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EMIR OPENS FORUM ON DEMOCRACY AND FREE TRADE

Warning over retreat from reform plans

By Arvind Nair

HH THE Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani yesterday opened the seventh Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade with an earnest call not to evade the democratic process in the region.

“There is no justification for evading the democratic process”, HH the Emir told the three-day conference, at Ritz-Carlton, which is also being attended by 600 delegates from 71 countries, consisting of political leaders, diplomats, intellectuals, academicians, businessmen and media personnel.

They included Finland President Tarja Halonen, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, leader of the UK House of Commons Jack Straw, Arab League secretary-general Amr Moussa, former Lebanese premier Dr Saleem al-Hoss, and former president of South Africa F W de Klerk.

HH Sheikha Mozah Nasser al-Misnad and Prime Minister HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor al-Thani and ministers were also present.

The interest in the development of

democracy in the region had grown during the past few years, HH the Emir said.

“The hope was that the region would make up for the time it missed and make a shortcut to catch up with the global march to freedom.

“But you know that what has been achieved so far is not up to the aspired level. Of late, there has even been a sort of lassitude and slackness in pushing forward the reform process with the pretext that the conditions in the region do not allow” it.

The region had previously experienced the deferring, if not freezing, comprehensive reform for many years, using all kinds of pretexts until its problems piled up and its crises increased.

“Therefore, it should not make the same mistake again under the false impression that the relative abatement in the international concern about the advancement of democracy in the area would bring things back to their previous stagnation”, HH the Emir said.

It was a big mistake, HH the Emir stressed, to subject the progress toward democracy or retreat from it, to messages coming from abroad, or to external pressures.

“This is an immature conception that ignores the free will of the people and their right to live a sound political life

where freedoms are respected and where all people enjoy all rights, on top of which is the right to participation in public affairs”.

HH the Emir refuted any argument that the region’s culture was responsible for the delay in the democratic process. The teachings of Islam made Shura and the rendering of advice obligatory, and stressed the sanctity of human rights.

Reforms did not move under foreign influence, HH the Emir said, referring to the successful handing of power to a civilian government by the military in Mauritania.

The main reason for the tardy democ-



HH the Emir addressing the seventh Doha Forum on Democracy, Development and Free Trade.

ratisation, he said, “is due to the lack of correct understanding of reform, which must be comprehensive and deep.”

“There can be no economic reform without political reform”, HH the Emir declared.

The reform experience in Qatar had paid great attention to the development of social system,” he said.

“We focus in particular on education as an effective means for sound social upbringing that makes way for creative thinking”.

Referring to the Iranian nuclear programme, HH the Emir said it was a sensitive one, and that it should be solved through peaceful means.

HH the Emir affirmed that the region’s march toward democracy, development and free trade would go on and be completed, even if it was slow at times.

Welcoming the delegates, Prime Minister HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor al-Thani said democracy was a core issue of concern to Qatar.

Secretary-General Ban said Qatar was a welcome example of a country that understood the need to share the benefits of globalisation and growth, and ensure that they contributed to social development.

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HH the Emir and HH Sheikha Mozah with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and Finnish President Tarja Halonen at the conference.