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Gulf Countries Urged to Invest More in Scientific Research

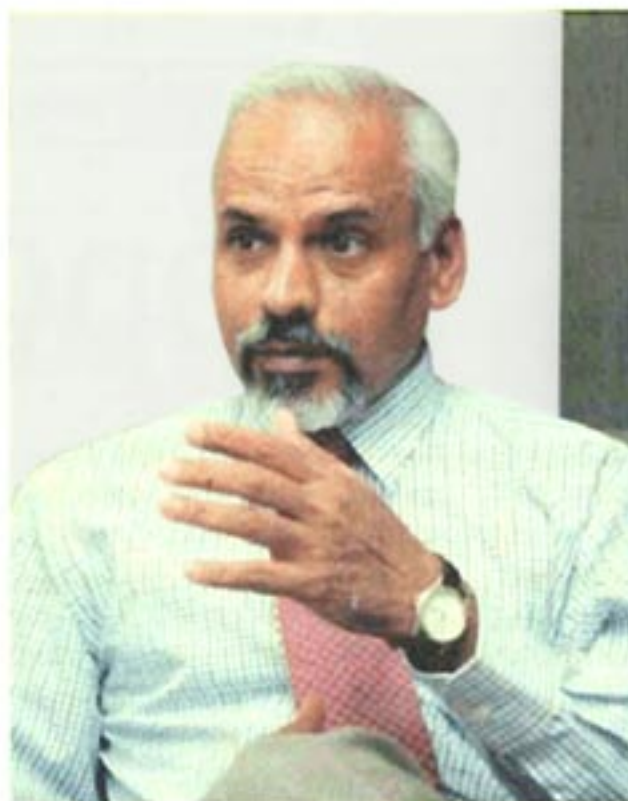
M. Ghazanfar Ali Khan
Arab News

RIYADH — A prominent scientist called on the Saudi and Gulf governments to invest in scientific research and advanced studies to reduce the gap between the Arab world and the developed countries for the sake of long-term sustainable prosperity of the region.

Katepalli R. Sreenivasan, who was here on a six-day visit left for Kuwait yesterday. Sreenivasan made his comments following talks with a cross-section of top Saudi officials and scientists at the Riyadh-based King Abdul Aziz City for Science & Technology (KACST) and the Dhahran-based King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals (KFUPM). Sreenivasan heads the prestigious Italy-based International Center for Theoretical Physics (ICTP).

Arab nations collectively spend 0.15 percent of their gross domestic product on research and development — well below the global average of 1.4 percent. Referring to the possibility of setting up a regional scientific center in the Kingdom, he said that ICTP could extend all help in this project.

During his stay in the Kingdom, the ICTP chief met with Khalid S. Al-Sultan, KFUPM rector, and Saleh Al-Athel, KACST president, and discussed with them the possibility of ICTP's tie-up with the two premier Saudi institutions.



Katepalli R. Sreenivasan

He also delivered a lecture on the occasion of Applied Mathematics Day at KFUPM on Sunday. The lecture was attended by a large number of faculty members, including prominent mathematician Abul Hasan Siddiqui.

Siddiqui said the ICTP was an apex international organization operating under a tripartite agreement among the Italian government and two United Nations agencies, UNESCO and International Atomic

Energy Agency (IAEA).

Referring to the need "to prepare native Saudi and Arab scientists", Sreenivasan said Muslim states were far behind in the field of science and there was a need for concerted efforts to make major strides in this vital field. He said that the ICTP would extend all support to Saudi Arabia, if it decides to set up a regional center for science in the region.

"This center can also help to provide opportunities to many young Arab scientists, especially resource-poor Iraqi scientists to work and contribute to the growth of the region," said Sreenivasan. "Our center has already enrolled three Iraqi scientists as associates, but it is difficult to invite or enroll more scientists from this region or from Iraq on sponsorship basis because of the budgetary constraints.

According to a UNESCO report, about 170-180 Iraqi scientists and academics had been killed since 2003. Thousands of scientists have also fled Iraq because of the instability that followed the US-led invasion in 2003, he noted.

"Hence, it is high time for the Gulf states to collaborate more closely in the field of science and increase their funding," said the ICTP director.

The ICTP, he said, can be of great help to the Gulf states or the region as a whole as it "seeks to foster the growth of advanced studies and research in physics and mathematics, especially in developing countries."