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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US participates in WMD drills at sea

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

ABOARD THE JS MURASAME — Sailors from the destroyer USS Milius joined Japanese and South Korean forces in a practice search for weapons of mass destruction materials south of Tokyo Bay on Wednesday.

The U.S. sailors took turns with their allies deploying search crews to investigate a private cargo ship.

A team of 13 Japanese sailors from the destroyer JS Murasame kicked off the day-long drills, which were part of the Pacific Shield 2018 exercise. The crew climbed aboard a small, rubber boat and sped up to the cargo vessel within minutes.

One by one, the sailors climbed up from the boat using a rope ladder dropped down the side of the cargo ship.

Donning Kevlar helmets and ballistic vests, they moved about the suspect ship. From more than a mile away, they looked like ants infiltrating each area of the ship

above and below deck.

Ultimately, they discovered a “suspicious box” and asked the ship’s crewmembers whether they knew about its presence, a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force spokesman said.

Afterward, the team again piled into the small boat and headed back to the Murasame so the Milius sailors and a team of South Korean sailors embarked on the U.S. ship could take a turn.

The JMSDF spokesman said the scenario’s procedures could be used if a ship within Japanese waters was suspected of carrying WMDs.

The U.S., Japan and South Korea are part of the United Nations’ 17-member Proliferation Security Initiative group, which agrees to inspect “shipments on vessels with the consent of the flag State on the high seas” if there are “reasonable grounds” to believe the cargo contains prohibited items related to WMDs, according to a statement by the group.

If a suspected ship’s country refuses an at-sea inspection, the ship must pull into a nearby port for a required inspection.

The participating countries also practiced communications as they navigated around one another during the exercises. A Japanese sailor embarked on the Milius to communicate happenings back to the Murasame, the JMSDF spokesman said.

A Philippine Navy observer also embarked aboard Murasame.

The USS Milius is the most recent ship to join the Navy’s 7th Fleet after transferring to Yokosuka earlier this summer.

The 7th Fleet remains down two guided-missile destroyers, as the USS Fitzgerald and USS John S. McCain continue undergoing repairs after suffering separate, fatal collisions last year.

The JS Murasame is also homeported at the JMSDF’s Yokosuka base.

Pacific Shield 2018 will continue Thursday with drills by the JMSDF and the U.S., Philippine and Thai navies.

Qatar plans improvements to base used by US military

The Washington Post

Qatar will spend \$1.8 billion upgrading the major air base used by the U.S. for its ongoing military and counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf kingdom says.

Expansion of the base, which houses about 10,000 U.S. military personnel, will include new family housing facilities for more than 200 officers and other infrastructure enlargements, along with “operational” improvements, Defense Minister Khaled Mohammed al-Attiyah said in an interview.

The improvements, which were announced this week, were previewed this year in meetings between Attiyah and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. They come as Qatar and its gulf rivals, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are in the midst of a deep regional dispute and competing for closer relations with the United States.

Last summer, fresh from a triumphant visit to Saudi Arabia, President Donald Trump sided with the Saudis and Emiratis

when they broke relations with Qatar and accused it of ties to terrorism. By fall, however, Trump backed off after Mattis and then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that it was unwise to take sides in what was a long-standing rivalry and reminded him of U.S. military interests in Qatar.

Since then, he has repeatedly called on them to mend their differences and offered to mediate. Last April, when Trump hosted a visit by Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar was described as a “valued partner and longtime friend” that provided “critical support” for operations against Islamic State.

Qatar is also viewed as a major donor to administration plans to provide development assistance to Gaza and the West Bank as part of a still-unrevealed U.S. plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Qatar is a major customer for the U.S. defense industry, including last year’s purchase of \$12 billion worth of F-15s. “We have bought a lot of military equipment from the U.S.

so we can fly hand in hand with our partners,” Attiya said.

He dismissed any notion of regional rivalry, saying that Qatar is “not very much interested in rivalry” but rather was interested in “the stability of the region.”

According to a background statement from the Qatar government, the contract for 36 F-15 fighter jets “supports 50,000 total jobs and more than 550 suppliers in 42 states.” Other recent purchases include \$20 million worth of Javelin guided missiles, \$700 million in logistics support services and equipment, and an estimated \$200 million in weapons systems “which support the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States.”

But the centerpiece of U.S.-Qatar ties is Al Udeid Air Base, home to scores of aircraft, including fighters, bombers, tankers and reconnaissance planes.

The base is key to U.S. military efforts in the Middle East and has played a central role in the Pentagon’s air campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Lawmakers: Deal will help pass NDAA on time

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A panel of House and Senate lawmakers on Monday reached a deal on a massive defense policy bill that includes a 2.6 percent pay raise for servicemembers and an increase in troops, equipment and weapons for the Defense Department.

Senate and House Armed Services Committee staffers, who spoke with reporters on the condition of anonymity, said Monday that the National Defense Authorization Act, or H.R. 2810, will also address a series of other matters, including the next step in creating a space force and authorization for a military parade in November.

The House began debating the negotiated deal, known as the NDAA conference report, Monday night. The effort could draw a vote in the lower chamber as early as this week.

“This legislation will strengthen our military’s readiness, provide our troops a pay raise, support effective implementation of the National Defense Strategy, drive further innovation in emerging technologies to secure our military advantage and continue to reform the Department of Defense,” Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz.;

Jack Reed, D-R.I.; and Jim Inhofe, R-Okla. — respectively, the chairman, ranking Democratic member and a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee — and Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said in a joint statement Monday.

The move signals the 2019 defense bill remains on track for on-time passage by Oct. 1, the start of the new fiscal year.

With a two-year spending deal that lifts budget caps already in place, midterm elections this fall and a more experienced administration, lawmakers are eager to pass the 2019 NDAA earlier than in recent years. Earlier this year, a budget deal allowed Congress to increase defense spending to \$716 billion for 2019.

This month, House and Senate lawmakers met in conference committee to hash out differences in their versions of the next NDAA, which directs policy and spending plans for DOD. Both chambers passed their own version of the plan with 2.6 percent pay raises for servicemembers, the largest increase in nine years. Both versions also included troop increases; purchases of aircraft, ships, submarines and weapons; and new policy initiatives.

Vet diagnosed with mental illness arraigned in killing

The San Diego Union-Tribune

An Oceanside, Calif., man with a diagnosed mental illness bought a gun legally two months ago, then emptied the five-shooter into a woman who lived downstairs last week, a prosecutor alleged on Tuesday.

After the ambush killing Friday, detectives found the 24-year-old victim’s name — as well as two others’ names — scrawled in ink on the radiator tank under the hood of the accused shooter’s brand new Toyota. They also found the words “rest in peace” and references to the Quran, Deputy District Attorney Keith Watanabe said.

The prosecutor’s detailed account of the apparently unprovoked killing of Devon Rideout came during an arraignment for former Marine Cpl. Eduardo Arriola, 25. He is accused of gunning down Rideout, a Navy corpsman, shortly before 4 p.m. Friday at their apartment complex.

Arriola pleaded not guilty to murder and a special circum-

stance allegation of lying in wait — an allegation that means he faces life in prison or the possibility of execution if convicted.

Arriola, who was reportedly attending a community college, lived with his family in the apartment above the victim, Watanabe said. There is no indication that Rideout and the defendant had any sort of relationship.

According to the Marine Corps, Arriola joined the military in 2011. His job in the military was aircraft technician.

Arriola, who had no deployments, was discharged last September. The Marine Corps was not able to say what sort of discharge Arriola was given.

Watanabe said Tuesday that Arriola had deserted the military in 2016, fleeing to Mexico. In 2017, he returned to the U.S., turned himself in and was arrested by the military, the prosecutor said. He also said Arriola’s diagnosis of schizophrenia was made after his return from Mexico.

Army’s oversight of \$429M Afghan contract found lacking

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

The Army doesn’t know if it got what it paid for on a contract in Afghanistan because officials didn’t properly review nearly \$78 million in invoices for maintenance work, a Pentagon watchdog found in an audit released Wednesday.

The inspector general audit of the Enhanced Army Global Logistics Enterprise-Afghanistan contract, which covered vehicle and weapons maintenance, found that poor over-

sight had left the Army without “reasonable assurance” that the contractor met critical requirements or provided services commensurate with what it billed.

Awarded to AC First LLC in August 2016 and valued at \$429 million, the cost-plus-fixed-fee contract provides maintenance services on armored vehicles and weapons throughout Afghanistan, including on Bagram and Kandahar airfields. As of May, the Army had paid out close to \$78 million on the contract.

The contract offers minimal incentive for contractors to control costs and normally requires added oversight, the audit said.

Fees could have been reduced if the work failed to meet requirements, but auditors found that officials failed to gather necessary feedback on the contractor’s performance.

“Specifically, (the contracting officer’s representatives) did not identify that the customers were not satisfied with the contractor’s maintenance turnaround time and expressed

concerns about the operational readiness capability,” the report said.

In one example, a maintenance officer told auditors he didn’t always turn in his unit’s vehicles for regular maintenance because of extended wait times that would leave him with fewer vehicles available for missions.

Three units that auditors met with said vehicles sat awaiting final inspection for up to 10 days, even though all repairs had been completed.

Court upholds right to carry gun in public

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A federal appeals court ruled Tuesday that the Second Amendment protects the right to openly carry a gun in public for self-defense.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled 2-1 that Hawaii officials had violated George Young's rights when he was denied a permit to openly carry a loaded gun in public to protect himself.

The decision reversed a lower court ruling that sided with officials who said the amendment applied only to guns kept in homes.

"We do not take lightly the problem of gun violence, which the State of Hawaii has understandably sought to fight," Judge Diarmuid O'Scannlain wrote. "But, for better or for worse, the Second Amendment does protect a right to carry a firearm in public for self-defense."

If the ruling stands, it could lead to more guns in public in the few western states under 9th Circuit jurisdiction where they

are currently restricted.

"States like Hawaii and California will have to allow far more guns on the streets than they do today," said Adam Winkler, a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. "States would be able to ban concealed carry but only if they allow people to carry their guns openly displayed."

Winkler, however, expects the decision to be appealed to a full panel of the San Francisco-based court.

Tuesday's ruling comes two years after a full panel of the 9th Circuit ruled that there's no right to carry concealed guns in public. That June 2016 ruling struck down a 2-1 panel opinion that was also written by O'Scannlain.

Gun rights is one of the most hotly debated issues in U.S. political and legal circles with any loosening or restriction of access to guns often leading to a court battle. The U.S. Supreme Court has shied away from firearms fights in recent years, turning away challenges to restrictions after strik-

ing down gun ownership bans in the District of Columbia and Chicago in 2008 and 2010.

Judge Richard Clifton suggested in his dissent that the Supreme Court will likely settle the issue because several conflicting appeals decisions now show "there is no single voice on this question."

Clifton, who like the other judges on the panel was nominated to the court by a Republican president, criticized the majority for going "astray in several respects" and disregarding that states such as Hawaii have long regulated and limited the public carrying of guns, which he said did not undermine the core of the Second Amendment.

Attorney Alan Beck, who represented Young, said Hawaii County never issued a carry permit in 20 years. Young, a Vietnam veteran who spent 21 years in the infantry, couldn't find anyone to represent him in his case and wasn't even allowed to argue his case in a lower court.

Trump discusses payment to model on recording

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Two months before the 2016 election, Donald Trump and his former lawyer discussed plans to pay for a former Playboy model's story of an alleged affair, according to a secretly recorded tape of the conversation released Tuesday amid an escalating feud between the president and his longtime personal attorney.

The audio recording, surreptitiously made by Trump's former personal lawyer Michael Cohen, appears to contradict the Trump campaign's later claim that Trump knew nothing about payments to a media company to keep model Karen McDougal's story from becoming public. The tape captures the soon-to-be president and his law-

yer discussing logistics of financing and whether to "pay with cash," although the sound is muffled and Trump's instructions on that are unclear. Lawyers for the two men disputed what was said.

The tape was provided to CNN on Tuesday by Cohen's attorney, Lanny Davis, and signals a new level of open hostility between the president and the man who once described himself as Trump's fixer.

Cohen, who is under federal investigation for potential bank fraud and campaign finance violations, has shown a growing willingness to reveal damaging information, and Davis said Tuesday that Cohen "will someday speak the truth about Donald Trump."

The taped conversation between Trump and Cohen came weeks after the National Enquirer's parent company reached a \$150,000 deal to pay McDougal for her story of a 2006 affair, which it never published, a tabloid practice known as catch and kill.

The men appear to be discussing buying the rights to McDougal's story from the Enquirer's parent company. Trump's lawyers say the payments were never made.

Cohen can be heard on the tape saying that he needed to start a company "for the transfer of all of that info regarding our friend David," a possible reference to David Pecker, Trump's friend and president of the National Enquirer's parent company, American Media Inc.

Georgia lawmaker who used racial slur on TV to resign

Associated Press

ATLANTA — A Georgia lawmaker will resign after exposing himself and yelling racial slurs on provocateur Sacha Baron Cohen's cable TV show, a spokesman for House Speaker David Ralston said.

Rep. Jason Spencer had vowed to serve out his term despite the fallout. Now he'll step down at month's end, spokesman Kaleb McMichen told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution late Tuesday.

tution late Tuesday.

In Sunday night's broadcast of Cohen's Showtime series "Who Is America?" Cohen poses as an Israeli military expert who persuades Spencer to take part in several outlandish exercises. The lawmaker is told they're making a counterterrorism video.

Spencer repeatedly shouts a racial slur for black people after Cohen tells him the tactic is useful for drawing bystanders' attention to an unfolding attack.

He also drops his pants, then his underwear, before backing his exposed rear end toward Cohen while shouting "USA!" and "America!" Cohen told Spencer this would incite fear in homophobic jihadis.

In a statement Monday, Spencer apologized for the "ridiculously ugly episode," but he initially refused to step down.

Spencer lost the Republican primary in May, but he could have remained in public office through the November election.

Scores killed in Syria bombings, fighting

From wire reports

DAMASCUS, Syria — At least 156 people were killed Wednesday in a series of suicide attacks and fighting in Syria's southern city of Sweida and surrounding areas, a monitoring group said.

"Among the killed were 62 civilians, the rest were pro-government fighters and villagers who died while fighting the attacking Islamic State militants," the head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdel Rahman, told dpa.

He added that ISIS lost 38 militants, including the four suicide bombers.

"This is the highest toll to take place in Sweida province," the watchdog said.

It added that 210 people were wounded in the attacks.

Unconfirmed reports said that ISIS militants managed to kidnap some people in

areas where fighting was taking place outside the city.

According to the observatory, four suicide bombers blew up their explosives in different areas across Sweida, a pro-government city in southern Syria.

Fighting between the extremist group and government forces in countryside areas northeast of the city also continued, with militants seizing three villages.

The Sweida News Network quoted health authorities on its Facebook page as saying that the attacks killed at least 50 civilians and wounded 78 others in the city and its countryside.

ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks and said its jihadis killed 100 "apostates."

"The soldiers of the caliphate launched an attack on security and government posts

inside the city of Sweida," a statement by the group said. It added that dozens were wounded in the attack.

Local residents told dpa the blasts could be felt throughout the city.

"People were in panic, but now the situation is calm, and security authorities have set up checkpoints across the city," a resident in Sweida said.

Sweida Gov. Amer al-Eshi told the state-run Ikhbariyah television that "the city of Sweida is secure and calm now."

However, there were conflicting reports, as the state news agency SANA reported that security personnel chased at least two suicide attackers and killed them before they could blow themselves up.

The observatory said 21 members of ISIS were killed in Sweida city and surrounding areas, including four suicide bombers.

2 Americans transferred from Syria for prosecution

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Two U.S. citizens, charged in separate cases with federal violations, have been transferred from the custody of the Syrian Democratic Forces to the United States, the Justice Department announced Tuesday.

Ibraheem Izzy Musaibli, 28, of Dearborn, Mich., faces charges of providing and attempting to provide material support to Islamic State. He was scheduled to be arraigned Wednesday in federal court in Detroit.

Samantha Elhassani, 32, of Elkhart, Ind., faces lesser charges of making false statements to the FBI. Elhassani, who also

goes by Samantha Sally, was charged in the Northern District of Indiana.

Ryan Holmes, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Hammond, said Elhassani was advised Wednesday of the charge against her and is due back in court Thursday for a hearing to determine if she'll have a private attorney or public defender.

The charges against Musaibli, unsealed Tuesday, reflect a willingness to use the criminal justice system to prosecute defendants captured on the battlefield overseas by an administration that has voiced skepticism about using the federal courts in foreign terrorism cases.

The decision to prosecute the individuals in federal courts also is an indicator of

widespread reluctance among government officials to add new cases to the military commissions used to try prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. That system has been plagued by a series of scandals and delays, and even suspects held in connection with the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks have not yet faced trial.

Musaibli was detained by the Kurdish-dominated SDF, the United States' main ally in Syria in the fight to defeat ISIS. The indictment alleges that from April 2015 through June, Musaibli provided material support "in the form of personnel (namely, himself)" to ISIS, "knowing that ISIS was a designated foreign terrorist organization."

In Greece, rescue crews search for missing in wildfires

Associated Press

MATI, Greece — Rescue crews were searching Wednesday through charred homes and cars for those still missing after the deadliest wildfires to hit Greece in decades decimated seaside areas near Athens, killing at least 79 people and sending thousands fleeing.

There was no official indication as to how many people might be missing, and some took to social media and Greek television stations with appeals for information on their loved ones.

Survivors described dramatic scenes of people fleeing to beaches and being forced to swim out to sea despite gale-force winds

and high waves to escape choking smoke and flaming pine cones raining down into the water.

Fire service spokeswoman Stavroula Malliri said the death toll had increased by five to 79. There were fears it would increase further as rescue crews gradually went through the hundreds of burnt homes while others searched the coastline and the sea.

More than 280 firefighters were still in the area to the northeast of Athens in the wider Rafina area, dousing the remaining flames to prevent flare-ups. An additional 200 firefighters backed up by a water-dropping helicopter were tackling the second forest fire west of the capital,

near Agioi Theodori, where local authorities pre-emptively evacuated three communities, a children's summer camp and three monasteries overnight, according to the fire department.

Flags across Greece flew at half-staff after the prime minister declared three days of national mourning.

The two fires on either side of the Greek capital started Monday within hours of each other, fanned by gale-force winds that hampered firefighting efforts.

The speed with which the blaze northeast of Athens spread took many by surprise and is believed to have contributed to the high death toll.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Tow truck, car drivers charged with DUI

MA HYANNIS — Massachusetts State Police said a woman and the driver of a tow truck sent to pick up her vehicle were both arrested on drunken driving charges.

Patricia O'Donnell, 51, of Marstons Mills, was stopped by a trooper Saturday night and arrested for driving under the influence. Then Brandon Fenton, 25, was dispatched by a towing company to pick up her vehicle, but he was also arrested for drunken driving.

Police said a Hyannis News journalist saw the truck swerve over the white center lines and off the right side of the road, almost striking a pole, and recorded it on his dash cam.

Good Samaritan pays for squad's breakfast

NJ TOMS RIVER — An anonymous benefactor surprised some emergency responders in New Jersey by paying their breakfast tab with a note saying "Thank you for all you do!" and signed "Recovering Addict."

Five Toms River First Aid Squad members had just finished eating at a restaurant Friday when they learned a woman had paid their \$77 bill. The group had gone there after finishing an overnight shift.

Squad Captain Alyssa Golembeski told NJ.com the note left the table "practically in tears," calling it "a reminder that there is still so much good in the world."

Amish outhouse case raises religious issues

PA HARRISBURG — An appeals court is questioning a township's efforts to make an Amish woman stop

using outhouses and hook into its sewer system, citing Pennsylvania's religious freedom law.

A seven-judge Commonwealth Court panel threw out an order that Iva Byler pay \$100 a month toward fines levied by Sugar Grove Township.

A trial judge had concluded the woman is violating the state's Sewage Facilities Act. The higher court said the judge didn't adequately address the state's religious freedom law and asked for more information.

The township argued the woman didn't show that connecting to a sewer system would be a major burden on her religious beliefs.

Officer captures python in yard

CT AVON — An officer with the Connecticut Environmental Conservation Police went head to head with an escaped python.

Authorities said Officer Edward Yescott was called to a home in Avon on Saturday for a report of a jungle carpet python sunning itself in the homeowner's yard.

Environmental police said Yescott was able to put his reptile capture training to good use and caught the snake unharmed.

Woman impaled by beach umbrella stable

MD OCEAN CITY — A 46-year-old Pennsylvania woman was in stable condition Monday at a Salisbury hospital after she was impaled in the chest by a wind-blown beach umbrella in Ocean City, officials said.

The woman, who was not identified, was sitting on the beach around 3:10 p.m. Sunday when a wind gust sent an unattended rental umbrella hurtling toward her, said town spokes-

woman Jessica Waters.

Emergency crews cut off the end of the umbrella, leaving the tip in her chest until she reached the medical center, Waters said. The woman remained alert and conscious, she said.

1950s Amtrak dome railcar is returning

ME PORTLAND — Amtrak is bringing back a 1950s-era domed railcar that offers panoramic views for riders of a New England train.

The Downeaster train will begin four daily trips starting Aug. 11 using the Amtrak Great Dome railcar, which features an upper level with windows on all sides.

Riders will have views of the coastline, marshes and streams along the Downeaster route from Boston to Brunswick, Maine.

The dome car is the only remaining dome car and dates to 1955.

Anonymous buyer gets piece of history

MT BOZEMAN — A piece of Yellowstone National Park history was purchased by an anonymous buyer at a Montana auction.

The bright yellow touring bus was one of 27 vehicles used to carry visitors around Yellowstone. The Bozeman Daily Chronicle reported that the bus was donated to the Museum of the Rockies in 1980. Museum officials said they have another touring bus on display and decided to auction the other vehicle off Saturday.

The bidding war lasted about five minutes, and an anonymous buyer won out over the Buses of Yellowstone Preservation Trust.

Museum officials said the \$170,000 winning bid will help maintain its collection.

Art dealer buys locker, then finds treasures

NY NEW YORK — A New York City art dealer who bought the contents of a New Jersey storage locker filled with paintings for \$15,000 said he got more than he bargained for.

He found half a dozen paintings he believes were done by artist Willem de Kooning, a painter whose works have sold for millions of dollars at auction.

The New York Post reported David Killen bought the contents of the locker last year. The paintings were originally from the studio of Orrin Riley, an art conservator who died in 1986, and his partner, Susanne Schnitzer, who died in 2009.

Killen reached out to an expert who was confident the paintings were done by de Kooning, an abstract expressionist originally from the Netherlands who moved to the United States.

Teens taking Olympic dream to Europe

WI LAKE GENEVA — Two 17-year-old sailors from southern Wisconsin are starting a European tour in their quest to earn a spot on the U.S. sailing team for the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.

The Janesville Gazette reported that Harry Melges IV and Finn Rowe, of Lake Geneva, are embarking on a tour with several marquee regattas, including the ISAF World Championships in Denmark later this summer.

The high school students have to balance their training schedule with schoolwork. That included training most weekends in Florida last winter when local lakes were frozen.

From wire reports

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China baseball gets boost in US

Associated Press

GRAND PRAIRIE, Texas — The starting lineups are announced in English and Spanish at home games for the independent Texas AirHogs, and then the Chinese national anthem is played.

For about 30 members of the Chinese national baseball team, the suburban ballpark adjacent to a horse track and only a few miles west of downtown Dallas has become their summer home and training ground in an unprecedented setup.

They are a revolving part of the roster for a professional team in the United States, playing more games and against tougher competition while working to improve their team for future international events such as the upcoming Asian Games and 2020 Olympics.

“The system that they’ve created here, where we work out in the morning, we’ve got weight training, the pitchers have a system where we throw on, the coaches have kind of set up a system that’s really helped them to be able to make the adjustment to play more games,” Sun Jianzeng, a 26-year-old right-hander, said through a translator.

Chinese players, who professionally back home would play only 20-30 games a season, make up about two-thirds of the expanded roster for the American Association team now formally known as the AirHogs powered by Beijing Shougang Eagles. The players ranging in age from 18 to 29 rotate on and off the active roster to play 6-7 games a week in one of the low-minor leagues not affiliated with Major League Baseball.

“It makes it workable, because we don’t want to wear these guys down,” said AirHogs manager John McLaren, a big league coach for three decades who has worked with Chinese teams since 2011.

Players not on the active roster for games go through early workouts at AirHogs Stadium, 10 minutes from the home ballpark of the Texas Rangers. There are conditioning and weight training drills that are

new to the Chinese players.

“They’re trying to do something they’ve never done before, which is play this many games on a daily basis, and you throw into the fact that with the exception of maybe three or four pitchers, they’re physically and experienced-wise over-matched,” said Larry Hardy, a former Rangers pitching coach filling the same role for the AirHogs. “But they’re getting better.”

McLaren, who had a short stint managing Seattle in 2007-08 and was Washington’s interim manager for three games in 2011, was on the Philadelphia Phillies staff the past two seasons.

He also managed China at the World Baseball Classic in 2013 and 2017. Over that time, there would be gaps of six or seven months when he wouldn’t even see the team, and players would barely play. China has a 2-10 record in its four WBC appearances, getting outscored 102-18.

“These guys, I don’t think they’d ever played twice in a week,” McLaren said.

That changed when the Chinese Baseball Association made arrangements with the AirHogs, allowing them to focus on daily development.

They are now together all of the time in a 12-team league that stretches more than 1,300 miles south to north through the middle of the United States — and into Canada with the Winnipeg Goldeyes. The closest stop is Cleburne, Texas, where 53-year-old former big league slugger Rafael Palmeiro is starring for the Railroaders.

China’s only Olympic berth was in 2008, going 1-6 in group play after an automatic berth as the host nation. That was the last time baseball was part of the Summer Games until its 2020 return in Tokyo.

The AirHogs are a league-worst 17-44 this season, but player-coach Na Chuang said the team has progressed faster than expected, increasing the confidence of the Chinese players who will leave with McLaren and some of their national coaches for the Asian Games in

Indonesia before the end of the 100-game AirHogs season.

Kevin Joseph, who pitched in the majors briefly with the St. Louis Cardinals in 2002, is an assistant pitching coach and invaluable translator. He learned Mandarin Chinese while spending more than eight years teaching baseball to young people after a friend with connections to baseball officials in China invited him there.

“The big need I think for China is they don’t play a lot of games. So for them to be able to come, and to learn the rhythm of a baseball lifestyle, play against better competition, has been a great experience,” Joseph said. “The players have really meshed well with the Chinese guys; they love them.”

There are the inevitable hiccups because of communication issues and culture differences, including the style of play the Chinese players were used to, but Joseph said things have gone great overall.

“It’s fun just to watch them interact with everybody, and themselves, and show up every day, kidding and joking,” said McLaren, sitting in the coaches office next to a narrow room cramped with lockers. “It’s a clubhouse. They’re a different culture, speak a different language, but the laugh in the clubhouse is the same.”

Joseph said hitters have changed the way they swing the bat, being more aggressive and ready to hit against velocity beyond what they’d ever faced.

For the pitchers, the emphasis has been on throwing more fastballs and fewer breaking balls. Hardy said the catchers have started to understand what the coaches are looking for from pitchers.

“The level of play is a lot higher,” Jianzeng said. “You can make smallest mistakes, can be hurt here as a pitcher. ... Because you’re playing so many games, you’re learning about yourself as a pitcher, and you’re getting a lot more experience.”

Yankees get lefty Britton

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — The Yankees have acquired left-hander Zach Britton from the rebuilding Baltimore Orioles for three prospects, a trade that will bolster New York’s bullpen for the stretch run.

Right-hander Dillon Tate is going to the Orioles along with left-hander Josh Rogers and right-hander Cody Carroll. The teams announced the deal Tuesday night.

The 30-year-old Britton will serve as a setup man for closer Aroldis Chapman, joining David Robertson, Dellin Betances, Chasen Shreve, Chad Green, Jonathan Holder and Adam Warren in an already strong bullpen.

“You’ve got to go into a new team and earn your role, especially with the guys they have over there,” Britton said. “They’ve got some guys who are doing really well. I’m just going to try to fit in. Right now, I’m just excited to get on a winning team and, hopefully, do some good things.”

As word leaked out about the deal, the Yankees expressed excitement over the new addition.

“I think he’s one of the best relievers in the game,” Chapman said through a translator. “Having the opportunity to add somebody like that with so much talent would be very helpful.”

Britton is eligible to become a free agent after this season, which makes him a summer rental for the Yankees in their pursuit of first-place Boston in the AL East.

He began the season on the disabled list after tearing his right Achilles tendon in December. He made his debut on June 12 and has appeared in 16 games, going 1-0 with a 3.45 ERA and four saves. He has not allowed a run in his last eight appearances, allowing just three hits over eight innings.

Thomas extends Tour de France lead

Associated Press

SAINT-LARY-SOULAN, France — Four-time champion Chris Froome cracked in the feared 17th stage of the Tour de France through the Pyrenees on Wednesday, solidifying Sky teammate Geraint Thomas' hold on the yellow jersey.

Colombian climber Nairo Quintana won the short but extremely difficult mountainous stage with a solo attack up the brutal finishing climb to Col du Portet.

Quintana, a three-time podium finisher in the Tour, finished 28 seconds ahead of Irish rider Dan Martin, while Thomas crossed third, 47 seconds back.

Froome finished eighth, 1:35 behind, and dropped from second to third overall, a distant 2 minutes, 31 seconds behind

Thomas.

Tom Dumoulin moved up to second, 1:59 behind Thomas, the Welsh rider who is seeking his first Grand Tour victory.

"Thomas has been the strongest, and that's the situation now," Dumoulin said. "For me, so far it has not been possible to gain time on him."

Froome is attempting to match the Tour record of five victories shared by Jacques Anquetil, Eddy Merckx, Bernard Hinault and Miguel Indurain. But he appeared to be close to conceding this title attempt.

"We just got to look after (Thomas) now," Froome said. "I've won the last three Grand Tours and G's ridden an absolutely faultless race this year, so he fully deserves to be in the yellow jersey, and fingers crossed he finishes it off and gets the job done in Paris."

Froome was first put in difficulty when Primož Roglič attacked with 2.5 kilometers to go, and then was dropped for good when Dumoulin accelerated at the 2K banner.

While Thomas followed Dumoulin, Froome quickly lost ground and had to be escorted up the rest of the way by Colombian teammate Egan Bernal, who kept turning around to check on his team leader.

Sticking his tongue out in apparent exhaustion, it was a strong signal that Froome has reached his limit after winning the last three Grand Tours — the Tour and Spanish Vuelta last year and the Giro d'Italia in May.

Froome also had to deal with the pressure of an asthma drug case over the last nine months. He was cleared of doping five days before the Tour.

It was Quintana's second career stage victory in the Tour, having also won a leg in 2013.

"I went through some difficult moments in the first part of this Tour and lost some time," said Quintana, who is fifth overall. "But I still felt strong and had the energy to finish the race on a high. I usually improve in the third week of the Tour and it's going that way."

A Formula One-like grid start introduced to the Tour for the first time had little impact on the race as Thomas and Froome waited for their Sky teammates to join them.

The 40-mile route from Bagnères-de-Luchon featured three grueling climbs and hardly a stretch of flat road, finishing at an altitude of 7,267 feet.

Sports briefs

Browns sign No. 1 draft pick Mayfield to 4-year deal

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Baker Mayfield's first win was beating the clock.

The No. 1 overall pick in this year's NFL Draft signed his rookie contract on Tuesday with the Cleveland Browns, who believe the quarterback from Oklahoma can lead them back to respectability and more.

Mayfield finalized his four-year, \$32 million deal a day before Cleveland's players are scheduled to report to training camp and avoided being a holdout. Mayfield's contract includes a \$22 million signing bonus.

One of college football's most popular and polarizing players, Mayfield is not expected to start in his first season for Cleveland. The Browns acquired former Buffalo quarterback Tyrod Taylor during an offseason trade and coach Hue Jackson has made it clear that the veteran will play until May-

field is ready.

Mayfield, who was a two-time walk-on in college, won the Heisman Trophy last season after he passed for 4,627 yards and 43 touchdowns. Despite some questions about his character after an off-field incident and some well-publicized antics during games, the Browns chose him over several other top-tier college QBs in April's draft.

After transferring from Texas Tech, Mayfield started 39 games for the Sooners. He finished his career with 14,607 yards passing and 131 touchdowns. He also ended ranked second in FBS history in passing efficiency rating (175.4), third in yards per attempt (9.7) and tied for fourth in touchdown passes.

In other NFL news:

■ The Browns also signed rookie cornerback Denzel Ward, the No. 4 overall pick in this year's draft.

The speedy Ward, who is

expected to start this season, finalized his four-year, \$29 million deal on Wednesday as Cleveland's players reported to training camp under coach Hue Jackson. Ward was the final player from the Browns' 2018 rookie class to sign his first pro contract.

■ The Buffalo Bills signed rookie quarterback Josh Allen to a four-year contract a day before opening training camp.

Though Allen still requires time to develop, he is the team's heir-apparent starter after Buffalo traded up five spots to select the Wyoming player with the seventh pick in the draft. Allen was the last of the Bills' eight draft picks to be signed.

He spent all but the final week of the Bills spring minicamps serving as the third-string quarterback while free-agent addition A.J. McCarron and returning backup Nathan Peterman split time with the starters.

■ Atlanta Falcons general

manager Thomas Dimitroff and coach Dan Quinn, who have led the team to the playoffs the last two seasons, signed three-year contract extensions.

The deals were announced Wednesday, a day before players report for training camp. Financial terms were not disclosed for the contracts, which will run through the 2022 season.

Mets' Cespedes to have surgery on both heels

NEW YORK — The New York Mets finally have some clarity about Yoenis Cespedes' health. But now they may be without their oft-injured slugger well into the 2019 season.

The Mets announced Wednesday that Cespedes will undergo a pair of surgeries to remove calcifications in both of his heels, an ailment that has bothered him dating back to his teenage years.

Plouffe's home run in 16th lifts Phillies

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Phillies' relievers just kept shutting down the Dodgers, and Los Angeles finally ran out of pitchers.

Trevor Plouffe hit a three-run homer off outfielder Kike Hernandez with one out in the 16th inning as Philadelphia outlasted the Los Angeles Dodgers 7-4 Tuesday night in a game that lasted nearly six hours.

After using eight pitchers, the Dodgers turned to Hernandez (0-1) in the 16th. He got Nick Williams to fly out, then walked Jesmuel Valentin and Jorge Alfaro before Plouffe hit an opposite-field shot for his first homer of the season and second career walkoff, ending the game after 5:55.

"All I want to do is contribute to a victory," Plouffe said. "I love being on a winning team. Just trying not to do too much. I was trying to elevate the ball."

Eight Phillies relievers com-

bined to allow one run and six hits over 11 impressive innings, with regular starter Vince Velasquez (7-8) pitching the top of the 16th. Velasquez, who tossed seven scoreless innings in the second game of Sunday's doubleheader win against San Diego, made his first relief appearance since 2015.

Velasquez, who lobbied manager Gabe Kapler to pitch, had to get out of a jam as Cody Bellinger singled with one out and Alex Verdugo drew a walk one out later. The runners advanced on a wild pitch, but Velasquez struck out Logan Forsythe to end it.

"Just a good feeling," he said.

After Adam Morgan allowed a solo homer in the sixth, the six traditional relievers who preceded Velasquez tossed eight scoreless innings while combining for 10 strikeouts, two walks and four hits.

"Our bullpen is nasty," said left-hander Austin Davis, who

pitched two innings. "Everyone, top to bottom, is gross. Our bullpen is disgusting."

The game, which was delayed 14 minutes at the start by rain, finished at 1:14 a.m.

"That was a long game, but when you win it makes it a little less long," Davis said. "That was a blast."

The teams combined to use 18 pitchers.

Williams and Jorge Alfaro homered for the Phillies, who moved a game ahead of Atlanta for first place in the NL East.

Yasmani Grandal hit solo home runs from both sides of the plate, and Joc Pederson had four hits with two doubles and an RBI for the NL-West leading Dodgers.

The Phillies threatened in the 15th, but Dodgers closer Kenley Jansen struck out Davis, who was forced to bat with the Phillies out of position players.

The Dodgers also had a chance in the 15th, but Davis struck out Grandal for the final

out with runners on second and third.

Los Angeles put runners on first and second with two outs in the 11th, but Pat Neshek got Hernandez to ground out.

The Phillies could have ended it in the ninth with runners on first and second and one out. But Daniel Hudson, the third reliever in the inning, got Valentin to line out and Alfaro to ground out.

Dodgers starter Kenta Maeda retired the first 11 batters before Odubel Herrera's two-out single in the fourth. He was cruising with a 4-1 lead until the Phillies scored three runs in the seventh, highlighted by Alfaro's 446-foot, two-run blast, to tie it.

"That was unnecessary," Maeda said. "If I get an out there, the probability of us winning would've gone higher."

Maeda ended up allowing four runs and six hits in seven innings with seven strikeouts.

MLB roundup

Pirates top Tribe, stretch winning streak to 11 games

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Pittsburgh Pirates manager Clint Hurdle has a simple philosophy when it comes to hot streaks.

"I have a saying that I use all the time," he said. "I'm not superstitious but just in case, there's some things I'll continue to do."

Whether it's superstition — or just solid baseball — whatever the Pirates are doing is working.

Starling Marte, Gregory Polanco and Josh Bell each hit a two-run homer, and Pittsburgh beat the Cleveland Indians 9-4 on Tuesday night for their 11th straight win.

Hurdle, in his 16th season as a big league manager, knows how quickly fortunes can change in baseball but realizes his team is doing something special.

"I can understand not making too much of it," he said.

"[But] I've been in the game 44 years and I won't tell you the amount of times I've been on a team that has won 11 games in a row. It hasn't been 44."

Athletics 13, Rangers 10 (10): Khris Davis' three-run homer in the 10th inning capped visiting Oakland's comeback from an eight-run deficit against Texas.

Orioles 7, Red Sox 6: Tim Beckham and Jonathan Schoop homered and drove in three runs each, and host Baltimore withstood four long balls by Boston in a victory.

Yankees 4, Rays 0: Masahiro Tanaka (8-2) pitched a three-hitter, and Austin Romine drove in two runs as visiting New York shut out Tampa Bay.

Brewers 5, Nationals 4 (10): Tyler Saladino's bases-loaded sacrifice fly in the 10th inning lifted host Milwaukee

over Washington.

Cardinals 4, Reds 2 (11): Austin Gomber took a no-hitter into the seventh inning and Dexter Fowler hit a two-run shot in the 11th, leading visiting St. Louis over Cincinnati.

Astros 8, Rockies 2 (10): Tony Kemp lined a go-ahead single off closer Wade Davis (0-3) as part of a six-run 10th inning and visiting Houston beat Colorado.

Diamondbacks 5, Cubs 1: Clay Buchholz (3-1) pitched effectively into the seventh in his return from the disabled list, Steven Souza Jr. had three hits and an RBI and visiting Arizona won its third straight.

Giants 4, Mariners 3: Steven Duggar scored from second base on a throwing error by Dee Gordon with two outs in the ninth inning and visiting San Francisco beat Seattle.

White Sox 4, Angels 2: Car-

los Rodon (3-3) pitched two-hit ball into the eighth inning, and Yoan Moncada homered in the seventh for visiting Chicago.

Royals 5, Tigers 4: Burch Smith (1-1) picked up his first win in nearly five years, and Mike Moustakas and Salvador Perez homered for host Kansas City.

Marlins 9, Braves 3: Wei-Yin Chen (3-7) pitched six innings and scored the first run of his career to help host Miami beat Atlanta.

Mets 6, Padres 3: Devin Mesoraco hit an early three-run double and made a heads-up play on defense that helped Zack Wheeler and host New York defeat San Diego.

Twins 5, Blue Jays 0: Jose Berrios (10-7) and two relievers combined on a five-hitter, and Eduardo Escobar hit a three-run home run for visiting Minnesota.