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Pentagon probes civilian deaths in Syria

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Pentagon officials said Tuesday that they are investigating claims that anti-Islamic State coalition airstrikes killed dozens of Syrian civilians near a city where U.S.-backed rebels were attacking the terrorist group.

The Islamic State group controls Tokhar and Hoshariyeh, two northern Syrian villages where at least 56 civilians were killed in a series of strikes early Tuesday morning, according to the Syrian Observatory for

Human Rights, a Great Britain-based activist organization. Another activist group, the Turkey-based Syrian Institute for Justice, said Tuesday that more than 85 civilians had been killed in four aerial attacks on the towns.

The Defense Department was conducting a “credibility assessment” of the claims, according to Pentagon officials. They did not provide additional information.

The claims came just days after the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces captured the Islamic State group’s headquar-

ters in Manbij. Syrian Democratic Forces, which are mostly Kurdish, have worked for six weeks to capture the city, which serves as the terrorist group’s last supply route connecting its capital in Raqqa to Turkey and the outside world.

SDF, which the United States has said includes a sizable force of Arabs native to the Manbij area, captured a hospital in the western part of the city Sunday that served as the Islamic State’s command center and housing for at least some of its fighters.

Capturing the hospital “posed a significant challenge,” said

Matthew Allen, a DOD spokesman. Islamic State militants had heavily fortified the structure, but SDF and coalition commanders were limited in the amount of force that they could use because they intended to keep the building intact.

SDF has worked for several weeks to liberate the building, which they hope to quickly return to civilian health worker control.

The Islamic State group has held Manbij since January 2014. It has served as a key smuggling route for supplies and foreign fighters.

Concerns raised over US nukes in Turkey

The Washington Post

As Turkey spiraled into chaos late Friday during a military coup attempt, one of the concerns that emerged was particularly alarming: What was the status of nuclear weapons the United States keeps at Incirlik Air Base, the Turkish airfield from which the United States regularly launches airstrikes against the Islamic State group?

U.S. officials are loath to discuss the location of nuclear weapons, but Air Force budget documents state that “special weapons” are stored in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. That’s a delicate way of saying nuclear weapons, as Jeffrey Lewis, of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, pointed out Monday on Twitter.

“This is remarkable for avoiding the use of the word ‘nuclear.’ ‘Special weapons’ please,” he posted.

The “special weapons” are there as part of a nuclear-sharing agreement among NATO allies, including Turkey and the United States. The weap-

Day 4 of Incirlik outage

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Incirlik Air Base in Turkey continued on Tuesday to rely on generators for electricity, four days after Turkish authorities cut commercial power lines to the base following an attempted coup.

“Nothing has changed. Power is still out,” U.S. European Command spokesman Capt. Danny Hernandez said Tuesday.

It was unclear why Turkey had not restarted commercial power at Incirlik, a launching pad for U.S.

strikes against the Islamic State group.

The base continues to be resupplied and there is sufficient fuel to carry out the mission, EUCOM said, and there is no need for food or water rationing.

The U.S. military has not been able to explain why power has not been restored to the base, where a Turkish general and numerous soldiers were taken into custody Sunday amid allegations that they were part of the attempted coup.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

ons deal, reached in the 1960s, holds that some NATO allies will allow the storage of B61 nuclear gravity bombs on their land, while other countries will

commit to maintaining aircraft capable of delivering them, according to one NATO outline. The U.S. keeps possession of and provides security for the

bombs wherever they are.

The deal was reached to deter Soviet aggression, but also to create conditions under which NATO countries like Germany and Turkey would be disinclined to pursue their own nuclear programs.

NATO said in a 2014 position paper that the alliance’s nuclear weapons “are stored under highly secure conditions,” without specifying where they are. The merits of the nuclear-sharing deal have nonetheless long been argued by scholars, military officials and politicians, particularly when it comes to Turkey, where it is believed up to 90 are kept in storage.

Those in favor of the nuclear deal argue that it helps keep the military alliance together.

Critics of nuclear sharing in Turkey argue that the country’s instability make it a poor choice for nuclear weapons, especially as the country deals with an Islamist terrorism threat that has grown large enough that the U.S. sent home the family members of most diplomats and servicemembers earlier this year.

Melania Trump's speech lifted from Michelle Obama?

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — The Trump campaign on Tuesday dismissed criticism that Melania Trump directly lifted two passages nearly word-for-word from the speech that first lady Michelle Obama delivered in 2008 at the Democratic National Convention, calling the complaints “just absurd.”

“There’s no cribbing of Michelle Obama’s speech,” Paul Manafort, Trump’s campaign manager, said Tuesday morning in a CNN interview. “Certainly, there’s no feeling on her part that she did it,” he said. “What she did was use words that are common words.”

Melania Trump’s star turn at the Republican National Convention on Monday night captivated a GOP crowd that had rarely heard from the wife of Donald Trump. The passages in question focused on lessons that Trump’s wife says she learned from her parents and the relevance of their lessons in her experience as a mother.

Manafort said Melania Trump was aware of “how her speech was going to be scrutinized” and said any notion that she picked up portions of Michelle Obama’s convention talk was “just absurd.” He also tried to blame Hillary Clinton.

“I mean, this is, once again, an example of when a woman threatens Hillary Clinton, how she seeks out to demean her and take her down,” Manafort said. “It’s not going to work.”

The White House declined to comment on similarities between the two prime-time speeches.

The passages in question came near the beginning of Melania Trump’s roughly 10-minute speech. Her address was otherwise distinct from the address that Michelle Obama gave when then-Sen. Barack Obama was being nominated for president.

Chinese admiral rejects freedom of navigation

BY ERIK SLAVIN

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A senior Chinese admiral has rejected freedom of navigation for military ships, despite views held by the United States and most other nations that such access is codified by international law.

The comments by Adm. Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of China’s joint staff, come at a time when the U.S. Navy is particularly busy operating in the South China Sea, amid tensions over sea and territorial rights between China and many of its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region.

“When has freedom of navigation in the South China Sea ever been affected? It has not, whether in the past or now, and in the future there won’t be a problem as long as nobody plays tricks,” Sun said at a closed forum in Beijing on Saturday, according to a transcript obtained by Reuters.

“But China consistently opposes so-called military freedom of navigation, which brings with it a military threat and which challenges and disrespects the international law of the sea,” Sun said.

International authorities contest both of Sun’s points.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled July 12 that “Chinese law enforcement vessels had unlawfully created a serious risk of collision when they physically obstructed Philippine vessels.”

The PCA decision, part of a Philippine case three years in the making, ruled against China on 14 of 15 claims related to the South China Sea. It also ruled that China’s claim to exclusive, “historic rights”

to nearly 90 percent of the area violates the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea.

China has stated that it will ignore the court decision, despite a clause within UNCLOS — which China has ratified — that binds it to the ruling.

The U.S. has conducted freedom-of-navigation operations close to submerged reefs that China has topped with landfill, military-grade runways, radar and weaponry. The PCA ruled that some of the artificial islands are not claimable as land.

“This kind of military freedom of navigation is damaging to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and it could even play out in a disastrous way,” Sun added without elaborating, according to Reuters.

More than \$5 trillion in trade transits the South China Sea annually. About \$1.2 trillion of that is U.S. trade, according to Census Bureau statistics.

Freedom of navigation for all ships is an “overarching interest” reflected in several parts of the sea treaty, Navy Cmdr. Jonathan Odom, a law professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, wrote in March. Odom cited a supporting speech by Singaporean diplomat Tommy Koh, who served as the UNCLOS conference president during the past three years of negotiations.

About 75 percent of the ships homeported at the 7th Fleet’s headquarters in Yokosuka are at sea. Several of them, including the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, are in the South China Sea.

Sun’s remarks came shortly before Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson met with China naval chief Adm. Wu Shengli in Beijing on Monday.

US offers inside look at THAAD to reassure S. Koreans

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE, Guam — The U.S. military offered a rare glimpse of an advanced missile defense battery in a bid to help the South Korean government convince its populace that the system is safe and vital to security on the peninsula.

Washington and Seoul agreed to deploy a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense system, known as THAAD, in a mountainous region southeast of Seoul to counter a

growing missile threat from North Korea. But critics, especially residents of Seongju county where the system will be based, fear the unit’s powerful radar will harm health, the environment and the economy.

Unable to assuage the concerns, South Korean and U.S. officials decided to try putting a friendly face on the system.

At the request of the government in Seoul, the U.S. military took a group of Korea-based reporters, including one from Stars and Stripes, on a tour Monday of the only forward-deployed THAAD system,

set up on the U.S. territory of Guam just over two years ago.

“North Korea poses a threat to South Korea, as they do to us here in Guam,” Rear Adm. Bette Bolivar, commander of Joint Region Marianas, said in a briefing. “THAAD is one of those tools that continues to keep us safe.”

The military also said all THAAD deployment sites conformed to the most conservative standards for radar emission exposure and were verified by the U.S. Missile Defense Agency.

IOC seeks legal advice on banning Russia from Rio

Associated Press

LONDON — International Olympic officials will “explore the legal options” for a potential total ban on Russia from the games in Rio de Janeiro, and are taking measures to punish athletes and officials involved in the state-run doping conspiracy.

The IOC executive board announced steps Tuesday following a scathing report by a World Anti-Doping Agency investigator who accused Russia’s sports ministry of overseeing doping of the country’s athletes across 28 Olympic sports.

WADA and other anti-doping officials urged the IOC to consider the unprecedented step of excluding the entire Russian contingent from the Rio Games. The International Olympic Committee stopped short of supporting such a move, but didn’t rule it out either.

First, the IOC said, it will “carefully evaluate” the report issued on Monday by Canadian lawyer Richard McLaren, who listed 20 summer sports as being part of systematic cheating in Russia, and confirmed the manipulation of Russian doping samples at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi.

The IOC “will explore the legal options with regard to a collective ban of all

Russian athletes for the Olympic Games 2016 versus the right to individual justice,” the 15-member ruling executive board said in a statement following a meeting by teleconference.

The IOC noted that it will have to take into account a decision coming on Thursday from the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which will rule on Russia’s appeal against the ban on its track and field athletes from Rio. That ban was imposed in November by the IAAF and upheld last month.

Meantime, the IOC said it has started disciplinary action against Russian sports ministry officials and others implicated in McLaren’s report, including denial of accreditation for the Rio Games.

The IOC also:

- Said it will not organize “or give patronage” to any sports event or meetings in Russia, including plans to hold the European Games in the country in 2019.

- Will launch retesting, including forensic analysis, of doping samples from the Sochi Games. Moscow’s former doping lab director, Grigory Rodchenkov, said dirty samples of Russian athletes — including gold medalists — were swapped out in the middle of the night for clean samples, with the help of Russian intelligence service officials.

- Set up a commission to carry out a

“full inquiry” into all of the Russian athletes who competed in Sochi, along with their coaches, officials, and support staff.

- Asked WADA to extend McLaren’s mandate to disclose the names of Russian athletes whose positive doping samples were covered up, and whose samples were manipulated in Sochi.

- Called on all international winter sports federations to “freeze” their plans for holding major events in Russia, including world championships and World Cups, and to seek alternative venues in other countries.

The IOC said the “provisional measures” would apply until Dec. 31, and be reviewed by the IOC that month.

Earlier Tuesday, summer Olympic sports federations made clear they do not support a blanket ban on Russia for Rio, and prefer doping was handled on an individual basis.

The Association of Summer Olympic International Federation asked WADA “to immediately provide all the detailed information to the 20 international federations concerned so that they may begin processing the individual cases under their own separate rules and regulations as soon as possible, and in line with the WADA Code and the Olympic Charter.

Grobe has tough task at Baylor

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Jim Grobe has a master’s degree in counseling that comes in handy dealing with athletes on and off the field.

Yet, Baylor’s acting head coach knows that doesn’t qualify him to handle issues such as domestic violence and sexual assault.

“We coach and we recruit,” Grobe said. “That’s our expertise. That’s what we do.”

The 64-year-old Grobe had put in 19 years as a head coach in the Bowl Subdivision and just two months ago was semi-retired, living in a lakeside home with plans for Hawaiian trips and cruises with his wife. Now he is back in the spotlight and then some, leading a Baylor program reeling from allegations that it didn’t properly handle claims of sexual misconduct against some of its players in the past.

Grobe’s task is seemingly immense: He has to help the Bears move forward from scandal — lawsuits against the world’s largest Baptist university are still pending — and keep Baylor among the top teams in the Big 12, one that was on the verge of the first College Football Playoff two seasons ago and still in that mix late last year. But Grobe said the players and staff have to “focus on, first and foremost, our character and integrity.”

When Grobe arrived in late May, within days after two-time Big 12 champion coach Art Briles was dismissed following the release of a scathing report, the former Wake Forest coach found a Baylor team that was discouraged, sad and embarrassed. He has discovered something much more encouraging during his short time on campus.

“The thing that I think’s gone unnoticed is how many great kids that we have here,” Grobe said. “That’s been a real pleasant surprise for me, because when you first come into this situation, all of the outside seem to think that we were a program rife with aggressive kids and kids that were kind of out of control, and that’s not the case at all. We’ve got a great group of kids.”

Still, the Bears, who have won 50 games the past five seasons, are down to about 70 scholarship players. That includes only about half of Baylor’s highly touted spring signing class of 22 players; six were eventually released from their letters of intent without enrolling and three others left after going through spring practice. Then backup sophomore quarterback Jarrett Stidham decided this month that he was leaving.

Grobe has a reputation of unimpeachable character and running clean programs. He has been a coach most of the past four decades, serving as head coach at Ohio (1995-2000) and Wake Forest (2001-13) before being away from coaching the past two seasons.

The Bears open the season Sept. 2 at home against Northwestern State.

NCAA: Top No. 1 seed will pick location

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NCAA says the top overall seed in the men’s NCAA Tournament will be able to pick its location to play for the first and second round and regional sites.

The Division I Men’s Basketball Committee decided the geographic preferences would be made by teams in contention for the overall No. 1 seed far in advance of Selection Sunday. There is no indication whether the preferences will be guaranteed.

Teams will be able to choose from eight assigned cities for the first and second round.

The eight cities hosting the first- and second-round games in 2017 are Buffalo, Milwaukee, Orlando, Salt Lake City, Greensboro, Indianapolis, Tulsa and Sacramento.

Tillman, longtime Bear, retiring after 13 seasons

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Longtime Chicago Bears cornerback Charles Tillman is retiring from the NFL after 13 seasons.

The 35-year-old Tillman, known for his “peanut punch” after forcing 44 career fumbles, spent his first 12 seasons with the Bears and went to two Pro Bowls.

He started 12 games last season with the Carolina Panthers before suffering a season-ending knee injury and missing the team’s run to the Super Bowl. Carolina didn’t attempt to re-sign him.

Ex-wrestlers sue WWE over head injuries

HARTFORD, Conn. — More than 50 former professional wrestlers sued World Wrestling Entertainment Inc., saying the company is responsible for repeated head trauma including concussions they suffered in the ring that led to long-term neurological damage.

Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka, Joseph “Road Warrior Animal” Laurinaitis and Paul “Mr. Wonderful” Orndorff are among the plaintiffs who filed the lawsuit Monday in federal court in Connecticut. The lawsuit also names WWE chairman Vince McMahon as a defendant.

The plaintiffs say they suffered concussions and other head trauma that resulted

in long-term brain damage.

Unlike other sports including football and hockey where players have suffered similar injuries, WWE wrestling matches involve specific moves scripted and choreographed by the WWE — thus making the company directly responsible for wrestlers’ injuries, according to the lawsuit.

The National Football League and National Hockey League were also sued by former players who suffered concussions and other head injuries. The NFL settled for \$1 billion, while the suit against the NHL is pending.

Ohio State RB off team for violating rules

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio State said its most experienced running back has been kicked off the team for violating the rules.

Coach Urban Meyer said in a statement that fifth-year senior Bri’onte Dunn has been dismissed for violating team rules. The statement didn’t specify what Dunn is accused of doing.

The 23-year-old from Canton was expected to compete for the starting running back position vacated by Ezekiel Elliott.



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Chapman throws 105 mph

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Alex Rodriguez finally has his best swing, the Yankees' No Runs DMC bullpen trio is rolling and they're all trying to keep the band together.

Rodriguez hit his 696th career homer, Ivan Nova grinded through six innings and the Yankees' bullpen triad closed up shop for the second straight game to help New York beat the Baltimore Orioles 2-1 on Monday night.

Aroldis Chapman got his 19th save. He threw five pitches of 104 mph or higher, reaching 105.1 on his sixth pitch to J.J. Hardy — the fastest pitch in the majors since MLB's Statcast system began measuring in 2015.

"He's just such an outlier," Miller said. Chapman's last pitch was 104.9. He got Ryan Flaherty out on a grounder with a runner on first — the bouncing ball hit part of Flaherty's shattered bat in the

middle of the diamond before being easily handled.

New York (46-46) pulled within 7½ games of first-place Baltimore in the AL East. It's on a 10-game homestand that could determine whether the Yankees are buyers or sellers at the Aug. 1 deadline.

"We definitely want to keep all the guys around and keep this together," Rodriguez said.

Nova (7-5) needed 60 pitches to get through three but allowed just a solo homer to Jonathan Schoop. He handed a 2-1 lead over to New York's bullpen troika of Dellin Betances, Andrew Miller and Aroldis Chapman.

No Runs DMC, possibly in its final days with Miller and Chapman rumored to be on the trade block, covered the final three innings to extend its scoreless streak to 22 innings. The Yankees are 18-1 when all three relievers pitch in the same game.

Nova had a 6.93 ERA in his past five

starts but was coming off 10 days' rest.

"I worry when he has a lot of extra rest because he's a sinkerballer," manager Joe Girardi said. "It took him about three innings really to find his command, and he was really good after that."

After New York failed to score in the first inning for the 22nd consecutive game, Rodriguez turned on a 2-0 fastball from Kevin Gausman for his ninth home run leading off the second.

The 40-year-old Rodriguez was making his fourth straight start coming out of the All-Star break, going 1-for-10 in the first three games. Since his last homer on June 18, he'd gone 10-for-50.

Yankees outfielder Carlos Beltran said it looked like A-Rod got back his "A-swing" on the homer.

"It's been a struggle," Rodriguez said. "I've been really bad this year. I've been working my butt off and I just haven't been able to figure it out."

Royals rally, top Indians

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Once Corey Kluber limped to the trainer's room, the Kansas City Royals broke loose against the Cleveland bullpen.

Jarrod Dyson hit a grand slam that capped a seven-run rally in the eighth inning and the Royals took advantage after Kluber cramped up, topping the Indians 7-3 Monday night.

Kluber scattered five hits and took the mound to begin the eighth with a 2-0 lead. But manager Terry Francona and trainer James Quinlan came from the dugout and pulled Kluber before he could throw a pitch.

Kluber was suffering from a right calf cramp with the temperature at 90 degrees and the heat index 99 at the start of the game.

"I don't think cramps are serious, but I don't know how he's going to push off the rubber," Francona said.

With Kluber out, the Royals roughed up relievers Bryan Shaw and Jeff Manship. Alcides Escobar and Eric Hosmer began the eighth with singles and both scored on Christian Colon's pinch-hit double.

Colon hit for Kendrys Morales, who had fouled a pitch off his right foot. X-rays were negative, detecting only a bruise. Colon squared around to bunt on the first two pitches, both balls. Colon then drove the next pitch to deep center tying it at 2.

With two outs, Shaw (1-4) walked Alex Gordon and Cheslor Cuthbert. Manship was summoned to face Paulo Orlando, who hit a go-ahead single. Whit Merrifield walked to load the bases before Dyson cleared them with his first career grand slam and first home run of the season.

"I let the whole team down," Manship said. "I let Corey down, Brian down, giving up his runs. That stinks, for sure. I definitely feel sick to my stomach for how that went."

Cubs 5, Mets 1: Anthony Rizzo hit a three-run homer, Jon Lester pitched 7²/₃ innings and Chicago stopped an eight-game losing streak against New York.

Marlins 3, Phillies 2 (11): Jose Fernandez tied a career-high with 14 strikeouts, and Martin Prado hit a solo homer off Brett Oberholzer (2-2) in the 11th for visiting Florida.

Tigers 1, Twins 0: Matt Boyd (1-2) allowed three hits in six innings, sending last-place visitor Minnesota to another loss just hours after it announced the firing of general manager Terry Ryan.

Reds 8, Braves 2: Zack Cozart, Joey Votto and Eugenio Suarez all homered in the fourth inning for host Cincinnati in a matchup between the NL's two worst teams.

Cardinals 10, Padres 2: Mike Leake (7-7) had his second straight double-digit strikeouts game with no walks, joining Bob Gibson (1968-69) as the only St. Louis pitcher to accomplish the feat, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. Leake struck out a season-best 11.

Athletics 7, Astros 4: Yonder Alonso drove in three runs with a pair of two-out hits to back Kendall Graveman's fifth consecutive win for host Oakland.

Angels 9, Rangers 5: Mike Trout hit a three-run homer to help host Los Angeles rally from four runs down.

Rockies 7, Rays 4: Trevor Story hit a two-run homer in the fifth while Colorado's bullpen stranded the tying run on third in two straight innings as the Rockies held off visiting Tampa Bay.

Mariners spoil gem by Chisox's Sale

Associated Press

SEATTLE — One swing by Mariners pinch-hitter Adam Lind erased a masterful performance by White Sox ace Chris Sale, who could only watch from the dugout.

Lind hit a three-run homer off closer David Robertson in the ninth inning to give Seattle an improbable 4-3 comeback victory on Monday night and hand Chicago its fifth consecutive loss.

Seattle, which had managed just one hit in eight innings off Sale, rallied against Robertson (0-2), who had recorded 13 straight save opportunities.

Franklin Gutierrez singled to open the ninth, but was forced out at second on Robinson Cano's fielder's choice. Nelson Cruz walked and Dae-Ho Lee struck out.

Kyle Seager followed with an RBI single to center to make it 3-1. Lind pinch-hit for Chris Iannetta and hammered an 0-1 pitch over the wall in right-center for his 14th home run.

"I knew I hit it well and I hit it true, with the backspin," Lind said. "But no, to answer your question, I didn't know if I had enough, but it carried out."

Sale, bidding to become the first 15-game winner in the majors, allowed just a first-inning single en route to eight scoreless innings.

"He did what an ace does," Robertson said. "He went eight innings, didn't give up any runs, and I went in there and just blew it. I pitched poorly. I gave up hits, I walked guys and I didn't get the job done. It's pathetic on my part."

"It was supposed to be a cutter away,"

he said. "It just ended up right down the middle and he put it in the seats."

Tim Anderson and Todd Frazier homered to account for all of the runs for the White Sox.

Sale gave up a one-out single in the first to Gutierrez, who was erased on a double play. Sale walked Leonys Martin in the third and then did not allow another runner until tiring in the seventh.

Sale hit Gutierrez and Lee with pitches in the seventh, but escaped by striking out Seager to end the inning.

Iannetta walked to open the eighth, but also was doubled up. Sean O'Malley then walked, but Sale enticed Daniel Robertson into an inning-ending force out.

Sale, tied for the AL lead with three complete games, struck out six and walked one before being lifted after 100 pitches.

Strasburg back to pre-injury dominance

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Watching Stephen Strasburg on the mound in 90-degree heat, Washington Nationals manager Dusty Baker recalled how he heard the right-hander would "wilt" in these situations.

Nothing about Strasburg's outing against the Pittsburgh Pirates on Friday night, or any other opponent this season, has resembled wilting. Strasburg is the first National League starting pitcher to begin a season 13-0 in more than 100 years, a recapturing of the dominance he showed early in his career before Tommy John surgery.

Strasburg has won 16 consecutive decisions dating back to September and during that stretch has struck out 182 batters and walked 37. This season his 2.51 ERA is sixth in the majors, and his command of his pitches is reflected in the numbers.

"In my opinion this has been the best year I've seen him pitch," catcher Wilson Ramos said through an interpreter. "He's been very effective attacking the zone, keeping the ball down. He's been hitting his spots very well with all his pitches. Usually a starter that attacks the zone like that and doesn't miss his spots very much will usually have success like he's been having."

Mixing his overpowering fastball with a cutter, curveball and change-up, Strasburg has thrown an impressive 66.4 percent of his pitches for strikes this season, and yet batters are hitting .195 against him with only 11 home runs in 17 starts.

Perhaps the most impressive number is the zero in the loss column.

"He hasn't lost," Pirates manager Clint Hurdle said. "That's pretty hard to do up here. It's in late July and he hasn't lost a game. Whatever he's doing, he's probably going to continue it."

Strasburg's 13 victories to open a season are tied with teammate Max Scherzer and Ron Guidry as the sixth-longest streak in major league history and mark the longest in the NL for a starter since Rube Marquard of the New York Giants went 18-0 in 1912.

Asked if this felt like a 13-0 season, the 27-year-old didn't know how to answer.

"The results, I can't control," said Strasburg, who signed a \$175 million, seven-year contract extension in May. "I'm trying to go out there and execute pitches and roll with the highs and lows. It's always going to be that way. You ask any veteran pitcher in the league, there are years where they feel like they really dominated all year and just didn't have the numbers to show for it and there are other years where they feel like they really didn't pitch to the level they expected and they had all the numbers to show for it."

There are tangible explanations for Strasburg's numbers, and Baker said it starts off the field. The veteran baseball man said the Nationals' staff urged Strasburg to increase his work between starts.

After an injury-filled 2015 that included a strained left trapezius muscle, a strained oblique and other tweaks that had little to do with pitching, Strasburg changed his workout approach. He may not work out more, but he does it differently.

"As I've gotten older it's not trying to go out there and lift the house in the weight room," Strasburg said. "I think I've just been trying to get back to square one, ready for the next start. Throwing that many pitches, doing that over and over again, it kind of takes a beating on your body, so we're just trying to work with the training staff and identify what areas I need to work on to get feeling good for the next one."

Strasburg missed two weeks this season with an upper-back strain, but that didn't slow him down. Since returning from the disabled list July 3, he has allowed just two earned runs on five hits and struck out 20 in 21 2/3 innings.

Some of that dominance is mental, according to Ramos, who said Strasburg had the tendency in previous years to get down when things didn't go his way or the defense let him down. Ramos has talked to Strasburg extensively about letting his pitches work and the defense take care of things.