

Qatar to create 'democracy centre' for Arab world

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Qatar, an absolute monarchy, said on Tuesday it was establishing a democracy centre for the Arab world, a region the United Nations says lacks basic human freedoms.

"The Arab Centre for Democracy will encourage the Arab region to adopt democratic culture," Sheikha Mouza Bint Nasser al Misnad, wife of the emir of Qatar, announced in Doha at the end of a forum on democracy in the Arab world, without giving further details.

A controversial report issued by the UN Development Programme in April last year sharply criticised a regression of basic human freedoms in Arab countries, warning that repression was stifling the opportunity for an overall "Arab renaissance."

Some 500 delegates from across the region attended the forum to examine issues concerning human rights, reform and political freedoms.

Qatar, a close ally of Washington, and other countries across the region have come under increasing pressure from the United States to institute democratic reforms following the September 11, 2001 attacks by Al-Qaeda militants who originated from the Middle East.

But the forum's closing statement said reform in the Arab world was an "internal matter that is based on national consensus."

Saad Ibrahim, an Egyptian human rights activist who took part in the three-day forum, told AFP that Qatar had made an initial payment of 10 million US dollars towards the centre which would be the "biggest civil organisation in the Arab world that supports democracy."

Qatar held elections on April 1 for the only municipal council in the state.

The first election to the 29-member council in 1999 was a landmark as it was the first time women were allowed to vote in Qatar, and a woman won a seat on the body in 2003.

However, the emirate, which has about 174,000 Qatari citizens out of a total population of 750,000, has yet to announce when it will hold its first parliamentary election despite officials saying it could be in early 2007.