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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

N. Korea returns remains of US soldiers

BY MARCUS FICHTL

Stars and Stripes

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — Fifty-five cases of remains thought to belong to U.S. servicemembers were flown out of North Korea on Friday — one of the first tangible results of last month's historic summit between Washington and Pyongyang.

"The Remains of American Servicemen will soon be leaving North Korea and heading to the United States!" President Donald Trump tweeted from the U.S. late Thursday. "After so many years, this will be a great moment for so many families. Thank you to Kim Jong Un."

American and allied troops were on hand to greet an Air Force C-17 Globemaster as it landed with the remains at Osan — the largest U.S. air base in the South — under fighter-jet escort at 11 a.m. The transport plane picked up the remains earlier that morning from Wonson, North Korea. It was accompanied by servicemembers from United Nations Command and technical experts from the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency.

"It was a successful mission following extensive coordination," U.N. Command

and U.S. Forces Korea commander Gen. Vincent Brooks said in a statement.

About 30 minutes after the aircraft touched down at Osan, the 55 remains-filled cases — draped in blue U.N. flags — were loaded into silver vans by a multinational U.N. honor guard. Thousands were on hand to watch, including troops from the U.S., South Korea, United Kingdom, Thailand and the Philippines. All saluted as the remains passed by.

"Now, we will prepare to honor our fallen before they continue on their journey home," said Brooks, who will host a ceremony for the fallen troops on Wednesday, according to the U.N. Command statement.

The honor guard's platoon sergeant, Army Staff Sgt. Jamil Green, 28, of Newark, N.J., carried the last set of remains off the plane.

"It's an overwhelming moment. It's an honor to bring the remains home," he said, adding that the case he carried weighed about 15 pounds.

It was an especially poignant moment for Green, who had family members fight in the Korean War who have since passed away.

"I know they would have wished to have

been here and seen this today," he said.

Another honor guard member, Staff Sgt. Glicerio Perono Jr., 39, of Iloilo, Philippines, called bringing back the remains alongside his American platoonmates a "historic" moment.

"It's important to remember we all fought together 65 years ago," said Perono, who hopes some of the cases hold Filipino remains.

A corridor of servicemembers provided a path for the remains to follow into the interior of Osan and the Transport Management Office, where they will be stored until Wednesday's departure ceremony, after which the remains will be flown to Hawaii for further processing by DPAA.

The White House on Thursday called the transfer "a significant step to recommence the repatriation of remains from North Korea and to resume field operations in North Korea to search for the estimated 5,300 Americans who have not yet returned home."

The repatriation sets off a lengthy series of forensic examinations and tests to determine whether the remains are human, and whether they are actually American or allied troops killed in the conflict.

Military raises drinking age in Bahrain to 21

BY JASON BEHNKE

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — The minimum age for drinking alcohol for servicemembers and Defense Department personnel in Bahrain is being raised to 21, officials announced Thursday.

A three-step process changing the drinking age from 18 to 21 was outlined in a picture sent Thursday afternoon to DOD personnel in Bahrain via a command messaging list. The message came out just before the weekend, which begins Friday in Bahrain and elsewhere in the region.

Navy officials said the change in policy had nothing to do with an increase in alcohol-related incidents. Instead, it had to do with the command's closer adherence to the Navy's alcohol policy, said Lt. Christina Gibson, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command

spokeswoman.

"The policy change is to ensure that all military service members, DOD civilian employees and contractors attached or assigned to military units in Bahrain or while transiting through or temporarily visiting Bahrain, as well as the dependents of all these personnel, are operating within Navy policy," Gibson said in an email.

The Navy instruction for drinking in foreign countries allows for servicemembers to follow the local drinking laws; however, commanders are free to use their discretion.

In the first step of the process, the purchase of alcohol off base by anyone younger than 21 was banned Thursday.

On Aug. 1, the ban will be extended to the purchase of alcohol on base, though the consumption of previously purchased alcohol and drinking at the on-base club still

will be allowed.

On Sept. 1, the policy goes into full effect with a ban on consumption of alcohol by anyone younger than 21.

Gibson said the original interpretation of Bahraini laws was why 18-year-olds were allowed to drink.

"However, based upon a recent review and research concerning this issue, it was determined that Bahraini law does not establish a drinking age," she said. "Therefore, the drinking age has been set to 21 in accordance with Navy policy."

Drunken behavior in public and driving under the influence of alcohol are against the law in Bahrain, according to a United Kingdom government website on living in Bahrain.

Bahraini government officials were not immediately available for comment.

7th Fleet vessels ship out ahead of storm

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — As Typhoon Jongdari churns its way toward mainland Japan, 7th Fleet ships homeported at Yokosuka have sailed out to sea to avoid the storm's expected high-impact winds and rain.

Guided-missile destroyers USS Benfold, USS McCampbell, USS Milius and USS Stethem left Japan on Thursday, followed by the guided-missile cruiser USS Antietam and the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier Friday, said 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley.

The Reagan had just returned to its homeport Tuesday after a two-month deployment.

Ships undergoing maintenance and repair, such as the 7th Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge and the collision-damaged USS John S. McCain, will stay at the base and weather the storm.

"The remaining vessels in port have taken all necessary precautions to ensure the safety of the ships and the crew while they are in port for their maintenance periods," Keiley said.

Jongdari was forecast to pass 167 miles southwest of Yokosuka on Saturday evening, according to Stars and Stripes' Pacific

Storm Tracker blog. Winds are expected to "increase to 35- to 40-mph sustained and 58-mph gusts early Saturday afternoon, picking up to 40- to 46-mph sustained and 63-mph gusts Saturday evening, decreasing to 35- to 40-mph sustained and 58-mph gusts overnight into Sunday and diminishing from there," it said.

The base issued a Tropical Cyclone Condition of Readiness 2 on Friday afternoon, meaning "destructive winds are anticipated in 24 hours," according to the Navy. Under TCCOR 2, essential personnel should be the only people going out around base.

"[Yokosuka Naval Base], Task Force 70 and 7th Fleet are closely monitoring the track of ... Jongdari and will ensure that our units and our personnel have taken every appropriate measure to weather the storm," Keiley said.

Several events planned for the weekend have been canceled due to the storm. These include a Saturday USO meet-and-greet with NFL players Donnie Edwards, Tony Richardson and Amani Toomer.

To check for updates on Jongdari's intensity and path, visit <https://www.stripes.com/blogs/pacific-storm-tracker>.

Mattis: US troops could seek remains inside North Korea

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon could send military teams into North Korea to search for the remains of thousands of missing Americans who fought during the Korean War if relations between the North and the U.S. continue to improve, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said Friday.

Restarting a long-stalled program that sent American military personnel into North Korea to search for remains of U.S. war dead and former prisoners of war is under consideration, Mattis told reporters at the Pentagon. Joint U.S.-North Korean military searches for American remains were suspended in 2005 by former President George W. Bush as tensions increased between the nations over North Korean nuclear activity.

"It's certainly something we're interested in exploring with the North Koreans," Mattis said. "We look at it as a first step of a restored process, so we do want to explore additional efforts to bring others home — perhaps have our own teams go in."

Between the mid-1990s and 2005, the joint teams conducted 33 recovery operations that resulted in the collection of 229 sets of American remains, according to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, or DPAA.

Mattis' statement came just hours after

North Korea returned 55 boxes containing the remains of what are believed to be American servicemembers.

Pentagon officials previously indicated the North Koreans had about 200 boxes of remains believed to be Americans. Mattis said Friday that he did not know why only 55 were returned.

Nonetheless, Mattis said the return of the remains was a key first step in improving relations between the two countries.

"We have families that ... never had closure," he said. "They never went out and had the bodies returned. So, what we're seeing here is an opportunity to give those families closure to make certain that we continue to look for those remaining."

President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un agreed to the return of the remains in their high-profile summit last month in Singapore. The White House said the two leaders agreed at that time that the North would return all American remains that it held. At the time, the U.S. announced it would suspend joint military drills with ally South Korea indefinitely.

Trump on Friday thanked Kim for "keeping his word" on returning the remains and indicated he anticipated more would be turned over in the future.

The return of the remains Friday could shape future talks as the U.S. seeks North Korea's denuclearization, Mattis said.

Help is on way for religious minorities pummeled in Iraq

The Washington Post

The U.S. soon will begin its first directly funded rebuilding projects for Iraqi Christian and Yazidi communities devastated by Islamic State militants, a U.S. official said Thursday.

Plans are being finalized for 10 modest reconstruction projects for Christian communities in the Nineveh Plains and for Yazidi villages around Sinjar in northern Iraq, said Mark Green, administrator of the United States Agency for International Development.

The long-delayed projects will focus on small infrastructure jobs to help restore water and electrical service in towns populated by religious minorities that were targeted by ISIS, which has lost most of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria.

"They're individual projects that create the context for which people, if they so choose, can return to those communities, or not leave those communities," he said.

The Trump administration is steering humanitarian aid funding in Iraq to Christian and other religious minorities, directing to them more than a third of the money allocated for "stabilization" projects aimed at rebuilding areas liberated from ISIS. Previously, the money went through the U.N. Development Program.

Trump says US to sanction Turkey over held pastor

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump declared on Thursday the United States will impose sanctions on Turkey, a crucial NATO ally, in retaliation for the detention of an American pastor on terrorism and espionage charges.

Turkey's response was both harsh and dismissive, calling his words "unacceptable" and a "cheap threat."

Trump's promise of unspecified punishing action marks the latest deterioration in relations between Turkey and the U.S. as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers expand two years after a failed coup against his government. Trump also has praised his counterpart, saying Erdogan's leadership is "getting very high marks."

The U.S. has long depended on a key air base in Turkey's south, most recently to launch airstrikes against Islamic State.

Pastor Andrew Craig Brunson was detained by Turkish authorities in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup. On Wednesday, he was let out of jail after 1½ years and transferred to house arrest because of "health problems," according to Turkey's official Anadolu news agency.

Trump said that was insufficient. "He is suffering greatly. This innocent man of faith should be released immediately!" Trump wrote on Twitter.

The announcement of sanctions — though with no details — came as the State Department was holding an event promoting religious freedom. Brunson's case has become a cause for conservative Christians.

Turkey responded that Brunson's detention falls within the jurisdiction of its independent judiciary. "Rule of law is for everyone; no exception," said Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, also via Twitter. And an Erdogan spokesman warned the U.S. to "reconsider its approach and adopt a constructive position before inflicting further damage to its own interests and its alliance with Turkey."

Senators seek to bar any US president from quitting NATO

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

A group of U.S. senators worried about President Donald Trump's commitment to NATO introduced a bill Thursday that would prohibit a U.S. president from pulling out of the alliance.

"Regrettably, President Trump's mistreatment of our closest allies has raised doubts about America's commitment to the trans-Atlantic alliance and the values of defense," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., in a statement.

The bipartisan bill, which was introduced by McCain and a group of Democrats, would require the president to get consent from the Senate in order to modify or terminate U.S. membership in NATO.

"If the President attempts to withdraw from NATO without Senate approval, this bill also authorizes the Senate Legal Counsel to challenge the Administration in court," the sen-

ators said in a joint statement.

The bill comes two weeks after Trump, during a July 12 news conference at the end of a NATO summit in Brussels, said he believed he had the authority as president to quit the alliance but did not intend to do so.

During his presidency, Trump repeatedly has chastised allies who he has said don't invest sufficiently in their own militaries — falling short of a NATO benchmark that calls for spending 2 percent of their respective gross domestic product on the military.

At the contentious NATO summit, Trump threatened that the U.S. would go it alone if members didn't start doing more. By the end of talks, he said he was satisfied with commitments from members to do more in the future and that NATO was now "much stronger" and a "fine-tuned machine."

However, Trump's mixed messages have rattled allies. Days after the NATO meeting

and a subsequent summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump expressed ambivalence about defending tiny NATO member Montenegro if it came under attack.

"Montenegro is a tiny country with very strong people," Trump said July 17 on a Fox News program. "They are very aggressive people. They may get aggressive and congratulations, you are in World War III."

Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., said the Senate bill sends a signal of U.S. commitment to allies unnerved by Trump's criticisms.

"This bill has become necessary because some of our closest allies have come to question the reliability of President Trump's commitment to collective self-defense and security guarantees," Reed said in a statement. "Regardless of the President's tweets or statements, there remains strong, bipartisan support for and commitment to the NATO alliance in Congress."

NATO battles fake news 1 video game at a time

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The road to the land of online gaming tedium is paved with good intentions.

At the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Latvia, a hub focused on countering misinformation campaigns, an online game has been launched to help citizens learn to identify fake news.

The game, called The News Hero, is hosted on Facebook and allows players to assume the role of a news publisher.

The user is responsible for putting together a newspaper free of the phony. With the help of trusty assistant Bronco, you decide what is real and what is fake.

For NATO, the issue of false

information is a serious one.

For example, when new multinational battlegroups deployed to the Baltics last year, suspicious reports emerged that German soldiers were responsible for raping a Lithuanian teenager. Allies suspected Russia of planting the story, which was quickly debunked, in an effort to undermine NATO support in the area.

In recent years, the U.S. and its allies have pointed to various Russian news outlets as purveyors of phony information designed to undermine faith in western institutions. In response, allies have looked for ways to fight more effectively on the information battlefield. The NATO center in Latvia "hopes to burst the bubble of an elite dominated discussion about

critical thinking and empower the society to become more conscious users of media through a gamified approach," the center said in a statement.

But fake news busting can be a bit of a bust, at least when it feels more like human resources-mandated training than the stylish games that have called many among this generation to their customized gaming chairs.

Is Justin Timberlake really an anti-vaccination activist? Did a lady in Detroit really train a squirrel to attack her boyfriend? In The News Hero, you have to decide — though a fact-checker does most of the thinking for you.

The game is available on Facebook at <https://apps.facebook.com/thenewshero>.

Legal implications of Cohen-Trump recording unclear

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A secret recording of Donald Trump discussing payments to a Playboy model has brought renewed attention to the question of whether — and how — he might have tried to block politically damaging stories ahead of the 2016 presidential election. But it's not clear that the tape, on its own, creates additional legal problems for the president.

The September 2016 conversation between Trump and his then-lawyer, Michael Cohen, took place weeks after the National Enquirer's parent company reached a \$150,000 deal to pay former Playboy model Karen McDougal for her story of a 2006 affair she has said she had with Trump. The recording captures Trump and Cohen discussing acquiring the rights to McDougal's story and whether to pay by cash or check.

At issue is whether the payment the men are discussing was campaign-related and intended to influence the election, in which case it likely would be regarded as a contribution, or whether it was merely meant to shield the married Trump from an embarrassing revelation harmful to his personal life. Also important is whether the payment to McDougal from the Enquirer's parent company, American Media Inc., functioned as a backdoor campaign contribution or as a legitimate media company expense.

"It's a piece of evidence. It's not a smoking gun," Rick Hasen, a campaign finance law expert at the University of California, Irvine, said of the recording.

Trump says he 'did NOT know' about meeting with Russian

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump denied Friday that he knew in advance about a Trump Tower meeting in June 2016 between a Russian lawyer, his eldest son and other campaign aides that had been convened to hear dirt on his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton.

Trump tweeted, "NO," he "did NOT know of the meeting with my son, Don jr."

CNN reported Thursday that Trump's former longtime lawyer and fixer, Michael Cohen, claims Trump knew in advance about the meeting. CNN cited anonymous sources saying Cohen was willing to share that information with special counsel Robert Mueller, who is investigating possible collusion between Trump's campaign and Russia.

A person familiar with the investigation confirmed the CNN report to The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because the person wasn't authorized to speak publicly.

Cohen wasn't at the Trump Tower meeting and Cohen has not offered evidence to support the claim that Trump knew about the meeting. He does not have any recordings of the meeting, the person said.

Trump's team met with the Russian lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya, believing she had dirt on Clinton to share.

The Associated Press reported this week that Veselnitskaya worked more closely with senior Russian government officials than she previously let on, based on scores

of emails, transcripts and legal documents that show her to be a well-connected attorney who served as a ghostwriter for top Russian government lawyers and received assistance from senior Interior Ministry personnel in a case involving a key client.

Trump, who in the past has denied knowing about the meeting before it happened, also shot back at Cohen, who was once so loyal to Trump that he said he'd take a bullet for his boss.

"Sounds to me like someone is trying to make up stories in order to get himself out of an unrelated jam," Trump tweeted, adding: "(Taxi cabs maybe?). He even retained Bill and Crooked Hillary's lawyer. Gee, I wonder if they helped him make the choice!"

Cohen, whose business dealings are being investigated by the FBI, has long-time dealings in the taxi industry and owns several medallions for New York City yellow cabs that allow them to pick up passengers on the street.

Cohen lawyer Guy Petrillo did not immediately respond to messages seeking comment.

Cohen is under federal investigation in New York. The Justice Department has been investigating Cohen for months, raiding his home, office and hotel room in search of documents related to a \$130,000 payment the attorney facilitated before the 2016 election to Stormy Daniels, an adult-film actress who says she had sex with Trump in 2006.

White House: Over 1,800 migrant kids reunited by deadline

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Shy children were given meals and plane or bus tickets to locations around the U.S. as nonprofit groups tried to smooth the way for them to be reunited with their parents as a deadline loomed following their separations at the U.S. Mexico border.

The Trump administration said Thursday that more than 1,800 children 5 and older had been reunited with parents or sponsors hours before the deadline. That included 1,442 children who were returned to parents who were in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody, and another 378 who were released under a variety of other circumstances.

But about 700 more remain separated, including 431 whose parents were deport-

ed, officials say. Those reunions take more time, effort and paperwork as authorities fly children back to Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

The court-ordered deadline has passed, and now the federal judge in San Diego who ordered the reunifications must decide how to address the hundreds of still-separated children whose parents have been deported, as well as how much time, if any, reunified parents should be allowed to file asylum claims.

Lee Gelernt, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union representing separated parents, said Thursday it was unclear how long it might take to find the parents returned to their homelands. "I think it's just going to be really hard detective work and, hopefully, we're going to

find them," he said.

U.S. District Judge Dana Sabraw also will consider the ACLU's request to give reunified parents at least a week to consider if they wish to seek asylum. The government opposes the waiting period, and Sabraw has put a hold on deporting reunified families while the issue is decided.

On a parallel legal front over treatment of immigrant children, U.S. District Judge Dolly Gee in Los Angeles was expected to be asked Friday to appoint a special monitor to oversee detention facilities.

Children described horrid conditions in a voluminous report filed this month over whether the Trump administration is meeting its obligations under a long-standing settlement governing how young immigrants should be treated in custody.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Girl, 12, revives toddler found in septic tank

WA EDGEWOOD — Authorities say a 12-year-old girl revived her 2-year-old brother after he was found unresponsive in the Washington state family's septic tank.

The News Tribune reported East Pierce Fire and Rescue Chief Bud Backer said the children's mother got the boy out of the tank Wednesday but got stuck in the process, so the girl called 911.

Dispatchers told the girl how to give CPR to her brother. Becker said the boy was conscious when emergency workers arrived.

It was unclear how long the boy was in the tank or how he got inside it.

Family finds loved one's casket unearthed

MS HOLLY SPRINGS — A Mississippi family is mourning again after they said a storm toppled a tree, unearthing their grandfather's grave and turning his casket upside-down.

Tracey Lane told WHBQ-TV she recently found the casket of her grandfather, David Ira Lane Sr., lifted from the ground and the headstone in the air at a cemetery in Holly Springs.

The family believes it's been that way for two weeks.

Ben Cole, a deacon trustee of Hopewell Church No. 1, said cemetery caretakers were working to find the best way to fix the damage.

Police: Teen aids arrest of burglary suspects

MA DOUGLAS — Police are crediting a 15-year-old Massachusetts girl for

remaining calm and calling 911 when two men broke into her house while she was alone.

Morgan Doyle told WFXT-TV she locked her door and hid under her bed when the men got into her Douglas home Wednesday by ripping out a window screen. She said that at one point, they tried her door.

She called 911 and responding officers took the keys from a vehicle they found in the driveway.

Officers confronted the suspects, who ran to their car but were apprehended quickly because they couldn't locate the keys.

Handcuffed suspect escapes in patrol car

NC CHARLOTTE — Police in North Carolina say a man handcuffed in the back of a patrol cruiser managed to escape by getting into the front seat and driving away.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg police said in a news release that as officers were searching the suspect's car Tuesday, the man managed to get the handcuffs in front of him, squeezed through the window inside the car and drove off.

The news release said the police cruiser was found but the suspect remained at large.

Police said Dontray Anotnio Pharr, 20, is wanted on multiple charges.

Wild burro with arrow in head finally captured

CA NORCO — A wild burro that was shot in the head with an arrow is recovering at a California animal hospital.

The burro, with an arrow lodged beneath its right ear, was spotted more than a week ago in a rural area of Riverside

County east of Los Angeles.

Two attempts to tranquilize it and one effort to chase it on horseback failed to capture the animal.

However, KABC-TV said Riverside County animal control officers finally caught it on Monday and took it for treatment to an animal hospital in Norco.

The person who shot the burro could face animal cruelty charges. A \$1,000 reward is being offered for information leading to an arrest and conviction.

Village ceremonially elects cat as mayor

MI OMENA — Politics in a small northern Michigan village have gone to the cats, dogs, goats, and even chickens.

Omena's newly elected mayor is a feline named Sweet Tart. Dogs Diablo Shapiro and Punkin Anderson Harder are vice mayor and second vice mayor.

Anelectioncommittee named Harley the goat press secretary while Penny the chicken is special assistant for fowl affairs.

The seats are ceremonial. WPBN-TV reported that the election is a fundraiser costing \$1 per vote and brought in more than \$7,000 to the Omena Historical Society.

Girl, 11, catches piranha relative in lake

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — An 11-year-old Oklahoma girl has quite the fish tale after catching a native South American fish with human-like teeth.

Kennedy Smith of Lindsay was fishing with her grandparents and brother Sunday when she caught a pacu, a relative of the piranha, in Fort Cobb Lake, about 55 miles southwest of

Oklahoma City.

Game Warden Tyler Howser said the pacu is considered an invasive species by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and was destroyed.

5 sea turtles found in trash can released

GA TYBEE ISLAND — Five rare baby sea turtles found in a hotel trash can in Georgia were released into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Savannah Morning News reported the loggerhead hatchlings were freed early Wednesday on the beach at Tybee Island.

A hotel housekeeper on the island discovered six live loggerhead sea turtle hatchlings in a waste basket on Tuesday.

Loggerheads are classified as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and even touching one can result in a fine. Police and wildlife officials are investigating how the animals got to the hotel.

Officials: Don't dump goldfish in waterways

IN INDIANAPOLIS — Officials have a message for those thinking about getting rid of unwanted goldfish by dumping them into a lake, pond or stream: Don't do it.

The Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife warns that the small aquarium dwellers can grow "huge" in the wild, tend to breed prolifically and become an invasive pest.

That threatens native fish species, throws the food chain out of whack and decreases biodiversity.

Officials suggest trading them away or donating them to pet stores, school museums or zoos.

From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES

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Have Bucs gone from sellers to buyers?

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Pirates pay Felipe Vazquez millions of dollars to close out games. It's a great way to make a living. It just doesn't happen to be the All-Star reliever's favorite thing about his gig.

Vazquez's biggest perk comes in a giddy postgame clubhouse, when "DJ Nightmare" flips on his portable turntable, his teammates throw on masks and one of the National League's hottest — if most enigmatic — teams lets loose.

Over the course of the season, the playlist has changed to better reflect the varying tastes of the group. Some days it's country. Some days it's techno. Some days it's hip-hop. On nights he's not working — and there's been little for Vazquez to do during a 13-2 surge that has thrust the Pirates back into the National League playoff picture — he'll spend the ninth inning mulling his options.

"I can't wait to get in and get

going," Vazquez said on Thursday before the Pirates opened a four-game series against the New York Mets.

Or, more importantly, keep it going.

Pittsburgh's longest winning streak in 22 years — an 11-game sprint sandwiching the All-Star break that ended with a loss in Cleveland on Wednesday — placed the Pirates in the middle of a crowded playoff race. Ten NL teams entered Thursday at .500 or better. Five reach the postseason. That's a densely populated neighborhood, though one that manager Clint Hurdle says "is a better neighborhood than the one we were in."

It also makes the math a little tricky for general manager Neal Huntington, who took responsibility for a six-week swoon that had Pittsburgh sitting at 40-48 heading into its final nine games before the All-Star break. Huntington suggested if there was ever time for an 8-1 run, that was it. And here's the thing: He got it.

Now, a club that looked like a seller at next week's non-waiver trade deadline could be a buyer. Maybe. Money could be tight. Attendance is down 15 percent from 2017 and 30 percent from 2015, when the Pirates won 98 games to reach the playoffs for the third straight season. Pittsburgh has never been eager to splurge. And yet its recent run didn't have the hallmarks of a fluke.

The Pirates swept Milwaukee and Cincinnati and took two of three from Cleveland and Washington, outscoring them by a combined 80-36. Their 43 runs after the All-Star break are tops in the NL. The starting rotation has a 2.48 ERA since July 8. They trailed for all of two innings during their 11-game streak. The outfield leads the NL in slugging percentage and batting average. First baseman Josh Bell is hitting .444 over his last 10 games.

The turnaround has been abrupt and decisive. Now the front office needs to figure out what to do about it. Hold onto

veterans like second baseman Josh Harrison and shortstop Jordy Mercer — both of whom are over 30 and make a combined \$17 million with contracts that are close to expiring — or flip them to contenders while looking for prospects under team control into the next decade?

"There's never an easy decision whichever way you go," said Harrison, the team's longest-tenured player and one who appeared to be on the trade block a month ago. "It's not our job to worry about that. It's an easy job for us if we go out there and win games. It's easy for everybody. Then again, it's still not easy."

Hurdle didn't get too low during a 14-31 slide from May 18-July 7 that turned a solid start into a distant memory. He's not getting ahead of himself now, either. Results may vary. His belief in the names on the lineup card does not.

"The biggest affirmation for me is we have a good club," Hurdle said.

Baltimore's Jones gets to decide whether to stay put

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Orioles center fielder Adam Jones isn't exactly fretting over the possibility of heading elsewhere as the July 31 non-waiver trade deadline draws closer.

That's because he won't have to leave unless he wants to.

Jones' contract expires after this season, so the rebuilding Orioles are surely considering dealing him away in a trade for prospects. Manny Machado fetched five players from the Los Angeles Dodgers last week and the Yankees gave up three minor leaguers for Zach Britton on Tuesday, leaving Jones next in line to be headed out of Baltimore.

Or not.

A player who has accumulated 10 years of major league service time and has spent the

past five consecutive seasons with one team gains the right to veto any trade. So, should the Orioles work out a deal for Jones, he has the final say.

"They can say whatever they want and propose whatever they want, but I can be like, 'Ehh, you know what? That doesn't work for me,'" Jones said Thursday. "But it's interesting. We shall see what happens. I don't know what the plan is here for the future or if I'm even part of it. Let's see what interest can be generated and see how my representation and my family feel about something that could happen."

Jones, who turns 32 on Aug. 1, would be a solid addition to any club vying for a playoff berth. He entered play Thursday batting .277 with 10 homers and 38 RBIs, plays his position reliably and has playoff experi-

ence. Although his power numbers are down this year, he hit at least 25 homers in each of the past seven seasons.

"I guarantee, if I was a club in contention I'd be wanting an Adam Jones on my club," Orioles manager Buck Showalter said.

Jones has been with Baltimore since 2008. He's as much a part of the team and the community as anyone who has worn an Orioles uniform. But with Baltimore stuck in last place with a 29-73 record, he now has a chance to instantly become part of a pennant race.

"It's like the first day of school when you wear that outfit and you see what interest everybody has in you, who's flirting with you and whatnot," he said. "It's cool, it's flattering. It's uncommon territory."

He could always leave, play

elsewhere for two months, and then negotiate a contract with Baltimore during the offseason — if the Orioles are interested.

"A lot of people want things," Jones said. "But if that door's not open, you're just going to be sitting outside knocking."

If these are his final days with the Orioles, he can take consolation in knowing he's wanted elsewhere.

"Pretty humbling to see that other teams have interest in my services — either with on-field play, leadership, tough mindset, show up every day, work mentality that I have," he said. "To not wear black and orange, I've donned it for 11 years. It'd be different, but it's business. You've got to go if the other team is calling you, the other team is paying you. It's what you've got to do."

Yanks lose Judge during rout of Royals

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Aaron Judge winced, and so did most everyone else at Yankee Stadium.

All geared up for a pennant race, the New York Yankees caught a bad break Thursday night: Their All-Star slugger sustained a fractured right wrist when he was hit by a fast-ball and is expected to miss three weeks.

After a 7-2 win over the Kansas City Royals, the Yankees said Judge had a chip fracture. The team said no surgery has been recommended, and estimated he wouldn't be able to swing the bat in a game until mid-August.

"I'm concerned, obviously," manager Aaron Boone said, even before the final diagnosis. His fans were, too.

As Neil Walker batted with two outs in the Yankees seventh, several thousand people in the sellout crowd of 46,965 suddenly switched on their cell phone lights and shined them toward the field.

"It was a candlelight vigil for

Aaron Judge," fan Al Orrico said as he shopped postgame in the souvenir store. "I saw some people doing it, then a person behind me showed me an app and said it was a candlelight vigil for him."

The hugely popular Judge is hitting .285 with 26 home runs and 61 RBIs.

Normally the right fielder, Judge was the designated hitter. He grimaced when he was stung by a pitch from Jakob Junis in the first inning, was checked by a trainer and stayed in. Judge had an infield hit the next time up and then was pulled for a pinch-hitter in the fourth.

Boone said when Judge tried taking swings in the indoor batting cage between at-bats, "he just didn't have a lot of strength."

When told he was coming out of the game, Judge "didn't balk at it," Boone said.

Junis said the pitch didn't wind up where he intended it.

"I was just trying to go heater away, and it totally got away

from me," Junis said. "Tried humping up a little extra on a little and it just really open and let it go."

Judge was seen by a team doctor at the stadium and an X-ray "was a little unsure," Boone said. Judge was then taken to a hospital for an MRI and CT scan.

On a busy day for the Yankees, Sonny Gray (8-7) pitched five shutout innings to win three straight starts for the first time since last July. He exited soon after getting nicked in the thumb of his pitching hand by a hard grounder.

Gray was slated for an X-ray, too. Boone indicated the ball might've hit the muscle part of Gray's hand, lessening the risk of something serious.

Didi Gregorius hit a three-run homer for New York, which is 4½ games behind AL East-leading Boston. Center fielder Aaron Hicks threw out Alex Gordon at the plate to end the game as Gordon tried to score from second on a single.

Before the game, the Yankees

obtained Toronto left-hander J.A. Happ in a trade for infielder Brandon Drury and minor league outfielder Billy McKinney. Also, ace reliever Zach Britton tossed a perfect eighth inning in his New York debut, two days after being acquired from Baltimore for three pitching prospects.

Junis (5-11) is 0-8 in 10 starts since beating the Yankees in mid-May. He has allowed a major league-high 25 home runs, and the drive by Gregorius made it 6-0 in the fourth.

Gregorius homered one pitch after shortstop Adalberto Mondesi bounced a throw to first on a routine grounder with two outs. As Gregorius rounded the bases, Mondesi took off his glove and wandered into shallow center field.

"No, I saw I had a little bit of time. I didn't let it go," he said.

Mondesi also misplayed a grounder in the first for another error.

Salvador Perez hit a two-run homer in the Royals' sixth off Adam Warren.

MLB roundup

Cubs hit two homers in ninth inning to beat Arizona

Associated Press

CHICAGO — A day that began with Kris Bryant's return to the disabled list ended with a late power surge by the Chicago Cubs.

David Bote hit a tying, two-run homer off Brad Boxberger with one out in the ninth inning, Anthony Rizzo followed two pitches later with a winning home run and the Cubs overcame a five-run deficit to beat the Arizona Diamondbacks 7-6 on Thursday.

Bote was called up when Bryant was put on the DL because of inflammation in his left shoulder. Bote drove a high-high 0-2 fastball about a half-dozen rows in the bleachers in left-center for his second home run this season, tying the

score 6-6.

"It was a great feeling," Bote said. "Just seeing it go out, tied game. Of course, Rizzo hitting that ball to walk off was incredible."

Rizzo took a strike, then sent a thigh-high changeup to the top of the bleachers in right-center for his 13th homer, but first since June 24.

Brewers 7, Giants 5: All-Star reliever Josh Hader retired four batters to earn a win while making his first appearance on the road since the lefty's years-old racist and homophobic tweets surfaced during the All-Star Game, helping lead Milwaukee past San Francisco.

Dodgers 8, Braves 2: Manny Machado hit his first home run for his new team, Rich Hill (4-

4) pitched seven dominant innings and visiting Los Angeles routed Atlanta.

Twins 2, Red Sox 1: Mitch Garver hit a tiebreaking RBI double with two outs in the eighth inning, and visiting Minnesota held on to beat Boston.

Mets 12, Pirates 6: Asdrubal Cabrera went 3-for-5 with a home run and four RBIs to break out of an extended slump, and visiting New York pounded sloppy Pittsburgh for its first three-game winning streak since mid-June.

Nationals 10, Marlins 3: Trea Turner homered and hit a tiebreaking, two-run triple in the seventh inning that led visiting Washington over Miami.

Angels 12, White Sox 8: Francisco Arcia became the

first Los Angeles Angels player with four RBIs in his major league debut, hitting a three-run homer and an RBI single as host Los Angeles beat Chicago.

Athletics 7, Rangers 6: Trevor Cahill (2-2) ended a nine-start winless streak, Bartolo Colon (5-9) failed for his fourth consecutive outing to become the winningest major league pitcher born in Latin America and visiting Oakland beat Texas to complete a four-game sweep.

Phillies 9, Reds 4: Rhys Hoskins, Maikel Franco and Nick Williams each hit two of their team's record-tying seven home runs, and visiting Philadelphia overpowered Cincinnati in the opener of a four-game series.

Thomas increases Tour de France lead

Associated Press

LARUNS, France — Geraint Thomas increased his hold on the yellow jersey in the final mountain stage of the Tour de France on Friday, while Sky teammate and four-time champion Chris Froome lost his spot on the podium.

Slovenian rider Primož Roglič won the 125-mile 19th leg through the Pyrenees with an attack on the dangerous descent from the Col d'Aubisque.

A former ski jumper who rides for Team Lotto NL-Jumbo, Roglič finished 19 seconds ahead of Thomas, with Romain Bardet of France crossing third with the same time.

"I had legs today," Roglič said. "I really tried a lot of times and finally I went away on the descent."

With the help of a six-second bonus for

finishing second in the stage, Thomas increased his lead over Tom Dumoulin to 2 minutes, 5 seconds.

Roglič leapfrogged Froome into third spot overall, 2:24 off the pace, while the British rider now trails by 2:37.

Dumoulin finished sixth in the stage and Froome eighth, both with the same time as Thomas.

One key stage remains — a 31-kilometer individual time trial through the Basque country on Saturday — before the mostly ceremonial finish in Paris on Sunday.

"It's going to be a tough day tomorrow. I'm really knackered," Thomas said. "I'm still trying not to get carried away."

Froome initially fell behind on the climb up the Aubisque before latching back onto the lead group on the descent.

It was Roglič's second Tour victory, having claimed Stage 17 in the Alps last

year.

Roglič, who also excels at time trials, showed courage on a twisty descent made more difficult by clouds and fog hanging over the Aubisque.

When the road allowed, he crouched down on to his bike frame in a risky aerodynamic move known as "super tucking."

The route through the pilgrimage town of Lourdes to Laruns took the peloton over three legendary climbs — the Col d'Aspin, the Col du Tourmalet and the Aubisque — before the dive down to the finish.

Mountain classifications leader Julian Alaphilippe was first over the Aspin and Tourmalet as part of an early breakaway.

Mikel Landa and Bardet then attacked from the yellow jersey group up the Tourmalet and joined the leaders before Roglič, Thomas and Dumoulin took over on the final climb.

Briefly

Cubs acquire Hamels in trade with Rangers

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Chicago Cubs are gambling a change of scenery will help Cole Hamels return to form after acquiring the veteran left-hander in a trade with the Texas Rangers.

Chicago also received cash in Friday's deal in exchange for right-hander Eddie Butler, minor league pitcher Rolie Lacy and a player to be named.

Hamels is in the midst of perhaps the worst year of his career, going 5-9 with a 4.72 ERA in 20 starts with last-place Texas. He is just 1-3 with an 11.12 ERA in four starts in July.

But the 34-year-old Hamels is an experienced playoff pitcher with a history of success at Wrigley Field. He was the NL Championship Series and World Series MVP when Philadelphia won the title in 2008. He is 7-6 with a 3.48 ERA in 16 career playoff starts.

In other MLB news:

■ The New York Yankees acquired left-hander J.A. Happ from Toronto on Thursday to bolster their starting rotation,

a deal that sent infielder Brandon Drury and minor league outfielder Bill McKinney to the Blue Jays.

Happ, who turns 36 in October, is 10-6 with a 4.18 ERA in 20 starts and was a first-time All-Star. He joins a rotation that includes Luis Severino, Masahiro Tanaka, CC Sabathia and Sonny Gray.

■ The Houston Astros acquired catcher Martin Maldonado from the Los Angeles Angels in a trade Thursday.

The Angels received left-hander Patrick Sandoval and international bonus pool money in return.

Maldonado, a Gold Glove winner last season, is hitting .223 with 32 RBIs in 78 games.

Titans LT Lewan agrees to extension

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Tennessee Titans locked up two-time Pro Bowl left tackle Taylor Lewan on Friday with a deal making him the NFL's highest-paid offensive lineman for the moment.

The team did not disclose specific terms, but multiple

reports say it's a five-year deal worth \$80 million with \$50 million guaranteed. That tops the four-year, \$62 million deal Nate Solder got from the New York Giants in March.

In other NFL news:

■ The Atlanta Falcons have agreed to a five-year, \$75 million contract extension with left tackle Jake Matthews.

The 26-year-old Matthews was the No. 6 overall pick in the 2014 draft. He has started in each of his 63 games while serving the key role of protecting quarterback Matt Ryan.

■ The Washington Redskins have signed backup quarterback Colt McCoy to an extension that keeps him under contract through the 2019 season.

The team announced the deal Friday. NFL Network reported Thursday the contract could be worth up to \$7 million.

6 Florida players face disciplinary action

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Six Florida football players, including top receiver Tyrie

Cleveland and highly touted freshman quarterback Emory Jones, are facing university disciplinary action following an on-campus altercation that included the brandishing of Airsoft guns that resembled assault rifles.

Cleveland, Jones, receiver Kadarius Toney, defensive tackle Kyree Campbell, receiver Rick Wells and tight end Kemore Gamble were not charged following a University Police Department investigation. Officers referred the matter to the school's Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution department.

Toney and Campbell were recommended to the board for having Airsoft guns, which have a plastic body and shoot plastic projectiles. Cleveland, Jones, Wells and Gamble were recommended for lying to police.

Coach Dan Mullen said in a statement Thursday he was aware of the May 28 incident immediately and followed campus protocol, which likely will include education and a student code of conduct hearing that could lead to punishment.