

US releases Afghanistan airstrike data

The Washington Post

U.S. airstrikes against the Taliban surged in August, rising to levels not seen in nearly a year as part of the final, failed attempt to prevent the Afghan army's collapse as militants rapidly took over the country, according to data disclosed Friday.

The burst of attacks came as Taliban fighters encircled numerous provincial capitals and ultimately seized control of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, on Aug. 15. About 153 U.S. bombs or missiles were dropped by U.S. war planes and drones that month, up from 18 in July, the data showed.

Until Friday, the U.S. Air Force had not released such a report for nearly two years.

The data does not include strikes launched by the Afghan air force, which routinely carried out bombing until disbanding along with the central government. Nonetheless, the numbers offer a fresh look at how the American military scrambled in the waning days of its longest war, as the situation on the ground grew increasingly desperate for U.S.-trained Afghan forces being overpowered by the Taliban's assault.

For many years, the U.S. Air Force released "airpower summaries" monthly in a demonstration of transparency to Ameri-

can taxpayers, congressional oversight committees and U.S. allies. But publication was suspended after the Trump administration signed a deal with the Taliban in February 2020 that promised to withdraw U.S. troops by this year in exchange for a handful of concessions, including that militants stop attacking U.S. troops. U.S. forces remaining in Afghanistan would retain the ability to defend themselves, U.S. officials said, but they continued to carry out limited airstrikes in support of their Afghan allies.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Friday before the reports' distribution that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed that the data again be released in an effort to improve transparency. The withheld monthly reports date back to February 2020, he said.

Kirby said there have been no U.S. military airstrikes in Afghanistan since the withdrawal was completed Aug. 30. The Pentagon will continue to provide air power summaries, he said, with publication by Air Forces Central Command, which oversees operations in the region.

The airstrikes occurred as hundreds of civilians were killed per month in 2021, mostly in roadside bomb explosions or fighting between Afghan forces and the Ta-

liban, according to U.N. mission reports. The U.S. military did kill some civilians, however, including in an Aug. 28 strike in Kabul in which commanders thought they were striking an Islamic State bomber but killed an aid worker and nine other civilians.

At the height of its air campaign against the Taliban, the U.S. military conducted thousands of strikes annually, reaching a high of 7,423 in 2019, as commanders attempted to force the Taliban to negotiate an end to the war.

The bombing campaign remained busy early in 2020, with 415 weapons dropped in January and 360 in February of last year. But it plummeted after the withdrawal deal was signed, with 116 weapons dropped in March, 27 in April, 15 in May and 18 that June, the newly released data show.

The numbers climbed again from there, as the Taliban mostly held true to not attacking U.S. troops but waged a bloody campaign against Afghan police and soldiers. The U.S. military dropped 246 weapons in October 2020, and then more than 100 per month for the first third of 2021, the reports show. The numbers tailed off again beginning in May, before the last spike as the Taliban asserted control of the country.

Russian envoy warns against West ignoring demands

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia may take unspecified new measures to ensure its security if the U.S. and its allies continue to take provocative action and ignore Moscow's demand for guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine, a senior diplomat said Saturday.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov accused Western allies of continuously pushing the envelope in relations with Russia, and warned that Moscow could also up the ante if the West doesn't treat its demands seriously.

Ryabkov's statement in an interview with the Interfax news agency came a day after Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet

countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe — bold ultimatums that are almost certain to be rejected by the U.S. and its allies.

The publication of the demands — contained in a proposed Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between Moscow and NATO — comes amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has raised fears of an invasion. Russia has denied it has plans to attack its neighbor but wants legal guarantees that would rule out NATO expansion and deploying weapons there.

Russian President Vladimir Putin raised the demand for security guarantees during a video call with U.S. President Joe Biden earlier this month. During the conversation,

Biden voiced concern about a buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine and warned him that Russia would face "severe consequences" if Moscow attacked its neighbor.

"They have been extending the limits of what's possible" regarding Russia, Ryabkov told Interfax in response to a question about the Western threat of tough new sanctions against Moscow.

"But they fail to consider that we will take care of our security and act in a way similar to NATO's logic and also will start extending the limits of what is possible sooner or later," Ryabkov said. "We will find all the necessary ways, means and solutions needed to ensure our security."

He didn't elaborate on what action Russia may take if its demands are rejected by the West.

Official: Iran nuclearization accelerating

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Iran's nuclear program is "rapidly accelerating" three years after the United States withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, a senior White House official said Friday.

Former President Donald Trump in May 2018 pulled the U.S. out the deal signed three years earlier with Iran, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany. The deal had traded sanctions relief for restrictions on Iran's nucle-

ar program.

At the time, Trump said the multinational agreement did not do enough to stop Iran's missile program, but the senior official said Friday that pulling out of the deal only accelerated Iranian nuclear development.

"This should not have been a surprise to anybody that knows Iranian behavior and would have predicted exactly what would have happened if the United States just unilaterally left the deal without any plan or conception of what would come next," said the official, who

spoke with reporters on condition of anonymity.

Now, President Joe Biden's administration is working with allies and competitors China and Russia to try again to curtail Iran's nuclear program.

"We've been working diplomatically to get this problem back in a box to return Iran to nuclear compliance with the deal," the official said. "We think we have very strong support in that regard."

The official said the diplomatic efforts have worked to make Iran "the isolated party,"

which the Biden administration hopes will lead to a return to the nuclear agreement.

"It's pretty clear that in return for its nuclear compliance with the [deal], we are prepared to return to compliance with our side," the official said. "But the Iranians to date have not agreed to take the steps that it would need to take on the nuclear side, which is why we've been stuck."

The official said efforts to reach a deal will be a "central focus" for the U.S. in the Middle East next year.

Destructive Typhoon Rai batters Philippines

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — A powerful typhoon left at least 31 people dead, knocked down power and communications in entire provinces and wrought widespread destruction mostly in the central Philippines, officials said Saturday. A governor said her island has been "leveled to the ground."

Typhoon Rai blew away Friday night into the South China Sea after rampaging through southern and central island provinces, where more than 300,000 people in its path were evacuated to safety in advance in a preemptive move officials say may have saved a lot of lives.

At its strongest, Rai packed sustained winds of 121 miles per hour and gusts of up to 168 mph, one of the most powerful in recent years to hit the disaster-prone Southeast Asian archipelago, which lies between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. The typhoon slammed into the country's

southeastern coast Thursday but the extent of casualties and destruction remained unclear two days after with entire provinces still without power and cellphone connection.

The government's main disaster-response agency said at least 31 people were reported killed, many after being hit by falling trees, but it added it was validating most of the deaths. At least three were injured and one was missing.

Officials on Dinagat Islands, one of the first provinces to be lashed by the typhoon's ferocious winds, remained cut off Saturday due to downed power and communication lines. But its governor, Arlene Bag-ao, managed to post a statement on the province's website to say that the island of about 180,000 "has been leveled to the ground." She pleaded for food, water, temporary shelters, fuel, hygiene kits and medical supplies. She said only a few casualties have

been reported in the capital so far because other towns remain isolated.

"We may have survived, but we cannot do the same in the coming days because of our limited capacities as an island province," Bag-ao said, adding some of Dinagat's hospitals could not open due to damage. "Most of our commercial and cargo vessels ... are now unsuitable for sea voyages, effectively cutting us off from the rest of the country."

Vice Gov. Nilo Demerey managed to reach a nearby province and told DZMM radio network that at least six residents died and that "almost 95% of houses in Dinagat have no roof," and even emergency shelters were destroyed.

"We're currently doing repairs because even our evacuation centers were destroyed. There are no shelters; the churches, gymnasium, schools, public markets and even the capitol were all shattered," Demerey said.

Fire engulfs Russian warship being built; 3 hurt

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia — A Russian warship under construction at a shipyard in St. Petersburg caught fire Friday, leaving at least three workers injured.

The Provorny (Agile) corvette being built at the Severnaya Verf (Northern Shipyard)

was completely engulfed by flames, and nearly 170 firefighters were taking part in efforts to extinguish the blaze that sent massive plumes of smoke over Russia's second-largest city.

Local authorities said three workers were injured, with two of them requiring hospi-

talization.

An official panel has been created to investigate the cause of the fire, which wasn't immediately known.

The corvette is the latest in a series of such ships built at the shipyard. It was set to be commissioned by the navy late next year.

Court OKs Biden's private employers vaccine mandate

Associated Press

A federal appeals court panel on Friday allowed President Joe Biden's COVID-19 vaccine mandate for larger private employers to move ahead, reversing a previous decision on a requirement that could affect some 84 million U.S. workers.

The 2-1 decision by a panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati overrules a decision by a federal judge in a separate court that had paused the mandate nationwide.

The mandate from the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration was to take effect Jan. 4. With Friday's ruling, it's not clear when the requirement might be put in place, but the White House said in a statement that it will protect workers: "Especially as the U.S. faces the highly transmissible Omicron variant, it's critical we move forward with vaccination requirements and protections for workers with the urgency needed in this moment."

Republican state attorneys general and conservative groups said they would appeal Friday's decision to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Twenty-seven Republican-led states joined with conservative groups, business associations and some individual businesses to push back against the requirement as soon as OSHA published the rules in early November. They argued the agency was not authorized to make the emergency rule, in part because the coronavirus is a general health risk and not one faced only by employees at work.

The panel's majority disagreed.

"Given OSHA's clear and exercised authority to regulate viruses, OSHA necessarily has the authority to regulate infectious diseases that are not unique to the workplace," Judge Julia Smith Gibbons, who was nominated to the court by former President George W. Bush, a Republican, wrote in her majority opinion.

"Vaccination and medical examinations are both tools that OSHA historically employed to contain illness in the workplace," she wrote.

The dissent in Friday's ruling came from Judge Joan Larsen, an appointee of former President Donald Trump, who said Congress did not authorize OSHA to make this sort of rule and that it did not qualify as a necessity to use the emergency procedures the agency followed to put it in place.

CDC endorses schools' 'test-to-stay' policies

Associated Press

NEW YORK — U.S. health officials are endorsing "test-to-stay" policies that allow close contacts of students infected with the coronavirus to remain in classrooms if they test negative.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention decided to more firmly embrace the approach, already used by many school districts, after research of such policies in the Chicago and Los Angeles areas found COVID-19 infections did not increase when using the approach.

"Test-to-stay is an encouraging public health practice to help keep our children in school," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said on Friday.

The CDC's official guidance for schools has been that when someone in a school tests positive for COVID-19 infection, those who were deemed to be in close contact should stay out of school, in home quarantine, for 10 days.

With the announcement Friday, the CDC is saying test-to-stay programs and quarantining approaches are both equally good options for schools.

Hundreds of schools have adopted test-

to-stay policies, and several states have funded statewide test-to-stay policies to prevent students from spending long stretches away from school.

Previously, the CDC said there is promise in the approach, as long as other measures such as masking for both teachers and students were followed.

The CDC has been working with some school districts to evaluate the programs, and the agency released two studies that indicated they worked well.

One was in suburban Lake County, Ill., just north of Chicago, which adopted a program in August. Close contacts were allowed to stay in school provided both the infected person and close contact were masked when an exposure might have happened, the close contact had no symptoms, and the close contact was tested one, three, five and seven days after exposure to the infected person.

Infections developed in only 16 of the more than 1,000 close contacts who were tracked, a transmission rate of about 1.5%. Health officials deemed it a successful approach that allowed many students to stay in school.

Rockettes cancel their season as New York tallies record virus cases

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York state reported Friday that just over 21,000 people had tested positive for COVID-19 the previous day, the highest single-day total for new cases since testing became widely available.

Just under half of the positive results were in the city, where lines were growing at testing stations, the Rockettes Christmas show was canceled for the season and some Broadway shows nixed performances because of outbreaks among cast members.

One-day snapshots of virus statistics can be an unreliable way to measure trends, but the new record punctuated a steady increase that started in the western part of the state in late October, and has taken off in New York City in the past week as the omicron variant spreads.

"This is changing so quickly. The numbers are going up exponentially by day," Gov. Kathy Hochul said during a Friday appearance on CNN.

The steep rise in infections should be of great concern but it was inevitable, given the quick spread of the newest variant, said Dr. Denis Nash, the executive director of the Institute for Implementation Science in Population Health at the City University of New York.

"We were already headed for a winter surge with delta, which is a very concerning thing in its own right," Nash said.

"But then you layer on top of that the new omicron variant, which is more transmissible from an infection standpoint," he said, noting that current vaccines may be unable to contain the "more invasive" new COVID-19 variant.

Capitol rioter gets toughest sentence yet

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Capitol rioter who attacked police officers working to hold back the angry pro-Trump mob on Jan. 6 was sentenced Friday to more than five years behind bars, the most so far for anyone sentenced in the riot.

Robert Palmer, 54, of Largo, Fla., wept as he told U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan that he recently watched a video of his actions that day and could not believe what he was seeing.

“Your honor. I’m really really ashamed of what I did,” he said through tears.

Palmer was one of several rioters sentenced on Friday in District of Columbia court for their actions that day, when the angry mob descended to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden’s victory following a rally by then-President Donald Trump. Scores of police were beaten and bloodied, five people died and there was about \$1.5 million in damage done to the U.S. Capitol. Palmer is the 65th defendant to be sentenced overall.

More than 700 people have been charged.

A college student who posted online that “Infamy is just as good as fame” after she climbed through a broken window at Capitol was sentenced to a month in jail for her actions. Gracyn Courtright, 23, of Hurricane, W.Va., didn’t injure anyone, though, and her 30-day sentence reflected that.

But Palmer made his way to the front line during the chaos and started to attack, throwing a wooden plank, spraying a fire extinguisher, then hurling it when it was done. He rooted around for other objects, prosecutors said. He was briefly pepper-sprayed by police before he attacked officers again with a pole. He pleaded guilty to attacking officers.

Palmer said in a handwritten letter to the judge that he felt betrayed by Trump and his allies who fed them conspiracy theories.

“Trump supporters were lied to by those at the time who had great power,” he wrote. “They kept spitting out the false narrative about a stolen election and how it was ‘our

duty’ to stand up to tyranny.”

Before Palmer’s sentencing of 63 months, the longest prison term handed down for a Capitol rioter was 41 months. That was the sentence received by both Jacob Chansley, the Arizona man who wore a horned fur hat, bare chest and face paint inside the Capitol; and New Jersey gym owner Scott Fairlamb, the first person to be sentenced for assaulting a law enforcement officer during the riot.

Courtright sobbed as she told U.S. District Court Judge Christopher Cooper that “if I could take back anything in my life it would be my actions on Jan. 6.”

She posted photos of herself online — like scores of other rioters — reveling in the moment. “Can’t wait to tell my grandkids I was here!” she wrote, and inside the Senate chamber, she was photographed holding a “Members only” sign.

“I will never be the same girl again,” the University of Kentucky student said through tears. “This has changed me completely.”

Officer who shot Wright is ‘sorry it happened’

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The Minnesota police officer who shot and killed Daunte Wright told jurors at her manslaughter trial on Friday that she “didn’t want to hurt anybody” that day, saying during sometimes tearful testimony that she shouted a warning about using her Taser on Wright after she saw fear in a fellow officer’s face.

Kim Potter, 49, has said she meant to draw her Taser instead of her handgun during the April 11 traffic stop in Brooklyn Center when she killed Wright. She testified that she was “sorry it happened” and that she doesn’t remember what she said or everything that happened after the shooting, saying much of her memory of those moments “is missing.”

Potter is charged with first-degree and second-degree manslaughter in the killing of Wright, a 20-year-old Black motorist who was pulled over for

having expired license plate tags and an air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror. Potter, who was training another officer at the time, said she probably wouldn’t have pulled Wright’s car over if she had been on her own that day because many drivers were late on renewing their tags at that point of the pandemic.

After she and the other two officers at the scene that day decided to arrest Wright on an outstanding warrant for a weapons violation, the encounter “just went chaotic,” Potter told the jury. Wright pulled away from the officers and got back in his car, police body camera footage of the traffic stop shows.

Potter’s attorneys argued that she made a mistake but also would have been justified in using deadly force if she had meant to because one of the other officers, then-Sgt. Mychal Johnson, was at risk of being dragged by Wright’s car.

In SC, Biden pledges fight for stalled voting rights

Associated Press

ORANGEBURG, S.C. — President Joe Biden pledged Friday to fight for stalled voting rights and police reform legislation, addressing graduates of South Carolina State University amid the harsh reality that months of talks with lawmakers have failed to move the measures closer to becoming law.

Biden spoke at the historically Black school a day after conceding that his nearly \$2 trillion social and environmental bill was unlikely to become law this year, as he had hoped, due to continued disagreement among fellow Democrats. Republicans unanimously oppose the spending.

Wearing a black gown as he delivered the December commencement address, the president bemoaned GOP opposition keeping voting rights bills from advancing in the 50-50 Senate following passage by the Democratic-controlled House. He

blamed “that other team, which used to be called the Republican Party,” for refusing to even allow the bills to be debated.

Biden vowed to keep pushing to protect what he called “the sacred right to vote” as the NAACP and similar groups have grown frustrated with the White House over the lack of progress on the issue. Voting rights is a priority for Democrats heading into next year’s midterm elections after Republican-controlled legislatures passed a wave of restrictive new voting laws.

Biden pledged similar advocacy for police reform, another issue important to the Black community after a series of killings of Black men by police.

The House passed a sweeping police reform measure earlier this year in response to George Floyd’s killing, but months of negotiations among a bipartisan group of senators failed to produce a bill.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dog missing for months finally is found

MI SODUS TOWNSHIP — A dog that disappeared in Michigan last summer while visiting from Texas has been returned to his grateful owners.

Jennifer Hysell and her husband drove 15 hours from Dallas to be reunited with Parker, their beloved pit bull.

“Knowing that he was safe and now he’s coming home, he’s not scared anymore — that’s what matters,” Hysell told WWMT-TV.

Parker ran away in July while Hysell was in Bangor, Mich., for her father’s funeral. Hysell searched but had to return to Texas. In late November, the dog was spotted and eventually lured into a kennel and caught.

Disney Castle evacuated after small fire

FL LAKE BUENA VISTA — A small fire at Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom started in a tree and may have been caused by fireworks debris, officials said.

The blaze broke out after fireworks were set off near the Cinderella Castle, Reedy Creek Fire Association president Jon Shirey told WESH-TV. The castle and surrounding areas were evacuated. Disney workers quickly extinguished the flames, Shirey said.

Man dies weeks after being ignited by Taser

NY CATSKILL — An upstate New York man died nearly six weeks after bursting into flames when po-

lice used a Taser to subdue him after he doused himself in hand sanitizer.

Jason Jones, 29, was taken off a ventilator at an intensive care unit at Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse, according to his family’s attorney, The Times Union reported. The state attorney general’s office will take part in the investigation into Jones’ death.

Jones had walked into the Catskill village police department in late October and got into a confrontation with officers. He appeared to be intoxicated and had removed his clothing, the newspaper reported.

Chief Dave Darling said last month that officers were familiar with Jones from previous encounters, and were likely afraid he was going to hurt himself.

Jones had been a standout track and basketball athlete at Catskill High School over a decade ago, The Times Union reported.

‘Nutcracker’ ice sculptures vandalized

NH DOVER — A bunch of ice sculptures installed in Dover, N. H., for the holiday season have been vandalized, and police are asking the public for their help as they investigate.

The damaged sculptures include characters from “The Nutcracker” at a park that were installed at a train station in honor of the 20th anniversary of Amtrak’s Downeaster line, Seacoastonline.com reported.

Jeff Spire, a board member of Dover Main Street, said the vandalism isn’t going to stop the group from continuing to spread holiday cheer. The last,

and largest, sculpture is still scheduled to be installed — a 5-foot-wide, 6-foot-tall work that spells out “D-O-V-E-R,” with Santa’s sleigh above it.

Man admits pointing lasers at planes

TN MEMPHIS — A Mississippi man has pleaded guilty to pointing a green laser at FedEx airplanes flying into Memphis International Airport in Tennessee, federal prosecutors said.

Eugene Conrad, 52, of Michigan City, Miss., faces up to five years in prison after he pleaded guilty to aiming a laser pointer at aircraft, the U.S. attorney’s office said. His sentencing is scheduled for March 10.

The Federal Aviation Administration told the FBI in July that airplanes flying into the busy airport from the east were being hit in the cockpit and cabin by a green laser coming from Hardeman County, Tenn., and Benton County, Miss. Officials reported 49 strikes, mainly on FedEx airplanes, from January to July, prosecutors said.

5 arrested for posing as police officers at motel

NC GASTONIA — Five men have been arrested and accused of posing as police officers looking for someone at a North Carolina motel, police said.

Gastonia police officers responded to a report at 1:10 a.m. of a possible burglary at a motel in the 1400 block of East Franklin Avenue involving five suspects who claimed to be law enforcement, The Charlotte Observer reported.

Police determined the men weren’t officers and arrested them. The men used flashlights to look inside at least two motel rooms while announcing to any occupants that they were law enforcement, according to police, who also said one suspect had a handgun.

Each man is charged with impersonating a police officer, a misdemeanor. Gastonia Police Department spokesman Rick Goodale said investigators don’t know the motive for the five men, especially since one of them was armed.

The five men each were given a \$2,500 unsecured bond, and Goodale said they have been released from jail.

City bans facial recognition technology

MA WORCESTER — Worcester has become the latest local community in Massachusetts to have banned the use of facial recognition technology by its city government.

The Worcester City Council voted Tuesday night to prohibit city departments from acquiring or using the technology.

Critics say facial recognition systems have the potential to violate personal privacy and are more likely to err when identifying people with darker skin.

“Facial recognition technology is found to misidentify suspects and does so disproportionately,” said City Councilor Krystian King said in a statement reported by The Telegram & Gazette. “Black women are often mislabeled as men and Black men are often misidentified as being a threat risk.”

— From Associated Press

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Three games moved due to outbreaks

Associated Press

The NFL has moved three games because of COVID-19 outbreaks: Las Vegas at Cleveland from Saturday to Monday; and Seattle at the Los Angeles Rams and Washington at Philadelphia from Sunday to Tuesday.

The Browns could have been without as many as 16 regulars on Saturday, so the game is now scheduled to kick off at 5 p.m. EST Monday. It will be televised by NFL Network.

Washington and Philadelphia will play at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, as will the Seahawks and Rams. Both games will be televised by Fox and available on Sunday Ticket.

“We have made these schedule changes based on medical advice and after discussion with the NFLPA as we are seeing a new, highly transmissible form of the virus this week resulting in a substantial increase in cases across the league,” the NFL said in a statement. “We continue to make decisions in consultation with medical experts to ensure the health and

safety of the NFL community.”

Previously, the NFL did not plan to move any games because of coronavirus outbreaks. It even said forfeits “could be in play.” But recent developments with the omicron strain of COVID-19 has changed the league’s thinking — as did several outbreaks across the league entering Week 15 of the season.

“We will make every effort, consistent with the underlying health and safety principles, to play our full schedule within the current 18 weeks,” Commissioner Roger Goodell said in a memo sent to the 32 clubs and obtained by the AP. “Each team is obligated to have its team ready to play at the scheduled time and place. There is no right to postpone a game, and games will not be postponed or rescheduled because of roster issues affecting a particular position group or particular number of players.

“If games are postponed, we will make every effort to minimize the competitive and economic burden on the participating teams.”

The moves were not looked at kindly by some players.

“I pay my player dues just to get lied to and the rules bent!” Raiders linebacker K.J. Wright tweeted at the league and the players’ union. “If it was the other way around I swear we would be playing tomorrow.”

Eagles safety Rodney McLeod tweeted: “So we have to suffer, and compromise our schedule because of another teams mistake. Make it make sense!”

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll also suggested future game preparation should be taken into consideration.

“Yes, that’s a big concern. Anytime you play Thursday game or this is like a Friday game, I think it’s a big burden on the players,” he said. “It’s a big burden on the recovery time. It’s not what their bodies want to do. They’re trained to have a whole week to recover and they don’t get it.

“Now, if our game (vs. Chicago on Dec. 26) could move back to Monday, that would help us some. I don’t know, that would kind of get in the middle of the

next week as well. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I’m not a fan of that for the player sake.”

Last season, in the midst of the coronavirus, the NFL completed its season on schedule, but had to reschedule 15 games, some to midweek. In July, Goodell warned teams that no games would be rescheduled under such circumstances and, instead, forfeits could happen.

Earlier Friday, Saints coach Sean Payton tested positive for COVID-19 and was immediately isolated from the team.

Payton, who is vaccinated and tested positive in 2020 for the coronavirus, will remain isolated for 10 days unless he meets the league requirements for a fully vaccinated individual to return to the team environment.

The Saints said defensive coordinator Dennis Allen has been assigned head coaching duties for Sunday night’s game at Tampa Bay. Payton is expected to return for New Orleans’ game against the Miami Dolphins on Dec. 27.

McCall, Coastal Carolina hold off Northern Illinois

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Grayson McCall threw four touchdown passes and Coastal Carolina held off Northern Illinois 47-41 in the Cure Bowl on Friday night, with the game ending with the Huskies at the Chanticleers 4.

McCall was 22-for-30 for 315 yards, and Braydon Bennett ran for 108 yards and two touchdowns on six carries to help Coastal Carolina (11-1) win 11 games for the second consecutive year. Bennett also caught four passes for 47 yards and a TD.

“He just operates, he’s a smooth operator,” Coastal Carolina coach Jamey Chadwell

said about McCall. “As a coach, if he misses a play, you’re like, ‘What in the world is wrong with him’ because he makes so many good ones.”

Chadwell said while there is speculation about McCall’s future, “we’re confident that he loves Coastal and he’s going to be here with us and finish out his career.”

It was also Coastal Carolina’s first bowl victory. The Chanticleers lost in their first bowl appearance last year, 37-34 in overtime to Liberty.

“Pretty cool,” McCall said. “Definitely a team effort. I don’t think I played my best game but all my teammates propelled me forward.”

Jay Ducker ran for 146 yards on 24 carries, and Antario Brown added 105 yards and 12 attempts for Northern Illinois (9-5). Rocky Lombardi completed 20 of 33 passes for 181 yards and two scores.

“Couldn’t be more proud of their fight,” NIU coach Thomas Hammock said. “This could be a launching pad for us into the 2022 season.”

Bahamas Bowl

Middle Tennessee 31, Toledo 17: At Nassau, Bahamas, freshman Nick Vattiato threw for 270 yards and two touchdowns, including a 59-yard scoring pass to Jarrin Pierce with 6:24 left, and the Blue

Raiders beat the Rockets.

Two plays after Toledo’s 32-yard punt, Vattiato connected with a wide-open Pierce along the right side for a 28-17 lead. The 59-yard play was the longest completion in Middle Tennessee’s bowl history.

On Toledo’s next possession, quarterback Dequan Finn was pressured by Jordan Ferguson and defensive lineman Zaylin Wood intercepted a tipped pass, leading to a 35-yard field goal for a 31-17 lead.

Toledo got within seven points with 1:08 remaining, but Thomas Cluckey recovered an onside kick to secure it.

Towns, Timberwolves top depleted Lakers

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Karl-Anthony Towns had 28 points and 10 rebounds and the Minnesota Timberwolves blew out the depleted Los Angeles Lakers for a second time this season, 110-92 on Friday night.

Malik Beasley and D'Angelo Russell each had 17 points and Jarred Vanderbilt grabbed a career-high 16 rebounds to help the Timberwolves win their third straight game. They played for the first time without star Anthony Edwards, who was placed in the NBA's health and safety protocols in the afternoon.

LeBron James had a quiet 18 points and 10 rebounds for the Lakers, who were hit even harder by COVID-19 with six players in the protocols. Isaiah Thomas made his season debut with 19 points, Russell Westbrook had 14 points and Kent Bazemore matched his season high with 11 points. Anthony Davis finished with nine points and one rebound in 20 minutes.

Warriors 11, Celtics 107: Stephen Curry scored 30 points, hitting five three-pointers and adding a one-handed scoop shot in the final minute, and visiting Golden State beat Boston.

In his first game since breaking the NBA's career three-pointer record at Madison Square Garden, Curry hit back-to-back threes on his first two shots of the game.

Andrewiggins added 27 points to help the Warriors win their third straight game to reclaim sole possession of the NBA lead at 24-5 — a half-game ahead of Phoenix. It was Steve Kerr's 400th coaching victory.

Trail Blazers 125, Hornets 116: Damian Lillard scored a season-high 43 points and host Portland beat Charlotte to snap a seven-game losing streak.

LaMelo Ball led the Hornets with 27 points in his first game

back after being in the NBA's health and safety protocols.

Spurs 128, Jazz 126: Lonnie Walker IV banked in a jumper with 14.9 seconds left and visiting San Antonio ended Utah's winning streak at eight.

Donovan Mitchell scored 27 points for the Jazz. Jordan Clarkson added 21 points and Mike Conley had 18. Rudy Gobert had 16 points and 14 rebounds.

Pelicans 116, Bucks 112 (OT): Devonte' Graham hit eight three-pointers and added two clutch free throws late in overtime to finish with 26 points, and host New Orleans outlasted Milwaukee.

Former Pelicans star Jrue Holiday, who received a warm welcome during pre-game introductions, scored a career-high 40 points.

Heat 115, Magic 105: Max Strus scored 23 of his career-best 32 points in the first half, Gabe Vincent added a career-best 27 and visiting Miami beat Orlando.

The Heat made 19 three-pointers to give them 91 over their past five games. That's the most in team history, easily topping the 82 made over a five-game stretch from Feb. 24, 2020, to March 4, 2020, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Nuggets 133, Hawks 115: Bones Hyland scored 24 points, Monte Morris added 21 and visiting Denver beat Atlanta.

Nikola Jokic and Jeff Green each finished with 20 points for the Nuggets. They have won three of four.

Grizzlies 124, Kings 105: Desmond Bane scored 24 points and Memphis overcame another double-digit deficit to win, beating host Sacramento.

Dillon Brooks had 23 points and six rebounds, and Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 21 points to help the Grizzlies to their sixth consecutive road win — their most since 2016.

Unranked Creighton upsets No. 9 'Nova

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Not much was expected of Creighton this season, not with its roster full of newcomers.

The Bluejays might be better than thought, judging by their performance against Villanova on Friday night.

Ryan Hawkins scored 19 points to lead four players in double figures, and the Bluejays closed with a flurry in a 79-59 victory over the ninth-ranked Wildcats.

A team with no returning starters that was picked to finish eighth in the 11-team Big East isn't supposed to rout the conference standard bearer, especially not in the league opener.

"I just don't think they know any better yet. I really don't," said Creighton coach Greg McDermott, who starts two freshmen and a sophomore. "Our young guys are really good. They don't have a care in the world. They just kind of play the game."

The Bluejays (9-3) saw their double-digit lead get cut to 56-54 with 8 1/2 minutes left, but the Wildcats (7-4) missed their last 12 shots from the field and were outscored 23-5 the rest of the way.

Ryan Nembhard had 11 of his 14 points in the second half as the Bluejays knocked off a second ranked opponent in seven days. Alex O'Connell added 12 points and Trey Alexander had 10 for Creighton, which beat No. 24 BYU 83-71 last Saturday before losing 58-57 at home to Arizona State on Tuesday.

"Would I have guessed we could beat a couple ranked teams in a week's time? Probably not," McDermott said. "Let's be honest, we're learning and growing. It's coming together. I said it early in the season, there is going to be some in-

consistency, peaks and valleys. We had a good peak Saturday against BYU, a valley against Arizona State and now we climbed out of it."

Villanova, for its part, has a big hole to dig out of right now. The Wildcats, beaten 57-36 at top-ranked Baylor in their previous game, have consecutive losses of 20 or more points for the first time in Jay Wright's 21 years as coach. In their last three games, they are 23-for-100 on three-pointers.

"We're struggling," Wright said. "Every guy individually is trying to get us going and we're kind of losing our rhythm offensively. We have to learn from this and we're going to have to get that back."

Collin Gillespie scored 16 points and Eric Dixon had a career-high 15 for the defending conference champion Wildcats, who shot just 33%.

Ryan Kalkbrenner, the Bluejays' 7-footer, had nine rebounds to go with his eight points, and he had four of his five blocks in the second half.

There were 10 lead changes and two ties before Creighton got on a roll late in the first half. The Bluejays made five straight shots during a 15-5 spurt. Hawkins scored eight points in two minutes and Nembhard made a three from the wing to put Creighton up 35-26.

"I hardly have words for how proud I am of these guys," McDermott said. "To bounce back from a tough one against Arizona State against such a veteran and talented team. Their (first) three losses are to three teams that could be in the Final Four. For our guys to fight the way we did and really dominate the paint, to have our bench step up the way it did ... A lot of young guys out there when the game was being decided."

NHL shuts down 2 more teams for a week

Associated Press

Postponements and coronavirus problems for the NHL are coming at a dizzying and disquieting pace not seen since earlier in the pandemic.

The league shut down two more teams through the Christmas holiday break on Friday, eager to avoid putting all 32 on pause amid worsening COVID-19 conditions across North America. A total of 20 NHL games have now been postponed, the majority of which have come in recent days, and roughly 10% of the 700-plus players are currently in the league's virus protocol.

While teams are reporting mostly asymptomatic or mild cases among players, the growing number of positive tests is adding to concerns that the NHL will not send its players to the Winter Olympics in China, and threatening to upend a schedule for a league with seven teams in Canada that relies on cross-border travel more than any other.

"The fact that we only shut down two additional teams means we are trying to avoid a full league shutdown," Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly told The Associated Press

by email. He added that is "obviously subject to change based on circumstances."

All games for the Colorado Avalanche and Florida Panthers have been postponed through at least the upcoming weekend, and the hard-hit Calgary Flames had their shutdown extended through the Dec. 24-26 holiday break.

"It was the only call to be made," Flames general manager Brad Treliving said on a video call.

The training facilities for all three teams have been closed with the league citing "concern with the number of positive cases within the last two days as well as concern for continued COVID spread in the coming days."

In another blow to a league that relies heavily on ticket revenue, four of the five Canadian provinces that are home to NHL teams are or will soon limit venue capacity to 50%. Only Alberta, home to Edmonton and Calgary, had not announced a similar restriction and in fact was going ahead as planned with the world junior men's hockey championship that opens Dec. 26.

More than 70 NHL players are now in

protocol, including 19 on the Flames. It is a discouraging sign for the the league, where all but one player on active rosters across the league, Detroit's Tyler Bertuzzi, are considered fully vaccinated. It was unclear how many have received a vaccine booster as recommended by health officials and the league.

In all, Calgary has had six games postponed, the Avalanche four and the Panthers three. The New York Islanders, Ottawa, Carolina — and now Boston and Montreal, who saw their game Saturday in Quebec called off — have all had games postponed.

Postponing this many games could threaten NHL participation in the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing, which begin Feb. 4. When the league and players agreed to participate, they left open the door to withdrawing if they need the two-and-a-half-week break to complete the season.

Daly said Friday there had been no decision made yet on the Olympics but noted the possibility is "becoming more and more difficult." The league has until Jan. 10 to withdraw without financial penalty.

Penguins extend streak to six, outlast Sabres in OT

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Jeff Carter redirected a centering pass from Kris Letang between the legs of Malcom Subban 2:53 into overtime to give the Pittsburgh Penguins a 3-2 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Friday night.

Pittsburgh extended its winning streak to a season-high six games by relying on the NHL's top penalty-killing unit at the start of overtime after Carter drew a penalty for tripping with just 5 seconds left in regulation. Carter atoned by deftly slipping the puck past Subban to send his teammates spilling over the bench in celebration.

Evan Rodrigues set a career high with his 10th goal and Brock McGinn scored for the third time in four games, but Buffalo pushed Pittsburgh to overtime thanks to a spectacular performance by Subban.

Subban made a career-high 45 saves in his second start with Buffalo since being acquired

from Chicago earlier this month. His best stop was a behind-the-back glove save to rob Rodrigues next to the crease.

Blues 4, Stars 1: Vladimir Tarasenko scored twice, Charlie Lindgren made 26 saves and host St. Louis capped a home-and-home sweep against Dallas.

Lindgren improved to 5-0 since taking over in net for the injury-ravaged Blues.

Jason Robertson scored and Braden Holtby made 30 saves for the Stars, who lost their fifth straight game. Dallas has scored three times in its last four games.

Golden Knights 3, Rangers 2: Jonathan Marchessault scored in the third round of the shootout and visiting Vegas beat New York for its season-high fourth straight victory.

Brett Howden had a goal and an assist and Dylan Coghlan also scored in regulation as Vegas won for the seventh time in

eight games. Laurent Brossoit had 27 saves.

Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider each had a goal and assist in the second period for the Rangers, who lost for the fourth time in six games after a seven-game winning streak.

Predators 3, Blackhawks 2: Tanner Jeannot scored in overtime, Thomas Novak and Colton Sissons also scored, and short-handed Nashville beat host Chicago.

The Predators won their seventh straight game despite having eight players in COVID-19 protocols. Defenseman Mark Borowiecki was ruled out following a positive test 90 minutes before faceoff.

The entire coaching staff is also out because of COVID-19. This was the second game Karl Taylor, head coach of their farm club in Milwaukee, ran the bench with his assistant, Scott Ford. Many of his players were called up as well.

Capitals 5, Jets 2: Vitek Vanecek made 40 saves and visiting Washington spoiled the debut of new Winnipeg coach Dave Lowry.

Michael Sgarbossa and Alex Ovechkin scored empty-net goals in the final 2:40 to seal the win for Washington.

Lowry, Winnipeg's former assistant coach, was named interim head coach after Paul Maurice announced his resignation earlier Friday.

Coyotes 6, Ducks 5 (OT): Clayton Keller had two goals and an assist, including a wrist shot 2:09 into overtime, giving visiting Arizona a win over Anaheim.

Anaheim's Trevor Zegras had a chance to win it, but had his shot go off the post. Arizona quickly went down the ice and converted as Keller's shot snapped a six-game losing streak.

Travis Boyd also had two goals and an assist.