

Analysts: Russia easing Ukraine offensive

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Foreign analysts say Russia may be temporarily easing its offensive in eastern Ukraine as the Russian military attempts to reassemble its forces for a significant — and what it hopes could prove decisive — new offensive in the neighboring country.

On Wednesday, Russian forces made no claimed or assessed territorial gains in Ukraine “for the first time in 133 days of war,” according to the Institute for the Study of War. The think tank based in Washington suggested that Moscow may be taking an “operational pause,” but said that does not entail “the complete cessation of active hostilities.”

“Russian forces will likely confine themselves to relatively small-scale offensive actions as they attempt to set conditions for more significant offensive operations and rebuild the combat power needed to attempt those more ambitious undertakings,” the institute said.

A Thursday statement from Russia’s Defense Ministry seemed to confirm that assessment. It said Russian military units involved in combat in Ukraine had been given time to rest.

“The units that performed combat missions during the special military operation

are taking measures to recover their combat capabilities. The servicemen are given the opportunity to rest, receive letters and parcels from home,” read the statement, quoted by Russian state news agency Tass.

Shelling continued in Ukraine’s east, where at least nine civilians were killed and six wounded in 24 hours, Ukrainian officials said early Thursday.

Ukraine’s presidential office said in its morning update that cities and villages in seven of the country’s regions were shelled in the past day. Most of the civilian deaths occurred in Donetsk province, where fighting is ongoing. Seven civilians were killed there, including a child, the presidential office said.

Later Thursday, a missile hit a residential area in the Donetsk city of Kramatorsk, killing one civilian and injuring at least six, officials said. Cars and broken trees smoldered at the scene of the strike, which left a crater in the center of a courtyard.

Volodymyr, 66, a resident who declined to provide his full name, sat in his overturned apartment, covered in blood.

“I was just sitting and drinking tea, and then there was an explosion,” he told the Associated Press. “You can see the result of it.”

Asked if he felt safe staying in his apartment building block, he responded: “Is it safe right now anywhere in Ukraine? It all just

happened in one moment, and that was it.”

Three people were killed and at least two wounded in what appeared to be a rocket attack on a residential neighborhood of Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city. The AP saw the bodies laid out on the ground.

Earlier in the day, a boarding school was hit in Kharkiv but no one was injured. In separate attacks, the Ukrainian regional administration reported three people across the Kharkiv region had been wounded by shelling.

The Kharkiv region, which lies along the border with Russia, is under daily shelling, and at least five civilians were killed there since Wednesday.

Ten cities and villages came under shelling in Donetsk, and 35 buildings were destroyed, including a school, a vocational college and a hospital, officials said.

The Ukrainian military said Thursday that Russian forces also carried out shelling and helicopter strikes in the Sumy region in the northeast.

Even as the fighting continued, the British Defense Ministry said it thinks Russia’s military is “reconstituting” its forces. A ministry intelligence assessment issued Thursday said the heavy shelling along the front line in Donetsk is likely intended to secure previous Russian gains.

FBI: China may be bracing for Taiwan raid sanctions

The Washington Post

LONDON — In a rare joint appearance with his British counterpart, FBI Director Christopher Wray warned Wednesday that the threat posed by the Chinese government to Western companies is “getting worse” and suggested China may be taking steps to insulate itself from economic repercussions if it invades Taiwan.

Speaking at the offices of MI5, Britain’s domestic security service, Wray focused on the threat Western businesses and governments face from what he called a relentless, multifaceted effort by China to compete unfairly in the global marketplace. He also said the Russian invasion of Ukraine may pose important lessons for geopolitics in Asia.

“As you all know, there’s been a lot of dis-

cussion about the potential that China may try to forcibly take over Taiwan,” Wray said. “Were that to happen, it would represent one of the most horrific business disruptions the world has ever seen.”

He spoke to a gathering of British business leaders, in what officials said was the first such event featuring the head of the FBI and the head of MI5.

Wray said he is confident that China “is drawing all sorts of lessons from what’s happening with Russia and its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. And you should, too. We’ve seen China looking for ways to insulate their economy against potential sanctions, trying to cushion themselves from harm if they do anything to draw the ire of the international behavior. In our world, we call that kind of

behavior a clue.”

Wray did not explain how the FBI deduced a connection between Chinese efforts to lessen the effects of sanctions and any potential planning for an invasion of Taiwan. In the West, some cybersecurity experts have been calling for more than a year for sanctions to be imposed on China for government-sponsored hacking campaigns against hundreds of companies.

The FBI director noted that when Russia was hit with tough sanctions following the Ukraine invasion, “there were a lot of Western companies that had their fingers still in their door when it slammed shut.”

Similar type of sanctions against China, he warned, could do harm to the world economy “at a much larger scale.”

Air Force probing death of family's dog on PCS flight

By JOSEPH DITZLER
AND KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — A Marine family is unhappy with the Air Force Air Mobility Command over the death of their dog July 1 on a flight to Okinawa on the Patriot Express.

The diminutive dog, Kolbie, was found dead on board the plane when it reached Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, after a 12-hour flight from Seattle and a layover at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo. His owners last saw Kolbie alive at Yokota, an airlift hub, before the hourlong leg to MCAS Iwakuni, according to a Facebook post July 4 by Amber Marie Panko.

A necropsy found that the dog, a 10-year-old Pomeranian mix, died of heatstroke, Gunnery Sgt. Christopher Panko told Stars and Stripes by Facebook Messenger on Thursday.

Amber Panko wrote that Kolbie was left

outside in the heat during the Yokota layover. "An hour he was sitting in an open garage in 100-degree weather before being boarded and sitting in cargo for over an hour in what was well over 100 degrees," she wrote.

Christopher Panko, a native of Erie, Pa., and an engineer with Marine Corps Installations Pacific on Okinawa, said a lieutenant colonel with the 730th Air Mobility Squadron at Yokota contacted his wife about Kolbie a week later.

"That was it. No one from, like, the actual AMC command," he wrote. The lieutenant colonel said he was sorry and "knows he should have reached out sooner," Christopher Panko said by Messenger.

Air Mobility Command in its statement said it will look closely at the incident.

"The family deserves to know exactly what happened," according to the statement, "and we need to better understand how we can prevent this from happening in the future."

Navy destroyer helps UK seize Iranian missiles

By ALISON BATH
AND J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A U.S. Navy destroyer helped in the seizure of smuggled Iranian surface-to-air missiles and other advanced weapon components potentially intended for Houthi rebels in Yemen, British officials announced Thursday.

An MH-60 Seahawk helicopter from USS Gridley provided overwatch on Feb. 25 as the British navy frigate Montrose intercepted a speedboat operated by smugglers in international waters south of Iran, the British Defense Ministry and U.S. 5th Fleet said in separate statements.

A similar incident in the same region on Jan. 28 also resulted in the confiscation of advanced weaponry.

The U.K. did not reveal the seizures until more than four months afterward because of their sensitivity, a defense ministry spokesman said Thursday, adding that it "took some time for the facts to become clear."

Concerns about Iran's missiles and aerial drones led to a secret meeting of U.S., Israeli and Arab military officials about possible air defense coordination, The Wall Street Journal reported in June.

Middle Eastern countries are worried about Iran's ability to launch attacks from afar, said Tom Karako, director of the Missile Defense Project at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"The capacity and the capability of Iranian missiles and drones is very robust," Karako said Wednesday.

British marines who boarded the vessels during routine security operations discovered dozens of packages later determined to be engine components for the Iranian 351 land attack cruise missile and an unspecified number of Iranian 358 surface-to-air missiles, officials said.

The transported items violate a 2015 U.N. Security Council resolution that, among other actions, imposed an arms embargo in Yemen, according to the British Defense Ministry.

Iran has been accused of providing weapons, training and financial support to the Houthis.

Army leaders, allied nations meet to review lessons of Ukraine war

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The implications of drones and long-range artillery were among the Ukraine war topics discussed by U.S. Army leaders and other allied commanders Thursday, as they assessed the path forward for an alliance still adapting to Russia's unprovoked invasion.

"We are getting lessons learned," Gen. James McConville, Army chief of staff, told reporters following the gathering of leaders in the Alpine town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.

More than 30 countries were part of U.S. Army Europe and Africa's conference of European armies, which included representatives of Ukraine and officials from prospective NATO members Finland and Sweden.

Gen. Darryl Williams, who took command of the Army in Europe last week, said his focus is on the fundamentals: making sure sol-

diers under his command are ready to deter aggressors and fight if necessary.

The war in Ukraine is providing important takeaways for the United States and allies, McConville said, including the imperative that commanders and foot soldiers be able to communicate on the move.

Given Russia's ability to hit targets from greater distances, effective communication requires "the ability to disperse your command and control," McConville said.

The war in Ukraine also has been a showcase for the effectiveness of drones on the battlefield, which means armies will need weapons system to counter the threat, he said.

"Much of the artillery being used is being targeted by unmanned aerial systems," McConville said.

Such lessons reinforce the Army's push in recent years to develop more long-range precision weaponry, he said.

Embattled UK leader Johnson resigns

Associated Press

LONDON — Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his resignation Thursday amid a mass revolt by top members of his government, marking an end to three tumultuous years in power in which he brazenly bent and sometimes broke the rules of British politics.

Months of defiance ended almost with a shrug as Johnson stood in 10 Downing Street and conceded that his party wanted him gone.

"Them's the breaks," he said.

The brash, 58-year-old politician who took Britain out of the European Union and steered it through COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine was brought down by one scandal too many — this one

involving his appointment of a politician who had been accused of sexual misconduct.

The messiest of prime ministers did not leave cleanly. Johnson stepped down immediately as Conservative Party leader but said he would remain as prime minister until the party chooses his successor.

The timetable for that process will be announced next week, he said.

But many in the party want him gone before then, and his government has been shredded by scores of resignations.

Among the possible candidates to succeed him: former Health Secretary Sajid Javid, former Treasury chief Rishi Sunak, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and De-

fense Secretary Ben Wallace.

Johnson had clung to power for two days, defiantly telling lawmakers on Wednesday that he had a "colossal mandate" from voters and intended to get on with the business of government. But he was forced to concede defeat Thursday morning after one of his closest allies, newly appointed Treasury chief Nadhim Zahawi, publicly told him to resign for the good of the country.

"In the last few days, I tried to persuade my colleagues that it would be eccentric to change governments when we're delivering so much and when we have such a vast mandate," Johnson said outside his office. "I regret not to have been successful in those arguments, and of course

it's painful not to be able to see through so many ideas and projects myself."

About 50 Cabinet secretaries, ministers and lower-level officials had quit the government over the past few days, often castigating the prime minister for his lack of integrity.

The mass resignations had left numerous positions unfilled, and the crisis had stalled the business of some parliamentary committees because there were no ministers available to speak on the government's behalf.

"It is clearly now the will of the parliamentary Conservative Party that there should be a new leader of that party and therefore a new prime minister," Johnson said.

US jobless claims above 230K for 5th straight week

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — More Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week and while layoffs remain low, it was the fifth consecutive week that claims topped the 230,000 mark.

Applications for jobless aid for the week ending July 2 rose to 235,000, up 4,000 from the previous week, the Labor Department reported Thursday. First-time applications generally track with the number of layoffs. Until early June, claims hadn't eclipsed 220,000 since January and have often been below 200,000 this year.

The four-week average for claims, which evens out some of the week-to-week volatility, inched up by 750 from the previous week, to 232,500.

The total number of Americans collecting jobless benefits for the week ending June 25 rose by 51,000 from the previous week, to 1,375,000. That figure has hovered near 50-year lows for months.

On Wednesday, the Labor Department reported U.S. employers advertised fewer jobs in May amid signs the economy is weakening, though the overall demand for workers remained strong. Employers posted 11.3 million job openings at the end of May, down from nearly 11.7 million in April. Job openings reached 11.9 million in March, the highest level on records dating back more than 20 years. There are nearly two job openings for every unemployed person.

The figures reflect the unusual nature of the post-pandemic economy: Inflation is hammering household budgets, forcing consumers to pull back on spending, and growth is weakening, heightening fears the economy could fall into recession. Yet companies are still scrambling to add workers. Demand has been particularly strong in travel- and entertainment-related services.

The Labor Department is set to release its May jobs report Friday.

Jury finds man guilty in murder of Nipsey Hussle

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A 32-year-old man who grew up on the same streets in the same gang as Nipsey Hussle was found guilty Wednesday of first-degree murder in the 2019 shooting of the Grammy-winning rapper, who rose above his circumstances to become an inspiration to the neighborhood where he was eventually gunned down.

The Los Angeles County jury also found Eric R. Holder Jr. guilty of two counts of attempted voluntary manslaughter for gunfire that hit other men at the scene. Prosecutors had sought two counts of attempted murder. Holder was also found guilty of two counts of assault with a firearm on the same men.

Holder, wearing a blue suit and face mask, stood up in the small courtroom next to his lawyer as the verdict was read. He had no visible reaction. His lawyer, Deputy Public Defender Aaron Jansen, conceded during the trial that Holder shot Hussle, 33,

whose legal name was Ermiyas Asghedom, but had sought a lesser verdict of voluntary manslaughter.

Jansen said in an email that he was deeply disappointed in the first-degree murder verdict.

"It was always going to be tough given the high-profile circumstances surrounding the case," Jansen said.

He added that he and Holder plan to appeal the murder conviction, he said.

A jury of nine women and three men deliberated for about six hours over two days before reaching the verdict. Most of their deliberations took place Friday, and they promptly came to their unanimous decision Wednesday, briefly reconvening after a four-day break.

"We hope that today is a day in which the Asghedom family and the friends and fans of Nipsey Hussle around the world will find some measure of closure," Deputy District Attorney John McKinney said outside the courtroom.

States try saving abortion from outside pursuits

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Democratic governors in states where abortion will remain legal are looking for ways to protect any patients who travel there for the procedure — along with the providers who help them — from being prosecuted by their home states.

The Democratic governors of Colorado and North Carolina on Wednesday issued executive orders to protect abortion providers and patients from extradition to states that have banned the practice.

Abortions are legal in North Carolina until fetal viability or in certain medical emergencies,

making the state an outlier in the Southeast.

“This order will help protect North Carolina doctors and nurses and their patients from cruel right-wing criminal laws passed by other states,” Gov. Roy Cooper said in announcing the order.

The governors of Rhode Island and Maine also signed executive orders late Tuesday, stating they will not cooperate with other states’ investigations into people who seek abortions or health care providers that perform them.

Rhode Island Democratic Gov. Dan McKee said women should be trusted with their own

health care decisions, and Democratic Lt. Gov. Sabina Matos said Rhode Island must do all it can to protect access to reproductive health care as “other states attack the fundamental right to choose.”

Maine Democratic Gov. Janet Mills said she will “stand in the way of any effort to undermine, roll back or outright eliminate the right to safe and legal abortion in Maine.”

Their offices confirmed Wednesday that they are preemptive, protective moves, and that neither state has received a request to investigate, prosecute or extradite a provider or patient.

Bernadette Meyler, a profes-

sor at Stanford Law School, said it’s not clear whether judgments against out-of-state abortion providers would hold up in courts, especially if they are not advertising their services in states with bans.

But she also said it’s not clear that the liberal states are on firm legal ground to protect their residents from any out-of-state litigation.

“Probably, they assume that some of the laws that they’re passing won’t be upheld or may not be upheld, and they’re trying to come up with as much as possible in order to resist the effects of the Dobbs decision,” Meyler said.

Ga. slabs called satanic by some razed after bombing

Associated Press

ATLANTA — A rural Georgia monument that some conservative Christians criticized as satanic and others dubbed “America’s Stonehenge” was demolished Wednesday after a predawn bombing turned one of its four granite panels into rubble.

The Georgia Guidestones monument near Elberton was damaged by an explosive device, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation said, and later knocked down “for safety reasons,” leaving a pile of rubble in a picture that investigators published.

Surveillance footage showed a sharp explosion blowing one panel to rubble just after 4 a.m. Investigators also released video footage of a silver sedan leaving the

monument.

After prior vandalism, video cameras connected to the county’s emergency dispatch center were stationed at the site, said Elbert Granite Association Executive Vice President Chris Kubas.

The enigmatic roadside attraction was built in 1980 from local granite, commissioned by an unknown person or group under the pseudonym R.C. Christian.

“That’s given the Guidestones a sort of shroud of mystery around them, because the identity and intent of the individuals who commissioned them is unknown,” said Katie McCarthy, who researches conspiracy theories for the Anti-Defamation League. “And so that has helped over the years to fuel a lot of speculation and con-

spiracy theories about the Guidestones’ true intent.”

The 16-foot-high panels bore a 10-part message in eight different languages with guidance for living in an “age of reason.” One part called for keeping world population at 500 million or below, while another calls to “guide reproduction wisely — improving fitness and diversity.”

It also served as a sundial and astronomical calendar. But it was the panels’ mention of eugenics, population control and global government that made them a target of far-right conspiracists.

The monument’s notoriety took off with the rise of the internet, Kubas said, until it became a roadside tourist attraction, with thousands visiting each year.

Favorable weather helps fight against Calif. forest fire

Associated Press

JACKSON, Calif. — Favorable weather early Wednesday aided the fight against a wildfire in California’s Gold Country that has forced evacuations in two counties.

The Electra Fire had burned 6.4 square miles of rural terrain but it was now about 40% contained without any buildings burned, the California Depart-

ment of Forestry and Fire Protection reported.

In addition, about 17% of the fire was declared controlled, meaning there wasn’t any smoke or any hotspots within the fire perimeter in that area, Cal Fire said.

“Humidity recovery in the early morning hours moderated fire activity,” Cal Fire said.

Some evacuation orders were

lifted.

The fire erupted Monday afternoon in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, forcing evacuations in Amador neighboring Calaveras counties. Some Amador County evacuations, however, were downgraded to warnings on Wednesday.

Cal Fire said the number of threatened structures remained at 1,217, but there were

no reports of structures destroyed or damaged. One firefighter was injured.

The National Weather Service said overnight infrared satellite imagery showed a “waning heat signature” from the fire as relative humidity levels reached 75% to 90% and northerly winds were generally light. Westerly breezes were expected by afternoon.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Animal cruelty charges for rabbit rescue head

MN SAVAGE — Prosecutors have charged the president of a Savage-based rabbit rescue nonprofit with animal cruelty and torture after police discovered nearly 50 dead rabbits in a barn.

The Star Tribune reported Tuesday that police arrived at the barn on June 27 to investigate reports of sick and dead rabbits. According to a criminal complaint, they found 47 dead rabbits, scores of rabbits running loose, some that had burrowed into manure, one rabbit with a broken back and a baby rabbit infested with maggots.

Peacebunny Foundation President Stephanie Smith told investigators that the animals' condition was "not appropriate" and another group was planning to pick up the loose bunnies, according to the complaint. She wrote in a blog post Saturday that Peacebunny Foundation is ceasing all its programs and pledged not to obtain any new rabbits or spend foundation money on her legal defense. She's due to make her first court appearance Aug. 22.

Scott County Attorney Ron Hocevar said the Humane Society is caring for the 200 or so rabbits found in the barn.

Fossil skeleton of T. rex relative to be auctioned

NY NEW YORK — The fossilized skeleton of a T. rex relative that roamed the earth about 76 million years ago will be auctioned in New York this month, Sotheby's announced Tuesday.

The Gorgosaurus skeleton

will highlight Sotheby's natural history auction on July 28, the auction house said.

The Gorgosaurus was an apex carnivore that lived in what is now the western United States and Canada during the late Cretaceous Period. It predated its relative the Tyrannosaurus rex by 10 million years.

The specimen being sold was discovered in 2018 in the Judith River Formation near Havre, Mont., Sotheby's said. It measures nearly 10 feet tall and 22 feet long.

All of the other known Gorgosaurus skeletons are in museum collections, making this one the only specimen available for private ownership, the auction house said. Sotheby's presale estimate for the fossil is \$5 million to \$8 million.

Great Salt Lake hits new low amid megadrought

UT SALT LAKE CITY — The Great Salt Lake has hit a new historic low for the second time in less than a year as the ongoing megadrought worsened by climate change continues to shrink the largest natural lake west of the Mississippi.

Utah Department of Natural Resources officials said Monday in a news release that the Great Salt Lake dipped Sunday to 4,190.1 feet. That is lower than the previous historic low set in October, which at the time matched a 170-year record low.

Lake levels are expected to keep dropping until fall or winter, the agency said.

Dwindling water levels at the giant lake puts millions of migrating birds at risk and threatens a lake-based economy that's

worth an estimated \$1.3 billion in mineral extraction, brine shrimp and recreation. The expanding amount of dry lakebed could also send arsenic-laced dust into the air that millions breathe, scientists have said.

\$300M for plan to move tracks off eroding bluffs

CA DEL MAR — California will provide \$300 million to help relocate train tracks along a stretch of eroding seaside cliffs near San Diego, regional transportation officials said.

Local governments and the North County Transit District have spent millions buttressing sections of the bluffs in Del Mar that have collapsed in recent years, causing delays for passenger and cargo trains.

The funding to relocate the tracks inland comes as part of California's \$308 billion state budget signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom last week, The San Diego Union-Tribune reported.

The project is slated to cost about \$2.5 billion, the newspaper said.

Officials have said the main reason the bluffs are failing is that urban runoff seeps into the ground when residents and businesses irrigate their properties. Coastal erosion from waves and wind also plays a significant role.

Sheriff: Man killed in Cascades climbing fall

WA LEAVENWORTH — A man from Vancouver, Wash., died in a climbing accident Monday in the Cascade Mountains south of Leavenworth, the Chelan County

sheriff said.

The 44-year-old's climbing partner said the two were climbing on Icicle Buttress when heavy rain moved in. She said she was lowered to the bottom of the pitch and the man was following when he fell about 100 feet.

She said she heard a noise and saw him fall. She flagged down a U.S. Forest Service officer who happened to be in the area, Sheriff Brian Burnett said in a statement.

A sheriff's search and rescue crew found him dead from apparent injuries sustained during the fall.

Crowd shoots fireworks at police aiding victim

ME PORTLAND — Police in a Maine city deployed pepper balls on Monday night when members of a crowd shot fireworks at the officers, who were attending to a shooting victim.

Portland police said they responded to a report of a man who had been shot near a park on Monday night. Police said they were rendering aid to the victim when a crowd nearby became hostile and discharged fireworks at them.

The fireworks were mortar-style fireworks and several officers were hit by sparks, police said. Police said no officers were seriously injured.

Police said they deployed the pepper balls into the groups that were shooting the fireworks.

The shooting victim was transported to a hospital where he is in stable condition, police said.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Russians a risky prospect in NHL Draft

Associated Press

The war in Ukraine has added an increasing level of uncertainty for NHL teams interested in drafting Russia-born prospects because of questions regarding their availability to play in North America.

While no team has openly stated it would avoid selecting Russians altogether in the two-day draft in Montreal that opened Thursday, there was the potential of Russia being shut out in the first round for the first time since 2005.

"I don't know if anybody has the answer," said Seattle general manager Ron Francis, whose team currently has 12 picks over seven rounds, including No. 4 overall. "It's certainly unknown right now so it makes it, I think, a little more riskier than years past."

While there has always been a risk of Russian prospects deciding to stay home to play, the concerns are greater now with travel restrictions in place during the war for anyone wishing to travel to or from Russia and

Belarus. NHL executives are left to wonder if a pick will actually be allowed out.

It doesn't help that the NHL and its Russian-based counterpart, the Kontinental Hockey League, do not have a transfer agreement in place. That prevents NHL teams from buying out KHL contracts, a consistent hurdle for any GM hoping to raid the second-best league in the world.

Without disclosing the Canadiens' strategy, Montreal GM Kent Hughes said it will be up to each team to weigh the risks of selecting a Russian player.

"It's simple enough to say that the war in Russia creates a level of complexity or probably more uncertainty," Hughes told *The Associated Press*. "Any team picking has to balance the uncertainty of it with the potential of the player."

Last week, Philadelphia Flyers goalie prospect Ivan Fedotov was suddenly assigned to a remote military base in northern Russia, according to

the player's agent, J.P. Barry. Selected in the seventh round of the 2015 draft, Fedotov signed with the Flyers in May after completing his contract with CSKA Moscow in the KHL.

"I think in years past, there's probably a little bit of concern — just is the guy going to come over?" Francis said before specifically referencing Fedotov. "This is probably on a different magnitude."

While the NHL has not issued any directives regarding drafting Russian players, Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly said the uncertainty could lead to teams being more hesitant.

"Would it surprise me if some slip in where they're projected to go based on the inability to access them? Potentially," Daly said.

This year's draft class includes several Russian prospects with first-round potential under normal circumstances.

Defenseman Pavel Mintyukov is ranked sixth among

North American skaters by NHL Central Scouting because he played in the Ontario Hockey League last season. Wingers Danila Yurov and Ivan Miroshnichenko, who played in Russia, are among the top 10-ranked European skaters.

Miroshnichenko's situation is more complicated because he was unable to complete his season after being diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma in March. He has since completed his treatments and plans to attend the draft.

NHL Central Scouting chief Dan Marr is confident Russian players will be selected but won't guess how long they might have to wait.

"I wouldn't even want to try and guess as to what the NHL clubs are thinking," Marr said. "If you're sitting there and you've got a solid prospect for the NHL, are you going to go by him or do you want to step up and take him, and cross your fingers and hope that the world is in a different place a couple of years from now."

WNBA's Griner pleads guilty in Russian criminal court

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Jailed American basketball star Brittney Griner on Thursday pleaded guilty to drug possession during her trial in Moscow but said she had no intention of committing a crime.

Representatives for Griner confirmed to *The Associated Press* that the WNBA star pleaded guilty to drug possession charges.

Russian news reports quoted Griner as saying through an interpreter at the court hearing that she had acted unintentionally because she was packing in haste.

Griner was detained in February at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport after vape canisters with cannabis oil allegedly were found in her luggage. She faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted of large-scale transportation of drugs.

The trial of the Phoenix Mercury star and two-time Olympic gold medalist began last week amid a growing chorus of calls for Washington to do more to secure her

freedom nearly five months after her arrest.

Before Thursday's hearing, Russian police escorted Griner, handcuffed and clad in a bright red T-shirt and sports trousers, into the courtroom past a crowd of journalists.

Elizabeth Rood, deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, told reporters after the hearing that she spoke to Griner in the courtroom and shared a letter from President Joe Biden that she read.

"She's eating well, she's able to read books and under the circumstances she's doing well," Rood said of Griner.

"I would like again to emphasize the commitment of the U.S. government at the very highest level to bring home safely Ms. Griner and all U.S. citizens wrongfully detained as well as the commitment of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to care for and protect the interests of all U.S. citizens detained or imprisoned in Russia," Rood said.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov bristled at the U.S. description of Griner as "wrongfully detained" and warned that "attempts by the American side to make noise in public ... don't help the practical settlement of issues."

The White House said Biden called Griner's wife on Wednesday to assure her that he's doing all he can to obtain the athlete's release, as soon as possible. They spoke after Biden read a letter from Griner in which she said she feared she'd never return home.

Washington hasn't made public its strategy in the case and the United States may have little leverage with Moscow because of strong animosity due to Russia's military actions in Ukraine. The State Department has designated Griner as wrongfully detained, moving her case under the supervision of its special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, effectively the government's chief hostage negotiator.

Browns trade Mayfield to Panthers

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Baker Mayfield's wild four-year ride in Cleveland is over.

The No. 1 overall pick in 2018, Mayfield was traded Wednesday by the Browns, who moved on from the quarterback months ago and finally sent him to the Carolina Panthers for a future draft pick.

Mayfield, who was pushed out of his starting job amid the Browns' pursuit of Deshaun Watson, is going to Carolina for a conditional draft pick in 2024 or 2025.

The Browns are paying \$10.5 million of Mayfield's \$18.8 million contract for next season, two people familiar with the negotiations told The Associated Press. The Panthers will pay \$4.8 million and Mayfield will take a \$3.5 million pay cut, said the people, who spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the trade can't be finalized until Mayfield passes a physical.

Mayfield can earn back

some of the money through incentives. Also, if he plays 70% of Carolina's snaps next season, the pick the Browns are receiving will be a fourth-rounder in 2024.

The trade was announced by both the Browns and Panthers, who coincidentally will meet in next season's opener in Charlotte, a matchup spiced up by Mayfield switching teams.

Mayfield's time with the Browns effectively ended in March when the team traded three first-round selections and six overall to the Houston Texans for Watson, who is facing a possible NFL suspension for violating the league's personal conduct policy.

Watson has been accused of sexual misconduct by two dozen massage therapists in Texas. The league's disciplinary officer is expected to rule on Watson before the Browns open training camp later this month.

Mayfield, who played most of last season with a left shoul-

der injury, felt betrayed by Cleveland's move for Watson, demanded a trade and then had to wait until the Browns found a team both interested in him and willing to take on his salary.

Mayfield began his rookie season as Tyrod Taylor's backup before coming off the bench in Week 3 and rallying the Browns to their first win in 635 days, a 21-17 victory over the New York Jets on national TV.

Mayfield wound up passing for 3,725 yards and throwing 27 touchdown passes as a rookie, breaking the NFL record for a first-year quarterback. For the first time in years, there was genuine hope for a floundering franchise that has had 32 starting QBs since 1999.

Mayfield sat out last season's finale and had surgery soon after. Browns general manager Andrew Berry said he expected Mayfield to bounce back as the team's starter in 2022, but everything changed with the pursuit of

Watson soon after.

In recent weeks, as Watson's legal entanglement dragged on, there had been speculation the Browns could turn to Mayfield. But the quarterback recently said he didn't think a reconciliation was possible.

The 27-year-old will compete for Carolina's starting QB job with Sam Darnold, who was taken two picks after Mayfield in 2018.

The Panthers, who have not made the playoffs since 2017, have been searching for stability at the quarterback position ever since head coach Matt Rhule was hired in 2020. They also took a run at Watson before he chose Cleveland.

Mayfield's four years with the Browns included fewer memorable moments than distracting ones as he couldn't end the team's long search for a franchise QB.

The stint was full of highs and lows, coaching changes, too much drama and not nearly enough wins.

Jabeur, Rybakina move into Wimbledon women's final

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — Ons Jabeur's steady progress from year to year — up the tennis rankings, through the draws of various tournaments and, now, at Wimbledon — has carried her to a Grand Slam singles final, the first African woman and Arab woman to make it that far in the professional era.

The No. 3-seeded Jabeur, a 27-year-old from Tunisia, got past her good friend Tatjana Maria 6-2, 3-6, 6-1 in an up-and-down semifinal at a sun-splashed Centre Court on Thursday.

"I want to go bigger, inspire many more generations. Tunisia is connected to the Arab world, is connected to the African continent. ... I want to see

more players from my country, from the Middle East, from Africa," said Jabeur, who sat on her sideline chair and threw her head back after the biggest victory of her career. "We didn't believe enough, at a certain point, that we can do it. Now I'm just trying to show (we can). Hopefully people are getting inspired."

On Saturday, she will face another player making her major final debut, No. 17 seed Elena Rybakina, for the championship. Rybakina, a 23-year-old from Kazakhstan, overwhelmed 2019 Wimbledon champion Simona Halep 6-3, 6-3 in the second semifinal.

"I already did a lot," Rybakina said, "and it's just time to enjoy."

After a surprising first-round loss at the French Open in May, Jabeur is on quite a run: She has won 11 consecutive matches, all on grass courts, and 22 of her past 24.

The men's semifinals are Friday, with three-time defending champion and No. 1 seed Novak Djokovic facing No. 9 Cameron Norrie of Britain, and 22-time Grand Slam winner Rafael Nadal against unseeded Nick Kyrgios. Nadal shed doubt on whether he'd even be able to show up for his semifinal after struggling through a five-set victory over Taylor Fritz on Wednesday.

Nadal held a limited practice session Thursday, mostly sticking to forehands and backhands. When he did attempt to

serve, which was a significant problem a day earlier, he did so without using full force or throwing his body behind his deliveries.

Rybakina, never beyond a major quarterfinal until now, leads the tour in aces this year and added five to her total Thursday. More surprising was the way Halep never got going, especially on her serve, double-faulting nine times.

Halep had won her past 12 matches at the All England Club, a streak that began with her title run three years ago. Wimbledon was canceled in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, and Halep was unable to compete a year ago because she tore her left calf muscle.

Judge, Hicks hit slams; Yanks rip Bucs

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Aaron Judge hit a grand slam for his major league-leading 30th home run and the New York Yankees routed the Pittsburgh Pirates 16-0 on Wednesday night to split their two-game interleague series.

Luis Severino pitched six dominant innings and Aaron Hicks also had a grand slam as New York scored 11 runs in the eighth and ninth and halted a two-game skid.

Judge became the first Yankees player to hit 30 home runs before the All-Star break twice in his career when he turned on a pitch from Pittsburgh reliever Manny Banuelos in the eighth for his third career slam.

Hicks cleared the bases in the ninth when he went deep against Pirates utility infielder Josh VanMeter.

Giancarlo Stanton, Josh Donaldson, Joey Gallo and Kyle Higashioka also homered for New York to boost the Yankees' season total to 139 homers, easily tops in the majors.

"Games like this help guys get rolling," Judge said. "Guys had good at-bats, put a couple of balls in the gaps and all of a sudden guys take off for a week or two or a whole month or even the rest of the season."

Severino (5-3) allowed four hits while striking out three without issuing a walk to pick up his first victory in more than a month.

Mitch Keller (2-6) worked in and out of trouble over six innings, allowing four runs on a season-high 10 hits with a walk and seven strikeouts.

Dodgers 2, Rockies 1: Cody Bellinger scored the winning run on Mookie Betts' infield single with the bases loaded in the ninth inning, and host Los Angeles completed a three-game sweep of Colorado.

Dodgers starter Mitch White and three relievers combined to allow only one hit.

Bellinger, who had three hits, and Gavin Lux opened the ninth with back-to-back singles. Lux hit a bleeder to the open left side of the infield with the shift on that allowed Bellinger to reach third. The Rockies then went to a five-man infield, bringing in center fielder Garrett Hampson and leaving only Kris Bryant and Charlie Blackmon to patrol the outfield. Pinch-hitter Will Smith drew a walk to load the bases and Betts hit a bouncer over the head of reliever Daniel Bard (3-3). The speedy Bellinger dashed home safely, and the Dodgers improved to 5-8 in one-run games this season.

Giants 7, Diamondbacks 5: Austin Slater hit a tiebreaking bases-loaded double in the ninth inning and visiting San Francisco rallied from an early four-run deficit, beating Arizona and snapping a six-game skid.

Darin Ruf hit a two-run, pinch-hit homer off Joe Mantiply (1-2) in the eighth inning, tying the game at 4. Slater, also pinch-hitting, led off the inning with a bunt single.

Cubs 2, Brewers 1: P.J. Higgins hit a tiebreaking two-out double off Josh Hader in the ninth inning, and visiting Chicago rallied to beat Milwaukee.

After Brewers starter Corbin Burnes threw seven shutout innings, the Cubs broke through against Milwaukee's bullpen by scoring in each of the last two frames. The Cubs took two of three at Milwaukee and have followed a 10-game losing streak by winning four straight series.

Angels 5, Marlins 2: Shohei Ohtani allowed one unearned run in seven dominant innings and had the go-ahead hit as visiting Los Angeles snapped Miami's six-game winning streak.

The reigning AL MVP won his fifth consecutive start, limiting the Marlins to two hits. Ohtani (8-4) walked three and

struck out 10.

Three-time AL MVP Mike Trout was hitless in four at-bats and had an RBI.

Mets 8, Reds 3 (10): Brandon Nimmo's three-run homer capped a five-run 10th inning and visiting New York rallied to beat Cincinnati.

Starling Marte grounded an RBI double over third base off Hunter Strickland with one out in the ninth, scoring Nimmo from first to tie the game at 3.

Braves 3, Cardinals 0: Marcell Ozuna and Eddie Rosario hit back-to-back homers, Max Fried threw six strong innings and host Atlanta beat slumping St. Louis.

Fried (9-2) and Miles Mikolas (5-7) each threw four scoreless innings before Ozuna led off the fifth with his 17th homer deep into the left-field seats. Rosario followed with his first homer. Austin Riley and Travis d'Arnaud added back-to-back doubles off Mikolas in the sixth, giving Atlanta a 3-0 lead.

Royals 7, Astros 4: Whit Merrifield, Hunter Dozier and Emmanuel Rivera homered as visiting Kansas City roughed up Cristian Javier early and snapped Houston's major-league best eight-game winning streak.

Javier (6-4) had trouble with the Royals almost immediately. Merrifield sent Javier's third pitch into the seats for his fourth homer. Javier walked Andrew Benintendi before Dozier's two-out shot made it 3-0. Rivera homered to left-center in the second.

Nationals 3, Phillies 2: Josiah Gray struck out a career-high 11 and shook off Kyle Schwarber's second consecutive two-homer game, helping last-place Washington beat host Philadelphia.

Luis Garcia hit a two-run double in the seventh inning off Phillies starter Aaron Nola (5-6) for a 3-2 lead.

Schwarber's two homers in-

creased his NL-best total to 27. Only Yankees slugger Judge has more homers with 30.

White Sox 9, Twins 8 (10): Andrew Vaughn tied the game with a two-run homer in the eighth inning, and Leury Garcia hit a game-ending single in the 10th to give host Chicago the win over Minnesota.

The White Sox trailed five times in the game and tied it each time before taking their first and only lead in extra innings to avoid a three-game sweep. Chicago snapped a seven-game losing streak to the AL Central-leading Twins.

Blue Jays 2, Athletics 1: Bo Bichette hit a tiebreaking homer in the eighth inning off Domingo Acevedo (1-2) and visiting Toronto rallied past Oakland to snap a five-game skid.

The Blue Jays' Matt Chapman homered against his former team for the second straight day.

Rays 7, Red Sox 1: Corey Kluber worked six scoreless innings and visiting Tampa Bay spoiled the major league debut of Brayan Bello, the top pitching prospect in Boston's system.

With a fastball topping out at 97 mph, the 23-year-old Bello (0-1) worked four up-and-down innings, allowing four runs on six hits with three walks and four strikeouts.

Tigers 8, Guardians 2: Miguel Cabrera hit a two-out, two-run single in the fifth inning as part of his three-RBI day and host Detroit completed its first four-game sweep of Cleveland since 2013.

Four Tigers relievers combined to pitch four innings of scoreless relief.

Orioles 2, Rangers 1: Spencer Watkins pitched more than six innings for the first time in his career, and host Baltimore beat Texas for its first three-game sweep of the season.

Watkins (2-1) allowed one run and four hits with three strikeouts in 6⅓ innings.