

LABOUR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Innovative schemes pay off

As a new Council of Ministers took oath of office on June 26, 1995, the Amir of Bahrain, His Highness Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa said that he looked forward to a 'new formula of stimulation and renewed vitality.' "True wealth is the individual and therefore we see our youth as the guardians of the achievements made and the hope for the future."

Development of human resources is central to the success of a nation and just how Bahrain's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has registered progress in this connection is in itself an interesting exercise. Adbulnabi Al Sho'ala, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, can be justly proud of the achievements recorded during the year. "Unemployment is a misnomer," he says. "There is 'structural unemployment (since there is no lack of opportunity in a country where foreigners constitute a major share in the private sector workforce) which will cease to be a problem with the training and human resources development programmes that are being pursued with renewed vigour."

Official figures indicate that the number of persons listed as unemployed dropped from 4,958 during 1996 to 3,800 during the current year.

The ministry has taken a number of measures to encourage the undertakings of the private sector to perceive the apparent and hidden advantages in optimising employment opportunities to nationals. Three symposia, called, 'Bahrain at work' were conducted during the year, with the active involvement and participation of a cross-section of entrepreneurs, corporate executives and others. These 'no-holds-barred' sessions enabled the ministry and the employers to understand and appreciate each other's requirements, within the framework of national priorities and objectives.

Said Al Sho'ala: "A realistic approach has been adopted in all the measures taken to optimise employment and training opportunities to nationals. The anxiety has been to ensure that there is no disruption to the operations of the undertakings of the private sector and their efficiency and competitiveness are not affected and local and foreign investment is not hampered. The leadership and the government have always appreciated the role of the expatriate workforce in the economic, industrial and social progress."

Employment scene

The government has been the major employer of nationals and the share of Bahrainis in ministries and other bodies is now in excess of 90 per cent, which is the highest in the region. Large public sector companies and private undertakings have also taken steps to employ nationals and some of them have reached about 92 per cent, while many others account for about 70-80 per cent of nationals in their total workforce. The



Adbulnabi Al Sho'ala

average share of nationals in the private sector as a whole is about 35 per cent.

Al Sho'ala's involvement with the private sector for well over 25 years, prior to his current assignment, has provided him a deep insight into the foreign employment scene. "A majority of the expatriate workforce belongs to the unskilled category. The readiness of such workers to accept lower wages is a major reason for their preference by private sector enterprises. This is a challenge that is being addressed," he says and adds, "It is a matter of record that given the right job and the right pay, Bahraini nationals have excelled in their jobs and are placed at par with the best in the world. They perform well as engineers, doctors, computer professionals, bankers, sales personnel and even in high tech environment such as petroleum refinery, petrochemicals, aluminium smelter, telecommunications, aircraft maintenance and so on."

Employment Services Bureau

The employment services Bureau of the ministry has been a veritable source of matching the needs of employers with the qualifications and aptitude of those seeking jobs. As Al Sho'ala mentioned, the total number of persons who were found jobs through the Bureau during 1997 was 6,945. Among the activities of the Bureau are (1) Organising training courses for its employees to update their knowledge and skills to serve employers and job seekers better (2) Field visits to companies in Bahrain and overseas to study the developments occurring in the related fields (3) Publications, including print materials on the attitude, characteristics and expectations from those seeking jobs and (4) Providing labour market information.

At the behest of the ministry, the International Labour Organisation has undertaken, through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) a project relating to the 'Enhancement of Institutional Capacity for Labour Market Analysis and Monitoring.' Said Al Sho'ala: "While optimisation of employment opportunities for nationals and the significance of human resources development are recognised as central issues in the meaningful utilisation of manpower, the need for collating market information is pronounced.



Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Adbulnabi Al Sho'ala at the 'First Arab Exhibition of Rehabilitation centres' products

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It is equally important to ensure that such information is fed into a comprehensive system of manpower planning function within the context of the country's economic development plans. The Ministry is confident that with the experience and expertise of the UNDP, Bahrain will be able to mobilise its human resources more effectively, with the benefits of the efforts reaching across to all the sections of the population."

Training promotion office

The Ministry's Training Promotion Office (TPO), with local and international expertise, monitors the progress achieved in the implementation of training programmes and strategies and renders assistance to international training institutes and companies to establish their presence in Bahrain. A number of incentives provided by the government are already in place (See Industry). The TPO has launched a sustained and aggressive promotional campaign aimed at encouraging international training institutes and training providers to set up operations in Bahrain and benefit from the enormous potential available in the AGCC region (where the annual total estimated expenditure on education and training is a whopping US\$7 billion). During the year, eight organisations signed agreements to set up

their enterprises, while the total number of inquiries was more than 125.

Since training and human resources development is a priority issue among all the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Bahrain has taken the initiative to fulfil this requirement and consolidate its position as the regional Training and Human Resources Development Centre. The goal is to see a larger and deeper involvement of the private sector in establishing training institutes. Bahrain's current drive to encourage such institutes to promote their activities in Bahrain is not only for the benefit of its nationals but also for all the other residents in the region, experts said.

The ensuing years is expected to witness a number of developments including the establishment of National Vocational Qualifications standard.

Social affairs

The most significant event of the year was the 'First Arab Exhibition of the Products of the Rehabilitation Centres and the Productive Families Projects,' hosted by the ministry during April 1997. The six-day exhibition held from April 6 to 11, 1997, highlighted the efforts concerted by the governments of the region in rehabilitating the unfortunate sections of the society into the mainstream of economic and social framework

on the one hand and promoting the inherent talents of people, especially those living in the rural areas on the other. As Al Sho'ala mentioned, the exhibition identified the aims of national projects in the rehabilitation and productive families sectors and traditional handicrafts in order to evolve proper promotional strategies for their development. About 15 countries of the Arab world took part in the exhibition.

Among the various activities and plans of the ministry to foster social and community welfare are (1) Development of handicrafts, cottage industries and promotion of the products in the local, regional and overseas markets (2) promotion of the 'Productive Families Project,' of the ministry which was established to foster the talents of people in the rural areas, especially women to be gainfully employed and be integrated into the mainstream of the economy (3) Establishment of a Special Council to develop and support small scale enterprises, formulation of policies and terms of reference (4) Constitution of an Executive Committee within the Council to monitor the progress of the various projects and consider improvements, review of policies (5) Creation of a technical body to study the development of similar projects overseas, exchange information and experience and seek guidance and cooperation for development of new projects (6) Establishment of a Fund to support self-employment schemes, encourage financial contributions from the government and the private sector to grant loans and grants to deserving projects.