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**Yemen's Past, Present and Hopes for the Future:
H.E. Dr. Abu Bakr al-Qirbi speaks on 'Yemen in a Changing Middle East'**

BY MARY E. STONAKER

SINGAPORE -- H.E. Dr. Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, the Foreign Minister of Yemen, spoke of overriding optimism during his evaluation on Yemen's development and international integration since unification on 22 May 1990. The seminar was held at the Shangri-la Hotel on Tuesday, 18 May 2010 and sponsored by the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore. Dr. al-Qirbi spoke candidly about the challenges facing Yemen today. He contrasted these challenges with reasons, and hope, for a brighter future for Yemen.

"Not lack of will, rather lack of resources." Dr. al-Qirbi explained that Yemen needed to be given "affordable prescriptions" – solutions that Yemen could effectively enact in order to finance its development and transparency within the region and the world.

The current state of affairs in Yemen stems from its shaky beginning as a unified nation in the early 1990s, the Foreign Minister reflected on the early 1990s. Most notably, Yemen's disapproval of the American intervention in Iraqi-occupied Kuwait prevented global economic integration. After this public stance set Yemen in negative light, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other countries imposed hefty sanctions that "paralyzed the country." These sanctions, imposed on newly-developing Yemen, left a nation "with no resources for development or reform" and separations that eventually spiraled into civil war in 1994. In a domino reaction, this war for separation, albeit unsuccessful, "multiplied economic ills in the country."

The Foreign Minister outlined what he believes to be the major problems still existing in Yemen today: the economy, al-Qa'ida and the crisis emanating from the Sa'ada region. However, he emphasized that the latter problems effectively translate into economic strife as well for the Yemeni people.

Speaking on the economy, Dr. al-Qirbi stated that the unemployment rate has hit an extreme level of 30% [as compared with the international averages in ranging from 10-20%]. He further demonstrated the negative effect of recent international media coverage in Yemen by stating that tourism has hit almost zero. Continuing to speak about terrorists, "The approach of dealing with terrorism, not only in Yemen but also worldwide, has not been successful... We cannot fight terrorists alone." Al-Qirbi cited the wide distribution of *wilayat* ('provinces') across Yemen as both a benefit and a handicap: although the relatively small population across the vast land of Yemen dilutes terrorists such as Al Qa'ida operatives to a tolerable level, it also poses a "great challenge [towards] development." The wide dispersal and large number of *wilayat* mean that it is very difficult to finance schools and hospitals in each *wilayah* ('province').

Another developmental handicap placed on Yemen, the Foreign Minister continued, is the high rate of refugees and the challenge of border security. Refugees coming from African countries, especially Somalia, are creating an economic burden on the state. Many refugees also use Yemen

as a hub from which to cross into bordering countries such as Saudi Arabia. Dr. al-Qirbi spoke to the repeatedly stressed border relations with neighbours, especially Saudi Arabia. When African refugees are caught entering Saudi Arabia illegally, the blame is put on Yemen's border patrol for not preventing their entrance to the Arabian Peninsula. This hinders the positive diplomatic relationships that Yemen's government is attempting to accomplish.

Yet this increased international media attention has not produced all negative consequences, the Foreign Minister insisted. Due to this attention in particular, Yemen has hope of gaining sincere developmental support and financial contributions. This is because countries around the world are finally beginning to see Yemen as a critical puzzle piece in the international economy. Dr. al-Qirbi explained: If Yemen destabilizes to the point of neighbours such as Somalia, the entire international economy would be hit. This realization by other nations is in part due to the recent rash of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Foreign Minister said piracy coupled with the increased presence of Al Qaeda has led nations to recognize the strategic geographic location of Yemen. If this critical narrow point in global trade routes were to become compromised further, it would be extremely dangerous for transportation. This, in turn, would affect the entirety of the global economy, putting either additional security costs onto ships traveling these waters or adding precious travel time as ships diverted around the Cape of Good Hope.

Yemen's strategic geographic importance in the global economy, therefore, is why Dr. al-Qirbi is hopeful for the future. He also believes the people of Yemen possess "positive attitudes" about their development as demonstrated by their increasing role as a regional peacemaker. It is his thought that working to ensure stability in neighbouring lands will positively affect the homeland's own development.

Dr. al-Qirbi continued to find hope in Yemen's geographic location as he cited long term regional growth opportunities with neighbouring GCC countries. Although GCC membership is the long term goal, Yemen can still find help in development projects as well as improve bilateral and multilateral relations with these countries in the short term.

Within Yemen, Dr. al-Qirbi cited the rehabilitation of the Yemeni government as crucial to future stability of governance. This "political reconciliation" has not been easy, Dr. al-Qirbi conceded, and it will not prove to be so until further steps are taken in integration of populations and anti-corruption matters. It is a long and bumpy road for sure, the Foreign Minister commented, but not an impossible one. With the continued external support and resources, he stressed that Yemen will be able to make these necessary changes.

Dr. Abu Bakr al-Qirbi ended the seminar by reiterating: "Training is badly needed." He called upon Yemenis abroad as well as all in Singapore to invest in Yemen's future through technical assistance such as government/public policy guidance.

Investment and education combined with a prevailing will is the prescription given by this doctor to ease the ills of a struggling Yemen.

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