

US troop drawdown in Middle East likely

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military is likely to reduce the number of troops it keeps in the Middle East and Central Asia while remaining engaged in those regions to counter Iran and extremist threats, multiple analysts and a former head of Central Command said.

Fewer resources there would allow the Pentagon to concentrate on deterring China from engaging in a fight for Taiwan and other territories in Asia, and to keep focusing on Russia, which is in an armed standoff with NATO over Ukraine.

A 2021 federal review of troop deployments directed the Pentagon to assess its “enduring posture requirements in the Middle East.”

The administrations of former presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump previously proposed shifting focus away from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The U.S. could move some troops elsewhere, consolidate the number of U.S. bases and decrease the time the Navy’s aircraft carriers spend in the region, Joseph Votel, a retired general who helmed U.S. Central Command from 2016 to 2019, said in a recent interview.

The troops remaining would still be able to respond to threats, but the U.S. would have to be more “thoughtful” in using this smaller force, said Votel, now a senior fellow on na-

tional security at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

“Our interests and challenges remain generally the same, but what’s different is that we’re going to have a different force structure on the ground,” Votel said.

An estimated 40,000 to 60,000 troops are deployed to CENTCOM, a recent statement from the command to Stars and Stripes said.

These troops are deployed to 21 countries, from Egypt in the west to Kazakhstan in the northeast. They train with local military units, operate drones and maintain a vast network of bases necessary to move U.S. troops throughout the area.

In an email, CENTCOM declined to discuss the future posture of its forces.

The U.S. is most likely going to try to “right-size” the number of troops in the Middle East by making modest but still significant cuts, said Michael E. O’Hanlon, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

“Do we really need (7,000) or 8,000 troops in Kuwait? Could we make do with (5,000) or 6,000?” O’Hanlon asked.

The U.S. has already withdrawn from Afghanistan and reduced its footprint in Iraq. And last summer it announced the closure of U.S. Army Camp As Sayliyah-Main in Qatar.

“This is overall just an evolutionary moment for CENTCOM,” said Jason Campbell, a policy researcher at Rand Corp.

The commander in charge of CENT-

COM’s next steps may soon be Army Lt. Gen. Michael “Erik” Kurilla, commander of the 18th Airborne Corps, headquartered at Fort Bragg, N.C.

If his nomination is confirmed as expected by the Senate, Kurilla will have to gauge what is needed to deal with continuing threats in Iran and Afghanistan.

Iran views the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as contrary to its ambitions for dominance in the Middle East, analysts said.

Attacks on American troops continue even after the U.S. announced the end of its combat operations in Iraq in December. Two drone attacks occurred this month on the anniversary of the U.S. airstrike that killed Iran’s former spy chief, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

Future conflicts in the region are expected to be in the “gray zone,” in which ill-defined campaigns of subterfuge and aggression fall below the threshold of outright war, Votel said.

Tehran boasts advanced missile and drone technology, which it has exported throughout the region via proxies, and has been accused by the West of pursuing nuclear weapons.

Another challenge remains in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, where terrorist groups like al-Qaida and the local Islamic State branch operate.

Volcano puts West Coast under tsunami advisory

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — An undersea volcano erupted in spectacular fashion near the Pacific nation of Tonga on Saturday, sending large tsunami waves crashing across the shore and people rushing to higher ground. A tsunami advisory was in effect for Hawaii, Alaska and the U.S. Pacific coast, with reports of waves pushing boats up in the docks in Hawaii.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or the extent of the damage because all internet connectivity with Tonga was lost at about 6:40 p.m. local time — about 10 minutes after problems began, said Doug Ma-

dory, director of internet analysis for the network intelligence firm Kentik.

In Hawaii, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center reported waves slamming ashore from 1.6 feet in Nawiliwili, Kauai, to 2.7 feet in Hanalei.

“We are relieved that there is no reported damage and only minor flooding throughout the islands,” the center said, describing the situation in Hawaii.

On Tonga, home to about 105,000 people, video posted to social media showed large waves washing ashore in coastal areas, swirling around homes and buildings, including a church. Satellite images showed a

huge eruption, a plume of ash, steam and gas rising like a mushroom above the blue Pacific waters.

New Zealand’s military said it was monitoring the situation and remained on standby, ready to assist if asked. The Tonga Meteorological Services said a tsunami warning was declared for all of the archipelago, and data from the Pacific tsunami center showed waves 2.7 feet had been detected.

In Hawaii, Alaska and along the U.S. Pacific coast, residents were asked to move away from the coastline to higher ground and pay attention to specific instructions from their local emergency officials.

Garbage, recyclables pile up over virus

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The omicron variant is sickening so many sanitation workers around the U.S. that some cities have had to delay or suspend garbage or recycling pick-up, angering residents shocked that governments can't perform this most basic function.

The slowdowns have caused recycling bins full of Christmas gift boxes and wrapping paper to languish on Nashville curbs, trash bags to pile up on Philadelphia streets and uncollected yard waste — grass clippings, leaves, branches — to block sidewalks in Atlanta.

Cities including Atlanta, Nashville and Louisville are so shorthanded they have temporarily stopped collecting things like recyclable bottles, cans, paper and plastic,

yard waste or oversized junk to focus on the grosser, smellier stuff. The delays are more than an annoyance to residents, creating problems such as clogged storm drains and blocked sidewalks.

The garbage crisis is actually the third of the pandemic. The first happened in the spring of 2020, when COVID-19 took hold in the U.S. Problems arose again as the delta variant spiked over the summer.

The Solid Waste Association of North America warned government officials and trash haulers in December to “plan now for staffing shortages.”

The highly contagious variant hit just when Americans were generating a lot of trash — over the Christmas holidays. Combine that with a relatively low vaccination level among front-line sanitation workers

and you have a “perfect storm for delayed collection,” the association’s executive director, David Biderman, said last week.

Atlanta officials said Monday that because of the worker shortage, recycling and yard waste will be picked up “as staffing allows.”

In Louisville, Ky., sanitation workers stopped picking up yard waste in early January until further notice. Residents can drop off branches and clippings at Christmas tree collection sites.

In Philadelphia, sometimes called Filthadelphia because of the condition of its streets, around 10% to 15% of the 900-person sanitation workforce is out on any given day, leading to delays in waste collection, according to Streets Commissioner Carlton Williams.

CDC recommends more wear N95, KN95 masks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — U.S. health officials on Friday encouraged more Americans to wear the kind of N95 or KN95 masks used by health care workers to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Those kinds of masks are considered better at filtering the air. But they were in short supply previously, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials had said they should be prioritized for health care workers.

In updated guidance posted late Friday afternoon, CDC officials removed concerns

related to supply shortages and more clearly said that properly fitted N95 and KN95 masks offer the most protection.

However, agency officials noted some masks are harder to tolerate than others, and urged people to choose good-fitting masks that they will wear consistently.

“Our main message continues to be that any mask is better than no mask,” Kristen Nordlund, a CDC spokeswoman, said in a statement.

The CDC has evolved its mask guidance throughout the pandemic. In its last update, in September, CDC officials became more

encouraging of disposable N95 masks, saying they could be used in certain situations if supplies were available. Examples included being near a lot of people for extended periods of time on a train, bus or airplane; taking care of someone in poor health; or being more susceptible to severe illness.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden announced that his administration was planning to make “high-quality masks,” including N95s, available for free. He said more details will come this week. The federal government has a stockpile of more than 750 million N95 masks, the White House said.

GAO: VA failed to vet doctors for community care program

BY NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs failed to thoroughly vet medical providers for its community care program, resulting in doctors with revoked or suspended medical licenses being approved to treat veterans, according to a new report from the Government Accountability Office.

The GAO investigated the VA’s community care program, which sends veterans to private-sector doctors in certain situations.

When vetting doctors to allow them into the program, the VA was “cutting corners,” the investigation found. The GAO identified 1,600 providers who were ineligible for the program under the VA’s policies but had been accepted into it.

In some cases, the doctors had criminal records or had previously committed health-care fraud.

“Our work ... basically found that they were really cutting corners,” said Seto Bagdoyan, director of audits at GAO. “They were not performing monthly checks, for

example. And even when they did flag someone as ineligible, that individual ... was not removed in a timely manner.”

In one instance, the VA approved a doctor who had been convicted of patient abuse and neglect. The doctor also had an expired medical license, had been arrested for assault and had been excluded from participating in other federal health care programs.

Another doctor who was accepted into the program had a revoked medical license and posed a “clear and immediate danger to public health and safety,” the GAO reported.

Chemical fire erupts at New Jersey plant

Associated Press

PASSAIC, N.J. — A large chemical fire burned through the night and into Saturday morning in northern New Jersey, its smoke so heavy that it was detected on weather radar and seen and smelled in neighboring New York City.

The fire at Majestic Industries and the Qualco chemical plant in Passaic spread to multiple buildings and threatened their collapse, officials said.

Water from firefighter hoses froze in cold weather and made the environment slick

and hazardous for responders.

“There have been bad fires, but this is the worst that I’ve ever seen,” Passaic Mayor Hector Lora told NorthJersey.com.

Security guard Justin Johnson told WCBS-TV he was working alone, checking water pressure, when he noticed smoke coming from a smokestack-like tower. He wasn’t sure what to make of it but called the fire department as alarms went off.

The fire was in buildings housing plastics, pallets and chlorine, officials said, but Fire Chief Patrick Trentacost said the part

where most of the chlorine was stored appeared to be under control.

Residents near the blaze were advised to close their windows but were not required to evacuate, with officials saying air quality remained acceptable and would continue to be monitored.

Some residents fled nonetheless.

“It’s worrying. You don’t know what’s going to happen,” Joel Heredia told WBCS-TV.

One firefighter was taken to a hospital after being struck by debris, officials said.

Ohio high court rejects gerrymandered GOP map

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio’s Republican-drawn congressional map was rejected by the state’s high court Friday, giving hope to national Democrats who had argued it unfairly delivered several potentially competitive seats in this year’s critical midterm elections to Republicans.

In the 4-3 decision, the Ohio Supreme Court returned the map to the Ohio General Assembly, where Republicans hold supermajorities in both chambers, and then to the powerful Ohio Redistricting Commission. The two bodies have a combined 60 days to draw new lines that comply with a 2018 constitutional amendment against gerryman-

dering.

The commission was already in the process of reconstituting so it can redraw GOP-drawn legislative maps the court also rejected during the week as gerrymandered. That decision gave the panel 10 days to comply.

With Feb. 2 and March 4 looming as the filing dates for legislative and congressional candidates, respectively, the decisions have raised questions of whether the state’s May 3 primary may have to be extended.

Ohio Republican Party Chair Bob Paduchik called the situation a mess, criticizing the Ohio Supreme Court for giving the commission less than two weeks to come up with

new legislative maps.

“That’s a lot to dump on a commission with a very short period of time,” he said during a forum at the City Club of Cleveland on Friday. “It’s hard to say what’s going to happen.”

Justices chastised Republicans in both decisions for flouting the voters’ wishes and the Constitution and directed them to move with haste.

Writing for the majority, Justice Michael Donnelly wrote, “(T)he evidence in these cases makes clear beyond all doubt that the General Assembly did not heed the clarion call sent by Ohio voters to stop political gerrymandering.”

FAA: 5G service may interfere with Boeing 787 landings

Associated Press

Federal safety officials are directing operators of some Boeing planes to adopt extra procedures when landing on wet or snowy runways near impending 5G service because, they say, interference from the wireless networks could mean that the planes need more room to land.

The Federal Aviation Administration said Friday that interference could delay systems like thrust reversers on Boeing 787s from kicking in, leaving only the brakes to slow the plane.

That “could prevent an aircraft from stopping on the runway,” the FAA said.

Similar orders could be issued in the coming days for other planes. The FAA has asked Boeing and Airbus for information about many models. Boeing said it is working with its suppliers, airlines, telecom companies and

regulators “to ensure that every commercial airplane model can safely and confidently operate when 5G is implemented in the United States.”

The order for the Boeing jets comes a day after the FAA began issuing restrictions that airlines and other aircraft operators will face at many airports when AT&T and Verizon launch new, faster 5G wireless service Wednesday.

The agency is still studying whether those wireless networks will interfere with altimeters, which measure an aircraft’s height above the ground. Data from altimeters is used to help pilots land when visibility is poor.

The devices operate on a portion of the radio spectrum that is close to the range used by the new 5G service, called C-Band.

The FAA actions are part of a larger fight between the aviation regulator and the tele-

com industry. The telecom companies and the Federal Communications Commission say 5G networks do not pose a threat to aviation. The FAA says more study is needed.

The FAA is conducting tests to learn how many commercial planes have altimeters that might be vulnerable to spectrum interference. The agency said during the week that it expects to estimate the percentage of those planes soon, but didn’t put a date on it.

“Aircraft with untested altimeters or that need retrofitting or replacement will be unable to perform low-visibility landings where 5G is deployed,” the agency said in a statement.

The order regarding Boeing 787s covers 137 planes in the U.S. and 1,010 worldwide. The 787 is a two-aisle plane that is popular on longer routes, including many international flights.

Thieves raid cargo containers in LA

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Thieves have been raiding cargo containers aboard trains nearing downtown Los Angeles for months, taking packages belonging to people across the U.S. and leaving the tracks blanketed with discarded boxes.

The packages are from retailers including Amazon, REI and others, CBSLA reported Thursday. The sea of debris left behind includes items that the thieves apparently didn't think were valuable enough to take.

While CBSLA cameras were on the scene, one person was spotted running off with a con-

tainer used to hold small packages, and a Union Pacific railroad police officer was spotted pursuing two other people who were apparently going through packages.

The scene was the same in November, when NBC4 showed thousands of boxes discarded along the tracks lined with homeless encampments northeast of downtown in the Lincoln Park area.

Passing trains carried containers with doors wide open and packages tumbling out, NBC4 reported. Video showed two men, one holding what looked like bolt cutters, walking along the tracks, the station

said.

Union Pacific said in a statement to CBSLA that the railroad was concerned about increased cargo thefts in California.

"We have increased the number of Union Pacific special agents on patrol, and we have utilized and explored additional technologies to help us combat this criminal activity. We also will continue to work with our local law enforcement partners and elected leaders," the railroad said.

Amazon said it was directing inquiries to police. The United Parcel Service, UPS, declined to comment on investigations into the cargo thefts but said it

was cooperating with authorities.

"The safety of our customers' goods and our employees is our highest priority," UPS said in a statement.

Luis Rosas, who makes about \$20 an hour working for a company subcontracted by Union Pacific to salvage items from the tracks in the Los Angeles area, says he's encountered the brazen thieves in action before.

Using bolt cutters, they break locks on the containers and load up vans or trucks with the stolen merchandise.

"They don't even run off anymore. They do it right in front of us," he said.

Gators get scrub, tooth cleaning after fuel spill

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Wildlife rehabilitators are decontaminating dozens of alligators, brushing their pointy teeth and scrubbing their scaly hides in the weeks after a pipeline rupture dumped 300,000 gallons of diesel fuel into a New Orleans area wetland.

Diesel poured into the area outside the New Orleans suburb of Chalmette on Dec. 27 after a corroded pipeline broke, according to federal records.

Seventy-eight alligators have since been rescued, and 33 of them had been cleaned and released by Friday into a national wildlife refuge located in New Orleans and about 10 miles from the spill site in St. Bernard Parish, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries said.

Cleaning a 6-foot-long alligator on Thursday required eight people: four holders, two scrubbers, one person with a hose for hot-water rinses and one to change the wash water, said Laura Carver, who became the department's oil spill coordina-

tor in February 2010, less than three months before a massive BP oil spill off Louisiana in the Gulf.

Carver said the impact of December's diesel spill on wildlife was relatively high compared to most spills in Louisiana.

Rehabilitating that many alligators at once "is a new one for us," Carver said.

She said a hard piece of wood "almost like a really old-fashioned mop handle" is used to hold the alligator's jaw open while its teeth are scrubbed.

The teeth cleaning comes toward the end of a series of body washes using gradually smaller concentrations of Dawn dish detergent to clean off the gunk. "They literally get their mouths washed out with soap. But it's the only thing that works," Carver said.

The spilled fuel killed about 2,300 fish in two pits from which dirt was once excavated for construction. Most were minnows and bait fish, Carver said, along with some shad, gar, sunfish and small bass.

Indiana man accused of killing roommate with windshield wiper fluid

Associated Press

MICHIGAN CITY, Ind. — A northwest Indiana man allegedly killed his roommate by repeatedly spiking her beverages with windshield washer fluid because he felt she was disrespecting him by not approving of his heavy drinking, authorities said.

Thomas Holifield, 59, is charged with murder in the June 1 methanol poisoning death of 64-year-old Pamela Keltz, according to Michigan City police and the LaPorte County coroner.

The Michigan City man has pleaded not guilty to the charge and is due back in court on Jan. 20.

A LaPorte County judge appointed mental health professionals in October to determine if Holifield is competent to stand trial.

Holifield told police that while he once had a romantic relationship with Keltz, he had

been renting a room from her and she was his "best friend."

But he told officers he was a heavy drinker and Keltz did not drink alcohol, and his habit had become "a point of contention between the two of them," court records state.

Holifield told officers he thought Keltz was disrespectful toward him and he devised a plan to poison her, initially by putting eye drops into a cup she drank soda from, according to court records.

"Thomas noted that the eye drops were not causing severe enough illness. Pamela would have hallucinations and diarrhea but then recover," the records state.

Holifield told police that in May he noticed a bottle of windshield washer fluid in Keltz's room, saw that it contained methanol and learned that the chemical was poisonous, according to court records.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man accused of using app to arrange rape

AL HUNTSVILLE — A man in Alabama was accused of trying to hire someone on a phone app to kidnap and rape a Wisconsin woman he met online, federal court documents show.

Matthias Jacob Edward Mann, 22, was arrested in Hartselle on charges of attempted kidnapping and attempted coercion after a person who he believed was willing to assault a woman turned out to be a police officer working undercover online, according to a sworn statement from an FBI agent.

Mann allegedly sent \$75 through the Kik payment app to cover expenses for the supposed abduction, the statement said, and was arrested.

Researchers study virus that killed 3 porcupines

ME BAR HARBOR — At least three porcupines in Maine have died from a virus that wildlife experts said could pose a threat to the population of the spiky rodents.

Five porcupines had to be rushed to Acadia Wildlife in Bar Harbor this fall because of illness, the Bangor Daily News reported. Three of them died.

Biological samples later diagnosed the porcupines with skunk adenovirus 1, which has been spotted in other mammals, including foxes and raccoons.

Man arrested after hundreds of pigs die

IA CEDAR FALLS — An Iowa man has been ar-

rested after hundreds of pigs died at his farm last month after they went without adequate food and were kept in conditions so cold that some of their ears froze off.

Black Hawk County sheriff's deputies arrested the 38-year-old man on one count of livestock neglect, a misdemeanor, the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier reported.

The man had been hired to raise 2,500 baby pigs until they reached around 280 pounds, according to court records.

The animals were delivered to his farm in rural Cedar Falls in late December with 15 tons of feed.

By Dec. 30, a consultant found that 800 of the pigs had died and that the animals didn't have ready access to water and some didn't have access to food.

Professor on leave after profanity-filled video

MI BIG RAPIDS — A Ferris State University history professor has been suspended after a profanity-filled online video for his students went viral this month, officials confirmed.

The Big Rapids, Mich., school's administration "is aware of a course video distributed to students, in early January, by a faculty member, believed to be Professor Barry Mehler," representatives said in a statement to The Detroit News.

The 14-minute video posted Jan. 9 through Mehler's YouTube account included an expletive-laden speech that included saying "no ... c—sucker of an administrator is going to tell me how to teach my classes

because I'm a f— tenured professor. So if you want to go complain to your dean, f— you. Go ahead. I'm retiring at the end of this year and I couldn't give a flying f— any longer. You people are just vectors of disease to me and I don't want to be anywhere near you. So keep your f— distance. If you want to talk to me come to my Zoom."

The professor said his "soliloquy," modeled after dialogue in a scene from the TV series "Deadwood," helped illustrate plagiarism and citing sources in classroom work.

Gig driver mauled by K-9 sues city, police

CA SAN FRANCISCO — A gig driver badly mauled by a police dog is suing a San Francisco area suburb, alleging use of excessive force and violation of civil rights when police stopped him in December 2020 after he had missed car rental payments.

Ali Badr, 42, of Oakland, has driven for Uber and Lyft and started delivering food for DoorDash when he rented a car from CarMommy, which caters to gig workers, according to the lawsuit.

When he fell behind on payments, CarMommy CEO John Blomeke reported the car stolen, said Matthew Haley, Badr's attorney, resulting in the car's license plate number being listed in a state Department of Justice database shared among agencies.

Badr was driving to work at a gas station when the plate triggered one of the city's license plate readers, alerting police of a vehicle reported as stolen.

Officers in a half-dozen cars

pulled him over, guns drawn and dog barking. He ended up being rushed to the hospital for surgery.

Teen pleads not guilty of leaving baby in trash

NM HOBBS —An 18-year-old New Mexico woman accused of abandoning her newborn baby in a dumpster pleaded not guilty to charges of attempted first-degree murder and child abuse.

Alexis Avila of Hobbs was told by a Lea County judge at her arraignment that she can stay out of jail pending trial and set house arrest as a main condition of release.

Police said a group of people were looking through a dumpster for anything of value in Hobbs, near the Texas border, when they heard what they thought was a dog or kitten. They moved a trash bag and found a baby inside, wrapped in a dirty blanket with its umbilical cord still attached.

Investigators used surveillance video to identify a car suspected of being involved. That led them to Avila, who admitted to giving birth at another location and then leaving the baby in a dumpster.

Questioned by police, Avila said she was not aware that she was pregnant until Jan. 6 when she sought medical attention for abdominal pain.

She told detectives that she was experiencing stomach pain the next day and unexpectedly gave birth.

Authorities said the infant is in the care of the New Mexico Department of Children, Youth and Families.

— From Associated Press



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49ers, Cowboys renew old playoff rivalry

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Old playoff foes Dallas and San Francisco haven't met in the postseason since the last of three consecutive NFC championship games in the 1990s.

The wild-card meeting Sunday is the first step toward a Super Bowl instead of the last, with Dak Prescott and the Cowboys (12-5) trying to get that far in the playoffs for the first time since the year after their rivalry with the 49ers was the biggest thing going in the NFL.

Prescott was the starter from the beginning of his rookie season in 2016, leading Dallas to the top seed in the NFC before a loss in his playoff debut at home to Green Bay. Now he's the \$40 million-a-year quarterback trying to get the storied franchise's long-awaited run going in his third trip to the postseason.

"I don't necessarily know why people have labeled the word 'pressure' as such a bad thing, honestly," Prescott said. "I think it creates high expectations and high standards, and they usually create high results."

Jimmy Garoppolo and visiting San Francisco (10-7) are

two years removed from losing to Kansas City in the Super Bowl. It needed a tense victory at the Los Angeles Rams in the finale to qualify for the playoffs while the Cowboys cruised late in the season as NFC East champs.

"We know we have a chance to do something special and it's just you don't get that opportunity every year," said Garoppolo, who was Tom Brady's backup for two of New England's Super Bowl titles before getting his start against Patrick Mahomes when the Chiefs rallied in the fourth quarter for a 31-20 victory.

"And so I've been on a number of teams that went to the Super Bowl, and I'm not saying anything like that, but just there's a feeling and you want to make them count as long as you have them I guess," Garoppolo said.

Jimmy's swan song?

Garoppolo knows every game from here on out could be his last with the 49ers. San Francisco traded three first-round picks to draft Trey Lance third overall last spring, and it's only a matter of time before the former North Dakota State

quarterback gets his chance.

But each time Garoppolo helps lead the Niners to a win, it gives him another game this season and raises some questions about whether he could return in 2022 for the final year of his contract.

"It's always in the back of your mind," Garoppolo said. "It has been in mine really this whole season. I knew what type of season it was, knew everything that was going on behind the scenes and whatnot. So it was a little different. But, at the same time, you've got to toe that line because you don't want to get too emotional in those moments."

Time to produce

Dallas led the NFL in points and yards, but pockets of inconsistency led to about a month of chatter over whether Prescott was in a slump. Receivers Amari Cooper and CeeDee Lamb have shown flashes of dominating games, but each disappeared at times.

Ezekiel Elliott battled a knee injury most of the season and hasn't had a 100-yard rushing game since Week 5. The two-time rushing champion appears to be getting healthy at

the right time. Now's the time for the Cowboys, in the playoffs for the first time since 2018, to put it all together on offense.

"I love the way our team has traveled through the season," said coach Mike McCarthy, in the playoffs for the first time with Dallas after taking Green Bay the postseason nine times in 12-plus seasons. "We've been able to go through the ups and downs, the adverse moments, changing personnel. We have an excellent foundation to take into this playoff."

Dynamic Deebo

San Francisco's offense has relied heavily on versatile receiver Deebo Samuel, who has been one of the most exciting players in the league whether as a receiver or a running back. He finished the regular season with a career-high 77 catches for 1,405 yards to go with 365 yards rushing and 14 total TDs.

Samuel is the only player in NFL history with at least 1,400 yards receiving and 300 yards rushing in a season and is the first to average at least 18 yards a catch and 6.0 yards per carry since Lenny Moore in 1958 as his ability to break tackles leads to big plays.

Brady, Bucs focused on Eagles, not personal glory

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Tom Brady's looking ahead, though not beyond this weekend.

No one's had more success in the NFL playoffs than the seven-time Super Bowl champion, who says his focus is on trying to help the Tampa Bay Buccaneers beat the Philadelphia Eagles and not a dazzling postseason résumé or how well he's played at age 44.

The Bucs (13-4) set a franchise record for wins during the regular season, with Brady joining Drew Brees and Peyton Manning as the only quarterbacks in the past 30 years to lead

the league in passing yards, touchdowns, attempts and completions.

With a career-best 5,136 yards — the third-highest single-season total in NFL history — and 43 TDs, the argument can be made that this has been his finest season.

"I feel like it's, for me, always about the team's success so it's hard to compare one year to another. I feel like I want to play as a championship-level player. That's what I've said for a long time," the Tampa Bay star said.

"I said a long time ago when I suck I'll retire. But what I really

meant was when I'm not capable of leading the team to victory, then someone else has to do the job. I feel like I can do that," Brady added. "Obviously, we've put ourselves in a decent position. Now we're in the postseason, and we've got to take care of a very tough opponent."

Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts was 3 years old when Brady made his first postseason start in 2001.

Brady enters Sunday's NFC wild-card round matchup at Raymond James Stadium with a sparkling 34-11 playoff record. He's thrown for 12,449 yards

and 83 touchdowns — both all-time league bests — in those 45 games.

Hurts, 23, is in his first year as Philadelphia's full-time starter. The Eagles have won seven of 11 games since losing to the Buccaneers 28-22 at home on Oct. 14, including four of the past five to earn the No. 7 seed in the NFC.

One of the keys to the surge has been the NFL's top rushing attack.

Hurts is one of eight quarterbacks in league history to throw for more than 3,000 yards and run for more than 750 in the same season.

Bennett's hat trick lifts Panthers past Stars

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Sam Bennett scored his second hat trick this season and added an assist to lead the Florida Panthers over the Dallas Stars 7-1 on Friday night.

Jonathan Huberdeau had a goal and three assists to give him 51 points. Gustav Forsling scored his first of the season, Anthony Duclair had a goal and two assists, and Carter Verhaeghe also scored for the Panthers.

Brandon Montour had two assists, and Sergei Bobrovsky made 28 saves.

Bennett also had three goals Oct. 16 against the Islanders, the second game of the season.

"Sometimes it's just your night," Bennett said. "You've got to take advantage of those nights because they don't happen too often, but tonight was one of those nights for sure."

Florida is 7-0-1 since the extended Christmas break and it improved to 20-3-0 at home.

"We want to bring an identity

that this is a real hard place for teams that come in. They better be ready to play because we play really well at home," interim coach Andrew Brunette said.

Jake Oettinger allowed four goals on 17 shots. He was replaced by Anton Khudobin with 13:57 left in the second period. Khudobin finished with 19 saves.

Roope Hintz scored for the Stars.

Dallas fell to 4-11-1 on the road, where it has only one win in regulation.

"There's a lot (we didn't like)," coach Rick Bowness said. "It starts with not being willing to compete."

"Some guys are very comfortable playing at home and uncomfortable playing on the road."

The Panthers scored two goals 30 seconds apart in the second to make it 4-0. Verhaeghe put the puck over Oettinger's glove at 5:33. Huberdeau's shot from the slot chased Oettinger.

Bennett's power-play goal with 7:23 left in the second

stretched it to 5-0, and his second goal of the game made it 6-0. His third came with 4:06 remaining in the third and made the score 7-1.

Wild 7, Ducks 3: Matt Boldy and Mats Zuccarello scored four seconds apart early in a four-goal third period as host Minnesota routed Anaheim.

Zuccarello finished with two goals and an assist, Boldy and Ryan Hartman had one of each, and Kirill Kaprizov added two assists in his return to the lineup after missing a game with an upper-body injury.

Kaapo Kahkonen made 39 saves for the rested Wild, who won their 10th straight against the Ducks — the longest win streak against one opponent in team history.

Anthony Stolarz stopped 23 shots for the Ducks but was pulled after Victor Rask made it 6-1 at 2:05 of the third period. Kevin Fiala and Matt Dumba also scored for the Wild.

Max Comtois, Derek Grant

and Trevor Zegras scored for Anaheim, which played much of the night without two top scorers.

Points leader Troy Terry, sixth in the NHL with 22 goals, was placed in COVID-19 protocol. Sonny Milano, tied for second on the team with nine goals, left in the first period with an upper-body injury and did not return.

Avalanche 4, Coyotes 3 (SO): Nazem Kadri scored the winner in a shootout and host Colorado extended the NHL's longest home winning streak in nearly four years to 13 games with a victory over undermanned Arizona.

Mikko Rantanen, Tyson Jost and Andre Burakovsky scored in regulation for the Avalanche, and Pavel Francouz stopped 23 shots.

The last team to win 13 straight at home was Toronto from Jan. 31 to March 24, 2018. Colorado is 31-2-2 at home since March 10.

The Coyotes were outshot 47-25 but took a 3-2 lead on Shayne Gostisbehere's goal 39 seconds into the third period.

Djokovic back in detention, still fighting deportation

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Novak Djokovic was back in immigration detention Saturday after his legal challenge to avoid being deported from Australia for being unvaccinated for COVID-19 was moved to higher court.

A Federal Court hearing was scheduled for Sunday, a day before the men's No. 1-ranked tennis player and nine-time Australian Open champion was due to begin his title defense at the first Grand Slam tennis tournament of the year.

Djokovic and his lawyers had a morning meeting with immigration officials and, by midafternoon, Australian media reported the tennis star was taken back into detention. Television footage showed the 34-year-old Serb wearing a face mask as he sat in a vehicle near an immigration detention hotel.

He spent four nights confined to a hotel near downtown Melbourne before being released last Monday when he won a court challenge on procedural grounds against his first visa cancellation.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke on Fri-

day blocked the visa, which was originally revoked when he landed at a Melbourne airport on Jan. 5.

Deportation from Australia can lead to a three-year ban on returning to the country, although that may be waived, depending on the circumstances.

Djokovic has acknowledged that his travel declaration was incorrect because it failed to indicate that he'd been in multiple countries in the two-week period before his arrival in Australia.

But that wasn't why Hawke decided that deporting Djokovic was in the public interest.

Lawyers for Djokovic filed documents in court that revealed Hawke had stated that the tennis star "is perceived by some as a talisman of a community of anti-vaccination sentiment."

Australia has one of the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates in the world.

But the minister said Djokovic's presence in Australia may be a risk to the health and "good order" of the Australian public and "may be counterproductive to efforts at vaccination by

others in Australia."

The Health Department advised that Djokovic was a "low" risk of transmitting COVID-19 and a "very low" risk of transmitting the disease at the Australian Open.

The minister cited comments Djokovic made in April 2020 that he was "opposed to vaccination" and wouldn't want to be forced by someone to take a vaccine to compete.

Djokovic's lawyers argued that the minister had cited no evidence that Djokovic's presence in Australia may "foster anti-vaccination sentiment."

Hundreds of activists held a peaceful rally outside the Melbourne Park complex that hosts the Australian Open.

On Saturday, Federal Chief Justice James Allsop announced that he would hear the case with Justices David O'Callaghan and Anthony Besanko.

The decision for three judges to hear the appeal instead of a single judge elevates the importance of the case from the judiciary's perspective and means any verdict would be less likely to be appealed.

Mavs halt Grizzlies' win streak at 11

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Luka Doncic had 27 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists in his 40th career triple-double, and the Dallas Mavericks used a second-half rally to rout Memphis 112-85 on Friday night and end the Grizzlies' winning streak at 11 games.

Doncic had 18 points in the second half, connecting on 8 of 10 shots. Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 16 points, and Jalen Brunson and Marquese Chriss had 15 points apiece, with Brunson adding nine assists.

"Our defense was amazing," Doncic said. "(The Grizzlies) have a great offense, and it's tough to stop them, but I think we did an amazing job in the second half."

Ja Morant led Memphis with 19 points and eight assists, Desmond Bane had 16 points and Kyle Anderson added 12. The Grizzlies lost for the first time since Dec. 23, getting little help beyond their top three scorers.

The Grizzlies were playing the second night of a back-to-back and their fifth game in a week. Morant said the schedule may have finally caught up with them.

"Pretty much from our legs being heavy and our shots were short," Morant said, later adding the fatigue contributed to his

eight turnovers and other mistakes in the game.

Suns 112, Pacers 94: Devin Booker scored 35 points, Deandre Ayton had 27 points and 12 rebounds and NBA-leading Phoenix won at Indiana.

Chris Paul added 12 points and nine assists for the Suns, and Cam Payne had 11 points and five assists. They finished the first half of the season 32-9, their second-best record in franchise history through 41 games.

"I'm a scoring guard and I get paid to make plays and put the ball in the bucket, that doesn't come without Deandre setting good screens, Chris getting the ball there on time," Booker said. "Deandre having a dominant first half (21 points) made things open up for all of us in the second half."

Warriors 139, Bulls 96: Andrew Wiggins scored 21 points, Stephen Curry added 19 and Golden State rolled to a win at Chicago, its most-lopsided victory of the season.

Rookie Jonathan Kuminga finished with 25 points, and Jordan Poole had 22. The Warriors broke out of their rut in a huge way, pulling away early after dropping four of five. It was just the sort of breather they needed coming off a lopsided loss at defending champion Milwaukee

the previous night.

Heat 124, Hawks 118: Tyler Herro scored 24 points, Jimmy Butler returned from a three-game absence with a sprained ankle to add 23 and host Miami rallied to beat Atlanta.

Omer Yurtseven had 17 points and 11 rebounds, and P.J. Tucker also had 17 points to help the Heat move within a game of Chicago for first place in the Eastern Conference. Miami has won seven in a row at home.

Trae Young had 24 points for the Hawks, who rallied from 17 down early and led by 10 in the second half before letting it get away.

76ers 111, Celtics 99: Joel Embiid had 25 points and 13 rebounds and host Philadelphia used a 28-2 first-quarter run to rout Boston.

Embiid finished five points shy of setting a franchise record with 30 or more points in nine straight games. He remains tied with Allen Iverson and Wilt Chamberlain for the club mark with eight in a row.

Magic 116, Hornets 109: Moritz Wagner scored a season-high 26 points, younger brother Franz added 19 points and seven assists and Orlando won at Charlotte to snap a 10-game losing streak.

Gary Harris added 18 points to help the NBA-worst Magic

improve to 8-35.

LaMelo Ball had 23 points and eight assists for the Hornets.

Cavaliers 114, Spurs 109: Darius Garland scored 28 points and visiting Cleveland handed San Antonio its fifth straight loss.

Jarrett Allen added with 17 points and 16 rebounds to help the Cavs win their third straight and fourth in five games.

Dejounte Murray had 30 points, 14 rebounds and eight assists for the Spurs.

Kings 126, Rockets 114: Marvin Bagley III had season highs of 26 points and 13 rebounds to help host Sacramento beat Houston in the opener of a two-game set.

De'Aaron Fox added 27 points and eight assists, Buddy Hield scored 19 points and Harrison Barnes had 16 points and nine rebounds.

Christian Wood had 26 points for the Rockets.

The teams will meet again Sunday in Sacramento.

Pistons 103, Raptors 87: Trey Lyles scored 21 points, Cade Cunningham and Hamidou Diallo each added 18 and host Detroit beat Toronto.

The Pistons are 5-3 in 2022 after finishing 2021 with 18 losses in their last 19 games.

Fred VanVleet had 24 points and 10 assists for the Raptors.

No. 25 Illinois tops Michigan behind Frazier's effort

Associated Press

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Kofi Cockburn scored 21 points and hauled in 10 rebounds to help No. 25 Illinois over Michigan 68-53 on Friday night.

Both teams struggled from distance in a foul-plagued first half, combining to go 1-for-20 from three-point range.

DeVante' Jones led the Wolverines with 17 points on a 7-for-16 shooting clip, and was the only Michigan player to make a three on 10 attempts. Jones

brought the Wolverines back within six points with his jumper with 5:16 left, but from there, the Illini's Trent Frazier took over.

Frazier scored 16 points in the second half on 5-for-11 shooting, including a stretch where he scored 11 straight points for Illinois (13-3, 6-0 Big Ten). He finished with 18 points and seven assists, the latter a career high.

Michigan (7-7, 1-3) was without star center Hunter Dickin-

son due to an undisclosed medical issue, as well as guard Brandon Johns Jr.

No. 7 Purdue 92, Nebraska 65: Zach Edey scored 22 points and Jaden Ivey added 17 as the Boilermakers routed the visiting Cornhuskers.

Purdue (14-2, 3-2 Big Ten) has won two straight and six of its last seven. Coach Matt Painter also captured his 183rd victory in Big Ten play, which broke a tie with former Michigan State coach Jud Heathcote

for seventh in career wins among conference coaches.

Keisei Tominaga led Nebraska with 11 points. Alonzo Verge Jr. and C.J. Wilcher each had 10 points for the Cornhuskers (6-12, 0-7), who have lost five straight and 10 of 11 while dropping to 0-4 this season against ranked foes.

The Boilermakers opened the game on a 23-4 run, which took less than 7 1/2 minutes. Nebraska never recovered — or led.