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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Data points to more struggles for economy

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A grim picture emerged Thursday of a U.S. economy that endured a record-shattering plunge last quarter and is struggling to rebound as the coronavirus keeps forcing more layoffs.

The economy shrank at a dizzying 32.9% annual rate in the April-June quarter, when the viral outbreak shut down businesses, throwing tens of millions out of work and sending unemployment surging to nearly 15%. The government's estimate of the second-quarter fall in the gross domestic product was the sharpest such drop on records dating back to 1947. The pre-

vious worst quarterly contraction, a 10% drop, occurred in 1958 during the Eisenhower administration.

So dizzying was the fall that most analysts expect the economy to produce a sharp bounce-back in the current July-September quarter. Yet with the rate of confirmed coronavirus cases having surged in a majority of states, more businesses being forced to pull back on reopenings and the Republican-controlled Senate proposing to scale back government aid to the unemployed, the economy could worsen in the months ahead.

In a sign of how weakened the job market remains, more than 1.4 million laid-off Americans

applied for unemployment benefits last week. It was the 19th consecutive week that more than 1 million people have applied for jobless aid. Before the coronavirus erupted in March, the number of Americans seeking unemployment checks had never exceeded 700,000 in any week, even during the Great Recession.

An additional 830,000 people applied for unemployment benefits under a new program that extends eligibility to self-employed and gig workers for the first time. In all, the government says about 30 million people are receiving some form of jobless aid, although that figure might be inflated by double-counting by some states.

The pain could soon intensify: A supplemental \$600 in weekly federal unemployment benefits is expiring, and Congress is squabbling about extending the aid, which will probably be done at some reduced level of payment.

The plunge in GDP “underscores the unprecedented hit to the economy from the pandemic,” said Andrew Hunter, senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics. “We expect it will take years for that damage to be fully recovered.”

A resurgence of viral cases in the South and the West has forced many bars, restaurants, beauty salons and other businesses to close again or reduce occupancy.

Marine Corps tankers say farewell to armor

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

Marine Corps M1A1 Abrams tanks of the 2nd Tank Battalion left Camp Lejeune, N.C., for the last time this week as part of the service's sweeping modernization plan that envisions a more agile force.

Tank units on the East and West coasts shuttered this month and began hauling their armor to military depots, the service said.

The Marines will eventually divest of all three of its active tank battalions as it moves from a “second land army” back to its maritime roots of defending ships at sea, island-hopping and battling for contested coastlines, in preparation for potential conflict with near-peer adversaries like China.

“We have sufficient evidence to conclude that this capability,

despite its long and honorable history in the wars of the past, is operationally unsuitable for our highest-priority challenges in the future,” Commandant Gen. David Berger wrote of the tanks in a March plan for the service's overhaul. “Heavy ground armor capability will continue to be provided by the U.S. Army.”

The Corps also plans to trim some 12,000 troops from its ranks by 2030, eliminate law enforcement units, reduce and restructure infantry battalions, slash the number of cannon artillery battalions and disband many manned aviation units.

It will instead build up light armored reconnaissance units, drone squadrons and long-range precision strike capabilities — plans call for the tripling of rocket artillery battalions — among other changes.

And the service isn't dallying. Early this month, the 1st Tank Battalion at Twentynine Palms, Calif., said goodbye to its tanks. Weeks later, Alpha Company, 4th Tank Battalion cased its colors down the road at Camp Pendleton, the first of the Marine Corps Reserve battalion's six companies expected to do so by the end of 2021.

Hundreds of Marines in tank units will be able to change specialties or transfer into the Army to continue serving as tankers, and those with at least 15 years of service may apply for early retirement, the service has said.

“Remember that our tanks were just weapon systems, albeit a damn fine weapon system,” Capt. Mark Rothcock, Alpha Company commander, said at a July 18 deactivation ceremony.

“You individual Marines were always the key to the company's success.”

On the East Coast, 2nd Tank Battalion's Charlie Company cased its colors last Friday, where company commander Capt. John Ferguson recalled the role its tanks played in the second battle for Fallujah in Iraq in 2004.

The decision to do away with tanks does not diminish their value in past conflicts, the service's top officials have said. They just won't be a part of the Corps' future.

“If I were to use one trait to describe the Marine Corps, it would be adaptable,” said 4th Tank Battalion commander Lt. Col. Michael D. O'Quin, citing the service's history, during Alpha Company's deactivation.

“Now is no different. We will adapt.”

Relocating troops in Germany will take lots of time, money

BY JOHN VANDIVER
AND MARCUS KLOECKNER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Removing 12,000 troops from Germany will likely mean several base closures and cost billions of dollars for an operation that could begin in weeks but take years to complete.

The realignment, triggered by President Donald Trump's call to move some of the roughly 36,000 troops out of the country, would impose immediate costs rather than savings, military officials said as plans were first detailed Wednesday.

Along with 5,600 troops heading to other bases in Europe under the proposal and about 6,400 heading home, planners must determine how to move thousands more military family members and civilian workers, find them housing and expand Defense Department school capacities, among other challenges.

They would also need to establish potentially costly new operations centers to allow U.S. European Command and other headquarters to seamlessly continue working.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters Wednesday from the Pentagon that “probably the area most affected would be the Stuttgart area,” where the U.S. military has been since defeating the Nazis in World War II.

The plan proposes moving EUCOM and its component, U.S. Special Operations Command Europe, from Stuttgart to Mons, Belgium, to operate alongside NATO's command.

U.S. Africa Command could also leave Stuttgart, but no decision has been made on where it would go, Esper said.

EUCOM's Patch Barracks, U.S. Africa Command's Kelley Barracks and garrison headquarters in nearby Boeblingen, where a \$100 million school complex opened a few years

ago, all could be vacated.

The U.S. could also pull out from rural areas like Grafenwoehr, Ansbach and Vilseck in Bavaria. That would likely mean mothballing sites or turning them over to the Germans.

Some moves could begin in weeks, but it's unlikely the initial wave will involve EUCOM, said Capt. Wendy Snyder, the command's spokeswoman.

“A lot of planning is needed for HQ moves, so we are a ways down the road,” Snyder said in an email.

Stuttgart Lord Mayor Fritz Kuhn called the proposed troop cuts “punitive action against an ally” that “upended decades of close cooperation” between Germany and the U.S.

But he and other German politicians were hopeful that the plan would be reversed.

That remains a possibility, with bipartisan resistance to the idea in Congress and the U.S. presidential election less than 100 days away.

Okinawa Marines announce 5 new cases

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND AYA ICHIHASHI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The Marine Corps on Okinawa reported five new coronavirus cases Thursday, bringing the total from two clusters discovered after the Fourth of July weekend to 232.

Meanwhile, the number of new infections outside the gates continued to climb. Okinawa on Thursday reported 49 new cases, according to a prefectural health official. Okinawa on Wednesday reported 44 cases, the highest daily toll since the pandemic began.

The Marines said four of its new cases had close contact with infected individuals at Camp Hansen; the fifth new case had contact with someone infected at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, according to a Facebook post Thursday by Marine Corps Installations Pacific.

The new patients have been in quarantine for over a week and were tested as part of the Marine Corps' policy to test all close contacts placed in quarantine. The Marines did not specify whether the individuals are service members, Defense Department civilian employees, contractors or family members.

“We continue to test large groups of individuals and have been re-testing many already placed in [restriction of movement] before they return to work,” the Facebook post said. “We are also phasing in a new policy to test all inbound personnel and will notify those who will be tested.”

Also Thursday, two Japanese base workers tested positive for the coronavirus — a Camp Foster gate guard and an employee at MCAS Futenma, a prefectural health spokesman said.

Navy spouses create kid's books on bases

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Some folks spent their coronavirus lockdown bingeing on Netflix and home shopping; Navy spouses Sarah Murphy and Amy Dobbins wrote a book.

Between January and June, a period that encompassed a stringent, three-month, stay-at-home order at Yokosuka, home of the 7th Fleet, the women created “Good Morning Yokosuka,” the first title in a series for military children. The book went on sale during a virtual unveiling Tuesday evening.

The pair dreamed up their brand, “Good Morning Military,” at a picnic table outside their neighboring on-base townhomes.

“Due to the coronavirus, that's all we did,” Murphy said. “We just sat and talked about it constantly.”

The self-published children's book includes lifelike illustrations of key places on base and in the surrounding Japanese community on 16

pages of thick paperboard.

The inspiration for the 6-inch-by-6-inch board book came from bedtime stories Murphy read to her four children, she said.

A variety of children's books help them learn about the world around them, but the two women found a hole in the market for a book about life on military bases.

“We want to give military children a really unique keepsake that they can share with other people and say, ‘This is a really special part of our growing up,’” Murphy said on Tuesday.

The concept soon became their passion project, and from January to June they dedicated their time to developing the first book.

With the help of Murphy's husband, Cmdr. Micah Murphy, commander of Afloat Training Group Western Pacific, the team immediately sold about a fourth of their stock of 500 books in less than an hour.

They said they plan to expand the series to include military bases across the world and from all service branches.

Tropical Storm Isaias batters Puerto Rico

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Tropical Storm Isaias battered Puerto Rico on Thursday as it continued on a track toward the U.S. mainland, unleashing small landslides and causing widespread flooding and power outages on an island still recovering from previous hurricanes and ongoing earthquakes.

Especially hard hit by the storm's maximum sustained winds of 60 mph was Puerto Rico's southern region, which is still being shaken by daily tremors. Santos Seda, mayor of the southwest town of Guanica, told The Associated Press that he has received reports of downed trees and inundated neighborhoods where earthquake-damaged homes still stand.

"The emotional state of people is dete-

riorating more every day," he said, adding that crews will fan out to assess damage once the weather clears.

Isaias was located about 100 miles west-southwest of Ponce, Puerto Rico, and about 160 miles southeast of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center. It was moving west northwest at 21 mph, and the center was expected to move over Hispaniola later on Thursday and near the southeastern Bahamas by early Friday.

Minor damage was reported elsewhere in Puerto Rico, where tens of thousands of people still use tarps as roofs since Hurricane Maria hit as a powerful Category 4 storm in September 2017.

Jose Pagan, 22, who lives in the eastern mountain town of Juncos, said his power

went out before dawn.

"I didn't think it was going to be this strong," he said of the storm, adding that his home is slightly flooded. "It's a rather difficult experience because it reminds us of Maria."

The hurricane center said Isaias, for now, is not expected to become a hurricane before reaching the U.S. mainland.

"Isaias is sending some mixed signals," the forecast discussion stated. "Model forecasts are showing a complex evolution of the tropical cyclone during the next day or two."

Tropical storm warnings were issued for Puerto Rico, the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, the Turks and Caicos Islands and portions of the Dominican Republic, Haiti and the Bahamas.

Wash. governor slams military testing impact on orcas

Associated Press

SEATTLE — The governor of Washington state and other state officials have criticized a Navy military testing program that would potentially harm endangered orcas if approved.

The planned military exercises include testing torpedoes, firing projectiles at seven times the speed of sound, piloting mine-detecting undersea drones, deploying underwater sonar and exploding bombs up to 1,000 pounds in waters from northern California to Alaska, including the outer coast of Washington state, The Seattle Times reported.

Democratic Washington state Gov. Jay Inslee said in a letter earlier this month that the Navy needs a "more robust avoidance and mitigation strategy" for the program

to protect marine mammals, particularly orcas, from harm caused by federal officials charged with protecting marine mammals and threatened wildlife.

The program would not allow any southern resident orcas to be killed, but would subject several other marine mammals to a wide range of disturbances and harm, including death. That could include seals, humpbacks, gray whales and others, according to Navy estimates.

The program could also interfere with orcas' hunting, feeding, socializing and breeding. The Navy increased its estimate of the number of times southern resident orcas would be disturbed by the program from two to 51 times a year.

The Navy is aware of potential harm to the whales, and is working to avoid or min-

imize further effects on the species, said Julianne Stanford, environmental public affairs specialist for the Navy Region Northwest.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has determined the impact from the proposed seven-year testing program to be "negligible" and is drafting a final rule for the program's implementation, scheduled to begin in November. However, several state officials disagree.

Approving the program would be "gross neglect" of NOAA's management duties, a joint letter from state agency directors said earlier this month, including the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Natural Resources, the state Office of Recreation and Conservation and others.

Pompeo: Russian officials warned of all threats to US

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Thursday that he and his team have warned Russian officials about all threats that Russia poses to Americans and U.S. interests in various parts of the world.

Pompeo would not say whether he had specifically raised allegations that Russia was paying bounties to Taliban fighters to kill American troops in Afghanistan, but said the discussions involved all manner of threats. Pompeo told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that threats from Russia against Americans in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere had

been covered. Pompeo's comments came a day after President Donald Trump told an interviewer he had not raised the bounty allegations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Among the Russian officials, Pompeo said he has discussed threats generally with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as has the U.S. ambassador to Russia, John Sullivan.

"Yes, I can assure you that each time I have spoken to Foreign Minister Lavrov, I have raised all of the issues that put any Americans at risk," Pompeo said in a response to a question from the committee's top Democrat, Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey. "We have raised this at my level

and not only at my level."

Pompeo declined to say whether he would recommend that Trump raise the matter with Putin but said the Russian leader understood full well the U.S. position. Pompeo pointed to military action taken against several hundred Russian mercenaries who were advancing on American forces in Syria in 2019. Those fighters "are no longer on this planet," Pompeo noted.

Menendez, a vocal critic of Pompeo's, challenged Pompeo about the Russian threats and Wednesday's announcement by the Trump administration about the redeployment of several thousand U.S. troops from Germany.

House orders broad mask mandate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Capitol officials issued broad new mask requirements Wednesday after a Republican member of Congress tested positive for the coronavirus. The member, Texas Rep. Louie Gohmert, often shunned wearing masks and was known to vote without one.

Pelosi announced Wednesday evening that all members will be required to wear a mask when voting on the House floor and that one will be provided if anyone forgets. Several hours later, the House sergeant-at-arms and the Capitol's top physician issued an order requiring masks inside House office buildings, with few exceptions. That mandate went into effect at 8 a.m. Thursday.

Pelosi said failure to wear a mask on the House floor is a "serious breach of decorum" for which members could be removed from the chamber. Members will be able to temporarily remove them while speaking, however. In the House office buildings, people can remove them to eat, drink and give interviews, among a few other specific situations.

Gohmert tested positive just before he was scheduled to travel to his home state with President Donald Trump. He was forced to cancel his plans and was immediately criticized by colleagues for not always wearing a mask. "A selfish act," one lawmaker said.

Gohmert, 66, one of the House's most conservative and outspoken members, told a Texas news station that he tested positive before boarding Air Force One and planned to self-quarantine. He is at least the 10th member of Congress known to have tested positive for the coronavirus.

Alaska

JUNEAU — Nonresident travelers to Alaska will need to show they tested negative for COVID-19 shortly before arriving as part of an effort aimed at minimizing cases and preserv-

ing testing supplies and protective gear, Gov. Mike Dunleavy said.

"We're not trying to make this difficult for folks to come here," Dunleavy said during a Tuesday evening news conference. "We just want to make sure that we are taking care of Alaskans first."

The changes take effect Aug. 11 and will require nonresidents arrive with negative results from a test taken 72 hours before arrival. Dunleavy said enforcement details are being worked out.

Florida

ST. PETERSBURG — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on Wednesday continued his push to reopen schools amid pushback from the state's teachers union, as health officials reported a new record of COVID-19 deaths reported in one day.

The state's death toll from the coronavirus now stands at more than 6,330. The number of confirmed cases in Florida stood at 9,446.

One of the new cases was that of state Sen. Rob Bradley, who is his chamber's budget chief. Bradley tested positive for the coronavirus Wednesday morning. The Republican from Clay County said he has a low-grade fever and fatigue, but otherwise no serious symptoms.

The governor said parents should decide for themselves whether to send their children back into the classroom next month.

Hawaii

HONOLULU — Hawaii Gov. David Ige said Wednesday he wants to reimpose some limits on gatherings and bars to control the spread of the coronavirus as the state reported a record 109 new cases of the disease.

The governor said he agrees with Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell's plan to close bars for three weeks. He said the state is also working with the other counties to restrict unsafe behavior at bars, yet avoid a broad

shutdown.

The governor said he also wants to limit all gatherings to no more than 10 people. Exceptions would be made for schools and universities because of the safe practice protocols they will be implementing.

Louisiana

BATON ROUGE — Eleven Louisiana bar owners filed a lawsuit Wednesday against Gov. John Bel Edwards, arguing his coronavirus rules limiting bars to takeout and delivery unlawfully target one business sector and impose overly harsh restrictions.

The lawsuit names the Democratic governor and Fire Marshal Butch Browning, the chief enforcement officer of the virus regulations for Edwards, as defendants.

The bars argue Edwards cannot show a "real or substantial relation" between the closure of bars to onsite drinking and the public health crisis. They say only a small number of known COVID-19 cases have been traced to bars by the state, and they say none of those cases were tracked to their businesses.

The Louisiana Department of Health says it has traced 464 confirmed coronavirus infections to 41 bars, among the largest number of cases tracked to a specific type of business.

Michigan

LANSING — Gov. Gretchen Whitmer on Wednesday tightened pandemic restrictions in northern Michigan while letting Detroit's three casinos reopen at limited capacity after four-plus months of being closed to curb the coronavirus.

The new limits covering 32 northern counties match ones already in place in the rest of the state. Indoor gatherings in the Traverse City and Upper Peninsula regions — where the rate of new COVID-19 cases is lower — will be capped at 10 starting Friday at 12:01 a.m., down from 50. Bars must close for indoor service if more than

70% of their gross receipts are from alcohol sales.

Nevada

LAS VEGAS — State casino regulators are seeking fines against two casinos and a bowling alley in rural Nevada, alleging that employees and patrons failed to comply with requirements including a mandate for people to wear masks or face coverings to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The complaints in each case allege that during repeat visits state inspectors saw employees and patrons without face coverings or wearing them improperly.

A complaint filed Tuesday named Bowl Incline on the Lake Tahoe shoreline, where owner Curt Wegener said he was unaware until a gaming control agent visited his bowling alley bar on July 11 that Gov. Steve Sisolak had rolled back permission for bar areas to be open, effective midnight July 10.

New York

NEW YORK — Demand for rides from taxis and app-based services plummeted in New York City during the height of the coronavirus, and only slowly started to climb back up as the city re-opened, according to a report released Wednesday.

New York City's Taxi and Limousine Commission said trips started declining in mid-March and continued into April, falling as much as 84% from the pre-virus days at their lowest point.

Since then, there was a very gradual increase throughout the period until the end of June.

The city data showed yellow taxis had just over 18,000 daily trips at the end of June, compared with more than 200,000 prior to the shutdown. The high-volume for-hire services, which includes apps like Uber and Lyft, were at over 251,000 daily trips, down from almost 750,000 daily trips in February.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman who sold half ton of pot sentenced

ND BISMARCK — A Mandan woman accused of selling more than half a ton of marijuana between March 2018 and April 2019 was sentenced to probation and community service.

Megan Isaak, 25, pleaded guilty to six felony drug possession and conspiracy charges which will be reduced to misdemeanors if she successfully completes two years of probation.

Police said they found 170 pounds of marijuana in her storage shed and \$150,000 in cash in her car when she was arrested in 2019, the Bismarck Tribune reported.

Assistant Morton County State's Attorney Gabrielle Goter said Isaak's cooperation led to others being charged.

Anonymous donor gives \$20M to school

LA NEW ORLEANS — A university in Louisiana received a \$20 million donation from an anonymous donor, the largest private contribution in the school's history.

Xavier University of Louisiana said the donation will allow the school to expand scholarships and make needed investments to sustain their mission as the country's only Catholic and historically Black university. The school said it produces the largest number of Black medical school graduates than any other university in the U.S.

Lost prosthetic leg returned to skydiver

VT WEST ADDISON — A Vermont skydiver who lost his prosthetic leg during a jump has it back, thanks to a

farmer who kept an eye out for it and spotted it in a soybean field.

Double amputee Chris Marckres of Hyde Park went for a jump at Vermont Skydiving Adventures in West Addison and lost one of his prosthetic legs after leaping from the plane.

Marckres, who was harnessed to an instructor, landed safely.

He put out the word on social media that he'd lost his leg. Farmer Joe Marszalkowski saw the post and found the prosthetic in a soybean field.

Angry man doused with boiling water

NM LAS CRUCES — A New Mexico man faces charges after police said he barged in on his neighbor in an angry tirade and was dispelled only after the neighbor doused him with boiling water.

The Las Cruces Sun-News reported Joseph "JoJo" Garcia was arrested following an argument over a bathroom break.

According to police, a man was approached by a woman he knew from his neighborhood who asked him if she could use his bathroom. Shortly after, Garcia ran into the house armed with a knife and demanded to talk to his girlfriend.

The neighbor grabbed the boiling water as Garcia fled but was eventually doused with the water outside. Police said Garcia threw three cinder blocks through different windows to the apartment.

Part of Berlin Wall defaced on campus

CA LONG BEACH — Officials at Chapman University in southern California said a piece of the Berlin Wall displayed on campus was

defaced and painted brown, covering some of the historic graffiti written decades ago.

University spokeswoman Amy Stevens said the 12-foot-high chunk of wall was probably defaced between July 21 and July 22, the Long Beach Press-Telegram reported. University officials were working with restoration experts to restore the artifact, she said.

Person killed in rare shark attack off coast

ME PORTLAND — Authorities in Maine said a woman killed in a rare shark attack off the state's coast was a 63-year-old resident of New York City.

The shark bite killed Julie Dimperio Holowach, the Maine Department of Marine Resources said. The shark bit Holowach off Bailey Island while she was swimming.

The marine patrol said a witness saw Holowach swimming when she was bitten. Two kayakers helped her get to shore and an ambulance provided further assistance, but she was pronounced dead at the scene, the marine patrol said.

There had previously only been one recorded unprovoked shark attack in Maine.

13-year-old runaway likely stole truck

NE LINCOLN — Authorities said a 13-year-old runaway is suspected of stealing a neighbor's truck in the Lincoln area.

KOLN reported that the Lancaster Sheriff's Office responded and pursued the truck for a few miles. But deputies had to stop the chase due to dangerous rain conditions.

Officials are still looking for the teenager and the 2004 F-250 truck.

Ranch reports several hundred calves stolen

ID BURLEY — Law enforcement agencies are investigating after several hundred calves were reported stolen from a cattle feeding operation in southern Idaho.

Cassia County Sheriff Jay Heward told The Times-News that Marcos Garcia, the owner of MGM Calf Ranch near Declo, reported the calves stolen July 1.

The calves were all under 11 months old and had ear tags, and Garcia didn't know exactly how many were missing, Heward said.

The animals were all Jersey or Jersey mix, a breed commonly raised for dairies. Garcia was caring for the calves for other companies in the region.

Passed-out driver saved in moving car

MS VICKSBURG — A Mississippi police officer said fast-thinking bystanders helped save a woman who passed out behind the wheel of a moving car.

Vicksburg police officer Matthew Barnes told WJTV-TV he was the first officer on the scene after motorists reported a driver swerving erratically in the road.

Barnes said he found a woman passed out from an apparent medical emergency in the driver's seat.

The car was locked and still rolling. Barnes said a bystander gave him a hammer from her car that he used to smash a rear window and open the door while other citizens helped hold the vehicle steady.

Barnes shifted the car into park and then helped get the driver out safely.

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Hightower's opt out part of an NFL trend

Associated Press

Now we know why a key topic in talks between the NFL and the players' union focused on opt outs.

Already, nearly three dozen players have decided not to play the 2020 season. It's certainly not about the money, because those opting out voluntarily are getting a \$150,000 stipend, and those walking away due to preexisting medical conditions get \$350,000. In the NFL, that's hardly a huge payout.

No, it's all about what it should be about: health and safety. For players and their families.

New England linebacker Dont'a Hightower, maybe the most accomplished player to opt out, described his feelings in a social media statement.

"I do feel that it's the best decision for my family at this time," Hightower said. "I'm so grateful for the support of my teammates and coaches as well, and I will try to continue to lead and help as much as I can.

"2020 has been a challenging year for our world. I hope you can all continue to be a light in these dark times — more light and great times are ahead."

For now, in these troubled times, opting out has been more popular in the NFL than anywhere else. Both MLB and the NBA had about a dozen players opt out of returning, while the NHL had half that. The biggest names included Buster Posey and David Price in baseball, Avery Bradley

in basketball, Travis Hamonic and Mike Green in hockey.

Opt outs in the NFL alone appear headed beyond those numbers combined, which privately has surprised some league executives. On Wednesday, Chiefs starting running back Damien Williams, a key to their Super Bowl run last season, said he wouldn't play.

In a sport built around contact, with rosters nearly equaling the size of the other three sports combined, and little to no thought of playing in a bubble, players deciding to skip the upcoming season seems plenty logical.

"We did know this was going to be a possibility," players' union vice president Ben Watson told SiriusXM NFL Radio. "That is why the NFLPA fought so hard to give guys the option. We are in times people don't have answers for. Everybody has different situations — maybe contractually, maybe who they live with, guys who live out of the area and have to travel back. There are a variety of different reasons why, and I think we are going to find out more about that as time goes on."

Any player who opts out creates some decision making for team personnel departments. But even if it is a star, an irreplaceable starter, there should be no questioning the move.

"The opt-out option is a player's choice and a player's right, and we'll respect that if a player decides to do that," Broncos President Joe Ellis said. "That's absolute-

ly, 100 percent their right, inherently. I've got no objection to that at all and would be supportive of that, if that's what somebody wants to do. That's been going on around the league, as you've seen. It's going around and around other sports leagues, as well.

"I had some good conversations ... and they were very, very curious. I don't want to say concerned, but they wanted to know what was going to happen and how it was going to be handled, things like that. It's at the front of their minds."

While players always rely on trainers and medical staff when it comes to injuries, the pandemic creates an entirely new set of issues. Recovery and rehab from, say, a knee injury, is a totally different, well, ballgame.

"(I) Wasn't quite sure exactly what number would come in, but the biggest thing to consider is players taking care of both themselves, as well as their families, and each player has their own unique circumstance," says Browns team physician Dr. James Voos. "We feel that it is our job to help to guide them through it, serve as a trusted healthcare adviser and allow them to ultimately make that decision themselves.

"I don't think it is an inordinately high number of players, but I'm proud of the way the players and the teams have worked through this together so that we can responsibly make those decisions so that everyone feels good and safe about participating in the season."

Or not.

Reworked 11-game ACC schedule features Irish

Associated Press

The Atlantic Coast Conference reworked its football schedule Wednesday to allow each team to play 11 games and to incorporate Notre Dame, which is giving up its cherished independence in a year turned upside down by the coronavirus pandemic.

The ACC's university presidents approved plans for a schedule with 10 conference games and one nonconference, and for pushing back both the first week of the season (from Labor Day weekend to the weekend of Sept. 12) and the league championship game (from Dec. 5 to either Dec. 12 or 19).

Miami athletic director Blake James called the schedule "as-

pirational" as concerns about COVID-19 have put major college football in the fall in peril. For now, though, conferences are working on plans to play what would be a most unusual season.

The ACC will eliminate its traditional divisional format this season and the two teams with the best winning percentages in conference play will meet in Charlotte, N.C., for the league championship game. Maybe a Clemson-Notre Dame rematch? The league will release specific dates and broadcast plans later.

Notre Dame, which competes in the ACC in all sports except football and hockey, will play in a football conference for the first time in the 133-year his-

tory of the proudly independent program — if the season is played. The biggest conferences are taking steps to try to mitigate potential disruptions and salvage a sport worth billions in broadcast rights deals.

"We recognize that we may need to be nimble and make adjustments in the future," ACC Commissioner John Swofford said in a statement.

Notre Dame already had a scheduling agreement with the ACC that puts five or six games with the league on the Fighting Irish schedule every year. They had six this season: Clemson, Duke, Wake Forest, Georgia Tech, Louisville and Pitt. Added to that will be home games against Florida State

and Syracuse and road games against North Carolina and Boston College.

The ACC and Notre Dame also agreed to equally share TV revenue — including the Fighting Irish's deal with NBC — among the 15 schools.

Notre Dame had already lost three games against Big Ten and Pac-12 opponents when those conferences decided to play only league games. The Big 12 and Southeastern Conference have not announced any changes to their football schedules.

The ACC said nonconference games must be played in the ACC school's home state — a move intended to save traditional rivalries.

Rios' 2-run HR lifts Dodgers past Astros

Associated Press

HOUSTON — After a testy, noisy game in the series opener, all was quiet between the Los Angeles Dodgers and Houston Astros on Wednesday night.

Until the loud crack of Edwin Rios' bat for a two-run homer in the 13th inning lifted the Dodgers to a 4-2 victory.

The teams showed no carry-over from a fracas the previous evening.

"Just playing those guys and everything that went on, obviously there's a little edge," Rios said.

No pitches were thrown above or behind any batters, nobody made any ugly faces and everyone remained in their respective dugouts, even as the game became the longest one this season.

Rios took Cy Sneed (0-1) deep for a lead-off homer — it was a two-run drive under the new extra-innings rule that starts with an automatic runner on second base.

The Dodgers played without manager

Dave Roberts, suspended one game for his part in Tuesday night's heated matchup that saw the dugouts clear. Bench coach Bob Geren managed the team in Roberts' absence.

Los Angeles used nine pitchers, but not Joe Kelly. The reliever was suspended for eight games by Major League Baseball after buzzing a fastball behind the head of Alex Bregman, then striking out Carlos Correa and mockingly taunting him by sticking out his tongue and pouting his bottom lip.

Kelly elected to appeal and can continue to play until the process is complete.

The Dodgers won both games in Houston in the first meeting between these teams since it was revealed the Astros stole signs en route to beating Los Angeles for the 2017 World Series title.

"You can tell with the morale in the dugout, everyone was more locked in and wanted to be out there," LA starter Dustin May said. "We played well in both games."

Both teams scored a run in the second inning and nobody scored again until an RBI double by Mookie Betts with two outs in the Dodgers 11th. Correa tied it again with an RBI single with no outs in the bottom of the 11th.

Kike Hernandez started the 13th on second per the new extra-inning rules before Rios got his first hit of the season after entering as a pinch-hitter in the 11th.

Dennis Santana (1-0) pitched 2¹/₃ scoreless innings for the win.

"We had a number of opportunities," Houston manager Dusty Baker said after his team left 15 on base.

Cristian Javier gave a strong performance in his first major league start for a Houston rotation that is without ace Justin Verlander indefinitely. The 23-year-old, who was Houston's minor league pitcher of the year last season, allowed two hits and one run with eight strikeouts in 5 ²/₃ innings.

Nats end skid with 'road' win at home over Jays

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Adam Eaton's bases-loaded chopper broke a scoreless tie in the 10th inning on a close play and Asdrubal Cabrera followed with a three-run triple, helping the Nationals snap a three-game losing streak by beating the Toronto Blue Jays 4-0 Wednesday night.

In a quirky game befitting this pandemic-altered, upside-down season, Toronto's team played its "home opener" at Washington — batting in the bottom half of each inning, wearing its white uniforms, playing its players' walk-up music and even blaring the song "OK Blue Jays," the club's traditional seventh-inning stretch staple.

Toronto's Nate Pearson, in his big league debut, and Washington's Max Scherzer, in his 358th start in the majors, put up plenty of zeros. So did the relievers that followed.

In the top of the 10th, though, Washington moved ahead on an odd-looking play. After starting with the automatic runner on second base Washington loaded the bags with two walks from

Toronto's sixth pitcher, Shun Yamaguchi (0-2).

After two strikeouts, Eaton bounced a ball off the mound. Second baseman Cavan Biggio grabbed it and tried to dive glove-first at the bag, but was edged out by runner Andrew Stevenson. After a replay review of more than two minutes, the "safe" call was upheld, making it 1-0. Cabrera then homered.

Soto waiting: Washington Nationals outfielder Juan Soto was still waiting on Thursday to be cleared to play by the city government after getting the OK from Major League Baseball a day earlier to return from the COVID-19 injured list.

Manager Dave Martinez said the Nationals hope their 21-year-old slugger will be allowed to work out with the team starting Saturday and play in their first game after that — which is next Tuesday at home.

Soto, who had 34 homers and 110 RBIs during the 2019 regular season and was a breakout star of October, tested positive for the coronavirus and was sidelined on opening day.

Tigers 5, Royals 4: JaCoby

Jones hit a tiebreaking solo homer in the seventh inning, and Detroit's bullpen came through again to beat visiting Kansas City.

Yankees 9, Orioles 3: The New York Yankees stepped in for the Miami Marlins and ruined Baltimore's home opener, hitting three home runs to back right-hander Gerrit Cole.

Mariners 10, Angels 7: Kyle Seager drove in three runs, Dylan Moore hit a three-run homer and visiting Seattle rallied from two late deficits.

Giants 7, Padres 6: Mike Yastrzemski homered twice, the second a solo shot into McCovey Cove in the ninth inning, lifting host San Francisco past San Diego.

White Sox 4, Indians 0: Yasmani Grandal and Eloy Jimenez hit sacrifice flies and visiting Chicago scored four runs in the ninth inning — three charged to ineffective Cleveland closer Brad Hand.

Red Sox 6, Mets 5: Christian Vazquez hit a tying home run off Seth Lugo in the seventh inning and a two-run single against Justin Wilson in a three-run eighth, rallying Boston to a win at New York.

Rangers 7, Diamondbacks 4: Joey Gallo hit a tying, two-run homer in the eighth inning and host Texas scored three more runs after that.

Rockies 5, Athletics 1: German Marquez struck out eight over six impressive innings to bounce back after losing on opening day, and Colorado wrapped up a successful season-opening road trip.

Braves 7, Rays 4: Freddie Freeman homered and drove in three runs on a four-hit opening night in Atlanta.

Brewers 3, Pirates 0: Milwaukee's Brandon Woodruff allowed one hit and struck out 10 while working into the seventh inning as the Brewers won at struggling Pittsburgh.

Reds 12, Cubs 7: Mike Moustakas and Nick Senzel homered in their returns from a COVID-19 scare, Nick Castellanos added a grand slam, and host Cincinnati ended a four-game losing streak.

Twins 3, Cardinals 0: Rich Hill pitched five scoreless innings in a smooth debut for host Minnesota, backed by Eddie Rosario's homer and Nelson Cruz's RBI double.

NBA rookies can end seasons in style

Associated Press

Forget hitting a rookie wall or stumbling into the playoffs exhausted and banged-up.

The NBA's break because of the coronavirus pandemic gave rookies an offseason within a season. They've had the chance to heal up, study film and gain some much-needed pounds to better handle the grueling season in a league filled with savvy veterans.

"I took the time off really to ... focus on my body, do the right things to continue to get better," said Grizzlies guard Ja Morant, the likely NBA rookie of the year. "Studied a lot of film. Kind of like I had an off-season but still preparing to come back and play."

Improving during a pandemic had its challenges.

"It was challenging for everyone. No one has ever been through this," said Pelicans coach Alvin Gentry, whose club has three first-round picks in the rotation this season, led by first overall draft choice Zion Williamson.

Not all rookies will be playing as the NBA wraps up the season. Coby White and his Chicago Bulls missed the cut to keep playing in Florida. So too did RJ Barrett and the Knicks, and Golden State's Eric Paschall.

Rookies to watch when the NBA resumes its season:

Ja Morant: Morant worked with trainers at his Memphis home and put on 12 pounds of mostly muscle. That's what the Grizzlies have wanted since the moment they drafted him at No. 2 overall last June behind top pick Zion Williamson.

The point guard also watched a lot of film, looking to improve after averaging 17.6 points a game and 6.9 assists a game.

"He's a great student of the game," Grizzlies first-year coach Taylor Jenkins said. "So I think he put a lot of time over the break doing those things, and I think we're already seeing that right now."

Zion Williamson: Williamson's weight was an issue when he arrived at training camp back in September. Less so now. His extended rehab from knee surgery involved a focus on losing weight and gaining flexibility, and it was apparent he stuck to his new workout regimen during the past few months.

Williamson is listed at 6-foot-6, 285 pounds. The team has declined to specify how much weight he has lost, but teammates noted how much leaner he looked when the Pelicans got back together a few weeks ago.

"He looks amazing. He looks fully healthy. He looks even stronger than he was before, if that's even possible," Pelicans guard Lonzo Ball said. "I was happy to see him, happy to see that he's in shape."

Williamson's status when the Pelicans resume play Thursday is unclear because he left the club July 16 to attend to a family medical matter and did not return to the Orlando area until Friday, when he was required to begin a four-day quarantine. The team says he's tested daily while away and should be able to practice by Tuesday night if all goes well during his quarantine.

"I think there are going to be parts of my game that y'all didn't see before that you all are going to see in the future when we start playing," Williamson said.

Riu Hachimura: The first Japanese-born player drafted in the first round, Hachimura also spent the break getting bigger. The 6-8 Hachimura added about 10 pounds, up from 230. He worked on his three-point shot and ball handling and now is trying to improve his defensive skills.

The Wizards will need Hachimura more, too, with Davis Bertans and Bradley Beal opting out of the NBA's re-

start. That leaves Hachimura as the Wizards' leading returning scorer with 13.4 points a game. He also ranked second with six rebounds despite playing only 41 games before the break.

Brandon Clarke: It would be easy to overlook the 6-8 power forward on a Grizzlies' roster led by Morant and second-year forward Jaren Jackson Jr. But the 21st pick overall last June has played a key role for Memphis and is averaging 12 points and 5.8 points a game.

For Clarke, working on his three-pointer has been a big key. Jenkins said he and some of his assistants also talked with Clarke a few times each week breaking down on film to help the rookie hone his game.

Heat's rookie duo: Technically a rookie, Kendrick Nunn went from unknown to starting point guard for the Heat, and he could be ready for the seeding games even after missing the first couple of weeks of practices at Disney.

Tyler Herro has shown an ability to rise to moments: his pull-up, go-ahead, transition three-pointer in the final seconds of a win against Philadelphia earlier this season is among Miami's top highlights of the year. He's recovered from an ankle injury that cost him 15 games.

Some NHL coaches know best-of-five series all too well

Associated Press

Fans counted down the seconds to the final buzzer, "Brass Bonanza" played over the speakers at Hartford Civic Center and Whalers players Dave Tippett, Joel Quenneville and Dean Evason celebrated a three-game sweep of the Quebec Nordiques.

Wait, Hartford Whalers? Quebec Nordiques? Three-game sweep?

It was 1986 and one of the final NHL playoff series of its kind. The league this summer holds its first best-of-five playoff series in 34 years, and Tip-

pett, Quenneville and Evason are among those involved in some capacity who know from personal experience what to expect.

"You have to be ready for the grind," said Tippett, now coach of the Edmonton Oilers. "In a unique situation like this, you're going from not playing to playing playoff-style hockey, so you've got to embrace the grind mentally, physically."

This is a different kind of grind after four-plus months off the ice. The champion could need 19 wins — not the 15 from decades past — to lift the Stanley Cup. Sixteen teams will play

eight best-of-five qualifying round series to determine who moves on to face the league's best from a truncated regular season.

Tippett's Oilers face the Chicago Blackhawks, whom Quenneville coached to three Cup titles from 2010-15. Quenneville's Florida Panthers face the New York Islanders, whose associate coach, Lane Lambert, played in a five-gamer with Detroit in 1984. And Evason's Minnesota Wild face the Vancouver Canucks, managed by Jim Benning, who went through one with Toronto in 1983.

These expanded playoffs have plenty of links to that past, which is plenty evident in Quenneville's trademark white mustache.

"It's going back just a couple years ago," Quenneville quipped. "It's going way back. Back in the day when we did have best-of-five, we played four in five nights and it was right off the bat. That was a heck of a grind. Game 4 it was like, 'Wow.' Sometimes your legs, you didn't know if you had them underneath you."

There will be more time off this year, with series spread out over eight or nine days.