

Dual bombings amid Afghan peace talks

Associated Press

GHAZNI, Afghanistan — At least 34 people were killed on Sunday in two separate suicide bombings in Afghanistan that targeted a military base and a provincial chief, officials said.

There were no immediate claims of responsibility for the attacks, which took place as Afghan government representatives and the Taliban hold face-to-face talks in Qatar for the first time to end the country's decadeslong war.

In eastern Ghazni province, 31 soldiers were killed and 24 others wounded when the attacker drove a military humvee full of explosives onto an army commando base before detonating the car bomb, according to an official in Afghanistan's National Security Council, who spoke anonymously because he was not permitted to speak directly to the media.

Ghazni's provincial health department

chief, Zahir Shah Nikmal, also confirmed the death toll and casualty figures from the attack.

Afghanistan's Defense Ministry released a statement claiming 10 soldiers were killed and nine wounded. The ministry also offered a different account of what happened than the official at the National Security Council, saying the vehicle exploded near the army base after security forces opened fire on the car.

It was not immediately clear why there was a discrepancy.

Interior Ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said that a suicide bombing took place, though he did not provide any further details.

The soldiers stationed at the base were responsible for conducting night raids, providing support to the army and police forces under siege, and taking part in large-scale operations against the Taliban and Islamic

State group in eastern and southern provinces of Afghanistan.

The base is located in a desert region, about three miles outside the city of Ghazni. Parts of the base and a nearby police building were partially destroyed by the powerful explosion.

Windows were also blown out in buildings of the city near to where the bombing occurred.

In southern Afghanistan, another suicide car bomber targeted a convoy belonging to a provincial council chief in Zabul province, which killed at least three people and wounding 21 others, including children, according to provincial spokesman Gul Islam Sial.

The council chief, Attajan Haqbayat, survived Sunday's attack with minor injuries, although one of his bodyguards was among those who were killed, said provincial police spokesman Hikmatullah Kochai.

Afghan pilot told to rejoin or lose protection

BY J.P. LAWRENCE

Stars and Stripes

An Afghan major under U.S. protection at a U.S. base after the Pentagon reversed its decision to approve his move to the United States said he has been told he will be forced to leave the base Monday if he does not rejoin the Afghan air force.

Maj. Mohammed Naiem Asadi, one of the Afghan military's few elite attack helicopter pilots, his wife and his 4-year-old daughter had been approved to seek refuge in America in early October due to being in "imminent danger of being killed by the Taliban," approval documents and emails shared with Stars and Stripes showed.

The Pentagon, which had endorsed Asadi's bid to come to America, changed its decision and withdrew its endorsement in early November, leaving the major fearing both violence by the Taliban and retribution from the Afghan air force for applying for asylum.

The Afghan government has threatened to jail pilots in the past for attempting to gain asylum in other countries, said Kimberly

Motley, Asadi's lawyer. Motley represented another Afghan pilot, Niloofar Rahmani, who received asylum in America in 2016 after receiving death threats from the Taliban.

Motley, in a letter to U.S. officials, stated she is "extremely concerned" the major will be imprisoned and separated from his family if he is turned over to the Afghan government.

For the last month, the 32-year-old Asadi and his family have been living under U.S. military protection.

But U.S. and Afghan military officers Sunday afternoon told Asadi that if he does not rejoin the Afghan air force, he will be forced to leave the base, Asadi said.

U.S. Forces-Afghanistan and NATO Resolute Support referred comment to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, which did not immediately reply to an email inquiry and a phone call.

The Afghan Defense Ministry wants to assure Asadi that it is committed to providing him safety, according to Fawad Aman, the ministry's deputy spokesman, adding no

further details.

Asadi said he doubts the Afghan government's ability and willingness to protect him, as the country suffers a wave of assassinations by the Taliban. Families of several of the country's elite pilots told Stars and Stripes in 2018 that their loved ones did not receive adequate protection by the government before being killed.

The major is said to have killed more Taliban members than any other pilot in the Afghan air force during thousands of flight hours, Afghan and U.S. military officers told Stars and Stripes. In the summer, he protected an American pilot who crashed his A-29 Super Tucano attack turboprop in northern Afghanistan, a letter of commendation signed by Air Force Capt. Robert V. Yost said.

Asadi said Sunday that he is concerned with what may happen to him and his family should they leave the base.

"It's very scary for me," Asadi said. "My wife, she knows, too. She is very sad, she didn't eat lunch or breakfast; we didn't sleep last night. It's a very bad situation."

N. Korea toughens rule on sea entry

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea is further toughening restrictions on entering seawaters as part of elevated steps to fight the coronavirus pandemic, state media said Sunday, two days after South Korea said the North had banned sea fishing.

The Korean Central News Agency reported the country is mobilizing more anti-virus units and establishing strong steps to “completely remove uncivilized and unhygienic elements that could help make room for the spread of an epidemic” at winter. Some experts say the coronavirus can spread more broadly during cold weather when people typically spend more time indoors.

KCNA said officials were building firm anti-epidemic measures along border areas to prevent the coronavirus from entering the country. In front-line coastal areas, authorities were working out more stringent

rules for venturing out at sea and collecting filthy materials in the waters, according to KCNA.

North Korea has maintained no single virus case has been found on its territory, a claim widely questioned by outside experts. Despite its claim, North Korea has swiftly sealed its borders, flew out diplomats and isolated residents with symptoms. A major outbreak in North Korea could have devastating consequences because of its broken health care system and a chronic lack of medicines.

North Korea has previously mentioned a restriction on entering the sea. Sunday's report came after South Korea's spy service told lawmakers Friday that the North's anti-virus steps included a ban on fishing and salt production at sea, as well as and the lockdown of the capital, Pyongyang, northern Jagang province and other areas.

Lawmakers who attended the closed-

door briefing also cited the National Intelligence Service as saying that North Korea executed an official for breaching regulations restricting the import of goods in August and a money changer for a falling exchange rate in October.

Ha Tae-keung, one of the lawmakers, quoted the agency as saying North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is displaying “excessive anger” and taking “irrational measures” over the pandemic and its economic impact.

In September, South Korea accused North Korea of fatally shooting a South Korean fishery official found in the North's waters before burning his body apparently in line with an anti-virus policy that involves shooting anyone illegally crossing the border. North Korea later acknowledged and apologized for the killing, but claimed it only burnt his floating device, not his body.

Guam extends its public health emergency

Stars and Stripes

Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero has signed an executive order that gives yet another 30-day extension to a coronavirus public health emergency set to expire at the end of the month.

The order, announced Friday afternoon by the Guam governor's office, came a day after the island reported its 111th virus-related death, a 61-year-old woman with underlying health conditions who'd been battling the illness at Guam Memorial Hospital since Nov. 8.

Earlier Thursday, a 61-year-old man succumbed to the virus at the same hospital.

As of Thursday evening, Guam had recorded a pandemic total of 6,748 cases, of which 1,680 are active, according to the governor's office. Forty-five are hospitalized, nine are in intensive care and some are on ventilators.

“Today, I ask the people of Guam to pray for all those we lost to this virus, for those receiving care in the hospitals, our front liners who are doing everything they can to keep us safe,” the governor said in a statement Thursday announcing the latest deaths. “Reach out to those close to your heart and mend wounds wherever they may be.”

Guam, a U.S. territory, has been under a government-mandated “Pandemic Condition of Readiness 1” since Aug. 15.

The updated order, which is now set to expire Dec. 29, forces schools to shift to virtual instruction; mandates businesses to enforce mask wearing and social distancing; and limits social gatherings and congregations to five people.

A “Safer At Home” advisory also remains in effect that encourages all residents, especially those 65 and older with serious health conditions like high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, asthma and obesity, to minimize travel outside the home.

US airman killed in UAE vehicle crash ID'd

Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department has identified a U.S. airman who died Friday in a non-combat related vehicle incident at Al Dhafra Air Base, United Arab Emirates.

Capt. (Dr.) Kelliann Leli, 30, of Parlin, N.J., was assigned to the 60th Healthcare Operations Squadron, Travis Air Force Base, Calif., according to a DOD press release.

“Our entire Travis family is beyond heartbroken over the tragic loss of our teammate, Kelliann,” Col. Corey Simmons, 60th Air Mobility Wing commander, said on Facebook. “We are thinking of and praying for all her loved ones during this unfathomable time.”

“Our Al Dhafra family is grieving the tragic loss of Capt. Kelliann Leli. She was an exceptional medic, officer, and teammate here, and her incredible

presence will be deeply missed, “Brig. Gen. Larry Broadwell, 380th Air Expeditionary Wing Commander, said on Facebook. “I ask our deployed community to look after each other during this difficult time, to warmly remember the positive impact that Capt. Leli had on our team, and to keep her loved ones in your thoughts and prayers.”

The cause of the incident is under investigation.

Budget office races to enact new job classification order

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The outgoing Trump administration is racing to enact the biggest change to the federal civil service in generations, reclassifying career employees at key agencies to strip their job protections and leave them open to being fired before Joe Biden takes office.

The move to pull off an executive order the president issued less than two weeks before Election Day — affecting tens of thousands of people in policy roles — is accelerating at the agency closest to the White House, the Office of Management and Budget.

The budget office sent a list last week of roles identified by its politically appointed leaders to the federal personnel agency for final sign-off. The list comprises 88% of its workforce — 425 analysts and other experts who would shift into a new job classification called Schedule F.

The employees would then be vulnerable to dismissal before Trump leaves office if they are considered poor performers or have resisted executing the president's priorities, effectively turning them into political appointees that come and go with each administration.

By fast-tracking a process that gave agencies until Jan. 19 to identify affected jobs, the administration appears to be signaling its intent to leave as big an imprint as possible on a workforce it has long mistrusted.

The White House budget office acts as the nerve center of the government, an elite career workforce that prepares and helps administer the annual spending plan and helps set fis-

cal and personnel policy for federal agencies. Its analysts are generally mission-driven, and they provide vast institutional memory and expertise for a president, regardless of party.

With little guidance from the administration, alarmed employees, their allies in Congress and experts in the civil service are wondering how far Trump can go in the 54 days he has left in office.

"A lot can happen," said Jeffrey Neal, a retired Department of Homeland Security personnel chief who took the lead on a proposal from civil service experts to the Biden transition to scrap the executive order.

"Does the Trump administration proceed with moving the career and political workforce of [the budget office] into Schedule F?" Neal said. "The fact that [the budget office] came up with a list two months ahead of the Jan. 19 deadline leads me to believe they will."

If enough employees are viewed as disloyal to the outgoing administration, they could be fired or reassigned, leaving Biden with an empty budget office.

Biden has pledged to reverse a number of Trump's executive orders on federal workers, including those that weaken labor protections in collective bargaining and all but eliminate the rights of union officers to work on employees' behalf during work hours.

But he has been silent so far on the Schedule F order, issued Oct. 21. When asked whether he plans to reverse it when he takes office, a transition spokesman pointed to his comments during the campaign on reinvigorating the federal workforce.

Biden plans swift moves to advance LGBTQ rights

Associated Press

As vice president in 2012, Joe Biden endeared himself to many LGBTQ Americans by endorsing same-sex marriage even before his boss, President Barack Obama.

Now, as president-elect, Biden is making sweeping promises to LGBTQ activists, proposing to carry out virtually every major proposal on their wish lists. Among them: Lifting the Trump administration's near-total ban on military service for transgender people, barring federal contractors from anti-LGBTQ job discrimination, and creating high-level LGBTQ-rights positions at the State Department, the National Security Council and other federal agencies.

In many cases the measures would reverse executive actions by President Donald Trump, whose administration took numerous steps to weaken protections for transgender people and create more leeway for discrimination against LGBTQ people, ostensibly based on religious grounds.

In a policy document, the Biden campaign said Trump and Vice President Mike Pence "have given hate against LGBTQ+ individuals safe harbor and rolled back critical protections."

Beyond executive actions he can take unilaterally, Biden says his top legislative priority for LGBTQ issues is the Equality Act, passed by the House of Representatives last year but stalled in the Senate. It would extend to all 50 states the comprehensive anti-bias protections already afforded to LGBTQ people in 21 mostly Democratic-governed states, covering such sectors as housing, public accommodations and public services.

Biden says he wants the act to become law within 100 days of taking office, but its future remains uncertain. Assuming

the bill passes again in the House, it would need support from several Republicans in the Senate, even if the Democrats gain control by winning two runoff races in Georgia.

For now, Susan Collins of Maine is the only GOP co-sponsor in the Senate.

Critics, including prominent religious conservatives, say the bill raises religious freedom concerns and could require some faith-based organizations to operate against their beliefs.

The Equality Act "is a dangerous game changer" in its potential federal threat to religious liberty, said the Rev. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Rep. Chris Stewart, a Utah Republican, tried to strike a compromise last year that would have expanded LGBTQ rights nationwide while allowing exemptions for religious groups to act on beliefs that could exclude LGBTQ people.

His proposal won support from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Seventh-day Adventist Church but was panned by liberal and civil rights groups.

"Anti-equality forces are trying to use the framework of religious liberty to strip away individual rights," said Alphonso David, president of the Human Rights Campaign, a national LGBTQ-rights organization.

Among the actions that Biden pledges to take unilaterally, scrapping Trump's transgender military ban would be among the most notable.

Jennifer Levi, a Massachusetts-based transgender-rights lawyer, said it's clear Biden has the authority to do so after taking office.

Nicolas Talbott, a transgender man whom Levi has represented in a lawsuit seeking to overturn the ban, called that "a huge relief."

Colorado governor tests positive for virus

Associated Press

DENVER — Colorado Gov. Jared Polis has tested positive for the coronavirus.

Polis and his partner, Marlon Reis, both have COVID-19 and are asymptomatic, the governor said in a statement Saturday night.

Polis had started quarantining Wednesday after he said he was exposed to the virus. He tweeted late Wednesday that he tested negative the night after learning of his exposure but would be retested.

The state has been hit with a substantial spike in COVID-19 cases. One in 41 residents are believed to be contagious.

He said he will continue to serve the state while isolating himself. He urged residents to wear masks and keep 6 feet apart in public.

New York

ALBANY — Coronavirus hospitalizations and deaths in New York continue to rise, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Saturday.

There were 3,287 hospitalizations recorded statewide Friday, compared with 3,108 the previous day, Cuomo said. There also were 42 deaths, up from 39 on Thursday, he said.

The state saw another uptick in its seven-day average on positive test results to 3.98% from 3.72%, Cuomo said. Western New York's positivity rate continued to be the highest in the state at 6.53%, according to the state figures.

"We are entering a challenging period of sustained COVID-19 spread across this state," the Democratic governor said in a statement. "It's up to you, your neighborhood and your community to slow the spread."

New Mexico

SANTA FE — New Mexico on Saturday reported 2,142 additional known COVID-19 cases and 23 new deaths.

The statewide totals increased to 93,982 cases and 1,527 deaths.

Friday saw New Mexico report a daily record of 35 deaths. The previous record was 33 set on Nov. 22.

The number of people hospitalized for COVID-19 was reported on Saturday at 854, down from 874 on Friday and the record of 897 set earlier in the week.

Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma health officials reported more than 2,800 newly

confirmed COVID-19 cases Saturday, and 13 more deaths linked to the disease caused by the coronavirus.

The Oklahoma State Department of Health reported 2,854 new cases of COVID-19 on Saturday. The state also reported 3,403 cases from Friday.

The counts come as the pandemic has grown worse across the state. Infectious diseases experts have warned that Thanksgiving could cause spikes in testing and delays in processing that may make the resulting figures difficult to interpret.

Over the last seven days, more than 13% of coronavirus tests in Oklahoma have come back positive, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

Oklahoma has reported a total of 193,824 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 1,717 fatalities. The actual number of cases is believed to be far higher because many people haven't been tested and some who get the disease don't show symptoms.

South Dakota

RAPID CITY — The Rapid City Council will consider a mask mandate for the city at a special session meeting on Monday.

The council will consider choosing between two ordinances and a resolution requiring face coverings, The Rapid City Journal reported.

One ordinance specifies masks to be required in public indoor spaces. Officials said details of a second ordinance will be posted before the meeting on Monday.

The resolution would require face coverings in certain situations, but would have no enforcement and no penalties. It also includes exemptions, including young children, law enforcement and those attending religious services.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem opposes mask mandates or other government interventions aimed at slowing the spread of infections. Cities across the state have moved to pass their own mask requirements.

North Dakota

BISMARCK — North Dakota has tens of thousands of COVID-19 antibody tests that are still awaiting a plan for their use, months after the state acquired them.

The state acquired 178,000 COVID-19 antibody tests last spring using \$3.68 million from the federal CARES Act coronavirus aid, the Bismarck Tribune reported. Only about 8,000 have actually been used, health officials said.

A forthcoming plan is dependent on a new, full-time state health officer coming on board. Four people, all chosen by Republican Gov. Doug Burgum, have served in the role since May, but all have quit. Interviews for a new person are ongoing.

The tests analyze patients' blood for antibodies and identify how the virus is spreading. Experts say it still has its limitations, and they look to its long-term usefulness. If someone who has never had symptoms of COVID-19 tests positive for antibodies, it's an indication they already contracted the virus but were asymptomatic.

Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas health officials reported more than 1,000 new cases of COVID-19 Saturday and 13 more deaths linked to the disease caused by the coronavirus.

State health authorities reported that 1,010 Arkansas residents were hospitalized with COVID-19 Saturday, as the pandemic continued to put pressure on state hospital systems. The state added 1,349 confirmed and probable cases of the virus Saturday, according to The Arkansas Department of Health.

Arkansas has had a total of 155,026 COVID-19 cases and 2,449 fatalities, according to the department. The actual number of cases is believed to be far higher because many people haven't been tested and some who get the disease don't show symptoms.

More than 13% of coronavirus tests in Arkansas came back positive over the last seven days, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins University.

Texas

DALLAS — Texas health officials reported more than 3,900 new cases of COVID-19 Saturday, as the disease caused by the coronavirus continued to put pressure on hospital systems around the state.

State health authorities reported more than 8,500 Texans hospitalized with COVID-19 Saturday, roughly in line with the Friday count. Texas added 3,954 confirmed cases of the virus and 102 fatalities Saturday, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services.

Texas has had more than 1 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and 21,309 fatalities. Over the last seven days, more than one in 10 coronavirus tests in Texas have come back positive, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

Historic church torn down after 140 years

MI KALAMAZOO — A landmark fixture in western Michigan is being demolished after 140 years.

Crews began tearing down the walls of the First Reformed Church in downtown Kalamazoo but were able to salvage some stained-glass windows and other items, according to WOOD-TV.

The church has been vacant since closing in 2003. The cost to repair it was considerably high and not enough funding was available, according to First Congregational Senior Pastor Nathan Dannison.

“I know that when we began, it was our hope that we could find a way to save the structure but these buildings, when they are left to sit for any length of time at all, immediately, the costs of restoration become astronomical,” Dannison said.

“We were estimating three to five million just to be able to get people back into that building and that was without making any of the necessary accessibility upgrades that we would want to do.”

First Congregational Church has been working with the Kalamazoo Nature Center to create a children’s playscape in the church’s place. Dannison said they wanted to make sure the space would be designated for community use.

Man in custody after 2-state car chase

NE OMAHA — A Bellevue man was jailed after a lengthy chase that crossed back and forth across the Iowa-Nebraska state line.

The Omaha World-Herald reported that the 34-year-old suspect was accused of a long list of crimes, including reckless driving and possession of methamphetamine. It wasn’t immediately clear if he has been charged.

The chase began when Council Bluff, Iowa, officers stopped a Chevrolet Silverado, but the driver took off on Interstate 480 and drove into Nebraska. The Nebraska State Patrol said the truck reached speeds of more than 100 mph.

The truck later turned east on Interstate 80 and crossed back into Iowa, where Council Bluffs police picked up the pursuit again, deploying spike strips, but the truck headed back to Nebraska.

In Omaha, troopers pulled in front of the truck and the driver got out and tried to run but was caught.

Abraham Lincoln statue vandalized with red paint

WA SPOKANE — An Abraham Lincoln statue in Spokane was vandalized with red paint.

The Spokane Police Department said there are no suspects and the motive for the vandalism isn’t clear.

The statue, erected in 1930, is 12 feet high and cost \$25,000 at the time.

The Spokane Historical Society said Sen. John F. Kennedy gave a speech at the statue in 1960 during his successful run to become president.

Tax preparer used fraud to help clients

MD GREENBELT — Federal prosecutors said a Maryland tax preparer was indicted on fraud charges after she used false or inflated itemized deductions and other means to increase her clients’ refunds.

The U.S. Attorney’s office in Maryland also said in a news release that Anita Fortune, 56, used other co-conspirators’ identifying information to file tax returns after the IRS revoked her e-file privileges.

Prosecutors said Fortune was indicted on one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States and thirty-nine counts of aiding and assisting in the preparation of false tax returns.

Prosecutors said the fraud occurred during the tax years of 2012 through 2018 at her Temple Hills-based business.

Man in lawyer's death added to most wanted list

IL NORTHBROOK — A man accused of the 2016 death of a suburban Chicago lawyer has landed on a most wanted list by the U.S. Marshals Service.

There is a \$25,000 reward for information that leads to the capture of John Panaligan, 54, who has been on the run since Victor Patel was strangled at his Northbrook office, the government said.

Patel was representing people who were suing Panaligan. The Marshals Service said Panaligan met Patel by setting up an appointment under a fake name.

Since 2016, Panaligan has been to Canada, Mexico and possibly the Philippines, where he’s a citizen, the government said.

Small town loses entire police force

SC PINE RIDGE — A small South Carolina town is without a police force after its

fourth chief in three years stepped down more than a month ago.

Pine Ridge in Lexington County has also lost five police officers during that same time span, leaving no one to patrol the town of 2,000 people.

Interim Police Chief Vincent Silano was Pine Ridge’s only full-time officer before he resigned Oct. 13, telling Mayor Robert Wells and the Town Council that the mayor constantly meddles in police matters and micromanages the department, according to Silano’s resignation letter, obtained by The (Columbia) State.

Wells and Pine Ridge Mayor Pro Tem Daniel Davis are the only members of a Town Council committee that oversees the police department.

Coast Guard saves 3 stranded on island

SC WILMINGTON — Three people who went hunting on an island on the North Carolina coast were rescued after they became stranded when their boat drifted off, the U.S. Coast Guard said.

A news release said personnel at the Coast Guard Sector North Carolina command center received word that three people were stranded on Racoon Island after their 21-foot craft drifted away.

The island is in the Bay River, which is between the mouths of the Pamlico and Neuse rivers.

The crew put the three unidentified people on the boat and took them to the Cedar Island National Wildlife Refuge Boat Ramp. No injuries were reported.

Police: Driver found parked, asleep drags troopers

NH HOOKSETT — A driver found parked and asleep in the middle of Interstate 93 is accused of dragging troopers with his SUV after he woke up, New Hampshire State Police said.

Police received multiple reports of the parked vehicle with no lights on in a southbound lane in Hooksett and found a man slumped over in the driver’s seat, with the vehicle still running.

Troopers said they tried to wake up the driver.

They said he eventually got into a struggle with them, briefly dragging them before he was removed from the SUV.

They arrested Quincy Suh Ambe, 28, of Lowell, Mass., on charges of reckless conduct by use of a deadly weapon, driving while intoxicated, and resisting arrest.

From The Associated Press

No. 1 Alabama keeps rolling amid disruptions

Associated Press

Amid all the uncertainty, disruptions, consternation and anxiety of the 2020 college football season, No. 1 Alabama's excellence has been business as usual.

In yet another rout, the Crimson Tide took all the drama out of Saturday's Iron Bowl: Alabama 42, No. 22 Auburn 13.

Mac Jones threw five touchdown passes, including his usual gorgeous deep balls to DeVonta Smith. Najee Harris dashed around and over tacklers. The Tide's offense continues to be near unstoppable.

The major development over the last month and a half has been on the defensive side. A unit that looked confused and porous in an early 63-48 victory at Mississippi is seemingly figuring things out.

After trailing Georgia 24-21 at halftime on Oct. 17, Alabama has outscored five opponents 215-33. Nobody has scored more than 17 in a game against the Crimson Tide.

Talent and athleticism is never the issue in Tuscaloosa. It was probably just a matter of time before new starters such as defensive backs Daniel Wright and Malachi Moore and linebackers Christian Harris and Christopher Allen rounded into form.

After holding Auburn to 4.3 yards per play, the Tide has held four straight opponents under 5.0. Now, they haven't been the most dynamic offenses (Tennessee,

Mississippi State, Kentucky and Auburn), but if anyone thought Alabama's defense would be a liability, that's just not the case.

Coach Nick Saban watched this Iron Bowl from his home after testing positive for COVID-19 for the second time this year. The first time turned out to be a false positive. This one kept the six-time national championship-winning coach away from his team and it hardly mattered.

"I sat here and felt a little helpless," Saban told reporters. "But I could see things and yell at things and listen to (wife) Miss Terry cheer downstairs. It's a little different, but it still feels good to win.

Saban's positive tests have been the only virus drama around the Tide this season. Nobody is about to celebrate that before the reaching the finish line.

There is only so much any program can do to keep out COVID. As Ohio State learned this week, you can do great job right up until the point when you don't.

Conventional wisdom has been that Alabama, Clemson and Ohio State were in a tier to themselves this season.

Then COVID-19 sidelined Trevor Lawrence and Clemson lost to Notre Dame. With Lawrence playing for the first time in more than a month, Clemson beat Pittsburgh like it was Florida State.

Ohio State has had its own defensive issues, but everything is secondary now to

just getting on the field for the Buckeyes.

Both Clemson and Ohio State — and maybe even No. 2 Notre Dame or No. 6 Florida — might still prove to be a match for Alabama in the College Football Playoff or SEC championship game.

But for now, Alabama, once again, appears to be in a class by itself. One of the few signs of normalcy in a totally abnormal season.

Trailblazer: Becoming a trailblazer can be difficult when you're relying on Vanderbilt's offense.

Soccer keeper turned kicker Sarah Fuller only managed to get in the game for the Commodores to kickoff to start the second half against Missouri, but that one play was historic.

Fuller is the first woman to play in a Power Five football game. She did it six days after starting for Vanderbilt in its Southeastern Conference championship-winning soccer match.

So, no, that kickoff didn't faze her.

"Honestly the SEC championship game was more stressful," she said told the SEC Network.

The Commodores might have their specialists back from COVID-19 absences by next week, but it would be cool if Vandy keeps Fuller around and — if the appropriate situation presents itself — gives her a chance to score.

Virus puts Ohio State's Big Ten title hopes in jeopardy

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio State officials are unsure when the team can practice again, let alone play next week at Michigan State, after an outbreak of COVID-19 put the No. 3 Buckeyes' Big Ten title hopes in danger.

"I have no clue what this afternoon or tomorrow will bring or next week will bring," athletic director Gene Smith said Saturday.

Three more college football games across the country were canceled or postponed Saturday, including Florida State hosting Virginia. For the second straight week, the Seminoles had their home game called off hours before kickoff and after

their opponent had already traveled to Tallahassee, Fla.

Last week the issue was Clemson and Florida State not agreeing on whether the game should be played after a Tigers player who was positive for COVID-19 traveled with the team to Florida.

This week, one positive test for a Seminoles player returned Saturday morning led to contact tracing that left the team with only 44 scholarship players.

"We deeply regret that many Florida State and Virginia fans have already traveled to the game as well as Virginia's team," Florida State athletic director David Coburn said. "We simply had no way of knowing we would not be playing until

this morning. We made every effort to play, but we could not do so in a way that was safe for the players."

Ohio State canceled its Saturday game at Illinois on Friday night. Across college football, 19 of the 58 games originally scheduled for this week were called off because of COVID-19 issues. Also called on Saturday morning was San Jose State at Boise State, a key matchup in the Mountain West. Boise State said it was pausing all football activities.

Before the day was over the first postponement of next week was announced. Miami at Wake Forest won't be played Dec. 5 as the Demon Deacons deal with COVID-19 cases. That ACC

game had already been pushed back because of Miami's outbreak.

The Buckeyes' disruption could be the most significant, impacting the Big Ten and national championship race.

If Ohio State (4-0) cannot play its final two regular-season games it would likely not reach the minimum number (six) required to be eligible for the Big Ten championship game. The Buckeyes had an earlier game canceled because of a COVID outbreak at Maryland.

This time Ohio State has the outbreak. According to Dr. Jim Borchers, the team physician, the program had virtually no positive tests this season until Wednesday's testing.

Top 25 roundup

Penn State beats Michigan for 1st win

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — In a year when everything seems so unusual and different, Penn State at Michigan felt particularly strange.

No fans, no buzz — and not much to feel good about these days for either team.

“We drive up to the Big House, and there’s not a car on the road,” Nittany Lions coach James Franklin said. “There’s nobody giving you the middle finger on the ride up to the stadium like you normally get at every place. The parking lots are empty.”

What was also empty was Penn State’s win column coming into Saturday’s match-up, but that changed when the Nittany Lions beat Michigan 27-17. Penn State never trailed in this matchup of proud programs that have stumbled their way through this pandemic-shortened season.

Even if there had been a normal crowd at the game, it would have felt different with both teams coming in under .500. For one day at least, the Nittany Lions (1-5, 1-5 Big Ten) could celebrate. However strange the circumstances, this was still a victory in Ann Arbor, where Penn State had lost three in a row.

“That was a battle of two very, very respected programs, in a very unique, challenging and weird year,” Franklin said.

Sean Clifford threw for 163 yards and scored one of Penn State’s three rushing touchdowns. Keyvone Lee and Will Levis also ran for TDs. Hassan Haskins ran for 101 yards and two touchdowns for Michigan, but the Wolverines (2-4, 2-4) never found much of a consistent rhythm offensively.

It was the 899th victory for the Penn State program, and the Nittany Lions had to wait a while for this one. This was the first time they’d started a season 0-5, but three impressive touchdown drives were enough to hold off Michigan.

Penn State led 20-17 in the fourth quarter before producing a 12-play, 75-yard drive that ended with a 2-yard scoring run by Levis.

“We have to get better,” Michigan defensive lineman Taylor Upshaw said. “There’s no excuse for missed tackles. We play football. We’ve been playing football. So when that’s happening, you gotta look in the mirror and say, ‘Why are we missing tackles?’”

Cade McNamara, who came off the bench to guide Michigan to an overtime win at

Rutgers last weekend, was off target for much of this game. He went 12 of 25 for 91 yards while dealing with shoulder problems.

Penn State marched 75 yards in 10 plays on the game’s first drive, taking a 7-0 lead on a 6-yard run by Lee. That was about as smooth as it got for either offense, however.

Haskins broke free for a 59-yard run later in the first quarter, and he eventually scored from 2 yards out to tie the game.

Clifford was shaken up briefly in the first half, but after returning to the game he broke free for a 28-yard touchdown run to put the Nittany Lions back on top. A muffed punt gave Penn State a field goal just before halftime.

No. 4 Clemson 52, Pittsburgh 17: Trevor Lawrence threw for 403 yards and two touchdowns in his first game in five weeks — and likely last at Death Valley — and the Tigers throttled the Panthers.

Lawrence hadn’t seen the field on game day since beating Syracuse on Oct. 24. He tested positive for the coronavirus the following week and missed Clemson’s next two games, including its only loss this season — a 47-40 double OT defeat at No. 2 Notre Dame.

Lawrence led Clemson (8-1, 7-1 Atlantic Coast Conference; No. 3 CFP) a step closer to the league championship game and a likely rematch with the unbeaten Fighting Irish.

Cornell Powell had five catches for 176 yards, including a 43-yard TD catch off a flea-flicker pass from Lawrence. Powell also had an incredible, one-handed grab on a 70-yard pass to the Pitt 5 that set up Chez Mellusi’s 2-yard TD run for a 38-3 lead.

The Panthers (5-5, 4-5) were the last team to win at Clemson, 43-42 in 2016. Kenny Pickett threw four interceptions, three in the first eight minutes that all led to Clemson touchdowns.

Texas A&M 20, LSU 7: Isaiah Spiller ran for 141 yards and a touchdown and Buddy Johnson returned an interception for a score in the host Aggies victory.

Texas A&M (6-1, No. 5 CFP) extended its winning streak to five games in its first contest since Nov. 7 after the team couldn’t play the last two weeks because of a coronavirus outbreak.

The Aggies relied on their running game and tough defense on a wet and soggy night where rain fell steadily and made passing

difficult. Kellen Mond had a season-low 105 yards passing in his first game this season without a touchdown pass. LSU’s 123rd-ranked pass defense broke up eight of his passes in the first half and finished with 11.

TJ Finley threw for 118 yards and had an interception in the second quarter for LSU (3-4) before he was benched for Max Johnson after Buddy Johnson’s Pick-6 in the third quarter.

No. 6 Florida 34, Kentucky 10: Florida’s Kyle-to-Kyle connection returned after a two-week hiatus and put the host Gators on the verge of the Southeastern Conference championship game.

Kyle Trask found Kyle Pitts for three touchdowns, including a 56-yarder in which the star tight end ran away from a cornerback, and Florida overcame a sluggish start to beat Kentucky.

Michigan State 29, No. 11 Northwestern 20: Matt Coghlin broke a tie with a 48-yard field goal with 3:35 left and the host Spartans handed the Wildcats their first loss of the season.

No. 12 Indiana 27, Maryland 11: Stevie Scott III had three touchdown runs and the host Hoosiers had three interceptions, three sacks and a game-changing safety.

No. 13 Georgia 45, South Carolina 16: James Cook ran for 104 yards on just six carries and three other Georgia backs had at least 77 yards to help the Bulldogs roll to a win over the host Gamecocks.

No. 16 Coastal Carolina 49, Texas State 14: C.J. Marable ran for 157 yards and three touchdowns and the visiting Chanticleers wrapped up the Sun Belt Conference East Division title in the rain against Texas State.

No. 21 Oklahoma State 50, Texas Tech 44: Dezmon Jackson rushed for career highs of 235 yards and three touchdowns and the host Cowboys bounced back from a disappointing loss to rival Oklahoma.

No. 23 La.-Lafayette 70, La.-Monroe 20: Levi Lewis passed for three touchdowns and ran for two more in less than three quarters, and the Ragin’ Cajuns won on the road.

Memphis 10, Navy 7: Riley Patterson’s 26-yard field goal with 10:53 left in the game lifted the visiting Tigers to a American Athletic Conference win.

Memphis (6-2, 4-2 AAC) tied a season low for points and rushed for only 75 yards.

NBA gives teams new health protocols

Associated Press

NBA players who test positive for the coronavirus this season may have to miss nearly two weeks in some instances before being allowed to return to the court, the league told its teams Saturday.

That revelation was one of many in a 63,000-word document, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press, that explained some of the health and safety protocols for the looming season. Preseason games begin Dec. 11 and regular-season contests start Dec. 22.

The document still needs to be ratified by the league and the National Basketball Players Association, but it at least provides some sort of blueprint for the start of training camps in the coming days. All players who will be part of training camp need to begin a testing program by Monday — many were expected to start it Saturday — and teams can begin holding mandated group workouts starting Dec. 6, the league said. Individual workouts can begin Tuesday, if players have three consecutive negative tests.

Players, coaches and other key staff are expected to be tested daily in most cases.

The league, in a separate memo, also told teams that even with the detailed prevention and mitigation strategies “it is likely that some staff, players and other participants in the 2020-21 season nonetheless will

contract COVID-19.” The league urged teams to have plans ready to assist visiting team personnel or referees who happen to test positive away from their home cities, such as directing them toward isolation accommodations if necessary and to assist with that person’s care while recovering.

“The NBA wouldn’t have put this plan together and we wouldn’t have agreed to it if it wasn’t safe,” Utah guard Donovan Mitchell said Friday, before the protocols were given to teams. “We did a great job with the bubble and we’ll do what we feel is safe, the PA and the NBA.”

Mitchell — who tested positive for the virus shortly after the league suspended last season on March 11, after Jazz teammate Rudy Gobert was the first NBA player known to have contracted COVID-19 — also said that he expects players to take the virus very seriously, especially since a positive test almost certainly would sideline someone for several games.

“This isn’t football where you play once a week,” Mitchell said. “We’re playing twice, three, maybe four times a week, so you’ve got to be careful, you’ve got to be cautious.”

There are two methods by which a player can return to play after a positive coronavirus test: one is a test-based resolution, in which an infected individual has at least two consecutive negative PCR test results. The other is a time-based resolution, where a

player would have to isolate, rest and avoid workouts for at least 10 days and then spend at least two more days training in isolation. He would also have to undergo cardiac screening before being cleared to return.

The league is still working with the union on specific protocols for life on the road, saying it wants to find ways to “promote more controlled environments and reduce nonessential interactions.” Teams will be urged to work with hotel vendors on best practices, such as face-mask usage and physical distancing, especially from people who are not part of a team’s travel party — which will be capped at 45 people, including players, coaches and staff.

There is a possibility that the league will have teams travel with someone whose specific task is to handle testing on the road. Those people — it may be one, it may be two — would not count toward the 45-person travel party total.

No players or coaches tested positive for the coronavirus after gaining entry to the NBA’s restart bubble that housed more than three months of practices and games at Walt Disney World near Orlando, Fla., from early July through mid-October.

But with no bubble, the risk of exposure and positive tests is obviously much higher. Virus figures around the world have been soaring in recent weeks, including in many U.S. cities.

Bubbleville upset: Virginia Tech tops No. 3 Villanova

Associated Press

UNCASVILLE, Conn. — Keve Aluma scored 22 points, Nahiem Alleyne added 20 and Virginia Tech upset No. 3 Villanova 81-73 in overtime Saturday night.

Tyrece Radford added eight points and 13 rebounds for the Hokies (2-0). They didn’t know they would be playing the nation’s third-ranked team until early Friday morning.

Collin Gillespie scored 18 of his 25 points in the first half for Villanova (2-1). Caleb Daniels added 17 points, and Jeremiah Robinson-Earl finished with 14.

Virginia Tech and took the lead at 64-62 with 1.3 seconds

remaining on a traditional three-point play by Aluma, who scored on a beautiful assist from Cartier Diarra in the lane, and then unintentionally made the free throw. Villanova’s Justin Moore then drew a charge on Justyn Mutts on the inbounds play and Moore’s two foul shots sent the game into overtime tied at 64.

Mutts made up for that mistake by scoring the first five points in extra time and the Hokies never relinquished the lead, outscoring the Wildcats 17-9 in the extra frame.

The Hokies were supposed to face Temple on Saturday, but the Owls were forced to pause

team activities for two weeks on Thanksgiving after a positive coronavirus test in the program.

No. 2 Baylor 111, Louisiana-Lafayette 82: MaCio Teague scored 21 points and the host Bears won their delayed season opener.

Baylor, which adjusted its opening schedule after coach Scott Drew tested positive for COVID-19, shot 45-for-80 (56.3%) from the floor, including 15 for 27 (55.6%) from three-point range.

Davion Mitchell finished with 18 points, Jared Butler and LJ Cryer each scored 17, and Adam Flagler chipped in 12. Cedric Russell led the Ragin Cajuns, al-

so opening the season, with 26 points.

No. 9 Duke 81, Coppin State 71: Freshman Jalen Johnson had 19 points, 19 rebounds and four blocks and the host Blue Devils overcome a turnover-filled performance in the delayed season opener for both teams.

The 6-foot-9 Johnson made all eight of his shots from the field, including a three-pointer, and both of free throws. He also had five assists.

Fellow freshman DJ Steward scored 24 points, including a three-pointer with 2:02 left that helped keep Duke in control during an unexpectedly tight finish.