

Notes from the Eastern Chair



Colin Clarke
Chairman, British
Business Association
Eastern Province

It's that time of year again when we commence the budget process for 2004, gazing into our collective crystal balls to see what the future may hold. The business climate in the Eastern Province is currently fairly upbeat and most companies seem to be having a reasonably good year. Whose crystal ball told them what 2003 would hold, when a year ago the clouds of war were billowing and the "sexing up" of dossiers were being enacted? Certainly not Mr. Campbell's and probably not Mr. Blair's either

In spite of difficult and tense times, both regionally and locally, we have seen a year of fairly buoyant oil prices coupled with equally high production levels, which can hardly be considered harmful to the Saudi economy, unless it takes away the momentum of the necessary reform programs. All the indications point to another year of good business prospects for 2004.

Some major projects are planned in the petrochemicals sector, and although the Gas Initiative did not produce the result many had hoped for, it has proceeded in a

smaller way. Opportunities continue to exist for the right partners in this sector, whatever the right partner may be, and the growing demand to build capacity in the power and water sector is not going away.

How British companies will fare in this competitive and highly opportunistic market will depend to a certain extent on the continuing stability, both real and perceived, and the travel advisory notices that our own and most other governments issue with guidelines on what is and what is not the smart thing to do.

Hopefully the steps that our hosts have taken, and for which they should be applauded, to ensure that stability is maintained, will continue to prove effective. This in turn will allow the advice to change, in order that we can welcome the hordes of visitors to come flocking back, which will have its own impact in allowing us to achieve our budget wish lists.

Happy budgeting to you all!!

With Kind Regards

KHOBAR KALLING



Brian Willey

Before we go any further, the editor's question in the last RGBB news about frog racing in the Eastern Province should be addressed. This is a harmless evening's fun in which cardboard frogs are raced down a course at the throw of a dice. It is NOT an athletics competition with our friends across the Channel.

Well, that's the summer gone for another year. Everyone is back 'on their seats' as they say here. We managed to keep the men from going astray while their better halves were away by staging a couple of quiz nights in July and August, quite well attended on both occasions.

We lost a few members to pastures new during the summer. We also lost member Richard Stanley who died suddenly in the UK at the age of 57 after a short illness at the end of August. Condolences go to his wife, Margaret and all his family on their sad loss.

We have welcomed newcomers to the Embassy and the British Council when they paid their first visits to the Eastern Province recently. We wish them success in their new postings.

The lack of visiting British businessmen is due only to the current FCO travel advice, which we hope will be eased in the not too distant future as it is a definite deterrent to people travelling to the Kingdom. The season is just starting so we are all hopeful that things will move forward more positively soon.

As you read this Ramadan is upon us once again. We wish all our Muslim colleagues and friends a peaceful Holy Month.

Our vice-chairman is kicking off a new business initiative of informal round table dinners, in which a small number of members each invite a business colleague (not a BBA member or necessarily British) to discuss topics of mutual interest with the object of promoting British Business in the Eastern Province. Watch this space for a report later.

LIFE AT THE BRITISH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF AL KHOBAR SINCE 01 SEPTEMBER 2003

The events which took place in the Kingdom during the past school year were, to say the least, unsettling. Like several other major international schools in the region, we acted on the advice of the experts and closed early last term. We also had shatterproof film applied to all windows during the vacation. As an international school licenced by the Ministry of Education, we rely solely on school fees to finance all aspects of school endeavour. At the same time, we are not permitted to be profit making. We were, therefore, more than a little anxious to know what our student roll would be when we re-opened on 06 September.

At the time of writing, towards the end of October, we are within 4% of our expectations, and no member of staff who was with us last May stayed away for security reasons. Well done!

Whilst, strictly, we are below budget, we are at the same time delighted with this return. Confidence in the school has been maintained – perhaps in some cases restored – and despite the two major checkpoints close to the school, the transportation of students to and from the campus is now smooth-running, and scarcely obtrusive. We have found the Saudi Arabian National Guard and the security team from nearby Al Bustan to be friendly and helpful, and in general there is the feeling that we are probably as secure as we can ever be.

BISAK is up-and-running and as lively and positive as ever. Let us hope that the international spirit we encourage will reap much longer-term dividends.

Chris Spedding, Principal
The British International School of Al Khobar