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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Afghanistan frees 80 Taliban in peace bid

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Afghan government has started releasing the final 400 Taliban prisoners the insurgent group wants as a condition for launching long-delayed peace talks, officials said Friday.

Eighty inmates were freed Thursday in order “to speed up efforts for direct talks and a lasting, nationwide cease-fire,” the National Security Council said.

The U.S.-Taliban peace deal signed in February called for up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners to be released prior to beginning talks with Kabul, but the Taliban have insisted on nothing less than 5,000 specific inmates — a demand the Afghan government is accepting.

President Ashraf Ghani had reservations about releasing the final 400 prisoners, whom he described as hardened

criminals involved in deadly attacks and the drug trade. But a meeting of thousands of prominent Afghans organized by Ghani last weekend agreed that the remaining inmates should be set free to help end decades of bloodshed.

“All released Taliban prisoners vowed to return to peaceful life after their release and not to fight the Afghan people again,” the NSC’s tweeted statement said.

However, Ghani maintained that the freed prisoners could “pose a danger both to us and to (the U.S.) and to the world,” he said during a videoconference Thursday with the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York-based think tank.

Both the Taliban and Kabul say they are ready to begin peace talks in Qatar once all prisoners are released.

Washington has welcomed the decision to release the remaining inmates after expressing frustration over the slow pace of

the peace process.

In addition to starting intra-Afghan talks, the U.S.-Taliban accord stipulates that the Taliban must break ties with al-Qaida and prevent terrorist groups from attacking the U.S. and its allies, in order to allow for all international forces to pull out of Afghanistan. This could happen as soon as 14 months after the agreement was signed Feb. 29.

The U.S. has withdrawn about a third of its troops since the deal was reached, bringing current numbers down to about 8,500.

Last Saturday, Defense Secretary Mark Esper told Fox News that troop numbers in Afghanistan would drop further to “a number less than 5,000” by the end of November, following remarks by President Donald Trump that the total could be between 4,000 and 5,000.

Army eSports team to return to streaming after pause

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Army’s official video game team planned to return to online gaming Friday after pausing five weeks to consider its internal policies following accusations that having soldiers ban users was unconstitutional.

The Army’s eSports Team was to resume streaming on popular gaming platform Twitch after updating internal policies for moderating commenters who watch its soldiers play live, said Lt. Col. Kirk Duncan, the commander who oversees the team. The soldiers will operate under new guidelines that Army officials said ensure commenters are allowed to share their viewpoints. Rules violations that could result in commenters being banned will be clearly spelled out.

“Regardless of platform, we welcome everyone’s viewpoint,” Duncan said by telephone Thursday. “But we can’t allow personal attacks on soldiers, crude and inappropriate language, pornographic material, harassment and bullying of any kind. That’s not going to be tolerated on our Twitch stream or our other social media platforms.”

The Army and other U.S. military branches have built small teams of troops to play video games online in an effort to breach gaps in reaching young Americans, who increasingly spend more time online. Army officials and Twitch have said 80% of U.S. 17- to 24-year-olds — the military’s primary target for recruiting — regularly play or watch online gaming streams.

The eSports soldiers are not recruiters by trade, but they fall within the service’s massive recruiting enterprise and are charged with talking about Army life and asking users’ questions.

Among the steps the Army has taken to address freedom of speech concerns was to unban 300 Twitch accounts that had been disallowed from participating in its stream. Some of those bans were linked to posters who repeatedly asked soldiers what their “favorite U.S. war crime” was, and posted links to Wikipedia’s page on war crimes.

The Army considered that harassing behavior — referred to as trolling — and defended its soldiers’ decision to ban them. Those incidents last month captured the attention of First Amendment-focused lawyers. Soldiers, who are government officials, cannot simply stop people from ex-

pressing their viewpoints in a public forum, argued Katie Fallow, an attorney at Columbia University’s Knight First Amendment Institute.

In response, the Army has built a new approach to moderating comments on its streams, Duncan said. And it has added a process to allow those who are barred to appeal. The new process instructs moderators to initially ignore trolling comments that do not include offensive material like pornography or profanity. After repeated instances, moderators will issue temporary bans of 1 hour, initially followed by 48 hours. Duncan will have to sign off a decisions to permanently ban users.

The Army also issued new guidelines for users to access its stream. A simplified summary of those rules breaks it down into a simple list of “do” and “do not.” Do: “Be civil to everyone, be respectful of everyone [and] express your point of view.” Do not: “Use profanity, demeaning or obscene language; advocate unlawful violence; make personal attacks; harass or bully any person; spam; disclose any other person’s private information; advertise or offer to sell any product or service [or] post in a language other than English.”

Fallen troops from sunken AAV sent to Dover

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The flag-draped coffins carrying the remains of seven Marines and a sailor who died after a Marine Corps assault amphibious vehicle sank off the coast of Southern California have arrived at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware for burial preparations.

The Marine Corps said Tuesday that six pallbearers of Marines and sailors escorted each casket aboard a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego. The body of another Marine was transferred Aug. 5.

Nine troops were killed, including one Marine who died at the scene.

The caskets will be handed over to their families for final arrangements, the Marine Corps said in a press release.

The military is investigating what caused the amphibious assault vehicle to sink off San Clemente Island on July 30 after completing a routine training. The troops were heading back to a Navy ship from the island, which lies about 70 miles west of San Diego.

Seven Marines were rescued.

The troops who died ranged in age from 18 to 22.

The military identified those who died as Pfc. Bryan J. Baltierra, 18, of Corona, Calif.; Lance Cpl. Marco A. Barranco, 21,

of Montebello, Calif.; Pfc. Evan A. Bath, 19, of Oak Creek, Wisc.; Navy Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Christopher Gnem, 22, of Stockton, Calif.; Pfc. Jack-Ryan Ostrovsky, 20, of Bend, Ore.; Cpl. Wesley A. Rodd, 22, of Harris, Texas; Lance Cpl. Chase D. Sweetwood, 18, of Portland, Ore.; Cpl. Cesar A. Villanueva, 21, of Riverside, Calif., and Lance Cpl. Guillermo S. Perez, 19, of New Braunfels, Texas.

Gnem was posthumously advanced to the rank of petty officer third class and posthumously awarded his enlisted Fleet Marine Force Warfare Specialist qualification, having met the criteria set by the Navy for both before his death.

Pentagon offers military airwaves for 5G networks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon plans to free up a big chunk of its military airwaves in the U.S. for high-speed internet service, part of a broader push to get ahead of China in the deployment of 5G wireless technology.

The Trump administration announced Monday that it has identified radio spectrum used for radar defense systems that can be shared with commercial telecommunications providers without compromising national security.

5G is a new technical stan-

dard for the “fifth generation” of wireless networks that promises faster speeds; less lag, or “latency,” when connecting to the network; and the ability to connect many devices to the internet without bogging it down. 5G networks will ideally be better able to handle more users, lots of sensors and heavy traffic.

But a June report by the Congressional Research Service said there aren’t as many frequencies available for 5G technology in the U.S. compared to other countries because the American military holds so

much of the usable spectrum. Much of the investment in the U.S. has centered around the higher-frequency “millimeter wave” spectrum that offers fast data speeds but won’t likely work as well outside urban areas. That’s in contrast to China, which has been investing in building out networks using the less-expensive lower and middle bands.

White House officials said Monday that the Federal Communications Commission will be able to auction 100 megahertz of the military’s “mid-band” spectrum beginning in

December 2021 for use as soon as mid-2022. It has previously been used for shipboard and airborne radar systems.

“This band has the ideal characteristics for 5G deployment — to travel long distances to ensure that all Americans have access to the network, while delivering ultra-fast and high performance that will power technologies in the future,” said Michael Kratsios, the U.S. chief technology officer. He emphasized this was an unusually fast timeline for transferring federal spectrum to commercial use.

Defense seeks leniency for ‘Satanist’ soldier in plot

Associated Press

BELLE PLAINE, Kan. — A former Army infantry soldier described by prosecutors as a Satanist who hoped to overthrow the U.S. government endured a lifetime of victimization, isolation and trauma that led him to become involved with online extremist groups, his defense attorney argued Thursday in a motion seeking lenient punishment.

Jarrett William Smith, a private first class stationed at Fort Riley, Kan., and previously at Fort Bliss, Texas, was discharged from the military after the 24-year-old admitted in February that he provided information about explosives in September to an FBI undercover agent.

At his sentencing hearing Wednesday, Smith faces up to 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine following his guilty pleas to two counts of distributing information related to explosives.

Federal public defender Rich Federico urged the court in his sentencing memorandum Thursday to impose 15 months imprisonment followed by three years of supervised release. With no prior criminal history, the guideline range is 30-37 months in prison. Prosecutors have not yet filed their sentencing recommendation.

In a passionate court filing interspersed with photos of Smith’s life, his attorney recounted the near-daily barrage of bullying endured by a client who was born with the

fiery red hair and a cleft lip and palate. Federico described the repeated, painful reconstructive surgeries and the speech therapy Smith underwent for his speech impediment.

When he was a freshman, Smith learned he had been on a classmate’s “hit list” as the intended target of a school shooting and related plot to bomb his high school. The attempt was thwarted after the classmate shot at and missed a high school resource officer and was caught with multiple pipe bombs in his bag.

Smith learned later that the classmate had written in a journal: “People would thank me for killing him” next to Smith’s name.

Remote start set for 42% of DODEA students

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Half of the Defense Department schools in the United States will start remotely with at-home classes, a defense official said Thursday.

The Department of Defense Education Activity, or DODEA, which runs 160 schools around the world, will begin reopening schools in the United States next week, according to DODEA director Thomas Brady, who gave a briefing Thursday at the Pentagon.

In America, 25 of the 50 DODEA schools will start classes remotely, including those at Fort Benning, Ga., and

Fort Bragg, N.C.

“My priorities as the director of DODEA is to open schools in a safe environment for our children and our staff and our teachers,” he said.

Schools in locations designated Health Protection Condition Bravo or Alpha will be able to have classes in person while following DOD and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for cleaning and social distancing, Brady said.

Students attending schools with Health Protection Condition Charlie or Delta will have to start their classes at home. Students will join their class online and will be led through lessons by their teacher. The remote

learning environment is meant to be temporary until local conditions improve, he said.

Only two out of 64 schools will be opening remotely in Europe, and 19 out of 45 schools in the Pacific will be remote, according to DODEA.

If a student attending in person comes down with the coronavirus, the school will shut down for two to five days for custodians to clean. If the school must close for six or more days, the school will move to remote learning until it is safe to return, Brady said.

Flexibility and balance are part of DODEA’s plan for the school year, addressing issues on a case by case basis. Brady

would not say when a decision would be made to transition a school to fully remote learning if cases continue to force it to open and close.

About 10,028 students around the world have also enrolled for a semester of student-led virtual schooling, Brady said, after DODEA expanded it to cover kindergarten through high school. The school is usually geared toward high schoolers in remote locations without access to certain courses, such as advanced placement.

In total, about 25,568 students — 42% of DODEA’s enrollment — will be learning outside of a physical classroom when school starts this year.

Blame game over virus relief continues in DC

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With talks on emergency coronavirus aid having stalled out, both sides played the blame game Thursday rather than making any serious moves to try to break their stalemate.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pressed the case for funding for the U.S. Postal Service, rental assistance, food aid and rapid testing for the virus at her weekly press event, blasting Republicans as not giving a damn and declaring flatly that “people will die” if the delay grinds into September.

“Perhaps you mistook them for somebody who gave a damn,” Pelosi said when asked

if she should accept a smaller COVID-19 rescue package rather than endure weeks of possible gridlock. “That isn’t the case.”

A modest Trump administration overture on Wednesday to restart talks generated nothing but stepped-up carping and accusations of bad faith.

“It’s a stalemate,” White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow said Thursday.

Across a nearly empty Capitol, the Senate’s top Republican sought to cast the blame on Pelosi, whose ambitious demands have frustrated administration negotiators like White House chief of staff Mark Meadows.

“They are still rejecting any more re-

lief for anyone unless they get a flood of demands with no real relationship to COVID-19,” said Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

All indications are talks will not resume in full until Congress resumes in September.

The Democrats said they are waiting for the White House to put a new offer on the table: “We have again made clear to the Administration that we are willing to resume negotiations once they start to take this process seriously,” they said in a statement.

But Mnuchin shot back with his own statement, saying, “The Democrats have no interest in negotiating.”

Trump, Biden trade barbs over US response to virus

Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. — President Donald Trump is attacking Joe Biden for calling on governors to mandate that all Americans wear masks for the next three months, accusing the Democratic presidential candidate of politicizing an issue Trump himself has used for political gain in recent months.

Trump claimed Biden has been wrong about the coronavirus pandemic at every turn,

“ignoring the scientific evidence and putting left-wing politics before facts and evidence.” Trump went on to falsely say that Biden was advocating for the president to use executive power to institute a nationwide mask mandate and that Biden was in favor of “locking all Americans in their basements for months on end.”

“To Joe, I would say stop playing politics with the virus,” the Republican president said at a White House press briefing.

Biden did not call for an ex-

ecutive order, but he did at an earlier campaign event call for the institution of “a mask mandate nationwide, starting immediately.” Biden clarified, however, that it should be left up to the governors to make mask-wearing mandatory. He said nothing about keeping Americans indoors, but he has argued that economic reopenings in states have been rushed and without proper guidance from the federal government to keep Americans safe.

The back-and-forth marked a

new line of attack from Trump. Biden has made what he says is Trump’s mishandling of the pandemic a centerpiece of his attacks on the president.

While Trump has charged that if Biden were elected he would cause everything from a stock market crash to a surge of crime in the suburbs, he has largely avoided taking Biden on when it comes to the pandemic, choosing instead to deflect blame for the deaths and economic damage.

More churches dispute virus restrictions

Associated Press

Churches in California and Minnesota, backed by a conservative legal group, filed lawsuits this week against the governors of their states challenging restrictions imposed due to the coronavirus outbreak that they contend are violations of religious liberty.

They're the latest in a long series of legal challenges, many of them in California, pitting clerics and houses of worship who believe they should be exempt from certain restrictions on public gatherings against governors who insist the measures are needed to rein in the pandemic. Most of the suits have been rebuffed; some have succeeded.

In Minnesota, a lawsuit was filed Thursday in federal court challenging Gov. Tim Walz's executive orders requiring 6-foot social distancing and the wearing of face masks at worship services.

"Gov. Walz, a former teacher, gets an F in religious liberties," said Erick Kaardal, special counsel for the Thomas More Society. "Other states, including Texas, Illinois and Ohio, have excluded churches from COVID-19 mask mandates."

The Thomas More Society, which specializes in litigation on religious issues, filed a lawsuit Wednesday in California Superior Court against Gov. Gavin Newsom and other officials. It seeks to prevent the enforcement of "unconstitutional and onerous coronavirus pandemic regulations" against Grace Community Church in Los Angeles' Sun Valley neighborhood.

The pastor, John MacArthur, has been holding services in recent weeks attended by throngs of worshippers in defiance of state and county limits on gatherings.

Kansas

KANSAS CITY — As schools prepare to reopen, sports teams are offering an early glimpse into the challenges of protecting students from the

coronavirus.

Nine clusters have been tied to sports, with 64 cases as of last week, according to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

Wyandotte County announced Thursday that it is barring non-professional athletes from competing this fall in football, volleyball and soccer because of virus concerns. The order also bars marching band events. The district in Kansas City, Kan., called off its fall sports season earlier in the week.

Kentucky

FRANKFORT — Gov. Andy Beshear pointed Thursday to the spread of COVID-19 among children in urging school districts to show patience and hold off resuming in-person classes until late September.

The state's public health commissioner warned that Kentucky's coronavirus cases have spiked to record highs. And the latest daily statewide report included six virus cases among school-age children in Warren County and six in Hardin County, the governor told reporters. In the past three weeks, 86 school-age children have tested positive for the virus in Warren County, he said.

Without the testing, those children would have exposed others if schools were reopened, Beshear said. That should reinforce decisions by school districts to delay resuming in-person classes, he said.

Louisiana

BATON ROUGE — Louisiana will accept President Donald Trump's partial extension of federal unemployment aid amid the coronavirus pandemic, though without increasing the state's payout to jobless workers, Gov. John Bel Edwards said Thursday.

The state has submitted its paperwork to federal officials to provide an extra \$300 in weekly federal unemployment benefits to Louisiana's residents. That will boost the maximum unemployment benefits available in

Louisiana to \$547 a week, with the state and federal payments combined, once the federal dollars start flowing to the state.

It's unclear when those federal dollars will be available to states. But Edwards said the \$300 federal unemployment payments will be retroactive to Aug. 1.

Tennessee

NASHVILLE — The mayor of Tennessee's capital city says he plans to roll back restrictions that have shuttered bars, allowing them to reopen starting Monday with strict limits in place.

Nashville Mayor John Cooper said Thursday that bars in the popular tourist destination could soon reopen to a maximum of 25 people if social distancing is possible at those levels.

Restaurants and bars will have to close by 10:30 p.m. and enforcement teams will be patrolling businesses to see whether they are complying with the various requirements, Cooper said.

The mayor said Nashville's hospitality industry has been especially hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic, particularly small neighborhood bars and restaurants. Still, he said he hopes that a well-managed bar or restaurant will be better than a backyard party of 25 people, which he said "probably will have a more relaxed atmosphere."

Texas

AUSTIN — Texas reported fewer than 7,000 hospitalized coronavirus patients for the first time in six weeks Thursday, but that encouraging sign was clouded by questions over testing as schools reopen and college football teams push ahead with playing this fall.

Testing has dropped off in Texas, a trend seen across the U.S. as health experts worry that people who are not symptomatic are not bothering to seek tests because of long lines and the prospect of waiting

days to get results. Demand has curtailed to the point that in Austin and Dallas, health officials have expanded eligibility for testing, including those who are asymptomatic.

Utah

SALT LAKE CITY — While Utah's coronavirus case counts have declined, Gov. Gary Herbert urged people Thursday to keep wearing masks and practicing social distancing — especially as schools reopen.

Herbert said schools will need to be flexible as they navigate the challenges that come with reopening during a pandemic. He said there's no way to ensure a "zero risk" scenario, but said every school district has a plan in case an outbreak occurs.

Herbert also emphasized the importance for all teachers, students and staff to comply with the statewide mask mandate as schools reopen. He said the mask order allows people to wear face shields, but they should be worn with masks except for special circumstances such as when working with children who need to read lips.

Washington

SPOKANE — Gov. Jay Inslee visited Okanogan County on Thursday, site of the latest hot spot in a coronavirus pandemic that has hit the counties of central Washington state.

Lightly-populated Okanogan County now has the highest rate of COVID-19 cases in the state with nearly 900 confirmed cases among its 42,000 residents, Inslee said during a conference call with reporters.

The town of Brewster, which has about 2,300 residents, is a particular hot spot with 514 cases, Inslee said.

A pattern has emerged in the central Washington farm belt with the Tri-Cities, Yakima and the Wenatchee area all being hard-hit by the virus. All share huge farm economies that require thousands of farm workers living and working in close proximity, Inslee said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Twin beams of light won't shine during 9/11 tribute

NY NEW YORK — Twin beams of light representing the World Trade Center towers won't be beamed into the sky during this year's memorial of the 9/11 terror attacks in New York City because of concerns about the coronavirus pandemic, organizers of the annual ceremony said Thursday.

Michael Frazier, a spokesman for National September 11 Memorial & Museum, said organizers were concerned about the health risks to workers who would set up the display. The Memorial & Museum is planning an alternative display that will include spires and facades of buildings in Manhattan being illuminated in blue, he said.

Last month, organizers also cited the pandemic in canceling one of the most poignant parts of previous memorials — the personal messages spoken by families of victims. They said recorded name readings from the museum's "In Memoriam" exhibition will be used instead of having relatives read the names in person.

Bullet grazes head of nursing home resident

MN ST. PAUL — A bullet grazed the head of a nursing home resident in St. Paul when gunfire erupted outside the facility, according to police.

The 63-year-old resident was sitting outside of Galtier, a Villa Center in the Summit-University neighborhood, Tuesday night when numerous shots rang out, officials said.

The resident was taken to the hospital, treated and released, according to the nursing home, which said the man "was the victim of senseless random gunfire," the St. Paul Pioneer

Press reported. Officers canvassed the area and found nine shell casings from two different caliber handguns.

Gun dealers warned about phishing scams

MD PIKESVILLE — Authorities in Maryland have issued an advisory about an apparent email phishing scam targeting firearms dealers in the state.

It was issued after the Maryland State Police Licensing Division was notified Tuesday about emails received by at least two firearms dealers, Maryland State Police said in a news release.

The emails, which contain an attachment that has a computer virus, had addresses that made them look like they were sent from employees of the licensing division, the release said.

Inspection for tunnel that cost lives is set

WV GAULEY BRIDGE — A West Virginia tunnel where hundreds of construction workers died from silica-choked passageways is set to undergo its first inspection in more than 80 years, its owner said.

The 3.1 mile Hawks Nest Tunnel has diverted water from the New River to power a hydroelectric plant since the 1930s. Brookfield Renewable, owner of Hawks Nest Dam, said the inspection will determine whether repairs are needed.

To accommodate the inspection, a nearby reservoir will be lowered by 25 feet starting Sept. 8, the Charleston Gazette-Mail reported.

During the tunnel's construction, thousands of workers were exposed to lethal concentrations of silica dust while drilling through the sandstone of Gauley Mountain.

Officer rescues man from oncoming train

CA LODI — A police officer in California pulled a man from a wheelchair that was stuck on railroad tracks seconds before the train came past, in a dramatic rescue caught on the officer's body camera.

Officer Erika Urrea of the Lodi Police Department was patrolling Wednesday near the tracks when she saw the man and the railroad crossing arms starting to come down, the police department said in a statement.

The video shows Urrea rush from her patrol car and try to push the man and the wheelchair out of the way as the oncoming locomotive sounds its horn. Unable to move the wheelchair, Urrea is seen dragging the man from it seconds before the train barrels through, striking the wheelchair and the man's leg, the department said.

The 66-year-old man was taken to a hospital to be treated for a leg injury. He was not identified.

2 men rescued from lake, 1 later dies

NH GILFORD — Two men who had fallen into Lake Winnepesaukee were rescued after they were found clinging to a dock, but one later died, the New Hampshire State Police Marine Patrol said.

The patrol in Gilford was alerted to screams for help Wednesday. They responded to the Gilford Town Docks, where they found the men, who had fallen into the lake between the dock and their drifting boat. They were struggling to remain on the surface.

Both were removed from the water and became unresponsive moments later.

Both men were treated at

the scene and taken to Lakes Region General Hospital in Laconia. One of them died at the hospital.

Woman receives ID with photo of empty chair

TN CENTERVILLE — Driver's license photos aren't always the best, but when a Tennessee woman received her new ID the picture was perfect — for a furniture store.

Jade Dodd renewed her license online and received it last week, but to her surprise, the photo wasn't a picture of her. It showed an empty chair.

"The lady at the DMV did not really believe me when I was like 'Hey, I need my license fixed,'" Dodd said. "Then, she looked it up in the system and goes, 'Oh, I need my manager for this.'"

The chair ended up being the focal point of the license because it was the last photo taken and saved to Dodd's file, the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security told WKRN-TV. The photo was taken accidentally, the department said. Dodd said she wasn't upset by the mistake.

Officials investigate fish kill on river

MI ESCANABA — Michigan officials are investigating a fish kill that affected a dozen species on the middle branch of the Escanaba River in the Upper Peninsula.

The die-off was reported Aug. 9 on the 52-mile-long river, which is popular with anglers, officials said Wednesday. It happened near Gladstone, downstream of Verso Corp.'s Escanaba Paper Mill, which the previous week had reported the rupture of a pipe at its wastewater treatment plant.

From wire reports

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NBA down to play-in matchup, playoffs

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — The last day of an NBA regular season typically sees just about every team in action, with plenty of drama surrounding down-to-the-wire playoff races and statistical titles on the line.

Typical doesn't seem to exist in 2020.

The NBA's regular season ends — sort of — Friday with just four games, none with any bearing on matchups for the first round of the playoffs that begin next week. The biggest items to be settled Friday are which teams will wear home uniforms to start the Miami-Indiana and Oklahoma City-Houston series.

"Everybody's excited about what's at stake," Oklahoma City guard Chris Paul said. "We'll try to have as much of a home-court feel as possible, as

far as the music and things like that, but when you get down to it I think everybody's trying to make sure they're going into the playoffs as healthy as possible."

Playoffs start Monday.

All the matchups are locked in: Milwaukee-Orlando, Toronto-Brooklyn, Boston-Philadelphia and Heat-Pacers in the East, with the Los Angeles Clippers-Dallas, Denver-Utah and Thunder-Rockets set to face off in the Western Conference. The West No. 1-seeded Los Angeles Lakers meet the winner of the play-in series beginning Saturday.

"It's certainly a one-of-a-kind season," Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle said. "And I think it's safe to say we'll never see a season exactly like this again."

Stat champions: Houston's James Harden will be the NBA's scoring champion, the

Lakers' LeBron James is the assist champion, Cleveland's Andre Drummond won the rebounding title, Philadelphia's Ben Simmons took the steals crown and Portland's Hassan Whiteside won the blocks title for the second time.

Best season: Win or lose Friday, the Toronto Raptors are assured of their best regular season in franchise history.

If Toronto drops its finale to Denver, the Raptors will finish 52-20, a .722 winning percentage, topping the .720 (59-23) mark of the 2017-18 Raptors. Last year's championship-winning team was 58-24 (.707).

Giannis' year: Likely back-to-back MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks will lead the league in points in the paint for the third straight season. Just like last season, he averaged 17.5 points per game from inside the lane.

Since the league started charting that officially 25 years ago, the only other player to lead the league in paint points per game in three consecutive years is Shaquille O'Neal — who led that category for 10 straight years.

Bulls fire Boylen: The Chicago Bulls fired coach Jim Boylen on Friday, the new front office beginning its remake of a team that missed the playoffs again.

The Bulls were 22-43 and were one of the eight teams that didn't qualify for the NBA's restart. That meant they wouldn't make the postseason for the fourth time in five years.

Boylen finished 39-84 as Bulls coach. He joined the team as associate head coach in 2015, becoming head coach on Dec. 3, 2018.

NBA roundup

Suns go unbeaten during restart, still miss postseason

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — The Phoenix Suns did all they could in the bubble. It still wasn't enough.

Devin Booker scored 27 points and Phoenix beat the Dallas Mavericks 128-102 on Thursday to finish as the only team to win all eight seeding games. That kept the Suns alive for a few hours, but they ended up on the outside looking in when Portland beat Brooklyn by a point.

Dario Saric scored 16 points and Cameron Payne and Cameron Johnson each added 15 for the Suns.

"I'm just really grateful for the effort and the growth of this team," Suns coach Monty Williams said.

The Suns needed either Memphis or Portland to lose to get into the play-in series for the No. 8 seed in the West. Memphis won its game against

Milwaukee in the same time slot as Phoenix.

Booker has been a breakout star in the bubble. The guard has averaged 30.5 points while shooting 50% from the field. He was more concerned about team goals after the game.

"We had one objective — to get better — and we did that," Booker said. "I think we approached this with the right mindset from the beginning, from practices, from training camp in Phoenix, from the first two weeks we got down here, everybody was locked in on all cylinders."

Trail Blazers 134, Nets 133: Damian Lillard sent his team into the NBA's first play-in series with 42 more points and a crucial steal, helping Portland escape with a victory over Brooklyn.

Grizzlies 119, Bucks 106: Jonas Valanciunas and Ja Morant had triple-doubles and Memphis kept its season alive

with a victory over Milwaukee, which was missing star forward Giannis Antetokounmpo after he was suspended for head-butting an opponent.

Jazz 118, Spurs 112: Rayjon Tucker scored 18 points and Utah won after San Antonio was eliminated from playoff contention, ending its streak of postseason appearances at 22 years.

Kings 136, Lakers 122: Buddy Hield scored 28 points, including a three-pointer that capped his team's streak of 11 consecutive baskets in the third period, and Sacramento beat Los Angeles.

Bogdan Bogdanovic had 27 points as the Kings won for only the third time in the NBA restart. The Kings made 21 3-pointers, with Hield going 8 of 14.

The Lakers had their focus on the playoffs. Most Lakers starters were held out, but LeBron James had 17 points in 15 min-

utes, all in the first half. Dion Waiters led the Lakers with 19 points. Markieff Morris had 14.

Wizards 96, Celtics 90: Thomas Bryant had 26 points and nine rebounds to help Washington beat Boston for its lone win in the restart.

Troy Brown Jr. added 17 points and eight rebounds for the Wizards.

The Celtics, who already were locked into a playoff matchup with the Philadelphia 76ers, rested their starters. Rookie Javonte Green took advantage and scored a season-high 23 points for Boston.

Magic 133, Pelicans 127: Nikola Vucevic scored 23 points on 10-for-11 shooting from the floor and Orlando tuned up for the postseason by beating New Orleans to snap a five-game skid.

Both teams were missing many of their top players in a regular-season finale that carried no playoff implications.

NCAA cancels championships for fall sports

Associated Press

The NCAA called off fall championship events — a move Thursday that does not affect major college football — because not enough schools will be competing in sports such as men's and women's soccer and women's volleyball during the first semester.

NCAA President Mark Emmert made the announcement in a video posted on Twitter, but it has been clear this was coming as conferences canceled fall sports seasons because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't and can't turn toward winter and spring and say, 'How can we create a legitimate championship for those students?'" Emmert said. "There are ways to do this. I am completely confident we can figure this out."

Emmert also said NCAA officials have begun work on contingencies for the NCAA basketball tournaments, possibly moving dates and looking into creating bubbles in which the teams can compete.

He said the NCAA would prioritize staging championships in winter and spring sports because those — including the lucrative men's basketball tournament — were canceled when COVID-19 first spiked across the United States in March.

Moving fall sports to the spring still must go through the Division I Council, which is comprised of representatives of all 32 conferences, and be approved by the DI Board of Directors.

Championship events in all sports could be modified going forward to deal with COVID-19, Emmert said. That is likely to include fewer teams participating at fewer and predetermined sites.

The spring calendar already features more sports than the fall so cramming still more in, including FCS football, will create logistical challenges.

Last week the NCAA Board of Governors said championship events in a sport would be canceled if fewer than 50% of the teams competing in that sport played a regular season.

Divisions II and III almost immediately followed by canceling their fall championships. Division I — which is comprised of 357 schools — held on, but as conference after conference canceled their fall seasons the tipping point came.

Fall sports also include field hockey, cross country and water polo. Schools in conferences that have not yet canceled their fall seasons could conceivably try to stage regular-season competition over the next few months.

Legacies on line at UFC 252

Associated Press

The hype for the third heavyweight fight in the Stipe Miocic-Daniel Cormier trilogy comes with a bit of a bombastic claim — the winner is not only the champion, but can stake his reputation as the greatest in the history of the division.

"They're two of the best ever," UFC President Dana White said. "Saturday you find out who's the best heavyweight of all time. It doesn't get any better than this."

It is billed as the super fight to end all super fights — well, until the next one — with good reason. The heavyweights slugged it out and traded wins in two crazy fights that had the sport frothing for a third. They'll settle the score Saturday when Miocic defends the championship against Cormier in the main event of UFC 252 at the UFC APEX complex in Las Vegas.

"Unfinished business," Miocic said.

Let others debate where the two truly stand on the list of greats. But what is undisputed is that both have built their résumés to make the short list of contenders for UFC's No. 1 big man.

The 37-year-old Miocic is a two-time champion and started his second reign when he defeated Cormier last August in the rematch at UFC 241. Miocic (19-3) lost the first two rounds on every judge's score-

card until he stopped Cormier with a barrage of punches in the fourth.

Miocic reigned as the UFC's heavyweight champion for 26 months, and he defended his belt a UFC-record three consecutive times before Cormier dethroned him in July 2018 with a first-round stoppage victory. Despite Cormier's decisive victory, Miocic campaigned for a rematch and eventually received it when Cormier said he "deserved it."

The 41-year-old Cormier (22-2, 1 NC) is a former two-division champion and has already cemented his status as one of the greatest pound-for-pound fighters in UFC history. The amiable Cormier, who has found his niche as a successful broadcaster, has vowed to retire after Saturday and end a career in which 10 of his last 11 fights were fought with a title on the line.

Cormier — who never got his desired big-money bout with Brock Lesnar — compared himself this week to Michael Jordan (Chicago Bulls edition) or Peyton Manning as the kind of star athlete who rides off into retirement sunset with a championship.

"It would put me in that type of sphere with some of the greatest athletes that have ever competed across any sport," Cormier said. "When I win on Saturday, I will retire in that way."

Senators lay out plan for college athletes bill of rights

Associated Press

A group of senators led by Cory Booker of New Jersey and Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut on Thursday released a plan for reforming college sports with an athletes bill of rights.

The legislative plan calls for college athletes to have the ability to earn money for their names, images and likenesses with "minimal restrictions," and much more.

The senators also want to ensure for the athletes long-term medical coverage and treatment, enforceable medical standards, academic freedom and revenue sharing agreements.

Last month, NCAA President Mark Emmert appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee for a hearing about name, image and likeness. Booker and Blumenthal questioned Emmert about athlete welfare and said then their plan for a bill of rights was in the works.

Booker and Blumenthal were joined in

a statement by seven other senators, including Democrats Chris Murphy of Connecticut, a frequent NCAA critic, and vice presidential selection Kamala Harris of California.

"As a former college athlete, this issue is personal to me," said Booker, who played football at Stanford. "The NCAA has failed generations of young men and women even when it comes to their most basic responsibility — keeping the athletes under their charge healthy and safe. The time has come for change."

The NCAA is in the process of changing its rules to permit athletes to earn money off their names, images and likenesses for things like endorsements and appearances.

The association has asked for help from Congress to relieve pressure from state lawmakers. California, Florida and Colorado have already passed bills. Florida's would take effect in 2021.

NHL roundup

Smith's OT goal lifts Vegas over Chicago

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Even though Reilly Smith called it a lucky bounce, a whole lot more than luck is working right now for the Vegas Golden Knights.

Smith scored in overtime, Robin Lehner made 22 saves and the Golden Knights beat the Chicago Blackhawks 4-3 on Thursday to take a 2-0 lead in the first-round series. Vegas has won all five of its games since the NHL resumed.

"We're a pretty resilient group," said Smith, who has three goals in the series. "We need to bring that for all 60 minutes ... There's still a lot of things we need to clean up, but we'll take the win and try to get

a little bit better tomorrow."

Blackhawks goaltender Corey Crawford stopped 35 of the 39 shots he faced, including 16 in the third period alone.

The Western Conference's top-seeded Golden Knights are looking for their first playoff series victory since 2018. They reached the Stanley Cup Final that year, then lost to San Jose in seven games in the first round last year.

This was already the third game in the first round to go to overtime. Tampa Bay beat Columbus in the fifth overtime Tuesday, and Boston beat Carolina in double OT Wednesday. Smith's goal came 7:13 into the first OT.

"He's come back from the pause and has got a lot of con-

fidence, a lot of energy; he's healthy," coach Peter DeBoer said about Smith. "He's really driving a lot of plays for us and important plays."

Blue Jackets 3, Lightning 1: At Toronto, two days after making an NHL-record 85 saves in a five-overtime loss, Joonas Korpisalo stopped 36 more shots to help Columbus beat Tampa Bay and even the series at a game apiece.

Ryan Murray and Oliver Bjorkstrand scored in the first period for Columbus, both goals set up by Pierre-Luc Dubois. Alexander Wennberg added another in the third.

Hurricanes 3, Bruins 2: At Toronto, Dougie Hamilton slapped in the go-ahead goal with 11:30 left in the third pe-

riod, and No. 2 goalie James Reimer stopped 33 shots to lead Carolina to a victory over Boston and tie their playoff series at one game apiece.

One day after Boston won the delayed, double-overtime opener, the Hurricanes also got goals from Teuvo Teravainen and Andrei Svechnikov to beat the Presidents' Trophy winners.

Stars 5, Flames 4: At Edmonton, Alberta, Jamie Oleksiak scored with 40 seconds left in regulation as Dallas beat Calgary after blowing a two-goal lead in the third period.

The Stars caught Calgary on a line change, and Oleksiak took a pass from Corey Perry and scored, evening their best-of-seven series at a game each.

MLB roundup

Betts' three home runs help Dodgers hammer Padres

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Mookie Betts hit three home runs in a game for the sixth time in his career, matching a major league record, and the Los Angeles Dodgers launched six long balls in all Thursday night during an 11-2 rout of the San Diego Padres.

Betts tied a mark shared by Sammy Sosa and Hall of Famer Johnny Mize. The 2018 AL MVP went 4-for-4 with five RBIs and was hit by a pitch in the leadoff spot, where manager Dave Roberts has been reluctant to lock him in.

Corey Seager, AJ Pollock and Austin Barnes also homered for the Dodgers. Seager returned after missing five games because of lower back discomfort. Barnes and Betts went back-to-back.

Cubs 4, Brewers 2: Yu Darvish took a no-hitter into the seventh inning in his third straight dominant start, and

major league-leading Chicago defeated visiting Milwaukee.

Darvish (3-1) allowed just one hit — Justin Smoak's solo homer with one out in the seventh inning on his 98th pitch — before Casey Sadler relieved to start the eighth. The 33-year-old right-hander from Japan struck out 11 and threw 104 pitches.

Before Smoak's drive, Darvish allowed only three base runners. He walked Ben Gamel in the second and Orlando Arcia in the fifth, and hit Christian Yelich with a low pitch in the first.

Mets 8, Nationals 2: Tomas Nido had his first two-homer game as a professional, hitting a two-run shot in the fourth inning and a grand slam in the fifth to lead host New York over Washington for a split of the four-game series.

Nido is just the fifth catcher in Mets history to hit at least two homers and collect at least six RBIs in a game.

Dominic Smith homered in the second, and Pete Alonso had an RBI single in the eighth for the Mets, whose second straight win may have been a costly one. Left fielder Jeff McNeil was carted off after crashing into the wall while robbing Asdrubal Cabrera of a two-run extra-base hit to end the first inning.

Pirates 9, Reds 6: Adam Frazier hit the first of three homers off Anthony DeSclafani, and Pittsburgh returned from a three-day layoff with a flourish against host Cincinnati.

Pittsburgh's three-game series in St. Louis was called off because of the Cardinals' COVID-19 outbreak.

The Pirates showed no rust against a pitcher they've dominated. Frazier connected on DeSclafani's second pitch, and the rout was on. DeSclafani (1-1) hasn't beaten the Pirates since June 17, 2018, at PNC Park. Since then, he's 0-5 in seven starts — all Pirates

wins.

Rays 17, Red Sox 8: Hunter Renfroe belted two homers and drove in three runs, Mike Zunino hit a three-run shot over the Green Monster and out of Fenway Park, and visiting Tampa Bay completed a four-game series sweep of Boston.

The Rays have won six straight and have beaten the Red Sox 12 of the last 14 times the teams met.

Brandon Lowe added a solo homer during a five-run third inning that chased starter Kyle Hart (0-1), who was making his major league debut.

Orioles 11, Phillies 4: Pedro Severino and Rio Ruiz homered to back Thomas Eshelman, and visiting Baltimore swept three games from Philadelphia.

The Orioles, who lost 108 games last season, are off to a 10-7 start.

Eshelman (1-0) allowed two runs and four hits in five innings to earn his second career win.