

Congress rushes toward vote on relief bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After months of Washington gridlock, Congress is set to vote on a \$900 billion pandemic relief package, finally delivering long-sought cash to businesses and individuals as well as resources to vaccinate a nation confronting a frightening surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Lawmakers tacked on thousands of pages of other end-of-session business in a burst of legislation as Capitol Hill is set to close down for the year.

The relief package, agreed to on Sunday and finally released in bill form Monday afternoon, remained on track for votes in Congress on Monday. It would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit and a \$600 direct stimulus payment to most Americans, along with a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.

The 5,593-page legislation came together Sunday after months of battling, posturing and postelection negotiating that reined in a number of Democratic demands as the end of the congressional session approached. President-elect Joe Biden was eager for a deal to deliver long-awaited help to suffering people and a boost to the economy, even though it was less than half the size that Democrats wanted in the fall.

Biden praised the bipartisan spirit that produced the measure, which he called “just the beginning.”

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, a key negotiator, said on CNBC on Monday morning that the direct payments would begin arriving in bank accounts next week.

Democrats acknowledged it wasn't as robust a relief package as they initially sought — or, they say, the country needs. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi vowed more to come once Biden takes office.

“It is a first step,” she said. “We have to do more.”

The final agreement would be the largest spending measure yet. It combined \$900 billion for COVID-19 relief with a \$1.4 trillion governmentwide funding plan and lots of other unrelated measures on taxes, health, infrastructure and education. The governmentwide funding would keep the government open through September.

Passage neared as coronavirus cases and deaths spiked and evidence piled up that the economy was struggling.

The final bill bore ample resemblance to a \$1 trillion summertime package put together by Senate Republican leaders, which failed to excite many GOP senators. As talks stalled, Republicans pulled back to a smaller, \$500 billion position that omitted direct payments, supplemental unemployment benefits and food aid, among other priorities. Ne-

gotiations only turned serious in recent weeks as failure was no longer an option and as time was running out.

On direct payments, the bill provides \$600 to individuals making up to \$75,000 per year and \$1,200 to couples making up to \$150,000, with payments phased out for higher incomes. An additional \$600 payment will be made per dependent child, similar to the last round of relief payments in the spring.

The \$300 per week bonus jobless benefit was half the supplemental federal unemployment benefit provided under the \$1.8 billion CARES Act in March and would be limited to 11 weeks instead of 16 weeks. The direct \$600 stimulus payment was also half the March payment, subject to the same income limits in which an individual's payment phases out after \$75,000.

The CARES Act was credited with keeping the economy from falling off a cliff during widespread lockdowns in the spring, but Republicans controlling the Senate cited debt concerns in pushing against Democratic demands.

Progress came after a bipartisan group of pragmatists and moderates devised a \$908 billion plan that built a middle-ground position that the top four leaders of Congress — the GOP and Democratic leaders of both the House and Senate — used as the basis for their talks. The lawmakers urged leaders on both sides to back off of hardline positions.

Cut off: Britain hit with travel bans over new virus strain

Associated Press

LONDON — Trucks waiting to get out of Britain backed up for miles and people were left stranded at airports Monday as dozens of countries around the world slapped tough travel restrictions on the U.K. because of a new and seemingly more contagious strain of the coronavirus in England.

From Canada to India, one nation after another barred flights from Britain, while France banned British trucks for 48 hours while the strain is assessed.

After a conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he understood the reason for the restrictions and expressed hope for a

swift resumption in the free flow of traffic between the U.K. and France, perhaps within a few hours.

He said officials from both countries were working “to unblock the flow of trade as fast as possible.” Macron said earlier that France was looking at establishing systematic testing of people for the virus on arrival.

Over the weekend, Johnson imposed strict lockdown measures in London and neighboring areas where Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the new strain is “out of control.” Experts said the early evidence indicates the strain is not more lethal, and they expressed confidence that the vaccines now being rolled out would still be effective against it.

After France announced Sunday night that it was closing its borders to trucks from Britain, hundreds of vehicles, mainly operated by drivers from Europe, became stranded outside the English Channel port of Dover. The lines shrank over the course of the day.

Around 10,000 trucks pass through the port of Dover every day, accounting for about 20% of the country's trade in goods. Meanwhile, the European Union gave the go-ahead to the coronavirus vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, setting the stage for the first COVID-19 shots across the 27-nation bloc to begin on Dec. 27. The approval came just hours after the EU's drug regulatory agency said the vaccine meets safety and quality standards.

US airport traffic up despite warnings

Associated Press

SAN RAMON, Calif. — More than 1 million people have passed through U.S. airport security checkpoints in each of the past two days in a sign that public health pleas to avoid holiday travel are being ignored, despite an alarming surge in COVID-19 cases.

It marks the first time U.S. airports have screened more than 1 million passengers since Nov. 29. That came at the end of a Thanksgiving weekend that saw far more travel around the country than had been hoped as the weather turned colder and COVID-19 cases were already spiking again.

Now, hospitals in many areas are being overwhelmed amid the largest outbreak of the

coronavirus in the United States since March, when most Americans were ordered to stay home and avoid interactions with other households.

The seven-day rolling average of newly reported infections in the U.S. has risen from about 176,000 a day just before Thanksgiving to more than 215,000 a day. It's too early to calculate how much of that increase is due to travel and gatherings over Thanksgiving, but experts believe they are a factor.

Although lockdowns are no longer in effect in many parts of the country, stay-at-home orders have returned in some areas in effort to contain the virus. Nearly 99% of California's population of roughly 40 million people, for in-

stance, has been told to remain at home except for essential work, shopping and exercise.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued an advisory declaring "postponing travel and staying home is the best way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19."

Nevertheless, about 1.07 million people passed through the security checkpoints at U.S. airports on Friday and again on Saturday, according to the Transportation Security Administration. Saturday's volume was down 57% from the same time last year, the smallest year-over-year decline in daily traffic at U.S. airports since Nov. 22 as people began their Thanksgiving getaways.

What to know about UK's virus mutation

The Washington Post

A flurry of European travel restrictions announced Sunday over worries about a fast-spreading new variant of the coronavirus have spurred curiosity and concern that the mutation could infect Americans.

After officials in the United Kingdom said Saturday that the variant first identified there was spreading 70% faster than others, Google searches about the mutation have spiked. American public health experts and federal officials said that although it appears the variant may be more contagious, it is not any more dangerous than others already detected in the United States.

"I don't think there should be any reason for alarm right now," Adm. Brett Giroir, who has been in charge of U.S. testing, told George Stephanopoulos on ABC's "This Week."

Variations to the virus are nothing new, and experts say the coronavirus does not mutate as much as influenza, meaning it is less likely that a vaccine would need to be developed every year to keep up with the new strains.

Still, much about this variant remains unknown, such as whether it is a new strain — a functionally different version of the virus.

"The take-home message for right now is that we need to get more information," said Krutika Kuppalli, an infectious-diseases specialist at the Medical University of South Carolina. "In the meantime, we all need to really double down on our public health

measures — wearing masks, remaining physically distanced, avoiding crowds of people."

In September, U.K. researchers discovered the variant's prevalence when they collected samples from infected people in southeastern England. It seemed to spread quickly.

"This lineage came up quite rapidly," Nick Loman, one of the researchers and a professor of microbial genomics at the University of Birmingham, told *The Washington Post*.

Since then, Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands have identified cases of the variant in their countries, the World Health Organization told the BBC. On Sunday, Italian officials announced that a patient returning from Britain "in the last few days" was in isolation after scientists detected the mutation.

In South Africa, health officials said Sunday that a version of the virus similar to the U.K. variant has been found in 80% to 90% of samples analyzed since mid-November.

The virus has not been detected in the U.S., but officials are watching for developments in Britain, Giroir told Stephanopoulos.

Although guidance from federal agencies discourages traveling to Britain, the U.S. has not banned travel from there.

Experts say there has been no indication that the variant is resistant to the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines authorized by the FDA.

USS McCain trains with French and Japanese navies

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain last week practiced anti-submarine warfare with a French submarine and Japanese carrier in the Philippine Sea, according to a Navy statement Friday.

France's nuclear-powered submarine FS *Emeraude* and support and assistance vessel FS *Seine*, along with Japan's helicopter destroyer JS *Hyuga*, practiced anti-submarine warfare tactics with the McCain, "strengthening cooperative efforts to support maritime security in the Indo-Pacific," according to the Navy.

While the Navy frequently trains with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, "it is a rare opportunity for U.S. Navy maritime forces to conduct operations with their French Navy counterparts in the 7th Fleet area of operations," according to the statement.

The exercise further demonstrated "the breadth, depth and value of our network of allies and partners," McCain skipper Cmdr. Ryan T. Easterday said in the statement.

The sub and its tender paid a port call at Guam Naval Base in late November, according to the Naval News website. The 241-foot-long *Emeraude*, commissioned in 1988, has a crew of 70, according to the Seaforces-online.org website.

Rockets target US Embassy in Baghdad

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Eight rockets targeted the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone late Sunday, Iraq's military and Iraqi officials said, sparking fears of renewed unrest as next month's anniversary of the U.S. slaying of an Iranian general draws near.

An Iraqi military statement said an "an outlawed group" launched eight rockets targeting the Green Zone, injuring one Iraqi security person manning a checkpoint and causing

material damage to a residential complex and some cars. The residential complex is usually empty.

The U.S. Embassy's C-RAM defense system, which is used to destroy missiles in mid-air, was activated to deflect the attack, the embassy said in a statement.

"The U.S. Embassy confirms rockets targeting the International Zone (Green Zone) resulted in the engagement of embassy defensive systems," the statement said. It said there

was some minor damage to the embassy compound.

"We call on all Iraqi political and governmental leaders to take steps to prevent such attacks and hold accountable those responsible."

The U.S. withdrew some embassy staff this month, temporarily reducing personnel ahead of the first anniversary of the U.S. airstrike that killed Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani outside Baghdad's airport on Jan. 3.

Marines test-drive new armored vehicles in mountains of Japan

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

CAMP SOUMAGAHARA, Japan — The Marine Corps' successor to the Humvee — the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle — got its first workout in Japan during this month's Exercise Forest Light.

Twenty of the armored trucks deployed to Japan with 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., which put them through their paces in the mountainous Gunma prefecture, west of Tokyo, during training that concluded Thursday.

The battalion was the first in the Marine Corps to replace its Humvees with the new vehicles, Capt. Nicholas Royer, a 3rd Marine Division spokesman, said in an email Tuesday.

"The Joint Light Tactical Vehicle is the successor to the Humvee (HMMWV), and the Marine Corps has been leading the charge on adopting them," he said.

The Army, Marines and Air Force plan to acquire more than 58,000 of the off-road armored vehicles.

Three of the new vehicles combined to form a mobile command post where an air assault involving some of the 1,000 Marines and Japanese soldiers participating in Forest Light was coordinated Dec. 15.

"It's is pretty easy to drive," Marine Cpl. Juan Flores, 20, of Fort Wayne, Ind., said that day of the truck he's been driving through the mountains of Gunma. "You just have to watch out because of the blind spots."

Thick armor means it's harder for drivers to see what's happening outside the new vehicles than it would be if they were in a civilian truck, so they work with a vehicle commander to watch for hazards, said Flores, who also maintains Joint Light Tactical Ve-

hicles.

Blind spots were one of the number of problems identified in a report to Congress on the vehicles last January. Also flagged were maintenance issues, noise and doors that didn't open properly.

Oshkosh Defense LLC, of Wisconsin, is the vehicle maker. The Army placed an order for another 2,738 vehicles on Dec. 1 at a cost of \$911 million, according to the news site Breaking Defense on Dec. 2.

Marines stationed in Japan are curious about the new trucks, Flores said.

"The Marines will come and knock on the armor," he said. "It's a lot different to what they're used to."

The new light vehicle is the only truck Flores has worked on with the Marines. He enlisted two years ago, not long before his battalion received its new vehicles.

Flores, who drives a Buick back in the States, said the truck has many sensors and electric components.

"There is a monitor inside the cab that gives you things like the air pressure in the tires," he said.

Drivers can switch the vehicle from road to cross-country mode and raise the suspension using hydraulics, he said.

The 22,000-pound truck has no issues going up steep grades in the backcountry, Flores said.

Forest Light is the first time the new trucks were used in an exercise or operational fashion on the main islands of Japan, although they have been used on Okinawa for utility duties for a year, Royer said.

"The JLTV is, in pretty much every respect, a sturdier, more capable vehicle in line with the Marine Corps' mandate for faster, more flexible and more survivable operations," he said.

General Dynamics gets \$4.6B for new M1 Abrams tanks

Stars and Stripes

The Army wants to field more upgraded M1 Abrams tanks and will spend \$4.6 billion to get the most modernized version of them to troops over the next eight years.

The service announced that General Dynamics Land Systems has been awarded the contract for the improved tank, which entered service in its first variant four decades ago.

The Abrams M1A2 SEP V3, described as the most reliable of the Abrams family, is a version of the current SEP V2 production model with significant improvements in the areas of survivability, maintainability and network capability, General Dynamics said.

Since 2017, the company has already delivered several batches of tanks upgraded to the new standard. In July, the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division out of Fort Hood, Texas, was the first unit to field them.

Putting the battle tank into operation served as a milestone for the Army as it moves to counter potential adversaries such as Russia and China.

"This is the first time we have fielded a new tank in about 16 years," Lt. Col. Nicholas C. Sinclair, a 3rd Brigade battalion commander, said in an Army statement in July after his unit received the new tank. "We will be the first ones trained on this, so it's really special to us to make sure we're doing it right."

CDC: Give front-line workers vaccine next

From wire reports

WASHINGTON — Grocery store employees, teachers, emergency workers and other people on the front lines of America's workforce should be next to get the coronavirus vaccine, along with adults ages 75 and older, a federal advisory panel said Sunday.

The recommendations, which came two days after regulators authorized a second coronavirus vaccine, will guide state authorities in deciding who should have priority to receive limited doses of shots made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. Nearly 2.9 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine have been distributed, and 556,208 of those shots were given as of Sunday afternoon, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The groups designated Sunday include about 49 million people, some of whom could begin getting shots early in the new year. The priorities represent a compromise between the desire to shield people most likely to catch and transmit the virus, because they cannot socially distance or work from home, and the effort to protect people who are most prone to serious complications and death.

An estimated 30 million front-line essential workers labor in meat plants, grocery stores, prisons, public transit and other key areas, and cannot work remotely. They are a priority because they play a critical role in keeping society functioning, and they live or work in high-risk, high-transmission communities.

Adults 75 and older — about 19 million people — were also included in this priority group because they account for 25% of hospitalizations and a significant share of deaths linked to COVID-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus.

The committee's vote also addressed an even larger group of people poised to gain access in the third phase. That larger group of 129 million people is made up of a second tier of essential workers, adults 65 to 74 and adults 16 to 64 with high risk medical conditions.

Michigan

DETROIT — Families of men incarcerated at Michigan's Kinross Correctional Facility believed its remote location would spare it from a deadly COVID-19 outbreak. For a while, they seemed to be right.

Kinross, built on the grounds of a former Air Force base in the Upper Peninsula, is closer to Canada than it is to Detroit. Unlike most prisons in Michigan, Kinross had re-

mained almost unscathed by the coronavirus with only one case between March and October.

But on Oct. 28, corrections officials transferred nine prisoners to Kinross from Marquette Branch Prison, several hours west, where COVID-19 was running rampant. There were 837 confirmed cases by late October, 350 of which were still active when the men were transferred.

Roughly three weeks later, Kinross had its first major outbreak, corrections department data showed. Though agency officials say it's not because of the transfers, more than 1,100 prisoners have now been infected, at least seven have died and more than 100 guards have fallen ill. The prisoners who came to Kinross had been transferred twice, sent first to Marquette after a riot where they were held, and then had tested positive for COVID-19 there before leaving for Kinross, officials said.

California

SACRAMENTO — California Gov. Gavin Newsom will quarantine for 10 days after one of his staffers tested positive for COVID-19, according to a spokesperson for the governor's office.

The staffer tested positive Sunday afternoon, the spokesperson stated. Newsom was then tested and his result came back negative.

The staffer also had contact with other staff members, who were also tested. Their results came back negative.

Newsom's 10-day quarantine is out of "an abundance of caution," the statement said. The governor and other staffers were expected to be tested again in the next few days.

North Dakota

MINOT — The impact of the coronavirus pandemic couldn't be more evident than it is for Minot's hotels. Business has plummeted. People haven't been traveling. The Canadian border has been closed for months. Social distancing has put an end to hosting events like banquets, wedding receptions and Christmas parties.

While hotels are certainly not the only businesses impacted by COVID-19, their empty parking lots and lobbies are vivid reminders of the ongoing economic effects of the pandemic.

"Before COVID we were meeting all of our goals and revenue was looking good," said Chris Baze, Clarion Hotel and Convention Center of Minot. "Now we're down to about 10% of revenue. It's sad. It really is.

Fortunately, ownership has been very good through this and keeps our business going."

The Clarion, located near the State Fairgrounds, boasts the largest convention center of any hotel in the state. But the convention business went away quickly as coronavirus spread, leaving the spacious center dark and quiet.

If business were normal, said Baze, the Clarion would have 150 or so rooms occupied daily. During the pandemic there have been days with no overnight rooms occupied. There's little difference at most other hotels in Minot where rooms that would turn over several times a week are seldom used, the Minot Daily News reported.

Mississippi

PEARL — Mississippi's top emergency manager is hospitalized because of COVID-19 complications.

The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency said in a statement Sunday that Director Greg Michel has been admitted to a hospital with pneumonia, a complication from his infection with COVID-19.

Michel tested positive for the coronavirus Dec. 9.

Spokesperson Malary White said the agency continues to "operate as usual while taking every precaution necessary to protect our staff."

White described Michel as remaining "in good spirits."

Tennessee

NASHVILLE — Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee has announced new social gathering restrictions while still refusing to implement a mask mandate despite pleas from front-line health care workers in a state experiencing the highest new cases per capita in the country.

Instead of a mask mandate, the Republican on Sunday signed an executive order limiting public gatherings to 10 people. However, places of worship, weddings and funerals are exempt from the order.

He called the state "ground zero" in the COVID-19 battle and urged Tennesseans not to gather with people outside their immediate households during the upcoming holidays. His message comes just a day after Lee confirmed that his wife Maria had tested positive for COVID-19. Lee says he has tested negative but will remain in quarantine at the governor's residence.

Tennessee is one of a dozen states without a mask mandate. Instead, local counties have the option of implementing their own mask restrictions.

Program offers free college to prisoners

SC ORANGEBURG — Some prisoners in South Carolina will soon be able to attend college for free.

The South Carolina Department of Corrections says it is partnering with Claflin University, a historically Black private school in Orangeburg, to offer bachelor's degrees to people incarcerated in state prisons. The program is slated to start in 2021, according to an agency news release on Thursday.

Claflin will offer the students degrees in criminal justice, psychology and organizational management, as well as minors and certificates.

The program is part of a federal initiative to help prisoners earn university credentials. School and prison officials said the partnership will help give prisoners skills to return to society successfully.

45 cold-stunned sea turtles being treated

MS GULFPORT — Seventy-five endangered sea turtles are being treated in Mississippi and Louisiana after being rescued from New England beaches where they washed up, injured and sick from the cold.

They're Kemp's ridley sea turtles, the world's smallest and most endangered sea turtles.

Twenty-five are being treated at the Mississippi Aquarium and 20 at the Institute for Marine Mammal Studies, which are about 5.5 miles apart in Gulfport. Another 30 are being treated at the Audubon Nature Institute in New Orleans.

More than 800 turtles have been stranded in New England so far this year, according to a

news release from the aquarium. That's about the number found during the entire winter of 2018-19.

Copter-dropped treats given to schoolkids

LA CARENCRO — Girls and boys at one school in Louisiana were so good that Mrs. Claus visited early, showing the basketball court with treats dropped from a helicopter.

Teachers at Carencro Catholic School kept masked students in tacky sweaters and flannel pajamas at a safe distance until all of the candy, toys, beads and reindeer headbands had landed, the Lafayette Daily Advertiser reported.

Then students rushed for goodies donated by a school sponsor and tossed from a chopper piloted by a student's father.

Principal Devin Soeseno, who played Mrs. Claus, had promised a helicopter drop last spring if students earned 5,000 reward tickets for good behavior.

Grant will help restore home at historic camp

IN CHESTERFIELD — Boosters of a historic central Indiana camp once famed for its spiritual mediums have won a grant to partially restore a home where it's believed the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous once lived.

The \$11,500 grant from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources' historic preservation division will allow for the work on the Lizzie Koch home at Camp Chesterfield.

The Friends of Camp Chesterfield, which received the grant, raised \$11,500 in matching funds for the project, which will go toward removing the two-story cottage's asphalt siding and

shoring up its foundation.

The restoration work on the home, which will be painted in historic colors, is expected to be completed next year, said Normandi Ellis with the Friends of Camp Chesterfield.

Prosecutor: 5 accused in 58 break-ins in total

GA MACON — A Georgia prosecutor said a burglary ring hit 49 businesses a total of 58 times over four months, and five people are accused.

Targets included gas stations, dollar stores and popular restaurants in Macon, and burglaries occurred from Dec. 23, 2019, into April, said Bibb County District Attorney David Cooke.

He said Wednesday that four men and a woman were charged on Tuesday with racketeering, and the men were also indicted on numerous burglary charges, The Telegraph reported.

The indictment said three of them were jailed April 28 after investigators learned they had received stolen property, including electronics and a slow cooker from a grocery store.

Officer rescues man, dog who fell through ice

CT EASTON — An Easton police officer is being credited with rescuing a man and his dog who both wound up falling through the ice at a local pond.

Easton Police Chief Richard Doye said Officer Anthony Telesco, 32, a two-year veteran on the force, was on routine patrol Friday night when he was flagged down by a man who said his dog had fallen through the ice at Keller Pond.

Telesco, who called the Easton Fire Department to perform an ice rescue, wound up having

to enter the frigid water after the dog's owner climbed onto the ice and attempted to rescue the animal himself before the fire department arrived. The man had fallen through the ice, onto his dog.

Doye, who posted a written statement Saturday on the department's Facebook page, said Telesco was in water up to his chest and experienced "minor distress" as he was exiting the water. The officer was transported to Bridgeport Hospital for cold-water exposure and later released in good condition. The dog's owner, whose name was not released, was treated at the scene and reunited with his pet, which is doing fine, the chief said.

Civil War battlefield gets preservation grant

AL SPANISH FORT — A south Alabama battlefield where thousands of Black Union troops helped defeat Confederate forces in the final days of the Civil War is being protected with a \$300,000 grant, preservation groups announced.

While the state already owns about 40% of the 2,000-acre battlefield around Fort Blakeley, near Spanish Fort north of Mobile Bay, the money will allow for the preservation of about 60 additional acres where some of the most significant action occurred, according to a joint announcement by The Conservation Fund, the American Battlefield Trust and the University of South Alabama.

Union soldiers, including 5,000 members of the U.S. Colored Troops, overran the Confederate fort at the site on April 9, 1865, the same day Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox Court House, Va.

— From wire reports

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Could Army be left out in the cold?

Associated Press

At a time when team after team had opted out of bowl games, Army found itself in a different sort of situation — left out.

The Black Knights have a 9-2 record and a nearly two-month-long commitment to the Independence Bowl. They seemed all set. But when the Dec. 26 game in Louisiana was called off Sunday night because there was not an available team to play, it suddenly left Army on the outside of the postseason landscape.

A sliver of hope remains: The Black Knights could be in line should some bowl-bound team find itself dealing with COVID-19 issues.

“These young men haven’t quit all year and we surely won’t quit now,” Army director of athletics Mike Buddie said in a statement. “They deserve better. Period.”

What is usually a joyous day for more than 60 teams around the country was far more surreal as organizers set the annual bowl schedule two weeks later than usual. Far below the head-

lines of Alabama, Ohio State, Notre Dame and Clemson, the scramble was weird — and in the case of Army, painful.

This only adds insult: With bowl contracts still in force, a South Carolina team with a woe-ful 2-8 record is going to the Gasparilla Bowl.

With the season winding down, more than 20 Bowl Sub-division teams chose not to accept an invitation to a bowl, calling an end to this long season. That led to the unusual situation of postseason games not having enough teams to fill the slots.

“It was a difficult day for all of college football,” said Nick Carparelli, the executive director of Bowl Season, the renamed Football Bowl Association. “We probably would have been naïve to think that wouldn’t have been, given all the challenges everybody’s gone through this year.”

Maybe Minnesota coach P.J. Fleck summed it up best in explaining why his team opted out.

“School is done. Nothing to do. Nowhere to go,” said Fleck, whose Gophers announced they were done after going 3-4 with

two cancellations. “You are talking about 11 days of doing what? Sitting there, doing nothing. Sitting there, doing nothing. Like doing nothing besides football in the hours we are allowed. Then also have boxed lunches. Boxed breakfasts. Boxed dinners. And that’s going to be memorable?”

This seemed to almost perfectly sum up what teams experienced all season: UTSA was set to play in the Frisco Bowl over the weekend when SMU withdrew due to COVID-19 concerns and the bowl was scrubbed. So the Roadrunners accepted an invitation to the First Responder Bowl, where they found out Sunday they will face No. 16 Louisiana-Lafayette.

That’s the typical playbook in ‘20 — plan, cross your fingers and have a viable backup plan.

Like with the Montgomery Bowl, which will serve as a substitute this season for the canceled Fenway Bowl and feature Memphis against Florida Atlantic.

The NCAA waived bowl eligibility requirements because of the coronavirus pandemic,

which explained why Michigan State announced it was opting out — at 2-5, no less. Then again, Mike Leach and his 3-7 Mississippi State squad are heading to the Armed Forces Bowl against No. 22 Tulsa.

No one lobbied harder to play this season than Nebraska. On bowl selection day, the Cornhuskers (3-5) called it a season.

“This year has been a long grind and it is time for our guys to have a break,” Nebraska coach Scott Frost said in a statement.

Some of the canceled bowl games — 15 in all, including three on Sunday alone — included the Bahamas Bowl, Celebration Bowl, Hawaii Bowl, Holiday Bowl, Las Vegas Bowl, LA Bowl, Pinstripe Bowl, Quick Lane Bowl, Redbox Bowl and Sun Bowl.

The Military Bowl remained in limbo late Sunday, though the executive director, Steve Beck, tweeted an interest in finding Army a postseason home: “We would love to host @ArmyWP_Football at the #MilitaryBowl...just have to find an opponent!”

Coastal Carolina, Cincinnati headline CFP snubs

Associated Press

The Coastal Carolina Chanticleers did everything asked of them and then some.

Coastal played 11 games during a pandemic that wreaked havoc on schedules nationwide and won them all. The Chanticleers even added unbeaten BYU late in the season on short notice and pulled out a victory in one of the season’s most exciting games.

That wasn’t enough for the Sun Belt co-champions to even get close to the College Football Playoff. The Chanticleers were No. 12 in the rankings released on Sunday.

Cincinnati got snubbed, too. The Bearcats defeated Tulsa on Saturday night in the American Athletic Conference championship game to remain undefeated, yet the Bearcats finished No. 8 in the standings.

Once again, Group of Five teams have no representation in the College Football Play-

off. That’s been the case every year since the current format was introduced for the 2014 season.

“If a G-5 team wasn’t going to make it this year, I don’t know if they’re ever going to make it, just because of all the circumstances,” Coastal Carolina coach Jamey Chadwell said.

Cincinnati was rewarded with a New Year’s Six game — the Bearcats will play Georgia in the Peach Bowl. But Coastal was left out of the top-tier games. The Chanticleers will play Liberty in the Cure Bowl on Dec. 26.

Chadwell called not getting a New Year’s Six bid “disappointing.”

It wasn’t just the Group of Five teams that got bruised. No. 5 Texas A&M, with only a loss to top-ranked Alabama and seven straight wins in the rugged Southeastern Conference, finished No. 5 in the playoff

rankings. The SEC often gets the benefit of the doubt, but not this time.

Texas A&M got a pretty good consolation prize: The Aggies will play North Carolina in the Orange Bowl.

That’s the kind of bowl bid Chadwell thought Coastal deserved. He said the system is working exactly as expected.

“Is it broken? Depends on who is it broken for,” he said. “For the G-5’s, it is. I don’t think it was ever fixed for them. For the Power 5s and for what they’re trying to get there, it’s working out the way they want it to work out.”

AAC Commissioner Mike Aresco recently said the previous system that was used before the playoff — the widely unpopular Bowl Championship Series selection process — was actually more fair. In that system, polls and computers selected participants for the title game and other major bowls.

Brady, Bucs near playoffs, Pats are out

Associated Press

Three AFC East teams won in Week 15 — yes, even the Jets. The one defeat, by the Patriots, was historic.

For the first time since the 2008 season, New England will not make the playoffs, nor win the division. For the first time since 2000, the opening year of Bill Belichick's reign in Foxborough, the Patriots will not have a winning record.

New England has the NFL's longest string of making the postseason, 11 seasons, all with a guy named Tom Brady at quarterback. Dallas holds the NFL mark with 20 straight seasons with a winning record. Minus Brady, the Patriots fall one year short of that.

Dour as always, Belichick offered little insight into how a perennial championship contender has slipped to a 6-8 record. He wasn't about to mention that a major reason — and probably the main reason for all that success through two decades — is now wearing a Buccaneers uniform. And almost certainly headed to the playoffs Belichick and company will miss.

"To win these games, we've got to do a better job," he said after a 22-12 loss in Miami that spotlighted the problems the 2020 Patriots have had: little talent on offense; sketchy defense, particularly in clutch situations; a lack of precision; and, yes, little cohesion between the guys wearing headsets and those with helmets on.

"I got to do a better job and, collectively as a staff and a team, we've got to perform better than this."

In essence, New England lost more than its winning ways when they lost their quarterback. They lost leadership, direction, big

plays, and their mojo. Like Michael Jordan and Wayne Gretzky, Brady made everyone around him — including the coaches — far better performers. He did it not only during games, but during the week in preparation. He did it through motivation. He did it with his arm, his head and his heart.

No one is saying the Patriots have lacked heart this season; their close victories against Baltimore, Arizona and even the Jets prove their grit. Such veterans as Devin McCourty, Stephon Gilmore and Matthew Slater would never allow ennui to invade their locker room.

But they also lost to Denver, San Francisco and Houston, all of whom will be spending the postseason at home, too. Without Brady, the onus was too heavy on a defense that often was undermanned. Without Brady — not to mention Julian Edelman and Rob Gronkowski — there was no one to lift the offense. And without Brady, only very rarely was there any significant boost from the coaching staff.

"It's felt like we've chased it the whole year, whether it's offense, defense, one play, a missed opportunity on defense, a turnover on offense, it just seems like no matter what, it's just right out of our reach," McCourty said. "That's how you end up in the position we're in."

So what is that position as the Patriots move forward?

Unenviable.

Within the division Brady ruled, there is a new king, the Bills. There's a team on the rise in Miami. Both are young and dynamic, superbly coached — Buffalo's Sean McDermott and Miami's Brian Flores are in the conversation for Coach of the Year — and

with something New England doesn't have and allowed to walk away: likely franchise quarterbacks.

There's also defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City in the West; a rising contender out of Cleveland in the North to go along with resourceful and resilient Pittsburgh and Baltimore; and two teams with solid bases in the South, Tennessee and Indianapolis.

Other than the Chiefs and Andy Reid, all have relatively young head coaches who figure to be around and successful for a while. Belichick is 68 and faced with a significant rebuilding project.

And one of the building blocks he must find is a quarterback. Cam Newton hasn't been the answer; not even close. Some observers believe the Patriots will seek a veteran QB to try to rekindle the offense, perhaps a Matthew Stafford or a Matt Ryan should they become available. Others suggest Belichick will attempt to bring back one of his former quarterbacks — no, not that one in Tampa — in Jimmy Garoppolo or Jacoby Brissett.

New England hasn't needed to develop a young starter at the most important offensive position since Brady was in his early 20s. That probably is the right way to go given the dearth of talent on that side of the ball, but does Belichick have the patience and the longevity to go that route?

Regardless, in a year played during a pandemic that strongly impacted the Patriots, Belichick and his staff can spend January not game planning but re-evaluating. They might even have time to tune in to watch Brady and the Buccaneers in the playoffs.

Mahomes shows flair in leading Chiefs past Saints

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Patrick Mahomes' repertoire of side-arm throws, basketball-style push passes, underhanded flips and renowned improvisation humbled yet another highly regarded defense.

Mahomes passed for 254 yards and three touchdowns, and the Kansas City Chiefs extended their winning streak to nine games with a 32-29 victory over the New Orleans Saints on Sunday.

"Patrick is more impressive than I could imagine," said running back Le'Veon Bell, who joined the Chiefs in mid-October and scored a 12-yard touchdown on an option

pitch from Mahomes. "He's even more impressive in person. ... I'm fortunate to be his teammate."

The Kansas City defense did its part to spoil Drew Brees' return from rib fractures and a punctured lung that had kept the record-setting passer out four games.

While Brees passed for 234 yards and three TDs, he completed fewer than half of his passes and was intercepted for just the fourth time this season.

"I wasn't real efficient, obviously, in the passing game," Brees said. "I'd say that was a combination of forcing some things down the field instead of just taking a completion

underneath. There were some miscues."

The victory kept the defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs (13-1) in pole position to capture the AFC's lone playoff bye as a No. 1 seed. The Saints (10-4), meanwhile, missed a chance to clinch the NFC South for a second straight week and now are longshots to capture the NFC's top seed.

Mahomes' scoring passes went for 5 yards each to Tyreek Hill and Mecole Hardman, the latter coming as the agile QB backpedaled toward the left sideline to avoid pressure and threw to the back corner of the end zone, where Hardman snagged it in traffic.

NHL, players agree on 56-game season

Associated Press

Hockey is set to return Jan. 13 after the NHL and players completed a deal Sunday to hold a 56-game season that would include playoffs lasting into July to award the Stanley Cup.

The league's Board of Governors voted to approve the agreement that was backed by the NHL Players' Association executive board Friday night. The regular season is scheduled to go until May 8 with a 16-team playoff to follow.

"It'll be exciting to get going again," San Jose general manager Doug Wilson said on a video call. "It's been a challenging year and journey."

The season will be highly unusual in at least one respect: There will be four divisions — North, South, East and West — and all play will be within them through the first two rounds of the playoffs to minimize travel and the potential for the coronavirus to disrupt the season. The North Division contains only the seven Canadian teams.

"It is the current plan to play games in the home arenas of participating teams while understanding that most arenas will not, at least in the initial part of the season, be able to host fans," the NHL said.

The league is allowing for the possibility of playing games at neutral sites if needed. Final details on where the Canadian teams will play were still pending until there are agreements with federal and provincial health officials.

Still, the hurdles won't be enough to prevent the season from starting without a quarantined bubble.

"The National Hockey League looks forward to the opening of our 2020-21 season," Commissioner Gary Bettman said in a statement. "While we are well aware of the challenges ahead, as was the case last spring and summer, we are continuing to prioritize the health and safety of our participants and the communities in which we live and play."

The NHL completed last season in bub-

bles in Toronto and Edmonton, Alberta, with players, coaches and staff isolated from the general public and virus-tested daily.

"The players are pleased to have finalized agreements for the upcoming season, which will be unique but also very exciting," NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said. "During these troubled times, we hope that NHL games will provide fans with some much-needed entertainment as the players return to the ice."

Most of the league will open training camp Jan. 3.

The seven teams that didn't make the playoffs last season can start as soon as Dec. 31. There won't be any exhibition games before play gets going for real.

Critical dates, such as the trade deadline and latest possible day for the end of the Stanley Cup Final, and the full schedule are expected to be released in the coming days. In the three U.S. divisions, teams will play eight times against each other.

Jets slip past Rams to avoid winless season

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Sam Darnold and the New York Jets could have been forgiven for forgetting the victory formation, yet everybody knew where to stand when they got the chance at SoFi Stadium.

After 51 weeks and 13 games without a win, the Jets finally earned the chance to celebrate with pride.

"It's the greatest feeling in sports to be able to ice the game out and know we had it," Darnold said. "It's the best."

New York (1-13) knew its 23-20 victory over the embarrassed Los Angeles Rams on Sunday was never pretty. Everybody realized it also came with a major drawback: the Jets are no longer in position for the top pick in the NFL draft.

Don't try telling that to the joyful players who surged onto the field after the final whistle with the knowledge their names will not be attached to the ignominy of the third 0-16 season in NFL history.

Darnold passed for 207 yards in a steady performance, while Frank Gore rushed for a score that was his 100th career touchdown in the team's first win since the 2019 season finale. Gore also made a decisive third-down reception with 2:12 left for the Jets,

who ended the longest losing streak in franchise history with a strong start and a gritty finish.

"I'm just happy for our guys," coach Adam Gase said. "They've done such a great job of how they've worked. They've been through a lot of adversity. It's been too long for us to even remember what a win feels like, almost. It's great to see those guys that excited."

Gase's club got its first win of the year only after blowing most of a 17-point lead in the second half. After a potential go-ahead touchdown for the Rams was wiped out by a penalty, forcing LA to kick a field goal, New York's defense stopped the Rams again on downs near midfield with 3:54 to play.

Moments later, Darnold hit Gore with the short pass over the middle that allowed the Jets to run out the clock. It was only a 6-yard gain for Gore, who awkwardly backpedaled with the ball into first down territory but it still meant a great deal to the young quarterback and his veteran running back.

"We knew we couldn't give it back to them, and for us to be able to execute when we really needed to, that was something that obviously we haven't done all year," Darnold said. "To be able to execute and see it

kind of come all into fruition, I think that was the biggest thing for us. It was an amazing feeling."

With two games left, New York might have ruined its chances at the No. 1 overall pick because Jacksonville (1-13) is likely to win a tiebreaker based on strength of schedule. But possibly missing the chance to draft Clemson star Trevor Lawrence meant nothing to the players and coaches responsible for this lost season.

It certainly didn't bother Darnold, who looked right at home in his first pro game in his native Southern California. The former USC Trojans star went 22 of 31 with a touchdown pass and no interceptions.

"It's not easy," said Wilson, whose Sharks will hold training camp in Scottsdale, Arizona, given restrictions on sports in Santa Clara County in California.

As far as the divisions, Boston, Buffalo, New Jersey, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington and the New York Islanders and Rangers are in the East; Carolina, Chicago, Columbus, Dallas, Detroit, Florida, Nashville and Tampa Bay are in the Central; and Arizona, Anaheim, Colorado, Los Angeles, Minnesota, St. Louis, San Jose and Vegas are in the West.