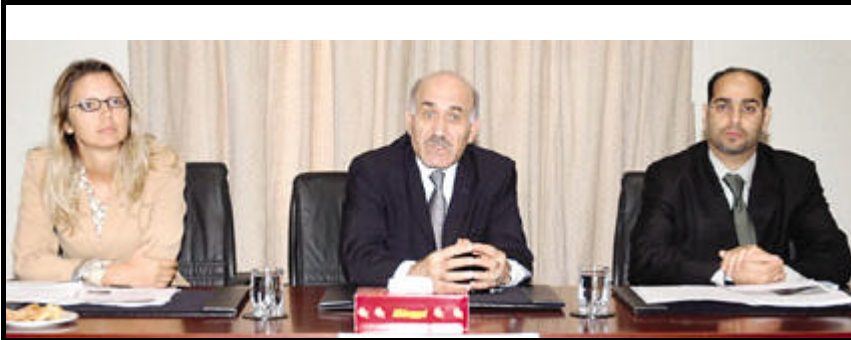


Democracy call to Arab nations



Dr Alloush, centre, unveils the report along with UNDP programme advisor Ela Chirileanu and programme analyst Ali Salman

**By SOMAN
BABY**

A NEW report that calls for sweeping political and human rights reforms throughout the Arab world was released

yesterday. The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2004 was written by a leading group of independent Arab scholars and intellectuals.

It analyses the pace of political change in the Arab world and strongly urges a rapid acceleration of democratic reform.

The report was sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) together with the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and the Arab Gulf Programme for UN development organisations.

There are specific proposals for new regional human rights institutions, robust and freely elected legislatures and truly independent judiciaries.

"The report is extremely rich and focuses on the different aspects of good governance in the Arab countries," said UN resident co-ordinator and UNDP resident representative Dr Khaled Alloush.

He was speaking to the media following the release of the report at UN House, in Manama.

This year's report is the third in a four-part series, which also covers the issues of gender imbalance and the empowerment of women in the 22 Arab states, he added.

Despite variations from country to country, the report finds that rights and freedoms in the Arab world remain poor.

"With limited exceptions in some countries and certain areas, freedoms - particularly those of opinion, expression and creativity - are under pressure in most Arab countries," Dr Alloush quoted the authors as saying.

The theme of this year's report is freedom and good governance.

It concludes that Bahrain is way ahead of some other countries in the region in that field.

"Bahrain's record in the area of freedom and good governance is better than many other countries," said Dr Alloush.

"Bahrain has conducted legitimate elections and the civil society here is prospering.

"New non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are being established on a regular basis."

He added that Bahrain's media is free to criticise the government in a constructive way.

"This is against conditions prevailing in some other Arab countries where journalists have been frequently targeted for prosecution for their opinions and some have been physically attacked," he added.

The official launch of the report was done yesterday by King Abdullah of Jordan at a ceremony in Amman.

It was unveiled in the presence of Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Bureau for Arab States director Dr Rima Hunaidi.

The second report issued last year focused on the challenge of building a knowledge society in Arab countries.

The first report, issued two years ago, outlined the most important development challenges facing the Arab world at the beginning of the third millennium.

Arab HDR report praises Kingdom's achievements

By Meera Ravi

BAHRAIN measures up well against a set of indices used by the Third Arab Human Development Report for 2004 (AHDR) to measure progress in three key sectors – access to knowledge, freedom and women's empowerment.

According to UNDP Resident Representative, Dr Khalid Alloush, the Kingdom has registered progress by having a legitimately elected parliament, a civil society that is prospering through the establishment of NGOs and social and cultural bodies, a Press that is relatively free and a judiciary that is recognised for being even-handed.

However, the report, whose findings were largely based on research done in five other countries (Morocco, Lebanon, Algeria, Jordan and Palestine) said Arab democratic institutions as a whole have "...become stripped of their original purpose to uphold freedom" and that most Arab rulers and political parties "...have selectively appropriated Islam to support and perpetuate their rule." Dr Alloush said Bahrain had not been approached to provide information although the Kingdom's efforts to make headway in the three key areas of development had been noted.

"However, some of the information has been dated by later developments – for example, Bahrain is referred to as having one woman minister when the Kingdom has elected a second one since then," he said.

The report, released on



Dr Alloush addressing the Press yesterday.

Tuesday under UN auspices, said most reforms were "embryonic and fragmentary" and did not amount to a serious effort to end repression in the region, which has some of the world's most authoritarian governments.

The US, which says it aims to promote democracy in the region, contributed to an international context that hampered progress through its policy towards Israel, its actions in Iraq and security measures affecting Arabs, the report said.

Both the US and Egyptian governments criticised parts of an early draft of the report, leading to a dispute that held up its release for at least three months.

The report, which covers the year from October 2003, was written before elections in Iraq and street protests in Lebanon that the Bush administration has cited as evidence of change.

Rima Khalaf, the senior UNDP official who presided over the intellectuals and reformers who wrote the report, said Arab states had to embark on reforms that expanded public freedom.

To do nothing would deepen the imbalance in the

distribution of power and wealth, and "lead some to perpetrate more violence and deepen internal conflicts", she said.

The most controversial sections described the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and the occupation of Iraq by the US and its allies as violations of freedom and obstacles to development. The report said occupation of Arab land had given governments an excuse to postpone democratisation, forced Arab reformers to divert energy away from reform and strengthened groups that advocate violence.

Following the American and Egyptian objections, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) decided to put the report out under its logo, with a disclaimer in the preface.

"Some of the views expressed by the authors are not shared by UNDP or the UN ... (But) this report clearly reflects a very real anger and concern felt across the region," wrote Mark Malloch Brown, UNDP Administrator at the time it was written.

In explaining why the

report was based on findings in five specific Arab countries, Dr Alloush said the research work had been outsourced to a private firm and financial constraints had limited the number of countries researched.

"Egypt responded too late to be included and Kuwait sent in its findings after the deadline," he said, "In some other Arab countries, the governments did not encourage such research."

Bahrain had not been approached to contribute to the study although there are some passing references to the Kingdom's progress.

"Despite laudable efforts to promote the status of women, success remains limited" said the report, "Greater progress is required in women's political participation, in changes to personal status laws, in the integration of women in development and in the right of a woman married to a foreign husband to transmit her citizenship to her children.

"The inability of existing legislation to protect women from domestic violence or violence on the part of the state and society is another deficit area. Violence against

women peaks in areas of armed conflict, especially in Sudan, Somalia and Iraq."

The report also pointed out that migrant workers in "oil-producing Arab states" including Arab workers, suffer certain forms of discrimination according to international standards.

"The most notorious cases stem from the 'guarantor system' and the abuse of domestic servants, chiefly women," said the report, referring to the system of sponsoring domestic helpers and locking them into contracts. "The 'war on terror' has cut into many Arab freedoms ... An unfortunate by-product in some countries has been that Arabs are increasingly the victims of stereotyping, disproportionately harassed or detained without cause," it said. "The fact that some Western countries ... have taken steps widely perceived to be discriminatory and repressive, has weakened the position of those reformers calling for Arab governments ... to change their course."

Dr Alloush emphasised that the report did not grade countries or compare one country with another.

Rather, he said, the report should be seen as a combination report card and blueprint for the future. It systematically surveys the pace of political change in the Arab world and strongly urges a rapid acceleration of democratic reform with specific proposals for new regional human rights institutions, robust and freely elected legislatures and truly independent judiciaries.

The report noted an increase in activity by civic groups pressing for changes inside Arab countries, some reform initiatives by Arab governments, some improvements in education and some empowerment of women in the Arab world.

But it added: "There is a near-complete consensus that there is a serious failing in the Arab world, and that this is located specifically in the political sphere ...

"Disaster can be averted. The alternative is to pursue an historic, peaceful and deep process of negotiated political alternation ... The desired outcome is a redistribution of power within Arab societies, restoring sovereignty to its rightful owners, the vast majority of people in the Arab world."

"As a next step, the report, which was released yesterday in Amman, will be circulated among Bahraini intellectuals, NGOs, government bodies, political parties, parliamentarians and civil societies so that we can initiate discussion on the findings," Dr Alloush said. "We hope the move will put the focus clearly on how best the Arab world can better its progress report for the next year."