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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Pentagon eyes random virus testing

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will likely never have enough supplies to test the entire U.S. military, but leaders aim to test random units to improve their understanding of the scope of asymptomatic carriers in the ranks.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Tuesday that some two months into the coronavirus pandemic that the military has little idea how many of its troops are actually carrying the virus without experiencing the telltale symptoms such as fever and breathing difficulties. The Pentagon knows 4,967 troops had tested positive for the disease, of which 100 had spent some time in a hospital battling the virus, 1,844 had recovered, and two of its service members died of complications caused by the illness, according to data released Tuesday.

The Defense Department has placed its troops into four tiered groups to prioritize those who must be tested. Esper said the Pentagon now needs to test 56,000 service members each week to achieve its goals, and those numbers are likely to rise in the

future.

The Pentagon's first priority is to test its troops deemed tier 1 — those responsible for the nation's nuclear enterprise, including service members on submarines and bomber aircraft capable of deploying nuclear weapons and those responsible for U.S.-based ballistic missile silos. Those troops have all been tested, said Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

DOD is now working through testing its entire second tier, consisting of those now deployed to support ongoing combat or other operations around the globe. The third tier in the Pentagon's coronavirus testing priorities are troops preparing to deploy or those preparing to return home.

The rest of the Pentagon's service members make up the largest group, tier 4, and its lowest priority for testing. Those are troops who are for the foreseeable future expected to remain at their home stations — where they are confined largely due to a near-universal, stop-movement order for nonessential travel. It is those units within tier 4 that Esper wants to test randomly in

a program that he has dubbed “sentinel testing.”

“We say this group out here, we haven't seen anything from them, but let's test just in case,” the defense secretary said Tuesday during a news briefing. “And we'll see if there's carriers out there, and it helps us sharpen our focus.”

Esper did not say when such testing could begin, how often the Pentagon plans to conduct it or how widespread it would be. The defense secretary said the program is still being shaped as the Pentagon is working to build up its coronavirus-testing supply base while simultaneously expanding the number of troops it tests every day.

Pentagon officials first realized the scope of potential asymptomatic carriers within its ranks as it worked through testing the entire crew of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt. In the month after its first cases were found within flight crews aboard the massive ship, more than 1,000 sailors contracted the virus — the majority without experiencing symptoms.

Navy SEAL recruits train while social distancing

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Navy SEAL recruits and their instructors are being tested for the coronavirus as the candidates in one of the military's most grueling programs return to training with new social distancing guidelines, a top official said Tuesday.

Everyone in the first phase of training will be tested to try to detect if anyone is infected but asymptomatic, Capt. Bart Randall said. The rapid tests to be administered this week to 170 recruits and instructors are part of a Defense Department pilot project.

“Ideally we'll get any asymptomatic shedders out of the

population to help keep the rest of the guys safe,” said Randall, the Naval Special Warfare Center's commodore.

The recruits returned to training Monday after classes were paused March 16 as leaders established safety standards amid the pandemic.

There are noticeable differences.

Each recruit is checked daily for symptoms of the virus. Instructors are wearing masks and surgical gloves and shouting into megaphones rather than recruits' faces. Only a limited number of SEAL trainees are allowed into classrooms at a time or during swims and runs.

No positive cases have been found so far at the training school for the SEAL recruits or candidates for special warfare boat operators, Randall said.

Anyone showing symptoms of the virus will be immediately pulled from training and evaluated by a medical team and placed into quarantine if determined to be a potential case, Randall said.

The SEAL program tests participants' physical and psychological strength along with water competency and leadership skills.

It starts at the Naval station in Great Lakes, Ill., and typically ends 65 weeks later with graduation in Coronado, across

the bay from San Diego. Each graduate is awarded the special warfare insignia known as the Trident that denotes membership in the elite fighting force: The pin features a golden eagle wrapped around a U.S. Navy anchor, while clutching a three-prong trident, and a flintlock style pistol.

The program is so grueling that 75% of candidates drop out by the end of the first month in phase one.

Medical crews will be watching closely this year to ensure any coughs or other flu-like symptoms that often are produced by the strenuous workouts are not a sign of the coronavirus, Randall said.

B-1B bombers in Baltics for NATO training

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Two B-1B Lancers arrived in the Baltics to work with NATO allies this week, marking the heavy bombers' first flights to Europe in about 18 months.

After crossing the Atlantic, the Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.-based bombers flew with Danish F-16s over Bornholm Island, east of mainland Denmark, and worked with Estonian ground forces to provide close air support training, U.S. Air Forces in Europe — Air Forces Africa said in a statement Wednesday.

The training also included overflights of Lithuania and Latvia.

"Integrating bomber missions with our

NATO allies and partners build enduring relationships that are capable of confronting a broad range of global challenges," said Gen. Jeff Harrigian, USAFE-AFAF-RICA commander.

The strategic bombers participated in the "Spring Storm" military exercise, the Estonian Defense Ministry said in a statement.

"It is important that our allies understand that security cannot be put on pause for the duration of the pandemic," Estonian Defense Minister Juri Luik said Tuesday, the Baltic Times newspaper reported.

The Lancers were last in Europe in November 2018 supporting NATO's Trident Juncture exercise.

Strategic bomber deployments to Eu-

rope have become more frequent in recent years, amid U.S. and European concerns about potential Russian aggression. In March, a flight of B-2 stealth bombers participated in a series of training operations on the Continent. And last August, the Air Force deployed a similar B-2 bomber task force to Europe.

The Air Force did not say how long the Lancers would remain in Europe.

The Europe mission for the variable-wing Rockwell jets came just after B-1B bombers from Texas flew to the Western Pacific region.

Four B-1Bs from Dyess Air Force Base arrived in Guam on Friday to conduct training and operations with allies and partners, the Air Force said.

Marines help detain unruly passenger

BY IMMANUEL JOHNSON
Stars and Stripes

Three Marines "stacked up" outside the door of a jetliner's bathroom and detained a passenger who had barricaded himself inside and screamed threats during a flight from Japan to Texas.

Capt. Daniel Kult, Sgt. John Dietrick and Pfc. Alexander Meinhardt, all with 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, were on their way back stateside Monday when they heard the disruption, the Marine Corps said in a statement.

"We all heard the commotion and instinctively knew something needed to be done," Dietrick, an assault infantry Marine, told Stars and Stripes via text message Wednesday.

"The only thing that was going through our heads was to ensure the safety of all passengers on board and our fellow Marines."

The trio was about halfway through a six-month deployment to Camp Schwab on Okinawa as part of the service's Unit Deployment Program.

But for different reasons, each was cleared to travel back to the U.S. despite the Defense Department's coronavirus-related stop movement order.

"Honestly we just kind of naturally positioned ourselves in a manner to cover the exit and cover each other," Kult, an infantry officer from Coon Rapids, Iowa, told Stars and Stripes.

They gathered in a tactical "stack" at the lavatory and prepared to subdue the passenger as a flight attendant unlocked the door.

They restrained him after the flight crew provided flex ties — locking plastic cable ties often used as handcuffs.

After restraining the passenger in a seat, they watched him for the duration of the flight, which was diverted to Los Angeles International Airport, the statement said.

The passenger was transported to a hospital for a mental evaluation, and federal authorities are investigating the incident, it said.

Afghan forces: ISIS fighters who attacked Bagram killed in raid

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Five members of an Islamic State terror cell that attacked the largest American base in Afghanistan earlier this year were killed in a series of operations by Afghan commandos in and around Kabul, Afghan officials said Wednesday.

The terror cell, which was blamed for two rocket attacks on Bagram Airfield in recent months and for firing rockets at President Ashraf Ghani's inauguration in March, was eliminated and its leader captured in three raids in northern Kabul and a district just outside the capital, said the country's main intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security.

A video released by the NDS shows the bodies of men said to be members of the cell. The operations were conducted Tuesday evening, an official said in the video.

Eight fighters were arrested during the raids, which were carried out by special operations forces assigned to the NDS, the agency said in a statement.

No one was seriously injured in the attacks on Bagram or the presidential inauguration attacks, but 25 people, including women and children, were killed in another attack blamed on the group, in which a gunman opened fire at a Sikh temple in Kabul in March.

Besides being part of Islamic State-Khorasan Province, the terror cell was said by the NDS to have ties to the Haqqani network, which is officially part of the Taliban but maintains district command and control over its own fighters.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said on Twitter on Wednesday that none of the group's fighters are linked to ISIS and rejected the NDS statement as propaganda.

The Taliban and ISIS-K are bitter enemies and regularly clash on the battlefield.

Nominee Ratcliffe vows not to politicize intel info

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Rep. John Ratcliffe, President Donald Trump's pick to be the nation's top intelligence official, was nothing if not consistent as he told lawmakers a dozen or so times that he wouldn't allow politics to color information he took to the president.

The senators kept asking anyway as Trump's firing or forcing out of at least seven top U.S. intelligence officials since last summer overshadowed the Texas Republican's confirmation hearing Tuesday.

The forced departures have left the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees the nation's 16 spy agencies, without a single Senate-confirmed leader as the nation faces the COVID-19 pandemic, threats from Iran and North Korea, Russian disinformation campaigns to interfere in the U.S. elections and rising competition from China. The turmoil has deepened speculation that the president is trying to place loyalists in charge of the nation's intelligence apparatus.

The senators' questions reflected that skepticism: Would you communicate intelligence to Trump even if you knew the president strongly disagreed with it?

"Of course," Ratcliffe replied.

Even if it put your job in jeopardy?

"Of course."

Ratcliffe added: "Anyone's views on what they want the intelligence to be will never impact the intelligence that I deliver. Never."

Variations of the question kept coming, but Ratcliffe offered the same answer: "No."

"I will be entirely apolitical as the director of national intelligence," he said, adding that he had an apolitical job as a U.S. attorney and "kept both parties out of everything that I did."

Ratcliffe's critics aren't convinced and worry he's beholden to Trump. They point to his ardent defense of the president during the Russia investigations and Trump's impeachment and argue that he doesn't have enough intelligence experience for the job. Before being elected to Congress in 2014, Ratcliffe was mayor of Heath, Texas, and a U.S. attorney in the Eastern District of Texas.

"Jesus. He is going to be the DNI," tweeted Mike Hayden, a former director of the CIA and the National Security Agency who served in both Republican and Democratic administrations.

Trump first nominated Ratcliffe for the job nine months ago, but Ratcliffe withdrew after doubts about his experience were raised. Trump unexpectedly nominated him again in February and his chances at securing the job appear better, although confirmation is not assured.

Space Force unveils 1st recruiting video

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Space Force unveiled its first official recruiting commercial Wednesday, featuring scenes from space, rockets launching, military troops in spacesuits and a glimpse of a secretive American space craft the service will launch this month.

In the short video, a young man looks up longingly at a night sky full of bright stars between short flashes of images associated with the military and space as a narrator says, "some people look to the stars and ask, 'What if?'"

"Maybe you weren't put here just to ask the questions," the voiceover says in the 30-second video. "Maybe you were put here to be the answer. Maybe your purpose on this planet isn't on this planet."

Gen. Jay Raymond, the chief of space operations, previewed the commercial Wednesday morning during a video conference with the Space Foundation, a Colorado-based nonprofit organization that advocates for the global space industry. Raymond reported a high level of interest in his new military branch, which was founded in December and saw its first major expansion last month. The Space Force grew from two members — Ray-

mond and his senior enlisted leader Chief Master Sgt. Roger Towberman — to 88 on April 18, when it added 86 second lieutenants who commissioned directly into the service upon graduating from the Air Force Academy.

Much like the Naval Academy commissions graduates in the Navy and Marine Corps, the Air Force Academy will commission its graduates into the Air Force and Space Force. Similarly, the Space Force is expected to remain inside the Air Force Department, as the Marines are in the Navy Department.

Raymond said he expected to see a lot of interest in Space Force driven by the commercial, which directs people interested to its website, spaceforce.mil. Officially, the Air Force is handling the recruiting efforts for the Space Force, which Raymond envisions remaining relatively small, reaching about 16,000 troops.

"There is no more critical time or exciting time to be in our business," he said. "If you are interested in serving, we are interested in having you."

Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett, who spoke alongside Raymond, described the commercial as an initial "effort to talk to the folks out there who would like to be part of an exciting, new, happening place."

Iran's president: End to arms embargo is a 'right'

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — The Iranian president said Wednesday that lifting a United Nations arms embargo on Tehran would be an "obvious right" and added a veiled warning of unspecified steps Iran could take if the embargo is extended, as the United States wants.

Hassan Rouhani's remarks were in response to a push by

the U.S., which last month circulated a draft U.N. resolution that would indefinitely extend the embargo set to expire in October. Such a move is almost certain to spark opposition from Russia, which has made no secret of its desire to resume conventional weapons sales to Tehran.

"Iran considers the lifting of the arms embargo an obvious right," Rouhani said during a

Cabinet meeting broadcast live on state TV.

A U.N. Security Council resolution that endorsed the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers envisages an end to the embargo five years after the deal. President Donald Trump pulled America out of the deal in 2018 and imposed harsher sanctions on Iran.

Since Iran is admittedly no longer complying with several

elements of the nuclear deal, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.S. administration believes it has a case to make that the embargo should not be lifted.

"Iran will not accept violation of the ... (U.N.) resolution under any circumstances," Rouhani said. He said that extending the embargo would lead to "serious consequence and a historic failure" for the West.

2nd wave on many minds as lockdowns ease

Associated Press

ROME — From the marbled halls of Italy to the wheat fields of Kansas, health authorities are increasingly warning that the question isn't whether a second wave of coronavirus infections and deaths will hit, but when — and how badly.

In India, which partly relaxed its lockdown this week, health authorities scrambled Wednesday to contain an outbreak at a huge market. Hard-hit New York City shut down its subway system overnight for disinfection. Experts in Italy, which just began easing some restrictions, warned lawmakers that a new surge of virus infections and deaths is coming, and they urged intensified efforts to identify victims, monitor their symptoms and trace their contacts.

Germany warned of a second and even a third wave and threatened to re-impose virus restrictions if new cases can't be contained. German Chancellor Angela Merkel met Wednesday with the country's 16 governors to discuss further loosening restrictions that have crippled Europe's largest economy.

"There will be a second wave, but the problem is to which extent. Is it a small wave or a big wave? It's too early to say," said Olivier Schwartz, head of the virus and immunity unit at France's Pasteur Institute. France, which hasn't yet eased its lockdown, has worked up a "re-confinement plan" to ready for that second wave.

Many areas are still struggling with the first wave. Brazil for the first time locked down a large city, the capital of Maranhao state. Across the ocean, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Africa has shot up 42% in the past week. Infections

were expected to surpass 50,000 there on Wednesday.

An Associated Press analysis, meanwhile, found that U.S. infection rates outside the New York City area are in fact rising, notably in rural areas. It found New York's progress against the virus was overshadowing increasing infections elsewhere.

"Make no mistakes: This virus is still circulating in our community, perhaps even more now than in previous weeks," said Linda Ochs, director of the Health Department in Shawnee County, Kan.

The virus is known to have infected more than 3.6 million and killed more than 251,000 people, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins that all experts agree is an undercount because of limited testing, differences in counting the dead and concealment by some governments.

The U.S. has seen over 71,000 deaths amid its 1.2 million confirmed infections, and Europe has endured over 144,000 reported deaths.

The researchers behind a widely cited model from the University of Washington nearly doubled their projection of deaths in the U.S. to around 134,000 through early August, in large part because of the easing of state stay-at-home restrictions.

President Donald Trump, with his eye on being reelected in November, is pushing hard to ease the social-distancing orders and resuscitate the U.S. economy, which has seen over 30 million workers lose their jobs in less than two months. Though the White House had signaled Tuesday that it would begin winding down the country's coronavirus task force, Trump tweeted Wednesday that it would continue "indefinitely with its focus on SAFETY & OPEN-

ING UP OUR COUNTRY AGAIN."

A century ago, the Spanish flu epidemic's second wave was far deadlier than its first, in part because authorities allowed mass gatherings from Philadelphia to San Francisco.

As Italy's lockdown eased this week, Dr. Silvio Brusaferrero, president of the Superior Institute of Health, urged "a huge investment" of resources to train medical personnel to monitor possible new cases. He said tracing apps — which are being built by dozens of countries and companies — aren't enough to manage future waves of infection.

"We are not out of the epidemic. We are still in it. I don't want people to think there's no more risk and we go back to normal," said Dr. Giovanni Rezza, head of the institute's infectious-disease department.

In Germany, authorities may reimpose restrictions on any county that reports 50 new cases for every 100,000 inhabitants within the past week.

Lothar Wieler, head of Germany's national disease control center, said scientists "know with great certainty that there will be a second wave" of infections but said Germany is well-prepared to deal with it. The country has been hailed for testing widely and has had one-fourth the number of deaths in Italy or Britain, which have smaller populations.

Britain has begun recruiting 18,000 people to trace contacts of those infected.

South Africa, which has years of experience tracking HIV and other infections, has more than 30,000 experienced community tracers at work. Turkey has 5,800 teams of contact tracers who have tracked down and tested nearly half a million people.

GOP wary as Democrats push ahead on big virus bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Even in absentia, House Democrats are seeking to drive the debate on the fifth coronavirus response bill, promising to produce a mega-package stuffed with Democratic priorities even as a chorus of GOP leaders voices hesitation about more spending.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi promises that the Democratic-controlled House will deliver legislation to help state and local governments through the COVID-19 crisis, along with additional money for direct payments to individuals, unemployment insurance and a third installment of aid to small businesses. The amount of funding is to be determined.

The California Democrat is leading the way as Democrats fashion a sweeping package that is expected to be unveiled soon even as the House stays closed while the Senate is open in the pandemic.

The contours of the next package are taking shape despite Republican resistance to more spending and a deepening debate over how best to confront the pandemic and its economic devastation. Some Republicans such as Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah and a group of GOP governors want to be more generous to states confronting furloughs and cuts to services as revenues plummet and unemployment insurance and other costs spike.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Tuesday it's time to push "pause"

on more aid legislation — even as he repeated a "red line" demand that any new aid package include liability protections for hospitals, health care providers and businesses operating and reopening.

McConnell and other Republicans, however, ducked the chance to endorse President Donald Trump's demand for a cut to Social Security payroll taxes as a salve for the economy. Many lawmakers think the payroll tax cut is a bad idea because it only boosts paychecks but doesn't help people thrown out of a job.

"I've never thought that really would be very effective," said Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine. She said she's working with a bipartisan, bicameral group on a state and local aid package.

NYC subways shut down for disinfecting

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York City's subway system went silent in the early morning hours of Wednesday, as part of a plan for the normally round-the-clock system to shut down for train cleaning.

The trains, which had been running on a reduced schedule since late March, are now going to be stopped from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. each day.

Police officers escorted people out of Brooklyn's Coney Island station, the end of the line for several trains, and told them they would have to board buses to get to their destinations. Cleaners carrying bottles of bleach then boarded the trains.

Fewer trains had been running in the overnight hours anyway, but the shutdown allows for daily cleanings and for city workers to move homeless people who have been more visible in subway cars during the coronavirus.

California

SACRAMENTO — California Gov. Gavin Newsom scolded two rural counties Tuesday for allowing some businesses to reopen in defiance of his statewide coronavirus restrictions, calling it a "big mistake" and saying that they are "putting their public at risk."

Restaurants, hair salons and many other businesses opened Monday in Yuba and Sutter counties, about 40 miles north of Sacramento. A revised public health order in the counties allows businesses to reopen but requires them to enforce social distancing and other restrictions. The Yuba Sutter Mall planned to reopen Wednesday.

The two counties together have had 44 confirmed coronavirus cases out of a combined population of just over 175,000 people, and no one is now hospitalized there with the virus, according to state data.

Iowa

IOWA CITY — Nearly 1,400 workers at three Tyson Foods pork processing plants in Iowa

have tested positive for the coronavirus, the state reported Tuesday, as deaths surged to a new daily high.

The Iowa Department of Public Health revealed that the state's largest outbreak to date has been at the Tyson plant in Perry, a town in central Iowa. There, 730 workers were confirmed to have the virus, a stunning 58% of those tested, the department said.

The Tyson plant in Waterloo has had 444 workers test positive, and its Columbus Junction plant has had 221 confirmed infections, the department said.

The department said that 258 workers at a National Beef plant in Tama tested positive, as did another 131 employees of a Newton wind turbine blade manufacturer.

Michigan

WARREN — Michigan communities saw record turnout for local elections Tuesday, as voters participated in largely mail-based contests that could be a blueprint for the presidential battleground in November.

In a first, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson's office automatically sent absentee ballot applications to all 740,000 registered voters in roughly 50 municipalities — about 10% of the electorate — to discourage in-person voting in a state where nearly 4,200 people have died from coronavirus complications. Turnout was projected to be at least 22%, nearly double the average for May elections.

Each jurisdiction had at least one place for in-person voting, though only about 850 people had done so as of late afternoon. Absentee ballots — roughly 180,000 had been returned by 6:30 p.m. — accounted for 98% of the vote.

North Carolina

RALEIGH — Gov. Roy Cooper agreed on Tuesday to ease North Carolina's stay-at-home order, saying that COVID-19 cases are generally stable and testing, tracing and health care supplies are improving enough

to warrant increased commerce and movement.

A new executive order taking effect Friday afternoon that opens many more businesses will replace a more restrictive mandate that Cooper had issued starting March 30. The Democratic governor began to loosen the number of activities that are no longer prohibited later than many other Southern chief executives.

Caution was the key word for Cooper, even as a conservative-leaning group has held weekly demonstrations near the Executive Mansion demanding he cancel his stay-at-home order completely in the name of freedom and reopening the economy.

Nevada

RENO — Democrats have dropped efforts to block the state's mail-in primary election on June 9 after Clark County agreed to provide more in-person polling places in Las Vegas and election officials agreed to other changes intended to protect the rights of elderly and disadvantaged voters.

Lawyers for Nevada's Democratic Party, the Democratic National Committee and congressional campaign committee were scheduled to go before a state judge in Carson City on Thursday via telephone in search of an injunction expanding the number of polling places and mandating mailing of ballots to all registered voters.

The primary is expected to be conducted almost entirely by mail for the first time in Nevada in an effort to guard against the spread of COVID-19. Early voting begins May 23.

Pennsylvania

HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania reported another 554 deaths from the coronavirus to pass 3,000 total, while Gov. Tom Wolf said Tuesday that he is not committing to a particular schedule to lift stay-at-home pandemic restrictions in the state's counties or regions.

The large number of new

deaths reported Tuesday by the state Department of Health were spread out over the previous two weeks, the agency said, as it reconciles its figures with deaths being reported by local agencies or hospitals.

Still, it was as stark a figure as the state has reported since the first case of the new coronavirus was detected in Pennsylvania in early March. It comes as the growth in cases appeared to slow down in many parts of Pennsylvania and Wolf's administration moves to lighten its restrictions on movement and business activity.

Texas

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas kept charging ahead with reopening Tuesday, as Republican Gov. Greg Abbott gave hair salons permission to return to business alongside restaurants and retailers and defended the pace of rebooting one of the nation's biggest states as experts have warned that going too fast could result in new outbreaks.

In letting barbershops and hair salons open starting Friday, Abbott appeared to be moving faster than he suggested even a week ago when he allowed stay-at-home-orders in Texas to expire. Restaurants and retailers in Texas began reopening under limited capacity Friday, but that has not satisfied even some GOP lawmakers who want a far quicker reopening of the state.

Two Republican state lawmakers Tuesday got haircuts at a barbershop outside Houston in defiance of Abbott's orders, saying that they were supporting business owners who need to work. Last week, Abbott had mentioned mid-May as a target for hair salons to open, along with bars and gyms.

He fired back at criticism over whether Texas is moving too fast during a news conference at the Texas Capitol, at one point rattling off a list of experts he said he has consulted with in making decisions, including Dr. Deborah Birx, the coordinator of the White House coronavirus task force.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Shopper wore KKK hood at store

CA SAN DIEGO — Authorities are looking into whether a man who they say wore a Ku Klux Klan hood while grocery shopping in a San Diego suburb could face criminal charges, the sheriff's department said.

The unidentified man was photographed with the white hood while pushing a grocery cart at the store in the town of Santee a day after the county required people to wear masks outside to slow the spread of the coronavirus, according to the San Diego County Sheriff's Department.

Store clerks asked him to take off the hood or leave the store, according to The San Diego Union-Tribune. He removed the tall, pointed hood that had two small eye holes cut into it, paid for his groceries and left.

Deputies are investigating to see if he could be charged with a possible hate crime, the department said.

Fowl play: Police search for 'aggressive chicken'

LA WALKER — Police are searching for an "aggressive chicken" accused of engaging in fowl play at a Louisiana bank.

The Walker Police Department responded to a complaint about the brazen animal, the agency said in a social media post.

Witnesses told police the chicken had been spotted at the bank multiple times, approaching patrons at the ATM, chasing customers and even attempting to climb into cars in the drive-thru, according to the department's post.

Officials said officers responded to the bank within a few minutes of the call, but

found the pesky poultry had already escaped.

Officials warn of disease killing off rabbits

AZ LAKEHAVASU CITY — Arizona wildlife officials are issuing a warning about the potential spread of a virus that kills rabbits.

The Today's News-Herald reported that state Game and Fish Department veterinarians are watching for cases of rabbit hemorrhagic disease virus type 2 — dubbed RHDV2.

For rabbits, the disease can be a painful and sudden killer. Experts say rabbits afflicted with an acute form of it die within 12 to 36 hours from the onset of a fever. Symptoms include lethargy, weight loss and jaundice. RHDV2 causes infected cottontail rabbits to bleed from their nose and mouth because of internal hemorrhaging.

Police: Woman wanted to get close to alligator

SC KIAWAH ISLAND — A woman killed by an alligator at a South Carolina pond told a friend she wanted to get close to the animal and didn't scream as it attacked her and dragged her into the water, according to a police report.

Cynthia Covert, 58, died in the attack on Kiawah Island, Charleston County deputies said.

A deputy had to shoot and kill the alligator to get Covert away from the animal, according to the police report.

The woman's husband and another man tried beating the alligator with shovels, but the animal swam deeper, the police report said.

When deputies arrived, the alligator kept surfacing with Covert and going under. One officer was able to shoot the

animal as it surfaced again, police said.

Police find dead dogs, cats in shelter's freezer

KY WEBBVILLE — Police seized 90 dogs from a no-kill animal shelter in Kentucky due to its allegedly poor conditions, and charged its owner after dead cats and dogs were found in the facility's freezer.

The dogs were taken because of "poor living conditions" at the Trixie Foundation's shelter, Kentucky State police said in a news release reported by news outlets.

Police obtained a search warrant after receiving complaints about the shelter in April, the Herald-Ledger reported.

Shelter owner Randy Skaggs, who was scheduled to stand trial this June on misdemeanor animal cruelty charges from 2018, said he provides medical care when the animals need it.

Skaggs, 68, now faces 12 additional counts, of improper disposal.

Deputy accused of taking money orders on patrol

FL PENSACOLA — A deputy in Florida is accused of cashing out blank money orders from a car he pulled over while on patrol.

The Escambia County Sheriff's Office received a complaint from a woman who said the money orders were in the car her boyfriend was driving when he was arrested on outstanding warrants by Deputy William Christopher Henley, news outlets reported.

The woman said she called Western Union to find out about the money orders after the arrest, and was informed they were already cashed out by Henley, Escambia County

Sheriff's Office spokeswoman Amber Southard told the Pensacola News Journal.

Henley, 37, was booked into county jail with no bond and on multiple charges, including burglary and fraud.

Billboard vandalized with 'Cancel Rent' graffiti

MD BALTIMORE — A billboard that features Baltimore's mayor was vandalized with the words "Cancel Rent" as well as a vulgarity directed at the police.

The Baltimore Sun reported that the vandalized billboard follows in the wake of many people losing their jobs during the coronavirus pandemic.

Many people have called for rent and mortgage payments to be suspended. The billboard graffiti also touched on tensions in the city with law enforcement.

Officials: Man set on fire while using blow torch

LA HARVEY — A Louisiana man was hospitalized after accidentally setting himself on fire from the waist up while using a blow torch to repair his truck.

The man was working under the chassis of his 18-wheeler truck when the blow torch ignited, Harvey Volunteer Fire Company 2 Captain Mike McAuliffe told the Times-Picayune/New Orleans Advocate.

The 58-year-old victim became covered in flames above his waist and ran 200 feet from his repair yard to a nearby business to call for help.

He was taken to a New Orleans hospital after people in that business extinguished the fire and called 911.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Strike didn't ruin shortened 1981 season

Associated Press

The season began with Fernandomania and ended with a classic World Series matchup between the Dodgers and Yankees. Mike Schmidt slugged his way to a second consecutive MVP, and Nolan Ryan pitched another no-hitter.

But perhaps the best way to describe baseball in 1981 is by recounting Pete Rose's pursuit of the National League's career hits record. He tied the mark in June, then had to wait until August to break it — because a strike shut down the sport for about two months.

All Rose could do was make regular visits to the batting cage while he waited.

"I went there every freaking day," Rose said.

If baseball is able to come back at all this year, fans should be prepared for a significantly shortened season, and that 1981 campaign may be the most relevant comparison available.

The season was split in two by a labor dispute, but when the sport finally returned, its stars still had an abbreviated chance to shine.

"The chaos, the change, the uniqueness, the intensity — all of those elements absolutely factor into how memorable that entire time is," said Steve Rogers, the right-hander whose Montreal Expos made their first postseason appearance in 1981.

The early days of the '81 season were dominated by Fernando Valenzuela. The Mexican rookie took Los Angeles by storm, winning his first eight starts for the Dodgers and throwing shutouts in five of them.

By the time the strike began, Rose was in the spotlight. He was with the defending champion Phillies then, and on June 10, he entered Philadelphia's last game before the strike needing one hit to tie Stan Musial's NL mark of 3,630.

Ryan was on the mound against the Phillies, and Rose tied the record with a first-inning single off him. Then Rose struck out in his next three chances against the Houston right-hander. He finally broke the record Aug. 10 against St. Louis, in his team's first game back.

Baseball's first big event after the stoppage was the All-Star game in Cleveland on Aug. 9. Schmidt homered in the eighth inning to give the NL a 5-4 win.

"That would have been my overall best year had we played a full season," Schmidt said in an email. "I was in the midst of my prime, especially following 1980. It really had nothing to do with a unique thing I did during the strike, actually I worked for CBS as a sports anchor. I did some working out with (Phillies reliever) Tug McGraw."

Schmidt hit .316 with 31 home runs in 102 games. Baseball-Reference.com credits

him with 7.7 wins above replacement that year. In 2019 — with a full season — only two NL players reached that WAR total.

In the first round of the playoffs, Rogers beat Steve Carlton twice, including in the winner-take-all fifth game at Philadelphia. He went the distance in that 3-0 victory and even drove in two runs.

In the NL Championship Series against Los Angeles, Rogers threw another complete game in a Game 3 win, but when he came on in relief in Game 5, Rick Monday homered in the top of the ninth to give the Dodgers the pennant. The ending was disappointing, but it had been a remarkable run for the Expos.

By the time the World Series ended — with the Dodgers winning in six games — it was fair to say the 1981 season, while far from ideal, had avoided becoming a farce.

Korean baseball league begins season without fans

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The new baseball season began in South Korea on Tuesday with the crack of the bat and the sound of the ball smacking into the catcher's mitt echoing around empty stadiums.

After a weeklong delay because of the coronavirus pandemic, umpires wore protective masks and cheerleaders danced beneath rows of unoccupied seats as professional baseball got back on the field.

There were many faces in the stands in at least one stadium, but they were pictures instead of real people because fans aren't allowed into the venues.

Instead, it was easy to hear players cheering and shouting from the dugouts. And it was a relief to fans watching from home in a country that is now attempting to slowly return to pre-COVID-19 normalcy amid a waning caseload.

The country's professional

soccer leagues will kick off Friday, also without spectators in the stadiums.

As one of the world's first major professional sports competitions to return to action amid the pandemic, the Korea Baseball Organization has employed various preventive measures aimed at creating safe playing environments.

Players and coaches will go through fever screenings before entering stadiums, while umpires and first- and third-base coaches must wear masks during games. Players are prohibited from signing autographs or high-fiving teammates with bare hands.

Also, chewing tobacco was banned to prevent spitting, while masks and latex gloves will be required at training facilities.

Fans will be barred from games until the KBO is convinced the risk of infection has been minimized. If any member of a team tests positive for

the coronavirus at any point of the season, the league will be shut down for at least three weeks.

"I feel great," said Cho Ki-hyun, a 65-year-old SK Wyverns fan who shared a mattress with three other fans outside the walls of the team's stadium in Incheon, watching the game against the Daejeon-based Hanwha Eagles with a tablet computer. "I am delighted just to hear the sounds of a baseball game from outside."

The teams tried to create a festive atmosphere in the empty stadiums.

In a game in the capital, LG Twins defeated crosstown rival and defending champion Doosan Bears 8-2 at Jamsil Stadium, where the outfield seats were decked with huge banners of the Twins' cheering slogans.

Twins outfielder Kim Hyun-soo, who spent some time with the Baltimore Orioles, hit the league's first home run of the season in the third inning, a

two-run shot off Bears starter Raul Alcantara. As he rounded the bases, Kim extended a hand toward third-base coach Kim Jea-gul, who raised his arm but stayed out of contact.

"The players just really wanted to play baseball, and we are delighted to do just that," Kim Hyun-soo said.

The Wyverns imitated a home crowd in Incheon by covering their outfield seats with rows of horizontal banners showing faces of fans wearing the team's hats and masks. They still lost 3-0 to the Eagles, who won their first season opener in 11 years with former Detroit Tigers pitcher Warwick Saupold hurling a two-hit, complete-game shutout.

A full season of baseball seemed doubtful in early March when South Korea was reporting about 500 new virus infections a day, forcing the KBO to postpone its March 28 season openers.

NFL plans for ticket refunds as a backup

Associated Press

While planning to play a full regular-season schedule, the NFL has formulated a ticket refund plan for canceled games or those held without fans.

In a memo sent to the 32 teams by Commissioner Roger Goodell and obtained by The Associated Press on Tuesday, a uniform baseline for full refunds on any tickets purchased directly from the clubs was prepared.

Goodell wrote that “all clubs will have in place a policy under which, if a game is cancelled, or is played under conditions that prohibit fans from attending, anyone purchasing a ticket

directly from the club (i.e., season tickets, group sales and/or partial season plans) will have the option of either receiving a full refund or applying the amount paid toward a future ticket purchase directly from the club.”

As for the secondary market, the league received pledges from Ticketmaster and SeatGeek to make full refunds available for all ticket sales within no more than 30 days of cancellation. StubHub, however, will do so only where required by state law.

The NFL will reveal its 2020 regular-season schedule on Thursday night. While it is discussing contingencies for

alterations to the schedule due to the coronavirus pandemic, it currently is planning for a normal season.

“In preparing for all elements of the 2020 season, including the schedule release, we have considered the unique circumstances facing us this year,” Goodell wrote, “and have been clear that all of our decisions will be guided by medical and public health advice and will comply with government regulations. We will be prepared to make necessary adjustments just as we have in other contexts, such as the offseason program and the draft.

“I believe the policies that clubs have in place will serve

the league and all member clubs in a variety of ways and will allow us to continue preparing for the 2020 season while also protecting the interests of our fans.”

Each team will communicate directly with its fans over the next few days with specific details on potential refunds.

Although contingency plans hardly are a regular procedure for the NFL, the specter of significant changes to the season, from delays to a shortened schedule, have to be considered this year. Each season, NFL teams and the league office re-examine what they term “fan friendly” ticket refund policies.

76ers’ GM: Simmons close to NBA return

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Philadelphia 76ers All-Star guard Ben Simmons is closer to getting cleared to play, should the NBA season resume.

The league leader in steals was sidelined with nerve issues in his lower back when the season was suspended on March 11 because of the coronavirus pandemic. He was allowed to rehabilitate at the 76ers’ practice facility in Camden, N.J, but there seemed to be no guarantee he would have been cleared to play in time for a playoff run.

“We’ve took our time, we’ve been methodical and thoughtful about his recovery and rehab, just to make sure, because we weren’t in a rush,” 76ers GM Elton Brand said Tuesday. “It’s hard to speculate. He’s been working hard and I know he’d be close or ready.”

Simmons had missed his eighth straight game and was receiving daily treatment for his nerve impingement at the time the season stopped. Brand, speaking to media for the first time since, said he would not

speculate on Simmons’ availability had the Sixers still been playing in the postseason. Simmons had yet to play 3-on-3 or 5-on-5 during his rehab.

“When I FaceTime him during his workouts and his treatments and I see him, I’d be highly encouraged,” Brand said. “His ramp-up would be different.”

The 23-year-old Simmons averaged 16.7 points, 7.8 rebounds and 8.2 assists in 54 games.

He and other players undergoing rehab, including All-Star center Joel Embiid, have permission to use the 76ers’ practice facility. Embiid was recovering from surgery on his left hand and had just returned after missing five games with a sprained left shoulder at the time of the shutdown.

“He’s asking about when his trainer can come in,” Brand said. “I wouldn’t bet against him.”

The Sixers have a skeleton staff on hand at the facility when players need rehab, usually a physical trainer or a strength coach, and never more than about six people at a time.

Germany’s Bundesliga gets approval to resume

Associated Press

BERLIN — The Bundesliga can resume playing this month, ending a two-month suspension caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced a loosening of a range of containment measures after meeting with the country’s 16 state governors on Wednesday. Pressure to relax the rules had been growing as the rate of daily infections in the country has dropped.

Soccer in the top two divisions will resume without spectators and with a range of other conditions designed to prevent another outbreak, including the continuous monitoring and testing of players. Teams will also have to spend time in quarantine before games can restart.

“Today’s decision is good news for the Bundesliga and second division,” German soccer league president Christian Seibert said. “It comes with great responsibility for the clubs and their employees to implement the medical and organizational requirements in a disciplined manner.

“Games without spectators

are not ideal for anyone. In a crisis threatening the very existence of some clubs, however, it is the only way to keep the leagues in their current form.”

The decision to allow play to resume came despite three positive tests for the virus at Cologne last weekend. The league said there were 10 positive cases from all 36 clubs in the top two divisions.

Hertha Berlin forward Salomon Kalou also broadcast a livestream showing social distancing measures being flouted at the club on Monday.

Bavaria governor Markus Soder called it a “spectacular own-goal” on Wednesday.

“I can only appeal for players who behave unreasonably to face consequences,” Soder said.

Hertha has suspended Kalou and blamed the player for the mishap, but there were also infringements that were the club’s responsibility.

While the league and clubs had been pressuring the government for permission to resume, other prominent athletes criticized what they saw as favoritism in soccer.