

US launched strikes to back Afghan forces

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military launched several airstrikes this week in support of Afghan government forces fighting Taliban insurgents, including in the strategically important province of Kandahar, officials said Thursday.

The strikes demonstrate U.S. intentions to continue supporting Afghan forces with combat aircraft based outside the country, at least until the scheduled conclusion of the U.S. military withdrawal on Aug. 31. The Biden administration has not said whether it will continue that support after the pullout is complete.

The U.S. has a variety of combat aircraft based in the Middle East within range of Afghanistan, including warplanes aboard an aircraft carrier in the region and fighters and bombers in the Persian Gulf area.

Asked by a reporter about news reports of a Navy FA-18 airstrike in the Kandahar area, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby did not confirm specifics, including the type of aircraft or location, but said, “In the last several days we have acted, through airstrikes, to support the

ANDSF,” using an acronym for the Afghan national defense and security forces. “But I won’t get into technical details of those strikes.”

These are the first known U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan since Gen. Scott Miller, who had been the top U.S. commander in the country, relinquished his command and left the country last week. The authority to launch airstrikes against the Taliban has since been in the hands of Gen. Frank McKenzie, the commander of U.S. Central Command, who oversees U.S. military involvement in the greater Middle East.

Following Kirby’s comments, another defense official said that on Wednesday and Thursday, the United States conducted a total of more than four airstrikes in support of Afghan forces. At least two of the strikes were to destroy military equipment, including an artillery piece and a vehicle, that the Taliban had taken from Afghan forces, the official said. The Afghans requested those strikes.

U.S. officials have urged the Afghans to make use of their own combat aircraft, as well as their U.S.-trained ground forces. In

recent months the Afghan forces have ceded a significant amount of territory to the Taliban, raising questions about their ability to hold out after the U.S. completes its withdrawal.

At a Pentagon news conference Wednesday, Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the future of Afghanistan is in the hands of the Afghan people, urging them to assert their will on the battlefield.

“The Afghan security forces have the capacity to sufficiently fight and defend their country, and we will continue to support the Afghan security forces where necessary in accordance with the guidance from the president and the secretary of defense,” Milley said.

Milley said the Taliban now control about half of the 419 district centers in Afghanistan, and while they have yet to capture any of the country’s 34 provincial capitals, they are pressuring about half of them. As the Taliban seize more territory, the Afghan security forces are consolidating their positions to protect key population centers, including Kabul, he said.

Report: US to house Afghan interpreters in Kuwait, Qatar

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The United States is planning to house up to 35,000 Afghan interpreters and their families at two military bases in the Persian Gulf while they wait for asylum in the U.S., according to a media report.

The U.S. would build temporary housing designed for applicants to live in for at least 18 months while they await their Special Immigrant Visas at Camp As Sayliyah in Qatar and Camp Buehring in Kuwait, The Wall Street Journal reported Thursday, citing unnamed U.S. officials.

The visas give interpreters and other Afghans who worked with the U.S. military and government safe passage to America and a pathway to citizenship.

Arrangements with Kuwait and Qatar have not yet been finalized, the report said.

“We are conducting planning for multiple scenarios, including the potential for tens of thousands of people. Though it’s unclear for how many, for how soon and for how long,” the newspaper quoted an unnamed U.S. official as saying.

Construction and expenses associated with housing the applicants at the Gulf bases are expected to cost the U.S. several hundred million dollars, the Journal said, citing unnamed officials.

Some 2,500 Afghans — including 750 interpreters and their families — who are at the last stage of the SIV process are scheduled to fly to Fort Lee, Va., next week to complete the final requirements, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Monday.

But about half of the over 20,000 SIV applicants are still in the first stages, which can take several years to complete, the State Department said.

Camp As Sayliyah in Qatar was closed last month. Outfitted with recreational facilities, it was known for giving some 200,000 deployed troops over the years a four-day vacation.

Camp Buehring is located in the Kuwait desert and was built to accommodate about 14,000 troops at any one time.

The Taliban have said they would not target Afghans who worked for the U.S. once international forces leave, but many doubt the group will keep their word. As many as 300 Afghans in the SIV pipeline have already been killed over the past decade because of their association with the U.S., according to advocacy groups.

The House on Thursday approved legislation that would increase the number of SIVs by 8,000, in addition to speeding up the application process by removing a requirement that makes applicants prove they’re under threat.

Senate panel votes to boost DOD budget

By SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate Armed Services Committee voted to increase the Defense Department's budget by \$25 billion more than the Biden administration's \$715 billion proposal for the Pentagon, a member of the committee announced Thursday.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., welcomed the budget increase as "very positive" on a call with reporters. He did not detail which specific priorities will be funded with the additional money, however, he said \$2 billion will go to shipbuilding and ship repair.

Military housing also "remains a problem," Kaine said, and the committee continued to "move forward" on the issue during their

discussions, though it is unclear Thursday how much in funding will go to improving the living conditions on bases. The full Senate will likely take up the National Defense Authorization Act, annual legislation that sets priorities and funding for the Pentagon, in September, Kaine said.

The defense bill authorizes funding, while the House and Senate Appropriations Committees allocate the funding. Those committees must agree to a higher overall budget amount for the money to be available.

"Congress must work on a bipartisan basis to ensure we have the policies and resources to deter America's adversaries, reassure our allies, and ensure our forces have the right tools and capabilities

to combat threats around the globe. Advancing this bill is a significant step toward achieving that objective," Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., the committee's chairman, said in a statement after Kaine announced the increase.

The beefed-up budget from Senate Armed Services Committee is likely to set up a clash with House Democrats who have backed President Joe Biden's spending proposal, which was released in early April. The administration set the overall proposed defense budget, which includes money for the Department of Energy and its nuclear weapons program, at \$753 billion.

Some Republicans have argued for months at congressional hearings and recent news confer-

ences that Biden's budget is insufficient to counter the rising threat of China and Russia. They have repeatedly called for a 3% to 5% increase in funding and criticized Biden for his effectively flat budget. However, advocates and some liberal lawmakers have sought to curb defense spending, which has steadily risen during the last decade.

The Senate committee wrapped up its debate on the defense legislation and approved the bill Wednesday night with a 23-3 vote.

The Senate and House Armed Services Committees must reach an agreement on a final version of the bill, which is expected to happen sometime later this fall. Some senators have estimated that could take until December.

Lack of movers, houses lead to PCS frustrations

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

A shortage of moving personnel and a limited U.S. housing market has helped create obstacles and delays for some of the 54,000 soldiers scheduled to move to new installations during summer, an Army general said Thursday.

The Army reported some 4% of the about 72,000 shipments for permanent change of station moves, known as PCS, that the service had completed since April had been delayed, noting many soldiers use more than one shipment for each move. The delays, at least in part, can be attributed to a coronavirus pandemic-induced shortage of truck drivers and packers, said Army Maj. Gen. Omar Jones, the deputy commanding general for Army Installations Management Command.

"PCSes are hard. Those are one of the most challenging pieces of military life — all the stresses associated with moving whether it's across the country or across the world," said Jones, who completed a PCS this month from the Washington, D.C., region to IMCOM headquarters at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. It was his 15th military move. "This year is especially hard ... with the unique challenges ... as we are not

out yet of this pandemic."

Jones said Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., has been the hardest hit by serious PCS-related issues. He cited especially a lack of available movers in the area and a shortage of available off-post rental properties and homes for sale. Similar issues have plagued soldiers moving to and from Fort Drum, N.Y.; Fort Knox, Ky.; and Fort Irwin, Calif., he said.

The general said top Army and Pentagon leaders recently signed off on changes meant to aid troops with the moves during summer, including allowing a flexible reporting date for soldiers scheduled to arrive at a new installation between July 6 and Sept. 30. Jones said soldiers can check in with their units as early as 30 days before their scheduled report date or 20 days later to help them avert moving challenges.

The Pentagon has also reached an agreement with IHG Army Hotels, which runs on-post hotels in partnership with the private military housing company, Lendlease, to allow soldiers who cannot immediately find permanent housing to stay in their hotels at their Basic Allowance for Housing rate, Defense Department and hotel officials said this week.

House OKs bill to add 8,000 visas for Afghan interpreters

By SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday approved legislation that would increase the number of visas for Afghan interpreters who worked with U.S. personnel, a potential lifeline for thousands waiting for application approvals as Taliban fighters continue to seize more territory in Afghanistan.

The bill from Rep. Jason Crow, D-Colo., would streamline the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa program by boosting the number of visa slots by an additional 8,000. It would also speed up the process by removing the requirement that applicants must prove they are under threat as a result of their work with the U.S. government during the nearly 20-year war in Afghanistan.

The measure passed overwhelmingly by a vote of 407-16.

"The phrase life and death gets tossed around a lot in this chamber. But this bill is truly that for thousands of our Afghan friends. The Taliban is intent on hunting down and killing Afghans who have served alongside Americans the

past 20 years," Crow said on the House floor ahead of the vote.

"Some members of this body, including me, may not be here today without the service and sacrifice of Afghans who answered the call to serve shoulder to shoulder with us," said Crow, a former Army Ranger who served three tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Averting Loss of Life and Injury by Expediting SIVs Act, or AL-LIES Act, will now move to the Senate.

The Biden administration announced this week that some of the Afghans who are nearing the end of the visa process will be evacuated to Fort Lee, Va. Chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said some of the roughly 2,500 Afghan refugees could be housed at Fort Lee, which is about 30 miles south of Richmond.

About 18,000 Afghans are seeking a Special Immigrant Visa, according to the State Department. Many translators and other partners who worked with the U.S. said it can take years for an application to be approved.

Vaccinations up in states with climbing infections

Associated Press

Vaccinations are beginning to rise in some states where COVID-19 cases are soaring, White House officials said Thursday in a sign that the summer surge is getting the attention of vaccine-hesitant Americans as hospitals in the South are being overrun with patients.

Coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients told reporters that several states with the highest proportions of new infections have seen residents get vaccinated at higher rates than the nation as a whole. Officials cited Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri and Nevada as examples.

"The fourth surge is real, and the numbers are quite frightening at the moment," Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said on a New Orleans radio show. Edwards, a Democrat, added: "There's no doubt that we are going in the wrong direction, and we're going there in a hurry."

Louisiana reported 2,843 new COVID-19 cases Thursday, a day after reporting 5,388 — the third-highest level since the pandemic began. Hospitalizations are up steeply in the last month, from 242 on June 19 to 913 in the latest report. Fifteen new deaths were reported Thursday.

Just 36% of Louisiana's population is fully

vaccinated, state health department data shows. Nationally, 56.3% of Americans have received at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Aly Neel, a spokesperson for Louisiana's health department, said the state has seen "a little bump" in vaccinations recently, adding that details would be available Friday.

Warner Thomas, president and CEO of the Ochsner Health system serving Louisiana and Mississippi, said the system had seen a 10% to 15% increase in people seeking vaccination over the past week or two. It has administered vaccines at churches, the New Orleans airport, basketball games and the mall.

"We see each person we get vaccinated now as a victory," said Dr. Katherine Baumgarten, director of infection prevention and control for the 40-hospital system.

In Missouri, immediately behind Arkansas and Louisiana in the number of cases per capita over the past 14 days, officials have rolled out a vaccine incentive program that includes \$10,000 prizes for 900 winners. The state lags about 10 percentage points behind the national average for people who have received at least one shot.

Pelosi says GOP boycott will not stop Jan. 6 probe

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Unfazed by Republican threats of a boycott, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared that a congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection will take on its "deadly serious" work whether Republicans participate or not.

The Republicans' House leader, Kevin McCarthy, called the committee a "sham process" and suggested that GOP lawmakers who take part could face consequences. McCarthy said Pelosi's rejection of two of the Republicans he had attempted to appoint was an "egregious abuse of power."

The escalating tension between the two parties — before the investigation has even started — is emblematic of the raw partisan anger that has only worsened on Capitol Hill since then-President Donald Trump's supporters laid siege to the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Joe Biden's presidential election victory. With most Republicans still loyal to Trump, and many downplaying the severity of the violent attack, there is little bipartisan unity to be found.

McCarthy said Wednesday that he would withdraw the names of all five Republicans he had appointed after Pelosi rejected two of them, Reps. Jim Banks, of Indiana, and Jim Jordan, of Ohio. Pelosi made clear on Thursday that she won't relent, and Democrats mulled filling the empty seats themselves.

"It is my responsibility as the speaker of the House to make sure we get to the truth of this, and we will not let their antics stand in the way of that," Pelosi said of the Republicans.

It is unclear, for now, whether Pelosi will try to appoint more members to the select panel, as she has the authority to do under committee rules. She left open that possibility, saying that there are other members who would like to participate. But she said she hadn't decided whether to appoint Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger, one of only two Republicans who voted in support of creating the panel last month.

The other, Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, has already been appointed by Pelosi to sit on the committee along with seven Democrats — ensuring they have a quorum to proceed, whether other Republicans participate or not.

US prosecutors seeks to drop case of Chinese researcher's visa fraud

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — U.S. prosecutors sought Thursday to drop their case against a Chinese researcher accused of concealing her ties to the Chinese military on a visa application so she could work in the U.S.

In documents filed in federal court in Sacramento, prosecutors asked a judge to dismiss a charge of visa fraud against Juan Tang but gave no reason why.

The trial was set to begin on Monday. A message seeking comment from the U.S. Attorney's office in Sacramento was not returned.

Tang's attorneys told the Sacramento Bee they provided "ample reason" to the government for dismissing the case.

The Justice Department announced charges against Tang and three other scientists living in the U.S. last July, saying they lied about their status as members of China's People's Liberation Army.

Prosecutors said Tang lied about her military ties in a visa application last October as she made plans to work at the University of California, Davis and again during an FBI interview months later. Agents found photos of Tang dressed in military uniform and reviewed articles in China identifying her military affiliation.

Tang's attorneys had argued that the doctor was not a member of the Chinese military but had worked as a civilian at a Chinese military facility.

Crews make progress on Ore. wildfire

Associated Press

BLY, Ore. — The nation's largest wildfire raged through southern Oregon on Friday but crews were scaling back some night operations as hard work and weaker winds helped reduce the spread of flames.

The Bootleg Fire, which has destroyed an area half the size of Rhode Island, was 40% surrounded after burning some 70 homes, mainly cabins, fire officials said.

At least 2,000 homes were ordered evacuated at some point during the fire and an additional 5,000 were threatened.

The upper eastern edge of the blaze continued to move toward Summer Lake, jumping fire lines on Thursday and prompting an evacuation order for some portions of

Lake County to be raised to "go now!" fire officials said.

Winds up to 10 mph could drive the flames through timber but not at the pace seen last week, when the wind-driven blaze grew exponentially, fire information officer Angela Goldman said.

The fire, which was sparked by lightning, had been expanding by up to 4 miles a day, pushed by strong winds and critically dry weather.

There was good news on the lower portion of the 624-square-mile blaze. Crews had locked in containment lines and on the lower southeastern side, crews were able to gain a substantial foothold, allowing them to cut back to nighttime patrols from what had

been a "24-7 run-and-gun" fight, fire information officer Sarah Gracey said.

"For us, that's a pretty big step," she said. "It's not that easy to work in a pitch-black forest in the middle of the night."

Crews will be able to rest and contribute to dayside attacks, she said.

"We have had day after day of red flag warnings (of extreme fire danger) and today we don't have a red flag warning," Gracey said Thursday. However, low humidity and high temperatures remained a concern.

That side of the blaze also had burned into an area blackened by a previous fire, creating gaps in the fuel and reducing the spread of flames through grass, shrub and timber, Gracey said.

US diplomat expresses N. Korea concerns

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — America's No. 2 diplomat on Friday expressed sympathy for North Koreans facing hardships and food shortages linked to the pandemic, and renewed calls for the North to return to talks over its nuclear program.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has recently warned of a "tense" food situation and admitted his country faces "the worst-ever" crisis. But his government has steadfastly insisted it won't rejoin the talks unless Washington drops its hostility.

"We all feel for the people of the DPRK, who are indeed facing all the most difficult circumstances given the pandemic, and what it means as well for their food security," U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy

Sherman told reporters in Seoul, referring to North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"We only hope for a better outcome for the people of the DPRK," she said.

Sherman spoke after meeting South Korean officials, during which the two sides reaffirmed that they'll continue diplomatic efforts to convince North Korea to return to the nuclear talks.

"We are looking forward to a reliable, predictable, constructive way forward with the DPRK," Sherman said. "We have offered to sit and dialogue with the North Koreans, and we are waiting to hear from them."

Speaking beside Sherman, South Korea's first vice foreign minister, Choi Jong Kun, said, "We'll wait for a North Korean re-

sponse with patience as now is the coronavirus period."

The talks between Washington and Pyongyang have made little headway since early 2019, when a second summit between Kim and then-President Donald Trump collapsed due to wrangling over U.S.-led economic sanctions. Kim has since threatened to bolster his nuclear arsenal and build more sophisticated weapons unless the Americans lift their hostile policy, an apparent reference to the sanctions.

Some experts say North Korea may be compelled to reach out to the United States if its economic difficulties worsen. Outside monitoring groups haven't reported any signs of mass starvation or social chaos in North Korea.

Flotilla leaves Miami in show of support for Cubans

Associated Press

MIAMI — A small group of Cuban Americans launched motorboats from Miami early Friday, planning to approach Cuba in a show of support for people experiencing hardships on the island.

Five boats left from Miami's Bayside marina just before 8 a.m. They planned to refuel in Key West before heading into the Florida Straits, said Jose Portieles, who is helping organize the effort.

He said they would stay in international waters, some 15 miles off the coast of Havana.

"We also want to draw the attention to the

United States government that they have to do something," Portieles said. "We feel identified with what is happening in the protests in Cuba; we could be the ones who are there."

Cuba considers the boats a provocation. Cuban Foreign Affairs Minister Bruno Rodriguez called the flotilla illegal and urged the U.S. government to halt the boats "to avoid incidents which are not in anyone's best interest."

The U.S. Coast Guard has warned it would be illegal for the boats to depart U.S. waters with the intention of entering Cuban territorial waters. However, for those intending on-

ly to go near Cuban waters, the agency has merely advised against doing so while also giving safety reminders for those who would ignore that advice.

The group is not armed, Portieles said. And most of them aren't activists, but rather Cuban-American entrepreneurs who know each other from the South Florida boating community and share a desire to see a free Cuba.

The boaters planned to arrive at the closest point to Cuba by 5 p.m. Friday, before heading back to Miami, arriving home by mid-day Saturday.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Explosion at home may have been intentional

TX PLANO — The explosion that destroyed a house in suburban Dallas and heavily damaged the two next door, injuring six people, may not have been an accident, officials said Wednesday.

Previously, fire officials had said that a gas leak in the Plano home that was destroyed Monday was the likely cause of the explosion.

"After further investigation, it was determined the explosion may have been intentional," Plano Police and Plano Fire-Rescue said in a news release, without providing details.

It appeared to be an isolated incident with no indications of any threats to the community, and the investigation remains ongoing, according to the release.

One person from the one-story home that exploded and five others, including three children, from one of the damaged homes next door were taken to hospitals for treatment, fire officials said. A person who was in the other damaged home wasn't hurt.

Black bears that entered houses are euthanized

MT MISSOULA — Montana wildlife officials euthanized two black bears this month after they broke into separate houses in the Missoula area, wildlife specialist Jamie Jonkel said Wednesday.

A male black bear was killed over the weekend after entering several houses in a neighborhood northeast of Missoula, the Missoulian reported.

Efforts to relocate the bear failed, and it was starting to show signs of being dangerous, Jonkel

said.

Earlier this month, a young, female black bear that had gotten into a house near East Missoula and eaten cat food returned to the house and damaged the door in an attempt to get back inside. That bear was also euthanized.

Seaplanes to take flight after years of planning

MA BOSTON — Seaplanes will be taking off from Boston Harbor this summer after years of planning.

Tailwind Air says it will launch nonstop flights from Boston Harbor to New York City starting Aug. 3.

The Boston Globe reports the Rye Brook, N.Y.-based company recently received final approval from the Federal Aviation Administration for the route.

Tailwind says the flights will take around 75 minutes and fares will start at \$395 one way. The company will be flying amphibious Cessna Caravans, which have space for eight passengers.

Postal worker is shot while on mail route

AL TARRANT — A postal worker has been shot while on his mail route in Alabama, authorities said.

The carrier was shot around 2 p.m. Wednesday in Tarrant, a suburb of Birmingham, Al.com reported.

The mailman had just hand-delivered mail to a resident and had walked back to his truck when the gunfire happened, police and witnesses told the news site.

A car pulled up and someone opened fire, shattering the window of his U.S. Postal Service truck, witnesses said. Resident Darnella Austin tells Al.com that she heard four gunshots.

The wounded carrier got out of his truck and ran to nearby homes in an attempt to get help, police said. He was taken to UAB Hospital with injuries that are not believed to be life-threatening.

The USPS offers a standing reward of up to \$50,000 for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of people responsible for attacks against its employees, Birmingham Postal Inspector Tony Robinson said.

Rare pink water bird lands, delighting public

MI SALINE — Bird lovers with cameras and binoculars are traveling to a stream in southeastern Michigan to see a rare creature with pink feathers and a long bill.

The roseate spoonbill was found in Saline in the Koch Warner Drain, the first to be seen in Michigan, said Molly Keenan of Michigan Audubon.

The bird, which typically lives in the Gulf Coast region, escaped from a zoo or is "very confused," said Saline police, which placed traffic cones on a road to manage the flow of people.

"Sometimes they wander a bit too far," said Benjamin Winger, bird curator at the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology.

Family could be fined for rescue on mountain

NH LINCOLN — A family of ill-prepared hikers from Florida was rescued on Mount Lafayette this week, and the New Hampshire Fish & Game Department is recommending that they be billed for the "preventable rescue."

A couple and their two children vastly underestimated the time needed to complete the Falling Waters-Old Bridle Path Loop

and ended up in the dark without lights or water, officials said.

One of the family members was suffering from exhaustion when the couple dialed 911 late Monday, and other hikers were assisting by the time a conservation officer arrived with lights and water, the agency said. The group reached the trailhead at 2 a.m. Tuesday, the agency said.

The agency urged people enjoying the outdoors to be prepared. "The White Mountains are rugged and unforgiving," the agency said.

Pet rescuer gets jail for starving cats in home

FL MIAMI — A self-styled pet rescuer has been sentenced to 364 days in jail for animal cruelty after hoarding cats and allowing them to starve inside her apartment in South Florida.

Cheryn Smilen, 56, pleaded guilty and will now be banned from owning or trying to rescue animals, the Miami Herald reported.

"You have to stay away from animal-rescue organizations," Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Alberto Milian told her during a hearing on Monday.

Smilen fed street cats nightly and began hoarding them inside the small efficiency apartment. Neighbors told investigators they would often hear the cats scratching and crying at the windows, but they never saw Smilen. A horrible smell eventually brought police to the home nearly three years ago.

Once inside, investigators found some cats emaciated and malnourished, and bones littered the scene, suggesting some cats had eaten each other, the newspaper reported.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

Opening ceremony kicks off pandemic-delayed games

Stars and Stripes

The games of the XXXII Olympiad began in surreal fashion Friday night with scaled back pageantry and ceremony and athletes marching inside a mostly empty National Stadium in Japan's capital city of Tokyo.

The world's largest athletic competition was postponed last year due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed more than 4 million people since the first cases emerged in China in late 2019, according to the World Health Organization.

Olympic organizers decided earlier this month to hold most events without spectators amid a new surge of coronavirus cases in the metropolitan area.

Small crowds, including anti-Olympics protesters, gathered outside a police cordon that blocked streets leading to the stadium ahead of the event but the area inside was quiet, except near the press entrance where journalists from all over the world gathered to take photographs with the Olympic rings.

As dusk fell on a hot summer night, the stadium, decorated with a large, stylized replica of Mount Fuji with a sun rising above its peak, was illuminated in Japan's national colors. It later proved to be the Olympic cauldron and was lit by tennis star Naomi Osaka at the ceremony's conclusion.

A moment of silence was held for the victims of the coronavirus while a ghostlike performer in a long white robe appeared alone on a platform in the center of the arena.

There was another display by performers in traditional and not so traditional costumes leaping on wooden tables surrounded by lanterns before a solo tap-dancing finale under the flagpole.

Among the dignitaries watching the action were U.S. first lady Jill Biden, who arrived a day earlier at Yokota Air Base, home of U.S. Forces Japan in western Tokyo.

Before heading to the stadium, she gave some American athletes a pep talk at the U.S. ambassador's residence, telling them: "Becoming an Olympian is a rare accomplishment in a normal time. But you did it during a global pandemic."

About 45 minutes into the opening cere-

mony, some of the more than 11,000 athletes from over 200 participating countries marched into the stadium behind their nations' flags.

The American athletes strolled in after most of the other teams. That reflected the fact that the U.S. will host the Olympics in Los Angeles in 2028. Team USA was followed by France, which will host the games in Paris in 2024, and finally the Japanese team.

The U.S. team, its size exceeded by only the Japanese team, made a fist-pumping entrance clustered around American flags. Clad in mostly dark blue Ralph Lauren outfits, they were led into the arena by basketball star Sue Bird and baseball player and speedskater Eddy Alvarez carrying the flag.

A diverse group of fans gathered to watch the opening ceremonies at the enlisted club on Yokosuka Naval Base.

"It's really exciting," said Navy spouse Maia Champlin. "I've never sat in for a watch party anywhere. To see the opening ceremony in another country while it's happening is so exciting. We really wanted to go in person — and we would've if we could."

Yokosuka base commander Capt. Rich Jarrett also weighed in.

"We're excited to celebrate with Japan, especially during such an important global event," he told Stars and Stripes on Friday night.

Tokyo remains under a state of emergency scheduled to last until Aug. 22.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government reported 1,359 daily coronavirus cases Friday, an increase of 88 from a week ago, bringing the seven-day rolling average of cases to 1,386 per day, up 46.5% from the previous week, according to metro government data.

At least 16 U.S. service members will compete in the games in events ranging from track and field to shooting, boxing, wrestling, sailing and modern pentathlon. Several service members are coaches.

The games will include a record 339 events and feature 33 sports at venues throughout Japan. New medal events include karate, skateboarding, surfing, men's and women's 3x3 basketball, and women's featherweight and welterweight boxing.

Abbott, US top Canada

Associated Press

FUKUSHIMA, Japan — Six outs from her second Olympic no-hitter, Monica Abbott was clinging to a one-run lead when she walked Canada's Jen Gilbert leading off the sixth inning, and pinch-hitter Sara Groenewegen lined a 0-2 pitch to the right-center field gap.

Center fielder Haylie McCleney picked up the ball at the wall and fired to Ali Aguiar. The second baseman made a perfect one-hop throw to catcher Aubree Munro, who moved up the third-base line and swiped a tag on sliding pinch-runner Joey Lye for the out.

"It's fun to be on the mound to watch that," Abbott said after her one-hitter led the United States over Canada 1-0 on Thursday in the first of three one-run softball games. "I don't want to give up a hit like that, but, man oh man, it took a lot of confidence in me on our defense."

Amanda Chidester hit an RBI single in the fifth off loser Jenna Caira that scored McCleney, who went 3-for-3 with a walk and has reached base seven times in two games.

Trying to regain the gold medal it lost to Japan in the 2008 final, the U.S. improved to 2-0. After a day off for the opening ceremony in Tokyo, the tournament shifts to Yokohama on Saturday.

Japan 3, Mexico 2: Mana Atsumi's squeeze bunt single with one out in the eighth inning scored automatic runner Eri Yamada, and host Japan improved to 2-0.

Haruka Agatsuma's grounder to second off Danielle O'Toole advanced Yamada to third, and Atsumi bunted toward third on a 0-1 pitch. Yamada was running on the pitch and slid home ahead of Amanda Sanchez's throw.

Australia 1, Italy 0: Jade Wall hit a run-scoring single in the second inning, Kaia Parnaby took a three-hitter into the seventh and Australia evened its record at 1-1 following an opening loss to Japan.

Australia is fourth among the six teams, and Italy fell to 0-2.

Taylah Tsitsikronis doubled off Greta Cecchetti leading off the second, advanced on Tarni Stepto's groundout and scored on a two-out infield hit by Wall, who beat the throw to first after second baseman Andrea Filler's diving, backhand stop.

NFL teams face forfeits for virus outbreaks

Associated Press

NFL teams that experience a COVID-19 outbreak among nonvaccinated players could forfeit regular-season games, with players on both teams not getting paid.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell warned the 32 teams Thursday in a memo obtained by The Associated Press that no games would be rescheduled under such circumstances. Instead, forfeits could happen.

"As we learned last year, we can play a full season if we maintain a firm commitment to adhering to our health and safety protocols and to making needed adjustments in response to changing conditions," Goodell said.

He added that the league does not anticipate adding a 19th week to accommodate games that need to be moved because of coronavirus issues.

"If a game can't be rescheduled and is canceled due to a COVID outbreak among nonvaccinated players on one of the competing teams, the team with the outbreak will forfeit and will be deemed to have played 16

games for purposes of draft, waiver priority, etc," Goodell added.

For purposes of playoff seeding, the forfeiting team would be assessed a loss and the other team a win.

If there is a virus outbreak because of a "spike in vaccinated individuals, we will attempt to minimize the competitive and economic burden on both participating teams," the memo said.

The NFL has not made vaccinations mandatory. The league and the NFL Players Association, however, are strongly urging team employees and players to do so.

Last year, in the height of the pandemic, the NFL completed its season, the playoffs and Super Bowl on time. But it had contingency plans for an 18th week to play makeup games if needed. There were several postponements but no cancellations.

For 2021, the regular season has been expanded to 17 games.

The league says more than half its teams currently have COVID-19 vaccination rates greater than 80% of their play-

ers, and more than 75% of players are in the process of being vaccinated. All training camps will be open by the end of next week.

The players' union, in response to Goodell's memo, reminded its players that "the same basic rules applied last year."

"The only difference this year is the NFL's decision to impose additional penalties on clubs which are responsible for the outbreak and the availability of proven vaccines," the NFLPA memo said Thursday.

Cowboys running back Ezekiel Elliott, who was stricken with the coronavirus last year, called getting the vaccine "a touchy subject," though he added he has been vaccinated.

"You can't really tell someone what to do with their body," Elliott said at Cowboys training camp.

As for potential forfeits, he added:

"A check is only monetary; you can't put a price on someone's health or what they think will make them feel good or not make them feel good. Like I

said, you're kind of walking a tight line."

Other key points in the league's memo:

■ If a vaccinated person tests positive and is not symptomatic, he or she will be isolated and contact tracing will promptly occur. The positive individual will be permitted to return to duty after two negative tests at least 24 hours apart, and will thereafter be tested every two weeks or as directed by the medical staffs. Vaccinated individuals will not be subject to quarantine as a result of close contact with an infected person.

■ If an unvaccinated person tests positive, the protocols from 2020 will remain in effect. The person will be isolated for a period of 10 days and will then be permitted to return to duty if not symptomatic. Unvaccinated individuals will continue to be subject to a five-day quarantine period if they have close contact with an infected individual.

■ Those who had a previous COVID-19 infection will be considered fully vaccinated 14 days after they have had at least one dose of an approved vaccine.

Source: Big 12 working on holding on to Texas, OU

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Big 12 leaders held a call without Texas and Oklahoma on Thursday to discuss how to keep the league's flagship schools from bolting to the Southeastern Conference — and contingency plans to survive without them.

"There was no panic," a person familiar with the meeting told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the Big 12 was not making its internal discussions public. "All options are on the table."

The Big 12 put out a statement Thursday night that revealed few details, but made clear the eight members in danger of being left behind want the Longhorns and

Sooners to stay put. And that leaving could be costly for Texas and Oklahoma.

"There is a recognition that institutions may act in their own self-interest, however there is an expectation that members adhere to Conference bylaws and the enforcement of Grant of Rights agreements," the statement said.

The Big 12's grant of rights, which ties a school's media rights to the conference, runs through the current television deals with ESPN and Fox. Those expire in June 2025.

For Oklahoma and Texas to leave the Big 12 sooner they would either relinquish tens of millions in television revenue for

every year the grant is in effect or agree to a financial settlement with the conference.

The person familiar with Thursday's call said Commissioner Bob Bowlsby, athletic directors and school presidents and chancellors discussed possible options for persuading Texas and Oklahoma to remain in the Big 12 and potential ways to keep the conference going if they leave.

Texas and Oklahoma were invited to join the call, and the hope is the Big 12 will soon hear directly from their conference mates, the person said.

Texas and Oklahoma have discussed a move to the SEC with officials from the powerhouse conference, but no formal invitation

has been extended nor have the schools officially informed the Big 12 they intend to leave.

Earlier Thursday, leaders from other conferences were hesitant to speculate on what's next, but some observers were concerned about the potential consequences.

"College football is filled with people operating in silos and what they fail to realize is that if they only look at and try to build their silo as big and as shiny as possible than the entirety of the sport is not going to be as strong as it needs to be," said former Colorado quarterback Joel Klatt, the lead college football analyst for Fox, which holds television rights with the Big 12, Big Ten and Pac-12.

Twins send All-Star slugger Cruz to Rays

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Nelson Cruz packed up his big bat and joined a contender.

The Tampa Bay Rays acquired Cruz, one of baseball's most proven sluggers, in a four-player trade with the Minnesota Twins on Thursday night.

Cruz was well aware of the likelihood he'd be dealt this month, with the disappointing Twins well out of contention. Nonetheless he told reporters the news still felt "shocking" and "heartbreaking" to him after becoming fond of the organization over his 2 1/2 seasons in Minnesota.

"It's a tough one. I guess it's a new chapter, and I will embrace it the way I embrace everything in my life — to go help the Tampa Bay Rays to win a championship," Cruz said.

Moments before opening a four-game series at Cleveland, the Rays, who entered the night one game behind first-place Boston in the AL East, announced they got Cruz and minor leaguer Calvin Faucher from Minnesota in exchange for minor league right-handers Joe Ryan and Drew Strotman.

The 41-year-old Cruz has 436 career

homers and 1,202 RBIs. He'll bring some needed pop to Tampa Bay's lineup and should help the Rays against left-handers. They're hitting .226 versus lefties.

Following Tampa Bay's 5-4 comeback win over the Indians, Rays manager Kevin Cash said he was thrilled to be adding someone of Cruz's caliber.

"It's very exciting," said Cash, who recently managed Cruz in the All-Star Game at Denver. "We're a good team and we know we just got better by adding Nelson Cruz, one of the hottest bats out there. His presence. His leadership. I've known him for a long time now, and you never hear anyone say a negative thing about him, so we're adding a high-quality hitter and a high-quality person."

Cash wasn't exactly sure when Cruz will join the Rays.

Beyond his skills at the plate, Cruz gives Tampa Bay a seasoned player with years of knowledge.

"We're going to allow him to go out and do what he does," said Cash. "He's going to DH and hopefully man that position for three months."

Usually frugal Tampa Bay assumes \$5.1 million remaining of Cruz's \$13 million salary. The Rays began the season with a \$68.3 million payroll, 26th among the 30 teams.

The seven-time All-Star also has plenty of playoff experience with 17 homers and 37 RBIs in 46 postseason games. He's batting .294 with 19 homers and 50 RBIs this season, and over 258 games with the Twins he finished with 76 homers and a .984 OPS.

"People joke about how he's ageless, and it really does feel that way," Twins president of baseball operations Derek Falvey said.

A 17-year veteran, Cruz signed a one-year, \$13 million deal with Minnesota in February. He has also played for Baltimore, Texas and Seattle. He hit at least 37 homers per season from 2014-19. He belted a career-high 44 homers for the Mariners in 2015.

"We thought we should be in the playoff race," Cruz said. "Never thought we should be in this situation. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case. You never want to leave the places where you are, where you feel comfortable. It is what it is. That's part of the business."

Meadows' RBI single caps Rays' rally

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Austin Meadows hit an RBI single in the 10th inning to cap Tampa Bay's comeback in a 5-4 win over the Cleveland Indians on Thursday night, hours after the Rays acquired Nelson Cruz from Minnesota.

Meadows' one-out liner off Bryan Shaw (3-4) brought home Randy Arozarena, who began the 10th at second base.

Down 4-2 in the ninth, the Rays rallied to tie it against closer James Karinchak on a leadoff homer by Yandy Diaz and Brandon Lowe's two-out RBI double.

Pete Fairbanks (3-3) pitched the ninth and Diego Castillo struck out Franmil Reyes and Bobby Bradley with the potential tying run at third in the 10th for his 14th save.

Angels 3, Twins 2: Jack Mayfield hit a three-run homer and Andrew Heaney (6-7) finished seven innings for his longest start of the season, leading visiting Los Angeles past Minnesota.

Red Sox 5, Yankees 4 (10): Kiké Hernández hit a two-run double that tied the game with two outs in the ninth inning, and host Boston took advantage of a record four wild pitches by Brooks Kiske in the 10th to

rally past New York.

Giants 5, Dodgers 3: LaMonte Wade Jr. broke a ninth-inning tie with a two-run single and visiting San Francisco rallied against closer Kenley Jansen again for a victory over Los Angeles.

Braves 7, Phillies 2: Dansby Swanson hit his first career grand slam, Orlando Arcia added a solo shot and Atlanta beat host Philadelphia to inch closer in the NL East race.

Cardinals 3, Cubs 2: Kwang Hyun-Kim (6-5) earned his fifth straight win on his 33rd birthday and St. Louis beat visiting Chicago.

Tigers 7, Rangers 5: Eric Haase hit a three-run homer in the first inning and host Detroit extended its winning streak to a season-best seven games with a four-game sweep of Texas.

Padres 3, Marlins 2: Blake Snell allowed one run in six-plus innings, Jurickson Proffar had two hits and two RBIs, and visiting San Diego beat Miami.

Athletics 4, Mariners 1: Sean Manaea struck out a career-high 13 in seven strong innings, Ramón Laureano drove in two runs and Oakland beat Seattle in the opener of a 10-game road trip.

Cleveland baseball team chooses new name: Guardians

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Known as the Indians since 1915, Cleveland's Major League Baseball team will be called Guardians.

The ballclub announced the name change Friday — effective at the end of the 2021 season — with a video on Twitter narrated by actor and team fan Tom Hanks. The decision ends months of internal discussions triggered by a national reckoning by institutions and teams to permanently drop logos and names considered racist.

The choice of Guardians will undoubtedly be criticized by many of the club's die-hard fans.

The organization spent most of the past year whittling down a list of potential names that was at nearly 1,200 just over a month ago. But the process quickly accelerated and the club landed on Guardians.

Dolan said last summer's social unrest, touched off by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, spurred his intention to change the name.