

Russian anti-satellite efforts cause concern

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. has gathered highly sensitive intelligence about Russian anti-satellite weapons that has been shared in recent weeks with the upper echelons of government, according to four people who have been briefed on the intelligence.

The people, who were not authorized to comment publicly, said the capability was not yet operational.

The intelligence sparked an urgent but vague warning Wednesday from the Republican head of the House Intelligence Committee, who urged the Biden administration to declassify information about what he called a serious national security threat.

Rep. Mike Turner gave no details about the nature of the threat, and the Biden administration also declined to address it. But several leading lawmakers, including House Speaker

Mike Johnson, cautioned against being overly alarmed.

A congressional aide said he understood that the threat relates to a space-deployed Russian anti-satellite weapon. Such a weapon could pose a major danger to U.S. satellites that transmit billions of bytes of data each hour.

The aide, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter, said it was not yet clear if the Russian weapon has nuclear capability, but said that is the fear.

In Moscow, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov described the claims about a new Russian military capability as a ruse intended to make the U.S. Congress support aid for Ukraine.

“It’s obvious that Washington is trying to force Congress to vote on the aid bill by hook or by crook,” Peskov said in remarks carried by Russian news agencies. “Let’s see what ruse the

White House will use.”

The threat Turner raised concerns about is not an active capability, according to U.S. officials familiar with the intelligence. One added that intelligence officials consider the threat to be significant, but it should not cause panic.

Turner issued a statement urging the administration to declassify the information so the U.S. and its allies can openly discuss how to respond.

He also sent an email to members of Congress saying his committee had “identified an urgent matter with regard to a destabilizing foreign military capability” that should be known to all congressional policy makers. He encouraged them to come to a SCIF, a secure area, to review the intelligence.

Turner has been a voice for stronger U.S. national security, putting him at odds with some Republican colleagues who favor a more isolationist ap-

proach. He has called for the renewal of a key U.S. government surveillance tool while some fellow Republicans and liberal Democrats have raised privacy objections.

And he supports continuing U.S. military aid for Ukraine in its war against Russia at a time that the funding remains uncertain because of opposition in the Republican-led House.

Johnson said he was not at liberty to disclose the classified information. “But we just want to assure everyone steady hands are at the wheel. We’re working on it and there’s no need for alarm,” he told reporters at the Capitol.

Democratic Rep. Jim Himes, the ranking member of the Intelligence Committee, said in a statement that the classified information is “significant” but “not a cause for panic.”

The Senate Intelligence Committee said it has been tracking the issue.

Navy policy now permits tiaras, hands in pockets

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy has lifted its ban on sailors keeping their hands in their pockets along with other uniform changes announced Wednesday in an updated service policy.

“Sailors are authorized to have hands in their pockets [and] when doing so does not compromise safety nor prohibit the proper rendering of honors and courtesies,” the service memo said.

The policy changes take effect immediately, which resulted from feedback from sailors and requests from command-

ers, the memo said.

The Navy is also bringing back the female combination cover, known as the bucket cover, which was eliminated in 2018. The female combination cover can be worn by sailors of any rank with the service dress and dinner dress uniforms, as well as by chief petty officers and officers while in service khaki and summer white uniforms.

The bucket cover cannot be purchased at Navy Exchange Uniform Centers and must be “privately obtained if desired for wear.”

The service is also allowing female sailors to wear the tiara

as an optional uniform component when wearing dinner dress blue and white jacket uniforms. Sailors can purchase the tiara from the Navy Exchange online as a “special order item.”

Women can now wear false eyelashes or eyelash extensions that “project a natural appearance and are no longer than 14 millimeters in length as measured from the eyelid to the tip of the eyelash.”

Female sailors are also allowed to wear T-shirts specifically designed for women if the shirts adhere to the Navy’s requirements for color, fabric and neck configuration.

“The intent of this policy up-

date is to address expressed dissatisfaction regarding the required wear of male or unisex T-shirts that are not designed to fit female bodies,” the memo said.

All sailors are now allowed to wear black or navy blue leggings or tights with the service’s physical training shorts and wear “commercially procured coyote brown backpacks” while in the Navy working uniform.

Other uniform changes include allowing chaplains to wear their new insignia warfare pin, which the service announced in December, and the Navy’s forthcoming drone pilots to wear their wings.

Trump's comments on NATO loom over security meeting

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — Donald Trump's declaration that he would encourage Russia to "do whatever the hell they want" to some NATO allies has once again put the former American president on center stage in Europe, where angst over a potential second term is overshadowing discussions this week stretching from Brussels to Munich.

On Friday, Vice President Kamala Harris and other global leaders will gather in Munich for an annual security conference centered around instability in Europe connected to Russia's war in Ukraine, turmoil in the Middle East and questions about China's military ambitions in Taiwan.

Against that backdrop, Trump's recent statement that he would oppose defending allies from a Russian attack, depending on whether those countries spent enough on their militaries, is looming over events.

In Brussels, NATO defense minister talks got underway Thursday with the formal agenda focused on boosting ammunition production to replenish stockpiles that have been depleted while supporting Ukraine.

But the talk quickly turned to Trump and whether a possible second term would undercut the essence of the NATO alliance, which is organized around the principle that an attack on one member is an attack on all.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, who will head to Munich after NATO's meeting wraps up Thursday, has

been peppered with questions the past two days about what the implications of a Trump second term would mean for NATO.

While he didn't indicate a return of Trump would mean the end of NATO, he issued several rebukes.

"We know that any suggestion that we are not there to protect and defend all allies will undermine the security of all of us and put at risk our soldiers, our personnel who are on the front lines to protect the whole alliance," Stoltenberg said Thursday. "So one for all, all for one applies for all allies and is the heart of NATO."

However, Trump's comments, made during a campaign event in South Carolina on Saturday, have cast doubt on the reliability of the U.S. commitment to that core NATO principle should the Republican frontrunner return to office.

During his tenure, Trump frequently criticized allies for falling short on a NATO pledge that members dedicate 2% of their respective GDP to their militaries, complaining that the situation amounted to free-riding on American military might.

While other U.S. presidents have also complained about Europe's underinvestment in defense, Trump's hectoring on the issue also entailed the threat that he wouldn't defend members he deemed security backsliders.

Some critics have suggested that Trump's focus on defense spending is less about wanting to build up allied militaries and more about hastening NATO's demise.

Trump eyes makeover for NATO, end to Ukraine war

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump is considering scaled-back commitments to some NATO members and a push for Ukraine to negotiate an end to the war with Russia if he returns to power next year, according to people familiar with the matter.

Among possible moves in a second term, Trump allies have discussed essentially a two-tiered NATO alliance, where Article 5 — which requires common defense of any member under attack — would apply only to nations that hit defense-spending goals, according to the people, who asked not to be identified and cautioned that no policy decisions have been finalized. Others are advocating new tariffs on laggard countries, they said.

Trump advisers have also discussed getting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and

Russian President Vladimir Putin around a negotiating table early in a potential second term, according to the people.

The initiatives, if pursued, would upend decades of U.S. policy, fracturing a defense alliance that has shaped European security since the Cold War and worrying allies in Asia about Washington's commitment to counter China.

One adviser to Trump said the promise of severing U.S. military aid could help get Ukraine to the negotiating table, while the threat of increased U.S. assistance could prompt Russia. Advisers including Larry Kudlow and Robert O'Brien have also publicly pushed for tougher sanctions on Russia's central bank to sway Putin.

The people added that the Trump campaign is not currently in talks with Russian or Ukrainian intermediaries.

Navy's largest overseas fleet gets new commander

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A veteran surface warfare officer took the helm of the U.S. 7th Fleet on Thursday amid a flurry of naval activity in the South China Sea and surrounding areas.

Vice Adm. Fred Kacher took command of the Navy's largest overseas fleet during a ceremony at Yokosuka's Fleet Theater. Departing is Vice Adm. Karl Thomas, 7th Fleet's longest-serving commander, who's led the Yokosuka-based naval force since July 2021.

Kacher most recently served as acting superintendent for the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., but most of his career

has been spent aboard destroyers, cruisers and other warships.

"Suffice it to say, I'm deeply honored to lead what I've long believed is one of the most historic and consequential commands in the United States Navy," Kacher, who was promoted to vice admiral that morning, told the audience.

Thomas will take over as the Navy's director of naval intelligence, a position that also carries the title of deputy chief of naval operations for information warfare.

He was nominated by President Joe Biden for the position in March 2023 and confirmed on Dec. 5, according to congressional records.

Israeli forces storm key hospital in Gaza

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces stormed the main hospital in southern Gaza on Thursday, hours after Israeli fire killed a patient and wounded six others inside the complex. The Israeli army said it was a limited operation seeking the remains of hostages taken by Hamas.

The raid came a day after the army sought to evacuate thousands of displaced people who had taken shelter at Nasser Hospital in the city of Khan Younis, the focus of Israel's offensive against Hamas in recent weeks. The war shows no sign of ending, and the risk of a broader conflict is growing as Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah step up attacks after a particularly deadly exchange on Wednesday.

The military said it had "credible intelligence" that Hamas had held hostages at the hospital and that the hostages' remains might

still be inside. Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief military spokesperson, said forces were conducting a "precise and limited" operation there and would not forcibly evacuate medics or patients. Israel accuses Hamas of using hospitals and other civilian structures to shield its fighters.

A released hostage told The Associated Press last month that she and over two dozen other captives had been held in Nasser Hospital. International law prohibits the targeting of medical facilities, but they can lose those protections if used for military purposes.

The troops were searching several hospital buildings after ordering all medical staff and patients to move into an older building in the compound, said Shaban Tabash, a nurse at the hospital. Doctors were unable to provide treatment to the patients in the building, which was not properly equipped.

"The situation of patients is difficult," Tabash told the AP.

Separately, Israel launched airstrikes into southern Lebanon for a second day after killing 10 civilians and three Hezbollah fighters Wednesday in response to a rocket attack that killed an Israeli soldier and wounded several others.

It was the deadliest exchange of fire along the border since the start of the Israel-Hamas war. Israel and Hezbollah — an ally of Hamas — have traded fire on a daily basis.

Hezbollah has not claimed responsibility for Wednesday's rocket attack. Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, a senior member of the group, said it is "prepared for the possibility of expanding the war" and would meet "escalation with escalation, displacement with displacement, and destruction with destruction."

Negotiations over a cease-fire

in Gaza, meanwhile, appear to have stalled, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the offensive until Hamas is destroyed and scores of hostages taken during the militants' Oct. 7 attack are freed.

Nasser Hospital has been the latest focus of Israeli military operations that have gutted Gaza's health sector. Israeli troops, tanks and snipers have surrounded the hospital for at least a week, with heavy fire all around it. Several people have been killed inside the compound in recent days, according to health officials.

Overnight, a strike slammed into a hospital ward, and video showed medics scrambling to wheel patients on stretchers down a corridor filled with smoke or dust. The AP could not authenticate the video but the footage was consistent with its reporting.

Missile strikes Russian city after Ukraine regions hit

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A missile strike on the Russian city of Belgorod near the Ukraine border on Thursday killed six people, including a child, and injured 18 others, a Russian official said. It was the latest in exchanges of long-range missile and rocket fire in Russia's war on Ukraine.

Hours earlier, Russia fired two dozen cruise and ballistic missiles at a broad area of Ukraine, hitting multiple regions after a midnight strike in Ukraine's northeast killed five people in an apartment building, authorities said.

Five of the 18 people injured in Belgorod, a city of around 340,000 people, were children, regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said on Telegram. Tass news agency reported that 15 people were hospitalized.

A shopping center and a school stadium were hit in Belgorod, according to Roman Starovoit, the

governor of Russia's Kursk region, which is next to Belgorod. "There are many casualties: dead and wounded," he said on Telegram.

Russia's Ministry of Defense said air defense systems destroyed 14 missiles over the Belgorod region that were launched by Ukraine using a RM-70 Vampire multiple launch rocket system.

Belgorod city, 25 miles north of the Ukrainian border, has been a regular target of Ukrainian fire, putting its residents on edge. Dozens of people were killed and injured in an attack there over Russia's New Year holiday weekend.

Those assaults have undermined President Vladimir Putin's attempts to reassure Russians that life in the country is largely going on as normal.

In Ukraine, five people were killed and 10 were wounded in the nighttime attack on the village of Velykyi Burluk, in the Kharkiv

border region, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said.

Hours later, missiles targeted the capital Kyiv, the southern Zaporizhzhia region and Lviv in western Ukraine, among other places. The Ukrainian air force said it intercepted 13 of the 26 missiles fired across the country.

Frequent Russian long-range bombardments are occurring as the almost two-year war has become bogged down in mostly trench and artillery warfare, which is destructive but is not bringing much change to the 930-mile front line.

Thursday's salvos on Ukraine were notable for the geographic spread of its targets and the wide variety of missiles deployed by the Kremlin's forces.

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says that one of his priorities is improving Ukraine's air defense systems. He is due in France on Friday to sign a bilateral security agreement as part of

his efforts to ensure continuing Western military support.

Zelenskyy's office announced he would also travel Friday to Berlin for talks with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

On Saturday, Zelenskyy will give a speech at the annual Munich Security Conference in Germany. He also is to hold bilateral meetings there with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and some European leaders as well as heads of major corporations.

The Russian missiles used on Thursday included Iskander ballistic missiles, Kalibr cruise missiles, guided aviation missiles and adapted S-300 anti-aircraft missiles.

Ukraine has also struck targets in Russian territory deep behind the front line. A fire broke out at an oil depot in Russia's Kursk region after an attack by a Ukrainian drone, Starovoit, the governor, said Thursday. There were no casualties, he said.

More US personnel using weight-loss pills

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Weight-loss prescriptions for U.S. service members remain low but have risen sharply since 2018, when the Defense Department began authorizing coverage of medications for active-duty troops struggling with weight control, according to a first-of-its-kind study.

Monthly prescriptions across all services rose from seven in January 2018 to 816 in June 2023, an analysis of DOD electronic health records during that same period shows.

The data was published in the most recent Medical Surveillance Monthly Report, a peer-reviewed journal of the Armed Forces Health Surveillance Division.

“The findings indicate a significant rise in the ... prevalence of weight loss prescriptions over time,” the report said, including a four-fold increase in 2022.

That trend corresponds to the Defense Health Agency approval of semaglutide in 2021 for weight management. Sold under the brand names Ozempic

and Wegovy, the drug was originally approved by the Food and Drug Administration for diabetes. It was later shown to suppress appetite.

The surveillance study looked at a wide range of demographics and characteristics, including sex, age, service, race, rank, occupation, history of type 2 diabetes and body mass index. Among the findings: higher prescription rates were associated with women, service members over 40, Black non-Hispanic personnel, those in the Navy and health care workers.

By rank, senior personnel had higher rates of prescriptions for weight-loss drugs, peaking in the spring of 2023, at 307 prescriptions per 100,000 for officers in the pay grades of O-4 and above. The rate was 145.7 per 100,000 people for enlisted members above E-5.

During the same period, April to June 2023, the rate of prescriptions for Navy personnel was 157.1 per 100,000, compared to 43.2 in the Marine Corps. For the Army and Air Force, the rates were 91.3 and 101.7, respectively.

Gunfire at Chiefs' parade kills 1, wounds at least 22

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Authorities in Kansas City said Thursday that the mass shooting which unfolded amid throngs of people at the Chiefs' Super Bowl celebration appeared to stem from a dispute between several people.

Police Chief Stacey Graves said that the 22 people injured in the shooting ranged between the ages of 8 and 47 years old, half of whom were under the age of 16. A mother of two was also killed.

Three people were detained — including two juveniles — and firearms were recovered

during the mayhem, police said. But investigators are calling for witnesses, people with cell-phone footage and victims to call a dedicated hotline.

“We are working to determine the involvement of others. And it should be noted we have recovered several firearms. This incident is still a very active investigation,” Graves said at a news conference.

The shooting outside Union Station occurred despite the presence of more than 800 police officers who were in the building and nearby, including on top of structures, said Mayor

Quinton Lucas, who attended with his wife and mother and ran for safety when the shots rang out. But he doesn't expect to cancel the upcoming St. Patrick's Day parade.

“We have parades all the time. I don't think they'll end. Certainly we recognized the public safety challenges and issues that relate to them,” Lucas said.

Throngs had lined the parade route before the shooting. Players rolled through the crowd on double-decker buses, as DJs and drummers heralded their arrival.

It's unclear exactly how many people attended the Chiefs' Super Bowl parade. When the Kansas City Royals won the World Series in 2015, an estimated 800,000 people had flocked to that victory parade.

Witnesses described confusion as gunshots began, sounding to some like fireworks.

Some people didn't run at first but others immediately scrambled for cover. The rally music initially continued playing despite the havoc. And then, within moments of the shooting stopping, some people were walking as if nothing happened.

No delay: Trump hush-money trial set for March 25

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump's hush-money trial will go ahead as scheduled with jury selection starting March 25, a New York judge ruled Thursday, turning aside demands for a delay from the former president's defense lawyers.

The decision means that the first of Trump's four criminal prosecutions to proceed to trial is a case centered on years-old accusations that he sought to bury stories about extramarital

affairs that arose during his 2016 presidential campaign. Other cases charge him with plotting to overturn the results of the 2020 election and illegally hoarding classified documents at his Florida estate.

In leaving the trial date intact, Judge Juan Manuel Merchan noted a delay in the separate prosecution in Washington related to efforts to undo the election. That case, originally set for trial on March 4, has been effectively frozen

pending the outcome of Trump's appeal on the legally untested question of whether a former president enjoys immunity from prosecution for actions taken in the White House.

Noting that he had resisted defense lawyer urgings from months ago to postpone the trial, Merchan said: “I'm glad I took that position because here we are — the D.C. case did not go forward.”

The hush money trial is ex-

pected to last six weeks, the judge said.

Assuming the New York case remains on schedule, it will open just weeks after the Super Tuesday elections, colliding on the political calendar with a time period in which Trump will be looking to sew up the Republican race and emerge as the presumptive nominee in this year's presidential contest. His attorneys cited that schedule in vigorously objecting to the March trial date.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Hiker kills coyote with his bare hands after attack

RI JOHNSTON — A coyote that a hiker killed with his bare hands has tested positive for rabies, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and the Rhode Island Department of Health announced.

The hiker was attacked on Feb. 9 and bitten on the leg while walking in the woods in Johnston, according to police. The hiker pinned down the coyote by its neck, killing it by cutting off its air supply, police said.

The same coyote is believed to have attacked a dog walker the day before in nearby Scituate, officials said.

In January 2020, a man fatally strangled a coyote with his bare hands after the animal attacked him and his family as they hiked in New Hampshire, according to CBS News.

Judge continues block of kids' social media use law

OH COLUMBUS — A federal judge extended a block on enforcement Monday of an Ohio law that would require children under 16 to get parental consent to use social media apps as a legal challenge proceeds.

U.S. District Court Judge Algenon Marbley's decision to grant a preliminary injunction prevents the law from taking effect while a lawsuit filed earlier this month by NetChoice winds its way through court. NetChoice is a trade group representing TikTok, Snapchat, Meta and other major tech companies. The group is fighting the law as overly broad, vague and an un-

constitutional impediment to free speech.

The law originally was set to take effect Jan. 15 and is similar to ones enacted in other states — including in California and Arkansas, where NetChoice has won lawsuits.

In his decision, Marbley said NetChoice is likely to prevail on its First Amendment speech freedom arguments.

Bill relaxing work permit rules for teens passes

WI MADISON — More Wisconsin teenagers would be able to work jobs without obtaining permits under a Republican-authored bill the state Assembly approved and sent to Gov. Tony Evers on Tuesday.

A 2017 law eliminated work permit requirements for 16- and 17-year-olds. The new bill eliminates the requirement for 14- and 15-year-olds, but it doesn't change state law governing how many hours minors can work or prohibiting them from working dangerous jobs.

The proposal comes amid a wider push by state lawmakers to roll back child labor laws.

The measure goes next to Evers, who will likely veto it. He nixed a bill in 2022 that would have allowed 14- and 15-year-olds to work longer summer hours.

Resident likely got bubonic plague from cat

OR BEND — Public health officials in Oregon have reported a case of bubonic plague in a local resident who they said likely contracted it from a pet cat.

All close contacts of the person and the cat have been con-

tacted and provided medication, Dr. Richard Fawcett, the health officer for Deschutes County, said in a statement last week.

The county said the case was identified and treated in its early stages and poses little risk to the community.

Symptoms of bubonic plague include fever, nausea, weakness, chills and muscle aches, county health services said. Symptoms begin two to eight days after exposure to an infected animal or flea.

Bubonic plague can lead to bloodstream and lung infections if it is not diagnosed early. These forms of the disease are more difficult to treat.

State may have to pay for homeless hotel program

CA SAN FRANCISCO — California cities and counties still don't know how much they'll have to pay for Gov. Gavin Newsom's pandemic program to house homeless people in hotel rooms after the Federal Emergency Management Agency said in October that it was limiting the number of days eligible for reimbursement.

State and local officials say they were stunned to learn via an October letter that FEMA would only pay to house homeless people at risk of catching COVID-19 for at most 20 days — as opposed to unlimited — starting June 11, 2021, which is when Newsom rescinded the sweeping stay-at-home order he issued in March 2020.

In response, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services requested that FEMA reconsider the policy change, saying that it would cost cities and counties

at least \$300 million and that local governments had relied on assurances that the federal government would pick up the cost.

FEMA said in a statement that it will review California's Jan. 31 letter, but that all states had been provided "the same guidance and policy updates throughout the pandemic."

Senate passes bill to limit college DEI initiatives

KY FRANKFORT — A Republican-backed measure to limit diversity, equity and inclusion practices at Kentucky's public universities won approval from the state Senate on Tuesday after an emotional debate that delved into race relations and what the bill's sponsor portrayed as the liberal bent on college campuses.

The bill cleared the Senate on a 26-7 vote after a nearly two-hour debate, sending the proposal to the House. The GOP has supermajorities in both chambers.

The legislation, among other things, would bar public colleges and universities from providing preferential treatment based on a person's political ideology. It would prohibit the schools from requiring people to state specific ideologies or beliefs when seeking admission, employment or promotions.

Republican Sen. Mike Wilson said he filed the bill to counter a broader trend in higher education toward denying campus jobs or promotions to faculty refusing to espouse "liberal ideologies fashionable in our public universities." He said such practices have extended to students and staff as well.

— From wire reports

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Money issues linger as NASCAR restarts

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — NASCAR launches its new season with rivals attempting to dethrone Team Penske after two years atop the Cup Series while an off-track battle over revenue sharing threatens to overshadow the competition.

Teams reported to Daytona International Speedway this week for Sunday's season-opening Daytona 500 without a new agreement that has been a sore spot for months. Talks on extending the charter agreement — which essentially is a franchise system in the top racing series in the U.S. — took a backseat to NASCAR's negotiations on the new, \$7.7 billion television deal that begins next year.

The current charter agreement expires at the end of this season. The teams declined to extend exclusive talks with NASCAR into February. They could theoretically race for another series if the situation deteriorates, though the challenges there would be immense.

Members of the negotiating council for the teams say they want a fair share of NASCAR revenue, do not believe the TV deal was as lucrative as NASCAR expected and believe teams are getting shut out of licensing agreements that should be shared.

Denny Hamlin, the three-time Daytona 500 winner for Joe Gibbs Racing and co-owner with Michael Jordan of 23XI Racing, used his podcast to accuse NASCAR of using the TV package negotiations as a stalling tactic.

"We tried to start these conversations two years ago and it's just been delay, delay, delay. So now here we are at the end of the rope," Hamlin said. "Do I believe we are closer to a deal now than 12 months ago? I don't think so."

While a deal will likely be reached — NASCAR, after all, controls most of the major racing facilities in the United States

— the discontent could make for a strained season.

Blaney a dream champ

Ryan Blaney is the reigning Cup champion after a late-season surge helped him follow Penske teammate Joey Logano with back-to-back NASCAR championships for Roger Penske. Blaney's title was somewhat surprising largely because Ford teams struggled last year with just eight wins in 36 races.

But Blaney held off Hendrick Motorsports drivers Kyle Larson and William Byron, as well as Christopher Bell of Joe Gibbs Racing, to win his first career championship.

Blaney is NASCAR's dream champion, a blue-collar racer from a family of racers rooted in the mill country of northeastern Ohio. He seems soft-spoken but showed he's got the internal fire to be a champion and delivered down the stretch last year.

He was beaten by good buddy Chase Elliott in the fan-voted NASCAR most popular driver contest, but Blaney is the one guy many believe — if marketed correctly — is NASCAR's next star.

Ford, meanwhile, introduced a remodeled Mustang for Cup competition this season. Ford will use the Dark Horse model as it attempts to pick up its performance with top teams Penske, Stewart-Haas Racing and RFK Racing.

Toyota expansion

Toyota has been looking to add more teams to its stable and does so this year with Legacy Motor Club, the team co-owned by Jimmie Johnson. The move keeps Toyota development drivers Erik Jones and John Hunter Nemechek with the automaker, as well as nine races for Hall of Famer Johnson, who starts his season with the Daytona 500.

Toyota always expects all four of its Gibbs entries to make

the playoffs and 23XI saw both Tyler Reddick and Bubba Wallace make the playoff field last season.

Like Ford, Toyota also rolled out a new design for its Camry and the XSE will race in 2024.

Larson plans the double

Kyle Larson fell short of a second Cup title last year but is poised to have another magical season. His year is centered on the Indianapolis 500-Coca-Cola 600 double, the longest day in motorsports over the Memorial Day weekend.

He will drive a Hendrick Motorsports entry fielded by McLaren Racing, which has been impressed so far with Larson's car. He's just the fifth driver to attempt to run the Indy 500 and the Coke 600, the longest race on the NASCAR schedule, and only Tony Stewart in one of his two attempts completed all 1,100 miles.

Larson started this year with a win in the Wild West Shootout, a slight recovery after his wreck that same week of January at the Chili Bowl. When boss Rick Hendrick checked in with Larson following his sprint car win last month, he said Larson "forgot to tell me" about his flip at the Chili Bowl.

"I found out about it later and asked him about it," said Hendrick. "He said, 'I was hoping you wouldn't find out about that.'"

New faces

Kevin Harvick is the latest veteran to retire and made his debut as NASCAR on Fox's new full-time analyst with the exhibition Clash. He was replaced at Stewart-Haas Racing by Josh Berry, a journeyman who finally gets his shot with a Cup team and joins Noah Gragson as SHR newcomers.

Shane van Gisbergen, winner of the street race in Chicago in his NASCAR debut last season, has now moved from Australia and embarks on a multi-series

season that begins with ARCA and Xfinity races this week in Daytona.

Zane Smith and Carson Hocevar are both moving from the Truck Series to Cup with Spire Motorsports, Smith under a development deal with Trackhouse Racing.

RFK Racing has introduced a program that will allow the team to field a third Cup entry at select races. First up? David Ragan will attempt to make the Daytona 500 this week.

Short track struggles

NASCAR will continue to try to improve its short track racing package, which has suffered since the 2022 implementation of the "Next Gen" stock car. NASCAR tested a new rules package at Phoenix Raceway in December that was encouraging but clearly not a miracle fix.

"NASCAR threw the kitchen sink at it in Phoenix and the consensus was, 'Eh, maybe a couple things might have helped,'" said David Wilson, president of Toyota Racing Development. "Unfortunately, with technologies in aerodynamics, there is no silver bullet. There is no magic that's going to be a cure-all, because you may fix one thing but then you've created a problem somewhere else."

Schedule tweaks

NASCAR last year brought North Wilkesboro in North Carolina back to the schedule and successfully held its first street race in downtown Chicago.

This year, NASCAR takes the Cup Series to Iowa Speedway for the first time. Atlanta Motor Speedway and the road course at Watkins Glen in upstate New York were added to the playoffs. Bristol Motor Speedway is removing the dirt for its spring race and Indianapolis Motor Speedway is returning NASCAR to its historic oval. The season ends once again at Phoenix Raceway, where the Cup champion will be crowned on Nov. 10.

Logano, McDowell give Ford front row

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Ford swept the front row in qualifying for the Daytona 500 with former race winners Joey Logano and Michael McDowell shocking powerhouse Hendrick Motorsports.

“This is all about the team. I’d like to take credit, but I can’t. Superspeedway qualifying is 100 percent the car,” said Logano, who won the first Daytona 500 pole for Team Penske. “Finally, someone else wins the pole.”

Hendrick drivers had won the pole at Daytona in eight of the last nine years, but the team’s highest qualifier Wednesday night was Kyle Larson in third.

The entire night, in which only the front row for Sunday’s season-opening race was set, belonged to Ford. Four drivers in the manufacturer’s new Dark Horse advanced to the final round-of-10 qualifying portion with Logano and McDowell sweeping the front row.

Logano turned a lap of 181.947 mph as the 2015 Daytona 500 winner earned his first pole since Atlanta last year. It was also Logano’s first pole on a superspeedway.

McDowell, the 2021 winner, qualified second at 181.686 for Front Row Motorsports.

Larson was third in a Chevrolet after Hendrick drivers had won three straight Daytona 500 poles heading into Wednesday night. Austin Cindric in a Ford for Penske was fourth and followed by Hendrick teammates Chase Elliott and William Byron.

Richard Childress Racing teammates Austin Dillon and Kyle Busch qualified seventh and eighth in Chevrolets, followed by Ross Chastain in a Chevy for Trackhouse Racing and Harrison Burton in a Ford for Wood Brothers Racing. Dillon won the Daytona 500 in 2018.

Anthony Alfredo of Beard Motorsports and David Ragan in a special third car for RFK

Racing took two of the four open spots in the field based on speed. Jimmie Johnson, a two-time Daytona 500 winner driving for his own Legacy Motor Club, did not make it into the field and will have to race his way in through one of the two Thursday night qualifying races.

Alfredo was never in danger after posting the fastest speed of all the cars not already locked into the 40-car field. But he was so fast — he was in the top five at one point — that making the Daytona 500 was a lock.

“This is insane, we were just talking about every (qualifying) scenario we may face,” Alfredo said. “We have clearly a fast Chevrolet Camaro and to know we are in ... and remove ourselves from some of the sketchy circumstances and focus on Sunday is amazing.”

Ragan is the first driver being used by RFK Racing this year as a third Ford in select races.

“It’s always big to be in the Daytona 500 and the whole

week, I’ve just been trying not to make mistakes,” said Ragan, who is 0-for-16 in “The Great American Race.”

“I didn’t have a chance to beat Jimmie Johnson day in and day out during my career, so I’ll take the small victories when I can get them.”

Johnson’s showing was a product of Toyota’s overall effort. The highest-qualifying Toyota was Erik Jones — who drives for Johnson at Legacy — at 22nd.

“I had higher expectations for sure, but we are lumped right there with the other Toyotas. It is what it is,” Johnson said. “I’ve never been in this position, so I don’t know. I came down here mentally prepared to race my way in if that was required. I’m well studied. I spent a lot of time working on the environment of the Duels and the way the race will unfold. Just get out there and race hard and see how it unfolds.”

Surging Canucks atop NHL but not celebrating yet

Associated Press

Rick Tocchet does not want a lot of wandering minds around the Vancouver Canucks’ locker room. He would rather his players simply focus on the next game.

“We can’t think of the big picture,” Tocchet said. “The only thing you can tell your players is short-term goals. You can’t think long term.”

The Canucks are so in sync with their coach that after winning in overtime Feb. 11, Conor Garland noted it was still a good effort he and his teammates would have been proud of even had they lost.

There hasn’t been a lot of losing at all for Vancouver since the puck dropped in October. The Canucks are atop the NHL standings this late in a season for

the first time since 2012 — five coaches and countless players removed from the franchise’s last era of winning.

“We’ve obviously had a lot more success this year than we have in the past,” said Thatcher Demko, whose play in net is one of the big reasons for that. “It’s obviously something that we’ve obviously something that we’ve wanted to do, and we just haven’t been able to up to this point. And we know there’s a lot of hockey left, so we’re staying focused on the task at hand. Obviously, we’ve got to make sure that we’re winning when it counts.”

Demko and the Canucks know they haven’t accomplished anything yet, with the playoffs still two months away. Still, with captain Quinn Hughes leading the way and Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller producing at ca-

reer-year levels, they’ve positioned themselves as one of the leading contenders for the Stanley Cup.

They also just added the best center available in the trade market, acquiring Elias Lindholm from Calgary just before the All-Star break.

“With that trade, they’re telling us and everyone that we may have a chance,” said Hughes, whose 65 points through 53 games are the most by a defenseman this season. “I think that we have a really good team. It’s been a great 50 games or whatever that we’ve played. Now we just need to put our foot on the gas and try to dial in our game.”

The Canucks’ game is a little bit of everything, starting with controlling the puck. They lead the league with 3.69 goals per

game and are fourth in goals allowed at 2.61. Vancouver has not lost more than two games in a row all season.

“We’re pretty aware of when we play well and when we don’t,” Garland said. “That’s the best thing about us: When we have a bad effort, we’ll follow it up with a good one.”

Beating the Capitals on Feb. 11 on Miller’s goal with 4.8 seconds left in 3-on-3 OT was the perfect example of that. Playing on back-to-back afternoons, Tocchet noticed some fatigue in a “mucky” game and was glad to see his team adjust to that and limit mistakes when it mattered.

“That means you have to play smart,” Tocchet said. “Some games you’ve got to play when you don’t have your legs, and you’ve got to play smart.”

Dodgers optimistic after huge offseason

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Money can buy lots of things, including Shohei Ohtani and Yoshinobu Yamamoto, a pair of Japanese superstars that set the Los Angeles Dodgers back more than \$1 billion.

Now the journey begins to see if it'll buy them a championship.

Major League Baseball's spring training opened for 28 of 30 teams this past week, with pitchers and catchers reporting to sites in Arizona and Florida. The Dodgers and San Diego Padres were already in camp, getting a head start because they'll open the regular season on March 20 in Seoul, South Korea.

"There's a lot more eyeballs on the Dodgers," LA manager Dave Roberts said. "I expect our players and organization to elevate our game. The responsibility with more eyeballs is greater expectations. That's good for all of us."

The New York Yankees took a big swing this winter by trading for Juan Soto and signing Marcus Stroman. The Philadelphia Phillies reloaded by bringing back Aaron Nola on a \$172 million, seven-year deal. The San Francisco Giants took a \$113 million gamble on Korean outfielder Jung Hoo Lee, while the Chicago Cubs gave lefty Shota Imanaga \$54 million to leave Japan.

But there's no doubt the Dodgers won the winter — not that it's any guarantee Los Angeles will hoist the Commissioner's Trophy after a World Series win this fall. Just ask the New York Mets, who splurged with a \$374 million payroll last year that was the highest in MLB history.

All that bought was a 75-87 record, a fourth-place finish in the National League East.

The Dodgers dominated much of the offseason conversation, but there are several other teams who have realistic championship aspirations. Among them are the defending champion Texas Rangers, who beat the Arizona Diamondbacks in five games during last year's World Series to win a title for the first time.

Ronald Acuña Jr. and the Atlanta Braves will try to finish the job after another disappointing early exit in last year's playoffs. The Houston Astros — who have been to the World Series four times over the past seven seasons, including two titles — are another formidable team with a deep lineup led by Jose Altuve, Alex Bregman, Yordan Alvarez and Kyle Tucker.

Here are some more things to watch as spring training begins:

Free agents

It may be mid-February, but there are still several big-name free agents available for teams who need help, including two-time Cy Young winner Blake Snell, third baseman Matt Chapman, left-hander Jordan Montgomery, outfielder/first baseman Cody Bellinger and veteran slugger J.D. Martinez.

Outfielder Jorge Soler had been part of that group as well, but several sources reported Tuesday that he was signing with the San Francisco Giants on a 3-year, \$42 million deal. Soler was the American League home run leader in 2019 and popped 36 long balls for the Marlins last season, making his first All-Star team.

Snell is a top-of-the-rotation option, while Montgomery had a breakout 2023 for the Cardinals and Rangers. Chapman has some power and a reputation as one of the game's elite defensive third basemen.

Bellinger is a former MVP who had a stellar bounce-back season for the Cubs. Martinez is a six-time All-Star.

Defending champs

Texas goes to spring training with World Series MVP Corey Seager recovering from surgery Jan. 30 for a left sports hernia repair. The Rangers are hopeful the shortstop will be ready for the start of the regular season and don't seem concerned about any lingering issues.

The Rangers won their first World Series title in their first season with manager Bruce Bochy, who won his fourth. They had six consecutive losing seasons before that.

Including Seager, in the third season of his \$325 million, 10-year contract, the Rangers return all six of their All-Stars from last season. Second baseman Marcus Semien, third baseman Josh Jung, catcher Jonah Heim, AL Championship Series MVP slugger Adolis García and right-hander Nathan Eovaldi are also back.

Cy Young Award winners Jacob deGrom (elbow) and Max Scherzer (herniated disk in lower back) could return to the rotation around the trade deadline. The Rangers won all six of deGrom's starts early last season before he had surgery, and he should resume throwing this

spring. The 39-year-old Scherzer, their deadline acquisition last summer, had surgery in December.

First female umpire?

Jen Pawol is on the verge of becoming Major League Baseball's first female umpire.

The 47-year-old from New Jersey was selected to work a full-time big league spring training schedule this year, putting her on track to become the first woman to umpire a regular-season big league baseball game.

Not so new rules

MLB's new rules package rocked the sport in 2023 — mostly in a good way.

The changes included a pitch clock, bigger bases and a limit on the number of times a pitcher could step off the rubber. There was scattered grouching by players, but it's hard to argue that the changes weren't a huge success.

The sport drew 70 million fans to stadiums for the first since 2017, game length fell to its lowest since 1984 and there was widespread agreement that the changes made the game much more watchable.

Last year's spring training was the testing ground for those rule changes. This year, everyone will be used to them.

Snakes and Birds

Two of the most exciting teams in baseball last year were the Diamondbacks and Baltimore Orioles.

Arizona made a stunning run to the World Series, led by unanimous NL Rookie of the Year Corbin Carroll, who was an all-around threat with 30 doubles, 10 triples, 25 homers and 54 stolen bases, all while playing stellar outfield defense.

The D-backs made some moves during the offseason to try to prove their team success wasn't a fluke, adding third baseman Eugenio Suarez, left-hander Eduardo Rodriguez and veteran slugger Joc Pederson.

The Orioles won 101 games before getting swept out of the playoffs by the eventual champion Rangers. AL Rookie of the Year Gunnar Henderson — also a unanimous selection — returns after blasting 28 homers and playing great defense at both shortstop and third.

Baltimore made a recent splash when it traded for Milwaukee ace Corbin Burnes, a three-time All-Star who won the 2021 Cy Young.