTC	R/A	24/3
J/5	Ocean Reyna	GI	Yang	Everett	12/3	22/3
J/6	Banglar Kakoli(48)	GI	Male	BSC	16/3	22/3
J/7	Shun An	GI	Sing	RML	15/3	23/3
J/8	Xing Ye	Rice(G)	Hald	MHCSL	20/2	28/3
J/9	Sarah-I	Rice(P)/GI	Kara	SMSL	7/3	28/3
J/10	Maria-G	Rice(P)	Viza	AMBL	1/3	22/3
J/11	Sea Coral	Rice(G)	Kand	USTC	17/2	26/2
J/12	Eagle Prosperity	Cont	Sing	RSL	14/3	21/3
J/13	Banglar Shukha	Cont	Sing	BSC	18/3	22/3
CCT/1	Bunga Mas Lima	Cont	P Kel	EOSL	15/3	23/3
CCT/2	Banglar Moni (Cont)	Cont	Sing	BSC	18/3	21/3
CCT/3	Buxmoon	Cont	Sing	QCCL	17/3	23/3
RM/14	Sun Ocean	Cement	Indo	USTC	8/3	23/3
CGJ	BUTI	C Clink	Bank	RML	11/3	26/3
GSJ	Topaz	Wheat(G)	K Dda	Lams	R/A	27/3
TSP	Good Faith	R Rhos	China	Cosmos	11/3	25/3
RM/5	Koo Yong	HSD	Sing	QCCL	18/3	22/3
CGJ	Envia	HSD	Sing	-	16/3	23/3
DCJ	Yungly	Cement	Pada	-	7/3	23/3
(B)	Banglar Robi	Repair	-	BSC	R/A	23/3
(D)/1	Tanary Star	IDLE	Tara	PSAL	R/A	23/3
(D)/2	Banglar Gourab	Repair	-	BSC	R/A	30/3
RM/8	Sea World	Repair	-	CNCL	R/A	22/3
RM/9	Banglar Urmi	Repair	-	BSC	R/A	30/3
P-Jetty	Tug Ocean Silver-8	-	-	ILAPSL	R/A	-
CUFJL	Maya Nour	Cement	Pada	BSL	15/3	26/3
KAFCO(U)	Ma Cho	Urea	Sing	Everett	5/3	-
KAFCO(A)	Hektor	Ammonia	Racomp	MBL	19/3	21/3