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Esper pitches budget amid wall funds issues

BY STEVE BEYNON
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Wednesday that the United States needs to embrace “critical and emerging” technology completely as it aims to continue its edge over near-peer adversaries China and Russia. However, clashes with Congress over the U.S.-Mexico border wall could spark a fight when it comes time to approve a federal budget.

“We are in the midst of rapid technological change that has the potential to fundamentally alter the character of war. Our adversaries are systematically and strategically developing and fielding advanced systems, eroding the advantage the United States military has maintained in conventional warfare,” Esper said testifying before the House Committee on Armed Services.

However, Congress and

President Donald Trump’s administration could brawl over the military’s budget, which seeks to move billions of dollars to southern border security to curtail illegal immigration, drug smuggling and human trafficking. The Pentagon plans to divert \$3.8 billion to construct more border wall, a key campaign promise from Trump. The move sparked a chorus of Democratic outrage and a rare rebuke from Republicans as the administration attempts to circumvent congressional control of federal spending in an election year.

“This is an enormous problem,” said Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., the chairman of the committee, who argued the money is being diverted from other defense resources. “The message it sends is that the Pentagon has plenty of money. It undercuts the congressional process.”

Rep. Mac Thornberry, of Texas, the top Republican on

the committee, also blasted the move, saying it is “substituting the judgment of the administration for the judgment of Congress. I am deeply concerned about where we’re headed with the constitutional issue.”

Thornberry, who is not running for reelection, warned in a statement two weeks ago, that the Pentagon’s move to shift funds from equipment and weapons to border security “undermines the principle of civilian control of the military and is in violation of the separation of powers within the Constitution.”

Trump has increasingly relied on the Defense Department to deliver on his promise of extending security on the southern border, with most efforts to build up physical border barriers stalling in the Democrat-controlled House.

The Pentagon has defended the move. Esper said: “The president has decided there’s

a national emergency on the border,” likening the military shifting priorities to the border to responding to wildfires and hurricanes.

The Pentagon is asking Congress to approve a \$705.4 billion budget for fiscal year 2021, which begins Oct. 1. However, the request is a 0.1% increase from this year’s budget and a far cry from the Department of Veterans Affairs’ 10.2% requested budget increase for next year. The budget plateau comes after years of big bumps by Trump since he took office.

The Pentagon’s proposed budget “does not keep pace with inflation,” Esper said. “Given this flattened funding level, we made many tough decisions to ensure our highest priorities were adequately funded.”

Esper said the Pentagon remains committed to a serious boost in the Navy’s fleet, but the future fleet will look much different than today, including “autonomous” ships.

US soldier in S. Korea is infected with coronavirus

BY KIM GAMEL
AND YOO KYONG CHANG
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — An American soldier tested positive for the new coronavirus, the military said Wednesday as it tightened restrictions aimed at keeping the pneumonia-like illness off-base.

The 23-year-old soldier, stationed at Camp Carroll, is the first U.S. service member known to be infected with COVID-19, which has spread globally with alarming alacrity since it first appeared in China in December.

The widow of a military retiree who had base access also was reported to be infected ear-

lier this week in the nearby city of Daegu, which is at the epicenter of the recent outbreak.

The two cases underscore the growing threat that has forced the military to increasingly focus attention and resources on fighting the virus.

“We are in this for the long haul, and it’s going to take everyone’s patience and cooperation,” Col. Michael Tremblay, the garrison commander at Camp Humphreys, said amid frustration over long delays at access gates.

Several service members and others were quarantined at Humphreys and the garrison in Daegu as a protective measure.

South Korea has the largest

number of confirmed cases outside China, with the number soaring past 1,200 and 12 deaths reported as of Wednesday, according to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Twenty South Korean service members also have been infected, the defense ministry said.

Most of the infections have been in the southeastern part of the country as the outbreak is believed to have begun with an infected woman who attended services at a church run by a secretive religious movement.

The KCDC said 24 novel coronavirus patients had fully recovered and been released.

The American soldier who was infected was transferred

in an ambulance to an isolation unit on Camp Humphreys, the main U.S. base on the divided peninsula.

“We are doing a very thorough trace history on this service member,” said Col. Edward Ballanco, the Army garrison commander for the affected area. “We’re going to know everywhere this service member and his family has been over the last week.”

Meanwhile, long lines formed at access gates at other bases across the nation after USFK raised the threat level to high, began health screening measures and reduced the number of entry points.

Helo crew ditches missile-replica system off Okinawa coast

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND AYA ICHIHASHI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Marine officials are investigating what caused a 1st Marine Aircraft Wing CH-53E Super Stallion crew to ditch a steel target into the ocean off Okinawa after experiencing trouble in-flight.

The incident occurred at approximately 1:10 p.m. Tuesday about a mile west of the Army's Torii Station, when the crew from Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 466 intentionally released a full-scale replica of a surface-to-air missile system with three dummy missiles attached after the object became "unstable," wing spokesman Maj. Ken Kunze said in a statement Tuesday evening and in subsequent emails to Stars and Stripes.

The crew from Marine Corps Air Station Futenma had picked up the target at Torii Station and was carrying it slung beneath the aircraft to a military training range on the island.

No injuries or damage were reported and Marine offi-

cials said the target had to be ditched to "ensure the safety of the crew."

"1st MAW takes all aviation related events seriously and will conduct a thorough review to determine the cause of the incident," Kunze wrote.

"Pending the outcome of that review, any further external transport of these structures has been suspended."

The target, which can be used in both aerial and ground live-fire training, was manufactured by the Indiana-based Patriot Products LLC, Kunze said. It is made from one-inch thick A-36 mild steel, according to the company website.

The targets are billed as environmentally friendly and recyclable; they contain no hazardous or dangerous chemicals or materials, according to Kunze and Patriot Products LLC's website.

The target ditched Tuesday belonged to the U.S. Air Force, Kunze said. It is unclear how much it cost or if it will be salvaged.

Okinawa officials were quick to denounce the incident as "extremely dangerous."

Pentagon: States need to help military spouses transfer work licenses

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — States still need to do more to make it easier for spouses of service members to obtain the credentials they need to work, according to a new Pentagon report.

The military spouse unemployment rate is 24%, according to the Defense Department, and frequent military moves can make it more difficult for spouses to hold down a career, even more so for spouses who need state-issued professional licenses to work.

The report released Monday and submitted to Congress explains how the Pentagon will determine reciprocity — the state-to-state exchange of occupational licenses for military spouses.

About 34% of military spouses need some type of license or certification in order to work in their career field, Marcus Beauregard, director of the Defense-State Liaison Office, told reporters Monday at the Pentagon.

The application process in a new state can delay how soon spouses can work, and costs for the new licenses can add up. The 2020 National Defense Authorization Act has a provision that doubled the reimbursement for state licenses from \$500 to

\$1,000.

The Defense Department in its report outlined what states can do immediately, what new policies they might need and how they need to accept more occupational licenses from other states, Beauregard said.

As a baseline for states to determine whether they are on the right track, the Pentagon determined that a state should be able to issue a license within 30 days to a spouse who has submitted the minimum documentation required, Beauregard said. The licenses could also be temporary and would allow spouses to work sooner while the state receives the remaining documentation for a full license.

Each of the 50 states establishes how people apply for professional licenses and the Defense Department has been working with states since 2011 to implement laws that make the process easier for military spouses.

After several years of the Defense Department working closely with states on military spouse occupational license laws, a 2017 study by the University of Minnesota examined what real change had occurred from their efforts.

"And we found that there were significantly mixed results," Beauregard said.

Marines cite safety concerns in disbanding squadron

Associated Press

YUMA, Ariz. — A Marine Corps search and rescue squadron in southwest Arizona will disband amid safety concerns, military officials said.

Capt. Gabriel Adibe confirmed that the air station's squadron of four twin-engine military helicopters is officially being decommissioned next month, Yuma Sun reported. The squadron is the last of its kind in the Marine Corps.

The decision marks the end of decades-

long military-aided rescue operations in the Yuma area, including search and rescue for missing hikers and boaters, authorities said.

The squadron was scheduled to be decommissioned in June, but worsening conditions have advanced the timeline.

The helicopters have become too difficult and costly for the Marine Corps to maintain, Adibe said, adding that some have been in operation since the 1970s.

The Marine Corps believes that it is no longer able to ensure the safety of the

Marines who fly the aircraft or anyone who would potentially need to be rescued. Search and rescue operations have also been phased out and are no longer a primary function of the Marine Corps.

"This is a capability that the Marine Corps does not intend to go forward with," Adibe said. "The Marine Corps does not plan to replace the aircraft."

Community leaders and residents have expressed concerns, because there is nothing set up locally to replace the squadron's services.

Globe braces for battle as virus spreads

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Crews scrubbed everything from money to buses, military bases were on high alert and quarantines were enforced Wednesday from a beachfront resort in the Atlantic to a remote island in the Pacific. All around the world, people have been working to halt the fast-spreading new coronavirus that, for the first time, counted more new infections outside China than inside the country where the epidemic originated.

Worries over the ever-expanding economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis multiplied, with factories idled, trade routes frozen and tourism crippled, while a growing list of countries braced for the illness to breach their borders. Even the Olympics, five months away, wasn't far enough off to keep people from wondering if it would go on as planned.

"We don't expect a miracle in the short term," said Kianoush Jahanpour of the health ministry in Iran, where an official tally of infections of 139 was doubted by some who thought the problem was far bigger.

The World Health Organization, meanwhile, reported that the number of new cases reported outside China exceeded the number of new cases in China for the first time.

"The sudden increases of cases in Italy, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Korea are deeply concerning," WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday.

About 81,000 people around the globe caught the coronavirus that kept finding new targets. With Brazil confirming the arrival of Latin America's first case, the virus is on every continent but Antarctica.

In Europe, where Germany, France and Spain were among the places with a growing caseload, an expanding cluster of more than 200 cases in northern Italy was eyed as a source for transmissions. In the Middle East, where cases increased in Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq, blame was directed toward Iran. In Asia, where the crisis originated late last year in China, threats continued to emerge around the region, with South Korea battling a mass

outbreak centered in the 2.5 million-person city of Daegu.

The illness has now spread to 37 countries, said world health officials, who simultaneously cautioned against the risks of unnecessary fears or stigma.

In South Korea, workers sanitized public buses, while in China, banks disinfected currency using ultraviolet rays. In Germany, authorities stressed "sneezing etiquette," while in the United States, doctors announced a clinical trial of a possible coronavirus treatment.

Around the world, as Christians marked the start of the holy season of Lent with Ash Wednesday, worshippers found churches closed and rituals changed by virus fears. Even in St. Peter's Square, many of those gathered for Pope Francis' weekly audience wore face masks and clergy appeared to refrain from embracing the pontiff or kissing his ring.

Major gatherings were eyed warily, with organizers scrambling to respond in the face of the epidemic.

Looming largest of all are the Olympic games, whose opening ceremonies are sched-

uled for July 24 in Tokyo. A member of the International Olympic Committee, Richard Pound, sounded alarms a day earlier, saying that the virus could force a cancellation of the games. The Japanese government, in turn, gave mixed signals, insisting they would go forward yet urging that sports events now be curtailed.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for major sports and cultural events in the coming two weeks to be canceled or postponed to stem further infections. Meanwhile, the top government spokesman said that Olympics preparations would proceed and the games would go on as planned.

China said Wednesday that those sickened by the virus included 555 prisoners, who officials said likely became infected by guards using the same bus station as a nearby pulmonary hospital. In a twist, China is now heavily regulating arrivals from abroad, with authorities placing South Koreans under monitoring, state broadcaster CCTV reported, after five people on a flight showed signs of fever.

USFJ recommends limiting large gatherings

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. military has told commanders in Japan to consider limiting or canceling public gatherings such as meetings, formations and large social events as a precaution against the spread of the new coronavirus.

Base commanders have also been authorized to initiate health screenings for anyone entering their installations, Maj. Gieve White, spokeswoman for U.S. Forces Japan, told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday.

Additionally, all nonessential travel to South Korea is prohibited due to the outbreak of the virus, also known as COVID-

19, in that country.

USFJ also directed units to monitor conditions near U.S. installations, coordinate with local health officials and encourage "strict hygiene measures," including frequent handwashing and wiping down common surface areas on a regular basis, according to a USFJ statement Wednesday.

The 7th Fleet is screening all personnel accessing its warships and aircraft for coronavirus exposure and symptoms. The checks include questionnaires and other medical screenings, 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley said Monday.

U.S. Forces Korea is screening base entrants with temperature checks and a health

questionnaire about possible exposure to the coronavirus. It was unclear Wednesday whether bases in Japan would adopt such measures.

Cancellations due to coronavirus concerns have already begun. Camp Zama, home to U.S. Army Japan in Kanagawa prefecture, on Tuesday canceled its 2020 Cherry Blossom Festival open-base event scheduled for March 29.

"While we regret not being able to host the event and share in this wonderful part of Japanese culture this year, we are focused on the health and safety of both our on-post and local neighboring communities," U.S. Army Garrison Japan commander Col. Thomas Matelski said in a statement on the

base's official Facebook page.

Naval Air Facility Atsugi declined to host this year's Tomodachi Bowl football game between American and Japanese high school players for health concerns. The base commander is "weighing his options daily" on implementing additional precautions, NAF Atsugi spokesman Sam Samuelson said Wednesday.

At Misawa Air Base, officials have reviewed a disease containment plan, evaluated the personal protective equipment supply and are staying in daily contact with local Japanese public health offices and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force, according to a post Wednesday on its Facebook page.

Dem rivals take aim at Sanders in debate

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. — Democrats unleashed a roaring assault against Bernie Sanders and seized on Mike Bloomberg's past with women in the workplace during a contentious debate that tested the strength of the two men at the center of the party's presidential nomination fight.

As the undeniable Democratic front-runner, Sanders faced the brunt of the attacks for much of the night, and for one of the few times, fellow progressive Elizabeth Warren was among the critics. The Massachusetts senator pressed the case that she could execute ideas that the Vermont senator could only talk about.

"Bernie and I agree on a lot of things," she said. "But I think I would make a better president than Bernie."

A group of moderates, meanwhile, fought to emerge as the chief Sanders alternative.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, who is seeking a strong win in South Carolina to keep his campaign afloat, argued only he has the experience to lead in the world. Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar repeatedly contended that she alone could win the votes of battleground state moderates. And former South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg pointed to Sanders' self-described democratic socialism and his recent comments expressing admiration for Cuban dictator Fidel Castro's push for education.

"I am not looking forward to a scenario where it comes down to Donald Trump with his nostalgia for the social order of the 1950s and Bernie Sanders with a nostalgia for the revolutionary politics of the 1960s," Buttigieg declared.

But the moderates did little to draw separation among themselves, a dynamic that has so far only benefited the Vermont senator. Sanders fought back throughout the night, pointing to polls that showed him beat-

ing the Republican president and noting all the recent attention he's gotten.

Trump, who returned to Washington early Wednesday after a two-day trip to India, responded to a reporter's shouted question about whether he'd seen the debate: "I did," he said while stepping into a car. "Not too good, not too good."

The intensity of Tuesday's forum, with candidates repeatedly shouting over each other, reflected the reality that the Democrats' establishment wing is quickly running out of time to stop Sanders' rise. Even some critics, including Bloomberg, conceded that Sanders could build an insurmountable delegate lead as soon as next week.

The 10th debate of the 2020 primary season, sponsored by CBS and the Congressional Black Caucus Institute, was just four days before South Carolina's first-in-the-South primary and one week before more than a dozen states vote on Super Tuesday. The Democratic White House hopefuls will not stand side by side on the debate stage again until the middle of March. That made Tuesday's debate likely the last chance for some candidates to save themselves and alter the trajectory of the nomination fight.

Though Sanders was at the center of the attacks, the night was actually something of a high point in his political career. After spending nearly three decades as an agitator who delighted in tearing into his party's establishment, that very party establishment was suddenly fighting to take him down, a clear sign of his rising status as the leading candidate for the nomination.

Bloomberg also faced sustained attacks that gave him an opportunity to redeem himself after a bad debate debut one week earlier. But Bloomberg will likely remain a force in the contest even as other candidates may face tough choices about the sustainability of their campaigns.

Court: 'Sanctuary cities' grants can be withheld

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Trump administration can withhold millions of dollars in law enforcement grants to force states to cooperate with U.S. immigration enforcement, a federal appeals court in New York ruled Wednesday in a decision that conflicted with three other federal appeals courts.

The decision by the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Manhattan overturned a lower court's decision ordering the administration to release funding to New York City and seven states — New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Washington, Massachusetts, Virginia and Rhode Island.

The states and city sued the U.S. government after the Justice Department announced in 2017 that it would withhold grant money from cities and states until they gave federal immigration authorities access to jails and provide advance notice when someone in the

country illegally is about to be released.

Before the change, cities and states seeking grant money were required only to show they were not preventing local law enforcement from communicating with federal authorities about the immigration status of people who were detained.

At the time, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions said: "So-called 'sanctuary' policies make all of us less safe because they intentionally undermine our laws and protect illegal aliens who have committed crimes."

The 2nd Circuit said the plain language of relevant laws make clear that the U.S. attorney general can impose conditions on states and municipalities receiving money.

It noted that the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly observed that the federal government maintains broad power over states when it comes to immigration policies.

Police: Man tried to set fire to car in Pentagon lot

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An Arkansas man was arrested Monday after he attempted to blow up a vehicle in a Pentagon parking lot and led police on a manhunt that ended at Arlington National Cemetery, according to the Justice Department.

Police arrested Matthew Dmitri Richardson, 19, of Fayetteville, Ark., on charges of maliciously attempting to damage and destroy by means of fire. He was set to make his initial appearance in federal court Tuesday afternoon.

Richardson was spotted by a Pentagon police officer at about 10:45 a.m. in the north parking lot, where he was striking a cigarette lighter to a piece of fabric that was inserted into a

vehicle's gas tank, according to the Justice Department. Richardson told the officer that he was going to "blow this vehicle up," as well as himself.

The vehicle's owner is an active-duty service member who does not know Richardson, the Justice Department said.

When the Pentagon officer approached Richardson, he ran onto a road and jumped over a fence into Arlington National Cemetery.

He was captured at about 1 p.m. near Arlington House, the former home of Robert E. Lee on cemetery grounds. A cemetery spokesman said Monday that no staff or visitors were injured.

Police found Richardson with a cigarette lighter and gloves, according to the Justice Department.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman, 84, sinks putt to win new car

MS OXFORD — All that Mary Ann Wakfield, 84, needed to do to win a new car was sink a putt across the entire length of the court at the University of Mississippi's basketball arena.

Wakfield did just that during a promotional segment at a game between the Ole Miss men's team and Alabama. The golf ball she struck rolled 94 feet from one end line to the other before dropping into a flag-marked hole.

The crowd erupted into applause as Wakfield flashed an astonished grin and clapped a hand over her head.

Her prize for the long-distance putt: a 2020 Nissan Altima from a local auto dealer.

Investigation begun after 7 swans found dead

MT BOZEMAN — An investigation has started in southern Montana after seven trumpeter swans were found dead at a pond near Bozeman, wildlife officials said.

Biologists and wardens collected the animals' bodies, department spokesman Morgan Jacobson said.

"We still don't have a cause of death," Jacobson said.

Trumpeter swans are on the state's species of concern list, according to Montana Field Guides' website.

Store worker charged with torching couch

ME AUBURN — A store employee in Maine was charged with setting fire to a couch in a storage area while the store was open, the state fire marshal's office said.

Ryan Graffam, 22, was charged with arson. Police ac-

cused him of setting fire to a couch in the back of a Big Lots store in Auburn and then putting the fire out. Employees evacuated the store. No one was hurt.

The couch was destroyed and two others stored nearby were damaged.

Judge pauses removal of slave auction block

VA FREDERICKSBURG — A judge in Virginia has hit the pause button on a city's plans to remove a 175-year-old slave auction block from a city's downtown street corner.

TheFreeLance-Starreported that Circuit Court Judge Sarah Deneke has agreed to a 15-day stay of her order to remove the block in Fredericksburg.

Her order allows a business owner who is challenging the removal to ask the Virginia Supreme Court to take on the case.

E.D. Cole Building LLC owns a commercial building across the street from the auction block. The firm and the owner of a nearby restaurant have argued that they'll lose business from tourist traffic if the auction block is removed.

Store owner admits stealing in coupon scam

PA PITTSBURGH — The owner of four Pittsburgh area grocery stores has admitted pocketing hundreds of thousands of dollars by claiming customers used coupons he had employees take out of unsold newspapers.

Michael Mihelic, 60, of Franklin Park, pleaded guilty to theft by deception and was sentenced to four years of probation. Authorities said he made roughly \$300,000 through the scam but has already paid \$275,895 in restitution.

Mihelic directed staff at his four Shop 'n Save supermarkets to cut out the coupons, which were then submitted for credit. A former employee told investigators the practice began under Mihelic's late father and continued after Mihelic took over.

Highway worker delivers baby on interstate

MS BRANDON — A routine road closure for a transportation worker in Mississippi turned into the quick delivery of a baby on the interstate.

Wayne Evans, Superintendent II with the Mississippi Department of Transportation, was getting ready to shut down a lane on I-20 near Brandon.

That's when a car pulled up with its emergency lights flashing, and two women got out of the car. When Evans approached the car, he found a third woman in labor in the backseat.

Evans got a first aid kit from his truck, put on a pair of gloves and helped deliver the baby boy.

Evans said he believes his Marine Corps training kicked in.

Police: Woman stole baggage from airport

KY LOUISVILLE — A Kentucky woman was accused of stealing luggage from passengers at an airport on two occasions.

Carrie Welch, 33, was charged with theft after police said she returned to the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport for a third time, news outlets reported.

Police said Welch was caught on surveillance video taking luggage Feb. 2 and Feb. 14.

The items taken in the first incident were valued at more

than \$12,000, and the items taken in the second theft were valued at nearly \$10,000.

Suspect charged in theft of silver coins

AK KODIAK — Alaska State Troopers made an arrest in the theft of silver coins valued at more than \$100,000 from a Kodiak home.

Christopher Peters, 34, of Kodiak was charged with burglary and theft in the case, troopers said.

Troopers on Feb. 6 received a report of a burglary in which \$126,000 in Canadian 1.5-ounce silver coins were stolen along with other collector coins, gold jewelry and two handguns.

The coins taken from the home began showing up at pawn shops in Kodiak, Anchorage and Fairbanks, troopers said.

Injured hiker crawls 8 hours for cell service

WA PORT ANGELES — An injured hiker in Washington state was airlifted to safety after crawling through the forest for eight hours to get cellphone service, a TV station reported.

The hiker was rescued near Olympic National Park after he fractured his ankle while hiking on a trail near Hood Canal, KOIN-TV reported.

A team from Jefferson County search and rescue reached the 26-year-old man on foot and then the U.S. Coast Guard was able to hoist him from the trail with a helicopter that took off from Port Angeles.

Authorities didn't say how the man broke his ankle or have any other details about his ordeal.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Astros try to fill void of Cole's departure

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — As the Houston Astros put together their rotation for this season, they're faced with a Texas-sized hole after Gerrit Cole left as a free agent to sign with the New York Yankees.

New manager Dusty Baker is looking for somebody to step up and help make up for the loss. But more than likely no one player will be able to replace Cole, and Baker will need multiple pitchers or "somebodies" to take a step forward.

"It's not easy to replace his quality of work, or his innings pitched," Baker said. "So, we're looking for somebody to replace him or somebodies as a group."

Justin Verlander and Cole provided a powerful 1-2 atop Houston's rotation last season to help the Astros win the American League pennant. Cole led the AL with a career-best 2.50 ERA and finished second in the majors to Verlander with 20 wins, also a career-best.

Cole was the runner up to Verlander in Cy Young Award

voting before leaving Houston to sign a \$324 million deal with the Yankees.

Zack Greinke, acquired at last year's trade deadline, will slide into the second spot in the rotation. The 36-year-old is working out on his own and hasn't reported to camp but is expected join the team on Saturday.

Behind Verlander and Greinke things are far less certain with six players vying for the remaining three spots in the rotation. Lance McCullers should lead the way to earn one of the spots in his return after missing last season while recovering from Tommy John surgery. An All-Star in 2017, the 26-year-old went 10-6 with a 3.86 ERA in 25 games in 2018.

Verlander thinks McCullers' return will go a long way in helping to make up for the loss of Cole.

"Anytime you lose a pitcher who was one of the best in baseball it's not easy, but I think we have the talent," Verlander said. "We're getting Lance back and everybody kind of forgot Lance was an All-Star pitcher and one

of the best in baseball before he (was) injured."

Also competing for a spot in the rotation is veteran Brad Peacock, who has spent time as both a starter and a reliever in his seven seasons in Houston. Jose Urquidy also returns for the Astros after going 2-1 with a 3.95 ERA in nine games as a rookie last season.

Another returning player who could compete to start is hard-throwing right-hander Josh James. He was 5-1 with a 4.70 ERA in 49 games with just one start last year in his first full season in the majors. He was a candidate to be in the rotation last spring but was slowed by an injury and relegated to the bullpen.

He's open to whatever role the team decides is best for him but would prefer to be in the rotation after starting for most of his minor league career. Baker has talked at length with James about his goal of being a starter and what he'll have to do to crack the rotation this season.

"I've talked to him extensively about mind control and controlling your emotions but also

being competitive at the same time," Baker said. "Because you just can't get too high or too low as a starter because you'll burn out as far as energy is concerned. So, I know he wants it and we're going to give them opportunity to get it."

Right-hander Austin Pruitt, who was traded from Tampa Bay in January, and top prospect Forrest Whitley are also in the mix to be a part of the rotation.

Verlander and Baker are also quick to point out that Cole wasn't the elite pitcher he is now when he joined the Astros before the 2018 season. And they hope someone might make an unexpected jump like Cole did in his time with the Astros to bolster the rotation this season.

"You can't replace Gerrit but you also, you can't forecast anything," Verlander said. "You don't know what some of these young guys can turn into or can be. I mean nobody knew that Gerrit was going to be as good as he was when he got here. So we'll see what happens."

Yanks' Severino needs surgery, will miss entire season

Associated Press

DUNEDIN, Fla. — Luis Severino will miss the season with an elbow injury that requires Tommy John surgery, and the New York Yankees' rotation no longer looks all that imposing.

New York announced Tuesday that the 26-year-old right-hander has a partially torn ulnar collateral ligament, a development that means the two-time All-Star will miss all of 2020 after being sidelined for nearly all of 2019.

Mets medical director Dr. David Altchek will operate Thursday in New York.

"I am extremely disappointed that I will not be able to put on a Yankees uniform and compete with my teammates this year," Severino said in a statement posted on Twitter. "but I

promise that I will be working tirelessly during this process to come back stronger than ever."

Left-hander James Paxton already was projected to miss the first two months of the season following back surgery on Feb. 5. Domingo German must serve the final 63 games of an 81-game suspension for violating Major League Baseball's domestic violence policy. He is eligible to return June 5, barring any postponements.

Severino's injury leaves the AL East favorites with a rotation of newly signed ace Gerrit Cole, Masahiro Tanaka, J.A. Happ and two openings. The usual recovery time for Tommy John surgery is a year or more.

"I don't want to sugarcoat the fact that being without Sevy, that's a blow, but it doesn't change our expectations and

what we're truly capable of," manager Aaron Boone said. "So, no, nothing changes."

Lefty Jordan Montgomery, who came back in September from Tommy John surgery, has been throwing at up to 94 mph and is the leading candidate for one slot. Jonathan Loaisiga and rookies Deivi Garcia and Michael King are possibilities, along with Luis Cessa.

"We're always constantly looking for upgrades anyway," general manager Brian Cashman said. "But this time of year you always look from within and see and give opportunities for what you have and typically that's how it shakes out, especially until after the June draft regardless, so you keep relying on depth. So wouldn't say expect any domino effect or cause and effect in terms of us being

able to go to marketplace where a marketplace this time of year typically doesn't exist."

Severino went 19-8 with a 3.39 ERA in 2018 and was given a \$40 million, four-year contract. He was scratched from his first scheduled spring training appearance on March 5 because of rotator cuff inflammation in his right shoulder. The Yankees said April 9 he had strained his latissimus dorsi muscle. He did not make a minor league injury rehabilitation appearance until Sept. 1 and did not make his first appearance for the Yankees until Sept. 17.

Severino was 1-1 with a 1.50 ERA over 12 innings in three regular-season starts for New York, then was 0-1 with a 2.16 ERA over 8¹/₃ innings in a pair of postseason outings.

Sharapova retires from tennis at age 32

Associated Press

Maria Sharapova quietly walked away from tennis at the age of 32 on Wednesday, ending a career that featured five Grand Slam titles, time at No. 1 in the WTA rankings and a 15-month doping ban.

She has been dealing with problems in her right shoulder for years and lost the last four matches she played at major tournaments.

This season, Sharapova played only two matches and lost both.

In an essay written for Vanity Fair and Vogue about her decision to retire, posted online Wednesday, Sharapova asks: "How do you leave behind the only life you've ever known?"

For a while, Sharapova was as big a star as her sport had, with many more millions of dollars in sponsorship deals than whatever prize money she earned on a court.

The Russian, who moved to Florida as a child, burst onto the tennis scene at 17 when she won Wimbledon in 2004 by upsetting Serena Williams in the final. She went on to complete a career Grand Slam with two titles at the French Open and one each at the U.S. Open and Australian Open.

Known as much for her grit with a racket in hand as for her groundstrokes, Sharapova reached No. 1 in 2005, the year before she won her second major trophy at Flushing

Meadows. She added an Australian Open title in 2008, and then won the French Open in 2012 and 2014.

Her last Grand Slam final came in 2015 at the Australian Open, where she was the runner-up to Williams. In all, Williams led their head-to-head series 20-2, including victories in their last 19 matchups in a row.

At the 2016 Australian Open, where Williams beat her in the quarterfinals, Sharapova tested positive for the newly banned drug meldonium.

After initially getting a two-year suspension, Sharapova appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which reduced the penalty, ruling she bore

"less than significant fault" in the case and could not "be considered to be an intentional doper."

Since returning from that suspension in 2017, Sharapova managed to reach only one major quarterfinal.

After so much success on the tennis court and off, so much time in the spotlight, Sharapova did not give her fans a chance to say goodbye, as many athletes do, by entering one last competition.

Her final match came last month at the Australian Open, where she was beaten 6-3, 6-4 by Donna Vekic. That sent Sharapova's ranking tumbling outside of the top 350 — she is 373rd this week.

College basketball roundup

Childress, Wake Forest upset seventh-ranked Duke

Associated Press

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Brandon Childress shook off an awful shooting start and hit a tying three-pointer late in regulation to help Wake Forest stun seventh-ranked Duke 113-101 in double overtime on Tuesday night.

Childress missed his first 10 shots before hitting the tying three with 15.5 seconds left in regulation. And once the game went into a second extra period, Childress buried another on the first possession to put the Demon Deacons (12-15, 5-12 Atlantic Coast Conference) ahead to stay, sending them to their first win against the Blue Devils since March 2014.

He made six of his last 10 shots and scored 13 points in the two overtimes and finished with 17 points, five rebounds and five assists.

It marked the second time in a week Duke (23-5, 13-4) lost on the road to an unranked in-state opponent. It lost by 22 points at North Carolina State last week, ending with another court-storming celebration.

No. 2 Baylor 85, Kansas State 66: Matt Mayer scored 19 points to lead five Bears in double figures, and host Baylor quickly recovered from its first Big 12 loss on Saturday to Kansas.

The Bears (25-2, 14-1 Big 12) jumped to an 11-2 lead in the first five minutes and never trailed.

No. 4 Dayton 62, George Mason 55: Obi Toppin had 19 points and seven rebounds as the visiting Flyers survived a sluggish performance to beat the Patriots and clinch at least a share of the Atlantic 10 regular-season title with three games to play.

Toppin, a redshirt sophomore and one of the leading candidates for National Player of the Year, scored 13 of his 19 points after halftime for Dayton (26-2, 15-0 Atlantic 10), which has the country's longest winning streak at 17 games.

No. 5 San Diego State 66, Colorado State 60: Malachi Flynn scored 10 of the host Aztecs' last 17 points and they rallied from a seven-point deficit to beat the Rams and rebound

from their only loss.

Flynn finished with 17 points after scoring just two in the first half.

San Diego State (27-1, 16-1 Mountain West) trailed 56-49 with 8:22 left before going on a 13-0 run. Jordan Schakel hit a put-back and Flynn a three-pointer before Schakel hit the go-ahead three-pointer with 4:50 left.

No. 8 Kentucky 69, Texas A&M 60: Immanuel Quickley had a career-high 30 points and made eight three-pointers, also a career-best, to lead the visiting Wildcats to their seventh straight win.

Quickley is the first Kentucky (23-5, 12-2 Southeastern Conference) player with consecutive games with at least 25 points since Malik Monk in 2017.

No. 15 Auburn 67, Mississippi 58: Austin Wiley had 15 points and 11 rebounds and the Tigers withstood the Rebels' rally attempts, and remained unbeaten at home.

Auburn (24-4, 11-4 Southeastern Conference) benefited from the return of Isaac Okoro, who

missed the past three games with a hamstring injury.

Okoro had 10 points in 27 minutes after the Tigers dropped two games without him.

No. 24 Michigan State 78, No. 18 Iowa 70: Cassius Winston scored 19 of his 20 points in the second half and Rocket Watts matched a career high with 21 points, helping the host Spartans rally past the Hawkeyes.

Michigan State (19, 9, 11-6 Big Ten) moved into sole possession of second place in the conference, 1½ games behind Maryland, with its third win in four games.

Oklahoma 65, No. 22 Texas Tech 51: At Oklahoma City, Kristian Doolittle scored 19 points and Brady Manek added 15 as the Sooners snapped a three-game skid.

Oklahoma (17-11, 7-8 Big 12) provided a much-needed boost to its NCAA Tournament résumé. Doolittle, who wore a mask after suffering a broken nose Saturday against Oklahoma State, made nine of 15 shots and had seven rebounds.

NBA roundup

Bucks take rematch of Eastern finals

Associated Press

TORONTO — Giannis Antetokounmpo had 19 points and 19 rebounds, Khris Middleton scored 22 points and the Milwaukee Bucks beat the Toronto Raptors 108-97 on Tuesday night in a matchup between the top teams in the Eastern Conference.

Eric Bledsoe scored 17 points and Brook Lopez had 15 as the NBA-leading Bucks won their fourth straight and 18th of 20. Milwaukee (50-8) was playing the second game of a back-to-back after winning in overtime at Washington on Monday.

Behind by 12 points late in the second quarter, Milwaukee rallied to beat the Raptors in its first game in Toronto since losing Game 6 of the Eastern Conference finals last May, completing a disappointing collapse after winning the first two games of that series at home.

Pascal Siakam scored 22 points and Fred VanVleet had 14 as the defending NBA cham-

pion Raptors lost for the second time in 19 games. Toronto was beaten at home for the first time since Jan. 12 against San Antonio, ending a nine-game run.

Lakers 118, Pelicans 109: LeBron James had 40 points and eight rebounds in his first career meeting with Zion Williamson while leading host Los Angeles to its sixth straight victory.

Anthony Davis had 21 points and 14 rebounds to remain unbeaten in his three meetings with his former team this season.

James opened up a close contest with back-to-back buckets at the rim with about three minutes left. Danny Green sealed it for the Lakers with his fifth three-pointer with 51 seconds to play.

Celtics 118, Trail Blazers 106: Jayson Tatum had 36 points, including a career-high eight three-pointers, and visiting Boston beat Portland.

Jaylen Brown added 24 points for the Celtics, who sit in third in the Eastern Conference behind the first-place Milwaukee Bucks and the Toronto Raptors.

Thunder 124, Bulls 122: Dennis Schroder scored 21 points and made a huge defensive play in the fourth quarter, helping Oklahoma City win at Chicago for its fourth consecutive win.

The Thunder blew a 24-point lead but recovered in time to earn their ninth straight victory on the road, breaking a franchise record. Danilo Gallinari scored 24 points, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 21 points and 11 rebounds, and Chris Paul finished with 19 points and nine assists.

Pacers 119, Hornets 80: Domantas Sabonis had 21 points, 15 rebounds and nine assists to lead host Indiana over Charlotte.

T.J. Warren scored 15 of his 19 points in the first half and

Justin Holiday had 16 points for the short-handed Pacers (34-24), who bounced back from a blowout in Toronto for a third win in four games.

Nuggets 115, Pistons 98: Jerami Grant scored a career-high 29 points and Nikola Jokic had a season-best four steals to help healthy Denver beat visiting Detroit.

At 40-18, the Nuggets are tied for their best start through 58 games in their NBA franchise history. They had the same mark a season ago on their way to winding up with the No. 2 seed in the Western Conference.

Kings 112, Warriors 94: Harrison Barnes and De'Aaron Fox each scored 21 points and visiting Sacramento sent Golden State to its longest home losing streak in 19 years.

The Warriors have lost seven straight overall and seven in a row at home for the first time since dropping the final seven home games in the 2000-01 season.

NHL roundup

Ovechkin scores 701st goal, plus shootout winner

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin scored his 701st goal and the shootout winner, and Braden Holtby made 30 saves in regulation and overtime to help the Washington Capitals beat the Winnipeg Jets 4-3 for the Capitals' second straight win.

Ovechkin, Jakub Vrana and Garnet Hathaway scored to stake Washington to a 3-0 lead. The Capitals came away with two points anyway after that lead was erased on goals by Nikolaj Ehlers, Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele.

Ovechkin scored his 43rd of the season two minutes in after a pregame ceremony to commemorate the Russian su-

perstar becoming the eighth member of the NHL's 700 club.

Winnipeg dropped its third straight game.

Rangers 4, Islanders 3 (OT): Mika Zibanejad scored 28 seconds into overtime and the Rangers recovered after giving up a two-goal lead and beat the host Islanders.

Maple Leafs 4, Lightning 3: One game after losing to a 42-year-old emergency goaltender on home ice, Toronto earned a bit of redemption with a win at Tampa Bay.

Flyers 4, Sharks 2: Kevin Hayes had two goals and Travis Konecny and Nicolas Aube-Kubel also scored to lift host Philadelphia to its fourth straight win.

Stars 4, Hurricanes 1:

Roope Hintz had a goal and two assists and surging Dallas rode a three-goal first period to win over host Carolina.

Flames 5, Bruins 2: Sean Monahan scored a pair of goals 1:12 apart in the second period and Calgary won at Boston.

Canucks 4, Canadiens 3 (OT): Tyler Toffoli scored 1:35 into overtime and Vancouver won at Montreal.

Devils 4, Red Wings 1: Cory Schneider made 27 saves for his first victory of the season, leading New Jersey to a win at Detroit.

Blues 6, Blackhawks 5: Zach Sanford had two goals and an assist, leading host St. Louis over Chicago, its fifth straight win.

Predators 3, Senators 2:

Ryan Ellis and Viktor Arvidsson scored power-play goals in the second period as host Nashville rallied to beat Ottawa for its second straight win.

Wild 5, Blue Jackets 4: Mikko Koivu scored twice to snap a 30-game goalless drought, Eric Staal added his 18th goal and host Minnesota held on to beat short-handed Columbus.

Panthers 2, Coyotes 1: Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 36 shots, Mike Hoffman scored for the third straight game and Florida spoiled Darcy Kuemper's return with a win at Arizona.

Ducks 4, Oilers 3: Sonny Milano netted the game-winner in overtime and finished with two goals, leading host Anaheim past Edmonton.