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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Iran launches ballistic missiles during drill

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard launched underground ballistic missiles as part of an exercise involving a mock-up aircraft carrier in the Strait of Hormuz, state television reported Wednesday.

It was the latest barrage in a drill that the previous day saw two American bases temporarily go on alert over the launches.

Drone footage captured by the Guard showed two missiles blasting out from covered positions in what appeared to be a desert plateau in central Iran, with debris flying up in the air in their wake.

The launches took place on Wednesday, said Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the Guard's aerospace division. He told state television it was the first time the Guard had done this, though the paramilitary force is known to have vast underground bases hiding its ballistic missile arsenal.

Separately, drones targeted the bridge of the fake aircraft carrier, according to the state TV report. The broadcaster did not immediately air footage of the launches or the drone attack, nor did it identify the missiles used in the drill.

However, the drill clearly meant to send a message to the United States.

A semiofficial news agency close to the

Guard published a graphic overnight that photoshopped the image of an American carrier into the shape of a casket with a set of crosshairs on it, with a caption quoting Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei pledging to seek revenge for the U.S. drone strike that killed a top Iranian general in January.

The drill — and the American response to it — underlined the lingering threat of military conflict between Iran and the U.S. after a series of escalating incidents last year led to the January drone strike. Tehran responded to that strike by firing ballistic missiles that wounded dozens of American forces in Iraq.

Iranian commandos fast-roped down from a helicopter onto the replica in the footage aired Tuesday from the exercise called "Great Prophet 14." Anti-aircraft guns opened fire on a target drone near the port city of Bandar Abbas.

State television footage also showed a variety of missiles being fired from fast boats, trucks, mobile launchers and a helicopter, some targeting the fake carrier. A commander said the Guard, a force answerable only to Khamenei, planned to fire "long-range ballistic missiles" as well during the drill that continued Wednesday.

Ballistic missile fire detected from the drill resulted in American troops being put

on alert at Al-Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates and Al-Udeid Air Base, the forward headquarters of the U.S. military's Central Command in Qatar, the military said. Troops sought cover during that time.

"The incident lasted for a matter of minutes and an all clear was declared after the threat ... had passed," said U.S. Army Maj. Beth Riordan, a Central Command spokeswoman.

Both bases are hundreds of miles away from where Iran put the replica aircraft carrier.

Al-Dhafra also is temporarily home to five French-built Rafale fighter jets on their way to India for that country's air force.

Other footage from the exercise aired by Iran's state television showed fast boats encircling the mock-up carrier, kicking up white waves in their wake. While Iran's naval forces are dwarfed by the U.S. Navy, its commanders practice so-called "swarm" tactics aimed at overwhelming the U.S. carriers that pass through the strait on their way in and out of the Persian Gulf.

A black-and-white satellite photo taken Tuesday by Colorado-based firm Maxar Technologies showed damage to the replica's bow and several of its fake jet fighters.

Pentagon to move about 12K troops from Germany

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will remove nearly 12,000 troops from Germany, sending thousands of service members home to the United States and shifting others to different locations in Europe, Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced Wednesday.

The plan would fulfill President Donald Trump's demands to remove thousands of troops from Germany, which he has long derided as delinquent on its defense spending obligations within NATO. The an-

nouncement also comes after a monthslong review of American force strength in Europe, where some troops are permanently stationed and others deploy on rotational tours to train alongside NATO allies in an effort to deter Russian aggression on the continent.

"It is important to note that in NATO's 71-year history, the size, composition and disposition of U.S. forces in Europe has changed many times," Esper said during a Pentagon news briefing. "As we've entered a new era of great-power competition we are now at another ... inflection point in NATO's

history. I am confident the alliance will be all the better and stronger for it."

The plan would move about 5,600 American troops now in Germany to other NATO countries, largely Belgium and Italy. It would send another roughly 6,400 troops to new permanent stations in the United States. Esper did not identify U.S. bases that could receive an influx in troops.

The moves would leave about 24,000 troops in Germany, he said. It would also include plans to begin heel-to-toe rotations of Army Stryker brigades into Eastern Europe.

The moves will cost billions of dollars "over time," Esper said, adding the Pentagon had yet to produce precise cost analysis of the plans.

Some forces could be moved "within weeks," he said, without specifying which units could be first to move. Other units will be moved after long-term planning, which Esper acknowledged was likely to "change to some degree" over time.

He pledged transparency through the process, and promised service members and their families would receive notification well in advance of moves.

US affirms Japan support in China dispute

Associated Press

TOKYO — The United States supports Japan's protests over Chinese ships venturing into the economic waters near disputed East China Sea islands, the commander of the U.S. Forces in Japan said Wednesday.

"The United States is 100% absolutely steadfast in its commitment to help the government of Japan with the situation in Senkaku," Lt. Gen. Kevin Schneider said of the group of islands, which are controlled

by Japan.

China also claims the islands, which it calls Diaoyu.

"That's 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is no deviation in that regard," Schneider told reporters.

Japan has long protested the repeated presence of Chinese coast guard vessels in the waters. Schneider also noted that such incursions had increased recently.

He called China the "No. 1 challenge" in regional security,

although North Korea was the more "immediate threat," given its weapons development.

Schneider said the U.S. was offering Japan surveillance information and other support, such as "reconnaissance capability," which refers to monitoring the whereabouts of a potential enemy, to help Japan "assess the situation and to figure out exactly what's going on in the water in and around the Senkaku."

China shrugged off such concerns.

Wang Wenbin, spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry, reasserted China's claim to the islands, stressing it was the country's "inherent right to carry out patrol and law enforcement" activities in the area.

"We hope that relevant parties will do something helpful to maintain regional peace and stability, and avoid words and deeds that are not conducive to regional peace and stability," Wang told reporters at a daily press briefing.

US and Australia leaders discuss countering China

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. and Australian defense and foreign policy leaders said Tuesday that their close alliance is committed to countering Chinese actions in the Indo-Pacific region where trade and freedom of navigation are key to each country's security.

"Today, we discussed a range of issues regarding the future of the region, including the impact of the global pandemic, as well as the security situation in the South China Sea specifically, and the Indo-Pacific, more generally," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said during a news briefing following the 2020 Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations held at the State Department.

The annual meeting included Esper, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and their Australian counterparts, Defense Minister Linda Reynolds and Foreign Minister Marise Payne.

"Our two great democracies face immediate crises like the [coronavirus] pandemic and longer-term challenges like the Chinese Communist Party's ambitions. We need to deal with each of these challenges simultaneously," Pompeo said.

Esper called the Indo-Pacific region the "United States' priority theatre."

The Pentagon's 2018 National Defense Strategy has shifted the military's focus from counterterrorism operations to "great-power competition" with China and Russia. The economic policies of China and its militarization of the South China Sea, and Russia's efforts to undermine NATO and its nuclear arsenal are major concerns for the U.S. military, according to the strategy.

The United States has about 1,200 Marines in Darwin, Australia, for training and exercises. Esper avoided providing details on whether there were any discussions to increase the number of Marines deployed there or hosting intermediate range missiles in the country, which the Australian government has said they are against.

Esper would only say he and Reynolds discussed the "capabilities" each country has and the "desire to advance them," including hypersonic weapons.

"I think it's important as we think forward about how do we deter bad behavior in the Indo-Pacific and how we defend the international rules based order, in this case specifically with regard to China," he said.

Trump hasn't spoken to Putin on alleged bounties

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said in an interview broadcast Wednesday that he has not spoken to Russian President Vladimir Putin about U.S. intelligence reports of Russian bounties given to Taliban-linked militants to kill U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

"I have never discussed it with him, no," Trump said during a taping of "Axios on HBO." He said he did not bring up the issue during his most recent conversation with Putin last week, which Trump said was "a phone call to discuss other things."

The Trump administration in recent weeks has questioned the veracity of the intelligence. But some of Trump's own senior intelligence officials viewed the information as credible enough to warn the Pentagon and allies so they could ensure they had measures in place to protect their forces in Afghanistan and to begin developing options for responding to such a Russian operation, national security adviser Robert C. O'Brien said earlier this month.

During the interview, Trump continued to cast doubt on the intelligence, saying, "Frankly,

that's an issue that many people said was fake news."

Pressed by Axios's Jonathan Swan on whether he believes the intelligence, Trump did not answer directly.

"You know, it's interesting," Trump said. "Nobody brings up China. They always bring Russia, Russia, Russia."

Trump did not respond directly to a question about news reports that the intelligence was included in a written briefing. In response to a question from Swan, Trump said he reads his written briefings.

"They like to say I don't read. I read a lot," Trump said.

He said that "a lot of people," including some foreign policy officials from the administration of President George W. Bush, were convinced that the intelligence was not real.

Trump also pressed his frequent argument that there are opportunities to improve U.S.-Russian relations.

"If we can do something with Russia, in terms of nuclear proliferation, which is a very big problem — bigger problem than global warming, a much bigger problem than global warming in terms of the real world, that would be a great thing," Trump said.

GOP bill replaces Pentagon project money

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The GOP Senate's new \$1 trillion coronavirus stimulus bill restores hundreds of millions of dollars in Pentagon spending that the Trump administration redirected to help pay for President Donald Trump's border wall.

Navy planes, ships and Air Force aircraft that the Trump administration canceled earlier this year so the money could go to pay for the wall have reappeared in the GOP bill that was introduced Monday. The programs are part of \$30 billion in defense spending in the GOP bill to which Democrats are already objecting. Republicans are defending the spending as important to protect jobs and

help the Pentagon cope with impacts of coronavirus.

The Trump administration's move to "reprogram" Pentagon money, to build Trump's promised wall along the U.S.-Mexico border has been a long-running dispute between the administration and Congress. Lawmakers of both parties have objected, but the administration contends it can move the Pentagon's money without congressional approval.

Now Senate Republicans, led by Appropriations Chairman Richard C. Shelby, R-Ala., have taken the opportunity presented by the coronavirus stimulus bill to restore spending on some of the programs they deemed most critical — although Democratic objections make it un-

certain whether the spending will make it into any final bill.

In one example, the administration sought to zero out a \$261 million account for the Navy's Expeditionary Fast Transport ship. The coronavirus bill puts \$260 million back into this program. The ship is built by Austal USA, which is based in Shelby's home state of Alabama.

The administration's reprogramming notice also took money from the budget for the Navy's P-8A Poseidon aircraft by \$180 million, saying there were already enough planes and describing it as a "congressional special interest item." The COVID bill puts more than \$1 billion into the P-8A program.

The Trump administration reprogramming notice also

redirected \$365 million from the Air Force's C-130J Aircraft program. The coronavirus bill puts \$720 million back into that program.

Another Air Force program, for the F-35 aircraft, was also targeted for a \$156 million cut by the Trump administration earlier this year. The coronavirus bill includes \$686 million for additional F-35As.

Apart from the money aimed at restoring programs cut to pay for the wall, the Pentagon spending in the coronavirus bill includes money for an array of other weapons systems, as well as money to help the Pentagon defray costs related to the coronavirus.

DC National Guard officer rebukes accounts of protest

BY STEVE BEYNON
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An Army officer for the National Guard told House lawmakers Tuesday that protesters at Lafayette Square last month were subjected to excessive use of force by police prior to President Donald Trump's photo opportunity at a church across the street.

"The events I witnessed at Lafayette Square on the evening of June 1 were deeply disturbing to me, and to fellow National Guardsmen," said Maj. Adam DeMarco, a member of the District of Columbia National Guard and an Iraq War veteran. "Having served in a combat zone, and understanding how to assess threat environments, at no time did I feel threatened by the protesters or assess them to be violent."

On Tuesday, Democratic members of the House Committee on Natural Resources pressed DeMarco and acting Chief Gregory Monahan of the Park Police on whether the use of weapons by police was a political tool by Trump to allow

him to take a photo in front of the historic St. John's Episcopal Church.

"I firmly believe what happened in Lafayette Square was a consequence to create a photo opportunity for President Trump," said Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., the committee chairman.

DeMarco's statements to the House committee about the incident contradicted the depiction from White House and law enforcement officials about the protests.

"From my observation, those demonstrators — our fellow American citizens — were engaged in the peaceful expression of their First Amendment rights," he said.

But Monahan offered a different account to committee members.

He said protesters at Lafayette Square were armed with "bricks, rocks, caustic liquids, water bottles, lit flares, fireworks and 2x4 sections of wood." However, no officers were injured during the day before police moved protesters out of the square, he added.

Thai soldiers test positive for virus after Hawaii training

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — Eight Thai soldiers who participated in a large Army exercise in Hawaii this month tested positive for the coronavirus after returning home last week, according to media reports.

The infected individuals were among a company of 133 Thai Royal soldiers who participated in the Lightning Forge exercise on Oahu that ran July 7-21.

About 5,500 soldiers with the U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division participated in the exercise, which was the division's first large-scale training since the coronavirus pandemic hit in the spring.

A 25th Infantry Division spokesman on Tuesday declined to say whether any U.S. soldiers involved in the training had tested positive, citing Defense Department policy.

Hawaii had 1,757 confirmed coronavirus cases as of Tuesday — the majority on Oahu — with 26 deaths.

The Bangkok Post newspa-

per reported Tuesday that the Thai government confirmed two soldiers, ages 22 and 25, were hospitalized for COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus. The pair began showing symptoms Friday, with the younger soldier having a fever, breathing difficulties and diarrhea, while the older one developed a cough, the newspaper said.

The government had earlier confirmed that six other soldiers had tested positive for the virus after returning to Thailand on July 22, according to the report. All the infected soldiers had been on the same flight home from Hawaii.

"We understand that reports of possible COVID-19 cases in Hawaii are concerning, and in accordance with Defense Department policy, we continue to share all available information within Hawaii public health channels to ensure the local community remains safe and any appropriate measures are taken to reduce the spread," Lt. Col. Adam Hallmark, a 25th Infantry Division spokesman, said in a statement emailed Tuesday to Stars and Stripes.

Some hard-hit states still resist mask rules

Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — The baseball season descended deeper into crisis Tuesday, states like Mississippi and South Carolina cast about for more hospital beds, and governors in some of the hardest-hit places staunchly resisted calls to require masks, despite confirmed cases of the coronavirus soaring.

Major League Baseball suspended the Miami Marlins' season through Sunday because of an outbreak that has spread to at least 15 of the team's players, and a series of games this week between the New York Yankees and Philadelphia Phillies was called off as a precaution.

States like Florida, Arizona and Texas are in dire condi-

tion, and the virus also has been spreading farther north in recent days, causing alarm among public health officials who fear states are not doing enough to avoid catastrophic outbreaks like those in the Sun Belt.

"We are watching very carefully California, Arizona, Texas, and most of Florida," President Donald Trump said at a news conference. "It's starting to head down to the right direction."

Florida, however, reported another one-day high for COVID-19 deaths, with 191, while Arizona recorded 104, and Arkansas had a daily record of 20.

While the White House has begun to feel cautiously opti-

mistic that the resurgence has begun to stabilize in parts of the Southwest, fears are growing about the potential for a significant uptick in the Midwest, including Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana and Colorado, according to a Trump administration official who wasn't authorized to publicly discuss private conversations.

It's fueled largely by a rise in cases among young adults, who have been hitting bars, restaurants and health clubs again.

Over the past two weeks, Wisconsin's rolling average number of new confirmed cases has increased by 31%. Minnesota reported its largest one-day case count Sunday, with more than 860 cases.

The virus is blamed for over

4.3 million confirmed infections and about 150,000 deaths in the U.S., according to the tally kept by Johns Hopkins University. Globally, more than 16.5 million people have been infected, and more than 655,000 have died. The numbers are thought to be higher because of limits on testing.

Republican governors in Tennessee, Mississippi, Missouri and South Carolina have all resisted calls to close bars and gyms or issue statewide mask requirements, though local officials have imposed some of their own restrictions.

"My reaction is that I'm disturbed. I'm disturbed by it," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-diseases expert.

Oregon governor: US agents to start leaving Portland

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Federal agents who have clashed with protesters in Portland, Ore., will begin a "phased withdrawal" from Oregon's largest city, Gov. Kate Brown said Wednesday.

Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said in a statement the plan negotiated with Brown over the last 24 hours includes a "robust presence" of Oregon State Police in downtown Portland.

"State and local law enforcement will begin securing properties and streets, especially those surrounding federal proper-

ties, that have been under nightly attack for the past two months," Wolf said.

The agents will begin leaving the city's downtown area on Thursday, Brown said.

Before departing Wednesday for a trip to Texas, President Donald Trump insisted federal troops would not leave Portland until local authorities "secured their city."

"Either they're gonna clean up Portland soon, or the federal government is going up, and we're gonna do it for them. So either they clean out Portland — the governor and the mayor, who are weak — either they clean out Portland or we're going in to

do it for them," he said.

The U.S. Marshals Service and Department of Homeland Security had been weighing this week whether to send in more agents. The marshals were taking steps to identify up to 100 additional personnel who could go in case they were needed to relieve or supplement the deputy marshals who work in Oregon, spokesman Drew Wade said.

The nightly Portland protests began after George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police and have grown to include the presence of federal agents.

Officials: Russia behind spread of virus disinformation

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Russian intelligence services are using a trio of English-language websites to spread disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, seeking to exploit a crisis that America is struggling to contain ahead of the presidential election in November, U.S. officials said Tuesday.

Two Russians who have held senior roles in Moscow's military intelligence service known as the GRU have been identified as responsible for a

disinformation effort meant to reach American and Western audiences, U.S. government officials said. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The information had previously been classified, but officials said it had been downgraded so they could more freely discuss it.

Officials said they were doing so now to sound the alarm about the particular websites and to expose what they say is a clear link between the sites and Rus-

sian intelligence.

Between late May and early July, one of the officials said, the websites singled out Tuesday published about 150 articles about the pandemic response, including coverage aimed either at propping up Russia or denigrating the U.S.

Among the headlines that caught the attention of U.S. officials were "Russia's Counter COVID-19 Aid to America Advances Case for Detente," which suggested that Russia had given urgent and substantial aid to the U.S. to fight the

pandemic, and "Beijing Believes COVID-19 is a Biological Weapon," which amplified statements by the Chinese.

The disclosure comes as the spread of disinformation, including by Russia, is an urgent concern heading into November's presidential election as U.S. officials look to avoid a repeat of the 2016 contest, when a Russian troll farm launched a covert social media campaign to divide American public opinion and to favor then-candidate Donald Trump over Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Pandemic chops Pecan Festival

SC FLORENCE — Organizers for the annual South Carolina Pecan Festival said this year's gathering will be canceled to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Organizers held off on cancelling the festival for as long as possible to see if daily reported COVID-19 cases would decrease in the state, The Florence Morning News reported.

The event, originally scheduled for Nov. 6 this year, usually draws 50,000 people to downtown Florence.

"Our S.C. Pecan Festival committee plans to use this time to continue to work on preparations for our return in 2021, bolder and more vibrant than before," festival chairman George D. Jebaily said.

110-ton sculpture moves to new home

IA IOWA CITY — The owner of a 20-foot-tall, 110-ton limestone statue succeeded in a slow process recently of moving the sculpture across a street in Iowa City.

The statue, called "Man on a Bench," had gazed out over a nature preserve in Iowa City for five years. But the Cedar Rapids Gazette reported that after its sculptor and the property owner, Doug Paul, completed a land swap with the education organization ACT, the statue had to be moved across a street.

Stonemason JB Barnhouse oversaw the move with the help of crane and excavation companies. They detached 11 blocks of carved Indiana limestone that had been held together by stainless steel pins and managed to haul the statue to its new home, one block at a time.

Suspected drunken driver hits building

ND GRAND FORK — A suspected drunken driver crashed into a Grand Forks apartment building, punching a hole in the wall of a first-floor apartment bedroom and landing in the kitchen. The tenants fortunately were not home at the time of the crash.

Officials said the 2005 Kia van was still running when first responders arrived. A juvenile male was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence, reckless driving and being an unqualified driver. He was not seriously injured, KVLY-TV reported.

Man injured after alligator seen at park

MS BRANDON — A man was injured during an encounter with an alligator near a Mississippi waterfront park where several other alligators have been removed this month, according to wildlife officials.

The man was swimming with a group in the Ross Barnett Reservoir at Lakeshore Park when an alligator was spotted nearby, according to Ricky Flynt, the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks' alligator program coordinator.

The group left the water, but later got back in after the alligator disappeared, Flynt said. The official said the alligator was likely waiting under a pier and swam between the man's legs when he reentered the water.

The man suffered three scratches and Wildlife Department employees returned to the area that night and captured and euthanized the alligator.

Officer shoots fleeing driver in leg

FL JACKSONVILLE — A police officer in Jacksonville shot a man in the leg after he fled from a vehicle involved in a high speed chase, officials said.

Officers had stopped the car for a red light violation when it sped away at speeds between 90 and 100 mph, Jacksonville Sheriff's Chief T.K. Waters said during a news conference.

The injured man was in stable condition, Waters said.

Waters said officers used "stop sticks" to eventually stop the fleeing vehicle. That's when the driver got out and ran, he said. An officer followed the man around a building and fired one shot. No one else was injured.

Nature preserve shut due to overuse, trash

IN WILLIAMSPORT — The Nature Conservancy closed a western Indiana nature preserve that features dramatic walled canyons because visitors flocking to the scenic area have overused the site and trashed it with litter.

In early July, crews with the nonprofit organization put up chains and felled some trees to block the entrance to the Fall Creek Gorge Nature Preserve.

A section of the preserve had been in "heavy use" for years as a destination for hikers, said Dawn Slack, director of stewardship for The Nature Conservancy in Indiana.

Lately, whether driven by people looking to escape outside during the coronavirus pandemic or for some other reason, she said that traffic — and all that comes with that — had increased significantly.

Wright-designed home moved about 800 feet

IL GLENCOE — A suburban Chicago home designed by Frank Lloyd Wright was relocated about 800 feet down the road — a short move that's part of a local saga over the historic structure.

The one-story frame house known as the Booth Cottage was built in 1913 and designed by Wright as a temporary home for Sherman and Elizabeth Booth, according to Landmarks Illinois, a state historic preservation organization. Sherman Booth was an attorney and Elizabeth an influential suffragist.

The home was threatened with demolition last year after it was purchased by a couple who wanted to build a new home on the property, the Chicago Tribune reported.

The Glencoe Park District agreed to a 99-year land lease with the Glencoe Historical Society for a nearby park site, for \$1 per year in rent.

Nonprofit turning trashed bikes into art

MA METHUEN — A nonprofit that cleans trash from the Merrimack and other rivers in Massachusetts has figured out what to do with some of the many bicycles it fishes from the depths — turn them into works of art.

Using the imagination and ideas of volunteers for the Methuen-based Clean River Project, the bikes have been "upcycled," painted in bright colors and adorned with flowers.

The group asks for a donation of \$100 or more for the reconditioned bikes and all proceeds offset the project's operating costs. So far, they have sold three bikes.

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NBA returns after 4½-month hiatus

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Games were canceled. Practice facilities were shuttered. A season ended unceremoniously for eight teams. The draft process was delayed, as was free agency. Some players tested positive for the coronavirus. Many more took to the streets and used their voices to demand justice and equality as racism and police brutality sparked a nationwide conversation.

The world has changed since the NBA stopped on March 11.

For 22 franchises, however, there is a goal that remains in place.

The NBA, at long last, is officially back. A reopening night doubleheader inside the bubble at Walt Disney World awaits Thursday, when New Orleans takes on Utah before a matchup of the two teams in the Western

Conference — the Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers.

There won't be any fans in attendance, health and safety protocols that were painstakingly written in response to the coronavirus pandemic will be paramount, and teams can't even shower in the arena after games. But after 20 weeks of waiting, wondering and worrying, the 2019-20 NBA season is ready to hit the restart button with a champion scheduled to be crowned in October.

"Nobody's life is pretty much how they planned it to be at this point with the pandemic, so you take it for what it is," Clippers forward and reigning NBA Finals MVP Kawhi Leonard said. "Everybody is happy that a champion will be crowned this year, and if that's the 2020 championship, then we want it. You know, that's how I look at it.

This is what the layout is, as far as to go out there and complete this journey."

The field for the 16-team playoff bracket that will be finalized next month is already largely filled — 12 of the 22 teams at Disney have clinched spots and Dallas is on the brink of another one. It leaves three teams vying for two spots in the Eastern Conference, and six teams fighting for one spot in the Western Conference.

For the front-runners, the NBA-leading Milwaukee Bucks and West-leading Lakers, the eight remaining games before the playoffs are about tuning up their games. For most of the other teams that have clinched berths, it's about securing the best possible playoff seed. And for the hopefuls, it's about finding a way to get into the field and stay at Disney at least a couple of weeks longer than

planned.

"We want to get back to work," said San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich, whose Spurs will aim to become the first franchise in league history to make 23 consecutive playoff appearances. "We want to do what we're all used to doing. We want to do as much as we can, safely, to energize the country, to play the games we all love. And as long as we can do that safely, it's a big win for everybody."

Starting Friday and running through Aug. 14, there will be at least four and sometimes as many as seven games per day, spread out over a three-arena corner of the Disney complex. There will be many instances where three games are happening at once. And there will be days that have games running for more than 10 consecutive hours.

Bench energy expected to be loud during restart

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Dion Waiters took an open three-pointer and about 75 feet away, a dozen or so of his Los Angeles Lakers teammates all seemed to leap from their seats in unison.

"SAY CHEESE!" they yelled, dragging out the last syllable for effect.

At Staples Center back in Los Angeles, such a yell would have been heard by the Jack Nicholson-types in the super-expensive seats. But at the NBA restart, where the only fans inside the building are the ones wearing uniforms, that sort of enthusiasm is most definitely getting noticed.

At the scrimmage games at Walt Disney World over the past few days, bench energy has been real — and often loud.

"It's a bunch of different things that they'll be screaming," said Waiters, whose teammates were playing off his 'Philly Cheese' nickname with the salute they directed his way. "But it feels good. That's

the only thing I got. Some guys like myself, we like to play off the crowd and their enjoyment. But the teammates, they're there, supporting you. It's a win-win."

There will be some crowd-noise elements when the seeding games — essentially the resumption of the regular season — begin Thursday night. Music will blare and the 17-foot video boards surrounding three sides of the courts in each arena will even sometimes show real fans who logged in to "cheer" for their team.

But the biggest source of cheerleading will come from the benches, and some coaches are even encouraging players not in the game to be active that way.

"To reference that and try to coach it and try to praise it, it's on my mind," Philadelphia coach Brett Brown said. "To ignore it and not reference it, I don't do that."

Brown's 76ers had the NBA's best home record this season, going 29-2 in games at Wells

Fargo Center. He'd love to see his players replicate that energy in all the neutral-site games that will be played the rest of the way this season.

"You have to decide where you want to spend your money and that one is important to me," Brown said. "You're talking about our spirit enduring. Anything you can do to help that — point it out, praise it, coach it — is on my mind."

When Deandre Ayton of the Phoenix Suns made a three-pointer in a scrimmage on Sunday against Boston, something he's never done in a "real" game during his two NBA seasons, some of his teammates leaped over the video board at the corner of their bench and onto the floor in celebration.

Hours later, in that same bench area for the next game, Carmelo Anthony of the Portland Trail Blazers spent much of the fourth quarter leaning on the top of that video screen and barking out encouragement. And when little-used players get a chance to score in these

scrimmages, their teammates have made sure they hear the instant celebration.

"I've always thought, for the most part, benches do that anyway," Los Angeles Clippers coach Doc Rivers said. "I just think you don't notice it because the fans are making so much noise. But good teams' benches are alive, very active, very verbal — probably too verbal sometimes."

Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said the bench activity can help what's happening on the court and has encouraged the Heat to "be mindful" of those situations.

"When the energy or momentum swings, you don't want it to be quiet," Spoelstra said. "We need to be intentional about doing that."

Rivers is certain of one thing: Games won't seem quiet.

"I think the NBA will keep figuring out ways of creating noise," Rivers said. "I know they don't want to hear the coaches yelling. So, if I'm them, I would create more noise."

MLB idles Marlins through weekend

Associated Press

MIAMI — Major League Baseball suspended the Miami Marlins' season through Sunday, and the Philadelphia Phillies will remain idled by the coronavirus pandemic until Friday, while the rest of baseball forges ahead with trepidation.

"There's real fear, there's real anxiety for me, for all my teammates," Milwaukee Brewers slugger Ryan Braun said Tuesday. "I think we've found it very difficult to focus on baseball at all the last couple of

days."

In the wake of a virus outbreak that infected half the Marlins' team, Braun said MLB players are constantly assessing whether they should keep playing.

But MLB came up with a patchwork schedule for the rest of this week and said that among more than 6,400 tests conducted since Friday, there were no new positives involving on-field personnel from any team other than the Marlins.

In a statement, MLB said it wanted to allow the Marlins time to focus on providing care

for their players and to plan for a resumption of play next week. MLB also postponed the three remaining games in this week's Phillies-Yankees series.

The Marlins remained stranded in Philadelphia, where they played last weekend. The Phillies-Yankees games were postponed "out of an abundance of caution," MLB said, although no Phillies players have tested positive.

The Marlins had been scheduled to play at Baltimore on Wednesday and Thursday. Instead, the Yankees will play at Baltimore on those days.

Miami's three home games this weekend against Washington were postponed. Nationals players had voted against making the trip, manager Dave Martinez said.

"We all decided that it was probably unsafe to go there," Martinez said.

Additional MLB rescheduling during the week of Aug. 3 will be announced later this week. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo offered up his state to any team needing a place to play.

MLB roundup

Dodgers top Astros in a testy rematch

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Benches cleared Tuesday night during Los Angeles' 5-2 win over Houston in the first game between the teams since it was revealed that the Astros illegally stole signs en route to a 2017 championship that came at the Dodgers' expense in the World Series.

The fracas occurred after Dodgers reliever Joe Kelly threw high-and-tight pitches to Astros stars Alex Bregman and Carlos Correa in the sixth inning.

Kelly threw an errant breaking ball over Correa's head. Correa, who homered and finished with three hits, took off his batting helmet and stared Kelly down before continuing the at-bat.

Kelly struck out Correa, then stuck out his tongue and made a face in his direction. Correa started walking toward him and the players exchanged words, prompting the benches to clear in the first such incident of this pandemic-delayed season. There was plenty of yelling and crowding — outlawed as MLB tries to play a 60-game season amid the pandemic — but no pushing or punches thrown.

Cubs 8, Reds 5: Javier Baez homered twice, doubled and scored on a deft dive to the plate as Chicago extended its opening surge by winning at Cincinnati.

Alec Mills pitched six solid innings for the Cubs, who have won four of their first five games and scored first in each one. Jason Kipnis' triple — Shogo Akiyama lost it in the sun — got Chicago going again.

Mills (1-0) added to the Cubs' stretch of impressive starts, holding the Reds to two hits in six innings. Chicago starters have a 1.80 ERA and a .131 opponent batting average this season.

Diamondbacks 4, Rangers 1: Merrill Kelly took a no-hitter into the seventh inning before giving up a home run as Arizona won at Texas.

Rougned Odor's one-out homer in the seventh was the first of three hits off Kelly (1-0), who struck out seven and walked one in 7.2 innings.

Angels 10, Mariners 2: Anthony Rendon hit a two-run homer and reached base three times in his debut with his new team, and Albert Pujols added his 657th career homer in host Los Angeles' victory over Seattle.

Max Stassi hit a three-run homer and Justin Upton drove in two runs as the Angels won their home opener for only the second time in eight years.

Blue Jays 5, Nationals 1: The reigning World Series champions dropped to 1-4 in the pandemic-shortened season with a loss to visiting Toronto that included two outfielders colliding on a homer by Toronto's Vladimir Guerrero Jr., two errors by Starlin Castro that led to three unearned runs, and just one hit for Washington after the third inning.

The Nationals have lost three consecutive games, scoring a total of four runs.

Rays 5, Braves 2: Yoshi Tsutsugo hit a two-run single during a five-run third inning, and host Tampa Bay beat Atlanta

for its fourth straight win. Yonny Chirinos pitched four effective innings for the Rays.

Pirates 8, Brewers 6: Adam Frazier hit a tiebreaking two-run homer in the eighth inning and host Pittsburgh rallied past Milwaukee.

Mets 8, Red Sox 3: J.D. Davis banged a two-run homer off the Pesky Pole, and left-hander David Peterson pitched 5.2 innings to win his major league debut and New York sent host Boston to its fourth consecutive loss.

Indians 4-5, White Sox 3-3: Carlos Santana hit a three-run homer, Oscar Mercado had a two-run single and host Cleveland competed a doubleheader sweep of Chicago.

In the first game, Francisco Lindor and Bradley Zimmer each homered and drove in two runs.

Twins 6, Cardinals 3: Josh Donaldson homered and drove in two runs in his Target Field debut with his new team, Jorge Polanco hit a two-run shot and host Minnesota beat St. Louis.

Tigers 4, Royals 3: Jonathan Schoop and Christin Stewart each hit a two-run homer in the third inning to lift host Detroit over Kansas City.

Padres 5, Giants 3: Fernando Tatis Jr. hit a three-run homer, Wil Myers added a two-run drive and San Diego spoiled San Francisco's home opener.

Rockies 8, Athletics 3: Sam Hilliard homered and Antonio Senzatela pitched out of an early jam on his way to a rare road win as Colorado beat Oakland.

Canada tries to end Stanley Cup drought

Associated Press

Ken Dryden became so accustomed to winning championships with the Montreal Canadiens the Hockey Hall of Fame goalie has difficulty assessing Canada's Stanley Cup drought.

"It is bizarre," Dryden recently told The Associated Press by phone from his home in Toronto.

"If you go back to the records, I remember, from 1944 to 1979, Canadian teams won 24 times or something," he said. "It's just amazing that was the case. And then from 1993, not at all. It is just a weird anomaly."

Canada's Cup total over that 35-year span is actually 27, with Dryden and the Canadiens claiming six of them from 1971-79.

But who's counting?

"Yeah, it's time," Dryden said. "It's been time for quite some time for a Canadian team to win. And I would think it would be fantastic if that happened."

And on Canadian ice, no less.

The NHL playoffs are scheduled to be held exclusively in Canada, with games set to open in Toronto and Edmonton, Alberta, on Saturday. Not since 1925 has every NHL playoff game been held north of the border, when Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria were in the four-team mix.

And yet, even with six of Canada's seven franchises competing in this year's 24-team format, there is no guarantee one of them will become the first in 27 years to win the Cup since Montreal defeated the Los Angeles Kings in five games.

The streak is so long that 22-year-old New York Islanders prospect Kieffer Bellows wasn't even born when his father, Brian, hoisted the Cup for Montreal.

"We've talked about it sometimes," said Bellows, who was born in Minnesota, where his family maintained an off-season home. "Being from Canada (my father) is going to cheer for Montreal and stuff. He's always going to have a soft place for them in his heart."

The same goes for Philadelphia first-year coach Alain Vigneault. As former coach of the Canucks, Vigneault was in the most recent position of ending Canada's drought in 2011, when the Canucks lost the Final in Game 7 to Boston — also the last time the Cup was awarded in Canada.

"There's no doubt that in Canada, hockey's the No. 1 sport. You can probably say everybody's focused on it 24 hours a day," said Vigneault, whose Flyers will compete in a round-robin series to determine first-round playoff seeding. "There was obviously positive pressure in Vancouver I felt. And there's some positive pressure here in Philly."

Where once a Cup drought such as this would've made a significant dent in a passionate hockey nation's psyche, the same can't be said today.

Dryden, who went on to enjoy a successful career as an author, scholar and politician, believes Canada is a far more self-confident nation.

"Canada in 2020 is different from the Canada in 2000

or 1980," said Dryden, who also noted how Canadians feared they were losing a grip on hockey with the NHL expanding into nontraditional U.S. markets and the Colorado Avalanche winning the Cup in 1996, their first season after relocating from Quebec City.

"We are a much more self-assured place than we used to be," Dryden said. "We're good at a lot of things. And we know that we have created something pretty special here."

Important as hockey is to Canada, it is no longer the everything it once may have been, Tory added, noting how the Toronto Raptors captivated the nation in winning the NBA championship last year.

The game once predominantly played by Canadians is also now awash with American and European stars, with German Leon Draisaitl and Russian Artemi Panarin vying with Canada's Nathan MacKinnon for MVP honors this year.

"Those things could've shaken us a lot, and maybe did. But I don't think that's the case now," Dryden said.

NFL camps eye baseball; opt-outs dominate news

Associated Press

Brady and Brees aren't the B words dominating the opening of NFL training camps.

Try baseball and babysitting.

As veterans report Tuesday for COVID-19 testing, with on-field work far on the horizon for now, eyeballs are focused on the pandemic issues in Major League Baseball. The coronavirus outbreak with the Miami Marlins, who won't be playing any games the rest of this week, is foremost in the football world.

"You know, for what's going on in baseball right now, it affects everyone," Jets quarterback Sam Darnold said. "I mean, because you look at the game the Marlins had and, you know, they affect the players on

the other team. ... There's no good way of really going about it. And you've got to start canceling games.

"So it's just a matter of what the league wants to do. And, if people start getting or contracting the virus within the NFL, it'll be interesting to see how the NFL wants to handle it."

Titans coach Mike Vrabel said he is not using the word worried, but "obviously, (we're) always very concerned about the health and safety of our players and their family and the coaches and our staff in this building. But until we see how our protocols and our plan that the NFL and the players association worked so hard to put into place, till we see how those are going to function and work, we can't make any changes. We have to follow the plan."

Nobody knows if the plan will work, of course.

Falcons coach Dan Quinn said baseball players having positive tests led to the question of "How does travel affect that and the testing when you go on the road and when you don't?"

Quinn said he was enjoying baseball's return, "so I was disappointed to see the outbreak had affected games being played. So, it's definitely something we all discuss for sure."

What Broncos President Joe Ellis won't be discussing is keeping tabs of where his players go and what they do. At least not yet.

"We can't control what happens when they go home. We're not going to babysit them and spy on them or anything like that," he said. "They're grown-ups. We'll just ask them to con-

duct themselves appropriately to take care of themselves such as they'll be taking care of the whole organization, their teammates specifically, and their coaches. And we've got some good guys on the team I think that can help get that message through to them."

The biggest news from NFL teams Tuesday dealt with opt-outs. Any player who decides not to play this season will get a \$150,000 stipend if it is a voluntary move, and \$350,000 if it is for pre-existing medical reasons.

Opting out were several key members of the New England Patriots: linebacker Dont'a Hightower, a defensive leader; safety Patrick Chung; offensive tackle Marcus Cannon; running back Brandon Bolden; and fullback Dan Vitale.