

## More convenient for co-operation

**Belarus and Oman have signed an intergovernmental agreement on visa-free travel for holders of diplomatic, service and special passports**

The document has been signed following the fourth round of Belarusian-Omani ministerial consultations, involving deputy foreign ministers. The Belarusian delegation was headed by Belarus' Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Aleinik, while the Omani delegation was led by the Foreign Ministry's Under-Secretary for Diplomatic Affairs, Ahmed bin Yusuf Al Harthy.

Mr. Aleinik also met other key figures: the Secretary General of the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamoud Al-Busaidi; the Executive Director of Oman's State General Reserve Fund, Warith Al-Kharusi; the Secretary General of the State Council (the upper chamber of Parliament), Khalid Bin Salim Al Saidi; and Oman's Deputy Minister for Heritage and Culture, Salim bin Mohammed Al-Mahrouqi.

During ministerial consultations, the two sides discussed acute issues regarding the implementation of investment projects, inter-parliamentary co-operation, cultural contacts, collaboration between international organisations and the development of legislation. They also exchanged opinions regarding the situation in the Middle East and in North Africa, alongside other burning issues on the international agenda.

## New status to aid liaisons

**Documents to establish diplomatic relations between Belarus and Niger signed in New York**

A joint communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations has been signed by Belarus' Permanent Representative to the UN, Andrei Dapkiunas, and Niger's Permanent Representative to the UN, Boubacar Boureima. The sides have confirmed their intentions to bolster co-operation and promote ties based on equality and mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of each state.

The heads of the diplomatic missions of Belarus and Niger agree on the need to step up collaboration in the international arena, including the co-operative implementation of joint projects.

# Rising cost of services

State order for social services enables solution of various problems more promptly

By Kirill Yevstigneev

The socio-demographic situation in the country has revealed a number of problems. In particular, as life expectancy rises, the number of elderly people grows. Meanwhile, 508,000 disabled people currently reside in Belarus, in addition to 580,000 elderly people who rely on their own company. The network of state social institutions needs to be extended (requiring additional budgetary funds) but non-state organisations and entrepreneurs can also do their part to improve delivery of social services.

Amendments to some laws in this sphere have been adopted during their first reading at the National Assembly's House of Representatives. Currently, the state dominates delivery of social services, which isn't ideal for a range of reasons. Competition tends to improve quality. "The new draft law aims to create a competitive environment in the sphere of social services — similar to the market for manufactures," notes Belarus' Minister for Labour and Social Protection, Marianna Shchetkina.

Local authorities will act as customers of social services while local budgets for these purposes will be distributed via purchases of social services



Training gym for elderly people launches work in Gomel

and support of non-state commercial organisations in the form of subsidies.

According to the Minister, this should allow us to more promptly solve social

problems, while expanding the range of services and enhancing their qual-

ity. Moreover, provision by non-state organisations and volunteers should save money by reducing the number of people sent to state institutions.

The draft law defines a 'difficult life situation' (previously categorised as serious disease or other similar circumstances, this has now been supplemented to include those on low incomes). Ms. Shchetkina notes that, in the first three months of this year alone, 66,000 people received one-off material assistance.

The draft law regulates the terms and procedure of delivery of social services, as well as reasons for refusal. Meanwhile, social workers often have to deal with those who are dependent on alcohol, which can lead to them facing aggressive situations.

Deputy Yelena Dikovitskaya tells us that the new system should promote a market of social services via state-private partnership. Moreover, foreign investments may be attracted into the social sphere: some public organisations have foreign grants for this purpose.

A similar mechanism is already operational in Russia and Kazakhstan, with Belarus now dynamically developing, attracting representatives of civil society into the market of social services, to raise efficiency.

## Across years and distances

By Yevgeny Kuvarin

**Exhibition at National Assembly's House of Representatives, dedicated to 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Belarus and Cuba, proves that Belarusian-Cuban dialogue is developing in all directions**

The Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Cuba to Belarus, H.E. Mr. Alfredo Neves Portuondo, notes that the exhibition has great historical value, chronicling friend-

ly relations over many decades. Some shots capture a visit to our country by the leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro Ruz, in 1972 — including his trip to Brest Fortress. Meanwhile, there are photos of 'Belarus' tractors operating in Cuban fields, common from 1961.

"Today, it's very important for Belarus to reinforce relations with 'long-distance arc' countries like Cuba," notes Vitaly Busko, the Chairman of the House of Representatives' Stand-

ing Committee for International Affairs and Links with the CIS. "It'll be easier for us to boost our economic collaboration if we have allies such as Brazil and Venezuela in the region. When we launch the assembly of our Belarusian machinery in Venezuela at full capacity, it'll be easier for Cubans to buy them from there. Meanwhile, a Belarusian parliamentarian delegation is soon to visit Brazil."

The President of

Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, has congratulated Raúl Castro — the President of the Council State and the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cuba, alongside the Cuban people, on the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Belarus and Cuba — on behalf of the Belarusian nation and on his own behalf. His letter of congratulations reads: 'I'm convinced that strategic partnership between Belarus and Cuba will continue to develop dynamically.'



'Belarus' tractors gain strong foothold in Cuba since 1961

## Walking to improve health

**Gomel City Executive Committee initiates Walking to Work campaign, with public servants setting example**

The idea of the project is to step off your bus one or two stops earlier, covering the remainder on foot. Drivers are also being encouraged to leave cars at home, saving fuel, alleviating traffic congestion and encouraging us to stay in shape (especially important for office workers).

The Gomel City Executive Committee notes that walking improves cardiac-vascular health, improves muscle tone and burns calories, while lifting the spirits.

The event — dated to World Health Day — is only to last a week but its organisers hope that their initiative will inspire some residents to raise their walking frequency.