

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Prime minister: Iraq still needs US help

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraq's prime minister said Monday ahead of a much anticipated trip to Washington that his country still needs U.S. assistance to counter the threat posed by Islamic State and that his administration is committed to introducing security sector reforms as rogue militia groups stage near-daily attacks against the seat of his government.

"In the end, we will still need cooperation and assistance at levels that might require direct and military support, and support on the ground," Mustafa al-Kadhimi said, but the levels depend on the changing nature of the threats posed by terrorist

groups.

Al-Kadhimi is slated to meet with President Donald Trump in Washington this week to conclude a strategic dialogue launched in June to reconfigure U.S.-Iraq ties.

In an exclusive interview Monday with The Associated Press, he said Iraqi forces are capable of fighting ISIS without the need for foreign combat troops on the ground. But, he said, the next stage of cooperation with the U.S. would require continued training and weapons support.

Sworn in as premier in May in the wake of historic mass anti-government protests, al-Kadhimi's administration inherited myriad crises. State

coffers in the crude-dependent country were slashed following a severe drop in oil prices, adding to the woes of an economy already struggling with the aftershocks of the global coronavirus pandemic.

Despite this, his administration set a lofty agenda including economic reform, battling corruption, avenging protesters and bringing arms under the authority of the state.

The latter has pitted his government against rogue Iran-backed militia groups.

The recent assassination of prominent Iraqi commentator Hisham al-Hashimi and the kidnapping of German art curator Hella Mewis have led many to question the limits of

his leadership.

But al-Kadhimi said these were perpetrated by those with an interest in profiting from chaos.

"These criminal acts are the result of many years of conflict," he said, blaming the poor policies and improper management of his predecessors which has undermined the authority of the state.

"We are committed to reforming the security establishment and enhancing its ability to deal with these kinds of challenges and holding accountable those who fail to protect civilians and put an end to these outlawed groups," he said.

Afghans halt prisoner release, Taliban talks delayed

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Afghan government said Monday it would not release the last 400 Taliban prisoners it is holding until the insurgents free more captured soldiers, defying a traditional council held last week and further delaying intra-Afghan talks sought by the United States.

The talks, which were laid out in a peace deal signed between the United States and the Taliban in February, were expected to begin on Thursday but are now postponed indefinitely.

The ruling by the traditional council, or jirga, which called for the immediate release of the Taliban prisoners, had raised hopes of a breakthrough in the process.

The U.S.-Taliban peace deal called on the Taliban to free 1,000 government and military personnel and for the government to free 5,000 Taliban pris-

oners. The prisoner releases were to be a goodwill gesture ahead of intra-Afghan negotiations aimed at devising a post-war roadmap.

"We are going to release them. That's not an issue. But it has to be two-way," government spokesman Sediq Sediqqi told The Associated Press. "If we take this bold step, releasing all these guys, all these bad people, why are the Taliban not releasing our captives, which is a very small number?"

Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban's political spokesman, said the group had fulfilled its obligations and was not aware of any other security personnel in its custody who were to be released.

"We have released 1,000 prisoners that we had promised to release," Shaheen said. The Taliban have said they are ready to open talks with the government within one week of the release of the last Taliban prisoners.

The deal with the Taliban is aimed at ending the U.S. war in Afghanistan that began shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks. U.S. troops have already begun leaving, and by November, fewer than 5,000 troops are expected to still be in the country. That's down from nearly 13,000 when the agreement was signed Feb. 29.

Under the agreement, the withdrawal of U.S. troops does not hinge on the success of intra-Afghan talks but on commitments made by the Taliban to combat terrorist groups and ensure Afghanistan is not used as a staging ground for attacks on the U.S. and its allies.

Since signing the agreement, the Taliban have held to a promise not to attack U.S. and NATO troops, but have carried out regular attacks on Afghan security forces.

The government wants an immediate cease-fire, while the Taliban have said the terms should be agreed in the

negotiations.

Seddiqi said Australia and France have also objected to releasing some of the last Taliban prisoners because they were involved in attacks on their forces. He said the government wants to address their concerns.

But President Ashraf Ghani set a precedent when he reached a peace deal with U.S.-declared terrorist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in 2016. Hekmatyar's group was blamed for an attack on a supermarket in the capital that killed civilians as well as an attack in 2014 that killed two U.S. contractors. The French also argued against his delisting as a terrorist because of an attack his group staged against French forces in Afghanistan in 2008 that killed 10 French soldiers.

Both the Taliban and the government have accused each other of creating hurdles in the peace process.

Coalition denies strike on Syrian troops

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

A convoy of U.S.-led coalition and partner forces returned fire after coming under attack near a Syrian military checkpoint in the country's north-east, the alliance said, but it denied reports of an airstrike.

A routine anti-Islamic State patrol, which included Syrian Democratic Forces, had received "safe passage from pro-regime forces" before coming under small-arms fire near the checkpoint, which was near Tal al-Zahab village in north-eastern Hasakeh province, the coalition said in a statement.

"Coalition troops returned fire in self-defense," the statement said. "The coalition did not conduct an airstrike. No co-

alition casualties occurred."

Citing local sources, the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said earlier that Syrian regime forces blocked a U.S. military column at the checkpoint south of Qamishli, leading to an "altercation between both sides."

Video posted on Twitter showed an apparent exchange of small-arms fire and grenades. At least one helicopter was visible flying nearby in the video, posted by journalist Mohammad Hassan.

One soldier was killed and two were injured in the incident, the state-owned Syrian Arab News Agency reported, citing an unnamed Syrian military source who said the fighting began around 9:45 a.m.

when a U.S. patrol tried to enter the area. "Warplanes" struck about 30 minutes later, causing the casualties, the source was reported as saying.

U.S. forces routinely patrol the area, where several hundred Americans, mostly special operations troops, are deployed to small bases to train, advise and assist Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces fighting ISIS.

Syrian military forces loyal to President Bashar Assad, known as the Syrian Arab Army, also patrol the area along with their Russian backers in the ongoing civil war that began in 2011.

U.S. forces have near daily contact with Russian forces there, officials have said, though they have said tensions are usu-

ally settled nonviolently.

Videos posted online in recent months have shown instances of one side's convoys escorting the others, or vehicles from Russian and American convoys vying for position on roadways. In one instance last February, American troops returned fire after Assad regime loyalists attacked near Qamishli, resulting in one Syrian death.

Last month, Brett McGurk, the former U.S. special envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, posted a video to Twitter showing Russian vehicles converging on a U.S. patrol. Such confrontations occur daily since the U.S. withdrew in October from territory near Syria's border with Turkey ahead of a Turkish incursion, McGurk said.

DODEA schools ready for virus learning experience

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — From mandatory face masks to one-way traffic in crowded hallways, the coronavirus has ensured a vastly different back-to-school experience for thousands of children of U.S. military and government workers in Europe when classes begin Monday.

There will be no games of tag at recess at some schools, fewer elective choices at others, maybe a "grab-n-go" lunch in the classroom instead of the cafeteria and no singing in music class, unless it's outside and face coverings are worn.

In a series of virtual town hall meetings held during the past week, Department of Defense Education Activity-Europe school leaders discussed plans for safely returning to in-person learning for the first time since March, when school buildings abruptly closed as the coronavirus pandemic took hold.

The most noticeable change in schools will be a requirement for students and staff members to wear cloth face coverings when they're unable to maintain a safe distance from others. Safety guidelines to reduce the spread of the coronavirus in schools, drawn up by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, say people should stay at least six feet apart if in-person events are held.

Face coverings will be mandatory on school buses, at the bus stop and when students are in transit or moving throughout the school, officials said during the virtual town hall meetings.

In classrooms, recommendations for wearing masks or not will depend on class size and space, officials said.

Schools have said they'll provide two cloth face-coverings to staff members and students, but "they are absolutely free to wear whatever mask they have at home," said Vogelweh Elementary School principal David Lee.

Plan to oust extremists from Philippines failed

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

Islamic extremists remain a stubborn problem in the Philippines despite a multiyear U.S. military effort to combat the threat, according to a recent report to Congress.

Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, an overseas contingency operation led by U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, has been ongoing since Sept. 1, 2017. Three years later, there are still 300-500 Islamic State-affiliated fighters in the Southeast Asian nation, according to the latest assessment by Defense Department acting inspector general Sean O'Donnell.

"There has been little change in the capabilities, size, financing and operations of [the Islamic State in East Asia]," O'Donnell wrote in the most recent report on the operation, which covers April 1 through June 30.

The failure to make progress

eliminating the militant group comes despite the U.S. budgeting \$72.3 million for the operation in the current fiscal year, according to the report. It cost more than \$100 million in each of the previous two years, Voice of America reported Aug. 12.

Extremists continue to carry out sporadic, mostly small-scale attacks, and the Philippines military, with intelligence and air support from the U.S., continues counterterrorism operations to keep Islamic State affiliates from spreading, O'Donnell wrote.

"In general, efforts to reduce extremism in the Philippines do not appear to have made a substantial difference since the launch of [Operation Pacific Eagle]," he wrote.

Islamic extremists have sought to capitalize on the Philippine government's deployment of military assets to assist with the response to the coronavirus pandemic, the report states.

Airlines struggle as flyers unsure on safety

Associated Press

In a bid to survive, airlines are desperately trying to convince a wary public that measures like mandatory face masks and hospital-grade air filters make sitting in a plane safer than many other indoor settings during the coronavirus pandemic.

It isn't working.

Surveys indicate that instead of growing comfortable with air travel, more people are becoming skeptical about it. In the United States, airline bookings have stalled in the past month after slowly rising — a reaction to a new surge of reported virus infections.

Globally, air travel is down more than 85% from a year ago, according to industry figures.

The implications for the airline industry are grave. Several leading carriers already have filed for bankruptcy protection, and if the hoped-for recovery is delayed much longer, the list will grow.

The four largest U.S. airlines lost a combined \$10 billion from April through June. Their CEOs say they will survive, but they have lowered their expectations for a rebound.

"We were all hoping that by the fall the virus might run its course," said Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly. "Obviously, that has proven to be

dead wrong."

When Consumer Reports surveyed more than 1,000 people in June about their comfort with various activities during the pandemic, 70% said flying was very or somewhat unsafe. They rated going to a hospital emergency room or standing in line to vote as safer.

In a survey commissioned by an airline trade group, the biggest concern of travelers was the possibility of sitting next to an infected person.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says sitting within 6 feet of other passengers, often for hours, may increase the risk of getting COVID-19. But CDC also

notes that most viruses and other germs don't spread easily on flights because of how air circulates on planes.

Standard & Poor's said this week that the industry's prospects have gone "from bad to worse," with global air traffic dropping by up to 70% this year. In May, S&P said a 55% drop was a worst-case scenario.

An airline trade group, the International Air Transport Association, predicts carriers will lose \$84 billion this year, making it the worst year in the industry's history. The group says traffic won't fully recover until 2024.

CDC: Infections are rising in kids

The Washington Post

The number and rate of coronavirus cases in children have risen since the pandemic took hold in the spring, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in recently updated guidance, underscoring the risk for young people and their families as the new school year begins.

According to the CDC, the infection rate in children 17 and under increased "steadily" from March to July. While the virus is far more prevalent and severe among adults, the true incidence of infection in American children remains unknown because of a lack of widespread testing, the agency said.

The Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use authorization Saturday for a saliva-based coronavirus test, developed by Yale University researchers, that aims to reduce turnaround times in commercial laboratories.

The United States continues to report more than 1,000 coronavirus-related deaths every day. Health officials reported 1,220 new deaths and 57,120 new infections Saturday — roughly even with the 1,117 deaths and 56,555 cases announced on the same day the previous week.

School closures and other public health measures may have contributed to initially low rates of coronavirus infections in children early in the pandemic, according to the CDC.

Returning vacationers face new constraints as cases spike

Associated Press

PARIS — Countries that had seen a summer respite from coronavirus outbreaks tracked swiftly rising numbers of new confirmed cases Monday, prompting fears among government leaders and health officials that months of hard-won progress would be lost in just days as vacationers return home.

New restrictions on leisure activities accompanied the final weeks of summer break in Europe. Hours-long traffic jams formed at the Croatia-Slovenia border over the weekend as Austrians trying to beat a midnight quarantine deadline rushed home from a favored coastal vacation spot.

With one goal in mind, the Italian government closed discos, required masks from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. anywhere people might gather and began testing all arriving travelers from Spain, Greece, Malta and Croatia.

"Our priority must be the reopening of schools in September in full safety," Italian Health Minister Roberto Speranza said. Italy's schools have been closed nationwide since early March.

France's two largest cities, Paris and Marseille, widened the areas where masks are required, and the French government sent riot police to the Marseille region to enforce the requirement.

The country's labor minister is planning negotiations for Tuesday on making masks mandatory in all workplaces and other employee safety measures. French government

studies indicated that at least a quarter of new virus clusters that emerged from May 9 to Aug. 11 were linked to workplaces.

In Greece, health officials attributed many new infections to wedding receptions and people ignoring social distancing and other public health protective measures while on vacation. Authorities began carrying out spot checks on ferry passengers returning to the mainland from the Greek islands amid growing concern of vacationers transporting the virus back to cities.

Despite the rise in cases, officials say schools will reopen as planned in Greece on Sept. 7.

Schools in northern regions of the Netherlands are reopening this week with most pupils expected back in classrooms by Wednesday without social distancing or face masks. Students returning from vacations in high-risk areas must quarantine at home for 14 days.

In the far grimmer case of Lebanon, reported coronavirus cases have surged after the devastating blast at the Beirut port earlier this month, prompting medical officials Monday to call for a two-week lockdown. The blast overwhelmed the city's hospitals and badly damaged two playing a key role in treating COVID-19 patients.

A new outbreak in New Zealand's largest city, Auckland, prompted Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to delay the country's national election by four weeks. She said it would be the only postponement in the vote.

New York reaches 7 million mark in testing

From wire reports

ALBANY, N.Y. — The number of New York coronavirus tests coming back positive remained below 1% for a ninth consecutive day as the total number of tests conducted statewide during the pandemic hit 7 million, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Sunday.

Six people died Saturday, he said, and more than 520 were in the hospital.

The governor on Monday is expected to release long-awaited reopening guidance for indoor gyms.

Bowling alleys can reopen statewide Monday but must limit occupancy to 50% and establish disinfection protocols for shared and rented equipment. Rules released by Cuomo on Friday also require bowling alley staff to close every other lane and bring food and alcohol to customers.

California

LOS ANGELES — Coronavirus cases have surged in California over the last two months, fueled by the reopening of the economy. Although public health officials have said making workplaces safer is essential to slowing the virus's spread, fear of retaliation is preventing employees from voicing safety concerns, workers and labor organizers say.

The toll has been particularly hard on essential workers, a sizable percentage of whom are people of color toiling in factories, hospitals, retail establishments, hotels and agricultural fields across the state. Many who are reluctant to speak up are low-wage workers in the country illegally, who don't qualify for unemployment benefits. They worry that if they are fired, they may not find another job in a hard-hit economy and won't have a safety net.

California law protects workers against retaliation for voicing safety concerns or refusing to engage in hazardous work. Those who feel they have been targeted can file a lawsuit or submit a claim with the state labor commissioner's office.

Washington

OLYMPIA — The Washington State Department of Health on Sunday reported 576 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 15 deaths.

King County continues to have the highest numbers in Washington, with 17,623 cases and 694 deaths. Yakima County is second, with 10,625 cases and 221 deaths. Pierce is third with cases at 6,150.

The Olympian reported that Pierce County reported 55 new cases and no new deaths Saturday. Pierce County had a total of 132 deaths likely caused by COVID-19 as of Saturday, according to the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department.

Statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are at 67,461 cases and 1,781 deaths, up from 66,885 cases and 1,766 deaths on Friday.

Oklahoma

TULSA — A top White House coronavirus adviser continued to press Sunday for people to cover their faces and to social distance to fight the global pandemic during a stop in Oklahoma, where Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt has resisted imposing a statewide mask order.

Dr. Deborah Birx led the roundtable discussion at the Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences in Tulsa. The meeting was closed to journalists, but state and local officials who attended told the Tulsa World that Birx was unwavering on the necessity for masks and distancing in public.

A statement from Stitt's office said Birx complimented Oklahoma's push to use saliva testing for COVID-19.

North Carolina

CHAPEL HILL — Another cluster of positive COVID-19 cases within student housing was announced Sunday at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The disclosure of cases within the Hinton James dormitory building marks the fourth

such cluster — defined as five or more cases in close proximity — since the semester began Aug. 10 at the state's flagship public university campus. The other three have occurred within an on-campus dormitory, private student housing and a fraternity house.

As with the other clusters, the individuals testing positive in the Hinton James cluster are being isolated and receiving medical monitoring. Contact tracing is also happening.

Florida

TALLAHASSEE — Florida reported about 3,900 new cases of the coronavirus Sunday, the lowest daily total in nearly two months. The number of Floridians dying of the disease — 107 — also took a dramatic downward turn from the last few days.

The lower numbers come just days before Florida voters cast ballots Tuesday in primaries across the state for congressional, legislative and other seats. More than 2.3 million people have opted to vote early, instead of braving lines and the risk of infection.

Election officials have urged voters to avoid the trip to precincts on Election Day by casting ballots early, including mailing in their completed ballots. Officials, however, have assured voters who decide to show up to the polls on Tuesday that doing so will be safe.

Illinois

CHICAGO — Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot again warned Sunday of rising COVID-19 rates, saying young people are behind the recent uptick.

The first-term Democrat spoke Sunday to CBS' "Face the Nation," as the state reported 1,562 new confirmed cases and 18 deaths.

Lightfoot said that there has also been an increase among Latinos, which city officials are trying to address by working with community groups.

Overall, Illinois has reported 206,081 confirmed cases of the virus and 7,744 deaths since the

pandemic began.

Nebraska

WAYNE — Two Wayne State College professors said they are frustrated that their requests to teach remotely this fall were denied.

Longtime history professor Don Hickey, 76, said he hired an attorney after college officials rejected his request.

After Hickey told administrators he would teach his classes remotely whether they approved or not, he was told his classes would be taught on campus by other faculty members. Hickey has taught at the school since 1978.

Another Wayne State history faculty member, Joseph Weixelman, 63, also had his request rejected. Weixelman said he has multiple sclerosis and that medications for the disease suppress the immune system, which could make him more susceptible to severe illness from the coronavirus.

Michigan

DETROIT — Michigan quietly surpassed 100,000 coronavirus cases when both confirmed and probable cases totaled 100,724 on Friday, five months into the pandemic.

Using that metric, at least 6,500 people have died of COVID-19, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services reported — a number higher than those who died in the 9/11 terror attacks and the attack on Pearl Harbor combined.

Still, by most measures, Michigan has managed to contain the spread better than many other states in a country that leads the world with 5.3 million cases and more than 168,000 deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Global Case Tracker.

But it's nowhere near over yet. The state should prepare to see another 100,000 new cases in the next five months, said Dr. Peter Gulick, an infectious disease specialist and associate professor of medicine at Michigan State University.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Boat explosion forces 6 to jump into water

CT NORWALK — Connecticut officials are investigating a boat explosion that forced six people to jump to safety into Norwalk Harbor.

Multiple people called 911 to report the explosion. All six people aboard were rescued, including two who were taken to a hospital but were expected to recover, Norwalk police said.

The operator of the 33-foot Egg Harbor yacht told authorities engine trouble developed as they were leaving the harbor, and the explosion happened about 100 yards from shore after they had turned around and were heading back toward the dock.

The boat became engulfed in flames and everyone aboard jumped off, police said. Firefighters towed it back to shore and put out the fire.

July to be 'National Blueberry Month'

ME PORTLAND, — The U.S. Senate approved a request to designate July as "National Blueberry Month" at the urging of senators from one of the country's most important blueberry growing states.

Maine Sens. Susan Collins, a Republican, and Angus King, an independent, called for the designation. Their state is America's top producer of wild blueberries.

The senators said in a joint statement the resolution recognizes the importance of the industry as it faces "tremendous strain due to the ongoing trade retaliation and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic."

The resolution also pays tribute to indigenous people who first cultivated the fruit long before the arrival of Europeans.

2 arrested after stolen vehicle pursuit

IA DES MOINES — Two people were arrested in Des Moines after fleeing from police in a stolen car and taking refuge in a house with one of their children inside, authorities said.

Des Moines Police Department spokesman Sgt. Paul Parizek said the owner of the car spotted the vehicle, leading to a chase on Interstate 235, The Des Moines Register reported.

Police called off the pursuit due to reckless driving. But Parizek said someone spotted the vehicle coming back into the city and followed it until it was abandoned. The two suspects then ran into a nearby home, where the 13-year-old child of one of the suspects wasn't allowed to leave for about an hour.

The two suspects were taken into custody.

Police wrote tickets outside jurisdiction

GA OLIVER — A small Georgia city's police department wrote more than 130 speeding tickets on a road where it had no jurisdiction, a state agency's investigation found.

Citations issued on Kildare Road over a two-year period by police in the city of Oliver brought in more than \$40,000 in fines to its municipal court, WTOG-TV reported.

The television station determined the average ticket was around \$342. One driver paid as much as \$875 and another agreed to serve 30 hours of community service. That stopped this year when one driver who got pulled over wrote a complaint to the Georgia Department of Public Safety.

The agency's investigating

found that Oliver police didn't have the required state permission to use speed-detection devices on that road.

Man arrested after stolen ambulance chase

OH TOLEDO — A man is in custody after leading troopers on a chase through three Ohio counties in a stolen ambulance, the Ohio State Highway Patrol said.

Troopers were dispatched to check on an ambulance that had been reported stolen from Mercy Health St. Vincent's Medical Center in Toledo and was parked on Route 24 in Lucas County, police said.

When troopers arrived to check on the ambulance, the driver fled west into Henry County, police said. Troopers tried unsuccessfully to halt the vehicle using stop sticks, and it continued into Defiance County, where troopers deflated the two front tires with stop sticks.

The driver, a Texas man, was taken into custody.

Suspect arrested after barricading inside bus

MD LUTHERVILLE-TIMONIUM — A man barricaded himself inside a public transit bus in a Baltimore suburb after he woke up and began making threats with a weapon, authorities said.

Police received a call about the situation inside the bus, said Kevin Gay, a public information specialist with the Baltimore County Police Department. Officers and a SWAT team responded to the scene near a light rail station and shopping center in Lutherville-Timonium.

Gay said the suspect was the only person inside the bus during the barricade incident. A loud bang was heard at the scene and seconds later, officers and SWAT team members went

inside the bus and took the man into custody. They did not immediately identify the suspect.

Ex-employee accused of smashing work vehicles

RI PROVIDENCE. — A former public works employee was accused of smashing vehicles at his former workplace in Providence with an ax.

WPRI-TV reported Raymond Fratus, 46, of Coventry, was charged with two counts of malicious damage.

Police said Fratus showed up at a Providence Department of Public Works building and smashed the windows of someone's personal car. He's also accused of smashing a DPW truck used by his former supervisor at another DPW location.

A city spokesperson said Fratus resigned in June after four years as a highway department mechanic.

Sea turtle rescued after snared, circled by sharks

NJ CAPE MAY — Authorities said a sea turtle entangled in a fishing trap line and being circled by sharks off New Jersey was rescued by a Coast Guard cutter.

The Coast Guard said the stricken animal was reported 11 miles southeast of Cape May by the Marine Mammal Stranding Center, which works to free stranded animals along the coast of the Garden State.

The cutter Shearwater, an 87-foot patrol boat, headed to the scene and saw sharks encircling the turtle, so a team in a small boat was sent to circle the ailing animal until the sharks dispersed. Officials said crew members then cautiously approached the turtle and cut it free.

From wire reports

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and Military News

Leonard could set NBA playoffs mark

Associated Press

1 Chasing history: If Kawhi Leonard wins an NBA Finals MVP award with the Los Angeles Clippers this season, he'd do something that nobody has ever done — three finals MVPs with three different teams.

Leonard was finals MVP for San Antonio in 2014 and for Toronto last year. Besides Leonard, only LeBron James (with Miami in 2012 and 2013, then Cleveland in 2016) and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (with Milwaukee in 1971 and the Los Angeles Lakers in 1985) have won finals MVPs with two different franchises.

If the Lakers or Clippers win the title, it'll be another rarity. If the Lakers win, James and Danny Green (San Antonio, Toronto) would have championships with three different teams; if the Clippers win, Leonard would be on that list.

The only players in NBA history to win titles with three different teams, to this point, are John Salley and Robert Horry.

2 Six-pack? Division championships in the NBA don't seem to mean much anymore.

Well, maybe they do.

If history holds, one of these six teams — Toronto, Milwaukee, Miami, Denver, Houston or the Los Angeles Lakers — will win the NBA title this season.

Every finals team since 2012 has done so after winning a division title. The last team not to win its division but make the finals was Dallas, which won the title in 2011. And the last time an NBA Finals had two non-division-winning teams was 2007, when San Antonio topped Cleveland.

3 Stat watch: A few numbers to watch during the playoffs:

■ LeBron James is 89 points away from 7,000 career postseason points. Nobody else has even reached 6,000; Michael Jordan had 5,987. James nearly has more playoff points than any other three players entering these playoffs do in their postseason careers combined. James Harden (2,654),

Russell Westbrook (2,489) and Kawhi Leonard (2,164) have 7,307 between them.

■ If the Lakers make a deep run, James could also take over the No. 1 spot on the postseason games played list. He's been in 239, behind Derek Fisher (259), Tim Duncan (251) and Robert Horry (244). James is already the NBA career playoff leader in minutes, field goals made and attempted, free throws made and steals.

■ Boston's Gordon Hayward has made 95.5% of his playoff free throws (106-for-111). Nobody with at least 100 career postseason makes from the line has ever been better; Mark Price is No. 2 at 94.4%.

4 Losing records: For the first time since 2015, teams with a losing record made the playoffs.

And for the first time since 1997, three teams below the .500 mark found their way into the postseason. Portland, Brooklyn and Orlando all finished the regular season with losing records — yet are still alive in the race for the NBA title.

Boston and Brooklyn were the last teams to get to the playoffs with losing marks, both getting there in 2015. Minnesota, Phoenix and the Los Angeles Clippers were the three teams that did it in 1987.

The last time there were more than three sub-.500 teams in the playoffs was 1986, when six made the field.

No team with a losing record has won a playoff series since 1987, when the Seattle SuperSonics won two rounds to reach the West finals. Since that season, sub-.500 teams are 0-26 in first-round matchups.

5 Power of 23: If the Toronto Raptors win this NBA title, there can be no doubt that the team's magic number this season would be 23.

Or maybe 23-9, to be more specific.

When the season was stopped on March 11 because of the pandemic, the Raptors were exactly 23-9 at home and 23-9 on the road.

At Disney in the seeding

games, they went 7-1. They went 16-8 last season in the playoffs, and if they do exactly that this year — yes, they would have gone exactly 23-9 at Disney this year as well.

6 Game 1 success: Inevitably, some version of the stat that says Game 1 winners almost always go on to win a best-of-seven series will come up after the opening game of every matchup. And it is true: Since the 16-team playoff format was adopted, teams with a 1-0 series lead ultimately win 78.3% of the time.

But last year showed 1-0 deficits don't doom a club, either.

There were six teams last season that lost Game 1 but went on to win a series — matching the most of any year in the 16-team format.

The six teams that rallied were Toronto (East finals vs. Milwaukee and first round vs. Orlando), Milwaukee (East semifinals vs. Boston), Portland (West semifinals vs. Denver), Philadelphia (East first round vs. Brooklyn) and Denver (West first round vs. San Antonio).

7 No home edge: Since 1984, home teams have won 411 of 540 playoff games played — 76.1%. Of course, much of that can be attributed to having 20,000 or so screaming fans cheering teams on in those games.

During the restart, teams went 49-39 in matchups designated as "home" games — a 55.7% clip in those contests where they got to see their logos on the video boards and hear their usual pregame music. And that is close to what teams were doing outside the bubble this season, when home teams prevailed 55.1% of the time.

8 Family matters: Callie Rivers Curry cannot lose in the first round of the Western Conference playoffs. Either her father is going to the second round, or her husband is.

The Los Angeles Clippers play Dallas in the first round. Callie's father is Clippers coach Doc Rivers. Her husband is Mavericks guard Seth Curry.

Washington hires Wright as president

Associated Press

The Washington Football Team on Monday hired Jason Wright as team president, making him the first Black person to hold that position in NFL history.

At 38, he becomes the NFL's youngest team president and will run the organization's business operations with coach Ron Rivera maintaining control over football decisions.

Washington's hiring of Wright drew a commendation from the Fritz Pollard Alliance, which seeks to promote diversity in NFL. Chairman Harry Carson and executive director Rod Graves called it a "historic event."

"The selection is the result of an inclusive process that recognizes the talents that people of color can offer," they said. "We hope that it signifies a true change for the manner in which leadership is chosen in the NFL."

Wright, a running back for seven years with Atlanta, Cleveland and Arizona, was a captain for the Cardinals and their NFLPA representative during labor negotiations in 2010-11.

In other NFL news:

■ Quarterback Alex Smith was activated off the physically unable to perform list by Washington's NFL team Sunday, the latest step in a remarkable recovery after his right leg was broken in two places during a game nearly two years ago.

The 36-year-old Smith is signed through 2022. He hasn't played since November 2018, when his right fibula and tibia broke when Smith was hit during a loss to the Houston Texans.

■ Jacksonville Jaguars defensive lineman Rodney Gunter is stepping away from football because of an enlarged aorta.

Gunter signed a three-year, \$18 million contract with Jacksonville in free agency, giving the team a potential replacement for five-time Pro Bowler Calais Campbell.

White Sox blast Ramirez, Cardinals

Associated Press

CHICAGO — St. Louis Cardinals reliever Roel Ramirez set a record in his debut — just not the kind any pitcher wants.

The Chicago White Sox tied a major league mark with four consecutive home runs, all against Ramirez, and went on to beat the Cardinals 7-2 on Sunday.

Ramirez is the first pitcher to allow four straight homers in his debut. Yoan Moncada, Yasmani Grandal, Jose Abreu and Eloy Jimenez connected during a six-run fifth inning.

“Clearly, it gets you on your heels,” Cardinals manager Mike Shildt said. “One of the reasons we liked Roel in spring training ... was the fact that he was not afraid to go after guys. He’d get after it.”

Ramirez took the mound in the fifth with Chicago leading 1-0. He struck out Luis Robert to start, but things went south quickly. After two singles, a caught stealing and a walk, Moncada smacked a three-run homer to right.

Grandal followed with another drive into the right-field seats, and then Abreu and

Jimenez each homered to left.

“It feels good every time that you hit a home run,” Moncada said through an interpreter. “But it feels better when you’re a part of history. ... It’s definitely something special for all of us. I am very happy for it.”

Shildt replaced Ramirez with the debuting Seth Elledge, and he struck out Edwin Encarnacion on three straight pitches to end the inning.

Ramirez is among the players promoted by the Cardinals following a COVID-19 outbreak that stalled St. Louis’ season for 2½ weeks. The club returned to action Saturday with a doubleheader sweep over Chicago.

Ramirez, a 25-year-old right-hander, split last season between Double-A and Triple-A.

“He got his first punchout today in the big leagues, which is pretty cool,” Shildt said. “I have every confidence he’s gonna go out and be aggressive when he gets an opportunity again.”

It was the 10th time in major league his-

tory a team hit four straight homers. The only other time the White Sox did it was on Aug. 14, 2008 against Kansas City, when Jim Thome, Paul Konerko, Alexei Ramirez and Juan Uribe connected.

For Chicago, it was a big improvement after combining for just six hits in the doubleheader.

“It was a big inning, a huge inning,” White Sox manager Rick Renteria said. “We needed something like that to kind of spark us. Albeit just one game, but certainly signs of the things that are capable of being done.”

Keuchel sharp: The White Sox got another solid start from Dallas Keuchel (3-2) and won for just the third time in 11 home games.

Keuchel gave up two runs and four hits in 5⅓ innings. The 2015 AL Cy Young Award winner exited after Matt Carpenter hit a two-run single.

St. Louis’ Dakota Hudson (0-2) held the White Sox to a run and two hits over four innings in his first start since July 26.

MLB roundup

Happ wins in return to Yankees rotation

Associated Press

NEW YORK — J.A. Happ won in his return to New York’s rotation after being skipped a turn, and the Yankees beat the Red Sox 4-2 for their ninth straight win over Boston in their best spurt against their rival in nearly 70 years.

Hours after second baseman DJ LeMahieu joined Aaron Judge and Giancarlo Stanton on the injured list, Mike Ford drove in three runs for New York. Happ (1-1) allowed one run in 5.2 innings in his first home start this year, giving up Kevin Pillar’s homer in the third.

Boston has been outscored 67-31 during a seven-game skid, dropping to an AL-worst 6-16.

Indians 8, Tigers 5: Franmil Reyes homered twice, and the Indians beat the host Tigers for the 20th straight time, nearing the major league record

for most consecutive wins by a team over a single opponent.

Baltimore holds the mark with 23 straight wins over Kansas City in 1969-70. The Indians can match the record when they host Detroit in a three-game series next weekend.

Athletics 15, Giants 3: Stephen Piscotty, Chad Pinder and Marcus Semien homered during visiting Oakland’s nine-run fifth inning, powering the A’s to their fourth straight win.

Piscotty matched his career high with five RBIs as Oakland, with the best record in the AL, won for the 13th time in 15 games.

Dodgers 8, Angels 3: Keibert Ruiz homered in his first major league at-bat, Corey Seager hit a three-run homer and the visiting Dodgers swept the Freeway Series.

Nationals 6, Orioles 5: Max Scherzer struck out 10 over seven innings, and visiting Washington went ahead to stay

with an unearned run in the eighth. With the victory, the defending World Series champion Nationals won the three-game series and climbed out of last place in the NL East at 8-11.

Rays 3-7, Blue Jays 2-5: At Buffalo, N.Y., Willy Adames hit a two-run homer in the eighth inning, and Tampa Bay, helped by a huge Toronto error, earned their second win of the day against the Blue Jays.

Earlier, in the finish of a game suspended Saturday night because of rain, Brandon Lowe hit a solo shot off Jordan Romano (1-1) in the ninth to lift the Rays to the victory. Aaron Loup (3-0) got the win in both games.

Braves 4, Marlins 0: Nick Markakis drove in three runs for visiting Atlanta, and five pitchers combined on a two-hitter.

Phillies 6, Mets 2: Andrew McCutchen entered as a midgame replacement and hit

a two-run homer to help host Philadelphia complete a three-game sweep.

Brewers 6, Cubs 5: Keston Hiura and Orlando Arcia homered, and visiting Milwaukee earned its third straight win against the NL Central leaders.

Astros 3, Mariners 2: Kyle Tucker hit a game-ending homer in the ninth inning, lifting host Houston to its fourth straight win.

Rockies 10, Rangers 6: At Denver, Colorado’s Jon Gray struck out seven over a season-high seven solid innings and was backed by a 14-hit attack.

Twins 4, Royals 2: Max Kepler hit a two-run homer to support another strong start by host Minnesota’s Randy Dobnak.

Diamondbacks 5, Padres 4: At Phoenix, Eduardo Escobar hit a three-run homer in the eighth inning, and Arizona completed the three-game sweep.

NHL roundup

Islanders have Capitals on the brink

Associated Press

TORONTO — Mathew Barzal scored 4:28 into overtime, lifting the New York Islanders to a 2-1 win over the Washington Capitals in Game 3 of their Eastern Conference first-round series Sunday.

The 23-year-old Barzal was thankful the play wasn't called offside.

"We knew it was tight," he said. "I run that play a little bit in practice and even in games, try to sneak behind the D, and time it perfectly on the blue line."

The Islanders are up 3-0 in the series, putting the Capitals on the brink of being eliminated in the first round for the second straight year after hoisting the Stanley Cup in 2018.

"Obviously, for us right now it's nothing to lose, right? So we just have to go out there and play," Washington star Alex Ovechkin said. "Don't think about the score in the series."

Anders Lee broke a scoreless tie late in the first period. Evgeny Kuznetsov pulled the Capitals into a tie with a power-play goal early in the second.

Semyon Varlamov stopped 22 shots for

sixth-seeded New York. Braden Holtby had 32 saves for third-seeded Washington.

Stars 5, Flames 4 (OT): Dallas scored 16:05 into overtime after Joe Pavelski forced the extra period by completing a hat trick in the final seconds of regulation and the Stars evened their Western Conference playoff series at two games apiece in Edmonton, Alberta.

John Klingberg's hard shot grazed Alexander Radulov's stick and went in to give Dallas the win. The shot that got past Cam Talbot was the 62nd for the Stars, their most since 63 in a five-overtime loss in the 2003 playoffs. The goal was initially given to Klingberg, but NHL announced the scoring change about three hours after the game.

Klingberg finished with three assists. Pavelski recorded the first playoff hat trick since the Stars franchise moved from Minnesota in 1993, and the first of his career on his 53rd career postseason goal.

Tobias Rieder tied an NHL record with his third short-handed goal of the playoffs, and Calgary got one in a third straight game against Dallas, for a 4-3 lead early in the third period.

Blues 3, Canucks 2 (OT): Brayden Schenn scored 15:06 into overtime to lift St. Louis.

Schenn, circling in the neutral zone, took a stretch pass, raced in and fired a shot high past Vancouver goalie Jacob Markstrom for the defending champion Blues' first win this postseason.

David Perron and Justin Faulk also scored, and Jake Allen stopped 39 shots as St. Louis pulled to 2-1 in the best-of-seven series in Edmonton.

Flyers 1, Canadiens 0: Jake Voracek scored and Carter Hart stopped 23 shots to help Philadelphia grab a 2-1 lead in the Eastern Conference playoff series in Toronto.

The top-seeded Flyers got another sensational performance from the 22-year-old Hart, who made a slew of big saves and benefited from Montreal shots that clanged off the post.

Blackhawks 3, Golden Knights 1: Corey Crawford made 48 saves in a stellar performance, and Chicago avoided a sweep in the first-round playoff series. Drake Caggiula and Matthew Highmore scored first-period goals for the Blackhawks.

Three in a row on the road for Elliott

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Chase Elliott was already NASCAR royalty. Now he's also the sport's road king.

Elliott won the Cup Series' first road course race at Daytona International Speedway on Sunday, holding off hard-charging Denny Hamlin following a late restart and notching his third consecutive victory away from ovals.

"I had a phenomenal car. I don't think I did anything special today," Elliott said.

NASCAR's most popular driver, the son of Hall of Famer Bill Elliott, also won on road courses at Charlotte and at Watkins Glen last year. He got a tougher challenge than many expected down the stretch in his latest roadie.

The 24-year-old driver had a 10-second lead with 10 laps to go and was pulling away when Kyle Busch blew a tire and brought out a caution that gave his Joe Gibbs Racing teammates, Hamlin and Martin Truex Jr., a chance.

But Elliott stayed out front on the final restart. Hamlin got to his rear bumper on the last lap, but couldn't do enough to mount any significant pressure.

"I kept him honest there," Hamlin said. "He had such good drive off (the corners) I couldn't do anything with him."

Hamlin finished second, followed by Truex and seven-time series champion Jimmie Johnson. Elliott, Hamlin and Truex had the cars to beat all afternoon.

Andretti on pole at Indy for 1st time in 33 years

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Marco Andretti was 2 months old the last time his venerable racing family led the field to green at the Indianapolis 500. In this strange pandemic-plagued season, he ended a 33-year Andretti drought by winning the pole.

That darned "Andretti Curse" has haunted three generations of racers at Indianapolis Motor Speedway since 1969, when Mario Andretti won his only Indy 500. Now his grandson, with a lightning-fast and fearful four laps around the speedway, has cleared the first hurdle toward an elusive victory.

Mario Andretti was 1-for-29 in "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing," with just three career

poles, his last in 1987. His son, Michael, never won a pole and his best finish in 16 tries was second in 1991. Jeff Andretti went 0-for-3. John Andretti was 0-for-12 and Marco currently is 0-for-14. In his 15th attempt, he will attempt to end that stupid family curse once and for all.

The last of nine drivers Sunday to make a qualifying run, Marco Andretti logged a four-lap average of 231.068 mph to bump five-time IndyCar champion Scott Dixon from the pole. Andretti worried about the wind all morning and relied on advice his grandfather has long given the racers of the family to find the courage to hold it wide open for four laps.

"The wind will scare you, but it will never crash you," Marco Andretti said, quoting his grandfather after his run.