

ObserverWeekend



B+ TO FIGHT VIRUS

SAMUEL KUTTY

Seven weeks ago, Wilson Thattakkat was self-isolated in his 2,100 sq ft villa in Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos as he developed COVID-19 symptoms that he describes as being like a bad flu with mounting headache and sneezing. Working as the director of engineering at a leading international brand, knew well that he would catch the virus, as he came in contact though unknowingly, with his workers, some of whom were later tested positive. Optimistic as he has always been, the 48-year-old, while in quarantine, on regular intervals would call up his subordinates to share with them the measures to be followed to stay fit both mentally and physically.

“I did not want to be cut off from anybody including my staff, friends or family members. Through video calling and group calls, I was connected with all of them. I did put on a brave face so that they remained positive. I had a strong feeling that I would recover and

If you are COVID-19 positive, what is it like? Observer spoke to three people who recovered from the coronavirus infection. They used perseverance and hope in the fight against the contagion

come out of it unharmed,” says Wilson.

While thanking his doctor for the healthy tips, he said that during the isolation, he would read on the Internet and watch videos on Netflix that kept him away from the thoughts that he was struck with the contagion.

“I kept myself away from any negative news. As it is a time when you are required to be optimistic,” he says. Shahin Abdulla, a salesman at a mobile shop in Ruwi, while sharing his tryst with the pandemic, said he felt chills down his spine when his diagnosis was confirmed positive.

“It was the time when people started dying in different parts of the world. Will I die?

What will happen to my family then were the questions before me,” he said.

When I thought about how the doctors and nurses are dealing with COVID-19 patients gave me the energy to wage the battle against the virus.

“During my quarantine in my room, my friends helped get good food. At the same time, I ensured that I did not infect them. So I kept maximum isolation as possible. I spent time reading the Holy Quran and chatting with my family back in India,” he said.

Now he is back at work as the shops have reopened. But he has a story to reassure that COVID-19 is not necessarily a death sentence.

“The virus did not kill me, and instead it has made me more resolute and compassionate. Follow the guidelines from the authorities and stay fit. Also stay optimistic and don’t lose hope. You can recover from it and you will. Stay strong,” he advises.

Amit Patel, another COVID-19 recovered patient, says care and precautions can keep the pandemic at bay. Citing his own example, he reveals that his family including 80-year-old mother, wife and two children were infected after his housemaid was tested positive.

“We put her in one room while ensuring that she had all amenities inside so that she did not have to depend on us. Along with her, we too followed the quarantine measures. She cooked her food while we often got it online,” he said. While claiming that her road to recovery was smooth without infecting others, Amit said, “when we care for ourselves, we protect others as well,” he said.

An optimistic attitude can do wonders for patients’ recovery; he said.

INSIDESTORIES

Libya’s rivals announce truce



TRIPOLI: Libya’s warring rival administrations announced in separate statements on Friday that they would cease all hostilities and organise nationwide elections, a move widely welcomed by the UN and several countries. The surprise announcement came after multiple visits by top foreign diplomats to Libya in recent weeks, resulting in the first deal between the rival authorities since a December 2015 UN-backed accord in Morocco that led to an agreement on a unity government. **PAGE 5**

Navalny’s evacuation to Germany sought



OMSK, RUSSIA: The wife of the hospitalised Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny made a direct appeal to President Vladimir Putin on Friday to allow her husband to be evacuated to Germany, as Russian doctors denied he had been poisoned.

Navalny, a 44-year-old lawyer and anti-corruption campaigner who is among Putin’s fiercest critics, was in a coma in intensive care in the Siberian city of Omsk after he lost consciousness while on a flight and his plane made an emergency landing on Thursday. **PAGE 6**

WEATHER TODAY

MUSCAT	SALALAH	NIZWA
MAX: 35°C	MAX: 28°C	MAX: 44°C
MIN: 29°C	MIN: 25°C	MIN: 31°C

SUNRISE 05.45 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR: 04:27
DHUHR: 12:15
ASR: 15:42
MAGHRIB: 18:39
ISHA: 19:53



ART



TWO ENVIRONMENTAL ARTISTS ARE WASTING NO TIME TO TURN SHELLS AND TRASH INTO FASHION ACCESSORIES AND CURIOS. THE PROCEEDS FROM THE SALE OF THESE ITEMS ARE DONATED TO FEED THE POOR OR HELPING THOSE WHO LOST JOBS DUE TO COVID-19 IN MUSCAT. **SEE P3**

LOST IN STORM



A long exposure photo of a ship, which ran aground at the Qurun area in Jaalan Bani Bu Hassan, is seen in the backdrop of the Milky Way. Photo by Mohammed Salim al Ghanboosi

Scientists find COVID-19 variant with milder infections

SINGAPORE: Researchers in Singapore have discovered a new variant of the coronavirus that causes milder infections, according to a study published in *The Lancet* medical journal this week.

The study showed that COVID-19 patients infected with a new variant of SARS-CoV-2 had better clinical outcomes, including a lower proportion developing low blood oxygen or requiring intensive care.

The study also showed the variant, which has a large deletion in a part of its genome, elicited a more robust immune response.

The study involved researchers from various Singapore institutions, including the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), the Duke-NUS Medical School and the Agency for Science, Technology and Research.

“These studies provide the first convincing data showing that an



PATIENTS HAD BETTER CLINICAL OUTCOMES, INCLUDING A LOWER PROPORTION DEVELOPING LOW BLOOD OXYGEN OR REQUIRING INTENSIVE CARE

observed genetic change (mutation) in SARS-CoV-2 has affected the severity of disease in patients,” said Gavin Smith at Duke-NUS.

The scientists said the findings had implications for vaccine development and treatments for COVID-19.

The variant, which likely came from Wuhan, China, was detected in a cluster of infections that occurred from January to March 2020. In Singapore, the virus was transmitted from person-to-person across several clusters before being contained.

An expert said this week that mutations in viruses may be “a good thing”. Viruses tend to become less virulent as they mutate so as to infect more people but not to kill them as they depend on the host for food and shelter, according to Paul Tambyah at Singapore’s National University Hospital.

— Reuters

Hawke’s electric performance ode to a pioneer

MATTHIAS VON VIERECK

Biopics of inventors or scientists are generally not big box office hits. Sometimes, however, they do manage to hold their own quite well.

For example, two successful films released in 2014: *The Imitation Game*, which covered the life of mathematician Alan Turing, and *The Discovery of Infinity*, which was about astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, together generated over \$300 million worldwide.

Films about chemist and physicist Marie Curie continue to be made, such as the recently released *Radioactive* starring Rosamund Pike.

The latest renowned scientist get the biopic treatment? The enigmatic inventor and physicist Nikola Tesla (1856-1943).

With Ethan Hawke in the lead role, Tesla boasts a prominent cast through which to tell the story of the inventor, born in what is now

Croatia and best known for his inventions relating to alternating currents.

Just a few weeks after *Edison - The Current War* starring Benedict Cumberbatch was released in cinemas, US director Michael Almereyda has turned his attentions to Edison’s rival, zeroing in on the divisions between the two men: Namely, that Thomas Alva Edison was initially unenthusiastic about alternating current, wanting to stick with direct current.

One of the very first scenes in the film depicts the moment in which the pair first met in New York in 1884. Here, a grey-haired Edison (played by Kyle MacLachlan of “Twin Peaks” fame) meets the European immigrant and electrical engineer, who is shown as having a sombre character and prominent moustache. Tesla would soon begin to work for Edison, though that cooperation did not last long.

The film not only addresses the big question of how to power New York, and

A film bringing to life the intertwining stories of inventors Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla depicts New York at the turn of the century, alongside a bitter rivalry that culminated in a duel

America (with alternating or direct current). It also deals with the subject of how many volts it would take to kill a person.

This wonderfully illuminated art-cinema-meets-historical-drama hybrid is flanked by a rousing music score and yet lacks a certain narrative dynamism. The fact that Ethan Hawke is a great actor is certainly not going to come as a surprise to many watching this

film. You only have to think back to his wry performance in *La Verite* (2020); not to mention earlier, stellar performances (for example in *Boyhood* or the much earlier *Dead Poets Society*).

This said, he plays the part of Nikola Tesla with such control and craft as to fascinate audiences, despite having to adhere to a screenplay which does not offer much flexibility or dimension to his characterisation of Tesla.

Even more thrilling are the female characters orbiting Tesla like satellites. First of all, we have Anne Morgan (daughter of the private banker J P Morgan), played by Eve Hewson, and the actor Sarah Bernhardt (played by Rebecca Dayan), who is considered one of the first world acting stars.

One of the film’s strengths is that, while covering a lot of ground on the subject of scientific history, it also touches briefly on economic and cultural history.

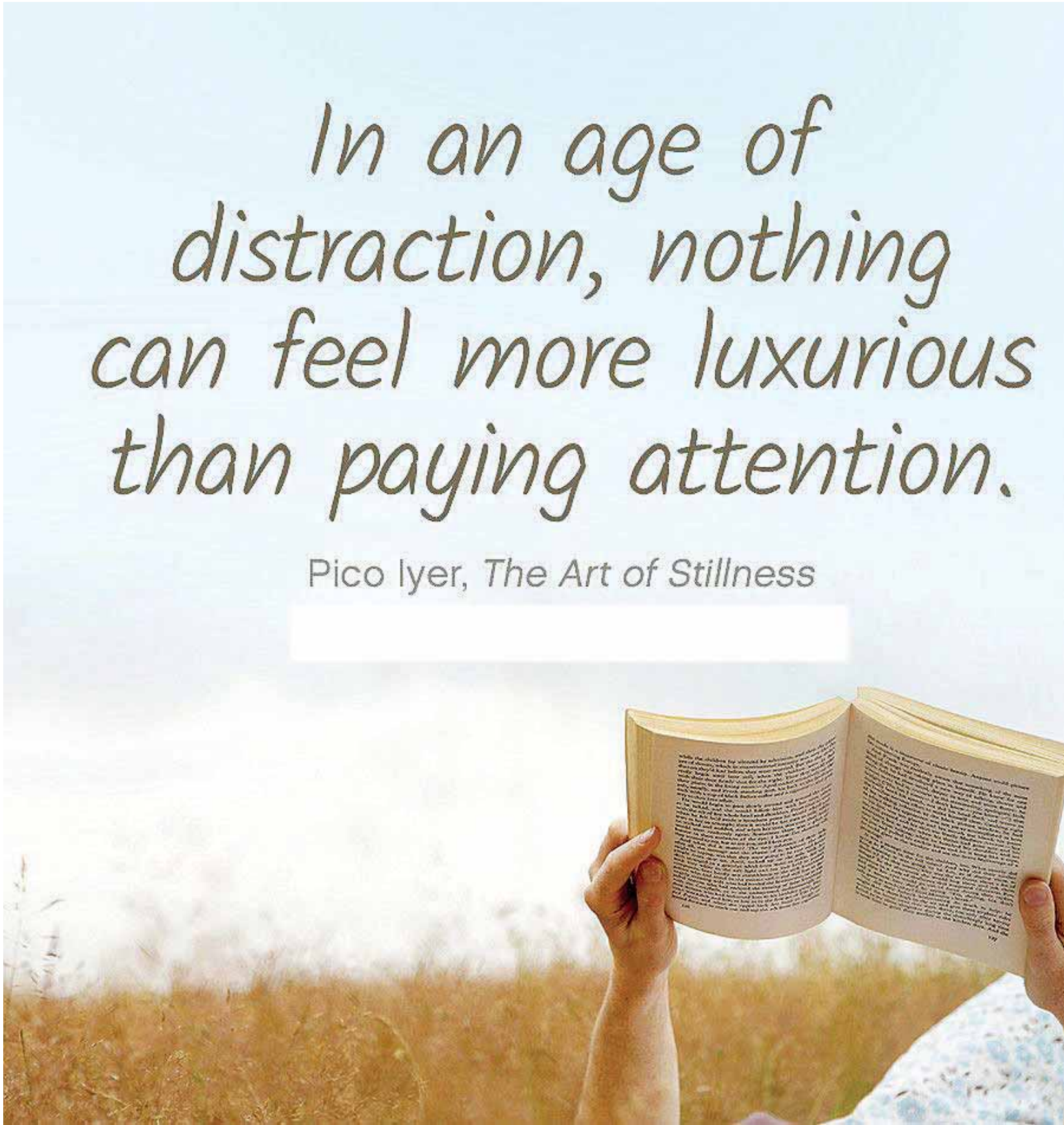
There’s a lot of depth to this film such that charming or witty moments are a bit lacking to the viewer. In tone it is rather serious, and in moments somewhat mannered, with a rather subdued style that runs through its dialogue.

At times it feels a little bit like a mafia drama populated with sinister-looking men whispering conspiratorially, made all the more enjoyable when accompanied with a hint of a smile comes flitting across Hawke’s face.

Surprisingly, Almereyda incorporates a truly bizarre vocal interlude into the film, with Tear’s for Fear’s *Everybody Wants To Rule The World*, performed shortly before the end.

And who knows, maybe the film can offer an (albeit highly artificial) history lesson, especially to viewers who associate the name Tesla more closely with speedy electric cars and Elon Musk than with early proponents of alternating current. — dpa

Can we find joy in going nowhere?



MAŁGORZATA PIECHOWICZ-PIETRUSZKA

In 2019, FlightRadar24, a popular online service for tracking flights, announced a new annual world record of almost 69 million flights, an average of 188,901 flights per day, which was a 10-per cent increase over 2018. Travel and tourism industry contributed \$8.9 trillion to the world’s GDP and accounted for 330 million jobs where one in four new employments over the past five years was created by the sector.

Since March 2020, when WHO announced COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic, the demand for air travel plummeted by 95 per cent compared to a year ago. 90 per cent of all flights have been suspended worldwide.

All these numbers clearly show how much we have learned to love travelling, to say the least. Either for pleasure, business or health purposes, the modern travel industry has become a commodity we had never envisaged to have to surrender. Yet, we all have been forced to stay home.

Like millions of other people I and my family had had beautiful plans for this holiday and like millions of other people we had to give up all of them. I was suddenly confronted with the idea of spending summer in Oman with three children (including an infant) within the confines of our home. Obviously, it is a challenge of its own. Now add to that the fear of the new virus and the scorching weather. Those who know, know.

EITHER FOR PLEASURE, BUSINESS OR HEALTH PURPOSES THE MODERN TRAVEL INDUSTRY HAS BECOME A COMMODITY WE HAD NEVER ENVISAGED TO HAVE TO SURRENDER. YET, WE ALL HAVE BEEN FORCED TO STAY HOME

Generally speaking, we were all hugely disappointed and frustrated. As it turns out staying in one place, even if it is your own house, might be an overwhelming experience. And believe me it was. At least until I remembered about a book I came across some time ago

and in a desperate act of looking for help I decided to reach for again. *The Art of Stillness: Adventures of going Nowhere* by Pico Iyer proved to be a challenging reading.

Not because of its length, you can actually devour it in one sitting, but because of its hard to deny plain and simple ideas about the perpetual mobile that we have made our lives to look and feel like. If you give yourself the time to not only read but also ponder on the wisdom contained in literally every sentence, you may discover that by going nowhere you are not losing anything but gaining the most precious thing: You. If you stand the challenge, I promise great rewards because as the author has gracefully put it: the greatest journeys are inner ones.

Sci-fi thriller *Biohackers* too relevant in pandemic times



MARCO NAGEL

The train speeds along, zipping through an idyllic landscape on its way through Germany. Then, one by one, passengers begin to suddenly keel over, falling unconscious to the ground.

It’s with this nightmare scenario that the new Netflix series *Biohackers* begins.

In a world roiled by the coronavirus pandemic, this six-part series, which premiered on Thursday, feels almost too relevant — even several months after it was originally set to debut on the streaming service.

While *Biohackers* focuses on genetic illnesses, not viruses and vaccines, it’s exploration of bioethics feels more than pertinent, setting the show up to be Germany’s next big Netflix export hit, after series like *Dark* and *How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast)*. “It’s a good time for this series, because it shows what’s already possible,” Jessica Schwarz, who stars as one of the main characters, says.

“These are things that are already possible, not things that will be discovered in the future. That’s super interesting.” The 43-year-old actor plays the unscrupulous head researcher Tanja Lorenz, who teaches at Germany’s Freiburg University and is in charge of her own laboratory. “We are making God obsolete,” she tells freshmen in her course. With the help of synthetic biology, she is hoping to genetically optimise humankind - man, not God, as creator.

It’s up to the student Mia, played by 21-year-old Luna Wedler, to gradually uncover the head researcher’s dark history, turning the series into a kind of revenge thriller.

Wedler says she’s fascinated by the characters’ moral ambiguity.

“One could eliminate a lot of pain, but at what price? How far can man interfere with nature?” says the actor of the show’s premise.

The series’ scientific elements are interesting enough to draw an audience, though the characters leave something to be desired. Scenes that take place in Mia’s shared flat seem so unrealistic that they mainly serve as comic relief, while Lorenz is given relatively little depth or backstory - it’s never explained how she became so unscrupulous. — dpa

CRAFTY FOR A CAUSE



AMIRA KHOULDI



CECILIA PITRE



LIJU CHERIAN

Two environmental artists are wasting no time to turn shells and trash into fashion accessories and curios.

The proceeds from the sale of these items are donated to feed the poor or helping those who lost jobs due to COVID-19 in Muscat.

Cecilia Pitre, a sustainable lifestyle consultant and Amira Khouildi have come together and put their skills to best use for a cause. The deft hands of these women from France and Tunisia have transformed broken jewellery, unused nail polish, and other unwanted items to things of beauty.

None of them had any clue that their small venture would eventually help support poor families and those who run out of income.

Both residents in Jebel Sifah, 45 km from Muscat, they used their lockdown time to collect sea shells from the beach to make newer designs.

After 47 days of self-isolation in Muscat during lockdown, Cecilia

stayed back to render helping people in Sifah village and around Bandar Al Kayran island.

"We are all in the same situation, but not with the same privileges," says Cecilia who contributed her foremost and devoted her time for it.

"As an SME owner, I faced problems with business activity so if I want to keep helping people who are less privileged I had to raise money by selling things," she explains.

Cecilia used her creativity to create a collection and named it 'BCBG Sifah Collection.'

She also managed to collect money and buy a large amount of grocery (dry food and canned food), few clothes for men and lavatory items to distribute in Sifah and neighbouring villages.

Cecilia wishes she could help more people who are in need. "I am also not in my best shape of finance or business and I am also waiting for a flight out, until then, I keep helping people who are less privileged."

Cecilia presented Amira with many baby cactuses, which she re-

planted in a recycled and decorated plastic bottles and in big shells. Those cacti sold very fast and helped raise money for the poor.

During her evening walks at the Sifah beach, Amira collected massive shells and wooden sticks to make very creative designs as a new 'home' for the baby cactuses.

"I decorated my design with small shells, some of them as a base and others as ornaments. Then I added some old wood as a base too. I just added glue and made a nice creative composition all from nature," says Amira. During the pandemic, she spent most of her time after school in on line teaching, reading, painting, walking and cleaning the beach.

Amira says, "We love to help the poor and seashell craft is for a good cause. COVID-19 gives me the opportunity to work on my creative skills which help support many poor families."

The talented duo sell their wares online at a very reasonable price which encourages people to buy as many are generous. They hand over more money or come forward with food and other necessary items.

OMAN OBSERVER



Be Careful, Be Responsible!

Now get news
on the go



To receive news updates
from Oman Observer,

WhatsApp
<your name> to
96473232



@omanobserver
www.omanobserver.om

#Living_with_COVID19

The tale of Queen Al Zuba'a and Qaseer that gave us proverbs

Al Zuba'a was a queen of the Levant and the area between the Euphrates and Tigris. Many sources claim her to be of an Arab origin, while others of being a Roman who spoke Arabic. But all agree on her beauty and power that made many princes around Arabia seek her hand in marriage. One of them was Juthaima Al Abrash, a known Arab prince that she didn't like and considered a threat to her kingdom. She decided to get rid of him by faking her agreement to his marriage proposal and inviting him to visit her.

Juthaima gathered his councils and asked for their advice. Many found her offer agreeable except for Qaseer, his friend who asked him to write her back and ask her to visit him instead. If she was true, then she'd come at once. Juthaima — who couldn't believe his luck in getting the queen's approval — decided to ignore his friend's

advice and ride to her. Being a loyal friend, Qaseer accompanied him.

When they reached Al Zuba'a's city they were surrounded by her soldiers and Qaseer managed to escape. Juthaima was taken to Al Zuba'a who mocked him before slashing the vein of his left leg and watching him die slowly while gathering his blood in a golden bowl. Qaseer reached home and went straight to Amr ibn Abdul-Jinn, Juthaima's cousin in Iraq, asking for vengeance.

Amr refused instantly fearing Al Zuba'a's revenge. Qaseer went then to Juthaima's maternal uncle Amr ibn Adey with the same request, to which he responded: "How could we when she's impossible to reach like an eagle in the sky?" Determined to commence his plot by earning her trust, Qaseer cut off his ear and nose. His action gave birth to the saying: "For a reason, Qaseer cut off his nose". He then went to Al Zuba'a claiming that

THE QUEEN
CONFESSED OF
HAVING ONE
DUG UNDER THE
EUPHRATES, THAT
CONNECTED HER
BEDCHAMBER
TO HER SISTER'S.
WITH THIS
VALUABLE
INFORMATION IN
HAND, QASEER
WENT STRAIGHT
TO AMR IBN ADEY
AND DREW A
PLAN FOR AN
ATTACK

Juthaima's uncle had maimed him as a punishment for leaving his nephew behind. He pledged his allegiance to her and offered to work as a trader, something he excelled in.

To gain her trust even further, he started providing her with false revenues that were in fact money paid by Amr ibn Adey in secret. Al Zuba'a fell for Qaseer's charms and false honesty and started trusting him. One day he asked her about the rumour of secret escape tunnels that all kings and queens seem to have in their palaces.

The queen confessed of having one dug under the Euphrates, that connected her bedchamber to her sister's. With this valuable information in hand, Qaseer went straight to Amr ibn Adey and drew a plan for an attack. They mounted one thousand soldiers in huge barrels that were carried by camels. He then went to Al Zuba'a and asked her to go up the roof of her palace to watch the procession

of the riches he'd made from this trip. The procession took so long that one of her soldiers — out of sheer boredom — stabbed one of the barrels with his sword to hear a human cry.

That was the moment when Amr's soldiers jumped out of the barrels and attacked Al Zuba'a's city. Witnessing the change of tides, Al Zuba'a ran to her escape tunnel to be met with Qaseer — sword in hand — standing there blocking the entrance. She tried to backtrack to be met with Amr ibn Adey preparing to kill her. Being trapped between the two enemies, Al Zuba'a shouted: "By my hands not by the hands of Amr!" before sucking a poison off her ring and dying instantly. Her last words became a proverb that is still in use among Arabs till this day.

Rasha al Raisi is a certified skills trainer and the author of: The World According to Bahja. rashabooks@yahoo.com



RASHA AL RAISI

Brew best iced tea at home

A COOL CUP OF TEA HAS A LONG WAY TO GO BEFORE BEING A DECENT ICED TEA. THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF DIFFERENT WAYS OF MAKING IT — AND ONE TYPE OF TEA THAT IS NOT SUITABLE AT ALL

KATJA WALLRAFEN

How much water should you drink per day? Experts recommend two to three litres. If you get bored and want a change, treat yourself to a homemade iced tea. This thirst-quencher requires less effort than you might think.

Essentially all you need to do is brew your tea of choice, let it cool down (or cool it quickly with ice) and then jazz it up with whatever you want — and you have a delicious alternative to mass-produced beverages.

Nutritionists are critical of the amount of sugar and sweeteners in industrial iced tea, while consumer watchdogs have pointed to a lack of real fruit content and the use of artificial aromas. What may look like a healthier alternative to soft drinks is still fattening and can cause tooth decay.

When you make your own iced tea, however, you know exactly what ingredients are going in.

Get creative with herbs, fruit and juice

Almost any tea can be turned into iced tea. Alongside a classic sweetened black tea, chopped strawberries, nectarines, lychees and lemons work well, as do fresh herbs such as mint or rosemary.

However, tea seller Alexander Poetsch recommends avoiding hibiscus tea, as it tastes undrinkably sour when left to infuse for a long time.

"Apple or pear-based teas on the other hand don't get bitter," says Poetsch. His tip: go for a fruit tea without hibiscus, like a flavoured green, black or rooibos tea. Tea blends containing mint are also an option. "They often have an inherent sweetness, requiring little or no additives," says Poetsch.

Merchant Richard Blechynden is credited with popularising iced tea, as Kyra Schaper from the German Tea Association explains. At the 1904 World's Fair in St Louis, USA, Blechynden had the task of inspiring Americans for Indian tea. The humid climate was not suited to trying hot beverages. So the resourceful merchant cooled down the hot tea and "iced tea" was born.

Tonic water and ginger ale add nuance

Tea sommelier Klaus Bruehl



Iced tea in pitcher, summer cold drink with lemon and mint, refreshing non alcoholic cocktail on table decorated with half of lemon.

prepares his iced tea each day and changes it up based on his mood. He likes herbal or fruit teas as well as black tea or Earl Grey with its bergamot flavour.

Ginger, lemongrass or mint complement his creations. "I also like

to use tonic water or ginger ale to add nuance," he says. It's important that his iced tea quenches the thirst, so he doesn't use sugar.

What's the best way to cool tea?

Boil a pot of tea, let it cool down and put it in the fridge or put some

ice cubes in your glass.

To prevent the tea from becoming too thin, the tea should be concentrated, two or three times as much as usual.

"If you usually use four spoons of tea for one pot of tea, use eight to 12

for iced tea," says Poetsch.

Alternatively, fill a pot with ice cubes. The hot, freshly prepared tea is poured over the ice cubes, cooling the tea down quickly. The "shock cooling" ensures the tea retains its bright colour and fresh aroma. — **dpa**

Libya's warring rivals announce ceasefire

TRIPOLI: Libya's warring rival administrations announced in separate statements on Friday that they would cease all hostilities and organise nationwide elections soon, an understanding swiftly welcomed by the United Nations.

The statements were signed by Fayeze al Sarraj, head of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) based in the capital Tripoli, and Aguila Saleh, speaker of the eastern-based parliament backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

The two have been at war virtually since the formation of Sarraj's government in December 2015.

The UN's top official to Libya, Stephanie Williams, called for "all parties to rise to this historic occasion and shoulder their full responsibilities before the Libyan people."

Sarraj called for the holding of "presidential and parliamentary elections next March", and for the "end of all combat operations".

On the other side, Saleh also backed elections — though he did not specify a date — and called on "all parties" to observe "an immediate ceasefire and the cessation of all fighting."

It is the first deal between rival Libyan factions since a UN-sponsored accord in Morocco in December 2015, when dialogue led to agreement on a unity government.

IMPORTANT STEP
Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al



In this file photo taken on May 29, 2018 (L to R) Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar, speaker of the eastern-based parliament Aguila Saleh Issa, and head of the Tripoli-based UN-recognised unity government Fayeze al Sarraj, attend an International Congress on Libya at the Elysee Palace in Paris. — AFP

Sisi said he supported the ceasefire declarations.

"I welcome statements by Libya's presidential council and the House of Representatives calling for a ceasefire and halting military op-

erations in all Libyan territory," Sisi said in a tweet.

Sisi said the twin announcements were an "important step" on the path to restoring stability.

Libya has been in chaos since

a Western-backed uprising toppled and killed longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Haftar launched an offensive in April 2019 to seize Tripoli from the GNA.

After 14 months of fierce fight-

ing, pro-GNA forces expelled Haftar's troops from much of western Libya and pushed them eastwards to Sirte, a gateway to Libya's rich oil fields and export terminals.

German Foreign Minister Heiko

Maas, on a surprise visit to Tripoli this week, had warned that Libya faced a "deceptive calm" since fighting stalled around Sirte.

The central Mediterranean coastal city — a symbolic site as the hometown of Gaddafi — is the gateway to Libya's eastern oil fields and export terminals, and to the key Al Jufra airbase to the south.

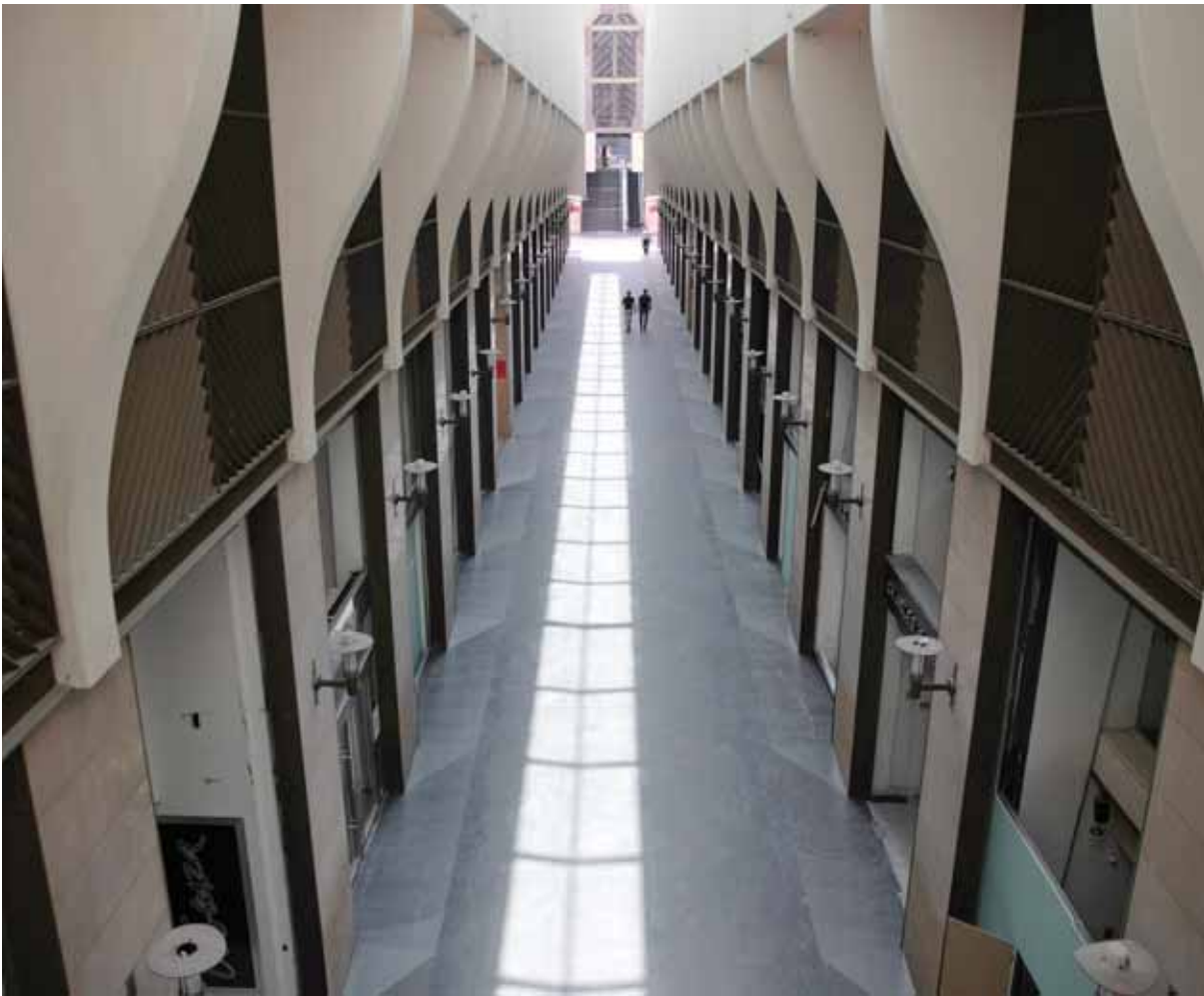
In reaction to the rival parties' declarations, German Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Adebahr said on Friday "this could be an important step towards establishing peace."

Italy also welcomed the announcement. "These developments constitute an important and courageous step towards the stabilisation of the Libyan crisis," the foreign affairs ministry said in a statement.

Sarraj said a ceasefire would allow the creation of "demilitarised zones" in Sirte and the Jufra region, currently under the control of pro-Haftar forces.

Saleh did not mention the demilitarisation of Sirte and Jufra, but proposed the installation of a new government in Sirte. But while the agreement was widely welcomed, analyst Jalel Harchaoui, research fellow at The Hague-based Clingendael Institute, said there was a long road ahead before peace.

"The question is, is this announcement fully achievable? In all likelihood, implementation will be difficult," said Harchaoui, noting the multiple regional forces who could act as spoilers of a deal. — AFP



People walk past closed shops, some of which were damaged from a massive explosion at Beirut port, as Lebanon imposed a partial lockdown for two weeks starting on Friday in an effort to counter the spread of COVID-19, at a shopping district in Beirut, on Friday. — Reuters

Lebanon enforces new partial lockdown to curb COVID-19

BEIRUT: Lebanon imposed a partial lockdown for two weeks starting on Friday in an effort to counter COVID-19 infections which have spiralled since the catastrophic explosion at Beirut port.

The spread of COVID-19 is compounding the woes of a country still reeling from the August 4 blast that killed at least 179 people and wounded some 6,000, and a financial meltdown that has devastated the economy since October.

"In this area those who escaped death have relatives who are wounded, there are no homes or cars, frankly we have forgotten corona," said Nabil Nahed, 50, a teacher whose house in the Gemmayzeh area was badly damaged in the blast.

"But we have to take precautions as much as we can because in the last two weeks everyone has been mixing, and corona certainly increased," he said.

Lebanon recorded its highest 24-hour tally of new infections on Thursday, with 613 new cases. The infections have spread in the aftermath of the blast as hospitals were flooded with the casualties, medics say.

"We've gone back to square one," said the caretaker government's health minister on Friday, adding however that the government was better prepared than at the start of the pandemic.

"Before the explosion, the total cases were 5,000-6,000, now we are

approaching 10,000 and above," Iman Shankiti, the World Health Organisation representative in Lebanon, told Voice of Lebanon radio. "In the last two weeks, the total is equal to everything from February to the day of the explosion."

The shutdown, which includes a curfew from 6pm to 6am, allows for clearing rubble, making repairs and giving out aid in neighbourhoods demolished by the explosion. The airport will remain open, with travellers having to take a PCR test before boarding and on arrival.

Three hours before curfew, shops were closed and traffic was light. A security source said compliance was good in the Beirut area though less so in northern Lebanon. — Reuters

Israel bombs Gaza as rocket fire intensifies

GAZA CITY: Israeli warplanes bombed the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip on Friday, as Palestinians fired rockets and launched fire bombs into southern Israel, the army said.

Parts of southern Israel were partially cordoned off by the security forces.

Israeli planes launched raids against Gaza shortly after Thursday midnight and then again later on Friday morning.

Israel said the bombs were in response to seven rockets launched from Gaza, six of which were intercepted by its air defences.

Witnesses in Gaza said rockets were launched towards the town of Sderot, just across the border.

The rocket that was not intercepted damaged the roof of a house in Sderot, but did not cause any casualties, an AFP photographer said.

Israel has bombed Gaza almost every night since August 6 in retaliation for the launch of balloons fitted with fire bombs, or, less frequently, rocket fire, across the border.

The number of rockets fired

from Gaza was the largest number in a day since the latest round of exchanges began two weeks ago.

Hamas "will not hesitate to fight a battle with the enemy if the escalation continues, if the bombardments and the blockade continue," Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum said in a statement.

"If the Israeli occupation continues its aggression... it must pay the price," he added.

Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz on Friday warned the army would "attack our attackers and deal them a very heavy blow".

"Gaza residents suffer at the hands of Hamas," he said in a statement following a situation assessment with the chief of the army, vowing to continue protecting Israel's residents.

BLOCKADE TIGHTENED

Israel has also tightened its 13-year blockade of Gaza's two million inhabitants.

It has banned Gaza fishermen from going to sea and closed its goods crossing with the territory, prompting the closure of Gaza's

sole power plant for want of fuel.

The reprisals came after an Egyptian delegation shuttled between the two sides, trying to broker a return to an informal truce.

Egypt has acted to calm repeated flare-ups in recent years to prevent any repetition of the three wars Israel and Hamas have fought since 2008.

The truce provided for permits for Gazans to work in Israel and financing for Gaza development projects, both measures that would provide some economic relief in an impoverished territory where unemployment exceeds 50 per cent.

According to a source close to Hamas, the movement wants the extension of an industrial zone in the east of Gaza, and the construction of a new power line.

Hamas also wants the number of work permits issued to Gazans to be doubled to 10,000 once anti-coronavirus restrictions are lifted, the source said.

Sources said the twin issues were at the root of the latest flare-up. — AFP



Palestinian landowners and demonstrators lift national flags as they protest Israeli settlement building activities on their land in Al Tha'alaba village, near Yatta in Area C, south of Hebron city in the occupied West Bank, on Friday. — AFP

Navalny's wife appeals to Putin to allow evacuation as medics deny poisoning

OMSK, Russia: The wife of the hospitalised Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny made a direct appeal to President Vladimir Putin on Friday to allow her husband to be evacuated to Germany, as Russian doctors denied he had been poisoned.

Navalny, a 44-year-old lawyer and anti-corruption campaigner who is among Putin's fiercest critics, was in a coma in intensive care in the Siberian city of Omsk after he lost consciousness while on a flight and his plane made an emergency landing on Thursday.

Aides say they believe he was poisoned and that something was put in his tea at an airport cafe.

Navalny's supporters organised an air ambulance with specialists from a German clinic that arrived at Omsk airport but Russian doctors said his condition was too "unstable" to move him.

His wife Yulia Navalnaya posted on Navalny's Twitter account a letter addressed to Putin, saying: "I officially apply to you with a demand for permission to take Alexei Navalny to Germany."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said there were "no obstacles" to evacuating Navalny and this was "purely a medical decision."

Russian doctors treating Navalny said tests had shown no trace of any poison and suggested he lost consciousness due to low blood sugar.

"So far no poison has been identified in the blood and urine," Anatoly Kalinichenko, the deputy head doctor of the hospital, told journalists in Omsk.



From left: Anastasia Vasilyeva, Alexei Navalny's personal physician, his brother Oleg Navalny and Yulia Navalnaya, wife of Alexei Navalny, talk to journalists at Omsk Emergency Hospital No 1 where the opposition leader was admitted after he fell ill in what his spokeswoman said was a suspected poisoning, in Omsk on Friday. — AFP

"We do not believe that the patient suffered poisoning," he said.

The hospital's chief doctor Alexander Murakhovsky said the preliminary diagnosis was a "metabolic disorder".

This could have caused a "sharp drop in blood sugar in the plane that led to loss of consciousness," he said.

Navalny's wife Yulia told journalists: "We certainly can't trust this hospital."

She said she wanted to "treat him in an independent hospital, whose doctors we trust."

The German doctors had been allowed to see him, Navalny's aide

Leonid Volkov told reporters at a press conference in Berlin.

The German government said it was in touch with the Russian authorities over the "humanitarian emergency".

'PLAY FOR TIME'

Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh claimed Russia's refusal to evacuate Navalny was a ploy to "play for time" and make it impossible to trace poison, posing a "critical threat to his life".

The director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, Ivan Zhdanov, said a police officer told

him they had detected a poison that was "dangerous not only to Alexei but to those around him", without saying where this was found.

The air ambulance dispatched by a German charity to bring Navalny to Berlin for treatment landed in Omsk after Chancellor Angela Merkel extended an offer of treatment.

European Union leaders including Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have voiced concern for Navalny, who has faced repeated physical attacks and prosecutions in more than a decade of opposition to Russian authorities.

The EU spokesperson for

Alexei Navalny

Top opponent of the Kremlin



AFP Photo/Maxim Zmeyev

Born June 4, 1976, Moscow region

Organised major demonstrations against Russian President Vladimir Putin, sentenced to numerous short prison terms

2011-2012

Emerges as opposition leader, critics call him a nationalist

AFP

2017

Jailed 3 times for organising protests against Putin

July 2019

Sentenced to 30 days in prison for calling for protest at Moscow city hall

Rushed to hospital suffering acute allergic reaction and said he may have been poisoned

October 2019

His organisation, Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), is declared as a "foreign agent"

July 2020

Calls the vote to extend Putin's rule a "huge lie"

Offices are raided

August 20

Hospitalised in suspected poisoning

August 21

In a coma, on ventilator, according to his spokeswoman

foreign affairs and security policy, Nabila Massrali, said: "The Russian authorities are well aware we are closely watching this," citing the need for "his safe transfer and treatment."

The US Embassy in Moscow said in a tweet that if the poisoning claim proved true it would represent "a grave moment for Russia, and the Russian people deserve to see all those involved held to account".

Navalny lost consciousness shortly after his plane took off on Thursday from Tomsk in Siberia, where he was working to support opposition candidates ahead of regional elections next month.

Yarmysh said he had seemed "absolutely fine" before boarding the flight and had only consumed a cup of tea at the airport.

She said she was sure he had suffered from an "intentional poisoning" and put the blame on Putin.

Peskov said claims of poisoning were "only assumptions" unless tests proved otherwise.

Navalny has made many enemies with his anti-corruption investigations, which often reveal the lavish lifestyles of Russia's elite and attract millions of views online.

— AFP

Challenger voices defiance as Belarus cracks down

VILNIUS: Belarus opposition challenger Svetlana Tikhanovskaya voiced defiance on Friday after President Alexander Lukashenko's government opened a criminal probe into attempts to "seize power".

In her first public comments since fleeing to Lithuania, Tikhanovskaya said Belarusians would "never accept the current leadership again" after a crackdown on mass protests following a disputed August 9 election.

"They can never forgive and forget all the violence that our citizens have suffered," she said.

Tikhanovskaya, a political novice who only put forward her candidacy when her blogger husband was arrested ahead of the vote, also told reporters she loved her homeland and planned to return "when I feel safe there".

"It should be clear to the president that there is a need for change. I hope that good sense prevails and the people will be heard and there will be new elections," she said, declining to comment on whether she would be a candidate in any fresh vote.

A nervous-looking Tikhanovskaya also refused to answer questions about her own safety or about what compelled her to leave Belarus in the aftermath of the election.

"As for threats, you know I don't think I would like to discuss this question now," she said in English.

"Every person in our country feels fear and is scared now, but it's our mission to step over all our fears and move further."



People rally in support of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk on Friday. — AFP

Supporters and the Lithuanian government have said she had little choice but to leave after coming under intense pressure from the authorities during a meeting at the Central Election Commission in Minsk.

'FEAR AND FALSEHOODS'

Tikhanovskaya's campaign helped to inspire unprecedented mass protests against Lukashenko's 26-year rule in the former Soviet republic.

The strongman claimed a sixth term with 80 per cent of the vote in the poll.

The EU has rejected Lukashenko's re-election and is planning sanctions against those it holds responsible for

violence against protesters.

Lukashenko said on Friday he would resolve the political crisis "in the coming days".

He also accused the United States of "directing" the anti-government protesters in order to create a buffer zone with Belarus, the three Baltic states and Ukraine between Russia.

Asked about Russian support for Lukashenko, Tikhanovskaya said: "I call on all countries of the world to respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus."

"We don't want to live in fear and falsehoods any more," she said, calling for striking workers to liaise with a Coordination Council she set up to organise pro-democracy

protests.

"The creation of the Coordination Council is aimed at negotiating a peaceful handover of power."

Belarus on Thursday opened a criminal probe into the Coordination Council, saying it was an unconstitutional attempt to topple Lukashenko.

Lawyer Maxim Znak, a member of the council, was cheered as he arrived for questioning at the Minsk offices of the investigative committee, supporters chanting: "One for all, all for one!"

The EU on Friday demanded that Belarus halt the investigation, accusing the government of "intimidation". — AFP

Irish minister quits for 'damaging national effort' on COVID-19

DUBLIN: Ireland's agriculture minister resigned on Friday after he said he had damaged the national effort in fighting COVID-19 by attending a social event that could have breached health regulations.

Dara Calleary (pictured) was among more than 80 guests at a hotel dinner hosted by the Irish parliament's golf society, the night after he and his cabinet colleagues significantly tightened nationwide restrictions to try to rein in a rise in infections.

Ireland has maintained some of the strictest controls in Europe and the government faced criticism all week for what many saw as poorly communicated and contradictory new restrictions, including limiting indoor gatherings to just six people.

Other politicians, including European Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan, attended the dinner that drew a wave of public anger.

"I want to apologise to everyone... I have damaged the national effort to try and take on COVID," Calleary told his local radio station, Midwest Radio.

"I've let people down, I've angered a lot of people, I've stressed a lot of people who have had to make very difficult calls over the last six months."

Prime Minister Micheál Martin accepted his resignation, saying Calleary made the right decision for the country and that the event should never have gone ahead.

An initial apology late on



Thursday on Calleary's Twitter account received almost 2,000 replies within two hours, many from people angry that they could not attend funerals because of the rules or had to cancel holidays or weddings.

Calleary was only named agriculture minister last month when his predecessor was fired after news emerged of a drink-driving prosecution just two weeks into the term of Martin's new coalition government.

The Irish Times quoted a person who stayed at the hotel and did not wish to be named as saying that he saw no evidence of social distancing when the attendees arrived, that they were not wearing masks, and that they shook hands with one another.

Police said they were investigating the event for alleged breaches of public health regulations.

Hogan, Ireland's representative on the EU's executive for the last six years, said in a statement that he attended the dinner on the clear understanding that the hotel had been assured the arrangements in place would comply with guidelines. — Reuters

Russia vaccine roll-out plan prompts virus mutation worries

KATE KELLAND

R

ussia's plan to roll-out its "Sputnik-V" COVID-19 vaccine even before full trials show how well it works is prompting concern among virus experts, who warn a partially effective shot may encourage the novel coronavirus to mutate. Viruses, including the pandemic SARS-CoV-2, are known for their ability to mutate all the time — and often this has little or no impact on the risk posed to people.

But some scientists are worried that adding "evolutionary pressure" to the pathogen by deploying what might not be a fully protective vaccine could make things worse.

"Less than complete protection could provide a selection pressure that drives the virus to evade what antibody there is, creating strains that

then evade all vaccine responses," said Ian Jones, a virology professor at Britain's Reading University.

"In that sense, a poor vaccine is worse than no vaccine."

Sputnik-V's developers, as well as financial backers and Russian authorities, say the vaccine is safe and that two months of small-scale human trials have shown that it works.

But the results of those trials have not been made public, and many Western scientists are sceptical, warning against its use until all internationally approved testing and regulatory hurdles have been passed.

Russia said on Thursday it plans to begin a large-scale efficacy trial of the vaccine in a total of 40,000 people, but will also begin administering it to people in high-risk groups, such as healthcare workers, before the trial has

Viruses, including the pandemic SARS-CoV-2, are known for their ability to mutate all the time — and often this has little or no impact on the risk posed to people

produced any results.

"You want to make sure the vaccine is effective. We really don't know that (about the Sputnik vaccine)," said Kathryn Edwards, a professor of paediatrics and vaccine expert in the infectious diseases division

at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in the United States.

She said that the risk of what a vaccine might do to a virus — in terms of fighting it, blocking it, or forcing it to adapt — is "always a concern".

Dan Barouch, a specialist at Harvard's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, noted that mutation rates for coronaviruses are far lower than for viruses like HIV, but added: "There are many potential downsides of using a vaccine that doesn't work. The risk that it (the virus) would mutate is a theoretical risk."

Scientists say similar evolutionary pressure to mutate is seen with bacterial pathogens, which — when faced with antibiotics designed to target them — can evolve and adapt to evade the drugs and develop resistance.

Antibiotic resistance and the rise of

superbugs, is described by the World Health Organization as one of the biggest threats to global health, food security and development today.

Jones stressed that vaccine-induced viral mutations are "a rare outcome", and the greater the efficacy of the vaccine in blocking a virus' ability to enter cells and replicate there, the lower the risk of it having an opportunity to circulate and "learn" how to evade antibody defences.

"If (a vaccine) is completely sterilising, the virus can't get in, so it can't learn anything because it never gets a chance," he said. "But if it gets in and replicates... there is selection pressure for it to evade whatever antibodies have been generated by the inefficient vaccine. And you don't know what the outcome of that will be." — Reuters



Former US vice-president Joe Biden accepts the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination during a speech delivered for the largely virtual 2020 Democratic National Convention from the Chase Center in Wilmington, Delaware, on Thursday. — Reuters

Biden emerges from shadow and into 'the light'

JAMES OLIPHANT

J

oe Biden finally got his moment.

After a 2020 presidential campaign dominated by President Donald Trump's words and actions, Biden on Thursday rose to the level of a true adversary as he accepted the Democratic Party's nomination for the November election.

Accused by the Republican Trump of hiding in his basement throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Biden turned his opponent's narrative to his advantage on the final night of the Democratic National Convention, delivering an austere address in a quiet room that some commentators, both left and right, likened to a speech from the Oval Office, not a convention floor.

Biden, 77 and nearing his 50th year in politics, cast himself as the wizened healer of a troubled and divided nation, pushing back at doubters within his party who whispered that he was wrong for the moment. He invoked president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who presided over a nation beset by economic hardship and then war.

A day after former president Barack Obama warned that Trump posed a threat to democracy, Biden, who was Obama's vice-president, offered Americans an alternative, pledging to be "an ally of the light, not the darkness" if elected.

Biden's remarks were in sync with a compressed, virtual Democratic convention that focused less on policy priorities and more on casting as wide a net as possible to assemble a coalition to win.

ACCUSED BY THE REPUBLICAN TRUMP OF HIDING IN HIS BASEMENT THROUGHOUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC, BIDEN TURNED HIS OPPONENT'S NARRATIVE TO HIS ADVANTAGE ON THE FINAL NIGHT OF THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

The online format allowed the party to feature an array of progressive Democrats and disenchanted Republicans over four nights of programming, while papering over the fissures from a divisive primary that tested how far left it was ready to move.

The two most beloved figures in the party, Barack and his wife Michelle Obama, savaged Trump in their respective convention speeches. That left Biden and his running mate, US Senator Kamala Harris, the room to outline a more ambitious vision beyond merely defeating the president.

Leaning into the themes of unity, character and decency emphasised throughout the convention, Biden said the country could choose a different, less angry, way forward.

"A path of hope and light," he said.

The speech afforded him the opportunity to promise to be more than a custodian of Obama's legacy, a charge that has followed him throughout his

presidential bid.

Robert Shrum, who managed John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign, said the site of the address, a near-empty hotel ballroom in Delaware made necessary because of the pandemic, worked to Biden's benefit.

"It felt more presidential," Shrum said. "A lot of people mocked him for being 'Biden in the basement.' He learned how to deal with this virtual reality. Tonight, he handled it brilliantly."

Some high-profile Republicans were equally impressed.

Karl Rove, White House deputy chief of staff to former president George W. Bush, called it "a very good speech," telling Fox News that Biden effectively portrayed himself as a unifier who would bring the country together.

He said Biden's message should worry Republican strategists in the Trump campaign if it resonated with swing voters.

While basking in accolades, Biden faces potential factors well outside his campaign's control, including efforts by Republicans to curtail voting amid the pandemic and concerns about the US Postal Service's capacity to handle a flood of mail-in ballots.

Trump, who was watching on Thursday and denigrated Biden on Twitter as an ineffective Washington lifer, will have his turn next week when Republicans hold their virtual convention. He is expected to accept the nomination at the White House, a backdrop with which Biden cannot compete.

— Reuters

US schools revamp curricula in response to Black Lives Matter

ERNEST SCHEYDER

J

ohn Marshall keeps a picture of Breonna Taylor in his office at the headquarters of Kentucky's largest school district, a visual reminder, he says, of the need for curriculum changes that better honour and focus on Black stories.

Taylor, a Black emergency medical technician, spent her senior year of high school at Kentucky's Jefferson County Public Schools, where Marshall, the district's chief diversity officer, has been leading a system-wide revamp of teaching materials and practices.

Taylor was shot dead by police officers in March. Her death and that of George Floyd, killed by Minneapolis police in May, and others have set off a national reckoning over race and race relations.

No criminal charges have been filed against the officers involved in Taylor's death, infuriating many in the school district, where a majority of the nearly 100,000 students are students of colour.

For educators in Jefferson County and across the United States, the deaths have jump-started demands for teaching materials and practices that help Black students better understand their history and place in the country.

After a summer of teacher workshops focused on updating curricula, millions of students will return to US classrooms in coming weeks — virtually or in person — that focus more on Black history and experiences, according to interviews with teachers, officials, publishers and others.

"We're not just talking about a couple of lesson changes," said Marshall. "We're getting to the quintessential work of trying to put race, equity and inclusion inside of our curriculum."

A June survey by the EdWeek Research Center, which is affiliated with the prominent trade publication Education Week, found that 81 per cent of US teachers support the Black Lives Matter movement.

"We can't control what happens with the police, but we can control what happens in our school systems," said Michael McFarland, head of the National Alliance of Black School Educators and a superintendent of the Crowley Independent School District in Texas.

Some of the changes don't necessarily involve new material, but rather teaching the same material from a new perspective.

In the Jefferson County schools, for instance, teachers discussing the Space Race of the 1960s plan now to focus on the Black women mathematicians whose computations underpin modern rocket science.

In Houston, teachers at YES Prep public charter schools will dissect James Baldwin's iconic book of essays "The Fire Next Time" less as a history of racial struggle and more as a guide for Black students to overcome injustice. These and other recommendations came after school districts spent summer months updating educational materials because most public school textbooks are only updated by publishers on a fixed schedule. — Reuters

OMAN
Observer
DAILY

ESTABLISHED ON 15 NOVEMBER 1981

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

HEAD OFFICE
Tel: 24649444, 24649450, 24649451, 24604563, 24699437
Fax: 24699643

SALALAH OFFICE
Tel: 23292633
Fax: 23293909

NIZWA OFFICE
Tel: 25411099
P.O. Box 955, P.C. 611

ADVERTISING
AL OMANEYA ADVERTISING & PUBLIC RELATIONS, P.O. Box 3303, P.C. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: SWITCHBOARD: 24649444
DIRECT: 24649430/24649437/24649401
Fax: 24649434

DISTRIBUTION AGENT
Al OMANEYA for Distribution & Marketing, P.O. Box 974, P.C. 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24649351/24649360
Fax: 24649379

Website: omanobserver.om

e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY: Ministry of Information
P.O. Box 974, Postal Code 100, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Achieve your children's dreams & education with our **long term deposit account**
It is time for you to apply for a long term deposit account that is customized to guarantee the future of your children

- Specific deposit periods (Till beneficiary reaches 18 years old).
- Interest rate up to 5.5%.
- Enjoy additional credit facilities.

Monthly Deposited Amounts	Years	Total amount at maturity
25 (OMR)	10 Years	3,821,286 (OMR)
50 (OMR)	10 Years	7,642,571 (OMR)
100 (OMR)	10 Years	15,285,142 (OMR)

Example:

For More Information: https://www.bankdhofar.com/en-GB/Long_Term_Deposit_Education.aspx

BankDhofar

Submission date for biodiesel project extended to Aug 31

GREEN FUEL: be'ah says it is closely collaborating with government ministries to force all commercial generators of used cooking oil (UCO) to be part of a proposed collection system



CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUG 21

Oman Environmental Services Holding Company SAOC (be'ah), the Sultanate's solid waste management flagship, has announced a two-week extension in the deadline for the submission of proposals from interested investors in a landmark project that seeks to convert used cooking oil (UCO) into environmentally friendly biodiesel.

Offers, originally due by August 16, may now be handed in by August 31, 2020, the state-run utility said in an e-mail to companies that had registered their interest in the initiative.

Last month, be'ah invited interest investors to prequalify for a competitive tender leading to the award of a contract for the management and recycling of UCO in the Sultanate. The initiative is expected to lead to the production and sale of biodiesel in Oman, said be'ah.

"The purpose of this pre-qualification document is to assess international and local interest from developers with relevant experience to manage the collection and/or the treatment of generated (used cooking oil) from local generators to be utilised as feedstock into biodiesel production, on a design, build, own and operate (DBOO) basis," it stated. The utility is allocating a 25,000 sq metre plot of land within the Barka landfill for the establishment of the biodiesel facility.

According to studies by researchers and experts, significant quantities of used cooking oil are produced daily as part of food preparations across an array of sectors and institutions in the Sultanate. They include hotels, restaurants, fast food outlets, school cafeterias, catering companies, camps and even residential homes. While a portion of this waste is collected by firms

for onward export to overseas-based recyclers, the remainder is understood to be disposed of in drains and landfills. Additionally, there are concerns that waste cooking oil is being resold to the detrimental of public health.

In response to queries from interested bidders, be'ah clarified that it is currently in the process of "assessing" the quantity of used cooking oil that may become available as feedstock for conversion into biodiesel.

Asked by bidders for details of "organisations, companies, factories and other establishments" that may have committed to providing be'ah with their waste oil output, the state-owned holding company noted: "As of now, be'ah currently has no commitments with any entities working in the UCO stream; however, be'ah is working in close collaboration with the ministries to force all commercial UCO generators to register with be'ah for a collection

system. This will be initiated in phases starting with Muscat Governorate."

be'ah also pointed out that it would support successful bidders in tying up with "potential biodiesel offtakers", but would leave it open to the bidders themselves to forge alliances with offtakers of their own choosing.

Separately, an Omani technological initiative dubbed Wakud has announced that it is pressing ahead with the establishment of a facility for recycling waste cooking oil into biofuels at Khazaen Economic City near Barka.

Wakud has roped in UK-based biofuels specialist Green Fuels as a joint venture partner in the project. Green Fuels is a pioneer in renewable fuels founded in 2003 and has supplied biofuel equipment with aggregate capacity equating to \$500bn in fuel sales to customers in more than 80 countries.

Euro zone economic recovery falters in August

LONDON: The euro zone's recovery from its deepest economic downturn on record hit the brakes in August, particularly in services, as pent-up demand unleashed by the easing of coronavirus lockdowns dwindled, a survey showed on Friday.

To contain the spread of the virus, which has infected over 22.5 million people globally, governments imposed strict lockdowns — forcing businesses to close and citizens to stay home, bringing economic activity to a near halt.

After many of those restrictions were relaxed, activity in the euro zone expanded in July at the fastest pace since mid-2018. But as infection rates have risen again in parts of the region, some earlier curbs have been reinstated.

So in data likely to concern policymakers and diminish hopes for a V-shaped recovery, IHS Markit's flash Composite Purchasing Managers' index sank to 51.6 from July's final reading of 54.9, below all forecasts in a Reuters poll that predicted no change.

"The fall back in the euro zone composite PMI in August

suggests the initial V-shaped rebound following the lifting of the lockdowns is already fizzling out," said Jessica Hinds at Capital Economics.

The flow of incoming new business for firms slowed and once again some of August's activity was derived by businesses completing backlogs of work.

Germany and France, the bloc's two biggest economies, also lost economic momentum this month, driven by the services slowdown. Apart from those economies, activity in the bloc decreased marginally in August, IHS Markit said.

In Britain, outside the currency union and who entered and exited lockdown later than its euro zone neighbours, the recovery from the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic quickened again in August.

British retail sales surged past pre-pandemic levels in July, the first full month shops selling non-essential goods were open since the country went into lockdown in March, although economists fear the retail recovery may not last.

However, snowballing job cuts sent an ominous signal for the months ahead. — **Reuters**



A worker makes final checks on an e-Golf electric car at the new production line of the Transparent Factory of German carmaker Volkswagen in Dresden, Germany. — **Reuters**

US, China differ over plans for Phase 1 trade deal talks

BEIJING: The Trump administration declined to acknowledge any plans to meet with China over the Phase 1 trade deal after the commerce ministry in Beijing said bilateral talks would be held "in the coming days" to evaluate the agreement's progress.

Commerce ministry spokesman Gao Feng made the comments about the forthcoming discussions at a weekly briefing held online, but did not elaborate.

China vows all necessary measures to protect its firms following US curbs on Huawei

The videoconference meeting, originally envisioned for the August 15 six-month anniversary of the trade deal's launch, had been delayed, and US President Donald Trump said it was his decision.

Two US sources familiar with the plans



Flags of US and China are placed for a meeting at the Ministry of Agriculture in Beijing, in this file photo. — **Reuters**

said on Thursday no new meeting date has been scheduled.

The US Trade Representative's office and US Treasury did not respond to queries about plans to review the trade deal, a regular six-month review by high-level officials called for in a chapter on enforcement.

White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow did not comment on possible talks with Chinese officials. But he said the Trump administration remains engaged with Beijing on the Phase 1 trade deal and USTR Robert Lighthizer was pleased with the progress so far.

China purchases of US goods are running well behind the pace needed to meet a first year increase of \$77 billion specified in the deal, according to official data. But China has increased the pace of farm product purchases

in recent weeks.

Trump, who has frequently expressed anger at China over the coronavirus pandemic, said on Tuesday he had "postponed" talks with China because "I don't want to deal with them now."

As his re-election campaign ramps up, Trump has turned to tougher talk and actions against China, including sanctions over China's Hong Kong security crackdown and the forced sale of Chinese-owned short video platform TikTok.

Trump told supporters at a rally in Pennsylvania on Thursday his administration would offer companies tax credits to bring US jobs back to America from China.

"And if they don't do it, we'll put tariffs on those companies, and they'll have to pay us a lot of money," Trump said. — **Reuters**

Rise in US weekly jobless claims clouds labour market recovery

WASHINGTON: The number of Americans filing a new claim for unemployment benefits rose unexpectedly back above the 1 million mark last week, a setback for a struggling US job market crippled by the coronavirus pandemic.

Still, in a sign some rehiring is under way, the rolls of those continuing to receive jobless benefits is slowly declining, the Labor Department reported on Thursday, and other data indicated a recovery from the recession triggered by COVID-19 continues, though at a more fitful pace than earlier.

Initial claims for state unemployment benefits rose to a seasonally adjusted 1.106 million for the week ended August 15, from an upwardly revised 971,000 in the prior week. Economists had forecast 925,000 applications in the latest week.

The previous week's level had marked the first time since March that new claims had registered below 1 million, and had fuelled some optimism that the pace of layoffs would slow further. Last week's reversal soured that, and new weekly claims have been above the 1 million mark for 21 of the last 22 weeks.

"The labour market is a long way from being healthy," Nancy Vanden Houten, lead US economist at Oxford Economics, wrote in a note to clients.

The volatility in benefits activity follows the lapse of an extra \$600 weekly unemployment benefit at the end of July. The enhanced benefit had been in place since the spring under the massive coronavirus stimulus package passed by Congress in late March, but Democrats in Congress and the White House have failed to reach agreement on extending it.

While President Donald Trump has signed an executive order that includes a provision extending the supplement at



Job seekers apply for the 300 available positions at a new Target retail store in San Francisco, California. — Reuters

a reduced rate of \$400 a week, there has been confusion over its implementation.

States are required to cover \$100 of the benefits, but many governors have indicated they don't have the financial capacity after revenues were decimated in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining \$300 will be funded from a limited emergency disaster relief programme, which economists estimated could be depleted as early as September.

Oxford's Vanden Houten noted that only seven states have been approved to pay the extra benefits.

Initial claims for state unemployment benefits rose to a seasonally adjusted 1.106 million for the week ended August 15, from an upwardly revised 971,000 in the prior week. Economists had forecast 925,000 applications in the latest week

New COVID-19 infections continue to spread across the nation, forcing authorities in some of the most afflicted areas to either shut down businesses again or pause reopenings. The newest twist in the path of the outbreak includes the eruption of hot spots associated with some colleges reopening their campuses.

First-time claims peaked at a record 6.867 million in late March.

"Claims are still down 325,000 from the last full week of July," economists at Jefferies said in a note to clients that described the overall increase as "disappointing." — Reuters

BUSINESS ALERT

Nigeria's revenue rose boosted by oil and tax receipts



A trader changes dollars with naira at a currency exchange store in Lagos. — Reuters

ABUJA: Nigeria's gross revenues rose to 676.41 billion naira in July from 653.35 billion naira in June due to higher crude oil sales and tax receipts, accountant general Ahmed Idris said.

The price of oil, Nigeria's main export, fell sharply early this year as the coronavirus outbreak hit demand, cutting government revenues, weakening the naira and creating a large financing gap for the country.

The global oil benchmark Brent has since recovered from a 21-year low below \$16 in April. OPEC member Nigeria relies on crude oil sales for two-thirds of government revenue.

The government said oil revenues with sales tax increased in July, while corporate taxes and import duty decreased. The government also said the balance on its oil surplus savings account stood at \$72.41 million as at Aug. 19.

Income from crude sales and value added tax (VAT) made up the bulk of the government's gross revenues.

Companies in Nigeria have seen profits slump especially in the second quarter when the government imposed a lockdown to slow the spread of the virus. Also, restrictions on international travel and dollar shortages have hurt imports.

In February, Nigeria increased VAT to 7.5% from 5% to boost revenues, seen among the lowest in the world. Lower government revenues could worsen Nigeria's debt to revenue ratio this year. — Reuters

British Airways likely to face strike action



A British Airways plane taxis past tail fins of parked aircraft to the runway near Terminal 5 at Heathrow Airport in London. — Reuters

LONDON: British Airways is increasingly likely to face strike action this autumn, as the trade union representing cabin crew said that new contracts offered to the airline's remaining staff did not offer enough stability and could cut pay substantially.

Unite, the trade union, first threatened BA with strike action in July. After a union meeting on Thursday, a spokesman said that he would instruct lawyers to proceed to industrial action.

But any strike action, which would need to be approved by a vote, is likely to be some weeks away given that Unite has yet to formally start the process.

BA on Friday said that it had "received no notification of any ballot for industrial action", the first step in a weeks-long process which precedes any strike.

British Airways, owned by IAG, says it

is battling to survive after the pandemic wiped out international travel. It has been burning through £20 million a day and has said it needs to axe up to 12,000 jobs.

While flying restarted in Europe in June, new restrictions continue to be imposed. On Thursday, Britain brought in quarantine rules for Austria and Croatia, creating a new problem for travel demand in markets served by BA.

Unite says that the cuts BA is trying to make go too far. It argues that staff who keep their jobs at the airline face contracts which provide no stability or security, and involve pay cuts of up to 43 per cent.

"Enough is enough. We will now instruct our legal specialists to proceed to industrial and legal action, which will hit BA in the autumn," Unite said in a statement.

— Reuters

Japan's consumer prices mired as deflation spectre looms

TOKYO: Japan's core consumer prices were stubbornly unchanged in July, dashing hopes for a modest rise as the coronavirus pandemic hit household demand and revived fears of a national plunge back into deflation.

A slow economic recovery from last quarter's record slump is expected to weigh on prices as consumer demand collapsed amid resurgent infections, which will in turn hit profits, jobs and business investment, analysts say.

The spectre of a return to deflation will keep the Bank of Japan (BoJ) under pressure to continue massive monetary stimulus and maintain ultra-low interest rates to support government fiscal spending aimed at battling the health crisis.

Japan's core consumer price index, which includes oil products but excludes volatile fresh food prices,



People are seen shopping inside a department store in Tokyo. — Reuters

stood flat in July from a year earlier, data by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications showed.

It fell short of a median market

forecast for a 0.1 per cent rise, following a flat reading in June.

Drops in gasoline prices reflecting weak global demand for crude oil offset gains in food and

household durable goods such as electric rice-cookers and air-conditioners, the data showed.

"Taken together, core CPI is likely to stay largely flat towards next year,"

A slow economic recovery from last quarter's record slump is expected to weigh on prices as consumer demand collapsed amid resurgent infections, which will in turn hit profits, jobs and business investment, analysts say

said Yasunari Ueno, chief market economist at Mizuho Securities.

"Japan is in a deflationary situation. As we shift towards 'new normal' following the coronavirus,

the BoJ's 2 per cent inflation target is increasingly losing reality."

The so-called core-core inflation index, which excludes food and energy prices and is similar to the core index used in the United States, rose 0.4 per cent in the year to July, maintaining the pace seen in the last two months.

The BoJ projects consumer prices to fall 0.5 per cent this fiscal year to next March and stay well below its 2 per cent target through early 2023. The central bank holds its next policy-setting meeting on September 16-17.

Friday's data came after a batch of indicators confirmed weak demand at home and abroad, with exports posting a fifth consecutive month of double-digit falls and a surprise drop in core machinery orders pointing to fragile capital expenditure.

— Reuters

Lakers, Bucks bounce back in NBA playoffs



Milwaukee Bucks forward Giannis Antetokounmpo (34) scores over Orlando Magic forward Gary Clark (12) during the second half in game two of the first round of the 2020 NBA Playoffs at The Field House. — USA Today Sports

MIAMI: The Los Angeles Lakers and Milwaukee Bucks stepped it up on Thursday, bouncing back from opening upsets with convincing victories in the NBA playoffs.

LeBron James and the Lakers, seeded first in the Western Conference, thumped the Portland Trail Blazers 111-88 to even their best-of-seven series at one game apiece.

The Bucks came back from a humbling loss to beat the Orlando Magic 111-96.

Anthony Davis, who struggled through an eight-of-24 shooting night in the Lakers' game one loss to Portland, led Los Angeles with 31 points on 13 of 21 shooting and pulled down 11 rebounds in 29 minutes.

He's the first Laker since Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to score more than 30 points in a playoff game in less than 30 minutes of action.

"He was just aggressive from the beginning of the game," James said of Davis. "He wasn't passive at all, looked for his shots. He did a great job of rebounding as well, got some put-backs."

James scored just 10 points, but his quiet night was no problem for a Lakers team that closed the first half on a 12-2 scoring run for a 17-point halftime lead.

"We knew we had to not have as many defensive lapses," James said.

"When you have a defensive strategy you have to execute that strategy for 48 minutes and I think we did a great job of that tonight," he added after the Lakers held the Blazers to 40 per cent shooting overall and just 27.6 per cent from three-point range.

The Lakers led by 30 — 88-58 — going into the fourth quarter, when Portland suddenly found themselves without star Damian Lillard.

Lillard exited with less than two minutes remaining in the third after dislocating his left index finger — apparently when he banged his hand against Davis's foot while reaching for the ball.

Lillard who torched the Lakers for 34 points in game one finished with 18.

The Blazers said X-rays on Lillard's hand were negative, but any lingering problem for the player who powered Portland to a playoff berth — averaging 37.6 points and 9.6 assists in eight seeding games in the NBA's quarantine bubble in Orlando, Florida — will be a severe blow to the Trail Blazers' bid to topple the Lakers.

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored 16 points for the Lakers, JR Smith added 11 off the bench and centre JaVale McGee chipped in 10.

Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Giannis Antetokounmpo led Milwaukee with 28 points and 20 rebounds as the Bucks brought the defensive intensity that carried them to the league's best regular-season record.

"Our whole mindset this game was to come out, play hard, play together and as long as we got stops we were going to figure it out on offense," Antetokounmpo said.

"I think the team did a great job first quarter, setting the tone. Coming out hard, playing hard, rebounding the ball and just making the right play."

Brook Lopez scored 20 points and Pat Connaughton chipped in 15 for the Bucks, who led by as many as 23 in the first half.

Orlando's Nikola Vucevic followed up his 35-point game one performance with 32 points.

But Milwaukee held the Magic without a point in the paint for the whole of the first quarter and out-rebounded Orlando 57-42.

"The effort was definitely an 'A,'" Lopez said. "Game one they came in and they out-worked us, that's not something we can allow."

ROCKETS, HEAT WIN

The Houston Rockets and Miami Heat both took commanding 2-0 leads in their series.

Houston, still playing without injured point guard Russell Westbrook, beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 111-98 despite a poor shooting night for star James Harden, who connected on just 5-of-16 shots from the floor on the way to 21 points.

Seven Rockets players scored in double figures and Houston made 19 of their NBA playoff-record 56 three-point attempts to take a commanding lead in the Western Conference clash.

"Couldn't make a shot," Harden said. "I just tried to be active defensively, tried to do other things to impact the game."

Houston trailed by one going into the fourth quarter, but after Oklahoma City's Chris Paul hit a jumper seconds into the period Houston put together a 17-0 scoring run, shutting out the Thunder for more than five minutes with a tremendous defensive display to put the game out of reach.

Just two points in the run came from NBA scoring champion Harden.

"My team-mates, man, they did an unbelievable job, especially in that fourth quarter getting stops," Harden said. "I think we got five, six stops in a row and just turned the whole game around."

Miami guard Duncan Robinson made seven of eight from three-point range for a game-high 24 points in the Heat's 109-100 victory over the Indiana Pacers. — AFP



Olympique Lyonnais' Jason Denayer in action with Bayern Munich's Thomas Muller, as play resumes behind closed doors following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. — Reuters

FLICK'S PATH FROM INTERIM BAYERN COACH TO CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL

LISBON: Hansi Flick can write himself into Bayern Munich folklore by lifting the Champions League trophy in Sunday's final to complete his 10-month odyssey from interim boss to treble-winning head coach in his first season. Flick leads out Bayern against Paris Saint-Germain in Lisbon having already secured the Bundesliga and German Cup.

Yet he was only initially appointed caretaker coach when Niko Kovac was sacked last November following a humbling 5-1 defeat at Eintracht Frankfurt.

It was the 55-year-old Flick's first job as a Bundesliga head coach.

"We can all be happy that we chose Hansi Flick and put our trust in him," said Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

"He's returned that trust a hundredfold."

Bayern have won 32 of their 35 games under Flick, earning him a contract until June 2023, and arrive in Sunday's final on a 20-match winning streak.

INCREDIBLE

"His development has been incredible," ex-Germany defender Per Mertesacker, head of Arsenal's academy, told daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. During his 10 months in charge, Flick, 55, has put into practice what he learnt in eight years as assistant coach to Germany boss Joachim Loew until 2014.

"Hansi is growing into this 'Jogi' (Loew) role right now," added Mertesacker.

At Bayern, Flick has stepped out of Loew's shadow, stamping his mark with "more focus on training and



Bayern Munich coach Hansi Flick. — REUTERS

match preparation, making difficult decisions," Mertesacker added.

Thomas Muller, who has seen nine coaches in 12 years with Bayern, is equally impressed.

"Our game hasn't been so well organised since Pep Guardiola (coached Bayern from 2013-16)," said Mueller.

"Hansi Flick has always been a

great guy, very clear in what he tells us. "But I didn't expect him to have the complete package to become Bayern's coach."

Mueller, often benched under Kovac, rewarded Flick's faith with a record 21 assists in the 2019/20 Bundesliga after returning to the starting side. Flick has managed the delicate feat of keeping Bayern's stars happy



Bayern Munich coach Hansi Flick celebrates with Benjamin Pavard. — Reuters



Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski celebrates scoring a goal. — Reuters

without relying on too much rotation.

"He was able to solve our problems as soon as he arrived," said midfielder Corentin Tolisso.

"He's a good coach who talks a lot with his players and gives them a lot of confidence."

German magazine *Kicker* hailed Flick's impact after winning his first

four games as Bayern scored 16 goals without reply.

"In a short space of time, he has given Bayern back its identity," enthused *Kicker*.

"Bayern are once again dominating: the ball is flowing, they've regained control, the movements between the lines is right. The game is more structured."

Bayern have steamrolled opponents to reach Sunday's final by scoring 42 goals in 10 straight wins.

The pinnacle was their jaw-dropping 8-2 thrashing of Lionel Messi's Barcelona in the quarter-finals.

Robert Lewandowski, the Champions League's top-scorer with 15 goals, has scored 55 times this season including a career-best 34 in the Bundesliga.

After injuries forced the former Bayern and Cologne midfielder to retire at 28, Flick had spells coaching lower league clubs.

KEY BREAK

His break was landing the plum job as Loew's assistant to the Germany team after the 2006 World Cup.

After helping mastermind Germany's 2014 World Cup triumph, Flick then became sports director of the German FA until 2017. He joined Bayern as Kovac's assistant in July 2019 and the rest is history.

"Hansi has a clear idea of what he wants to convey to his players," said Loew when Flick was appointed Bayern coach.

"I knew he would have a good start, but I believe Bayern will also give him confidence."

Loew's words proved prophetic as Flick cut a calm figure before the semi-final win over Lyon.

"I'm relaxed because, I know this team is very focused and has big goals," he said.

Victory on Sunday will see Flick graduate in ten months from interim coach to landing the treble for only the second time in Bayern's proud history after Jupp Heynckes achieved the feat in 2013. — AFP



follow us @observersportz

www.omanobserver.om
editor@omanobserver.om



sport



MESSI CONTEMPLATES BARCELONA EXIT

BARCELONA: Lionel Messi still wishes to leave Barcelona after meeting new coach Ronald Koeman, according to reports in the Spanish media on Friday, as all four sports newspapers dedicated their front covers to the Argentine's uncertain future.

Marca, Spain's biggest selling daily, said the Argentine told Koeman that he was more likely to leave the club than to stay, while *AS* declared on its cover 'Messi sees himself leaving'.

Barcelona-based daily *Mundo Deportivo* said Messi 'does not see his future clearly', but stressed that the captain has little hope of leaving the club immediately due to his 700-million-euro (\$827.05 million) release clause.

Messi, who joined Barca aged 13, has scored a record 634 goals for the Catalans in 730 matches and is also the club's most decorated player with 33 trophies.

He is 37 games away from matching Xavi Hernandez as the club's all-time appearance maker.

But the 33-year-old is into the final year of his contract at the club and doubts about his future have grown since last week's historic 8-2 thrashing to Bayern Munich to exit the Champions League, which Barca have failed to win since 2015.

Sport, also based in Barcelona, talked of a 'first summit meeting' between the captain and coach, adding that Messi interrupted his holidays in order to meet with Koeman.

The Dutch coach said in his presentation on Wednesday that he wanted Messi to stay, although he did not show as much reverence to the player as some of his predecessors.

Koeman said he "did not know if he needed to convince Messi to stay" although he did call the Argentine the best player in the world and said he would be happy if he chose to remain at Barca.

With his contract running out next June, the six-times world player of the year is free to negotiate with other clubs from next January.

Yet, even without a transfer fee, Messi's colossal salary, reported to be the highest in world football, means very few clubs would be able to afford him.

A study by French newspaper *L'Equipe* earlier this year said Messi earns 8.2 million euros per month from Barca, way more than Juventus forward Cristiano Ronaldo and Paris St Germain striker Neymar, who earn 4.5 million and 3 million, respectively.

— Reuters

Barcelona's Lionel Messi reacts at the end of the UEFA Champions League quarterfinal against Bayern Munich at the Luz stadium in Lisbon. — AFP