

News in Brief

Spain Expanding Ties

A top Spanish embassy official in Tehran has said the Islamic Republic is Spain's third biggest trade partner in the Persian Gulf.

"Last year, Spain was the sixth biggest exporter in the European Union and Iran was the country's third biggest trade partner among Persian Gulf littoral states," PressTV quoted Maria Dibes, the Spanish embassy's economic advisor, as saying.

She further said that Spain is trying to diversify its trade partners from Latin American countries since it has remained unknown in Asia. Dibes made the remarks at the opening ceremony of an exhibition of a three-dimensional model of the Iranian city of Bam. The ancient city was struck by a deadly quake in December 2003, in which more than 40,000 people were killed.

Spain granted \$20 million to Iran for the reconstruction of Bam in four stages, one of which is the three-dimensional model of the city, she said.

Spain was one of the 30 countries which took part in April's International Oil, Gas and Petrochemical Exhibition in Tehran.

Spain's Repsol is also involved in the development of phase 14 of South Pars gas field.

IPI Transit Fee Deal Soon

Pakistan Petroleum Minister Khwaja Asif has said that Pakistan and India will soon sign a transit fee agreement on gas supply to India under the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline project.

Progress on the gas transit fee issue has been made between India and Pakistan and the two countries would soon sign an agreement," the Daily Times quoted Asif as saying.

He said that five to six communicative exchanges have been made between Pakistan and India in recent days and all matters regarding gas transit fee agreement would be settled within the next few days.

Asked whether the government would cap the oil prices in the country before the upcoming budget to help consumers, the minister did not make any commitment for keeping oil prices unchanged before the announcement of next budget.

"It is not right to presume some thing about the hike in oil prices before the next budget," he said.

Meanwhile, a senior Pakistani Petroleum Ministry official said that Islamabad and New Delhi are expected to agree on 40 cents per million British thermal unit (mBtu) gas transit fee that would generate around \$148 million per annum for Pakistan from India as transit fee.

Electrical Engineering Confab Underway

The 16th Iranian Conference on Electrical Engineering begins on Tuesday at Tarbiat Modarres (instructors' training) University in Tehran.

An official in charge of the three-day conference said that a number of Iranian and foreign companies active in the fields of electronics, communications, high-voltage electronics and computer will take part in the event which is being held from May 13-15 in an area of 650 square meters, reported IRNA.

Vahid Ahmadi also said that 2,180 articles were submitted to the conference headquarters, of which 625 were accepted.

"The conference aims to provide an opportunity for academics and specialists from national and international electrical engineering community to discuss the latest findings in electrical technology, progress in standards, services and their applications in various branches of electrical engineering," he said.

Ahmadi noted that the articles will be presented in 14 halls. "Some 10 articles from the US, Canada, UK, Germany, Malaysia, Japan and Thailand will be read out at the event," he added.

Panel and special discussion sessions, workshops and an exhibition will be held on the sidelines.

Concurrent with Chabahar International Conference on Transit and Development of the East Axis, a specialized exhibition on transit and transportation will be held at Tehran's IRIB International Conference Center on May 24-25.

The objective of the two-day event is to introduce the capabilities and potentials of domestic and foreign companies in the transit and transportation sector with particular emphasis on the importance of transit in the prosperity of national economy. The event will focus on the east axis of the country and developing domestic and international interactions.

At the gathering, ministries, associations, road and transportation organizations, ports and shipping companies, Islamic Republic Railways and a number of foreign firms will showcase their latest achievements in the field.

Health Insurance For All



Once the medical insurance databank is compiled, only individuals whose names are not registered can be covered by the plan.

According to statistics, close to nine million Iranians do not have any type of health insurance.

Expressing this in an interview with the Persian daily 'Khorasan', deputy head of Medical Services Insurance Organization elaborated on a plan to provide health insurance to those who are not covered by any insurance services.

Hamid Reza Ghaffari noted that the government has allocated two trillion rials in the budget for the fiscal year March 2008-9 to implement the plan.

He pointed out that the insurance premium currently stands at 55,000 rials, half of which is paid by the beneficiary and the rest by the government. Although a self-insurance program is also available, it has not been well received by the people due to high premium rates, Ghaffari said.

He continued that about 2.5 million needy people who are provided for by Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and State Welfare Organization have also been insured in accordance with Public Insurance Law.

However there are uninsured persons who can neither afford to pay insurance premiums nor are covered by supportive organizations, he said.

Therefore, the plan targets two groups: those uninsured people who can afford the costs and those who cannot.

"It is an ideal situation to cover all the uninsured people but it is not mandatory. This plan only concerns health insurance. It does not include retirement benefits," he said.

Ghaffari added, "A working group comprising of government representatives is considering ways to implement the plan. Once finalized, it will be put in force."

Since the premium of the proposed insurance plan is low compared to other kinds of insurance policies such as self-insurance, voluntary insurance and special insurance systems for government employees and armed forces personnel, many insured persons may cancel their insurance contracts with other insurance companies and opt for the proposed insurance system, the official cautioned.

However, once the medical insurance databank is compiled, only individuals whose names are not registered can be covered by the plan, he assured.

Also, deputy health minister said that uninsured individuals used to receive part of the hospital charges from insurance. However on the order of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, policies have been adopted to provide insurance to uninsured individuals permanently with the help of the government, said Hassan Aminlou. Therefore, they can benefit from medical services through the insurance system, he added.

Earlier, Minister of Welfare and Social Security Abdolreza Mesri said that the government has drawn up an ambitious plan to provide health insurance to all Iranians.

He commended the performance of the Medical Services Insurance Organization saying, "The organization is one of the best and the most successful entities in rendering insurance services. Nowhere in the world, can you see 20 million villagers provided with health insurance in one year."

The minister made the remarks in reference to an all-inclusive plan to cover rural and tribal people with medical insurance last year. Over 20 million rural and tribal families are insured under the plan.

Shell Out of Gas Project

Royal Dutch Shell has pulled out of Phase 13 of Iran's South Pars gas field, but may join in the later stages of the field's development.

"We have agreed to the principle of substitution of alternative later phases for the PLNG [Persian liquefied natural gas] project so that the NIOC (National Iranian Oil Company) can proceed with the immediate development of Phase 13," Reuters quoted a spokeswoman for the Anglo-Dutch company as saying.

Shell, Europe's largest oil and gas company, teamed up with Spain's Repsol to sign a memorandum of understanding with the NIOC in January 2002 to invest \$10 billion in the gas project, known as Persian LNG.

The spokeswoman would not give a reason for the decision. Repsol was not available for comment.

Shell's decision is reportedly due to US pressure to prevent foreign companies from investing in Iran over the country's nuclear program.

According to a report published in the Spanish daily Expansion in early May, Shell and Repsol were trying to help Iran find new partners for the project, including the Russian energy giant, Gazprom, the Indian Oil Corporation and Chinese companies.



SP Phase 8 Ready

A phase of the huge South Pars (SP) gas field that is operated by Norwegian Statoil-Hydro will start production soon, a senior Iranian energy official said.

Mohammad Javad Shams, member of the Pars Oil and Gas Company's Board of Directors, told Fars News Agency that the eighth phase of South Pars gas field development project will begin production in the month from June 21, followed by phases six and seven. Statoil is responsible for the offshore part of the project.

He said that they would reach full production capacity of 1.3 billion cubic feet (33.8 million cubic meters) each of natural gas per day by next March.

"(This) is about 300 million cubic feet above the yield from other phases which stands at one billion cubic feet a day," said Shams, who is the project manager for South Pars' phases 6-8.

He was speaking a day after Royal Dutch Shell said it had pulled out of developing another phase of South Pars following pressure from US lawmakers.

Washington is spearheading a drive to force Tehran to give up its nuclear rights.

