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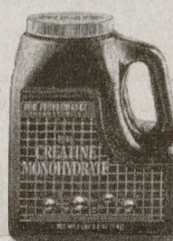
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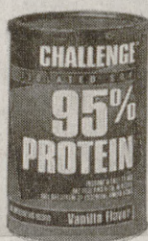
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Oil supply to increase

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia (AP)— Gulf Arab states are leaning toward a slight increase in oil production to lower prices, officials said Wednesday after a meeting of Gulf oil ministers.

In a closing statement, the ministers called for a stable market, but gave little away on what position they would adopt at next month's meeting of the 11-member Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries in Vienna.

"The ministers stressed their countries' desire to maintain the market's stability in the coming period in cooperation with other producing nations," the statement said.

The skyrocketing price of oil, which has nearly tripled over the past year, has led to spikes in heating oil and gas prices in the United States and prompted calls for the government to tap the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve. U.S. officials have also lobbied OPEC and non-OPEC countries to increase oil production to alleviate the high energy costs.

Gulf officials said Wednesday the ministers favored an increase in production of between 2 million and 2.5 million barrels a day to reach a price of between \$20 and \$25 a barrel. Oil for delivery in April was trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange at \$29.39 a barrel.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, did not say how such an increase should be apportioned among OPEC and non-OPEC member states.

Officials from Saudi Arabia, which towers over its fellow Gulf states as the world's largest oil exporter, said their government favored prices at about \$20 to \$25 a barrel.

United Arab Emirates oil minister Obeid bin Saif Al-Nasseri also said \$20 to \$25 a barrel would be acceptable.

However, Kuwait is believed to oppose any production increase. And Iran, the second-largest producer in OPEC, has already come out against a rise in output.

The Saudis are scheduled to meet March 2 with Mexico and Venezuela to discuss whether to increase production. Their decision is expected to influence the OPEC meeting on March 27 in Vienna.

U.S. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, who is touring the Middle East, said in Cairo on Wednesday that he would be talking to oil officials in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait about increasing production to ease prices.

"We want to see oil prices go down," Richardson told reporters. "I am going to Kuwait and then Saudi Arabia. These are two nations that are very good friends to the U.S. ... It's going to be a friendly, positive discussion. I'm not going there to pressure anybody."

His trip was prompted by U.S. consumer concern over soaring fuel prices. The United States is the world's biggest oil importer.

Fire in the sky



Sheet lightning streaks across College Station skies Wednesday after a thunderstorm. Lightning continued for hours into the morning.

Pope visits Egypt for 1st time

CAIRO, Egypt (AP)— "It is a beautiful thing, this visit," says Adel Abbas, a Muslim caretaker at the old synagogue in the crumbling Coptic Christian quarter known as Babylon, awaiting a Roman Catholic pope.

In a fresh millennium, John Paul II comes to holy ground to weave together ancient threads. He arrives Thursday in Cairo, where tradition says Joseph and Mary brought their young son, fleeing the wicked King Herod.

Before leaving on Saturday, he visits Mount Sinai, where the Bible says Moses received God's law chiseled in stone after escaping the pharaohs across a magically parted Red Sea, 13 centuries before Christianity.

Rarely has a papal visit been so charged with symbolic meaning. This is Cairo, not easily fazed. Rarely has the pontiff's imminent arrival caused so little stir.

"Cairo made a much bigger deal of Hillary Clinton last year," says Maggie Michael, a Copt student at the American University in Cairo. "I don't know why, but people aren't talking about the pope."

Muhammed Fareq, in red coat and shiny buttons, greeted yet another faceless foreigner at the Conrad Hotel with heart-warming insincerity: "All of Egypt is glad you are here, sir."

When asked his opinion of the pope's visit, however, the clued-in archetypal doorman looked puzzled. "Who, sir?"

Workmen painted Vatican yellow on rusted hoardings by the stadium where the pope is to celebrate Mass on Friday. But not one banner, poster, T-shirt or coffee mug was spotted on a tour of Cairo's chaotic streets.

Deep in the Khan el-Khalili souk, it was business as usual: a raucous bustle of overeager merchants, wide-eyed tourists, under-served beggars, bootblacks, and indifferent if well-armed police.

Men sucked on their water pipes at El Fishawy cafe, impervious to the lady offering a belly dancing doll in flamenco dress or the man with Barbie doll lamps wrapped in sequin gowns tight enough to offend any religion.

In Babylon, at the heart of Christian Cairo, a Muslim woman named Fathia sold her

usual gaily painted saints and icons. She had not heard of the pope, nor did she know he was coming to Cairo.

Near the stadium, Ahmed Masad, 21-year-old computer programmer, knew someone known as the pope expected, and that he lived somewhere in Italy. But that was it.

"Even if they don't show it, many Egyptians are excited that he is coming and are eager to see their land," says Rasha Soliman, a water expert. "It is important that comes in peace and security."

It will be John Paul II's first visit to Egypt.

"I am Muslim, but I am thrilled this visit," exclaimed Amr Abbas, behind a colorful wall of soft drinks for sale. "This will give a true image of Egypt and show the world we live in peace with no discrimination."

Nearby, a trendy young couple of Coptic Christians, were eager to see the Roman pope.

"He is coming because of his sacred last month at el-Kushbeh, very bad feelings," says Ahmed Shafiq, a salesman, expressing a widely held belief among Copts.

On Jan. 2, Muslim extremists rampage shot or beat to death 23 people all but two of them Christians, in the village of el-Kushbeh, south of Cairo on the Nile. Unusual for Egypt, Copts are 70 percent majority in the village.

Although the visit was announced shortly afterward, Coptic church officials said the pope did not involve himself in internal conflicts.

The Pope in Egypt

Pope John Paul II's visit to Egypt, Feb. 24-26, is the first of his planned pilgrimages to religious sites in the Middle East and the first papal visit to Egypt. He will meet with the president, Coptic and Muslim leaders and visit Mount Sinai, said to be the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments.



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