

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Military announces new virus testing plans

The Washington Post

The U.S. military on Wednesday announced plans to roll out more testing for COVID-19, beginning with nuclear forces and troops engaged in combat, a process that would be widened to include other service members as more diagnostic materials become available.

Gen. John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters that Defense Secretary Mark Esper had recently approved a plan to allocate the force into four tiers that would govern prioritization of coronavirus testing.

Officials said that the first tier would include troops involved in “critical national capabilities,” such as nuclear forces and at least some Special Operations forces. The

second would include troops assigned to combat zones and those involved in the domestic virus response, while the third would be troops located overseas on priority missions and those being brought back to the U.S. following deployments. All remaining troops would make up the last tier.

Hyten said that testing would be completed this month for “tier one” troops, “focusing our supplies and efforts on these critical forces like our strategic deterrent, making sure that they’re always full-up, always ready to go.”

“To get to the entire force, the 1.4 million active duty and the entire [National] Guard and Reserve, is going to take us into the summer, but I think we’ll get to the deploying, redeploy-

ing forces, the forces engaged, all of the tier one forces next month,” Hyten said.

Officials said that the Pentagon would, at the same time, prioritize testing according to movements, such as submarine and aircraft carrier deployments and basic training arrivals. Since the U.S. outbreak accelerated, the military has taken steps to adjust and even pause training recruits.

“So we’re moving quickly. It is a supply issue right now, which is causing us not to be able to go down the full spectrum of all of the forces,” Hyten said. “That’s why we came up with the tiered approach.”

While the military has been testing troops for weeks, focused on the sites of known outbreaks, including the air-

craft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, a national shortage of supplies, restrictive testing policies and several other factors have limited testing.

The plan outlined by Hyten and Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist provides the most detailed glimpse yet of how the Pentagon plans to expand testing across the force in an attempt to avoid disruption of its core security mission.

Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has publicly laid out an objective of being able to conduct 60,000 tests per day in the next month or so. When asked about that goal, however, Norquist seemed to suggest that the department would initially have a much lower target of about 50,000 per week.

Unemployment numbers continue rising amid crisis

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—More than 4.4 million laid-off workers applied for U.S. unemployment benefits last week as job cuts escalated across an economy that remains all but shut down, the government said Thursday.

Roughly 26 million people have now filed for jobless aid in the five weeks since the coronavirus outbreak began, forcing millions of employers to close their doors. About one in six American workers have lost their jobs in the past five weeks, by far the worst string of layoffs on record. Economists have forecast that the unemployment rate for April could go as high as 20%.

The magnitude of job cuts has plunged the economy into the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Some economists have said that

the nation’s output could shrink by twice the amount that it did during the Great Recession, which ended in 2009.

The economic consequences of the virus-related shutdowns have sparked angry protests in several state capitals from crowds insisting that businesses be allowed to reopen.

Thursday’s report, showing that the pace of layoffs remains immense, could heighten demands for reopenings.

Some governors have begun easing restrictions despite warnings from health authorities that it may be too soon to do so without causing new infections. In Georgia, gyms, hair salons and bowling alleys can reopen Friday. Texas has reopened its state parks.

Yet those scattered reopenings won’t lead to much rehiring, especially if Americans are

too wary to leave their homes. Most people have said that they favor stay-at-home orders, according to a survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs, and believe that it won’t be safe to lift social distancing guidelines anytime soon. And there are likely more layoffs to come from many small businesses that have tried but failed to receive loans from a federal aid program.

The number of people who are receiving unemployment benefits has reached a record 16 million, surpassing a previous high of 12 million set in 2010, just after the 2008-09 recession ended. This figure reflects people who have managed to navigate the online or telephone application systems in their states, have been approved for benefits and are actually receiving checks.

“This has been a really devastating shock for a lot of families and small businesses,” said Aaron Sojourner, a labor economist at the University of Minnesota. “It is beyond their control and no fault of their own.”

Just about every major industry has absorbed sudden and severe layoffs. Economists at the Federal Reserve have estimated that hotels and restaurants have shed the most jobs — 4 million since Feb. 15. That is nearly one-third of all the employees in that industry.

When the government issues the April jobs report May 8, economists expect it to show breathtaking losses. Economists at JPMorgan are predicting a loss of 25 million jobs. That would be nearly triple the total lost during the entire Great Recession period.

Hyten: Orders needed to execute Iran tweet

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Pentagon leaders must now develop orders for troops that match President Donald Trump's tweet instructing the Navy to shoot at harassing Iranian ships, Gen. John Hyten, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Wednesday.

"The president made a clear statement. I think the Iranians understand that, I think the American people understand that. Now, we as the military have to apply that clear direction from the commander in chief into lawful orders that we execute," the Air Force general

said during a Pentagon news conference that he conducted with Deputy Defense Secretary David Norquist.

Trump tweeted earlier Wednesday that he had "instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea."

On April 15, 11 boats identified as Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy vessels "repeatedly conducted dangerous and harassing approaches" of six U.S. ships in the northern Persian Gulf, according to the U.S. Navy.

Images posted by the 5th Fleet of the incident show what

look like speed boats conducting close passes and tight turns around the U.S. ships. The American sailors gave multiple warnings to the Iranian ships through bridge-to-bridge radio, five short horn blasts and "long-range acoustic noise marker devices," for an hour before the vessels eventually responded to radio messages and moved away, the Navy said.

"What's been going on right now is that you can't let a boat, a fast boat, get into a position where they can threaten your ship," Hyten said.

Tensions between Iran and the United States have increased during the past few

years, resulting in several violent and deadly incidents.

On Wednesday, Hyten said the U.S. military has a right to respond to "hostile intent" and has specific guidance on how to use lethal force.

"I go back to what the president said sends a great message to Iran. That's perfect. We know how to translate that into our rules of engagement," Hyten said. "We don't talk about rules of engagement in public, but they're based on the inherent right of self-defense."

Norquist said the intent behind Trump's words was a "very clear message" to Iran about their behavior.

Severe weather sweeps through southern parts of US

Associated Press

MADILL, Okla. — Severe weather was moving through the South on Thursday after at least six people died in Oklahoma, Texas and Louisiana, including a factory worker whose body was found a quarter-mile away after an apparent tornado struck his workplace and severely damaged the town nearby.

More than 100,000 customers from Texas to Mississippi were without power Thursday as the severe weather moved through, according to poweroutage.us, which tracks utility reports.

Tornado warnings sent residents taking cover in southern Mississippi and Alabama. Trees and power lines were toppled in parts of west Alabama. No injuries or major damage were reported immediately.

The factory worker was killed when a suspected twister hit just as the workforce was leaving for the day from J&I Manufacturing in southern Oklahoma, Marshall County Emergency Management Director Robert Chaney said. The worker's body was found about a fourth of a mile from the factory, Chaney said.

That apparent tornado also caused widespread damage in Madill, near the Red River, said Donny Raley, the city's emergency manager.

A Louisiana man was found dead after a witness saw him try to retrieve a trash can from water near a drainage ditch. He lost his footing and was swept away by floodwaters, DeSoto Parish Sheriff Jayson Richardson told The Shreveport Times.

"There was some pretty extreme flood-

ing here in Mansfield. Water like I've not seen in many, many years, if ever," the sheriff told the newspaper. "Basically the water rose really fast and we had to rescue some people out of homes. I think we had about 20 or so homes that people were flooded in."

A woman was killed on a bridge in Woodworth, La., 15 miles south of Alexandria, due to the severe weather, the Rapides Parish Sheriff's Office told KALB-TV. The sheriff's office did not provide any details on how she died.

At least three people were killed when an apparent tornado touched down in southeast Texas about 6 p.m. Wednesday near Onalaska, about 75 miles north of Houston, the Polk County Emergency Management System said in a statement.

AAFES sees surge in alcohol sales at exchange stores

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — With many clubs and restaurants on military bases closed and civilian establishments off limits thanks to the coronavirus, retail alcohol sales on U.S. bases worldwide soared by 50% the third week of March, an exchange spokesman said.

"Alcohol sales across the retail indus-

try have understandably seen increases as bars and restaurants have closed and demand has shifted to at-home consumption," Army and Air Force Exchange Service spokesman Chris Ward said in an email Sunday.

According to Nielsen data, U.S. alcoholic beverage sales in retail formats jumped 55% in the third week of March compared to the same time a year ago, Ward said.

"AAFES worldwide sales during this

same timeframe were slightly below with the broader industry trend, reflecting an increase of 50% vs. prior year," he said.

During the first half of April, however, AAFES worldwide alcohol sales are only up 10% on the same period last year, Ward said.

The Navy Exchange Service Command did not respond to emailed questions about sales at its stores.

26 ships have sailors infected with virus

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON— Sailors on 26 Navy ships have the coronavirus now and 14 other ships have had confirmed cases of illness, though crew members have recovered, a Navy official said Wednesday.

All the ships are in port and

none of the 90 ships at sea have cases of the virus, according to the official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The Navy has 297 warships.

The Navy official would not say which ships had cases of the virus or how many sailors were infected, only that it was small numbers.

The Navy has been the hardest hit of the military services by the coronavirus with 997 cases now. In total, 1,298 sailors have been infected by the virus.

Most of the Navy's cases are among the crew of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, which docked in Guam on March 27 due to an outbreak

among its sailors, which number about 4,800. As of Wednesday, 777 sailors have tested positive, of which 63 have recovered. Six Roosevelt sailors are hospitalized now at a Navy hospital in Guam. One Roosevelt sailor, Chief Petty Officer Charles Robert Thacker Jr., 41, died April 13 from the virus.

Roosevelt sailors show thanks for Marines aiding them

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

USS Theodore Roosevelt sailors on Guam went to their balconies and cheered the Marines supporting them at civilian hotels, where they are in 14-day medical isolation after an outbreak of the coronavirus on the aircraft carrier.

The sailors have also expressed their gratitude in letters and notes for the Marines, said Capt. Vicente Huerta of the 3rd Law Enforcement Battalion, III Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group, in a video posted on the Commander Navy Task Force 75 Facebook page.

"My Marines just started making sure that all of the sailors here receive everything that they need," Huerta said. "As the sailors started seeing that, we just started getting flooded with a bunch of letters and them showing their appreciation."

The cheers and applause from the hotel balconies gave Huerta goosebumps, he said.

"Okay, this is a different type of deployment," he said.

Earlier this month, videos showing hundreds of crew members cheering and ap-

'[The show of gratitude] has been probably the most gratifying thing I've done in the Marine Corps.'

Capt. Vicente Huerta
U.S. Marine Corps.

plauding the ship's skipper, Capt. Brett E. Crozier, captured headlines after the Navy fired him over the leak of a memo, in which he urged more rapid evacuation of personnel.

Days later, acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly traveled to Guam where he briefly visited the ship and criticized Crozier in remarks to the crew, leading to Modly's resignation when audio of the address also leaked.

As of Thursday, some 4,200 of the ship's crew members had been moved ashore, and 840 had tested positive for the disease, with 100% of the crew having been tested and only "a small number of results" still

pending. Of the infected sailors, 88 had recovered and one, Chief Petty Officer Charles Robert Thacker Jr., 41, had died.

Six were still being treated at Naval Hospital Guam, though none were in intensive care, the Navy said.

The ship has undergone thorough cleaning, but sailors may not be getting out of isolation at the end of the prescribed 14 days, Politico reported Tuesday, citing an internal memo in which Navy officials indicated that the virus may remain active in asymptomatic individuals longer than previously thought.

The memo called a halt to "out-testing" for those in quarantine and holding their release until further evaluation could be completed, Politico reported.

A second video posted on the Task Force 75 Facebook page this week showed service members writing and reading whiteboard messages to the crew to remain "TR strong" and "hold fast."

For Huerta, the show of gratitude from the isolated crew "has been probably the most gratifying thing I've done in the Marine Corps."

About 10,000 sailors eligible for reenlistment bonus

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON— About 10,000 more sailors are now eligible for a reenlistment bonus as part of the Navy's effort to retain needed personnel.

The selective reenlistment bonus update allows all sailors to reenlist a full year before

the end of their active-service obligation to receive the bonus instead of waiting to be within 270 days of the end of their hitch.

"By expanding the eligibility window, more sailors are now eligible to reenlist at any given time," Cmdr. Dave Hecht, a spokesman for the chief of naval personnel, said in a statement.

Sailors can receive up to a \$100,000 reenlistment bonus, with the amount calculated based on job, time in service, and the Navy's retention needs.

The Navy is updating its 2020 selective reenlistment bonus program as part of its regular adjustments that are based on which sailors are leaving the service. Some jobs might

need more financial incentives right now to keep those sailors, whereas other jobs are doing better with retention.

The Navy has also included an additional 27 "skillsets" to the bonus eligibility list, meaning sailors with specific time in service and with certain qualifications are now able to apply.

Virus warnings for Ramadan as some shutdowns eased

Associated Press

BANGKOK — The world inched toward a new phase in the coronavirus crisis on Thursday, as some countries like Vietnam and New Zealand with few new cases moved toward ending their pandemic shutdowns while others like Singapore and Japan were doubling down on measures to prevent a surge in infections.

Like the U.S., many countries are moving from crisis mode to figuring out how to live with the virus by modifying pre-pandemic routines with precautions, more testing and containment of flare-ups, mindful of the potential for future waves of the virus.

Authorities in the capital of Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim majority nation, extended to May 22 strict disease-fighting restrictions with the approach of the month-long Ramadan fasting season, which begins with the new moon this week.

With traditional, communal meals for the poor, large fast-breaking dinners with family and friends and cultural events after sunset canceled, the world's 1.8 billion Muslims find themselves cut off from much of what makes the month special as authorities fight the pandemic.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged Muslims to "focus on our common enemy — the virus," and repeated an earlier appeal for an immediate cease-fire for all conflicts. In a separate message, he urged countries to provide equitable help to all, saying the pandemic was "a human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis."

Some leaders are using the crisis as a pretext for repressive measures, Guterres said. "The message is clear: People — and their rights — must be front and center," he said.

The United Nations has warned that tens of millions of people risk starvation as the coronavirus pandemic, a plague of locusts in Africa and other disruptions prevent food from reaching the world's most vulnerable populations in places like Yemen and South Sudan.

A report released Wednesday estimated that at least 135 million people are at acute risk of starvation due to conflicts and other factors. The report was compiled before shutdowns, border closures and freezes on transport activities began disrupting food supplies.

In response, the EU pledged \$22 billion for helping bridge such disruptions to provide help to vulnerable communities in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, parts of

Asia and Latin America.

While some parts of the world are just beginning to grapple with the pandemic, in China authorities reported no new deaths and just 10 new cases on Thursday. The number of people hospitalized dropped to 959, with 63 considered serious cases.

As new cases drop close to zero, China has re-opened many businesses. Middle and high school seniors preparing for exams are returning to classes. But a ban on foreign arrivals and strict quarantine measures remain in place to prevent an influx of new cases from abroad or fresh infections among those thought to have recovered or who had no symptoms but could still be spreading the virus.

Neighboring Vietnam, which moved quickly to close its borders and trace coronavirus cases, has reported no new cases in the past three days and is preparing to loosen restrictions.

New Zealand, which announced just three new cases of the coronavirus on Thursday, remained on strict lockdown, with 1,451 confirmed cases and 16 deaths, but was preparing to ease limits next month.

But the virus continues to pop up unexpectedly.

Singapore has been reporting hundreds of new cases each day, many traced to crowded migrant worker dormitories.

Japanese officials said Thursday that 14 more crew members on an Italian-operated cruise ship docked in southern Japan tested positive for the coronavirus, raising the breakout on board to 48.

Other infected crew members are quarantined in single rooms, and officials planned to test all by Friday. Officials are investigating how the virus could have got on board after discovering the first known case in a crew member who tested positive after developing a cough and fever.

An earlier outbreak aboard the U.S.-operated Diamond Princess cruise ship, which was quarantined offshore of Yokohama for weeks, resulted in more than 700 cases among its 3,700 passengers and crew. Separately, Japan has about 12,000 cases, with 300 deaths.

The global outbreak of coronavirus has infected more than 2.6 million people and killed about 183,000, including more than 45,000 in the United States, according to a tally compiled by John Hopkins University from official government figures.

The true numbers are believed to be far higher, and most people infected suffer from only mild or moderate symptoms and survive.

House expected to send 4th aid bill to president

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House is reassembling to send President Donald Trump a fourth bipartisan bill to help businesses crippled by the coronavirus, an almost \$500 billion measure that many lawmakers are already looking beyond.

Anchoring the latest bill is a request by the Trump administration to replenish a fund to help small- and medium-sized businesses with payroll, rent and other expenses.

Supporters are already warning that more money will be needed almost immediately for the business-backed Paycheck Protection Program. Battle lines are forming over the next measure amid growing demands to help out state and local governments, the Postal Service and first responders.

Thursday's vote in the House would bring the total cost of the four bipartisan bills to respond to various impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to about \$2.5 trillion, according to the Congressional Budget Office, Washington's impartial scorekeeper.

The bill started two weeks ago as a simple Trump-sought \$250 billion replenishment of the oversubscribed payroll subsidy program and grew from there. The payroll program provides forgivable loans so businesses can continue paying workers while forced to stay closed for social distancing and stay-at-home orders.

It also contains \$100 billion demanded by Democrats for hospitals and a nationwide testing program, along with a \$60 billion set-aside for small banks and an alternative network of community development banks that focus on development in urban neighborhoods and rural areas ignored by many lenders. There's also \$60 billion for small-business loans and grants delivered through the Small Business Administration's existing disaster aid program.

Republicans say the delays likely forced some businesses waiting for the payroll subsidies to close. But they are sure to back the measure by a wide margin.

The legislation swept through the Senate on Tuesday by voice vote barely hours after being first circulated.

The House, however, will conduct a roll-call vote in which lawmakers will vote in turns taken under social distancing rules.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., has also orchestrated a vote to establish a select panel to provide oversight of the government's efforts to battle the coronavirus, a move decried by Republicans as playing politics with the crisis.

Sweden strategy: Stores open, keep apart

Bloomberg

Sweden's unusual approach to fighting the coronavirus pandemic is starting to yield results, according to the country's top epidemiologist.

Anders Tegnell, the architect behind Sweden's relatively relaxed response to COVID-19, told local media that the latest figures on infection rates and fatalities indicate the situation is starting to stabilize.

"We're on a sort of plateau," Tegnell told Swedish news agency TT.

Sweden has left its schools, gyms, cafes, bars and restaurants open throughout the spread of the pandemic. Instead, the government has urged citizens to act responsibly and follow social distancing guidelines.

The spread of COVID-19 across the globe is triggering different responses across national and even state borders, as authorities struggle to contain an outbreak about which much remains unknown.

It's unclear which strategy

will ultimately prove most effective, and even experts in Sweden warn that it's too early to draw conclusions. But given the huge economic damage caused by strict lockdowns, the Swedish approach has drawn considerable interest around the world.

Part of that approach relies on having access to one of the world's best-functioning health care systems. At no stage did Sweden see a real shortage of medical equipment or hospital capacity, and tents set up as emergency care facilities around the country have mostly remained empty.

As of Sunday, Sweden had reported 1,540 deaths tied to COVID-19, an increase of 29 from Saturday. That's considerably more than in the rest of Scandinavia, but much less than in Italy, Spain and the U.K., both in absolute and relative terms.

Tegnell isn't the only high-level Swedish official to claim that the country may be over the worst.

"The trend we have seen in

recent days, with a more flat curve — where we have many new cases, but not a daily increase — is stabilizing," Karin Tegmark Wisell, head of the microbiology department at Sweden's Public Health Authority, said Friday. "We are seeing the same pattern for patients in intensive care."

Just two weeks ago, the picture was considerably bleaker, and Prime Minister Stefan Lofven suggested that the government may need to review its approach amid the prospect of thousands of Swedish deaths. In particular, the failure to protect people in nursing homes has stood out as a clear weakness, which has contributed to higher death rates than in neighboring countries.

Yet overall, Lofven's strategy has won the approval of Swedes, and his personal popularity has soared.

"I have very high confidence in the Swedish authorities that manage this," Volvo Cars CEO Hakan Samuelsson said in a phone interview.

Volvo, which was forced to

halt production across Europe and furlough about 20,000 Swedish employees, resumed production at its Swedish plants Monday.

"Our measures are all based on individuals taking responsibility, and that is also an important part of the Swedish model," Samuelsson said.

Sweden's COVID-19 strategy may ultimately result in a smaller — albeit historically deep — economic contraction than the rest of Europe is now facing, according to HSBC Global Research economist James Pomeroy.

Pomeroy pointed to some Swedish characteristics that may be helping the country deal with the current crisis. More than half of Swedish households are single-person, making social distancing easier to carry out. More people work from home than anywhere else in Europe, and everyone has access to fast internet, which helps large chunks of the workforce stay productive away from the office.

As people are staying home, Earth gets cleaner

Associated Press

An unplanned grand experiment is changing Earth.

As people across the globe stay home to stop the spread of the coronavirus, the air has cleaned up, albeit temporarily. Smog stopped choking New Delhi, one of the most polluted cities in the world, and India's getting views of sights not visible in decades. Nitrogen dioxide pollution in the northeastern United States is down 30%. Rome air pollution levels from mid-March to mid-April were down 49% from a year ago. Stars seem more visible at night.

People are also noticing animals in places and at times they don't usually. Coyotes have meandered along downtown Chicago's Michigan Avenue and near San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. A puma roamed the streets of Santiago, Chile. Goats took over a town in Wales. In India, daring wildlife has already become bolder, with hungry monkeys entering homes and opening refrigerators to look for food.

"It is giving us this quite extraordinary

insight into just how much of a mess we humans are making of our beautiful planet," says conservation scientist Stuart Pimm of Duke University. "This is giving us an opportunity to magically see how much better it can be."

Chris Field, director of the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, assembled scientists to assess the ecological changes happening with so much of humanity housebound. Scientists, stuck at home like the rest of us, have said that they are eager to explore unexpected changes in weeds, insects, weather patterns, noise and light pollution. Italy's government is working on an ocean expedition to explore sea changes from the lack of people.

"In many ways, we kind of whacked the Earth system with a sledgehammer and now we see what Earth's response is," Field says.

Researchers are tracking dramatic drops in traditional air pollutants, such as nitrogen dioxide, smog and tiny particles. These types of pollution kill up to 7 mil-

lion people a year worldwide, according to Health Effects Institute president Dan Greenbaum.

The greenhouse gases that trap heat and cause climate change stay in the atmosphere for 100 years or more, so the pandemic shutdown is unlikely to affect global warming, said Breakthrough Institute climate scientist Zeke Hausfather. Carbon dioxide levels are still rising, but not as fast as last year.

Field said that he's most intrigued by increased urban sightings of coyotes, pumas and other wildlife that are becoming video social media staples. Boar-like javelinas congregated outside of an Arizona shopping center. Even New York City birds seem hungrier and bolder.

In Adelaide, Australia, police shared a video of a kangaroo hopping around a mostly empty downtown, and a pack of jackals occupied an urban park in Tel Aviv, Israel. We're not being invaded. The wildlife has always been there, but many animals are shy, Duke's Pimm says.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Search on for possible escaped exotic cat

NM RIO RANCHO — New Mexico officials are searching for a possible escaped exotic cat in an Albuquerque, N.M., suburb.

KRQE-TV reported New Mexico Department of Game and Fish said it's investigating reports of an escaped serval from a Rio Rancho home.

Animal control reportedly captured a cat said to be a Savannah cat — a cross between a serval and another breed. But it's unclear if it is the same feline officials sought.

Game and Fish officials say they are still investigating.

Track to adopt dogs after ending racing

AL BIRMINGHAM — An Alabama race course will need to find homes for more than 500 dogs after discontinuing live greyhound racing at the venue, officials said.

The Jefferson County Racing Association announced that it would no longer hold live greyhound races at the Birmingham Race Course, citing declining revenue and interest in the event, WVTM-TV reported.

While some of the greyhounds could go on to race at other tracks, Kip Keefer with the racing association said officials would be initiating a "massive" adoption and placement effort in the coming months to try and find homes for about 550 dogs that would remain.

Officer, senior citizens treated for bee stings

AZ MESA — A Mesa police officer was among four people treated for multiple bee stings at a senior living facility, authorities said.

Mesa Fire Department officials said crews were called to Fellowship Square after a report of a bee attack.

They said three senior citizens were taken to a hospital for treatment while the police officer was treated at the scene.

Residents of the facility were asked to shelter in place while a pest elimination crew removed the bees.

Firm 'devastated' by fire at large egg farm

OH CROTON — Authorities said a fast-moving fire at a large egg farm in Ohio destroyed one large building and also killed hens in other buildings.

The blaze reported at the Trillium Farms facility in Croton sent flames shooting high into the sky.

Chief Mike Richardson of the Hartford Volunteer Fire Department told the Newark Advocate that the flames destroyed one building that was about 300 feet long and damaged another. He said all chickens were lost in one building and some chickens were lost in two other buildings due to exposure.

Meeting interrupted with child abuse photos

CT NEW HAVEN — A Connecticut city's public Zoom meeting was interrupted by a person showing material depicting child abuse, throwing council members into a fit about how to secure meetings going forward.

Participants in the videoconference before the New Haven Board of Alders were stunned and disgusted by the display, the New Haven Register reported.

The Register added that anonymous users disrupting meet-

ings with vulgar displays have been dubbed "Zoom-bombers."

Police arrest 30 men for soliciting minors

VA FAIRFAX — An online sting operation in northern Virginia resulted in the arrests of 30 men charged with trolling the internet to solicit sex from minors, authorities said.

Fairfax County Police called the sting Operation COVID Crackdown. They said school closures and stay-at-home orders to combat the coronavirus have increased children's online presence and their vulnerability to exploitation along with it.

Police said the men who were arrested went online to initiate explicit conversations and solicit sex from police officers posing as children. Each of the suspects agreed to meet their targets in person at specified locations. Detectives arrested the men when they showed up.

Stellar sea lion to give birth at sea life center

AK KENAI — A female Steller sea lion at the Alaska SeaLife Center is pregnant and expected to give birth within months, officials said.

The sea lion named Mara would be only the second of her species to give birth at the center in Seward, The Peninsula Clarion reported.

Mara will not be used to breed again because she is now 17 and most Steller sea lions normally live to their early 20s in captivity, SeaLife Center Husbandry Director Lisa Hartman said.

The father is a 10-year-old at the center named Pilot.

The SeaLife Center previously hosted four other births, all from a female named Eden.

Man charged in robbery of drive-thru

FL MIAMI — Police charged a Florida man with robbing a McDonald's through its drive-thru window.

Angel Torres Peraza, 37, was pulled over in an unrelated traffic stop in Miami when officers learned about the robbery at the restaurant less than an hour earlier, news outlets reported.

Police then brought the McDonald's cashier from Hialeah to the traffic stop, and he identified Peraza as the robber.

Peraza is accused of demanding cash while threatening to shoot the McDonald's cashier "in the face" if he didn't comply, the Miami Herald reported.

Man accused of hiring men to beat up wife

WA VANCOUVER — A Vancouver man was accused of hiring two men to beat up his estranged wife after she had him served with a no-contact order.

The plan was stymied when the men tipped her off, documents said. Edgar Gonzalez-Gomez appeared in Clark County Superior Court on suspicion of criminal solicitation, The Columbian reported.

The woman served Gonzalez-Gomez with a no-contact order April 7. One week later, she was sitting in her car when she saw an unknown man walk by several times before tapping on her window, asking her name and then telling her about the plan, saying he wouldn't do it, a probable cause affidavit said.

He then let her hear a recording of Gonzalez-Gomez describing in Spanish what he wanted done to her, according to court records.

From wire reports

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Red Sox lose draft pick, Cora suspended

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Boston Red Sox escaped severe penalties in Major League Baseball's cheating investigation on Wednesday, with Commissioner Rob Manfred concluding that the 2018 World Series champions' sign-stealing efforts were less egregious than the Astros' when they won it all the previous season.

Ex-manager Alex Cora was formally suspended for the coronavirus-delayed 2020 season — but only for his role as Houston's bench coach; Manfred had held off a penalty for Cora despite fingering him as the ringleader of the Astros' sign-stealing operation.

In a statement, Cora said he was "relieved" the investigations were finished and that Manfred found he "did not violate any MLB rules as a member of the Red Sox organization in 2018 or 2019."

"I also take full responsibility for the role I played, along with others, in the Astros' violations of MLB rules in 2017," Cora said. "The collective conduct of the Astros organization in 2017 was unacceptable and I respect and accept the Commissioner's discipline for my past actions."

The Red Sox upgraded the status of Ron Roenicke, who had been their interim manager pending the outcome of the investigation.

"That interim tag is re-

moved," Chief Baseball Officer Chaim Bloom said. "Ron is now our manager."

The only member of the Red Sox organization who was penalized was replay system operator J.T. Watkins, who was suspended without pay for a year for violating the prohibition on in-game use of video to identify pitch signals. Watkins, who denied the allegations, was also prohibited from serving as the replay room operator through 2021.

Boston was also stripped of its second-round pick in this year's amateur draft, No 52 overall.

"To be clear, we're not taking any victory laps. A violation was uncovered and that was wrong and we're being punished for it," Red Sox president Sam Kennedy said on a conference call with reporters, while acknowledging relief that the monthslong investigation is over.

"We have to earn back trust, and we're prepared to do that," Kennedy said, adding that the team's owners apologized to their counterparts on a conference call that afternoon. "We recognize that as an organization."

Both Bloom and Kennedy dismissed suggestions that Cora could be welcomed back — especially if the coronavirus pandemic wipes out the entire 2020 season. Roenicke, who

was hired on the eve of spring training after a shotgun job search, is signed only for one year.

"Since we parted ways with Alex, we were clear that that was the result of his role with the Astros. That's still the case," Bloom said. "All the reasons that we parted ways with him then are still the case."

Manfred said in his report that Boston's misdeeds were limited to the regular season and not as pervasive as the Astros', who repeatedly used a video camera in the outfield to steal catchers' signs during their run to the 2017 championship and again the following season.

Manager AJ Hinch and general manager Jeff Luhnow were suspended through the 2020 postseason and fired by the Astros on Jan. 13. Houston was fined \$5 million, the maximum under the Major League Constitution, and lost its next two first- and second-round amateur draft selections.

"Unlike the Houston Astros' 2017 conduct, in which players communicated to the batter from the dugout area in real time the precise type of pitch about to be thrown, Watkins' conduct, by its very nature, was far more limited in scope and impact," Manfred wrote.

A 30-year-old from Tuscaloosa, Ala., Watkins is a 2012 graduate of the U.S. Military

Academy. The catcher was selected by Boston in the 10th round of that year's amateur draft and played in the Red Sox system until 2015. He declined comment, the Red Sox said.

Watkins compiled advance scouting information, and part of his job was to decode opposing pitchers' sequences ahead of series. Manfred called him a "key participant" in the 2017 Apple Watch incident, saying he relayed decoded signs from Boston's replay room to the dugout, at first with a runner and then with the watch to an athletic trainer.

MLB said it interviewed 65 people, including 34 past and present Boston players. Manfred concluded Cora did not know of Watkins' conduct but "did not effectively communicate to Red Sox players the sign-stealing rules."

In his statement, Cora said: "I am grateful for the Commissioner's thoughtful and thorough investigation relating to my conduct as Red Sox manager."

Red Sox players were promised immunity in MLB's investigation, but Manfred said even if players had been subject to discipline, none would have been punished.

Watkins denied any wrongdoing, telling MLB that any information he provided during games was obtained from advance scouting.

Bettman: NHL reviewing options for restarting play

Los Angeles Times

The NHL is leaning against staging regular-season or playoff games in nonleague arenas when it gets clearance to resume operations following its COVID-19-related pause and its options now include bringing teams to compete in two or four NHL cities.

Those sites would be chosen not necessarily on a division-related basis but as "anywhere that isn't a hot spot and has what we need both in terms of the arena and having practice facilities," Commissioner Gary Bettman said Wednesday.

Speaking to Sportsnet's Ron MacLean in

a video posted on Facebook, Bettman reiterated he remains hopeful the season can be completed, perhaps by going late into the summer and with a modified playoff format, and that next season could start late but would be played in its entirety. Asked the status of the NHL's back-to-play plan, Bettman replied, "Which one of the plans?"

"We're modeling. We're trying to see what our options will be under whatever scenario unfolds. ... The decision ultimately will be made by medical people and people who run governments at all different levels, so we're not going to try to do anything that flies in the face of what we're being told is

appropriate."

Those scenarios include possibly playing without fans in the building or using precautions to mitigate the spread of the virus. "I think there will be some social distancing for a while. I think there will be masks. There will be Purell," Bettman said. "There will be lots of things but that's something that ultimately the medical people and the government leaders will be the best able to tell us."

He said it's unlikely games will take place in neutral arenas in Grand Forks, N.D., or Manchester, N.H., a possibility that was floated the past few weeks.

Minor league players face lost season

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Mike Nutter is surrounded by questions everywhere he goes these days. So the longtime president of the Fort Wayne TinCaps is planning for each scenario he can imagine, one at a time.

What does minor league baseball look like in the COVID-19 age? What happens if his Class A team plays only half a season?

And the big one: What if there are no games at all?

While Major League Baseball tries to figure out a way to play this summer, the prospects for anything resembling a normal minor league season are increasingly bleak.

For minor league communities across the country from Albuquerque to Akron, looking forward to cheap hot dogs, fuzzy mascot hugs and Elvis

theme nights, it's a small slice of a depressing picture.

Attendance at minor league games last year was more than 41.5 million, a 2.6% increase over 2018 and the 15th straight year with more than 40 million fans.

Among the most popular teams in the minors is the Durham Bulls. But no club is immune from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. The Bulls recently placed more than half of their front-office staff on furlough.

"I'm still holding out hope, but we're also being realistic that the challenges we face over the next few months are pretty severe just because we are so spread out around the country," Bulls vice president Mike Birling said.

"And we kind of need a perfect storm in terms all of the cities of where Triple-A teams

are located would need to be OK, which that seems pretty unrealistic right now."

Nutter tackles each day with a focus on what's most important to his San Diego Padres affiliate in the Midwest League, knowing full well how many people are dealing with more dire issues in Indiana and beyond. But it's tough sometimes for a minor league lifer used to the grind of a pocket schedule.

"There's been times, early on, I was really struggling with it," Nutter said, "and shared that with some co-workers. I would say stress and anxiety for sure, started to probably broach on the depression. I don't use any of that lightly, but the point is, like, so much, overwhelming is the right thing."

The uncertainty also weighs on players. The loss of a minor league season would be a tough blow for prospects, especially

those just starting out in professional baseball. While major league organizations have more training possibilities than ever before, there is no substitute for live games.

MLB and its players' union are aiming to hold as many games as possible, offering a glimmer of possibility to some prospects who could be in the mix to help with a packed schedule.

"Hopefully they'll expand rosters or something like that for somebody like myself or whoever," said Zach Short, an infielder in the Cubs' organization who reached Triple-A Iowa last summer. "And then just go with it."

Short, from Kingston, N.Y., stayed in Arizona after training camp was cut short, sharing a house with fellow pros Ian Happ, Nico Hoerner and Dakota Mekkes from the Cubs.

Irish's McGraw retires

Associated Press

Two years removed from winning her second national championship, Muffet McGraw retired as coach of Notre Dame on Wednesday, a surprising decision to many of the countless players and coaches she has influenced on and off the court as a mentor and advocate for women.

The Hall of Fame coach has a resume that includes two national championships in 33 seasons at the school, a surprising decision to many of the countless players and coaches she has influenced on and off the court as a mentor and advocate for women. McGraw sent 20 players to the WNBA during her coaching career, including Skylar Diggins-Smith, Kayla McBride, Arike Ogunbowale and Ruth Riley.

Former Fighting Irish player and longtime assistant coach Niele Ivey will return to take over for McGraw. She was on the Memphis Grizzlies staff last year after 17 seasons at Notre Dame.

The 64-year-old McGraw became the 13th woman inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2017. She won 936 games, ranking sixth among Division I coaches, with 842 coming at Notre Dame.

"I am proud of what we have accomplished and I can turn the page to the next chapter in my life with no regrets, knowing that I gave it my best every day," said McGraw., a four-time winner of the AP women's basketball Coach of the Year.

McGraw said that she and Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick have had an annual conversation over the last few years about whether she would be back. She felt this, at last, was the right time to step away.

The 64-year-old coach said she didn't want to leave after the team lost in the title game in 2019 because she didn't want the next coach to step into a rebuilding situation with all five starters from that team leaving for the WNBA.

Despite no 1st-round pick, Bears expect to stock up

Associated Press

Chicago general manager Ryan Pace is all wired and ready to go for the draft. He thinks the Bears are, too.

Chicago comes in with no first-round picks for the second year in a row, having traded them to Oakland for star linebacker Khalil Mack prior to the 2018 season. But with two second-rounders at numbers 43 and 50 and seven selections in all, the Bears hope to add some key pieces as they try to shake off a disappointing season.

"It puts it on us as evaluators and scouts and coaches to maximize the draft picks we have," Pace said Tuesday. "Fortunately we have two twos and it is a deep draft, and we've just got to capitalize at that point."

The Bears went 8-8 and missed the playoffs for the eighth time in nine years, a huge letdown after winning the NFC North at 12-4 in 2018. While a defense that has ranked among

the league's best in recent years continued to perform at a high level, the offense was one of the least productive in the NFL.

Though the Bears have been busy, bringing in pass rusher Robert Quinn to take the load off Mack and former All-Pro tight end Jimmy Graham, they still have some big question marks.

It's not clear how much Graham has left after getting released by Green Bay. But he has a strong connection to Pace, who had a hand in drafting him while working in New Orleans' front office.

The Bears need help on the offensive line and more playmakers to go with receiver Allen Robinson. The wish list also includes a cornerback and safety to go with Kyle Fuller and Eddie Jackson.

And there's a different setup to the draft this year, with headquarters off limits because of the coronavirus pandemic.