

OPEC set to slash exports

by William Drozdiak
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BRUSSELS - Nearly three years ago, as Asia's economies began slipping into crisis, OPEC oil ministers made a grave miscalculation: In a bid to maximize their income, they decided to boost output. But with the so-called Asian contagion came a collapse in demand for oil, and prices plummeted to less than \$10 a barrel, provoking tremors of political and economic instability among oil exporting countries from Venezuela to Saudi Arabia.

This time, the cartel's leaders say they have learned their lesson. With the American economy showing signs of slouching toward recession ahead of a crucial meeting of OPEC - the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries - in Vienna on Wednesday, the ministers say they are determined to head off any slump in demand by slashing production in the hope of keeping prices safely above present levels of about \$25 a barrel.

This weekend, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson made a whirlwind tour through the oil-rich nations of the Persian Gulf region, hoping to head off any precipitous moves by OPEC. Richardson, who stopped in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, said Monday in a telephone interview that he sought to convince oil ministers of the need for restraint at the Vienna meeting. By his own account of his trip, however, the prospects for a successful outcome look dicey.

"We made some progress in urging them to keep consumer views in mind and make only modest cuts," Richardson said. "But my concern is that some of these countries are getting too happy with oil at \$30 a barrel. Oil at that price is not good for the world economy. It can lead to in-

flation and a deeper slowdown that will ultimately be just as harmful" to the oil producers.

Many analysts are sounding similar warnings. If OPEC production cuts cause panic and drive oil prices close to \$40 a barrel or even higher, they say, a new energy crisis could trigger a deep global recession that, in turn, would provoke a steep fall in demand for oil that could ultimately drive prices back down below \$10 a barrel. Such extreme market volatility for the world's most crucial commodity would prove disastrous for producers and consumers alike.

Richardson said he was encouraged to hear that the kind of precipitous production cuts being proposed by such price hawks as Iran and Venezuela - as high as 2 million or 3 million barrels a day - will not be supported by Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter and the most powerful voice in the cartel.

Last week, Saudi Arabia's national oil company, Aramco, told its customers to expect reduced deliveries in February amounting to 500,000 barrels a day, about 5 percent of total Saudi production. This figure would be in line with Saudi Arabia's anticipated share of a production cut if the cartel as a whole agreed to trim 1.5 million barrels a day.

But Richardson said it is clear that even Saudi Arabia and its gulf neighbors - which remain solicitous about sustaining close ties with their U.S. ally 10 years after American forces helped drive Iraqi invaders out of Kuwait - are fearful about the damage another oil glut could inflict on their own economies.

"These countries are just obsessed about what happened to them after they decided to raise production at the Jakarta conference in 1998," Richardson said. "But they have to realize that the only way we achieve

stability in the global oil markets is by having a cooperative dialogue between producers and consumers. We need to find a healthy range for all concerned, because \$10 a barrel is too low and \$30 a barrel is too high."

Richardson said he was received with warmth and hospitality during his tour. When he arrived in Kuwait late Sunday, Saud Nasir Sabah, the sheikhdom's oil minister, delayed their discussions so the two of them could watch the NFL playoff games on television before pondering the fate of the world's economy.

But while his charm offensive was greeted cordially, Richardson's appeal for small or no cuts in oil production was rebuffed with lectures about the need to consider mutual interests. "We agree there should be consultations between us to avoid any negative impact on the economies of the United States and Europe," Richardson quoted the Kuwaiti minister as saying. "But when we look at the interests of our friends and allies, we expect them to also look at our interests and how our economies are so dependent on oil."

After the debacle in Jakarta, several OPEC members - including Algeria, Venezuela, Iran, Indonesia and Nigeria - suffered a near collapse of their oil-dependent economies that contributed to political instability. Even Saudi Arabia suffered a serious budget shortfall that prompted the affluent desert kingdom to seek emergency loans for the first time in its history.

But since last year, OPEC countries - which account for about 40 percent of the world's oil output - have reaped a windfall in profits as demand for oil picked up in virtually every corner of the world. After suffering through several years of recession caused by weak revenue, the cartel's 11 members saw their oil income jump by 75 percent last year to

\$285 billion, according to OPEC statistics.

In response to a surge in prices last year that sent the cost of crude oil soaring to the highest levels in a decade, OPEC raised production on four successive occasions by a total of 3.75 million barrels a day. By this spring, however, after the heavy consumption of heating oil ends in the Northern Hemisphere and before the summer driving season picks up, OPEC fears there will be a sharp decline in consumption that could drive prices down.

For that reason, many OPEC leaders insist that radical measures are required to soak up excess oil supplies before a glut develops. "We realize that world economic growth is going to be slower this year than last and that will impact oil demand," said Ali Rodriguez, Venezuela's oil minister before becoming OPEC general secretary two weeks ago. "But we figure that after cutting production, if prices rise too much we can always correct that, because it's always more easy to correct an increase in price than a fall."

But others say there is a zero-sum game at work and that, contrary to pleas for cooperation, there is an inherent struggle between producers and consumers that bears hostile overtones of class warfare between the rich oil consumers of the West and poor producing nations of the Third World that are desperately dependent on oil exports as their only source of income.

"It's clear that Europe and the United States only want very low prices," OPEC's acting president, Algerian Oil Minister Chakib Khalil, told reporters. "Do they want to see the same prices as 1988? And do they care what will happen to us? If we don't do any cuts, we're going to see those prices as early as the second quarter of this year."

Saying "Chao" to Chavez



President-elect George W. Bush, left, listens as his new Labor Secretary nominee Elaine Chao speaks at a news conference Thursday, January 11, 2001. Bush named Chao after Linda Chavez withdrew her name.

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Reagan recuperating after surgery

by Rene Sanchez
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SANTA MONICA, Calif. - Former president Ronald Reagan was recuperating in a hospital here Saturday after undergoing surgery to repair his broken right hip, an injury he suffered in a minor fall at his home.

Joanne Drake, a Reagan family spokeswoman, said the operation was successful and without complication. Reagan, who turns 90 next month, "is resting comfortably back in his room," she said, with his wife, Nancy, at his side.

Authorities at St. John's Health Center, where Reagan was rushed to by ambulance Friday, said the surgery this morning lasted just over an hour. Doctors inserted metal pins and screws into Reagan's hip, a common medical procedure that for elderly patients presents a lengthy and often difficult recovery.

Kevin Ehrhart, the orthopedic surgeon who led the operation, said Reagan is doing well but will remain in the hospital for at least another week. Ehrhart also said the two-term former president may have a "long uphill struggle" to a full recovery, in part because he is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease.

"I'm sure it will complicate it somewhat more," Ehrhart said.

About 350,000 people, many of them elderly and frail, fracture their hips every year in the United States, mostly from falls, according to the American Academy of Orthopedic

Surgeons. Only 25 percent of those patients make a full recovery; 40 percent require nursing home care; 50 percent need a cane or walker; and 20 percent die from complications in 12 months, the academy said.

Reagan's doctors said that although they were encouraged by the health of his bones and tissue, his rehabilitation could take months and poses particular risks for a person his age because it wears on the heart and lungs.

During his presidency, Reagan survived a 1981 assassination attempt, a 1985 colon cancer operation and 1987 prostate and skin-cancer surgery.

Since 1994, when Reagan announced in a handwritten letter to the American people that he had Alzheimer's and had begun a journey "into the sunset of my life," the former president has withdrawn from public life. He and his wife live in the exclusive Bel-Air community of Los Angeles.

In the past two years, as his mental health has steadily declined, Reagan has stopped going to his office in nearby Century City and has not made any public appearances, except for occasional walks with Secret Service agents in a park near his home. Some friends and family members say he no longer recognizes them.

Ehrhart said that when Reagan arrived at the hospital Friday afternoon, he was in considerable pain, as is common for patients with broken hips. He said the break caused by the fall was not extreme but still a "significant injury."

Not just economy-class syndrome

Los Angeles Times
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The following editorial appeared in Tuesday's Los Angeles Times:

Until last October few airline passengers worried about blood clots forming during flights. Then a 28-year-old Englishwoman stepped off a plane at London's Heathrow Airport after a 12,000-mile journey from Australia and collapsed and died. An autopsy attributed her death to a pulmonary embolism resulting from deep vein thrombosis - in other words, a blood clot that had lodged in a lung. The likely cause of the clot was the passenger's restricted movement in a cramped seating space during the long trip.

Since then what quickly came to

be called economy-class syndrome has drawn a lot of attention. Last week a hospital near Heathrow reported that at least 30 people had died over the last three years after debarking at the airport following long flights. That's at just one hospital near one airport. Since symptoms of a clot, which can include swelling and cramping, vary and are often mistaken for something else, precise numbers are unavailable.

It's not a problem just for air passengers. The syndrome is the fourth most common cause of death in the United States, according to Dr. Robert McBane, a thrombosis expert at the Mayo Clinic. It occurs as well in people who sit at desks or in theater seats too long and in patients immobilized during surgery. McBane and

others, according to news reports, also believe it is related to a genetic propensity to clot more quickly that is present in up to 5 percent of people.

Although business-class and first-class airline passengers too can be afflicted, the misery of long-distance flights in cramped economy class made a vivid link for many people. The idea that more legroom would help prevent a dangerous medical problem caught on quickly. More room, of course, would make it easier to stretch out one's legs, which doctors recommend as a preventive. For reasons of comfort and competition, some airlines are already removing a row or two of seats to add legroom.

Doctors also recommend sitting on the aisle or near a bulkhead to allow for more bodily movement, drinking

plenty of water and avoiding alcohol on flights to stave off dehydration in a plane's dry air. Walking around once an hour, or at least doing foot and leg stretches, may help as well. Of course, there are a limited number of the roomier aisle and bulkhead seats, and strolling around crowded airplanes whose narrow aisles are often clogged with food and beverage carts is not so much an option as a challenge.

Among those who survived thrombosis during or after flights, lawsuits are being threatened. Some airlines now provide written warnings to passengers or show videos that encourage stretching. And even if it's no magic bullet for preventing thrombosis, that extra inch or two of leg space is still a goal devoutly wished in economy class.

Oldest piece of Earth found

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Scientists have found what they believe is the oldest piece of Earth ever identified - a crystal dating back about 4.4 billion years.

Moreover, chemical analysis of the tiny rock, which contains the mineral zircon, suggests that liquid water might have existed on the planet much earlier than previously thought.

Two teams of researchers analyzed the crystal, uncovered inside a much younger rock found in western Australia, and determined it dated back 4.3 billion to 4.4 billion years, making it the oldest terrestrial material ever found. Chemical analyses of the crystal, which is about the diameter of two human hairs, indicate it was formed in the presence of liquid water, which contrasts with the prevailing

view that at that time the nascent Earth was a swirling ball of molten metal and rock. That suggests that conditions necessary for life to emerge might have existed earlier in the planet's history.

"Although it is unclear how general a picture a few tiny zircon grains can provide, the results represent a significant advance in reconstructing Earth's Dark Ages," wrote Alex N. Halliday of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich in a commentary accompanying the report in the Jan. 11 issue of Nature.

The discovery also casts doubt on the theory that Earth's moon formed when the young planet was struck by a large object, casting off a piece of debris that became the moon. If that had happened, the planet would have been too hot for liquid water to have been present.



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Fuzzy math on Pulsars?

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In the spring of A.D. 386, Chinese astronomers witnessed the explosion of a massive star in the constellation now known as Sagittarius. A remnant of that blast is telling modern astronomers that one of their assumptions about these powerful events may be wrong.

Scientists have used the Chandra X-ray observatory in space to identify the husk left from that stellar death - a collapsed object known as a pulsar, about the diameter of the District of Columbia and spinning 14 times per second. If confirmed, this would be only the second pulsar to be clearly associated with a historical event.

The pulsar was detected in 1997

by a Japanese satellite, but its connection with the ancient explosion remained murky. The question is important because a pulsar provides a



dow" on the death throes of its exploded parent star. And it is in such explosions that heavy elements manufactured in stars are distributed

through the universe, setting the stage for the evolution of planets and life.

Chandra's observations reveal clearly for the first time that the pulsar is at the precise center of the spreading cloud of gas and particles from the explosion. This makes the linkage "essentially inescapable," according to Victoria Kaspi of McGill University in Montreal. She presented her team's results last week at a meeting of the American Astronomical Society in San Diego.

Astronomers using the standard method of calculating pulsar ages, based on rate of spin, had previously estimated the pulsar to be 24,000 years old. The new evidence indicates their figure was more than 22,000 years high and "suggests that other standard pulsar age estimates may be wrong as well," Kaspi said. David Helfand of Columbia University, not on the Kaspi team, said pulsar specialists will have to reassess their assumptions about "original spin."

Sleep-cycle gene is identified

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Researchers have identified the first gene involved in regulating the human sleep cycle, an advance that could lead to new ways to treat such sleeping problems as jet lag.

Kong L. Toh of the University of Utah and colleagues made the discovery by studying a Utah family with the unusual disorder known as familial advanced sleep-phase syndrome, or FASPS. The disorder causes people to fall asleep unusually early, about 7:30 p.m., and awake unusually early, about 4:30 a.m.

The family members had a defect in a gene known as hPer2, according to a report that will be published in the journal *Science*. Experiments with fruit flies have shown that the gene plays a crucial role in regulating the body's circadian rhythm - the body clock that controls a variety of basic bodily functions, such as sleep.

"Such discoveries will likely provide novel insights into human sleep and may improve our ability to treat ... other sleep-phase disorders such as ... jet lag and (problems associated with) shift work," the researchers wrote.