

Trump orders Somalia withdrawal

By COREY DICKSTEIN
AND CAITLIN KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump ordered the Pentagon to remove most of its about 700 troops in Somalia working to assist the East African nation's military with its long battle against al-Shabab terrorists, the Pentagon announced Friday.

Most of the troops to be removed from Somalia will be relocated to neighboring countries, from where they will continue efforts against the al-Qaida-aligned al-Shabab group, according to a Pentagon statement, which did not provide specifics on how many troops would remain in Somalia. The withdrawal was to be completed by an unspecified date in early 2021, according to the statement.

Pentagon spokespersons Friday declined to provide further details on the number of troops to remain in Somalia or precisely when those withdrawing were to leave.

Trump's withdrawal order comes on the heels of his decisions last month to draw down troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to 2,500 service members in each of those countries by Jan. 15, just five days before he leaves office. It also comes just days after Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said no decision

had been made regarding the troop presence in Somalia, and he characterized al-Shabab as a threat to the U.S. homeland "if left unattended."

The brief Pentagon statement announcing the withdrawal said it had not changed its policy toward the country, vowing it would continue to fight al-Shabab and other terrorist groups in Somalia.

"The U.S. will retain the capability to conduct targeted counterterrorism operations in Somalia, and collect early warnings and indicators regarding threats to the homeland," the statement read.

The announcement came just one week after acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller made a surprise visit to Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, on Nov. 27 to meet with American forces stationed there during the Thanksgiving holiday.

The about 700 American troops in Somalia are charged with conducting counterterrorism operations and train, advise and give support to Somali forces primarily against al-Shabab. There is also a small Islamic State contingent in Somalia, but it does not have the capability of al-Shabab, defense officials have said.

Al-Shabab seeks to overthrow the U.S.-backed Somali government and establish a hardline Islamist nation. It is active across

the country and it has conducted bombings and high-profile attacks in Somalia and neighboring countries, including the 2013 attack on a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, that left 67 dead.

More recently, it claimed responsibility for an attack on the Manda Bay Airfield along Kenya's coast just south of Somalia, killing a U.S. soldier, Spc. Henry Mayfield Jr., 23, and two Defense Department contractors, Dustin Harrison, 47, and Bruce Triplett, 64.

A Defense Department inspector general report released Nov. 25 stated that U.S. Africa Command has seen "a definitive shift" in recent months of the group's focus to attack U.S. interests in the region. AFRICOM also said it believes al-Shabab is the most "dangerous, capable, and imminent threat" on the continent, according to the report. The group has the intent to attack the American homeland but does not have the ability now to do so, that report said.

The Pentagon said Friday that some of the troops in Somalia might be moved out of East Africa, but most would be repositioned to locations from where they could conduct cross-border operations into Somalia. The U.S. has troops at bases in countries that border Somalia, including Djibouti to its north and Kenya to the south.

Pentagon blocks Biden from meeting with spy agencies

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration has refused to allow members of President-elect Joe Biden's transition team to meet with officials at U.S. intelligence agencies that are controlled by the Pentagon, undermining prospects for a smooth transfer of power, current and former U.S. officials said.

The impasse has prevented the Biden team from engaging with leaders at the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and other military-run spy services with classified budgets and global espionage platforms.

The Defense Department rejected requests from the Biden team this week, offi-

cials said, despite a General Services Administration decision Nov. 23 that cleared the way for federal agencies to meet with representatives of the incoming administration.

The rejections came even as Biden advisers spent much of this week meeting with officials at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the CIA, agencies that are part of the U.S. intelligence community but independent of the Defense Department.

Sue Gough, a Defense Department spokeswoman, said Friday that the Biden team "has not been denied any access." In what officials in the Biden camp interpreted as a change in the Pentagon position, she said

the requested meetings could take place as early as next week.

By then, Biden advisers will have waited more than a month since the election to have meaningful contact with intelligence agencies that have multibillion-dollar budgets, satellite networks that circle the planet and vast surveillance authorities.

The delays have added to the unprecedented tensions surrounding the transition, fueled by a president who refuses to concede that he lost the election and spent much of his tenure accusing the nation's spy agencies of disloyalty to him.

A spokesman for the Biden transition team declined to comment, as did officials from the NSA and DIA.

Soldier found dead in NC was Green Beret

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

Two men connected to the special operations community were found dead on an Army post in North Carolina where both had served for years — one a soldier in an elite unit and the other a veteran.

Master Sgt. William J. Lavigne II, 37, with U.S. Army Special Operations Command's Headquarters and Headquarters Company, and Timothy Dumas, 44, an Army veteran from Pinehurst, N.C., were found Wednesday in a training area on Fort Bragg, near Fayetteville.

The Army has given few details about the circumstance of their deaths but has said they were not related to official training. Foul play is suspected and they may have been involved in criminal activity at the time of their deaths, unnamed military officials told some news outlets.

Lavigne had spent about a dozen of his 19 years in the service assigned to Special Forces and USASOC, the command said in a statement Friday.

"The loss of a soldier is always tragic," said Lt. Col. Justin Duvall, the soldier's company commander.

Fort Bragg identified Dumas in a separate statement. A former chief warrant officer 3 and property book officer, he served from November 1996 to March 2016, an Army spokesman at the Pentagon said. He was assigned to Fort Bragg for nearly all that time, a LinkedIn account showed.

The post is home to USASOC, as well as the XVIII Airborne Corps, Army Forces Command, 82nd Airborne Division and the Army Reserve Command. More than 30 soldiers assigned to the base have died this year, about half by suicide.

No more information about the deaths of Lavigne and Dumas will be released while the Army Criminal Investigative Command investigates, USASOC said.

CID did not respond to a request for comment Friday, but an unnamed defense official told ABC News that foul play was suspected.

The two men may have been involved in criminal activity, a defense official familiar with the incident told The Washington Post, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter still under investigation.

Lavigne had been investigated in the 2018 death of Sgt. 1st Class Mark Leshikar, 33, USASOC confirmed in an email. A member of the National Guard's 19th Special Forces Group, Leshikar was fatally shot in Fayetteville on March 21 of that year.

Leshikar's sister, Nicole Rick, told Connecting Vets on Friday that Lavigne and her brother were close friends, but had gotten into an altercation that night. Lavigne locked Leshikar out of the house, but his young daughter unlocked the door. When Leshikar came into the home, he and Lavigne had a confrontation that ended with the shooting. Lavigne told Rick that her brother had a screwdriver, she said, but she claimed nothing was found at the scene and "no real investigation was ever held."

A sergeant with the Cumberland County Homicide Unit investigated the death, said Lt. Sean Swainn, a spokesman for the county sheriff's office. An incident report on the sheriff's website lists it as a justifiable homicide, but in response to an email seeking further details, Swainn offered little more information and directed Stars and Stripes to a statement the sheriff issued the day after the shooting, which said no charges had

been filed.

A senior defense official told ABC News in late March 2018 that the shooter was an active-duty member of a Special Missions Unit, known as Delta Force. Rick said Lavigne was also in Delta Force.

"Master Sgt. Lavigne dedicated himself to the Army for 19 years and deployed multiple times in the defense of our nation," Duvall said.

Lavigne enlisted in the Army in 2001 and graduated the Special Forces Qualification Course in 2007, after which he was assigned to the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), then to USASOC, the command said.

He deployed several times to Afghanistan and Iraq, the command said, though it did not provide an exact number.

Dumas had deployed to Afghanistan four times, according to a service history Army spokesman Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Hewitt provided via email. Hewitt declined to provide further information about what unit Dumas had served with at the end of his career.

Beginning in 2001, Dumas served as a property book officer with the 7th Special Forces Group, his LinkedIn account shows, which is supported by Cumberland County records showing he was delivered legal documents at 7th Group in 2002. It's unclear if he remained at the command throughout the remainder of his career.

He earned numerous awards and decorations during his service, including a Bronze Star Medal, Joint Service Commendation Medal, four Army Commendation Medals, a parachutist badge and a driver and mechanic badge.

"Our condolences go out to his family during this difficult time," Duvall said.

Appeals court OKs military money for border wall

Associated Press

HOUSTON — A federal appeals court ruled Friday that a lower court was wrong to bar the Trump administration from taking \$3.6 billion from military construction projects for a border wall.

A panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said that El Paso County and the nonprofit Border Network for Human Rights did not have the standing to challenge President Donald Trump's redirecting funds from more than 100 military construction projects, including a \$20 million road project at a base located in the city. The

appeals court found that neither the county nor the Border Network proved it was directly harmed by Trump's move. The court reversed a December 2019 ruling by U.S. District Judge David Briones.

Trump took roughly \$6 billion from military funds under a national emergency he declared in early 2019 after Congress refused to fully meet his demands for wall funding, leading to the longest government shutdown in history.

President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to end that national emergency, though the Trump administration has locked in con-

struction contracts with the funding and already built many new stretches of wall across the southwest border.

The U.S. Supreme Court has already agreed to review a different ruling on the use of military construction funds. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals previously agreed with a coalition of border states and environmental groups that contended the transfer of money was unlawful and that building the wall would pose environmental threats.

In its order Friday, the 5th Circuit said it disagreed with the 9th Circuit's ruling.

CDC suggests wearing a mask when indoors

The Washington Post

The Centers for Disease Control is urging “universal mask use” indoors for the first time as the country shatters records for coronavirus hospitalizations and deaths ahead of the holiday season.

The CDC has for months encouraged mask-wearing in public spaces with people outside the household. The new guidance, published Friday, asks people to put on masks anywhere outside their homes.

In its weekly Morbidity and Mortality report, the CDC warned Friday that the U.S. has entered “a phase of high-level transmission” as colder weather and the ongoing holiday season push Americans indoors, and said that “consistent and correct” use of face masks is critical to taming the virus.

Mask use is most crucial indoors, and in outdoor spaces where social distancing cannot be maintained, the CDC said in the report. The agency recommended mask use at home when a member of the household has been infected or potentially exposed to the virus, including those with high-risk occupations such as meatpacking or agricultural processing.

“Compelling evidence now supports the benefits of cloth face masks for both source control (to protect others),” the report said, “And to a lesser extent, protection of the wearer.”

Mitigation measures are particularly essential in light of recent research that suggests roughly 50% of transmission of the coronavirus is from asymptomatic people, the report said. It also recommended that communities make a plan for distributing masks to people who might struggle to access them.

Robert Redfield, head of the CDC, has called masks “the most important, powerful public health tool” in combating the coronavirus. A growing body of research shows widespread mask use can save scores of lives and stave off economic damage. One June analysis from Goldman Sachs estimated that a 15% increase in universal masking could prevent lockdowns and reduce associated losses of up to \$1 trillion.

On Thursday, President-elect Joe Biden said that, on his first day in office, he’d ask Americans to mask up for 100 days. “Not forever. 100 days,” Biden said in an interview with CNN. “And I think we’ll see a significant reduction.”

In addition to stepping up mask use, the CDC also recommended postponing travel plans. For those who do plan to travel, both domestically and internationally, the agency encouraged staying home, getting tested before and after traveling and quarantining for a week upon return, regardless of test results.

Cargo ship is attacked off Yemen coast

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A cargo ship traveling past Yemen in the Gulf of Aden came under attack in unclear circumstances, maritime authorities said Saturday.

The Gulf of Aden is a crucial route for global trade and has seen attacks attributed to Yemen’s Houthi rebels as its civil war rages on. A number of Somali pirate attacks that once plagued the region have mostly stopped in recent years.

The ship ended up off the small port city of Nishtun in Yemen’s far east after coming under attack early Saturday morning, according to an alert from the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Organization that is overseen by Britain’s Royal Navy.

“Vessel and crew are safe,” the organization said.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. Yemen’s Houthi rebels, who have held the capital, Sanaa, since September 2014, did not respond to requests for comment. Nishtun’s port has been used by a Saudi-led coalition battling the Houthis on behalf of Yemen’s internationally recognized government.

The British Defense Ministry declined to elaborate on the attack. The U.S. Navy’s Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, which patrols Mideast waterways, said it was aware of the incident, but declined to comment further.

Ambrey Intelligence, a British private maritime intelligence firm, identified the vessel attacked as the MV Hasan, a cargo ship flagged out of Sierra Leone that had been on its way to Salalah, Oman.

The Hasan is registered to Oasis Shipping Co., a Marshall Islands-registered firm with an address linking it to a Beirut address for Barhoum Maritime Co. A similarly named company also operates out of Tartous, Syria. An employee at the company in Tartous declined to immediately comment.

The eastern part of Yemen where the ship was attacked is held by the country’s internationally recognized government, amid its yearslong war against the Iranian-backed Houthis. It marked the fourth known attack against shipping in the eastern Gulf of Aden in 2020, according to the private security firm Dryad Global.

Judge orders restoration of DACA

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Trump administration must accept new applications for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that protects some young immigrants from deportation, a federal judge ruled Friday, in vacating a memo from the acting Homeland Security secretary that had suspended it.

U.S. District Judge Nicholas Garaufis said the government had to post a public notice within three days — including on its website and the websites of all other relevant government agencies — that new DACA applications were being accepted.

The ruling follows one from November

where Garaufis said Acting Department of Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf was unlawfully in his position.

On Friday, the judge said that invalidated the memo Wolf had issued in July suspending DACA for new applications and reducing how long renewals were valid from two years down to one year.

Wolf had issued his memo after the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in June that President Donald Trump failed to follow rule-making procedures when he tried to end the program.

Garaufis also ordered the government to put together a status report on the DACA program by Jan. 4.

Calif. fire risk still high despite easing winds

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Fire danger remained high Friday amid unpredictable wind gusts and dry conditions in Southern California, as crews made progress against blazes that burned several homes and injured two firefighters.

The region's notorious Santa Ana winds decreased slightly but red flag warnings of extreme wildfire risk were in place into the weekend because of low humidity. After the weather calms in the southern part of the state, winds are expected to increase in Northern California starting Sunday, forecasters said.

Firefighters were still busy trying to contain a number of blazes south and east of Los Angeles. The biggest began late Wednesday as a house fire in Orange County's Silverado Canyon that spread to dry brush by fierce winds. Some 25,000 people were ordered to flee their homes, although some evacuations orders were later lifted.

Larry and Carol Pfaffy owned the canyon house where the blaze is believed to have started. The couple told KNBC-TV that they had started up a generator after the power was shut off by Southern California Edison as a precaution against high winds knocking down power lines and sparking a fire.

Larry Pfaffy said they turned off the generator before going to bed Wednesday night but a half-hour later they heard something

fall in the garage and smelled smoke. They still don't know the cause of the fire.

Pfaffy said he tried to put out the blaze but failed. The home he had built 40 years ago was destroyed.

"First time I saw our house, I knew it was gone," Larry Pfaffy said. "But I was scared to death of the neighbors getting burnt, too."

The fire grew to 11.5 square miles and blanketed a wide area with smoke and ash. It was 30% contained as calmer conditions helped hundreds of firefighters who fought the flames on the ground and by air.

"Firefighters took advantage of the less severe weather conditions today to construct and reinforce fire lines, which are currently holding. They will continue to work through the night to extend these fire lines," a fire update stated. Two U.S. Forest Service firefighters were hospitalized after being hurt while battling the blaze, though it wasn't known how the injuries occurred. One was treated for a leg injury and the other suffered bruising and both were released Wednesday night, the Forest Service said on Twitter.

Some residents said they didn't receive evacuation alerts because Southern California Edison had shut off power as a precaution before the fire erupted, leaving them without cellphone service.

The fire was not far from the site of Octo-

ber's Silverado Fire, which also forced thousands from their homes and left two firefighters critically burned.

Crews mostly tamed two small fires that prompted evacuations in Riverside County east of Los Angeles.

And to the south, a small blaze in San Diego County that threatened about 200 residences was fully contained Thursday after destroying one home and damaging six others in a neighborhood near El Cajon.

Santa Ana winds hit 50 mph to 85 mph at times throughout the region beginning Wednesday night.

Numerous studies have linked bigger wildfires in America to climate change from the burning of coal, oil and gas. Scientists have said climate change has made California much drier, meaning trees and other plants are more flammable.

The fires erupted as Southern California utilities cut the power to more than 100,000 customers to avoid the threat of winds knocking down or fouling power lines and causing wildfires — something that has sparked devastating fires in recent years.

Southern California Edison cut power to nearly 50,000 homes and businesses but as winds eased the utility began restoring electricity and had restored power to most customers by Friday evening.

California already has experienced its worst-ever year for wildfires.

Northeastern US braces for powerful, windy storm

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — The northeastern U.S. braced Saturday for a powerful, windy storm that forecasters said had the potential to bring 18 inches or more of heavy, wet snow to parts of the region.

The heavy, blowing snow was expected in the afternoon in New England and had the potential to result in the near-blizzard conditions that make travel difficult. Power outages were possible.

The nor'easter had the potential to

dump as much as a foot of snow on suburban Boston.

National Weather Service Meteorologist Michael Clair of the Gray, Maine, office said the storm began as rain and was expected to turn to snow Saturday afternoon. In some areas snowfall of up to 3 inches per hour was possible.

"This is the first big one," Clair said of the beginning of the winter season. "There has been some snow up in the mountains, but this is the first one across

where most people live."

While localized totals of more than 18 inches were possible in the higher terrain, Clair says that in general, the region was expected to get hit hardest just inland from the coast, where forecasts called for about a foot of snow.

Areas south of New England were expected to see heavy rain and strong winds. In Canada, the storm is expected to affect southern Quebec and New Brunswick.

Carbon monoxide kills at least 18 miners in China

Associated Press

BEIJING — China's state TV says at least 18 coal miners have been killed by high levels of carbon monoxide in the country's southwest.

One miner was found alive following the disaster Friday in the Diaoshidong mine in Chongqing, the report said. Rescuers are looking for five others.

China's coal mining industry used to be

the world's deadliest, suffering more than 5,000 fatalities a year.

Safety improved dramatically after authorities overhauled the industry starting about 15 years ago.

Midday fireball and boom thrill gazers

NY SYRACUSE — A noontime boom that was heard and felt from southern Ontario to Virginia was likely caused by a disintegrating meteor, according to an organization in western New York that keeps track of such phenomena.

Witnesses across the area reported hearing the boom or seeing a fireball in the sky shortly after noon, said Robert Lunsford of the American Meteor Society in Geneseo. By 5 p.m., the organization had recorded 90 reports of the fireball seen in Maryland, Michigan, New York, Ontario, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Police agencies and fire departments around central New York received 911 calls reporting a boom that shook windows.

4 arrested in historic Black church vandalism

MO HOLTS SUMMIT — Four juveniles were arrested in the vandalism of an historic Black church in central Missouri, officials said.

Callaway County Sheriff Clay Chism said the suspects, aged 14 to 16, were arrested and are being detained at a juvenile center in Columbia.

They are charged in vandalism at the The Mount Vernon Missionary Baptist Church in Holt's Summit.

He said the four male teens, from Holts Summit and Jefferson City, are being detained on felony charges of property damage and burglary but more charges could be added, KRCG reported. Investigators also continue to work to determine if more people were involved.

New format planned for Bourbon Festival

KY BARDSTOWN — Next year's Kentucky Bourbon Festival will offer a new format that includes expanded tastings and educational experiences, officials said.

The 30th annual festival will be held Sept. 16-19 in Bardstown, officials announced in a statement.

Highlights of the festival will include expanded tastings with heritage and craft brands, an auction of vintage and rare bourbon and the annual bourbon barrel rolling competition.

There will also be interactive sessions including culinary and cocktail classes.

27 pounds of fentanyl found in home

NC UNIONVILLE — Authorities in North Carolina seized over 27 pounds of fentanyl, one of the largest narcotic seizures in the county, officials said.

The Union County Sheriff's Office and the Monroe Police Department confiscated the fentanyl, along with 34 pounds of pressed pills, believed to be Roxicodone, news outlets reported.

After the search, Aron Gerardo Prado Martinez, 33, and Luis Noe Prado Martinez, 25, were both arrested and charged with two counts of trafficking in opium/heroin.

Hunger group loses nearly \$1M in cyberattack

PA PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia region's largest hunger-relief group has lost nearly \$1 million in a cyberattack.

Thieves infiltrated the group's computer systems in the spring through a phishing scam, Philabundance chief executive Loree Jones told The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Jones said they managed to block legitimate emails and used a spoofing email to mimic an invoice for \$923,533 for the construction of group's \$12 million Philabundance Community Kitchen.

18 indicted, including rapper, in gang-related activity

NY NEW YORK — Authorities announced the indictment of 18 people, including New York City rapper Casanova, in connection to a litany of gang-related crimes including racketeering, murder, drugs, firearms, and fraud offenses.

Acting U.S. Attorney Audrey Strauss and other law enforcement officials issued a statement accusing those named in the indictment of being part of the Untouchable Gorilla Stone Nation gang, operating in New York City and part of New York state.

Authorities said 17 of the 18 named in the indictment were in custody. The FBI's New York office issued a tweet saying Casanova, whose legal name is Caswell Senior, was still being sought.

Appeal rejected in Great Danes abuse case

NH WOLFEBORO — The state's highest court rejected an appeal by a New Hampshire woman who argued her privacy was violated in a case that even-

tually led to her being convicted of housing dozens of filthy and sick Great Danes in her mansion.

In a unanimous decision, the New Hampshire Supreme Court found a lawyer for Christina Fay had not demonstrated her right to privacy was violated and turned down a request to vacate her convictions. Fay's lawyer unsuccessfully argued authorities violated her privacy when they allowed an animal welfare group to take photos and video as it helped gather the dogs from her house.

Fay, of Wolfeboro, was sentenced on 17 animal cruelty charges in 2018.

A lawyer for Fay did not respond to a request for comment.

Authorities had gotten a search warrant and seized 84 dogs from Fay's home. They said the animals were living in filth and had health problems.

Bill to erase Confederate flag from state's Coat of Arms

AL MONTGOMERY — An Alabama lawmaker aims to remove a Confederate flag from Alabama's Coat of Arms.

State Rep. Laura Hall has pre-filed three bills aimed at eliminating symbols and language associated with the Confederacy, Al.com reported. The bills will be part of Alabama's legislative session that's set to start Feb. 2.

Along with the Confederate flag, Alabama's coat of arms features a shield with the flags of three countries that held territory in what later became Alabama: Great Britain, France and Spain. Hall is a Democrat from Huntsville.

Man charged in illegal animal carcasses case

MT HELENA — An Idaho man was charged with multiple felonies on accusations that he bought illegally obtained wild animal carcasses and parts from an undercover Montana official.

Yan "Bo" Fong was charged with three felony counts of unlawful sale of a game animal and three felony counts of unlawful possession, shipping or transportation of a game animal or fur bearing animal, the Independent Record reported.

According to the charging documents, Fong is caught on audio saying that he offered bear and mountain lion meat for free to "the tour guide and bus people." Fong owns a restaurant called Bamboo Garden in Pocatello.

From The Associated Press

Simmons says 76ers need accountability

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The idea of Ben Simmons and Joel Embiid as a modern-day odd couple bunking together in a Center City condominium trash-talking during games of “FIFA 21” after playing taxing real NBA games momentarily got a rise out of 76ers fans.

Alas, Simmons was just joking when he said he moved in with Embiid — who welcomed his first son with his girlfriend in September — so the Philadelphia 76ers’ All-Stars could tighten their bond.

Simmons is good with Embiid, the max-contract cornerstones of a franchise that has not yet reached the championship heights so many expected when they were drafted two years apart.

As for the rest of the team, the Sixers are ready to hit the reset button in coach Doc Rivers’ first season running a team that netted them just the sixth seed in the Eastern Conference and a first-round exit. Former Sixers guard Josh Richardson, traded to Dallas in the offseason, lamented in August the underachieving season could be pinned on a lack of accountability from management to the roster.

Simmons said Richardson was right and the Sixers were not ready to compete for a title when the NBA restarted the season in the Disney bubble.

“We weren’t in a position to go into the bubble and win,” Simmons said. “I think our mindset was off. Accountability is a huge part of winning. I think he’s definitely right. Bringing Doc and all of these

guys in, Doc’s team, with all of these coaches around, the maturity has definitely risen with the team. It’s been great to see that and see guys be accountable for certain things, and come here ready with a different mindset.”

Boston swept the 76ers in the postseason and ended former coach Brett Brown’s reign after seven seasons that put him in charge of the lose-first Process era to consecutive 50-win seasons and berths in the Eastern Conference semifinals.

So what was the problem in the bubble?

“I mean, you can’t just come into a situation like the bubble if you guys aren’t ready and don’t have that chemistry and accountability already,” Simmons said Friday. “Doc and I have spoken about it already. You can tell the teams that were doing well in the bubble were tight-knit and held accountable for certain things going on. You kind of see it with the Clippers now, things that are coming out.”

Whoa, wait a minute. The Clippers? The same team Rivers coached last season that blew a 3-1 playoff series lead in the Western Conference semis and led him to leaving Los Angeles?

The Clippers were painted in a story this week on *The Athletic* as an organization without any, well, accountability where star players called the shots and Rivers did little to reign them in. Clippers star Paul George even said in a separate interview Rivers failed to make the necessary adjustments to stop the losing and

lead the Clippers into the next round.

Simmons said accountability — the new buzzword in Philly — starts with the players.

“There’s only so much that can happen with players and coaches and that’s on the players to make sure they’re held accountable, and if they’re not gonna listen and do certain things, they’re not gonna win,” Simmons said. “But I think it’s a great opportunity for us, being younger guys, to have somebody like Doc come in. We gotta get it done.”

The Sixers also hired former Houston executive Daryl Morey to run basketball operations and gave the franchise a draft-night overhaul with deals that rid them of Al Horford and Richardson and brought in sharpshooter Seth Curry and drafted Kentucky guard Tyrese Maxey.

Simmons says he’s 100% healthy following surgery on his left knee in August that kept him from playing in the postseason. He averaged 16.4 points, 8.0 assists and 7.8 rebounds in his third full season.

Simmons expressed excitement about being coached by Rivers, who led the Celtics to the 2008 NBA championship. Rivers threw his support this week behind Simmons and noted, “I don’t care about Ben’s shooting as much as so many other people seem to care about it.”

The 24-year-old Simmons has been the primary ballhandler for the Sixers for the bulk of his three-year career, but the 6-foot-10 triple-double threat played power forward when the NBA season resumed.

NBA teams will be spending more time in road cities

Associated Press

Some NBA teams are going to have longer-than-usual road trips to certain cities this season.

The league released the schedule for the first half of its truncated 72-game season on Friday. The schedule includes something that hardly ever would have been the case in recent years — teams taking a trip someplace and playing two games there before moving on to another city or heading back home.

It’s by design, with the NBA doing so to limit the amount of actual travel this season as teams

look for any edge in the quest to stay healthy during the coronavirus pandemic. Teams still play half of their games on the road, of course. But the mileage that teams save by playing twice in one place adds up quickly — examples included the Los Angeles Lakers playing twice at San Antonio in a three-day span on Dec. 30 and Jan. 1, and Toronto playing both of its road games for the season at Indiana on back-to-back dates, Jan. 24 and 25.

The dreaded stretches of four games in five nights remain out of the schedule; the NBA did away with those in recent years

to try to not overtax players and their bodies. Teams will take an average 7.5 road trips in the first half, which represents a 22% drop over the first 36 games of a usual schedule — and one-game trips have been cut nearly in half, down 44%.

As the NBA previously announced, opening night is Dec. 22 with two games: Golden State at Brooklyn and then the Los Angeles Clippers visiting the Los Angeles Lakers in the arena they share, a game where the Lakers are expected to display their new championship banner but without any fans in the building that

night.

The other 26 teams all open the next day, including the Toronto Raptors, at their temporary home in Tampa, Fla., for the first time when they host New Orleans. There are no games on Dec. 24, as is customary, and then the Christmas quintuple-header the following day.

The season will begin amid a spike in coronavirus cases around the country. The NBA had 48 players, almost 9%, test positive between Nov. 24 and Nov. 30 as teams returned to their home markets to prepare for the start of training camps.

Schwarber, Bradley, Duvall among 59 cut loose by teams

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kyle Schwarber and Albert Almora Jr. were cut loose by the Chicago Cubs after helping the team win its first World Series title in more than a century, among a record 59 players who became free agents as part of the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic when their teams declined to offer them 2021 contracts by Wednesday night's deadline.

Cincinnati reliever Archie Bradley, Atlanta outfielder Adam Duvall, Colorado outfielder David Dahl and Minnesota outfielder Eddie Rosario also were let go by their clubs, who did not want to allow those players to become eligible for salary arbitration in February, which would have been their right had they been tendered contracts.

The total cut was one more than the previous high at the tender deadline, ahead of the 2004 season.

Schwarber earned \$2,596,296 in prorated pay from his \$7.01 million salary last season but hit .188 with 11 homers in 59 games, down from 38 homers, 92 RBIs and a .250 batting average in 155 games in 2019. Almora batted .167 in 28 games last season and earned \$1,667,667 prorated from \$4.5 million, down from a .236 average, 12 homers and 32 RBIs in 2019.

Schwarber returned from a serious knee injury and hit .412 with two RBIs in the 2016 World Series as the Cubs won their first championship since 1908. He served as the designated hitter for games in Cleveland.

Almora made a key play in Game 7, running for Schwarber in the 10th inning, advancing on Kris Bryant's fly ball and scoring the go-ahead run on Ben Zobrist's double in an 8-7 victory.

Just 137 players remained eligible to exchange salary arbitration numbers with their teams on Jan. 15, down from 155 on the eve of the deadline last January.

While the total number of players let go at the deadline was up only a bit from 56 last year, more high-quality players were set free by teams, many trying to cut expenses after a regular season that included a sharp revenue drop because no fans were allowed in stadiums due to health conditions.

BRIEFLY

Source: Mid-January start appears likely for NHL

Associated Press

Time has all but run out on the NHL's hope to start the season Jan. 1, with the league and NHL Players' Association now focusing their discussions on opening play in mid-January, a person familiar with the talks told The Associated Press on Friday.

A mid-January start date has become more realistic given the number of issues that need to be resolved before players can begin traveling to their home cities, according to the person who spoke to The AP on the condition of anonymity because the discussions are private.

The two sides still need to agree on a schedule, with the current working plan featuring between 52 and 56 regular-season games. There has also been talk of a buffer being worked into the schedule in the event games are postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic, the person said.

Without going into detail, NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly told The AP "various similar concepts are being discussed" when asked about the 52- or 56-game schedule and mid-January start.

Also needing to be resolved is a one-time divisional realignment, with the likelihood of there being a seven-team all-Canada division due to cross-border travel restrictions, as well as an updated COVID-19 protocol for players and teams.

Under a mid-January start date, players would have to begin reporting after Christmas, followed by a shortened training camp and preseason. The regular season would likely stretch into early May at the latest, with the Stanley Cup Final targeted to end in late June or early July.

Liberty win No. 1 pick again

The New York Liberty will pick No. 1 for the second consecutive year in the WNBA Draft. This time there isn't really a clear-cut choice of who they'll take to pair with last year's choice Sabrina Ionescu.

Dallas will pick second, with Atlanta third and Indiana fourth. Dallas also has the fifth and seventh picks through trades made over the last few years.

The Liberty had the best chance to win

the lottery at 44.2%. Atlanta was second at 27.6%. Dallas third 17.8% and Indiana fourth at 10.4%. The WNBA determines its percentages on the two-year record of the four participants.

Trump criminalizes doping

A bill that will criminalize international doping conspiracies became law Friday with President Donald Trump's signature, closing out a two-year legislative process during which the only true opposition to the bill came from outside the United States.

The Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act had earlier passed both houses of Congress on voice votes. It passed despite lobbying efforts from the World Anti-Doping Agency, which said it will "disrupt the global legal anti-doping framework."

The bill is designed to allow U.S. prosecutors to go after doping schemes at international events in which Americans are involved as athletes, sponsors or broadcasters. It is named after Grigory Rodchenkov, the former Moscow lab director who helped uncover widespread cheating directed by the Russian government at the Sochi Olympics.

MLB sues insurance providers

Major League Baseball and all 30 of its teams are suing their insurance providers, citing billions of dollars in losses during the 2020 season played almost entirely without fans due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The suit, filed in October in California Superior Court in Alameda County, was obtained Friday by The Associated Press. It says providers AIG, Factory Mutual and Interstate Fire and Casualty Company have refused to pay claims made by MLB despite the league's "all-risk" policy purchases.

The league claims to have lost billions of dollars on unsold tickets, hundreds of millions on concessions, tens of millions on parking and millions more on suites and luxury seat licenses, in-park merchandise sales and corporate sponsorships. It also cites over a billion dollars in local and national media losses, plus tens of millions in missed income for MLB Advanced Media.

TOP 25 ROUNDUP

Marquette knocks off No. 4 Wisconsin at buzzer

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Justin Lewis scored 18 points and converted a putback off a missed free throw at the buzzer as Marquette knocked off No. 4 Wisconsin 67-65 on Friday night.

Marquette's D.J. Carton was just inside the three-point arc when he drew a foul from Wisconsin's D'Mitrik Trice with nine-tenths of a second left. Carton made the first free throw and his second attempt bounced off the rim.

Lewis got into the paint and tapped the ball with his right hand. The freshman's shot hit the front of the rim and went off the backboard before falling through the basket as his teammates mobbed him.

Marquette (3-1) earned its first victory over a top-5 team since beating No. 1 Villanova 74-72 on Jan. 24, 2017. The Golden Eagles also snapped Wisconsin's 11-game winning streak, which began late last season.

The lead changed hands six times in the final 70 seconds, and neither team led by more than six points.

Trice led Wisconsin (3-1) with 17 points, while Jonathan Davis scored 12 and Nate Reuvers added 11.

Lewis had eight rebounds to go along with his 18 points. Carton scored 12 points and Jamal Cain added 10.

No. 6 Duke 76, Bellarmine 54: Matthew Hurt scored 24 points and made six of his team's 13 three-pointers, and the Blue Devils used a 19-2 run in the second half to cruise past the visiting Knights.

Bellarmine (0-1) overcame a 1-for-9 shooting start to get within 28-25 late in the first half before Duke (2-1) closed with a 7-0 run, retaking a double-digit lead it never lost.

The Knights, making their Division I debut, got 14 points from Nick Thelen and 13 from Ethan Claycomb.

No. 8 Michigan State 83, Detroit Mercy 76: Rocket Watts scored a career-high 23 points and the Spartans started out flat against the Titans but avoided a huge upset at home.

Michigan State (4-0) was coming off a road win over No. 6 Duke earlier this week.

Detroit Mercy's (0-1) led by five points midway through the second half of a closely contested game with 10 lead changes and nine ties. Detroit Mercy's last win over a Top 10 team on the road was in 1979 at Marquette.

Detroit Mercy was led by Antoine Davis, who scored 24 points on 10-of-26 shooting. Matt Johnson scored a career-high 20 points.

No. 9 Creighton 93, Kennesaw State 58: At Omaha, Neb., Marcus Zegarowski and Ryan Kalkbrenner scored 14 points apiece to lead the Bluejays past the Owls.

Creighton coach Greg McDermott went nine deep into his bench in the first half and 13 of his players got minutes in a game in which the Bluejays (3-0) led by as many as 43 points.

No. 15 Virginia 71, Kent State 64 (OT): Sam Hauser scored six of his 18 points in overtime and the host Cavaliers outlasted the Golden Flashes.

Hauser scored the first five points of the extra period as Virginia kept Kent State from scoring until the final minute. Jay Huff also finished with 18 points and had 11 rebounds for Virginia (3-1), which was upset by San Francisco in its second game this season.

Mike Nuga scored 20 points, Danny Pippen had 13 and Justyn Hamilton had 12 for Kent State (1-1).

No. 17 Texas Tech 80, Troy 46: Mac McClung scored 17 of his 20 points in the first half and the host Red Raiders beat the Trojans in a replacement game for both teams.

Texas Tech (3-1) was supposed to play St. John's this week before the New York City school balked at making the trip to Texas as coronavirus infections surge. Troy (1-2) couldn't go to Wake Forest because of COVID-19 issues for the Demon Deacons.

No. 21 Oregon 83, Seton Hall 70: At Omaha, Neb., Eugene Omoruyi scored 22 points in his second straight strong game and the Ducks (1-1) all but shut down Pirates star Sandro Mamukelashvili.

It took Mamukelashvili 15 minutes to score. He attempted only seven shots and finished with 10 points.

No. 20 Ragin' Cajuns finally get win over Mountaineers

Associated Press

BOONE, N.C. — It was anything but pretty, and at times downright nerve-wracking, yet coach Billy Napier and Louisiana-Lafayette finally got the best of Appalachian State.

No. 20 Louisiana-Lafayette overcame three snaps that sailed over the punter's head and another bad one on an extra point to beat its Sun Belt rival 24-21 for the first time on a cold, rainy Friday night when the Mountaineers' Chandler Staton missed a 30-yard field goal with 2 seconds left.

Running back Trey Ragas scored three touchdowns, and Levi Lewis threw for 101 yards and a touchdown and ran for 77 yards to help the Ragin' Cajuns (9-1, 7-1 Sun Belt) beat Appalachian State (7-3, 5-2) for their sixth straight win.

"Our kids competed and I couldn't be more proud," Napier said. "We talked all week about being tough minded, and having a tough culture. I think today is the best example of that so far this season."

Louisiana-Lafayette was 0-8 against Appalachian State, including losses in the last two conference championship games.

Long snapper Paul Boudreaux became the unfortunate story of the night.

He put Louisiana-Lafayette in a bind early, twice snapping more than 10 yards over the head of the punter in the first half and then sending a high snap to the holder on a failed extra point resulting in a 10-9 halftime deficit.

The Ragin' Cajuns already clinched a spot in the Sun Belt Conference championship against Coastal Carolina, so the contest was largely about pride. Appalachian State beat Louisiana-Lafayette four times in the previous two seasons, twice in the championship game on this same field.

UP NEXT

Louisiana-Lafayette: Will play at No. 14 Coastal Carolina in the Sun Belt Conference championship game on Dec. 19. It is the Ragin' Cajuns' third straight appearance in the conference title game.

Appalachian State: Heads on the road to face Georgia Southern on Dec. 12 in the regular-season finale.