

## Austin pledges US support for Baltics

*Associated Press*

RIGA, Latvia — The U.S. will conduct more military exercises with Baltic nations such as Latvia, and look to provide increased training, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Wednesday, saying the U.S. may bring in additional troops from America if needed to bolster the region against any possible threat from Russia.

Speaking at a press conference with Latvia's Defense Minister Artis Pabriks, Austin said plans to do continuous rotations of forces into the Baltics will likely use troops from U.S. brigades in Romania and other parts of Europe, but "we can also bring in forces from the United States."

Austin is the first U.S. defense secretary to visit Latvia in nearly three decades, underscoring the increased importance of the Baltic nations, who sit at Russia's western edge. They have watched Russia's invasion of Ukraine and fear that they could be the next victims of Moscow's aggression. The Pentagon said the last defense chief to go to Latvia was William Perry in 1995.

Pabriks told reporters that his top priorities are to get more U.S. military enablers, adding that in order to defend his country,

his troops need "nitty gritty training" on a daily basis. He added that Latvia also needs additional financial assistance from the U.S. in order to buy new military equipment, and to beef up its air defense and coastal defense.

In two days of meetings in this Baltic capital, just a few hours' drive from the Russian border, Austin repeatedly re-enforced America's commitment to helping the region defend itself. He met with U.S. troops on Tuesday, including members of the Security Force Assistance Brigade that provides training to allies. He said Wednesday that he is looking to maintain use of the SFAB in the Baltic region going forward.

Austin's visit comes as the Russian war in Ukraine is in its sixth month, as Russia continues to make slow but incremental progress but has met growing counterattacks by Ukrainian forces in Russian-occupied areas of southern Ukraine. Ukraine has also been battling to hold off the Kremlin's forces in the industrial Donbas region in the east.

In a rapid-fire series of meetings on Wednesday with top Latvian leaders, including President Egils Levits at Riga Cas-

tle, Austin pledged America's steadfast commitment to stand with the Baltic region against any Russian aggression.

The three Baltic nations — Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — are all former Soviet republics, and were seized and annexed by Josef Stalin during World War II. They gained independence with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, and joined NATO in 2004, putting themselves under the military protection of the U.S. and its Western allies.

"We will enhance our rotational deployments in the region and intensify our training with our Baltic allies to further strengthen our combat credible posture in the region," Austin said, at the start of his meeting with Latvian Prime Minister Arturs Krišjanis Karins at the Council of Ministers on Wednesday morning.

During the press conference, Pabriks acknowledged worries about the threat from neighboring Belarus, which is a Russian ally.

He said he doesn't consider Belarus an independent nation and is instead just part of Russia. He said Latvia is routinely concerned about the threat along that border and watches it closely.

## China reaffirms threat to use force to annex Taiwan

*Associated Press*

BEIJING — China on Wednesday reaffirmed its threat to use military force to bring self-governing Taiwan under its control, amid threatening Chinese military exercises that have raised tensions between the sides to their highest level in years.

The lengthy policy statement issued by the Cabinet's Taiwan Affairs Office and its news department followed almost a week of missile firings and incursions into Taiwanese waters and airspace by Chinese warships and air force planes.

The actions have disrupted flights and shipping in a region crucial to global supply chains, prompting strong condemnation from the U.S., Japan and others.

An English-language version of the Chinese statement said Beijing would "work with the

greatest sincerity and exert our utmost efforts to achieve peaceful reunification."

"But we will not renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all necessary measures. This is to guard against external interference and all separatist activities," the statement said.

"We will always be ready to respond with the use of force or other necessary means to interference by external forces or radical action by separatist elements. Our ultimate goal is to ensure the prospects of China's peaceful reunification and advance this process," it said.

China says the threatening moves were prompted by a visit to Taiwan last week by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, but Taiwan says such visits are routine and that China used that merely as a pretext to up its threats.

In an additional response to Pelosi's visit,

China said it was cutting off dialogue on issues from maritime security to climate change with the U.S., Taiwan's chief military and political backer.

Taiwan's foreign minister warned Tuesday that the Chinese military drills reflect ambitions to control large swaths of the western Pacific, while Taipei conducted its own exercises to underscore its readiness to defend itself.

Beijing's strategy would include controlling the East and South China seas via the Taiwan Strait and imposing a blockade to prevent the U.S. and its allies from aiding Taiwan in the event of an attack, Joseph Wu told a news conference in Taipei.

Beijing extended the ongoing exercises without announcing when they would end, although they appear to have run their course for the time being.

# Army preps to fire HIMARS during drill

By SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

PALEMBANG, Indonesia — Indonesians gathered to watch as American and Indonesian aircraft delivered long-range artillery systems Tuesday morning at the airport in Palembang on Sumatra for a training exercise.

A U.S. Army High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, and an Indonesian CASE-SAR self-propelled howitzer rolled off military airlifters and quickly drove to firing positions at Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II International Airport.

HIMARS has made headlines recently with regular reports of rockets striking Russian targets. The United States has sent the Ukrainians 16 of the truck-mounted rocket systems that can hit targets up to 43 miles away with 500-pound, precision-guided ammu-

nition, according to the Pentagon.

The artillery drill at Palembang is part of Super Garuda Shield, an exercise involving 2,000 American and 2,000 Indonesian troops. The largest installment yet of an exercise held annually for 16 years kicked off Aug. 1 and ends Sunday.

Twenty-five members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's amphibious reconnaissance platoon and a similar number of Indonesian troops arrived at the airport Monday to secure the facility for the big guns.

The Marines and Indonesians sped around the flightline in a pair of black tactical vehicles scanning for danger as the artillery pieces rolled into position under their own power.

Several hundred reporters and military officials watched the exercise from outside a nearby pas-

senger terminal.

The artillery didn't fire a shot at the airport, but Indonesian troops threw out smoke canisters and loud booms sounded as crews went through procedures with the weapons.

The Army and Marines have trained in recent years with the HIMARS in several Indo-Pacific countries, including Japan, Australia and the Philippines.

The 17th Field Artillery Brigade out of Fort Lewis, Wash., brought three systems to Indonesia this month for live-fire training at Baturaja Training Area, also on Sumatra, on Friday.

There are 54 members of the brigade participating in Super Garuda Shield, fire platoon leader 2nd Lt. Danny Perez, 24, of El Paso, Texas, said in Palembang on Monday.

The troops spend many hours

becoming proficient before their live-fire training about twice a year, he said.

Perez said the HIMARS is usually transported on a C-17 Globemaster III, but it can just squeeze into an MC-130J Commando II, the special operations version of the Super Hercules airlifter that delivered the system to Palembang.

"This is the first time my platoon has used [an MC-130J]," he said.

Backing a HIMARS onto a tactical airlifter is like trying to fit a large pickup truck into a garage built for an economy car, Sgt. 1st Class Garrett Skelton, 31, of Key West, Fla., said Monday, also at Palembang.

The system is ready to fire within minutes of rolling off a plane, said Skelton, the platoon sergeant.

## USFK sees 4-month COVID high as S. Korea cases climb

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The U.S. military in South Korea reported a jump in new COVID-19 infections last week as the disease continued to spike again across the country.

U.S. Forces Korea counted 442 new cases in the week ending Monday, a 39% increase over 316 cases the prior week, according to an update on the command's website. USFK is responsible for roughly 28,500 U.S. troops across the peninsula.

The command's latest report is the highest number of weekly infections since April 11, when it recorded 524 cases. USFK reported its one-week pandemic high, 1,599 new infections, Jan. 10.

On Tuesday, South Korea reported 151,792 new COVID-19

cases, also its highest daily count in about four months, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency.

The spread of COVID-19 is "accelerating again" and daily infections could reach as high as 200,000 cases, Ministry of Health and Welfare vice minister Lee Ki-il said Wednesday.

"The government is going to strengthen inspections and supervision over facilities which are vulnerable to infections, for example, geriatric hospitals and facilities," Lee said.

Lee urged South Koreans to get COVID-19 vaccine booster shots; those at a high risk of developing complications should get a second booster shot. As of Tuesday, nearly 88% of South Korea's population of 51 million people have received a booster shot.

## Biden signs bill on burn pits health coverage expansion

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden, whose elder son Beau died of cancer years after deploying to Iraq, signed legislation on Wednesday expanding federal health care services for millions of veterans who served at military bases where toxic smoke billowed from huge "burn pits."

"We owe you," Biden said. "You're the backbone. You're the steel. You're the sinew. You're the very fiber that makes this country what it is."

The law, which Biden described as long overdue, caps a yearslong battle to ensure treatment for chronic illnesses that veterans have blamed on burn pits, which were used to dispose of chemicals, tires, plastics, medical equipment and human waste on military bases. Estimates of af-

ected troops run to 3 million or more.

Burn pits were used in Iraq and Afghanistan to dispose of chemicals, cans, tires, plastics, medical equipment and human waste. However, 70% of disability claims involving exposure to the pits were denied by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"For too long, too many veterans who got sick while fighting for our country had to fight for their care here at home," VA Secretary Denis McDonough said at Wednesday's ceremony.

The legislation will direct officials to assume that certain respiratory illnesses and cancers were related to burn pit exposure, helping veterans get disability payments without having to prove the illness was the result of their service.

# Ukraine: Blasts hit 9 Russian warplanes

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's air force said Wednesday that nine Russian warplanes were destroyed in a deadly string of explosions at an air base in Crimea, amid speculation the blasts were the result of a Ukrainian attack that would represent a significant escalation in the war.

Russia denied any aircraft were damaged in Tuesday's blasts — or that any attack took place.

Ukrainian officials stopped short of publicly claiming responsibility for the explosions, while mocking Russia's explanation that a careless smoker might have caused ammunition at the Saki air base to catch fire and blow up. Analysts said that explanation doesn't make sense

and that the Ukrainians could have used anti-ship missiles to strike the base.

If Ukrainian forces were, in fact, responsible for the blasts, it would be the first known major attack on a Russian military site on the Crimean Peninsula, which was seized from Ukraine by the Kremlin in 2014. Russian warplanes have used Saki to strike areas in Ukraine's south.

Crimea holds huge strategic and symbolic significance for both sides.

The Kremlin's demand that Ukraine recognize Crimea as part of Russia has been one of its key conditions for ending the fighting, while Ukraine has vowed to drive the Russians from the peninsula and all other occupied territories.

Hours after the blasts, Ukrai-

nian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy promised to do just that.

"This Russian war against Ukraine and against all of free Europe began with Crimea and must end with Crimea — its liberation," he said in his nightly address.

The explosions, which killed one person and wounded 14, sent tourists fleeing in panic as plumes of smoke rose over the coastline nearby. Video showed shattered windows and holes in the brickwork of some buildings.

One tourist, Natalia Lipovaya, said that "the earth was gone from under my feet" after the powerful blasts. "I was so scared," she said.

Sergey Milochinsky, a local resident, recalled hearing a

roar and seeing a mushroom cloud from his window. "Everything began to fall around, collapse," he said.

Crimea's regional leader, Sergei Aksyonov, said some 250 residents were moved to temporary housing after dozens of apartment buildings were damaged.

But Russian authorities sought to downplay the explosions on Wednesday, saying all hotels and beaches were unaffected on the peninsula, which is a popular tourist destination for many Russians.

A Ukrainian presidential adviser, Oleksiy Arestovych, cryptically said the blasts were either caused by a Ukrainian-made long-range weapon or the work of Ukrainian guerrillas operating in Crimea.

## Iranian operative charged in plot to murder Bolton

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An Iranian operative has been charged in a plot to murder former Trump administration national security adviser John Bolton in presumed retaliation for a U.S. airstrike that killed the country's most powerful general, offering hundreds of thousands of dollars to "eliminate" him, the Justice Department said Wednesday.

Shahram Poursafi, identified by U.S. officials as a member of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, is wanted by the FBI on charges related to the plot.

Prosecutors said the scheme started more than a year after Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard force and an architect of Tehran's proxy wars in the Middle East, was killed in a targeted airstrike at Baghdad's international airport in January 2020. After the strike, Bolton, who by then had

left his White House post, tweeted, "Hope this is the first step to regime change in Tehran."

Poursafi, 45, offered \$250,000 to people in Maryland and the District of Columbia to carry out the killing, including providing a work address, according to an FBI affidavit that was unsealed in a federal court in Washington.

In a statement, Bolton thanked the FBI and Justice Department for their work.

"While much cannot be said publicly right now, one point is indisputable: Iran's rulers are liars, terrorists and enemies of the United States," he said.

Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen, the Justice Department's top national security official, said it was "not the first time we have uncovered Iranian plots to exact revenge against individuals on U.S. soil and we will work tirelessly to expose and disrupt every one of these efforts."

## Trump says he took 5th in New York civil case

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump invoked the Fifth Amendment and wouldn't answer questions under oath in the New York attorney general's long-running civil investigation into his business dealings, the former president said in a statement Wednesday.

Trump arrived at state Attorney General Letitia James' offices in a motorcade shortly before 9 a.m., announcing more than an hour later that he "declined to answer the questions under the rights and privileges afforded to every citizen under the United States Constitution."

"I once asked, 'If you're innocent, why are you taking the Fifth Amendment?' Now I know the answer to that question," the statement said. "When your family, your company and all the people in your orbit have become the targets of an unfounded politi-

cally motivated Witch Hunt supported by lawyers, prosecutors and the Fake News Media, you have no choice."

As vociferous as Trump has been in defending himself in written statements and on the rally stage, legal experts have said the same strategy could have backfired in a deposition setting because anything he said could potentially be used in the criminal investigation.

His decision comes just days after FBI agents searched his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida as part of an unrelated federal probe into whether he took classified records when he left the White House.

The civil investigation, led by James, involves allegations that Trump's company, the Trump Organization, misstated the value of prized assets like golf courses and skyscrapers, misleading lenders and tax authorities.



# Omar ekes out House primary win over centrist

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Minnesota Rep. Ilhan Omar, a member of the progressive Squad, eked out a closer-than-expected Democratic primary victory Tuesday against a centrist challenger who questioned the incumbent's support for the "defund the police" movement.

The evening went far smoother for another progressive, Becca Balint, who won the Democratic House primary in Vermont — positioning her to become the first woman representing the state in Congress.

And a key race was unfolding in western Wisconsin, where Democratic Rep. Ron Kind's retirement after 26 years in office opens up a seat in a district that has been trending Republican.

Omar, who represents Min-

neapolis and is one of the left's leading voices in Congress, has defended calls to redirect public safety funding more into community-based programs. She squared off with former City Councilmember Don Samuels, whose north Minneapolis base suffers from more violent crime than other parts of the city.

Samuels argued that Omar is divisive and helped defeat a ballot question last year that sought to replace the city police department with a new public safety unit. He and others also successfully sued the city to force it to meet minimum police staffing levels called for in Minneapolis' charter.

Republicans see a pickup opportunity in Wisconsin's 3rd Congressional District, the seat being vacated by Democratic incum-

bent Kind.

The district covers a swath of counties along Wisconsin's western border with Minnesota and includes La Crosse and Eau Claire. Republican Derrick Van Orden was unopposed in his primary Tuesday and has Trump's endorsement.

Van Orden narrowly lost to Kind in the 2020 general election. He attended Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally near the White House but has said he never stepped foot on the grounds of the Capitol during the insurrection.

State Sen. Brad Pfaff topped three other Democrats to secure the party's nomination and will face Van Orden in the fall. Pfaff, a onetime state agriculture secretary, had previously worked for Kind and received his endorsement.

Vermont is the last state in the country yet to add a female member to its congressional delegation. Balint, who immediately becomes the favorite in November's general election, would also be the first openly gay member of Congress from Vermont.

Balint is vying to fill the state's lone House seat, which is being vacated by Rep. Peter Welch who is running for Senate and easily secured the Democratic nomination on Tuesday. Welch is trying to succeed Sen. Patrick Leahy, the Senate's longest-serving member, who is retiring.

Balint defeated Lt. Gov. Molly Gray, an ex-staffer for Welch who had been backed by Leahy and former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean. In November, she'll face Liam Madden, a Marine Corps veteran.

## US inflation slows from 40-year peak but still high

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Falling gas prices gave Americans a slight break from the pain of high inflation last month, though overall price increases slowed only modestly from the four-decade high that was reached in June.

Consumer prices jumped 8.5% in July compared with a year earlier, the government said Wednesday, down from a 9.1% year-over-year jump in June. On a monthly basis, prices were unchanged from June to July, the smallest such rise in more than two years.

Besides gasoline, among the consumer purchases whose prices sank from June to Ju-

ly were airfares, which plunged nearly 8%. Hotel room costs fell 2.7%, used car prices 0.4%. Such items had previously delivered some of the economy's steepest price jumps.

Those declines lowered so-called core inflation, a measure that excludes the volatile food and energy categories to provide a clearer picture of underlying inflation. Core prices rose just 0.3% from June, the smallest month-to-month increase since April. And compared with a year ago, core inflation amounted to 5.9% in July, the same year-over-year increase as in June.

Wednesday's report raised hopes that a

modest slowdown in inflation might enable the Federal Reserve to raise short-term interest rates by less than had been anticipated when it meets in late September. Many economists had forecast that it would increase its benchmark rate three-quarters of a point for a third straight time. But financial markets are now predicting that a half-point increase is more likely.

The prospect of slower inflation and smaller Fed rate hikes buoyed the stock market as trading began Wednesday, with futures pointing to a solid increase in the S&P 500 index.

## Afghan man charged in killings of Muslims in New Mexico

Associated Press

The ambush killings of four Muslim men in Albuquerque, N.M., shook the community but inspired a flood of information, including a tip that led to the arrest of a local Muslim man originally from Afghanistan who knew the victims, authorities said.

Muhammad Syed, 51, was arrested on Monday after a traffic

stop more than 100 miles away from his home in Albuquerque. He was charged with killing two victims and was identified as the prime suspect in the other two slayings, authorities announced Tuesday.

The Muslim community is breathing "an incredible sigh of relief," said Ahmad Assed, president of the Islamic Center of New Mexico. "Lives have been turned

upside down."

The first killing last November was followed by three more between July 26 and Aug. 5.

Police Chief Harold Medina said it was not clear yet whether the deaths should be classified as hate crimes, serial killings or both.

"The offender knew the victims to some extent, and an interpersonal conflict may have led to

the shootings," a police statement said, although investigators were still working to identify how they had crossed paths.

When asked specifically if Syed, a Sunni Muslim, was angry that his daughter married a Shiite Muslim, Deputy Police Cmdr. Kyle Hartsock did not respond directly. He said "motives are still being explored fully to understand what they are."

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Ex-court mediator accused of sending feces in mail

**OH** COLUMBUS — An Ohio man is in custody after being accused of sending about three-dozen feces-filled letters to lawmakers around the country, including Ohio's 25 Republican state senators in early July.

Police arrested Richard Steinle, 77, from Mogadore. Steinle is charged with sending "injurious articles as non-mailable," violating a federal law that prohibits mailing certain things, including hazardous material, according to court records.

The misdemeanor charge carries a maximum prison sentence of one year and a \$100,000 fine.

The feces mailed in early July prompted an investigation by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, but investigators said Steinle has been sending such letters since August 2021 to elected officials in Washington, D.C.; Kentucky; California and Ohio.

### Buffalo gores owner to death, injures deputy

**KS** BUSHTON — A buffalo charged and seriously injured a Kansas sheriff's deputy one day before the animal's owner was found gored to death, authorities say.

Ellsworth County Sheriff Murray Marston said in a news release that the buffalo had wandered onto a state highway and the deputy was trying to get the animal back in a pasture when it charged.

A deputy from neighboring Rice County killed the buffalo when it appeared that it was preparing to charge again at the downed deputy.

That deputy is in stable condition, Marston said.

The next day, dispatchers received a call from a woman who said she had found her nephew, Scott Schroeder, 56, of rural Bushton, dead in a pen and that she thought a buffalo had killed him.

Schroeder owned at least 20 buffalo that were being kept at that location, Marston said.

### Parents of boy who shot sister charged

**IN** MUNCIE — The mother and father of a 6-year-old eastern Indiana boy who fatally shot his 5-year-old sister in their home were each charged with four counts of neglect, a prosecutor said.

If convicted of the most serious charge — level one felony neglect of a dependent resulting in death — Jacob Grayson, 28, and his wife, Kimberly Grayson, 27, could each face 20-40 years in prison and fines of up to \$10,000.

First responders discovered the girl with a gunshot wound to her head at the home in Muncie, 60 miles northeast of Indianapolis.

She was taken to IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital, where she was pronounced dead.

The boy said he went to a safe in his parents' bedroom while his mother was napping, turned a key to unlock the safe

and accidentally shot his sister while playing with the gun, Muncie Police Officer Andrew Sell said in an affidavit.

### Trace of 'bone-crushing' dog found at fossil site

**TN** JOHNSON CITY — East Tennessee State University said researchers have discovered evidence of the extinct "bone-crushing" dog at a fossil site that also included herbivores, a saber-tooth cat and alligators.

The university said it identified the Borophagus dog at the Gray Fossil Site by finding a single right humerus upper arm bone.

The "bone-crushing" animal had powerful teeth and jaws.

The university said this is the first evidence of a dog there.

The animal has been discovered at dozens of fossil sites across the U.S. and Mexico.

### Officials warn of traffic delays from bridge work

**DE** WILMINGTON — Drivers are being warned to expect traffic delays when a major construction project to completely rebuild the driving surface of the Delaware Memorial Bridge begins next month.

The News Journal reported that the project will remove the top two inches of the north-bound (New Jersey-bound) side of the bridge deck and replace it with an "ultra high-performance concrete," according to the Delaware River

and Bay Authority.

In the first phase of the project, two lanes of the Delaware side of the bridge will be closed to traffic, with a third lane shut down overnight.

The second phase of the project — expected to run from Feb. 1 to May 25, 2023 — will close the left two lanes along the entire length of the bridge.

The third phase, estimated for Sept. 5 to Nov. 21 of 2023, will close the two right lanes of the New Jersey side of the bridge.

### Coastal tribe builds tsunami refuge tower

**WA** TOKELAND — There's a new option to escape a tsunami for people on the southwest coast of Washington.

The Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe has dedicated a 50-foot tall evacuation tower in Tokeland, the Northwest News Network reported.

Tokeland is on a long, flat peninsula with no high ground within walking or running distance for many there. The tower stands close to the midpoint of the nearly 3-mile-long Tokeland Peninsula.

The tower platforms have a capacity of more than 400 people, which is considerably more than the tribal population of the small Shoalwater Bay reservation.

The Tokeland evacuation tower resembles free-standing tsunami towers built in Japan, but officials said it's the first of its type in North America.

— From wire reports

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# Goodell defends Watson suspension appeal

Associated Press

BEREA, Ohio — NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said he feels the league needed to keep pushing for a yearlong suspension for Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson because of his “egregious” and “predatory behavior” toward women.

Speaking at the owners’ meetings Tuesday in Bloomington, Minn., Goodell addressed the league’s decision to appeal a six-game suspension given to Watson by Sue L. Robinson, a former federal judge appointed by the NFL and NFL Players Association as an independent league disciplinary officer.

Robinson found Watson violated the league’s conduct policy after he was accused by two dozen women of sexual assault or harassment while he played for Houston. Watson has settled 23 of the 24 lawsuits filed by the women, though he has denied any wrongdoing.

The league has been seeking

an indefinite suspension and fine for Watson, and felt Robinson’s six-game ban wasn’t enough. Goodell cited the collective bargaining agreement for empowering the league to seek further discipline.

“Either party could certainly challenge and appeal that and that was something that we felt was our right to do as well as NFLPA,” Goodell said. “So we decided it was the right thing to do.”

Watson’s fate now rests with Peter C. Harvey, a former New Jersey attorney general hand-picked by Goodell to handle the appeal. Harvey has previously worked as an arbiter in league cases.

Goodell said the league is pushing for a full-year penalty for Watson because of the evidence against the 26-year-old, who was accused of being sexually inappropriate with the women during massage therapy sessions while with the Texans in 2020 and 2021.

In her 16-page ruling, Rob-

inson concluded Watson violated the league’s personal conduct policy with his behavior, using both “egregious” and “predatory” to describe his actions.

Goodell was asked why the league is seeking a harsher punishment.

“Because we’ve seen the evidence,” he said. “She (Robinson) was very clear about the evidence. She reinforced the evidence, that there was multiple violations here and they were egregious, and that it was predatory behavior.”

“Those were always things we felt was really important for us to address and in a way that’s responsible.”

Goodell doesn’t have a sense of when Harvey will issue a decision. There’s no specific deadline for Harvey, but the appeal policy requires that it be “expedited.”

There also remains the possibility the sides could reach a settlement.

While attending the meetings

in Minnesota, Cleveland owner Jimmy Haslam had little to say about the ongoing appeal.

“We’ll respect and honor the process,” he told reporters.

Meanwhile, Watson’s playing status for the Browns’ exhibition opener is unknown.

Cleveland coach Kevin Stefanski didn’t reveal whether Watson will play in Friday’s game in Jacksonville. Stefanski said the team has a plan but he won’t make it public until he tells his players.

“We have a framework for how we are going to handle this preseason,” he said. “As you know, you always reserve the right to change your mind based on how practice goes and those type of things, but we are pretty confident in the plan we have.”

Stefanski said Watson will make the trip to Florida. The three-time Pro Bowler has not played since 2020. He sat out last season after demanding a trade and before the allegations came to light.

## Steelers’ Harris seeks to expand leadership role

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Pittsburgh Steelers running back Najee Harris enjoyed a breakout rookie season last year.

Harris has been slowed by a foot injury during his second training camp with the Steelers. But the brief summer setback has allowed Harris an opportunity to pause from the daily on-field training camp practice grind and expand his leadership role.

“It has been a blessing in disguise in a way ... not to get hurt, but to see the other younger guys get more reps,” Harris said. “It has been pretty frustrating, but it’s good, though. There have been a lot of other guys who come in here and we get to see their skillsets.”

Last season, Harris led the NFL with 381 touches and finished second in yards after contact behind

only Indianapolis’ Jonathan Taylor.

Harris, the No. 24 overall pick in 2021, certainly welcomes a heavier workload, but he’s also expressed his desire to see Pittsburgh find a complementary back.

Benny Snell and Anthony McFarland are the leading candidates to fill in behind Harris.

Snell, a 2019 fourth-round pick, is entering his fourth season with the Steelers. The 5-foot-10, 224-pound Snell has played in 46 games with five starts in three seasons.

McFarland, a 2020 fourth-round selection, is entering his third year with Pittsburgh. The 5-foot-8, 193-pound change-of-pace back has appeared in 13 games.

“Anthony is really controlling the role he has and he’s really

been making explosive runs,” Harris said. “Benny, being the veteran, he’s a reliable guy and that’s the kind of stuff you expect from Benny. Anthony and Benny have been looking great all camp. I think everybody in the running back room has looked great all camp.”

Harris hurt his foot during the Steelers’ first padded practice and he’s missed the team’s last four workouts since. Harris shrugged off the severity of his injury on Saturday and noted that he’s been rehabbing his foot and swimming in the pool while sidelined.

“I wouldn’t be walking if it was serious,” Harris said. “(But), I injured it and that’s why I’m not practicing.”

Harris enjoyed a Pro Bowl season as a rookie. He had 307 car-

ries and 1,200 rushing yards in addition to 74 catches and 467 receiving yards, all tops among rookie running backs in franchise history. Harris led all NFL running backs in receptions and finished third among running backs in receiving yards.

In his second season, Harris hopes to fill an offensive leadership void left after two-time Super Bowl-winning quarterback Ben Roethlisberger retired during the offseason.

“I just want to be better than last year,” Harris said. “Not statistically, but just as a person. I want to be someone the team can rely on. On-field wise, I think the expectation and the standard has already been set for what I need to achieve. We’ll wait until (the first game against) the Bengals for that to happen.”



# Federal judge denies LIV golfers' request

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — A federal judge in California ruled Tuesday that three golfers who joined Saudi-backed LIV Golf will not be able to compete in the PGA Tour's post-season.

U.S. District Judge Beth Labson Freeman made her decision in San Jose after attorneys for the sides each spoke for about an hour. Freeman said she didn't consider the golfers faced irreparable harm because of the big money they were guaranteed by joining LIV, a key issue in the case.

"There simply is no irreparable harm in this case," PGA Tour attorney Elliot Peters said.

The three suspended golfers were seeking a temporary restraining order, which Freeman denied. Talor Gooch, Matt Jones and Hudson Swafford claimed they should be able to play where they want to, each saying in letters last month to the PGA Tour, "I am a free agent and independent contractor." They are among 10 players who filed an antitrust lawsuit against the PGA Tour last week — including Phil Mickelson.

Robert Walters, an antitrust litigator representing the golfers, noted this would be their opportunity on a big playoff stage, "effectively the Super Bowl of golf" because of its "significant income opportunities." Freeman responded that the LIV Tour earnings potential was also great and asked

whether players might have been able to wait until the conclusion of the PGA Tour season to depart for the new tour.

Walters argued there were only 48 spots and they would have filled up according to LIV Golf CEO Greg Norman, to which Freeman said she agreed with that stance but that the golfers stood to gain far more financially joining LIV than the money they might have earned on the PGA Tour.

"This is an extraordinarily attractive financial opportunity but it's much more than that," Walters said, saying the harm done is that "players lose intangible benefits" such as qualifications for the major tournaments as well as other marquee invitations.

"This is the holy grail because everybody wants to compete in and prevail in major championships, but it's not just the majors," Walters said. He noted that the PGA Tour inferred these golfers would put a "taint" or "stench" on the tour's image by playing, perhaps even wearing LIV Tour gear in PGA Tour tournaments.

"We're disappointed that Talor Gooch, Hudson Swafford and Matt Jones won't be allowed to play golf. No one gains by banning golfers from playing," LIV Golf said in a statement.

The first of three FedEx Cup playoff events begin Thursday. Two tournaments offer \$15 million prize funds, and the player

who wins the FedEx Cup at East Lake in Atlanta gets \$18 million — thus the urgency for Freeman to rule. This case could go to trial next year, with the possibility of an injunction hearing in late September or early October, according to Peters.

Peters said lifting the suspensions of the golfers and allowing them to play would "change the status quo" for the PGA Tour and "give them a fabulous platform" to promote the LIV tour while competing in a PGA event.

"I think it's a huge problem," he said. "... The Commissioner needs the ability to protect the Tour. This is a very dire situation for the Tour."

Gooch (No. 20), Jones (No. 65) and Swafford (No. 67) are among nine players who have joined LIV Golf and finished the regular season among the top 125 in the FedEx Cup standings. The other six who joined LIV Golf are not asking to play in the tour's post-season.

PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan issued a memo to members that included: "With today's news, our players, fans and partners can now focus on what really matters over the next three weeks: the best players in the world competing in the FedEx Cup Playoffs, capping off an incredibly compelling season with the crowning of the FedEx Cup champion at the Tour Championship."

# Fired-up reliever Díaz has Mets fans dancing

Associated Press

Trumpets blare, the bullpen door pops open — here comes Edwin Díaz, baseball's most dominant closer.

Cue the fiesta at Citi Field.

Once the regular target of angry boos, and decried a rotten egg in the Big Apple, Díaz has become the toast of the town with the New York Mets, one electric save at a time.

The All-Star reliever is overpowering hitters at a record rate during a sensational season, helping the Mets build up their NL East cushion and putting him in the Cy Young Award conversation.

"How he's been able to kind of reinvent himself and really just maximize what he can do,

it's just really special," New York slugger Pete Alonso said.

"We know that when Eddie gets the ball, he's going to shut the door."

In addition to his pitching, Díaz's newfound popularity in Queens is largely due to his catchy entrance song "Narco" by Blasterjaxx & Timmy Trumpet. When the Mets take a lead into the ninth inning, "Sound the horns!" is what fans proclaim from living-room couches to the upper levels of Citi Field.

The tune sets off a two-minute party all around the ballpark — with Mr. and Mrs. Met pretending to play trumpets as Díaz jogs in from the outfield and warms up on the mound.

Young and old bounce gleefully in the stands, clapping right along and mimicking the dancing mascots by using empty beer and water bottles for makeshift horns.

It's almost like a cut from the movie "Major League," with Ricky "Wild Thing" Vaughn summoned from the bullpen to "give 'em the heater" as the crowd goes crazy.

Then, most fans remain standing, roaring and rocking with each pitch as a pumped-up Díaz often strikes out the side to secure another win.

It's a fun, familiar scene in New York this season that went viral nationwide last weekend while the hard-throwing Díaz saved three games in a pivotal

series against Atlanta.

The only hiccup came Thursday night, when he entered earlier than usual in the eighth. Perhaps caught off guard with scheduled promotions running, stadium staff didn't get "Narco" going until Díaz was already on the mound.

"I was trying to run (in) at the same pace of the song," he said with a laugh.

Affectionately nicknamed Sugar, the slender right-hander from Puerto Rico entered Wednesday with a 1.39 ERA and 26 saves in 29 chances this year. He had a 0.86 WHIP to go with 91 strikeouts in 45½ innings, and was chosen NL reliever of the month for June and July.

# Dodgers top Twins for 9th straight win

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Max Muncy continued to rebound from a slow start to the season with a home run and Julio Urias pitched seven strong innings as the Los Angeles Dodgers extended their winning streak to a season-best nine games with a 10-3 victory Tuesday night over the Minnesota Twins.

The defeat knocked the Twins into a first-place tie in the AL Central with the Cleveland Guardians, the first time they have not held sole possession of the top spot in the division since June 24.

“I will put stock into what the standings look like on the last day of the season; that’s when I’m going to do it,” Minnesota manager Rocco Baldelli said. “I’m not surprised that they’re playing well. They’re a really good club. We know that. We see them all the time. We know what they’re all about. They’re playing good. We have to find the groove again.”

Trea Turner had two doubles and drove in three runs, while Cody Bellinger had a two-run double as the Dodgers improved to a major league-best 76-33, while going 31-5 since

June 29. Los Angeles matched a season high with eight doubles.

In his first game back from the injured list because of an abdominal strain, the Dodgers’ Justin Turner had two hits and an RBI.

“Scary enough, I think there is still a lot more in there for the whole team,” Muncy said of the Dodgers’ potential. “It’s been looking really good lately. We’ve been looking good all year long, yet at the same time, not all of us have gotten going at once. Hopefully we save that for the playoffs.”

**Mets 6, Reds 2:** Francisco Lindor and Jeff McNeil both homered and drove in two runs, leading Carlos Carrasco and streaking New York past visiting Cincinnati.

**Padres 7, Giants 4:** Manny Machado hit a game-ending, three-run homer and Juan Soto connected for his first long ball with host San Diego, which overcame a blown save by Josh Hader to beat San Francisco and stop a five-game skid.

**Mariners 1, Yankees 0 (13):** Pinch-hitter Luis Torrens singled with one out in the 13th inning to score Eugenio Suárez, and host Seattle edged New

York in a game dominated by the starting pitching of Gerrit Cole and Luis Castillo.

**Diamondbacks 6, Pirates 4:** Pittsburgh infielder Rodolfo Castro briefly lost his phone on the field and host Arizona won behind the pitching of rookie Tommy Henry.

**Nationals 6, Cubs 5:** Joey Meneses hit a go-ahead two-run homer in the eighth inning, Keibert Ruiz went deep twice and Washington regrouped to win at Chicago after blowing a three-run lead to snap a six-game losing streak.

**Astros 7, Rangers 5:** Aledmys Díaz hit a grand slam and host Houston roughed up Texas’ Martín Pérez in a comeback win.

**Royals 4-2, White Sox 2-3:** Lenyn Sosa hit his first major league home run and Yoan Moncada also connected as Chicago, minus injured All-Star shortstop Tim Anderson, salvaged a split of the doubleheader at Kansas City.

Vinnie Pasquantino homered in both games, becoming the 13th different Royals player to accomplish the feat.

**Braves 9, Red Sox 7 (11):** Austin Riley had a go-ahead,

two-run single in the 11th inning and Atlanta rallied to win at Boston.

**Guardians 5, Tigers 2:** Shane Bieber pitched seven dominant innings, Oscar Gonzalez drove in two runs and visiting Cleveland got its third straight win.

**Orioles 6, Blue Jays 5:** Ronged Odor hit a two-run homer in the bottom of the eighth inning, and host Baltimore rallied to top Toronto.

**Brewers 5, Rays 3:** Andrew McCutchen and Kolten Wong each drove in two runs and host Milwaukee won for the second time in eight games.

**Phillies 4, Marlins 1:** J.T. Realmuto homered, doubled and drove in two runs, Zack Wheeler allowed one run in six sharp innings and host Philadelphia won its sixth straight.

**Angels 5, Athletics 1:** Shohei Ohtani withstood another injury scare and pitched six scoreless innings to go with his team-leading 25th home run, as Los Angeles won at Oakland.

**Rockies 16, Cardinals 5:** Ryan McMahon hit a 495-foot homer, the longest drive by a Colorado player ever at Coors Field, in a win over St. Louis.

# World Cup may start a day earlier than scheduled

Associated Press

GENEVA — The World Cup in Qatar could start one day earlier than scheduled with FIFA looking at a plan to let the host nation play Ecuador on Nov. 20, a person familiar with the proposal told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The person said a decision could be made within days by a committee comprised of FIFA president Gianni Infantino and the heads of the six continental soccer bodies.

The proposal to create a 29-day tournament instead of the long-planned 28 has been favored by Qatari officials and

South American soccer body CONMEBOL, with talks also involving the Qatar and Ecuador soccer federations, the person said.

The World Cup is set to open on Nov. 21, a Monday, with the Netherlands facing Senegal at 1 p.m. local time in Doha. Qatar and Ecuador are also in Group A but that match was scheduled to start six hours later on the same day.

The match schedule — with the official opening ceremony at the third match when Qatar was scheduled to play — was finalized after the draw was made in Doha on April 1.

A Sunday start for the World Cup had been ruled out several years ago when a shorter, 28-day schedule requiring four games each day during the group stage was agreed to by FIFA after talks with influential leagues in Europe which will play club games through Nov. 13.

However, a Qatar-Ecuador game involves few players who are with European clubs and would give the host nation an exclusive day to open its tournament.

The opening ceremony could now actually be before the opening game, at Al Bayt Stadium,

and open up the early evening slot on Monday for the Netherlands and Senegal.

The 2022 World Cup is the first in the tournament’s 92-year history to be played outside of the traditional northern hemisphere summer. The previous 21 editions were all played between late-May and the end of July.

FIFA finalized a decision in 2015 to avoid the searing heat in Qatar’s summer and move to November and December, despite opposition from most of European soccer unhappy at shutting down their domestic leagues for several peak weeks.