

Mideast mediators hopeful following talks

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Mediators trying to end the Israel-Hamas war expressed hope for an imminent deal Friday, saying two days of talks had wrapped up in Qatar and they aimed to reconvene in Cairo next week to seal an agreement to stop the fighting.

President Joe Biden said he was optimistic about the prospects for a ceasefire and hostage release deal. “We are closer than we’ve ever been” to an agreement, he said.

Israel did not immediately respond and a statement from Hamas did not sound enthusiastic about the latest proposed deal to end the 10-month-old devastating war in Gaza and free Israeli hostages held in the territory. A cease-fire is seen as the best hope for heading off an even larger regional conflict.

Both sides had agreed in principle to the plan President Joe Biden announced on May 31. But Hamas has proposed amendments and Israel has suggested clarifications, lead-

ing each side to accuse the other of trying to tank a deal.

Hamas has rejected Israel’s demands, which include a lasting military presence along the border with Egypt and a line bisecting Gaza where it would search Palestinians returning to their homes to root out militants.

The statement from the mediators — Qatar, the United States and Egypt — said U.S. officials had presented a proposal that would bridge the gaps remaining between both sides’ positions. Teams will continue working in the coming days on how to implement the specifics of the proposal, they said.

“Senior officials from our governments will reconvene in Cairo before the end of next week with the aim to conclude the deal under the terms put forward today,” the statement said.

Hamas quickly cast doubt on whether an agreement was within reach.

In a statement, the militant group said the latest proposal diverged significantly from the

previous iteration they had agreed to in principle, implying they were not disposed to accept it.

The new push for an end to the Israel-Hamas war came as the Palestinian death toll in Gaza climbed past 40,000, according to Gaza health authorities, and fears remained high that Iran and Hezbollah militants in Lebanon would attack Israel in retaliation for the killings of top militant leaders.

International mediators believe the best hope for calming tensions would be a deal between Israel and Hamas to halt the fighting and secure the release of Israeli hostages.

International diplomacy to prevent the war from spreading intensified Friday, with the British and French foreign ministers making a joint trip to Israel.

British Foreign Secretary David Lammy and French Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné appeared hopeful after meeting Friday with Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz.

Lammy said Israeli officials told them they were hoping they were on the verge of sealing a deal.

“As we head now to 315 days of war, the time for a deal for those hostages to be returned, for aid to get in, in the quantities that are necessary in Gaza, and for the fighting to stop is now,” Lammy said.

Speaking alongside him, Séjourné called any action to destabilize negotiations unacceptable.

Katz said in a statement that he told his British and French counterparts that if Iran attacks Israel, Israel expects its allies not just to help it defend itself, but to join in attacking Iran back.

He also warned Iran — which backs Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthi rebels in Yemen, all of whom have attacked Israel since the Gaza war started — to stop the attacks.

“Iran is the head of the axis of evil, and the free world must stop it now before it’s too late,” Katz said on X.

Ukrainian civilians urged to evacuate eastern city

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Military authorities in the eastern Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk on Friday urged civilians to speed up their evacuation because the Russian army is quickly closing in on what has for months been one of Moscow’s key targets in the war.

Pokrovsk officials said in a Telegram post Friday that Russian troops are “advancing at a fast pace. With every passing day there is less and less time to collect personal belongings and

leave for safer regions.”

Ukrainian troops have been trying to divert the Kremlin’s military effort from the front line in Ukraine to Russian soil by launching a bold incursion across the border into Russia’s Kursk region. But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had warned on Thursday that Pokrovsk and other nearby towns in the Donetsk region were “facing the most intense Russian assaults.”

The urgency of the evacuation of civilians has under-

scored the high-stakes gamble Ukraine is making by taking the war into Russia with its ongoing Kursk assault that started Aug. 6.

The attack is a daring attempt to change the dynamics of the 2½-year conflict, but it could backfire and leave Ukraine’s shorthanded defense on the front line at the mercy of Russia’s push. The Kremlin’s forces have had battlefield momentum and superior forces in eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk region since the spring.

Russia’s slow slog across Donetsk this year has been costly in terms of troops and armor, but its gains have mounted up.

Pokrovsk, which had a pre-war population of about 60,000, is one of Ukraine’s main defensive strongholds and a key logistics hub in the Donetsk region. Its capture would compromise Ukraine’s defensive abilities and supply routes.

It would bring Russia closer to its stated aim of capturing the Donetsk region than ever before.

Trump hammers Harris on inflation

Associated Press

BEDMINSTER, N.J. — Former President Donald Trump said Thursday he thinks he's "entitled to personal attacks" on his Democratic rival, adding he's "very angry" at Vice President Kamala Harris and questions her intelligence.

Trump was asked during a news conference whether his campaign needs more discipline as he faces a Democratic ticket newly energized since Harris replaced President Joe Biden as the party's presidential candidate.

"As far as the personal attacks, I'm very angry at her because of what she's done to the country. I'm very angry at her that she would weaponize the justice system against me and other people, very angry at her. I think I'm entitled to personal attacks," Trump said at his New Jersey golf club, where he invited reporters in his quest to sad-

dle Harris with Biden's unpopular economic record.

"I don't have a lot of respect for her intelligence and I think she'll be a terrible president," he added.

There is no evidence that Biden or Harris weaponized the criminal justice system to target Trump, who has pledged to retaliate with criminal investigations of Biden and his relatives if he wins.

Trump also took issue with Democrats branding him and his running mate, Ohio Sen. JD Vance, as "weird." Harris is "weird in her policy," he said.

Trump stuck close to his scripted economic message for more than half an hour, reading from a binder in front of him. Later, he veered into familiar stories he enjoys telling at his rallies. A day earlier, he had struggled to make a sustained case for his economic policies during a meandering speech

that his campaign had billed as a major policy address.

"Kamala Harris is a radical California liberal who broke the economy, broke the border and broke the world, frankly," Trump told reporters.

Trump was flanked by popular grocery store items, including coffee, breakfast cereals and pastries, laid out on tables as he highlighted the cost of everything from food to car insurance to housing. Posters showed the increase of prices for grocery staples.

At one point, as Trump talked about the 2020 election he lost, he noticed a box of cereal.

"I haven't seen Cheerios in a long time," Trump said. "I'm going to take them back to my cottage."

As he turned to walk back inside, Trump did not respond to shouted questions about when he last went grocery shopping.

The event came one day after

the Labor Department announced year-over-year inflation had reached its lowest level in more than three years in July — the latest sign that the worst price spike in four decades is fading.

But consumers are still feeling the impact of higher prices — something Trump's campaign is banking on to motivate voters this fall.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that Americans are more likely to trust Trump over Harris when it comes to handling the economy and immigration, issues he has put at the center of his case for returning to the White House.

Trump predicted he would beat Harris by more that he would have beaten Biden by "once she's exposed."

"People don't know who she is," Trump said.

Harris proposes new tax breaks in bid to lower costs

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Vice President Kamala Harris is promoting a broad set of economic proposals that would offer new tax breaks and lower the cost of living for Americans, aiming to address the financial concerns that are at the top of the mind for voters and that Republican Donald Trump is trying to lay at her doorstep.

Harris was to be in the battleground state of North Carolina on Friday to lay out her plans, including a proposal for a federal ban on price gouging on groceries. She also is proposing \$25,000 in down payment help for certain first-time homebuyers and tax incentives for builders of starter homes, among other things.

Harris is calling for tax breaks aimed at families, as well as middle- and lower-income people. She would expand the child tax credit to up to \$3,600 — and \$6,000 for children in their first year of life. Harris would expand the earned income tax credit to cover people in lower-income jobs without children, which the campaign estimates would cut their effective tax rate by \$1,500. Harris also wants to lower health insurance premiums through the Affordable Care Act.

Many of the changes would require congressional approval, far from a given in the current political environment.

Harris is trying to blunt Trump's attacks on her as "a radical California liberal who

broke the economy," as he put in during a speech Thursday at his golf club in Bedminster, N.J.

Year-over-year inflation has reached its lowest level in more than three years, but food prices are still 21% above where they were three years ago. A Labor Department report this week showed that nearly all of July's inflation reflected higher rental prices and other housing costs, a trend that, according to real-time data, is easing. As a result, housing costs should rise more slowly in the coming months, contributing to lower inflation.

Harris' grocery pricing proposal would instruct the Federal Trade Commission to penalize "big corporations" that engage in price spikes and singles out a lack of competition in the meat-

packing industry for driving up meat prices.

Polls show that Americans are more likely to trust Trump over Harris when it comes to handling the economy: Some 45% say Trump is better positioned to handle the economy, while 38% say that about Harris. About 1 in 10 trust neither Harris nor Trump to better handle the economy, according to the latest Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll.

Riding a resurgence of enthusiasm since the Democrats' campaign reboot, Harris has embarked on a battleground state blitz in recent weeks that has broadened the number of races viewed as competitive by strategists.

NJ governor names Menendez replacement

Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. — New Jersey Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy will name his former chief of staff George Helmy to serve as interim senator when Bob Menendez resigns later this month after his conviction on federal bribery charges, according to a person familiar with the decision.

Helmy served as Murphy's top aide from 2019 to 2023 and is now an executive at RWJ Barnabas Health, a large health care provider in the state. He was formerly an aide to Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey. The source spoke on condition of anonymity because the decision was not yet public ahead of an expected announcement on Friday in Newark.

His appointment means Murphy passed over Rep. Andy Kim, who is the Democratic nominee for the seat on the November ballot, facing off against Republican hotelier Curtis Bashaw. Kim was briefly locked in a tough primary with first lady Tammy Murphy before she dropped her bid. Murphy's choice denies Kim a boost in seniority if he were to win the seat in November.

Menendez wrote in a letter to Murphy last month that he's resigning on Aug. 20, just over a month after the jury's verdict. He said he planned to appeal.

Menendez, 70, was convicted of charges that he sold the power of his office to three New Jersey businessmen who sought a variety of favors. Prosecutors

said Menendez used his influence to meddle in three different state and federal criminal investigations to protect his associates. They said he helped one bribe-paying friend get a multimillion-dollar deal with a Qatari investment fund and another keep a contract to provide religious certification for meat bound for Egypt.

He was also convicted of taking actions that benefited Egypt's government in exchange for bribes, including providing details on personnel at the U.S. embassy in Cairo and ghostwriting a letter to fellow senators regarding lifting a hold on military aid to Egypt. FBI agents found stacks of gold bars and \$480,000 hidden in Menendez's house.

After his conviction, Menendez denied all of those allegations, saying "I have never been anything but a patriot of my country and for my country. I have never, ever been a foreign agent."

Numerous fellow Democrats had urged him to resign, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. Murphy had urged the Senate to expel Menendez if he didn't quit. Only 15 senators have ever been expelled. Sen. William Blount, of Tennessee, was ousted in 1797 for treason. The other 14 were expelled in 1861 and 1862 for supporting Confederates during the Civil War.

Menendez's sentencing is scheduled for late October, shortly before the election.

Trump asks judge in NY to delay his sentencing

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump is asking the judge in his New York hush money criminal case to delay his sentencing until after the November presidential election.

In a letter made public Thursday, lawyers for the former president and current Republican nominee suggested that sentencing Trump as scheduled on Sept. 18—about seven weeks before Election Day—would amount to election interference.

Trump's lawyers wrote that a delay would also allow Trump time to weigh next steps after the trial judge, Juan M. Merchan, is expected to rule Sept. 16 on the defense's request to overturn the verdict and dismiss the case because of the U.S. Supreme Court's July presidential immunity ruling.

"There is no basis for continuing to rush," Trump lawyers Todd Blanche and Emil Bove wrote.

Blanche and Bove sent the let-

ter to Merchan on Wednesday after the judge rejected the defense's latest request that he step aside from the case.

In the letter, Blanche and Bove reiterated the defense argument that the judge has a conflict of interest because his daughter works as a Democratic political consultant, including for Kamala Harris when she sought the 2020 presidential nomination. Harris is now running against Trump.

By adjourning the sentencing until after that election, "the Court would reduce, even if not eliminate, issues regarding the integrity of any future proceedings," the lawyers wrote.

Election Day is Nov. 5, but many states allow voters to cast ballots early, with some set to start the process just a few days before or after Trump's scheduled Sept. 18 sentencing date.

Merchan, who has said he is confident in his ability to remain fair and impartial, did not immediately rule on the delay request.

US colleges revise rules on free speech amid war

Associated Press

NEW YORK — As students return to colleges across the United States, administrators are bracing for a resurgence in activism against the war in Gaza, and some schools are adopting rules to limit the kind of protests that swept campuses last spring.

While the summer break provided a respite in student demonstrations against the Israel-Hamas war, it also gave both student protesters and higher education officials a chance to regroup and strategize for the fall semester.

The stakes remain high. At Columbia University, President Minouche Shafik resigned Wednesday after coming under heavy scrutiny for her handling of the demonstrations at the campus in New York City, where the wave of pro-Palestinian tent encampments began last spring.

Some of the new rules im-

posed by universities include banning encampments, limiting the duration of demonstrations, allowing protests only in designated spaces and restricting campus access to those with university identification. Critics say some of the measures will curtail free speech.

The American Association of University Professors issued a statement Wednesday condemning "overly restrictive policies" that could discourage free expression. Many of the new policies require protesters to register well in advance and strictly limit the locations where gatherings can be held, as well as setting new limits on the use of amplified sound and signage.

"Our colleges and universities should encourage, not suppress, open and vigorous dialogue and debate even on the most deeply held beliefs," said the statement, adding that many policies were imposed without faculty input.

Bermuda braces for Ernesto

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Hurricane Ernesto charged toward Bermuda on Friday as officials in the tiny British territory in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean prepared to open shelters and close government offices.

The Category 2 storm was located 215 miles south-southwest of Bermuda. It had maximum sustained winds of 100 mph and was moving north-northeast at 14 mph.

Ernesto was expected to strengthen further on Friday before it passes near or over Bermuda on Saturday morning. Tropical storm conditions including strong winds and life-threatening floods were expected to start affecting Bermuda on Friday afternoon, according to the National Hurricane Center.

"Preparations to protect life and property should be rushed to completion," the center said.

The storm was forecast to

dump between 6 and 12 inches of rain, with up to 15 inches in isolated areas. Forecasters noted that Ernesto was a large hurricane, with hurricane-force winds extending up to 70 miles from the center and tropical storm-force winds extending up to 265 miles.

In preparation for the storm, officials in the wealthy British territory announced they would suspend public transportation and close the airport by Friday night. Local grocery stores were also preparing to close Friday evening.

National Security Minister Michael Weeks had urged people to complete their hurricane preparations by Thursday.

"Time is running out," he said.

Bermuda is an archipelago of 181 tiny islands whose land mass makes up roughly the size of Manhattan.

According to AccuWeather,

it's uncommon for the eye of a hurricane to make landfall. It noted that since 1850, only 11 of 130 tropical storms that have come within 100 miles of Bermuda have made landfall.

The island is a renowned offshore financial center with sturdy construction, and given its elevation, storm surge is not as problematic as it is with low-lying islands.

Ernesto previously battered the northeast Caribbean, where it left hundreds of thousands of people without power or water in Puerto Rico after swiping past the U.S. territory as a tropical storm.

More than 250,000 out of 1.4 million clients were still without power more than two days after the storm. Another 170,000 were without water.

Ernesto is the fifth named storm and the third hurricane of this year's Atlantic hurricane season.

Shoppers boost retail spending

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Americans stepped up their spending at retailers last month by the most in a year and a half, easing concerns that the economy might be weakening under the pressure of higher prices and elevated interest rates.

The Commerce Department reported Thursday that retail sales jumped 1% from June to July, the biggest such increase since January 2023, after having declined slightly the previous month. Auto dealers, electronics and appliance stores and grocery stores all reported strong sales gains.

The July retail sales data provided reassurance that the U.S. economy, while slowing under the pressure of high interest rates, remains resilient. It showed that America's consumers, the primary driver of economic growth, are still willing to spend.

The prospect of a still-growing economy is likely to be promoted by Vice President Kamala Harris' presidential campaign, which is preparing to roll out policies Friday to ban "price gouging" on groceries. On Wednesday, her opponent, former President Donald Trump slammed the economic record of the Biden-Harris administration, though he wildly inflated cost increases on food and monthly mortgage payments.

Other economic data released Thursday was also mostly positive, including a report on first-time applications for unemployment benefits. The figures show that businesses are mainly holding onto their workers and not increasing layoffs.

With Americans spending more, economists at Morgan Stanley have boosted their forecast for growth in the July-September quarter to a 2.3% annual rate, from an earlier estimate of 2.1%.

Matthew Perry's assistant among five people charged in 'Friends' star's death

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Five people including his personal assistant and two doctors have been charged in connection with Matthew Perry's death in what prosecutors called a "broad underground criminal network" dedicated to getting the "Friends" star the powerful surgical anesthetic that killed him.

The doctors preyed on Perry's history of addiction in the final months of his life last year to provide him with ketamine in amounts they knew were dangerous, U.S. Attorney Martin Estrada said as he announced the charges Thursday.

"They knew what they were doing was wrong," Estrada said. "They knew what they were doing was risking great danger to Mr. Perry. But they did it anyway."

One doctor even wrote in a text message, "I wonder how much this moron will pay" and "Let's find out," according to an indictment unsealed Thursday.

Perry died in October due to a ketamine overdose and prosecutors said he received several injections on the day he died from his live-in personal assistant, Kenneth Iwamasa, who found Perry dead later that day and was the first to talk to investigators.

Ketamine has seen a huge surge in use in recent years as a treatment for depression, anxiety and pain. While the drug isn't approved for those conditions, doctors are free to prescribe drugs for so-called off-label uses.

Perry had been receiving regular ketamine infusion treatments for depression — in amounts not nearly enough to

account for his death — from his regular doctors, who were not among those charged, authorities said. When those doctors refused to give him more, he went in desperation to others.

"We are not talking about legitimate ketamine treatment," Estrada said. "We're talking about two doctors who abused the trust they had, abused their licenses to put another person's life at risk."

DEA Administrator Anne Milgram said in one instance the actor paid \$2,000 for a vial of ketamine that cost one of the physicians about \$12. Perry paid the doctors about \$55,000 in cash in the two months before his death, Estrada said.

Two of the people, including one of the doctors charged, were arrested Thursday, Estrada said.

Bleday, Langeliers lift A's past the Mets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — JJ Bleday hit his first career grand slam, Shea Langeliers reached base five times for the second time in three games and the Oakland Athletics rallied to beat the New York Mets 7-6 on Thursday in the longest nine-inning game in the pitch clock era.

The game lasted 3 hours and 45 minutes and the teams combined to throw 425 pitches, the most in a nine-inning game this season.

Langeliers, who went 4 for 4 and was hit by a pitch in Tuesday's 9-4 win, was 3 for 4 with a walk and was hit by another pitch Thursday as the A's took two of three from the Mets. Langeliers reached base 11 times in 15 plate appearances in the series for an on-base percentage of .733.

The Athletics, who trailed 5-0 in the third, won despite leaving a season-high 16 runners on base. Oakland left the bases loaded twice in the first three innings against Jose Quintana before Bleday's slam in the fourth.

Mark Vientos homered twice and Luis Torrens hit a two-run single for the Mets, who have lost five of their last six. New York is two games behind the Atlanta Braves in the race for the third NL wild-card spot.

Brewers 6, Dodgers 4: Jackson Chourio and Wiliam Contreras homered in the first inning and scored again in an eighth-inning comeback as host Milwaukee rallied for a victory over Los Angeles.

Devin Williams earned his third save in as many opportunities and ended the game by striking out Mookie Betts and Shohei Ohtani. That save came

one day after Williams preserved a 5-4 victory by retiring Ohtani, Betts and Freddie Freeman in order.

By winning both games, the Brewers earned a split of the four-game series between division leaders.

Giants 6, Braves 0: Logan Webb threw seven-plus shutout innings, Grant McCray had his first career hit and home run, and host San Francisco beat Atlanta to avoid a sweep.

The Giants snapped a four-game losing skid behind Webb's performance. The All-Star recorded his fourth straight win and held opponents to a run or fewer for his fourth consecutive start. He finished at least seven innings for the 14th time this season, most of any pitcher in the majors.

Webb (11-8) threw 104 pitches, striking out seven and holding the Braves to four hits. He departed with runners at the corners and two outs in the eighth.

McCray, after going hitless in his major league debut on Wednesday, went 2 for 3 and hit a solo homer in the sixth inning to extend the lead to 5-0.

With his father, former big-leaguer Rodney McCray, watching from the stands, McCray, the Giants' 11th-ranked prospect, also had an RBI bunt single in the second inning that knocked in San Francisco's first run for his first big league hit.

Tigers 2, Mariners 1: Javier Báez hit a two-run homer in the eighth inning and host Detroit held Seattle to one hit and rallied for a win on Thursday to complete a three-game sweep.

The teams were playing for

the sixth time in nine days. Detroit won two of three last week in Seattle.

The Mariners got seven scoreless innings from their starter for the second game in a row and once again handed the lead to Yimi García. On Wednesday, he allowed Kerry Carpenter's tying homer in what ended up a 3-2 loss in 10 innings.

This time, Parker Meadows walked and stole second, but García retired the next two hitters before giving way to closer Andrés Muñoz.

Muñoz (2-4), who hadn't allowed a hit in a franchise-record 12 straight outings, hung a 2-1 slider and Báez lined it over the fence in left field.

Shelby Miller (6-7) earned the victory with 1½ hitless innings of relief. Jason Foley pitched the ninth for his 16th save in Detroit's fourth straight win.

Orioles 5, Red Sox 1: Zach Eflin pitched six impressive innings to improve to 4-0 since joining the Orioles, and Gunnar Henderson and Cedric Mullins homered in host Baltimore's victory over Boston.

Eflin (9-7) has won all four starts since Baltimore acquired him from Tampa Bay before the trade deadline. He allowed a run and five hits, striking out a season-high eight without a walk.

The Orioles pulled into a first-place tie with the idle New York Yankees atop the AL East. Boston is eight games behind.

Nick Pivetta (5-8) allowed three runs and three hits in five innings. He struck out six and walked one, but two of the hits he yielded were homers.

Phillies 13, Nationals 3: Weston Wilson became the ninth Phillies player to hit for the cycle, Alec Bohm and Nick Castellanos had consecutive homers in the first inning and host Philadelphia overpowered Washington.

Wilson tripled and singled in the fourth; homered in the seventh and, then — with fans chanting "Double! Double!" — doubled to right in the eighth, with Alex Call failing on a diving attempt.

Wilson had the 10th cycle in Phillies history — Chuck Klein did it twice — and he was the first home player to accomplish the feat at Citizens Bank Park since David Bell in 2004.

Philadelphia took a 4-0 lead in the first, with Bohm hitting a three-run homer and Castellanos following with another shot.

Zack Wheeler (12-5) moved one behind Atlanta's Chris Sale for most wins in the National League and the Phillies scored at least nine runs for the second straight game.

Twins 3, Rangers 2: Carlos Santana hit a sacrifice fly off All-Star closer Kirby Yates in the ninth inning and playoff-contending Minnesota won at Texas in the series opener against the reigning World Series champion Rangers.

Santana's deep fly to right-center came after Yates (4-2) issued consecutive one-out walks and then threw a wild pitch.

Willi Castro homered for the Twins (68-53), who moved within four games of idle Cleveland for the AL Central lead.

Minnesota currently holds the American League's second wild card.

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NL West is hottest division in baseball

Associated Press

PHOENIX — The Arizona Diamondbacks are in the midst of a stretch that most big-league clubs can only dream about, winners of six straight games, 20 of 25 since the All-Star break and 30 of 40 since late June.

Certainly, that should be enough to take control of the NL West. Right?

Not even close.

The NL West is home to three of the hottest teams in baseball, including the Diamondbacks, San Diego Padres and Los Angeles Dodgers. As pennant races around baseball heat up with approximately 40 games remaining, the one out west looks like the best with sluggers like Shohei Ohtani, Manny Machado and Ketel Marte duking it out on a nightly basis.

"We're very aware of it," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said of his team's shrinking lead last week. "I'd be lying if I said no one's watching the scoreboard and appreciating how good the rest of the teams in our division are playing."

"That just puts the onus on us to play good baseball."

The Dodgers — who have won the division in 10 of the past 11 years — looked well on their way to another division title by mid-June. They have arguably the best lineup in baseball with

Ohtani, Mookie Betts and Freddie Freeman, and Tyler Glasnow leads a rotation that is solid.

But Betts missed 1½ months with a broken left hand and the Dodgers weren't quite the same in his absence. That gave the D-backs and Padres the opening they need to make a move.

And move they did. The Padres and the D-backs have been on fire since the All-Star break — San Diego has a 19-4 record and Arizona is 20-5. The Dodgers aren't playing poorly with a 15-9 record during that span, but they're struggling to hold their division lead.

The Padres (69-53) and D-backs (69-53) were just two games behind the Dodgers (71-51) on Thursday.

Buckle up.

"It's fun to be a part of, a lot of hard work goes into it," D-backs slugger Joc Pederson said of his team's success. "Everybody comes to the field every day prepared to do their thing to help the team win. It's a powerful thing when you've got all the guys pulling on the same string."

The Dodgers are still loaded with talent. Betts has returned from his injury with a flourish, injecting the lineup with his power-speed combo. Los Angeles added right-hander Jack Flaherty in a trade and three-

time Cy Young Award winner Clayton Kershaw is back, joining Glasnow and Gavin Stone in the rotation.

"I think the biggest thing for us is we're getting some guys back," Kershaw said. "We're getting our lineup the way we want it. We're getting some guys — starter-wise, reliever-wise, everything — we're having our team look like what we want our team to look like."

"I think you'll see us kind of start to take off here pretty soon."

They better, because the Padres and D-backs are in hot pursuit.

The Padres have been one of the most frustrating teams in baseball the past few seasons, loaded with high-priced talent often without the matching results. But this version has been formidable.

Jurickson Profar is having a career year and All-Star rookie Jackson Merrill continues to play great, joining veterans like Jake Cronenworth, Manny Machado, Xander Bogaerts and David Peralta in the lineup. Right-hander Joe Musgrove looked good in his recent return, helping a rotation that includes Dylan Cease, Michael King and the recently acquired Martín Pérez.

"I am going to give it every-

thing I have as long as they will to allow me to hold the ball out there," Musgrove said. "Me being healthy down the stretch is a big part of this team."

Then there's the D-backs. The darlings of last year's postseason following a surprise trip to the World Series, they got off to a slow start this season with a 39-43 record on June 29. They're 30-10 since that point, boasting one of MLB's top offenses and a starting rotation that's getting healthy.

Marte is having an MVP-caliber season while others like Jake McCarthy have produced. NL Rookie of the Year Corbin Carroll is also playing better after a brutal start to the year. Recent additions, including first baseman Josh Bell and reliever A.J. Puk, have played well and even rookies like Adrian Del Castillo are coming up big.

Three hot teams. One division title up for grabs.

Six weeks of baseball to play. "I love where this team's at," D-backs manager Torey Lovullo said. "I don't want to get too far ahead of things. We try to stay present. Try to stay humble. We go out there to do our best every day and go 1-0."

"We're a really good baseball team. And when we do things right, we can get on this type of run."

Brewers' Yelich to have season-ending back surgery

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — The National League Central-leading Milwaukee Brewers will have to continue their playoff push without Christian Yelich.

Yelich underwent season-ending back surgery Friday, putting an end to the 2018 NL MVP's resurgent season. Yelich was leading the NL in batting average (.315) and on-base percentage (.406) when he went on the injured list in late July.

But, he hasn't played since

getting removed from a game at Chicago's Wrigley Field on July 23. Yelich has been dealing with back trouble for the past few years, and the issue landed him on the injured list twice this season.

The 32-year-old Yelich said Thursday in a video posted on social media that surgery "was just the best option that we really had left."

"It just got to the point where it wasn't getting better," Yelich said. "I tried everything I could,

ran out of options and it came time to make a decision."

The Brewers announced that Dr. Brandon Rebolz will perform the surgery in Milwaukee.

"There's really no other way to put it other than it sucks," Yelich said. "It's terrible. But it's part of sports. These things happen. You get hurt, you get fixed and you get back out there. Try to stay as positive as possible about it."

Yelich was having his best season since his first two years

in Milwaukee, when he won the NL MVP in 2018 and finished second in the 2019 MVP balloting. He earned his third All-Star Game selection this season and had 11 homers, 42 RBIs and 21 steals in 73 games despite dealing with his back issues.

Brewers manager Pat Murphy has praised Yelich throughout the season for the leadership he has provided to a young team that has withstood numerous injuries to remain atop the NL Central since the end of April.

Celtics-Knicks kicks off next NBA season

Associated Press

Boston will get its championship rings on Oct. 22, and the rival New York Knicks will be there for the celebration.

The NBA schedule was released Thursday for the coming season, and Game 1 on the slate is the Celtics hosting the Knicks on opening night — the one where the NBA champions will get their rings and reveal their 18th championship banner.

The second game on opening night has Minnesota visiting the Los Angeles Lakers, a reunion of Olympic gold medalists with the Timberwolves' Anthony Edwards facing off with the Lakers' LeBron James and Anthony Davis.

The league released 1,200 of the 1,230 games on the schedule Thursday; the other 30 will be slotted in December, depending on how teams fare during the NBA Cup. The schedule for those tournament games was released Tuesday, with Klay Thompson's return to Golden State as a Dallas Maverick among the matchups.

Some regular-season contests were previously announced, such as Miami and Washington playing in Mexico City on Nov. 2 and the San Antonio Spurs and Indiana Pacers playing a home-and-home in

Paris — with Spurs star and France native Victor Wembanyama as the main attraction — on Jan. 23 and Jan. 25.

A look at more of the slate:

■ Christmas Day games: Victor Wembanyama and San Antonio go to New York to start the Christmas Day quintupleheader, followed by Minnesota at Dallas, Philadelphia at Boston, the Lakers at Golden State and Denver at Phoenix.

It'll be the first Christmas game for the Spurs since 2016 and the first for the Timberwolves since 2017. Milwaukee won't play a Christmas game for the first time in seven seasons.

■ All 30 teams playing: There are four nights this season where all 30 teams will be in action, starting with Nov. 4 — when a new game will start every 15 minutes from 7 p.m. through 10:30 p.m. EST.

The other dates when all teams are playing: Feb. 12, April 11 (the second-to-last day of the regular season) and April 13 (the last day of the regular season).

■ Election Day among the off days: For the third consecutive year, Election Day — Nov. 5 this year — will not have any NBA games, with the league saying it wants to "continue to encourage fans and the broader

NBA community to make a plan to vote and participate in the civic process. As part of this initiative, the NBA will share important resources from voting organizations and highlight the civic engagement work of teams in their markets."

Other off days for the NBA this season: Nov. 28 (Thanksgiving), Dec. 24 (Christmas Eve), Feb. 17-19 (the break following All-Star weekend, which starts Feb. 14) and April 12. There will likely be one other dark day in December, depending on how the schedules are set for those teams that do not make the NBA Cup semifinals.

■ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day slate: There are seven games on Jan. 20 as part of the league's annual celebration of the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.: Dallas at Charlotte, Detroit at Houston, Minnesota at Memphis, Atlanta at New York, Phoenix at Cleveland, Boston at Golden State and Utah at New Orleans.

Memphis, where King was assassinated in 1968, will host a game on the holiday for the 22nd time in the last 23 seasons.

■ Durant going back to college, for one night: Kevin Durant could play at least one more game at his college home.

The Spurs will play two

games in Austin, Texas, again this season — Feb. 20 against Durant and Phoenix, then Feb. 21 against Detroit.

Durant played his one college season at Texas. He had 30 points in his home finale on Feb. 28, 2007.

That schedule means Detroit won't be going to San Antonio this season. The Pistons are 1-13 in their last 14 trips to the Spurs' home arena.

■ LeBron's 40th birthday: This season will be the 22nd in the NBA for LeBron James, tying Vince Carter for the league's longevity record. And he gets his 40th birthday off.

The Los Angeles Lakers don't play on Dec. 30. They're at home on Dec. 28 against Sacramento (his first NBA opponent, when he was 18) and then off until a home game Dec. 31 against Cleveland (his first NBA team).

James is 5-5 in birthday games.

■ NBA Finals lookahead: Game 1 of the NBA Finals will be June 5.

That means — if the schedule is shaped as it has been in recent years — Game 2 is likely on June 8, Game 3 would be June 11, Game 4 on June 13, Game 5 on June 16, Game 6 on June 19 and Game 7, if necessary, on June 22.

Kirk makes an ace and leads St. Jude Championship

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Hideki Matsuyama lost his wallet in London and lost his caddie and coach for the start of the FedEx Cup playoffs from thieves who snatched their bag. None of that seemed to bother the Japanese star Thursday to start of the PGA Tour's postseason.

Chris Kirk made a hole-in-one on his way to a 6-under 64 for a one-shot lead in the FedEx St. Jude Championship. Olympic gold medalist Scottie Scheffler and double major winner

Xander Schauffele, the best two players in golf, were right in the mix as expected.

The surprise in some respects was Matsuyama, the Olympic bronze medalist who has had plenty of distractions since leaving Paris and still motored around the TPC Southwind on a sweltering day for a 65.

"I've forgotten it completely. It's not even an issue now," Matsuyama said through his interpreter.

He stopped over in London with caddie Shota Hayato and

his swing coach, Mikihiro Kuro-miya. They were having dinner in town when Matsuyama said his caddie noticed the bag was no longer there. The contents included Matsuyama's wallet, and the passports of Hayato and Kuromiya. Matsuyama had left his passport — and his bronze medal — in his hotel room.

"It was an unfortunate situation," Matsuyama said. "Luckily, I only lost my wallet, but Shota, my caddie, and the coach, lost their passports, and we're trying hard now to get their vi-

sas back in line. And, hopefully, we can join as a team as soon as possible."

In the meantime, he lined up Taiga Tabuchi, who caddied on the Japan LPGA recently and had worked with Ryo Hisatsune on the PGA Tour this year.

New caddie, same old Hideki. The former Masters champion has been building momentum. After a hit into the water and a bogey on the par-5 third hole, he answered with plenty of birdies — four in a five-hole stretch on the back nine, for a 65.

Harbaugh: Kaepernick not with Chargers this season

Associated Press

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — If Colin Kaepernick wants to join the Los Angeles Chargers, it will not be until next year at the earliest.

And it will only be as a member of Jim Harbaugh's coaching staff.

"I love Colin, but he's not going to be on the coaching staff, which is set for this year. And he's not going to be playing on the roster either," Harbaugh said after Thursday's practice.

Harbaugh — who coached Kaepernick in San Francisco from 2011 through '14 — told USA Today Sports earlier this week that he reached out to Kaepernick about joining his Chargers' staff shortly after being named coach on Jan. 24.

Harbaugh said on Thursday that it wasn't the first time he has touched base with Kaepernick about coaching, and that he mentioned it a couple times when he was the coach at Michigan.

"I have thought that for a long

time. Just the respect that I have for the football mind he has and the football man that he is," said Harbaugh when asked what made him think Kaepernick would make a good coach. "(Late Raiders owner) Al Davis saw something in me that made him think I would be a good coach, and I see those same qualities in Colin. If it is something he chooses."

Kaepernick, who turns 37 on Nov. 3, has not played in an NFL game since Jan. 1, 2017, after he began kneeling on the sideline at games during the national anthem to protest social injustice and police brutality.

Kaepernick — who played six seasons with San Francisco after being a second-round pick in 2011 — hopes to play again. He told Britain's "Sky Sports News" during the Paris Olympics that he is still training.

"It's something I've trained my whole life for, so to be able to step back on the field, I think that would be a major moment, a major accomplishment for

me," Kaepernick said. "I think I could bring a lot to a team and help them win a championship."

Kaepernick had a 29-16 record as a starter, including the playoffs, when Harbaugh was his coach. After Harbaugh left to go to Michigan, Kaepernick's record was 3-17.

Kaepernick was the starting QB in Super Bowl 47 against Baltimore. He was 16 of 28 for 302 yards with a touchdown and also ran for a score in San Francisco's 34-31 loss.

Harbaugh has three players he coached in San Francisco on his Chargers staff — NaVorro Bowman, Jonathan Goodwin and Will Tukuafu. Mike Iupati and Delanie Walker were coaching assistants during training camp while Dashon Goldson is a coaching intern for the season.

Greg Roman, who was Kaepernick's offensive coordinator in San Francisco from 2011 through '14, is also directing the Chargers' offense.

Notre Dame swim team suspended for wagers

Associated Press

Notre Dame suspended its men's swimming program Thursday for at least one year after an external review found members of the team violated NCAA rules by wagering among themselves on results of their competitions and failed to "treat one another with dignity and respect."

"In order to ensure that this behavior ends and to rebuild a culture of dignity, respect and exemplary conduct, we have decided to suspend the men's swimming program for at least one academic year," athletic director Pete Bevacqua said in a statement.

Notre Dame did not reveal details of the review done by a law firm.

According to a person with knowledge of the situation, members of the team had set up a makeshift, internal sportsbook where athletes could wager on the times posted by themselves or teammates at meets. Athletes were not found to have bet on opposing teams or on any other Notre Dame athletic events, the person said.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because Notre Dame was not making the contents of the report public.

The person said more than 60% of the returning team, which includes 25 swimmers, took part in betting on the performances of members of the team. The review also revealed that some members of the team had bet among themselves on events such as the Super Bowl and March Madness basketball tournament games.

The person said a group text chat with members of the team filled with derogatory remarks and messages was also found. No evidence of physical hazing or abuse was uncovered.

Cubs great Sandberg says he's cancer-free

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Hall of Fame second baseman Ryne Sandberg says he is cancer-free.

The Chicago Cubs great made the announcement Thursday on Instagram, nearly seven months after he announced he had metastatic prostate cancer.

"Rang the Bell this morning!" he wrote. "WE did it, WE won! What a Dream Team, family, doctors, friends, nurses, fans who supported myself and Margaret through the last 8 months! We feel so blessed from all the love, prayers and thoughts and positive words that have come our way! Modern medicine has

come a long way so once again early detection is important. Annual doctor visits! Time to celebrate! #godisgood."

The 64-year-old Sandberg has kept well-wishers updated on his progress through an Instagram account and said last month that scans showed no signs of cancer.

Sandberg hit .285 with 282 homers, 1,061 RBIs and 344 steals in 16 seasons in the majors. He made his big league debut with Philadelphia in 1981 and appeared in 13 games with the Phillies before he was traded to the Chicago Cubs in January 1982.

Sandberg turned into one of the majors' best all-around performers with the Cubs. He made 10 All-Star teams and won nine Gold Gloves. He also was the NL MVP in 1984.

He was inducted into Cooperstown in 2005. In June, the Cubs unveiled a statue of Sandberg outside Wrigley Field in a ceremony emceed by Bob Costas, 40 years to the day he hit a pair of late homers in a win over St. Louis. The statue depicting him crouched and waiting for a grounder is next to bronze tributes to Hall of Famers Ferguson Jenkins, Billy Williams, Ron Santo and Ernie Banks.