

Taliban claim to seek calm after blitz

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban vowed Tuesday to respect women's rights, forgive those who resisted them and ensure a secure Afghanistan as part of a publicity blitz aimed at convincing world powers and a fearful population that they have changed.

Following a lightning offensive across Afghanistan that saw many cities fall to the insurgents without a fight, the Taliban have sought to portray themselves as more moderate than when they imposed a brutal rule in the late 1990s. But many Afghans remain skeptical — and thousands raced to the airport on Monday, desperate to flee the country.

Older generations remember the Taliban's ultraconservative Islamic views, which included severe restrictions on women as well as public stonings and amputations before they were ousted by the U.S.-led invasion following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

As others have in recent days, spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid addressed these concerns head on in his first news conference Tuesday.

Mujahid, who had been a shadowy figure for years, promised the Taliban would honor women's rights, but within the norms of

Islamic law, though he gave few details. He said the group wanted private media to "remain independent," but stressed journalists "should not work against national values."

And he promised the insurgents would secure Afghanistan, but seek no revenge against those who worked with the former government or with foreign governments or forces.

"We assure you that nobody will go to their doors to ask why they helped," he said.

Earlier, Enamullah Samangani, a member of the Taliban's cultural commission, made similar promises, saying the Taliban would extend an "amnesty" without giving details and encouraging women to join the government.

The capital of Kabul remained quiet for another day as the Taliban patrolled its streets and many residents stayed home, fearful after the insurgents' takeover saw prisons emptied and armories looted. Many women have expressed dread that the two-decade Western experiment to expand their rights and remake Afghanistan would not survive the resurgent Taliban.

While the Taliban pledged not to go after their enemies, some in Kabul alleged the fighters have lists of people who cooperated with the government and are seeking them

out. A broadcaster in Afghanistan said she was hiding at a relative's house, too frightened to return home much less return to work following reports the insurgents are also looking for journalists. She said she and other women didn't believe the Taliban had changed their ways. She spoke on condition of anonymity because she feared for her safety.

Samangani addressed the concerns of women, saying the Taliban were ready to "provide women with environment to work and study, and the presence of women in different (government) structures according to Islamic law and in accordance with our cultural values."

That would be a marked departure from the last time the Taliban were in power, when women were largely confined to their homes.

In another sign of the Taliban's efforts to portray a new image, a female television anchor on the private broadcaster Tolo interviewed a Taliban official on camera Tuesday in a studio — an interaction that once would have been unthinkable. Meanwhile, women in hijabs demonstrated briefly in Kabul, holding signs demanding the Taliban not "eliminate women" from public life.

Pentagon boosts estimates for Afghanistan evacuations

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

Top defense officials said Tuesday that they estimate ongoing operations at Kabul's international airport can increase evacuations to some 5,000 to 9,000 people from Afghanistan each day.

"[The airport] remains secure," Army Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor, the Joint Staff's deputy director for regional operations, told reporters at the Pentagon. "It is currently open for military flight operations as well as limited commercial flight operations."

American troops had restored order at Hamid Karzai International Airport by Tuesday morning, and U.S. military cargo jets were flying in and out of the airfield in Kabul, bringing in troops and gear and

evacuating people, Taylor said. It came after a chaotic Monday at the airport — the last ground in Afghanistan held by the United States and its allies — where operations shuttered for hours as troops worked to clear the airfield of thousands of desperate Afghans trying to flee the Taliban.

Overnight, nine U.S. Air Force C-17 cargo jets arrived at the airport delivering some 1,000 American troops and their equipment. Seven C-17s also departed the airport evacuating 700 to 800 passengers, including 165 Americans, Taylor said.

The estimated 5,000 to 9,000 evacuees per day was based on flight operations running smoothly, he said. It would require more than two dozen flights coming and going each day, added John Kirby, the Pentagon's

top spokesman.

Neither Kirby nor Taylor provided estimates of the number of people the U.S. intends to evacuate from Afghanistan. In addition to American citizens, the U.S. is also helping evacuate citizens of other nations who have worked with Americans during the 20-year war and certain Afghans and their families who have supported the U.S. war effort.

The U.S. had evacuated some 2,000 Afghans by Monday. Kirby said the Defense Department would soon be able to host another 22,000 at two U.S. Army bases — one in Texas and another in Wisconsin. He said a third country had also agreed to take in some Afghans seeking to settle eventually in the U.S.

Biden defends call to leave Afghanistan

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

President Joe Biden said Monday that the complete collapse of the Afghan government and military in recent days proved his decision to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan is correct.

Biden said during his first public remarks since the Taliban's sudden return to power that he could not risk more American lives in a civil war in Afghanistan if Afghan troops trained by the United States for the last two decades would not fight for themselves. The U.S. military could provide Afghan troops weapons and tactical knowledge, the president said, but it could not provide them "the will to fight for their future."

"Here's what I believe to my core: It is wrong to order American troops to step up when Afghanistan's own armed forces would not," Biden said during his speech to the nation from the White House's East Room.

The president admitted his administration had not expected the Taliban would grasp power so quickly. By Monday, the Islamist group was in control of virtually the entire country for the first time since it was toppled by American forces just months after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The group at the beginning of last week controlled roughly half the country, but rapidly took control of Afghanistan's key cities in a blitz over the weekend that culminated in the near violence-free capture of Kabul on Sunday amid the collapse of the U.S.-backed government.

"I'm left to ask again of those who argue that we should stay, 'How many more generations of

American daughters and sons would you have me send to fight Afghanistan's civil war, when Afghan troops will not? How many more lives, American lives, is it worth?' " he asked.

Biden placed blame on poor Afghan leadership — including on its President Ashraf Ghani, who fled the country Sunday before the Taliban took Kabul — and on former President Donald Trump's administration. Trump forged an accord last year with Taliban leaders that promised U.S. troops would fully withdraw by May 2021 in exchange for assurances, including that the Taliban would cut ties with terrorist groups such as al-Qaida.

Biden said the agreement and Trump's order last fall to draw down American troops in Afghanistan from about 5,500 to some 2,500 ahead of Biden's inauguration left him with few options.

"The choice I had to make, as your president, was either to follow through on that agreement or be prepared to go back to fighting the Taliban in the middle of the spring fighting season," Biden said. "There was only the cold reality of either following through on the agreement to withdraw our forces or escalating the conflict and sending thousands more American troops back into combat in Afghanistan, lurching into the third decade of conflict. I stand squarely behind my decision."

Ending the 20-year war was among Biden's top campaign pledges. Unlike his two immediate predecessors, who made similar promises, Biden will have fulfilled that promise when the last U.S. troops leave Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport by Aug. 31.

GOP hits Biden over Afghan War despite internal divides

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — When President Joe Biden announced he would stick to his predecessor's plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Republican reaction was mixed and largely muted. Foreign policy had become so contentious that the party's own leaders had no single position on the end of the nation's longest war.

But the fall of the Afghan government and the Taliban's swift return to power have, at least for now, reunited Republicans in criticism of Biden. Longtime opponents of a withdrawal argued Monday that the president should have seen the disaster coming. Even those who cheered his decision to pull out troops turned to slamming him for doing it badly.

"An embarrassing spectacle, a diplomatic humiliation and a national security catastrophe," said Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas.

It was a rare moment of cohesion for a party that has been divided between an old guard that long pushed for U.S. military aggression and supporters of former President Donald Trump who prioritized "America First." As Republicans moved Monday to turn the chaos into a political opportunity, it was unclear how long they'd be able to paper over that split.

"If they're smart and say, 'Look, I wanted us out of Afghanistan, but not this way,'" Glen Bolger, a veteran GOP pollster who's worked on numerous congressional campaigns, said of Republicans potentially staying on the political offensive. "Not in a total surrender and not letting the Taliban just waltz in and take over everything, hurting women and taking the clock back to the 1400s."

The Taliban's entering Kabul doesn't change the fact that Republicans have essentially at-

tempted a U-turn on foreign policy — the kind of about-face that likely muddles any case they can make for blaming Biden without drawing some political blowback themselves.

The party has moved sharply away from the hawkish days just after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when President George W. Bush first led the invasion of Afghanistan and spent years pushing nation-building and aggressive military intervention abroad. The Trump administration agreed late in its term to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan this past May, with the then-president saying last year, "Now it's time for somebody else to do that work."

"You know it's been 19 years and even they are tired of fighting," Trump said, though he added, "If bad things happen, we'll go back."

Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., who served in the Air Force in Afghanistan, faulted "Donald Trump's terrible deal he negotiated" but also Biden's "terrible execution of a deal he never should have followed through on."

"At this moment, people are super excited about, or super focused on, how can they blame the other side. How can they win this political back and forth," Kinzinger said. "I think Donald Trump bears huge blame and Joe Biden will ultimately bear the ultimate blame."

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, told reporters in Anchorage that she was among those who didn't anticipate U.S. troops would be or should be in Afghanistan forever. But, she said, "what we have seen play out, I think, is troubling at such a degree and such a level."

Murkowski added: "I think there's going to be a lot of review about how we came to be at this place at this moment."

Billions spent on Afghan army benefited Taliban

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Built and trained at a two-decade cost of \$83 billion, Afghan security forces collapsed so quickly and completely — in some cases without a shot fired — that the ultimate beneficiary of the American investment turned out to be the Taliban. They grabbed not only political power but also U.S.-supplied firepower — guns, ammunition, helicopters and more.

The Taliban captured an array of modern military equipment when they overran Afghan forces who failed to defend district centers. Bigger gains followed, including combat aircraft, when the Taliban rolled up provincial capitals and military bases with stunning speed, topped by capturing the biggest prize, Kabul, over the weekend.

A U.S. defense official on Monday confirmed that the Taliban's sudden accumulation of U.S.-supplied Afghan equipment is enormous. The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and so spoke on condition of anonymity. The reversal is

an embarrassing consequence of misjudging the viability of Afghan government forces — by the U.S. military as well as intelligence agencies — which in some cases chose to surrender their vehicles and weapons rather than fight.

The U.S. failure to produce a sustainable Afghan army and police force, and the reasons for their collapse, will be studied for years by military analysts. The basic dimensions, however, are clear and are not unlike what happened in Iraq. The forces turned out to be hollow, equipped with superior arms but largely missing the crucial ingredient of combat motivation.

"Money can't buy will. You cannot purchase leadership," John Kirby, chief spokesman for Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, said Monday.

Doug Lute, a retired Army lieutenant general who help direct Afghanistan War strategy during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, said that what the Afghans received in tangible resources they

lacked in the more important intangibles.

"The principle of war stands — moral factors dominate material factors," he said. "Morale, discipline, leadership, unit cohesion are more decisive than numbers of forces and equipment. As outsiders in Afghanistan, we can provide material, but only Afghans can provide the intangible moral factors."

By contrast, Afghanistan's Taliban insurgents, with smaller numbers, less sophisticated weaponry and no air power, proved a superior force.

"If we wouldn't have used hope as a course of action ... we would have realized the rapid drawdown of U.S. forces sent a signal to the Afghan national forces that they were being abandoned," said Chris Miller, who saw combat in Afghanistan in 2001 and was acting secretary of defense at the end of President Donald Trump's term.

Stephen Biddle, a professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University and a former adviser to U.S. commanders

in Afghanistan, said Biden's announcement set the final collapse in motion.

"The problem of the U.S. withdrawal is that it sent a nationwide signal that the jig is up — a sudden, nationwide signal that everyone read the same way," Biddle said. Before April, the Afghan government troops were slowly but steadily losing the war, he said. When they learned that their American partners were going home, an impulse to give up without a fight "spread like wildfire."

In his book, "The Afghanistan Papers," journalist Craig Whitlock wrote that U.S. trainers tried to force Western ways on Afghan recruits and gave scant thought to whether U.S. taxpayer dollars were investing in a truly viable army.

"Given that the U.S. war strategy depended on the Afghan army's performance, however, the Pentagon paid surprisingly little attention to the question of whether Afghans were willing to die for their government," he wrote.

USAF C-17 leaves Kabul, rescues more than 600 Afghans

By CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

An Air Force cargo jet safely airlifted over 600 Afghans from Kabul as the United States scrambles to evacuate thousands following the Taliban's takeover.

A crowded C-17 Globemaster III whisked away the evacuees from Hamid Karzai International Airport late Sunday, according to the caption on a photo released by Air Mobility Command on Tuesday.

"This speaks to the humanity of our troops in this mission," Maj. Gen. Hank Taylor, director of current operations on the Joint Staff, told reporters Tuesday at the Pentagon.

The photo and the details of the flight were first reported Monday by Defense One, citing unidentified defense officials.

The U.S. began evacuating government personnel, American citizens and vulnerable Afghans over the weekend. The 600-plus from Sunday might be among the most people ever flown on the 174-foot-long aircraft, Defense One reported.

Flight tracking software showed that it belongs to the 436th Airlift Wing based at Dover Air Force Base, Del., according to Defense One.

The four-engine jet with a wingspan of 169 feet, operating under the call sign Reach 871, wasn't expected to take so many people, a defense official told the news site. But many Afghans who were cleared to evacuate on later flights pulled themselves onto its half-open ramp. The crew chose not to force them off.

Some 640 Afghan civilians dis-

embarked when the plane landed, the official said. The AMC photo caption confirmed that number.

The crew apparently believed that there were as many as 800 on board. A recording of radio communications spread online Sunday in which one official expressed surprise at that estimate.

"American heroes all," retired Adm. James Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, tweeted Monday morning about the evacuation flight.

The airport was overrun Sunday by fleeing Afghans, some with travel documents and others desperately seeking asylum without any paperwork as the Taliban entered Kabul.

Several people were killed in the ensuing chaos, including some who fell from a departing

C-17 they were clinging to during takeoff. A body was found in the wheel well of a C-17 that landed in a nearby country after flying out of Kabul, Politico and The Washington Post reported.

The U.S. rapidly deployed thousands of troops to secure the airport in a matter of days, Taylor said Tuesday. Troop numbers were expected to reach 4,000 by the end of the day.

Since the killing of two armed Afghans at the airport by U.S. troops Monday, there have been "no hostile interactions, no threat" and "no additional security incidents," he said.

The airport has reopened to military and limited commercial flights, he said, and the goal is to ramp up to one military flight per hour to evacuate some 5,000 to 9,000 passengers a day.

US eyes vaccine boosters for everyone

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. health experts are expected to recommend COVID-19 vaccine boosters for all Americans, regardless of age, eight months after they received their second dose of the shot, to ensure lasting protection against the coronavirus as the delta variant spreads across the country.

Federal health officials have been actively looking at whether extra shots for the vaccinated would be needed as early as this fall, reviewing case numbers in the U.S. as well as the situation in other countries such as Israel, where preliminary studies suggest the vaccine's protection against serious illness dropped among those vaccinated in January.

An announcement on the U.S. booster recommendation was expected as soon as this week, according to two people famil-

iar with the matter who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Doses would only begin to be administered widely once the Food and Drug Administration formally approves the vaccines. That action is expected for the Pfizer shot in the coming weeks.

Last week, U.S. health officials recommended boosters for some with weakened immune systems, citing their higher risk of catching the virus and evidence that the vaccines' effectiveness waned over time.

The director of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins, said Sunday the U.S. could decide in the next couple weeks whether to offer coronavirus booster shots to Americans this fall.

Among the first to receive them could be health care workers, nursing home

residents and other older Americans, who were some of the first Americans to be vaccinated once the shots received emergency use authorization last December.

Since then, more than 198 million Americans have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, with more than 168 million fully vaccinated. Still, the country is experiencing a fourth surge of virus cases due to the more transmissible delta variant, which is spreading aggressively through unvaccinated communities but is also responsible for an increasing number of so-called "breakthrough infections" of fully vaccinated people.

Collins said because the delta variant only started hitting the U.S. hard in July, the "next couple of weeks" of case data will help the U.S. make a decision.

Weakening Fred spawns twisters and flooding

Associated Press

Tropical Storm Fred weakened to a depression and produced several apparent tornadoes in Georgia on Tuesday as it dumped heavy rains into the Appalachian Mountains along a path that could cause flash floods as far north as upstate New York.

One death was reported — a Las Vegas man whose car hydroplaned near Panama City, Fla., Monday night and overturned into a water-filled ditch, the Florida Highway Patrol said.

The National Hurricane Center said Fred had top sustained winds of 35 mph as it crossed southeast Alabama into western and north Georgia. Senior hurricane specialist Stacy Stewart said Tuesday that it could dump 5 to 7 inches of rain into parts of Alabama, Georgia and the Carolinas — and possibly up to 10 inches of rain in isolated spots.

At least three apparent tornadoes touched down in Georgia:

One hit Americus, in the southwestern part of the state, one hit a rural area of Meriwether County, between Atlanta and Columbus, and one hit Jeffersonville, near Macon, according to the National Weather Service.

Meanwhile, reconnaissance aircraft found Grace regained tropical cyclone strength early Tuesday. Grace lashed earthquake-damaged Haiti as a tropical depression on Monday, dumping up to 10 inches of rain in the aftermath of Saturday's 7.2 magnitude earthquake, now blamed for more than 1,400 deaths.

Grace's sustained winds grew to 45 mph as it left Haiti on a westward path between southeastern Cuba and Jamaica. Forecasters said it could be near hurricane strength as it approaches Mexico's Yucatan peninsula late Wednesday or early Thursday.

Tropical Storm Henri, meanwhile, was about 135 miles south-southeast of Bermuda.

Winds drive nation's largest wildfire closer to Calif. city

Associated Press

SUSANVILLE, Calif. — Firefighters faced more dangerously windy weather Tuesday as they struggled to keep the nation's largest wildfire from moving toward a Northern California county seat and other small mountain communities.

Forecasters issued red flag warnings of critical fire weather conditions including gusts up to 40 mph from late morning to near midnight.

Winds spawned by a new weather system arrived Monday afternoon and pushed the Dixie Fire within a few miles of Susanville, population about 18,000, and prompted evacuation orders for the small nearby mountain community of Janesville, fire officials said.

"The fire moved fast last night," fire spokesman David Janssen said early Tuesday.

Susanville is the seat of Lassen County and the largest city that the Dixie Fire, named for the road where it started, has ap-

proached since it broke out last month. The former Sierra Nevada logging and mining town has two state prisons, a nearby federal lockup and a casino.

The weather forecast prompted Pacific Gas & Electric to warn that it might cut off power to 48,000 customers in portions of 18 California counties from Tuesday evening through Wednesday afternoon to prevent winds from knocking down or hurling debris into power lines and sparking new wildfires.

The Dixie Fire has scorched more than 900 square miles in the northern Sierra Nevada and southern Cascades since it ignited on July 13 and eventually merged with a smaller blaze called the Fly Fire. It's less than a third contained..

Ongoing damage surveys have counted more than 1,100 buildings destroyed, including 627 homes, and more than 14,000 structures remained threatened.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man climbs radio tower, starts long standoff

AZ PHOENIX — A man who climbed to the top of a Phoenix radio tower came down uninjured after a 2 ½-hour standoff, authorities said.

Phoenix Fire Department officials said the man descended on his own thanks to negotiations by police.

Multiple technical rescue teams, firefighters, paramedics, police officers and special assignment crews worked together to ensure a successful outcome and the safety of everyone involved, authorities said.

Police said when officers initially responded, the man made some statements indicating he wanted to hurt himself.

Man charged for making and throwing bombs

CA FRESNO — A California man was charged with making 10 shrapnel bombs, including one that was thrown at a home and burned a fence, authorities said.

A federal grand jury indicted Wes Parker McDaniel, 52, of Merced in the San Joaquin Valley, on charges of making and possessing unregistered destructive devices, destroying property with an explosive, impersonating a federal agent and being a felon illegally possessing a rifle and ammunition that were found at his home, according to a statement from the U.S. attorney's office.

McDaniel was arrested two days after police said the backyard fence of a Merced home caught fire and metal shrapnel damaged the exterior.

A bomb squad found five addi-

tional explosive devices around the home.

Rain and clogged drain mix flood state Capitol

TX AUSTIN — Torrential rain and a clogged storm drain combined to flood an atrium and back corridor at the Texas Capitol, officials said.

Gov. Greg Abbott revealed the flooding in an urgent Twitter message saying his office was working with affected state agencies and the State Preservation Board, which maintains the building, to get the leak stopped and the ankle-deep water mopped up.

"It's all hands on deck," Abbott's message said.

Police investigate string of paintball assaults

VA HAMPTON — Hampton Police are asking the public for help as they investigate a series of assaults using a paintball gun.

Several people and vehicles were struck by paintball projectiles throughout Hampton between Aug. 6 and Aug. 8, but police said none of the incidents resulted in serious injuries or damage. The victims were all walking or standing near roadways, news outlets report.

Eyewitnesses described the suspect vehicles as a white Ford Explorer, a white Dodge Charger and a yellow Ford Mustang.

Rare bourbon to be raffled off for charity

KY LOUISVILLE. — An Indiana man with a collection of rare bourbon is teaming up with the Kentucky

Derby Museum to raffle it off in an effort to raise money for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

The collection consists of five limited-edition bottles of Pappy Van Winkle bourbon, which are valued at \$18,250, the Kentucky Derby Museum said in a statement. The winner of the raffle will also receive a VIP Kentucky Derby Museum experience and a one-night stay at Hotel Distil.

Nathan Perdue of Carmel, Ind., teamed up with the museum to raise the funds in an effort to help his 2-year-old son, Wyatt, and others who have cystic fibrosis, a genetic lung disease.

Pets are missing after transport truck crashes

NC OLD FORT — Several pets are missing days after they ran off when a transport truck crashed in western North Carolina, officials said.

The N.C. State Highway Patrol said the truck crashed into a concrete barrier on eastbound Interstate 40, news outlets reported. The crash happened in the Old Fort area, roughly 25 miles east of Asheville, according to McDowell County Emergency Management.

The driver of the spay/neuter transport vehicle was seriously injured and five dogs died, three at the scene and two at an emergency clinic, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. When some of the animal enclosures were damaged, several animals fled the scene and six dogs and one cat were still missing. Over two dozen pets have been reunited with their families.

Small child bitten by coyote on beach

MA PROVINCETOWN — A coyote bit a small child on a Cape Cod beach, authorities said.

The child was bitten on North Herring Cove Beach in Provincetown, which is within the Cape Cod National Seashore, according to a statement from seashore Deputy Superintendent Leslie Reynolds.

The child was bitten in the face/neck/shoulder area, Reynolds said in a telephone interview. They were taken to Cape Cod Hospital in Barnstable with injuries not considered life-threatening, she said.

Park rangers shot the coyote and found the carcass in thick dune vegetation approximately 50 yards from where it had been shot. The body will be tested for possible rabies.

Small plane has to make quick landing on highway

KS TOPEKA — A small airplane was forced to make an emergency landing on a highway in northeastern Kansas.

Jackson County Sheriff Tim Morse said a 1961 Bonanza V-35 airplane made an emergency landing on U.S. Highway 75 after it lost engine power after taking off in Topeka.

No injuries were reported from the landing, according to television station WIBW. Morse said four people were on the plane when it encountered engine trouble shortly after takeoff.

Both northbound lanes were closed for a time while the plane was removed.

— From wire reports

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Alabama No. 1 in preseason AP poll

Associated Press

Another college football season will start with everyone chasing the Tide.

Alabama is No. 1 in The Associated Press Top 25 preseason poll for fourth time in the past six seasons.

Coming off their sixth national championship under Nick Saban, the Crimson Tide enter the season loaded with potential replacements for the record-breakers and NFL Draft picks who have moved on, including Heisman Trophy winner DeVonta Smith.

Alabama received 47 of 63 first-place votes from the panel of sports writers and broadcasters in the poll presented by Regions Bank. Oklahoma is No. 2, just ahead of No. 3 Clemson (each received six first-place votes).

Ohio State, which lost to the Tide in last season's championship game, is No. 4 after receiving a first-place vote. Georgia received three first-place votes and rounds out the top five.

The 2020 Buckeyes were emblematic of a bizarre season played through the pandemic, suiting up for only eight games after the Big Ten didn't kickoff until late October. The season was riddled with postponements, cancellations, and players and coaches missing games across the country because of COVID-19. There was little nonconference play and none among Power Five conference teams.

Amid all the chaos and frustration was a familiar ending: The season came to a close with Alabama on top.

Last year's Tide staked a claim as the greatest team of the Saban dynasty. Alabama went 13-0, facing 11 Southeastern Conference teams and playoff showdowns with Notre Dame and Ohio State.

Poll points

■ Alabama is now tied with Ohio State for the second-most preseason No. 1 rankings with eight. Oklahoma has the most with 10.

■ Only two teams have gone wire-to-wire as the No. 1 team in the country during a season. Southern California was the last in 2004, with Heisman Trophy winner Matt Leinart. The first was undefeated Florida State in 1999, possibly the best team of the Bobby Bowden era. Bowden died earlier this month at 91.

■ No. 8 Cincinnati of the American Athletic Conference is the first team from outside the Power Five leagues to be ranked in the preseason top 10 since Louisville started ninth in 2012. That was the Cardinals' final season as a member of the AAC before joining the Atlantic Coast Conference.

The defending AAC champion Bearcats have the best preseason ranking for a non-Power Five or BCS conference team since Boise State was No. 5 to begin 2011. The Broncos out of the Mountain West finished that season No. 8.

Rarities and firsts

■ Sun Belt rivals No. 22

Coastal Carolina and No. 23 Louisiana-Lafayette are ranked in the preseason poll for the first time. It's the first time the conference has had any teams ranked in the preseason.

■ No. 7 Iowa State is ranked in the preseason for the third straight season after having only one previous appearance in the preseason poll (1978). The Cyclones had never been ranked better than 20th to begin a season. They also have never been ranked higher at any point than the No. 8 they reached last year on the way to finishing ninth.

■ No. 10 North Carolina has its best preseason ranking since being No. 7 in 1997 during coach Mack Brown's first stint with the Tar Heels.

■ No. 17 Indiana is ranked in the preseason poll for the first time since 1968. The Hoosiers finished last season at No. 12, the second-best final ranking in program history. Indiana has never started and finished a season ranked.

Brickyard 200 organizers seek answers

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — One by one, drivers sped across the deteriorating curbing in the fifth and sixth turns late in the Brickyard 200. One by one, they veered off course.

When the NASCAR Cup Series race restarted after track workers removed the curbing, seven more cars had similar results in the same section of the Indianapolis road course Sunday.

It looked like a demolition derby and race organizers have plenty to reconsider before next year's race.

"Obviously, we had our problems today," NASCAR vice president of competition Scott Miller said. "We'll take a lot of learnings away and come back and put on a better event, obviously avoiding the problems we had today. But I think that we saw some exciting action out there and I think that the course itself puts on a really good show."

The entertainment value proved costly.

Nine of the 11 cars that didn't finish were involved in crashes. Many of those running at the end of the race, which was won by AJ Allmendinger, looked like they had been involved in a rough-and-tumble short track or dirt track race rather than a road course.

As a result, most Cup teams will spend this week scrambling to repair and rebuild their cars after a second straight road race. They return to an oval Sunday at Michigan, and for some it can't come soon enough.

Organizers will likely investigate whether the wear and tear of three days of practice, qualifying and racing on a rare cross-over weekend with the IndyCar, NASCAR Xfinity and Cup series played any role in the chaotic finish.

"The curbing is the same style we've had since we built it. It's been replaced, repaired," Indianapolis Motor Speedway President Doug Boles said. "We've not ever really had an issue with those curbs. We

looked at that section every session, looked at it every night, every morning there was no indication there was ever anything wrong with it, so it's a little bit of a surprise to us."

Drivers were surprised, too.

William Byron, the pole winner and the first to crash, prepared for the first Brickyard on the 14-turn, 2.4-mile course by working on a simulator with IndyCar driver Rinus VeeKay. And yet, Byron said he'd never experienced anything like it.

Others went public with their complaints.

"I'm missing the oval already," playoff contender Austin Dillon said after being knocked out in the second melee.

The wild finish overshadowed what had been a relatively safe, intriguing race. Only 11 of the first 78 laps were run under yellow — two coming at the end of the first two stages and two for debris on the track.

49ers counting on deep receiver corps

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Whoever ends up playing quarterback for San Francisco this season figures to have a much deeper set of receivers at his disposal than what the 49ers had last season.

With starters Deebo Smauel and Brandon Aiyuk dealing with injuries last season that limited them to just a handful of games when both were healthy and not much proven depth behind them, the Niners struggled to get a consistent downfield passing game going in 2020.

But now with the top two targets healthy to start the season, the return of Mohamed Sanu, a strong camp from special teams ace Trent Sherfield and the emergence of Jauan Jennings after sitting out his rookie season injured, Jimmy Garoppolo and Trey Lance should have plenty of options.

"We don't have 1, 2, 3 or 4 settled," coach Kyle Shanahan said Monday. "You guys know who's probably going to make it, at least with those groups, but those guys have got to go out there and play. I mean, we had a lot of young guys play last year by default with the injuries that happen and some of the situations we were in. I want those guys going out there competing and showing

they can play good football."

While Samuel and Aiyuk both figure to start, it's the performance of some of the other players that has been most encouraging so far this summer.

Sherfield caught just nine passes the previous two seasons in Arizona when he played mostly on special teams but has proven he can contribute as a receiver as well.

"We were hoping he could, we just didn't study him a ton on it," Shanahan said. "There wasn't a ton of tape on it. We liked how he was wired and how he could run and stuff and how physical he played on special teams. But getting him here right in OTAs, we saw the receiver ability."

That has been evident on the practice field and in the exhibition opener when he caught an 80-yard TD from Lance on Saturday against Kansas City.

Sherfield and Lance have built a strong connection getting plenty of time together as part of the second-team offense.

"Just building that relationship with him has been really, really good," Sherfield said. "Not just with Trey, but also with Jimmy, too. All the quarterbacks. ... All those guys and being able to work with all of them has been a really, really fun opportunity and

whenever the ball come my way, no matter who it's from, got to catch it and make a play."

Jennings has also been a bit of a surprise this season after being drafted in the seventh round in 2020. He started the season on the practice squad but hurt his hamstring and never got a chance to play.

But now he is showing off the skills that helped him catch 59 passes his final year at Tennessee when he was also dynamic after the catch with the ability to break tackles.

He caught two laterals from Lance on Saturday that he turned into gains of 11 and 12 yards for first downs, added a 26-yard catch and was a strong run blocker.

"He's a physical guy who loves to play football and I wanted to see it transfer over to the game and make sure he could still stay under enough control and do his assignments also," Shanahan said. "When he got his opportunities when the ball was thrown to him, he came through."

Sanu, a nine-year vet who played three games in San Francisco last season, is back for another stint and is showing he can be a part of the offense as well. He caught a TD pass in practice from Garoppolo on Monday to end a drive.

US women's soccer star Lloyd calling it a career

Associated Press

U.S. forward Carli Lloyd is retiring after a decorated career that included a pair of World Cup titles and two Olympic gold medals, as well as a bronze medal at the Tokyo Games.

The two-time FIFA World Player of the Year known for her dramatic hat trick in the 2015 World Cup final will play four as-yet unannounced friendly matches this fall with the U.S., and finish out the season with her club team, Gotham FC. She hinted for more than a year that she was nearing the end of her career and made it official Monday.

"Through all the goals, the trophies, the medals and the championships won, what I am most proud of is that I've been able to stay unapologetically me," said Lloyd, whose international career has spanned some 16 years.

"My journey has been hard, but I can honestly say I've stayed true to myself, to my teammates, my coaches, the media and the fans throughout my entire career and that is what I am most proud of. Everyone sees the moments of glory, but I have cherished the work behind the scenes and the adversity that I've had to overcome to get to those glorious moments."

The 39-year-old Lloyd scored a pair of goals in the United States' 4-3 victory over Australia in the bronze medal game in Japan earlier this month. She became the first American to score in four different Olympics, and her 10 total goals in the event set a new record among U.S. players.

She ranks second on the national team's all-time list with 312 appearances, and fourth with 128 goals.

Lloyd is probably best known for her three goals, all in the space of 16 minutes, to lead the United States to a 5-2 victory over Japan in the 2015 World Cup final. Her third goal in that match was a blistering strike from midfield.

At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Lloyd scored in overtime in a 1-0 victory over Brazil in the final. Four years later, she scored both goals in the gold-medal match against Japan at Wembley Stadium, becoming the only player to score winning goals in consecutive Olympic finals.

"Carli Lloyd is a true legend," U.S. coach Vlatko Andonovski said. "Her career was unique, and her success on the field is something all current and future National Team players should aspire to achieve. The way she approached her everyday training and career as a professional

is truly impressive and I've been honored to coach her."

A New Jersey native, Lloyd has played professionally for some 12 years, spanning time in the now-defunct Women's Professional Soccer league and in the National Women's Soccer League. She also had a brief stint with Manchester United in the Women's Super League.

Known for her steely focus and competitiveness, Lloyd suggested after the United States' run to the 2019 World Cup title that she would try to make the roster for the Tokyo Games, but it would likely be her last major tournament with the national team.

When the Olympics were pushed back a year because of the coronavirus pandemic, Lloyd underwent a knee procedure and worked her way back under a new trainer.

Cole sharp in return from COVID, Yanks top Angels

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Ten or so days ago, Gerrit Cole was playing catch with his wife, Amy, hoping his body would bounce back from COVID-19 quickly enough for him to help the Yankees soon.

Unsure how much he had in the tank, Cole's first pitch Monday night to Shohei Ohtani was 99 mph. The rest were plenty good, too.

Cole pitched two-hit ball into the sixth inning and struck out nine in his return from the COVID-19 injured list, and Joey Gallo hit a two-run homer as New York beat the Los Angeles Angels 2-1.

The Yankees have won 10 of 13 and pulled within two games of Boston for an AL wild-card spot. New York opens a three-game series against the rival Red Sox with a day-night doubleheader Tuesday.

Cole (11-6) went 5²/₃ innings, the only damage against him coming on Justin Upton's homer in the first. The Yankees' ace walked just one batter and threw 90 pitches, reaching 100 mph in his first appearance since allowing eight runs to Tampa Bay on July 29.

"I was a bit prepared for if I didn't know where the balls were going to go," Cole said. "The plan was just to attack the strike zone in the first and go from there."

Braves 12, Marlins 2: Freddie Freeman and Adam Duvall homered in a seven-run fourth inning, and surging Atlanta won at Miami.

Freeman also singled twice while Ozzie Albies had three hits and three RBIs for the NL East-leading Braves, who have won four straight and 11 of 13.

"Every guy's clicking right now at the same time, right when we needed it," Freeman said. "It's been fun. The line's been moving a lot lately, so that's all you can ask for as an offense."

Twins 5, Indians 4 (10): Jorge Polanco doubled with two outs in the bottom of the 10th inning to score Max Kepler and give host Minnesota a second straight walk-off win.

Polanco lined a double down the right-field line off Nick Wittgren (2-6) to score the winning runs.

Caleb Thielbar (5-0), Minnesota's fourth reliever, pitched a 1-2-3 final inning.

Rays 9, Orioles 2: Brett Phillips had an inside-the-park homer, Brandon Lowe went deep twice and AL East-leading Tampa Bay

dealt visiting Baltimore its 12th consecutive loss.

Kevin Kiermaier and Mike Brosseau also homered for the Rays, who are 12-1 against the Orioles this season.

Reds 14, Cubs 5: Jonathan India homered and drove in five runs, Wade Miley threw seven shutout innings and host Cincinnati sent Chicago to its 12th straight loss.

Joey Votto got the 2,000th hit of his career, a solid single in the seventh. Votto came up again later in the inning and drove in a run with another base hit during an eight-run Reds outburst.

Dodgers 2, Pirates 1: Max Muncy hit a tiebreaking home run in the eighth inning and host Los Angeles extended its winning streak to four games with a victory over Pittsburgh. Billy McKinney's solo shot tied the game in the seventh.

Giants 7, Mets 5: Kris Bryant hit two home runs, Kevin Gausman set a career high for wins and host San Francisco beat New York.

Brandon Crawford had four hits. Brandon Belt also homered and Wilmer Flores added two hits and an RBI. The Giants have won 16 of 21.

White Sox 5, Athletics 2: Eloy Jiménez hit a tiebreaking RBI single and Liam Hendriks got the save against his former team, leading host Chicago over Oakland.

Seby Zavala had two hits and two RBIs as the White Sox improved to an AL-best 40-22 at home. Luis Robert homered, and Dallas Keuchel (8-6) pitched five innings of two-run ball in his first win since July 9.

Royals 7, Astros 6: Salvador Perez drove in the go-ahead runs with a two-out single in the eighth inning, helping struggling Kansas City to a win at home over AL West-leading Houston.

Rockies 6, Padres 5: C.J. Cron hit a solo homer in the ninth inning and host Colorado handed San Diego its fifth loss in six games.

Arrieta signs with Padres

Jake Arrieta caught on with a playoff contender after getting released by the Chicago Cubs, signing a minor league deal with the San Diego Padres on Monday.

The former NL Cy Young Award winner was expected to make his first start for San Diego on Wednesday against the Colorado Rockies.

Woman says her night with Bauer left her terrified

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A woman wrapped her own hair around her neck as she sat on the witness stand to demonstrate the way she said Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Trevor Bauer used it to choke her into unconsciousness.

"I couldn't breathe. It almost felt like I was going to gag. I was gagging for air. Then I went unconscious," the woman said, crying through one of the more dramatic moments in more than three hours of testimony Monday. "It took me a while to remember who was even having sex with me, or where I was."

The 27-year-old San Diego woman is seeking a five-year restraining order against Bauer, who was placed on paid administrative leave on July 2 by Major League Baseball. That leave has been extended through Friday. MLB and police in Pasadena, Calif., are investigating the woman's allegations, and Bauer could face punishment under baseball's domestic violence policy.

The woman said she sought the protective order when she realized how long the police investigation was going to take.

She was granted a temporary civil restraining order against Bauer until evidence could be heard for the five-year order she is now seeking.

Bauer's representatives have repeatedly said everything that happened between him and the woman was consensual. He is expected to give his own version of events during the hearing, which is scheduled to last several days. The woman will return to the stand Tuesday morning.

Bauer's attorney Shawn Holley said Monday the woman gave Bauer every indication she wanted to be choked in the way she described, and otherwise consented to rough sexual treatment during the two nights she and Bauer spent together at the pitcher's home in Pasadena.

Holley read from private Instagram messages the woman sent Bauer in which she said she had "never been more turned on in my life" than when Bauer choked her out during their first encounter in April, and wanted more of the same when they got together again in May. Holley said during her opening statement that the woman told Bauer in the messages to give her "all the pain."

The woman testified that she in no way consented to how violent things got the second night when, as she was still reeling from being unconscious, Bauer punched her in the jaw, the cheekbones and the side of the head.