

Doha Forum discusses role of media in democracy

Jazeera has never been anti-US: Khanfar

DOHA: Al Jazeera said yesterday it has never been anti-American although there were indications of the US administration showing a bias against the TV channel.

Wadah Khanfar, Director of Al Jazeera Satellite Channel, said there were grounds to suspect that the US administration has pressured the interim Iraqi government to close its bureau in Baghdad.

Khanfar was responding to a question during a question-answer session at the Fifth Doha Forum on Free Trade and Democracy at Hotel Ritz Carlton here yesterday.

Some 20 Al Jazeera staffers were arrested in Iraq and some of them were detained without trial for over 70 days, he said.

There were no problems with Al Jazeera since its launch in 1996 until 2001, and it was actually appreciated as long as the focus was on differences of opinion between the people and their leaders in the Arab world.

But things changed after 2001, Khanfar said, without referring to changed US attitude towards the channel in the aftermath of 9/11. The change was because opinions now reflected included the US.

Khanfar earlier spoke at a session devoted to the 'role of the media in creating a demo-



Picture: AYYUB ABDULLAH

Speakers discussing the role of media in creating democratic environment. Inset: Wadah Khanfar and Nouzha Bennis.

cratic climate'. The moderator was Joe Trippi, from USA's MSNBC.

Other speakers included Walker Russel Mead, senior fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, USA, Alain Menargues, French journalist, Smuts Ngonyama, from African National Congress (ANC), and Brian Hanrahan, from the BBC World.

Nearly all the speakers referred to Al Jazeera and said

it was bringing in revolutionary changes in the Arab world.

Speakers stressed that it was not possible for a society to progress economically if there was no free flow of information.

Trade suffers if reliable information is not available, said one speaker from the US.

Trippi noted that this was not the age of information but the age of people's empowerment.

Menargues observed that with 20,000 'pieces of information' available daily, people faced difficulty in making a choice of what to access.

He was referring to information explosion and the quick transmission of information in this electronic age.

Ngonyama stressed that international communities should play a role in fighting curbs imposed on the media by governments, owners and

other vested interests. He called for a widened role for women in the media worldwide.

This was after a Moroccan parliamentarian, Nouzha Skalli Bennis, said during the question-answer session that although the forum talked about the role of women in media and democratisation, they were under-represented at the forum.