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Bahrain gears up for the next century

The Gulf country is preparing its students and workers to meet the requirements of the labour market, writes Mae Ghalwash

SEATED alone in a classroom, Radi Mohammad studies his notes before his teacher arrives, struggling not only with the intricacies of electricity but — tougher yet — the mysteries of English.

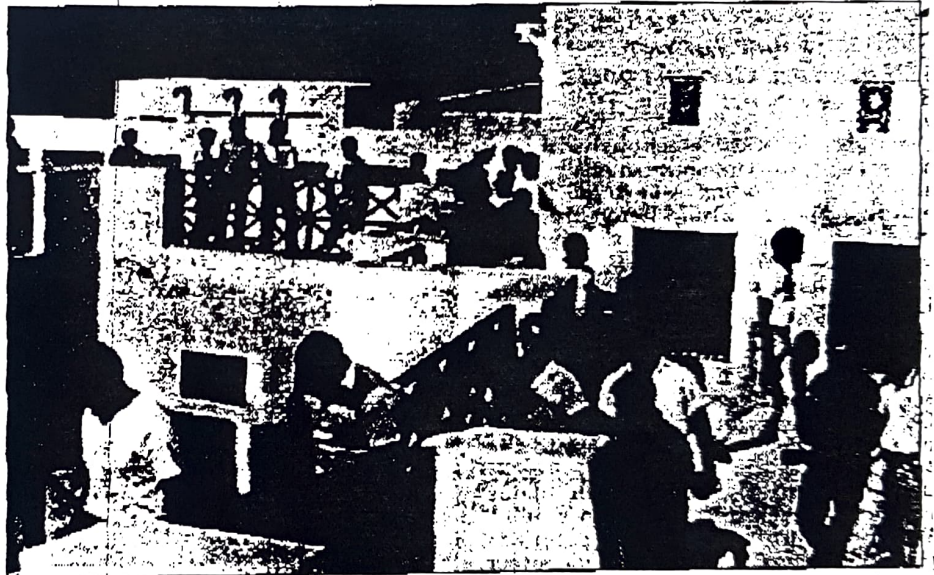
Back in school at 26, Mohammad wants to become an electrician. He studies at the government's Bahrain Training Institute, which is trying to help unemployed, low-paid Bahrainis find jobs in an economy where more than 60 per cent of the labour force is foreign.

The programme is the most innovative in the Gulf region, where expatriate workers often outnumber locals. Along with training, it tries to instill new attitudes — on punctuality and production — and it teaches in English, the language of world business.

The institute is part of a broad government plan to go beyond the 1980s "Bahrainisation" campaign whose goal was to employ Bahrainis, often regardless of their qualifications.

Labour Minister Abdel-Nabi Shola, the driving force behind the new employment plan, said he wants to provide work for Bahrainis based on competence as well as nationality. "My message, my mission, is to find jobs for people — without discrimination," he said.

Two developments have spurred the employment programme. First, Bahrain — the first Gulf state to pump oil — is running out of the precious liquid that some Arab nations have used to give citizens vast benefits with little or no work. Bahrain's oil reserves in



January 1995 were estimated at 70 million barrels and are expected to be exhausted in 2000.

Second, the small island country faces an insurgency by Shia Muslims, who make up a slight majority of the 400,000 native Bahrainis. Since 1995, the rebels have set off small bombs at hotels, restaurants and shops in a rebellion against the ruling Al Khalifa family.

People also grumble even more about the lack of jobs and low wages. Radi Mohammad, the would-be electrician, complains he could not afford college. He sees no future in his job as a helper at a power plant. He said his high school did not give him the skills to get ahead, so he came up with the 52 Bahraini dinars (Dhs514) for the course at the institute. He said proudly he was maintaining a B average. "I think I will improve myself," he said, outlining his hopes in halting English.

The Labour Ministry last year issued a decree ordering all companies to

increase their Bahraini employees by 5 per cent each year.

The ministry's upgraded employment service, using computers and counseling to match skills with needs, found 3000 jobs last year.

Diplomats and longterm expatriate residents say the new laws and programmes show the Labour Ministry is serious. The training institute, for example, was once a crumbling campus teaching theory — not practice. Teachers went out of their way to render technical terms in Arabic to promote Arab nationalism.

"At the end of the day a person knows Arabic but he cannot work," said Naji Ahmed Al Mahdi, the institute's director. "They were putting nationalism before professionalism."

In 1992, the institute had about 650 students; today it has more than 4000. The institute's figures show that 80 per cent of the 1995 graduates managed to find jobs.

Associated Press