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THE FIRST DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

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RABI ALTHANI 2, 1437 AH

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High Tide 00:16 & 14:20
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AID TRUCKS ENTER STARVING SYRIA TOWN

MADAYA, Syria: The first trucks carrying desperately needed aid entered the besieged Syrian town of Madaya yesterday, where more than two dozen people are reported to have starved to death. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent said two trucks loaded with food and blankets entered the rebel-held town in the late afternoon, at around the same time a military source said that three others entered the government-controlled towns of Fuua and Kafraya.

"The operation has started. It is likely to last a few days. This is a very positive development," said Marianne Gasser, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation to Syria. "But it must not be just a one-off distribution. To relieve the suffering of these tens of thousands of people, there has to be regular access to these areas," she said in a statement.

The Red Crescent, ICRC and the United Nations and its World Food Programme have been trying to get supplies to Madaya since President Bashar Al-Assad's regime gave permission for the deliveries on Thursday. The deliveries come after an outpouring of international concern and condemnation over the dire conditions in Madaya, where some 42,000 people have been living under a government siege. An AFP correspondent who reached Madaya with the aid convoy said the town's streets were deserted, with only a service station open.

A pair of elderly women were seen sitting on suitcases waiting to be evacuated. People said they resorted to extreme measures to survive. "For 15 days we have been eating only soup," said Hiba Abdel Rahman, 17. "I saw a young man killing cats and presenting the meat to members of his family as rabbit."

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MADAYA, Syria: A convoy containing food, medical items, blankets and other materials is delivered to this besieged town yesterday. — AP

By B Izzak and agencies

DUBAI/KUWAIT: Bahrain yesterday announced a hike of more than 50 percent in petrol prices following its cut in subsidies for energy products as oil producing countries struggle with nosediving crude prices. The government said the price of regular petrol will increase today from 80 fils (20 cents) per litre to 125 fils (33 cents), an increase of 56.3 percent. The more expensive super petrol will increase by 60 percent, from 100 fils (27 cents) to 160 fils (42 cents) per litre, it said after a cabinet meeting. Earlier this month, Bahrain cut government subsidies for diesel and kerosene following similar moves by its Gulf neighbors.

Saudi Arabia in December raised petrol prices by 50 percent as part of subsidy cuts for petroleum products, power and water, after the country posted a record \$98 billion budget deficit for 2015. The United Arab Emirates has liberalized fuel prices, while Kuwait lifted subsidies on diesel and kerosene from the start of 2015. Arab states of the Gulf, heavily reliant on oil income, have been hit hard by the sharp decline in crude prices.

Kuwaiti Finance Minister Anas Al-Saleh said the government plans to take proposals to cut subsidies on commodities and public services, as suggested by an international consultant, to the National Assembly. The aim is to rationalize the use of these services and to ensure that subsidies reach those who deserve it, the minister said. National Assembly speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem meanwhile said that he was assured by the prime minister that the government will not take any unilateral decision on subsidies and that it will share it with the Assembly.

Ghanem however insisted that the Assembly is prepared to adopt measures that do not harm low-income people and pave the way for "real economic reforms" to deal with the distortions in the national economy. He underscored the need to "tackle the large distortions in the state budget", adding that "it is not possible to lead the state to bankruptcy".

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RAMALLAH: Palestinian Mohammed Khatib trains on Nov 16, 2015 in this West Bank city as part of his preparations for the qualification of the 2016 Summer Olympics to be held in Rio de Janeiro. —AFP

PALESTINIAN DREAMS OF RACING PAST USAIN BOLT

RAMALLAH: Mohammed Khatib is 25 and dreams of winning Palestine's first Olympic medal. The yoga instructor with a sociology degree first starting dreaming of flying the Palestinian flag after winning a 100-meter sprint a few years ago. So every day, he rushes at full speed on an asphalt track - neither very professional nor very safe - in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank where he lives. "There are football stadiums but for athletics almost nothing. There are 100-meter tracks, but they are asphalt and can cause injuries," laments the young man wearing a keffiyeh in the colours of the Palestinian flag around his neck and with a curly mop of hair falling over his forehead.

But Mohammed Khatib has no time for the lack of infrastructure because the stakes are high and the smiling boy with crinkled hazel eyes has always set the bar high. He wants to "create hope and happiness" for Palestinians, who have been waiting 70 years for international recognition. The idea came to him in 2013, the year the Gazan Mohammed Assaf won Arab Idol - one of the most

watched Arab TV shows. "I saw how happy people were. They partied all night because a Palestinian had won thanks to the votes of the public across the Arab world. I told myself 'imagine what it could be like if a Palestinian won a global competition.'"

Since that night listening to the horns and cheers, Khatib has trained alone with exercises he found on YouTube. In three years, he said, he has managed to lower his 100 m time from 15 seconds to 11. But it is still far from the 9.58 sec world record held by Usain Bolt, and a distance from the 10.16 sec he needs to qualify for the Rio Olympics this year. Mohammed wants to believe. "Many people think I'm crazy for choosing the hardest discipline to win - the 100 and 200 m - but I'm sure I can do it and I'll show them," he insists.

There were times when he lost hope but he never stopped going every day and sprinting 100 or 200 m, headphones attached to his ears - "psychedelic trance, believe it or not, and dub reggae for the rhythm".

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ON IRAN-SAUDI RIFT, GULF ACTS WITH CAUTION

DOHA: Gulf Arab states rallied dutifully behind Saudi Arabia when it cut relations with Iran last week, recalling their ambassadors and cancelling flights to Tehran in solidarity with the oil-rich kingdom after its embassy in Iran was torched by protesters. But all apart from Bahrain stopped short of severing ties, responses that suggest these small states - energy powers but military minnows - wish to safeguard strategic interests and avoid a full-blown conflict with Iran in which they would fare poorly.

The crisis erupted when Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shiite cleric on Jan 2 and Iranian protesters retaliated by storming and setting fire to the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Tensions in the Gulf have reached levels unseen since the 1980s, when Iraq received Gulf Arab funding for its 1980-88 war against Iran in a pan-Arab effort to stem the influence of the Islamic revolution that had toppled the Shah.

Sunni Muslim power Saudi Arabia has warned it could take further steps against Shiite Iran, which it accuses of meddling in Arab affairs. That raises the prospect of renewed Saudi pressure on its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies to adopt more energetic responses. "Gulf countries are under immense pressure from Riyadh. Most are trying to appease Saudi and maintain minimal relations with Iran to prevent further escalation," said Lina Khatib, former director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. "They fear they'll get caught in the middle."

In solidarity with Riyadh, Kuwait and Qatar last week pulled out their ambassadors from Tehran, and the United Arab Emirates downgraded its ties. Bahrain and two non-Gulf states, Djibouti and Sudan, severed relations completely. But long-standing trade links, shared access to oil and gas fields and the presence of sizeable Shiite communities stopped many Gulf states from shutting the door on Iran, opting instead for positions of neutrality and diplomatic half-steps that could be quietly reversed if the furor were to die down.

The Sunni-ruled Gulf states face a long-standing dilemma over Iran, whose regional clout gained an unintended boost from the 2003 US-led war that toppled its Iraqi foe, Saddam Hussein. Many of the smaller Gulf Arab states fret that deeper Saudi-Iranian tensions may only spur Iranian muscle-flexing. "The Saudis are on the phone lobbying countries very hard to break off ties with Iran but most Gulf states are trying to find some common ground," said an Arab diplomat in Doha.

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MUSIC LEGEND DAVID BOWIE DIES AGED 69

LONDON: British music legend David Bowie has died at the age of 69 after a secret battle with cancer, unleashing a cascade of tributes for one of the most influential and innovative artists of his time. A notoriously private person, Bowie's death in New York was a shock to the world with the announcement coming just three days after he released his 25th studio album "Blackstar", on his 69th birthday on Friday. "David Bowie died peacefully today (Sunday) surrounded by his family after a courageous 18-month battle with cancer," said a statement posted Monday on his official social media accounts.

The death brings the curtain down on an extraordinary musical innovator and style icon, with a career dating back to his first major hit "Space Oddity" in 1969, about an astronaut called Major Tom who became lost in orbit. Tributes poured in from the world of music, show business and politics for the singer-songwriter, producer and actor described as a visionary and master of re-invention. The Rolling Stones hailed Bowie as an "extra-

ordinary artist", collaborator Iggy Pop called his friendship "the light of my life" while Madonna described him as "Unique. Genius. Game Changer."

Bowie spanned styles ranging from glam rock, New Romantic and dance music to alternative rock, soul and hard rock, underpinned by an astonishing array of stage personas from the sexually ambiguous Ziggy Stardust to the Thin White Duke. "He will be remembered amongst the greats but not just one of them, as a unique great," said Bowie biographer Paul Trynka, describing him as "a creative force" who redefined pop music over decades.

Fans left flowers and messages by a colorful mural of him in Brixton, the south London district where he was born David Robert Jones on January 8, 1947, and where preparations were underway for a street party in his honor. Although Bowie left school with just one qualification, an O-level in art, he went on to sell an estimated 140 million records worldwide.

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FRANKFURT: A photo taken in May 1983 shows British rock music legend David Bowie performing onstage during a concert at the Festhalle. —AFP (See Pages 14 and 40)