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IT efforts to get a shot in the arm Oman plans to introduce legal framework for e-commerce

By V M Sathish

MUSCAT — The beginning of a new era of electronic commerce has started in Oman as a number of information technology experts, future cyber businessmen and government officials are meet here to discuss various challenges preventing the growth of e-business in the Arab world.

Under the patronage of Mohammed bin Ali al Alawi, Minister of Legal Affairs, experts from the Arab Management Society and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) came out with useful recommendations to help the Arab businessmen achieve a smooth transition from the traditional market place to the cyber market place.

In his inaugural speech, the Minister of Legal Affairs, Mohammed bin Ali al Alawi said the Government of Oman, led by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, is aware of the rapid economic changes taking place in international business, particularly in the field of e-commerce, which will account for business transactions worth \$100 billion by 2001.

"This rapid development dictates a radical change in our abilities and competence to keep pace with the rest of the world. Our plans to join the stream of globalisation should take into account our economic interests for a balanced partnership with the countries of the advanced world," he said.

NECESSARY LEGISLATION: Indicating that the government will introduce necessary legislation to facilitate e-commerce, he said a flexible and globally coherent legal system is required to facilitate e-commerce. The minister added that Oman's laws are known for their favourable approach towards trade liberalisation.

The Sultanate gives a major role to the private sector according to the directives of His Majesty, who stresses the need for helping Omani youth to benefit from modern technolo-



Mohammed bin Ali al Alawi, Minister of Legal Affairs, addressing the meeting.

gy "Oman as a host of this conference is the translation of a desire to address the challenges of the future. While I appreciate the efforts of the organisers of the conference, I hope that it would provide a good opportunity for enhancing and exchanging technical data relevant to e-commerce. I would like to express gratitude for the experts attending the conference," he added.

Talal Abu Ghazaleh, Conference Chairman said in his opening address that establishing communication between parties from different cultures and languages is an important requirement for facilitation of electronic business and trade liberalisation. "In the Arab world we have over 250 million people and most of those do not speak English. For them, the Internet is essentially a closed door and therefore, still a mystery. This poses a real problem for Arab businesses that wish to enter the e-business arena and it poses a problem for the Arab governments," Talal said.

GLOBALISATION: Electronic commerce and globalisation are interrelated and encourages the other. "A retreat from globalisation would seriously weaken the promise of e-business just as in the absence of e-business globalisation would not advance so quickly," he added.

Arabising the Internet is

vital to facilitate transition to e-commerce and e-governance in the Arab world, he said.

Besides developing Internet programmes and platforms accessible to the majority of non-English speaking Arab public, facilitating secure electronic cash transactions through e-banking and ensuring a legal framework to govern the cyber market place are some of the important problems that need to be jointly addressed by the government and business community.

Experts also said that in order to boost electronic business and reap its full benefits a flexible and globally coherent legal system is required. Hamud Mamdouh, Senior Counsellor, Trade in Services, World Trade Organisation (WTO), Abdullah Mansoor, Undersecretary, Ministry of Commerce Bahrain and Christian van der Valk, Chief Information Officer, AddTrust, Sween and former Deputy Director of Electronic Commerce Department, International Chamber of Commerce spoke in detail about such a legal framework and other requirements for the cyber market place.

They said the government's role in e-commerce should be that of a facilitator rather than an interventionist. Government should ensure sufficient modes of IT education and consumer protection in the e-business sec-

nario. While the government's need to change their traditional mindset about business and regulation, businessmen need to follow self-regulation.

INFORMATION FLOW: Experts from the advertising world, the Internet Watch Foundation and Internet Content Rating Association spoke about controlling objectionable information flow through the Internet and controlling the misuse of personal data to ensure consumer privacy.

They also discussed ways to adapt traditional law enforcement mechanism to the new situation. Tony Butler, Deputy Director General, Advertising Standards Authority, UK, David Kerr, Chief Executive, Internet Watch Foundation and others spoke about the issue.

Although electronic commerce is a new phenomenon, it presents enormous opportunities for consumers and business.

According to estimates, within one decade there will be one billion cyber consumers offering a lucrative market.

Data protection for consumers, removal of customs barriers impeding the flow of goods, liberalisation of postal and express delivery services, and liberalisation of transport services are other steps needed to facilitate e-commerce.