

Strike launched against site tied to Iran

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. launched an airstrike on a facility in eastern Syria linked to Iran-backed militants in response to an increasing number of recent attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East, the Pentagon said Wednesday.

“The United States is fully prepared to take further necessary measures to protect our people and our facilities. We urge against any escalation,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement about the U.S. attack.

The strike was carried out by two F-15 fighter jets against a weapons storage facility in Maysulun, according to a senior U.S. military official who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity. The official watched the engagement and believed there were some secondary explosions indicating the facility was housing weapons used against

U.S. forces in the region.

“We’d been watching it for a bit to ensure that when we struck the target, we would strike it at a time that we would be able to eliminate the use of the facility to [Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps] and do so with the minimal number of casualties,” the military official said. “We are very certain this did not involve civilian loss and that the personnel, if they were there, were associated with the IRGC.”

The strike came the same day the Houthis, an Iranian-backed militant group that has been fighting a civil war against the government in Yemen, shot down a U.S. MQ-9 reaper drone. A senior military official said the drone was shot down over the Red Sea, which borders Yemen to the west.

This is the second time in weeks that the U.S. has targeted facilities used by Iran-backed militant groups. On Oct. 26, the

U.S. launched airstrikes on two locations near al-Boukmal in eastern Syria on weapons and ammunition facilities aligned with Iranian militia, a senior U.S. military official said at the time.

“No one should question the readiness of the Department of Defense with additional options to defend our forces and our interests or President [Joe] Biden’s willingness to direct additional self-defense strikes,” said a senior U.S. defense official on Wednesday who also spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity.

The number of attacks against U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria have continued to rise since Oct. 17. Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh on Tuesday said 40 attacks have occurred since then, 22 in Iraq and 18 in Syria. Forty-six service members have been injured by drone or rocket attacks in the two countries, Singh said. Among

the injuries, 25 were cases of traumatic brain injuries and 21 were considered to be minor.

Recently, the U.S. military deployed an additional 1,200 troops to the Middle East to support Israel and protect other troops in the region. But the Pentagon has said their primary objective is to deter other groups and countries from escalating the war between Israel and the militant group Hamas, which is backed by Iran. The American service members in Iraq and Syria are part of the U.S. forces in the region deployed to support the ongoing campaign against the Islamic State group.

However, the Pentagon also has mobilized other U.S. military forces to the region after Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, including fighter jets and two Navy aircraft carrier strike groups. The Pentagon said Sunday that an Ohio-class, nuclear-powered submarine had also arrived in the region.

Israel agrees to 4-hour pauses in Gaza fighting

Associated Press

Israel has agreed to put in place four-hour daily humanitarian pauses in its assault on Hamas in northern Gaza starting on Thursday, the White House said, as President Joe Biden pressed Israelis for a multi-day stoppage in the fighting in a bid to release hostages held by the militant group.

Biden said Thursday that there was “no possibility” of a formal cease-fire at the moment, and said it had “taken a little longer” than he hoped for Israel to agree to the humanitarian pauses. Biden had asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to institute the daily pauses during a Monday call and said he had also asked the Israelis for a pause of at least three days to allow for negotiations over the release of some hostages held by Hamas.

“Yes,” Biden said, when asked whether he had asked Israel for a three-day pause. “I’ve asked for even a longer pause for some of them.”

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said that the first daily humanitarian pause would be announced Thursday and that the Israelis had committed to announcing each four-hour window at least three hours in advance. Israel, he said, also was opening a second corridor for civilians to flee the areas that are the current focus of its military campaign against Hamas, with a coastal road joining the territory’s main north-south highway.

Similar short-term pauses have occurred over the last several days as tens of thousands of civilians have fled southward, but Thursday’s announcement appeared to be

an effort to formalize and expand the process, as the U.S. has pressed Israelis to take greater steps to protect civilians in Gaza.

In Gaza, crowds of Palestinian families stretching as far as the eye could see walked out of Gaza City and surrounding areas toward the south Thursday to escape Israeli strikes and ground troops battling Hamas militants in dense urban neighborhoods. Others joined tens of thousands taking shelter at the city’s biggest hospital, not far from the fighting.

Gaza’s largest city is the focus of Israel’s campaign to crush Hamas following its deadly Oct. 7 incursion — and the Israeli military says Hamas’ main command center is located in and under the Shifa Hospital complex. The militant group and hospital staff deny that claim.

DOD focusing on ground troops in Pacific

Associated Press

BANGKOK — As Chinese missile testing in the waters around Taiwan grew increasingly aggressive in 1996, the U.S. sailed two aircraft carrier groups to the island that Beijing claims as its own, and China was forced to back down.

It employed a similar response to Hamas' surprise attack on Israel a month ago, dispatching two carrier groups to the Eastern Mediterranean in a rapid and massive show of force meant to deter other countries or Iran-backed proxy groups such as Hezbollah from joining.

But what is still viable in the Mideast is increasingly less practical with China, which in 1996 had no carriers of its own and little means to threaten the American ships, but now has the world's largest navy, including three aircraft carriers, and a coastline bristling with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles.

Instead, ongoing exercises in Hawaii, which conclude Friday, highlight part of a new American approach to Pacific defense and deterrence, with a focus on small groups of mobile land forces operating from islands like those off China's coast.

In the exercises, the largest-scale training held in Hawaii so far, more than 5,000 troops from the 25th Infantry Division, along with units from New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand and Britain and supported by the U.S. Air Force, have been practicing fighting in an island jungle environment against an advanced enemy force, with exercises including paratrooper drops, a long-range air assault, and re-supply by air and sea.

"All of those are examples of the importance of being able to project force here in the Pacific, which first requires seizing and holding ground and building up a base of operations where you can consolidate gains, secure

and hold key infrastructure such as an airfield, and then introduce additional combat power," said Maj. Gen. Marcus Evans, commanding general of the 25th Infantry Division, in an interview from Wheeler Army Airfield on Oahu.

While the exercises are not officially directed against a specific threat, the U.S. Department of Defense in its report last month to Congress reiterated that it considers China its "pacing challenge" as "the only competitor to the United States with the intent and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order."

Even though China's navy is now larger than that of the U.S. in terms of numbers of ships, the U.S. Navy is still more capable and has 11 carriers to China's three, among other advantages. But where China's main focus is on its nearby waters, the U.S. Navy operates globally and in the event of a Taiwan conflict, it would take time for many of its assets to get to the region.

As part of its "Operation Pathways" revamp of Pacific defense set in motion nearly a decade ago, the U.S. has been increasing its number of exercises with partners in the Indo-Pacific. It has also been rethinking the way its soldiers and Marines operate in the first island chain off of China, which includes southwestern Japanese islands, Taiwan and the northwest Philippines, and the second island chain, which includes the Mariana Islands and the heavily fortified American territory of Guam.

Those islands give them platforms from which anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles can be launched by mobile units that can quickly relocate to avoid counter battery fire, said Euan Graham, a defense analyst with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

"The U.S. already has a positional advantage by being forward deployed and having allies there, so it wants to utilize that geography in its favor," Graham said. "And that helps the U.S. to overcome its numerical disadvantages as China's navy is continuing to expand. The U.S. has to do what it can to try and close the gap, and land forces are part of the equation."

Beyond just being able to take and hold positions, the military has to overcome what Evans called a "tyranny of distance" in the Pacific where troops may find themselves on remote islands many hundreds of miles away from new supplies of water, fuel and ammunition. Among several new technologies being tested in the ongoing exercises in Hawaii are three variants of an "atmospheric water generator" to produce potable water in field conditions.

Operating from the first and second island chains would require the consent of the countries they belong to, and the U.S. has also been working hard to shore up and expand alliances in the region.

It runs large-scale training exercises with the Philippines, where earlier this year it signed an agreement to expand its use of bases, as well as with South Korea, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, Thailand and India.

The exercises provide experience in technical and procedural interoperability and also build human bonds that can be critical in times of crisis.

"We are just finishing up a defense here on the island of Oahu and watching soldiers from Indonesia, Thailand and New Zealand alongside soldiers from the United States Army dig fighting positions together, experience a crucible of privation — that challenges, but most importantly forges relationships," Evans said.

On the political level, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is on his ninth trip to the Indo-Pacific this week with stops in India, South Korea and Indonesia, in which he is to "underscore the depth of the long-standing U.S. commitment to strengthening the Indo-Pacific's dynamic security architecture." Austin's travels overlap with Secretary of State Antony Blinken's own visits to Tokyo, Seoul and New Delhi.

Planning and training by the U.S. and its allies have not been going on in a vacuum, and China has been working hard to extend the operational capability of its navy. It has also developed so-called "carrier killer" missiles able to hit targets at long distances, and a ballistic missile capable of striking Guam.

It launched its first domestically designed and manufactured aircraft carrier in 2022, and that same year signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands in the Pacific, which many say could be used as a port to re-supply Chinese navy ships.

That could give the Chinese navy a better ability to operate well beyond the second island chain and disrupt American supply lines or reinforcements coming from Hawaii — making it even more important for forward units to buy time in the event of a conflict.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has not ruled out the use of force to take Taiwan, and while the American policy on whether it would come to Taiwan's aid is that of "strategic ambiguity," or not saying how far it is willing to go, President Joe Biden has said that Washington would intervene militarily.

With tensions rising over Taiwan, the U.S. use of the island chains could both deter China from considering an invasion, and also exact a heavy price if they tried, Graham said.

USMC leader: Health recovery 'going well'

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Gen. Eric Smith, the new Marine Corps commandant, on Wednesday said his recovery is going well in his first public remarks about his health since suffering a heart attack 10 days ago.

"I appreciate the outpouring of support for my family and me. My recovery is going well, and I look forward to getting back in the fight as soon as I can," Smith said in a statement.

Smith, who was confirmed by the Senate as the Marine Corps commandant in September, has been in the hospital since suffer-

ing the heart attack on Oct. 29 near his home at the Marine Barracks in Washington. At the time, he had been performing the duties of two jobs because the general nominated to become the assistant commandant was blocked from promotion along with hundreds of other military personnel by Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala.

Since September, Senate Democrats have sidestepped Tuberville's hold by individually confirming several of the most senior military nominees, including Smith, Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

Gen. Randy George as Army chief of staff, Adm. Lisa Franchetti as chief of naval operations, Gen. David Allvin as Air Force chief of staff and Lt. Gen. Christopher Mahoney as assistant Marine Corps commandant.

Tuberville's blockade on military promotions is a protest against a Pentagon policy that reimburses troops who travel out of state to receive reproductive care, including abortions. Some Republican-controlled states have outlawed or imposed severe restrictions on the practice since the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade* in mid-2022.

The Marine Corps said it will be some time before Smith can resume his duties as commandant, even after he is discharged from the hospital. In the meantime, Mahoney will continue to perform his duties.

"Based on his baseline physical health and his rapid improvement over the last week, his medical team has recommended that he transition to inpatient rehabilitation to expedite his recovery," the Marine Corps said Wednesday. "They are confident that with focused attention and daily interaction, he will be back to full-duty status sooner than if utilizing outpatient rehabilitation."

Houthi rebels shoot down US drone off Yemeni coast

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A rebel group in Yemen shot down a U.S. drone on Wednesday, roughly three weeks after a U.S. warship intercepted missiles fired toward Israel by the same rebels, Pentagon officials said.

The U.S. drone was an MQ-9 Reaper taken down by the Houthis, an Iranian-backed militant group that has been fighting a civil war against the Yemeni government since the 1990s, according to a senior U.S. military official.

Attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East have risen significantly since Hamas militants in Gaza attacked Israel a month ago. Israel has retaliated with airstrikes and an invasion of Gaza. The Pentagon said earlier this week that there have been at least 40 separate attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria in the past three weeks. None have caused any serious injuries or heavy damage to the bases, officials said.

The drone attack came on the same day that President Joe Biden ordered a U.S. airstrike by

two F-15 fighter jets on a weapons storage facility in eastern Syria used by Iran's military and rebel groups. The U.S. carried out a similar strike in the same region of Syria on Oct. 26.

It wasn't immediately clear Wednesday what the drone was doing or whether it was armed. MQ-9 Reapers can carry a variety of armaments, including missiles and laser-guided bombs.

The military official said the Reaper was shot down in the waters off the Yemeni coast but didn't say whether it was destroyed. Yemen is bordered by the Gulf of Aden to the south and the Red Sea to the west.

The attack came three weeks after the USS *Carney* shot down several Houthi rockets that were fired toward Israel on Oct. 19. The Pentagon said those missiles had a range of about 1,200 miles and could have reached Israel.

"We know that the Houthis have the ability, by virtue of the missiles, that they're employing to range targets in Israel," Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's top spokesman, said recently.

Russian missile hits ship with Liberia flag in Odesa

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A Russian missile strike on the Ukrainian port of Odesa hit a Liberian-flagged freighter, killing a port worker and injuring three citizens of the Philippines, who are crew members on the ship, Ukraine's armed forces said Thursday.

The report did not give the name of the ship or the country of its owners, but Infrastructure Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov said the ship was to carry iron ore to China. The extent of the damage was not immediately reported.

Another port worker was injured in the attack along with the one killed.

The Odesa port and others in the region are economically vital to Ukraine as its outlets to the Black Sea, from which ships can head for world markets. Odesa port facilities have come under Russian attack 21 times since Russia in August declined to renew a deal allowing Ukraine to safely export grain via the Black Sea, Kubrakov said.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in October that a new

Black Sea export corridor had allowed some 50 ships to set sail.

In the southern city of Kherson, which lies across the Dnieper River from Russia-held territory, one civilian was killed and three were wounded in Russian firing on a residential area around midday Thursday, according to Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko.

Three other civilians were killed in Russian attacks over the past day, according to a summary from the presidential office.

In the Donetsk region, the Russian army shelled 11 towns and villages, killing two people in Toretsk and wounding one civilian in Chasiv Yar. In the neighboring Kharkiv region near Iziium, a man was killed during artillery shelling.

In the south, one civilian was wounded during shelling of residential areas of Kherson, and another was wounded by a mine. In the area of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, Russians shelled Nikopol on the opposite bank of the Dnieper River, wounding a person and damaging infrastructure, power lines and 14 houses.

GOP debate focuses on Israel, China, Ukraine

Associated Press

MIAMI — In their first debate since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, the Republican presidential candidates all declared hawkish support for Israel but squabbled over China and Ukraine as they faced growing pressure to try to catch Donald Trump, who was again absent.

Sparring over several issues were Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley, who has appeared competitive with DeSantis' distant second-place position in some national polls. Much of the debate focused on policy — especially foreign policy issues — rather than Trump and his record.

Haley, the former South Carolina governor and United Nations ambassador, declared she would end trade relations with China “until they stop murdering Americans from fentanyl — something Ron has yet to say that he’s going to do.” In return, the Florida governor said Haley “welcomed” Chinese investment to her state, referencing a land deal with a Chinese manufacturer while she led South Carolina.

All five candidates face grow-

ing urgency, with the leadoff Iowa caucuses just a little more than two months away, to cut into Trump’s huge margins in the 2024 primary and establish themselves as a clear alternative. But it’s not clear many Republican primary voters want a Trump alternative. And given his dominance in early state and national polls, Trump again skipped the debate to deprive his rivals of attention.

Trump was the subject of the debate’s first question, when moderators asked each candidate to explain why they were the right person to beat him.

DeSantis said, “He owes it to you to be on this stage and explain why he should get another chance.” He suggested Trump had lost a step since winning the White House in 2016, saying he failed to follow through on his “America First” policies.

Haley, who is pulling some voter and donor curiosity from DeSantis, said Trump “used to be right” on supporting Ukraine but “now he’s getting weak in the knees.”

But the conversation moved on to policy issues with relatively few head-to-head confrontations. The moderators often de-

clined to call on candidates who were mentioned by others onstage, as is normally the custom.

The DeSantis and Haley campaigns for months have attacked each other on China, long a topic of scorn in GOP primaries. Their allied super PACs have run ads in early primary states alleging the other side is soft on Beijing.

Also appearing onstage Wednesday were South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

Scott frequently referenced the Bible and appealed to the Christian faith of many Republican primary voters, echoing his campaign themes and his singular focus on Iowa, where white evangelical voters are an influential bloc.

Christie defended U.S. support for Ukraine in its defense against Russia’s invasion, saying that for the United States: “This is not a choice. This is the price we pay for being the leaders of the free world.”

Ramaswamy tried several times to push his way into the center of the debate. Having

long styled himself as someone willing to challenge his rivals, Ramaswamy repeatedly went after other candidates, notably Haley, who tussled with him in the first two debates.

Haley seemed to ignore his first barbs, but snapped during a discussion about the social media app TikTok, which many Republicans want banned in the U.S. due to its parent company’s ties to China.

Ramaswamy accused Haley’s daughter of having had her own TikTok account until recently. Responded Haley, “Leave my daughter out of your voice!” She then told him, “You’re just scum.”

All the candidates said they were staunchly behind Israel as it mounts an offensive in Gaza following Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack that killed more than 1,400 people. The candidates did not discuss humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza as the number of Palestinians killed in the war passed 10,500, including more than 4,300 children, according to the Hamas-run Health Ministry in Gaza.

Several also said they would pressure college campuses to crack down on antisemitism.

Congress expands to-do list days before potential shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Several days before a potential government shutdown, Congress is no closer to resolving the standoff and is even complicating the issue with Republican demands for border security changes as a condition for further support for Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

New House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said Tuesday that Republicans do not want to close things down, but he is well aware that his predecessor, Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., was ousted as speaker after compromising with Democrats in September to keep federal offices open.

“We certainly want to avoid a government shutdown,” Johnson said at a news conference alongside families with loved ones kidnapped in the Israel-Hamas war.

“It’s a dangerous time around the world

right now,” he said. “We recognize that, and we’re doing our job.”

Johnson is facing one of his most difficult tests yet, just two weeks into the job. Rather than lead the House Republicans into a strategy, Johnson appears to be crowd-sourcing a way out of the government funding dilemma with his GOP colleagues.

At a closed-door meeting, House Republicans discussed stopgap measures, including a new idea gaining traction: a “laddered” approach that would fund parts of the government until early December and the rest until mid-January, according to Republicans granted anonymity to discuss the private gathering.

The Senate, which is controlled by Democrats, has been working to devise a more comprehensive spending plan that would fund the government at current levels while also consi-

dering President Joe Biden’s nearly \$106 billion request for supplemental money for Ukraine, Israel, the Asia-Pacific region and border security.

“None of this will be easy to do, none of this,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. “The outcome of the next two weeks will hang on the same thing I’ve emphasized all year — bipartisan cooperation.”

To further complicate matters, Republicans are refusing Biden’s request to support Ukraine in battling Russia unless the president agrees to their demands to bolster security along the U.S. border with Mexico.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said he spoke Monday with Biden and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and did “make it clear to both of them: We have to have a credible solution” to the border.

Actors, studios reach accord ending strikes

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — On Thursday, for the first time in more than six months, neither Hollywood's actors nor its writers will be on strike.

The long-awaited clearing in the industry's stormiest season in decades comes as a deal was reached late Wednesday to end what was, at nearly four months, the longest strike ever for film and television actors.

The three-year contract must be approved by the board of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists and its members in the coming days. But union leadership declared that the strike will end at 12:01 a.m. on Thursday, putting all of the parts of production back into action for the first time since spring.

Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, SAG-AFTRA's executive director and chief negotiator, said the gains made in the deal justified the struggle.

"It's an agreement that our members can be proud of. I'm certainly very proud of it," Crabtree-Ireland said. "We said we would only accept a fair, equitable and respectful deal, and that's precisely what this deal is. So I think our members, as we are able to release more of the details of it, will look at them and say, now this is something that was worth being on strike for."

More than 60,000 SAG-AFTRA members went on strike July 14, joining screenwriters who had walked off the job more than two months earlier. The studios and writers reached a deal that brought their strike to an end on

Sept. 26.

The union valued the deal at over \$1 billion. Crabtree-Ireland said the deal includes boosts to minimum payments to actors, a greater share of streaming revenue going to performers, a bolstering of benefit plans and protections against the unfettered use of artificial intelligence in recreating performances. Details will not be released until after a meeting on Friday where board members review the contract.

The AI protections were a sticking point in the negotiations that had moved methodically, with breaks for both sides to huddle, since they restarted Oct. 24.

"It is something that has evolved even while we've been in this negotiation process," Crabtree-Ireland said. "The capabilities of generative AI tools have ex-

panded dramatically. So we have really been focused on making sure that the guardrails that we negotiated for were future-proof or at least future-resistant."

The other side in the negotiations, Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, said in a statement that the "agreement represents a new paradigm. It gives SAG-AFTRA the biggest contract-on-contract gains in the history of the union." The AMPTP said it "looks forward to the industry resuming the work of telling great stories."

Although the writers strike had immediate, visible effects for viewers, the impact of the actors' absence was not as immediately apparent. But its ripple effects — delayed release dates and waits for new show seasons — could be felt for months or even years.

House Republicans subpoena president's son and brother

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans issued subpoenas Wednesday to members of President Joe Biden's family, taking their most aggressive step yet in an impeachment inquiry bitterly opposed by Democrats that is testing the reach of congressional oversight powers.

The long-awaited move by Kentucky Rep. James Comer, the chairman of the House Oversight Committee, to subpoena the president's son Hunter and brother James comes as Republicans look to gain ground in their nearly yearlong investigation. So far, they have failed to uncover evidence directly implicating the president in any wrongdoing.

But Republicans say the evi-

dence trail they have uncovered paints a picture of "influence peddling" by Biden's family.

"Now, the House Oversight Committee is going to bring in members of the Biden family and their associates to question them on this record of evidence," Comer said in a statement.

The stakes are exceedingly high, as the inquiry could result in Republicans bringing impeachment charges against Biden, the ultimate penalty for what the U.S. Constitution describes as "high crimes and misdemeanors."

The subpoenas demand that Hunter Biden and James Biden as well as former business associate Rob Walker appear before the Oversight Committee for a deposition by mid-December.

US jobless aid claims inch down

Associated Press

Slightly fewer Americans applied for jobless claims last week, further indicating that the labor market remains strong in an era of high interest rates.

Applications for unemployment benefits fell by 3,000 to 217,000 for the week ending Nov. 4, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

Jobless claim applications are seen as representative of the number of layoffs in a given week.

The four-week moving average of claims, a less volatile measure, inched up by 1,500 to 212,250.

Overall, 1.83 million people were collecting unemployment benefits the week that ended Oct. 28, about 22,000 more than the previous week and the most since April. Those "continuing claims," analysts suggest, are up because

many of those who are already unemployed may now be having a harder time finding new work.

Still, the American labor market continues to show resiliency in the midst of the Federal Reserve's campaign to get inflation back down to its 2% target.

Though Fed officials opted to leave the benchmark rate alone last week, the U.S. central bank has raised rates 11 times since March of 2022 in an effort to tame inflation, which reached a four-decade high in 2022. Part of the Fed's goal is to cool the economy and labor market, which officials say should slow price growth.

In September, consumer prices were up 3.7% from a year earlier. However, U.S. economic growth surged in the July-September quarter on the back of robust consumer spending.

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Michigan 'a statement game' for Penn St.

Associated Press

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — As their teammates filed out of practice earlier this week, Penn State defensive ends Adisa Isaac, Chop Robinson and Dani Dennis-Sutton lingered at the far end of the facility.

The Nittany Lions' most disruptive defenders stutter-stepped and bull-rushed their way around and through assistant coaches, putting in extra work before the biggest game of the season.

They seek to upstage Michigan's top-ranked defense when the No. 2 Wolverines (9-0, 6-0 Big Ten) visit Beaver Stadium on Saturday.

"This is a statement game from our defense because you know a lot of people around the country believe that Penn State is unable to take the next step," cornerback Kalen King said. "And I feel like this game is the perfect opportunity for us to go out and prove ourselves against a powerhouse team like Michigan."

The Nittany Lions (8-1, 5-1) also want to keep their conference title hopes alive. The Wolverines,

who've arguably been just as good on offense as they have been on defense, can snuff them out.

They've foiled everything every opponent has thrown at them so far.

Michigan is allowing just 6.7 points and 231.4 total yards per game. No team has taken a single snap inside Michigan's 10-yard-line this season.

But the Wolverines know this game won't be as easy.

"They're a super-talented team," Michigan quarterback JJ McCarthy said. "They're well coached. It's going to be a good one for us to see where we're at."

The Wolverines are in control of their fate. They play at Maryland on Nov. 18 before hosting No. 3 Ohio State in the season finale. For that game to mean more, Michigan must deal with Penn State's rising offense, which has played well since Ohio State shut it down in a 20-12 loss on Oct. 21.

The Nittany Lions have scored 30 or more points in every game except the one in Columbus. They have scored 84

points and totaled 746 yards in the last two weeks.

"It's one of those games where we can't kill ourselves with mistakes because they'll capitalize," Penn State quarterback Drew Allar said. "We just have to do a good job of just, you know, eliminating all the unforced errors that, you know, can come back and bite us."

Swirling scandal

Since Michigan's alleged sign-stealing scheme became public nearly three weeks ago, coach Jim Harbaugh and his players have had to deal with the distraction.

Zak Zinter, an All-Big Ten offensive guard, has embraced the outside noise.

"There's a lot of noise going on outside the building," he said. "If someone thinks we're the villain, I'm fine with being the villain. Sometimes, the villain wins and takes down the superhero."

Secondary motivation

McCarthy has had good chemistry with wideouts Roman Wilson and Cornelius Johnson, who've combined for 60 catches,

1,011 yards and 11 touchdowns.

It's cause for concern for a Penn State secondary that's allowed an average of 280 passing yards and two touchdowns per game over the last three weeks.

King said he was taking preparations personally after struggling to contain Marvin Harrison Jr. in Columbus.

"That loss, it brought us closer," King said. "I feel like this stretch in November is really where we going to do a lot of our talking."

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Michigan running back Blake Corum hasn't faced a defense like Penn State's this season.

"Penn State is a great football team," Corum said. "Great defense, top 10 in every category."

Corum is pretty good, too. He has an FBS-high 16 touchdowns, scoring each on the ground.

Even though the Wolverines will be facing a ranked team for the first time since losing to TCU in the 2022 College Football Playoff, Harbaugh insisted the Wolverines' previous opponents put up a fight.

Undrafted NFL players stay mindful of humble roots

Associated Press

If Carl Granderson and Terence Steele splurged after joining a short list of undrafted free agents to sign big contracts, they aren't telling.

The New Orleans edge rusher and Dallas offensive lineman fit the profile of players who wait three days and never hear their names called during the draft, feeling as far as possible from NFL riches.

Humble. Grateful. Mindful of their roots.

"I guess your lifestyle changes a little bit," said Carolina receiver Adam Thielen, who once followed the same path to a big payday in Minnesota. "You're not maybe pinching pennies as much. But you still try to have that humble beginning."

Steele signed an \$87 million, five-year extension with \$50 million guaranteed about a week before the season started, jumping to second behind former Dallas quarterback

Tony Romo (\$55 million) in guaranteed money for undrafted players over the past 20 years, according to ESPN.

About three weeks later, Granderson agreed on a \$52 million extension with up to \$35 million guaranteed with the Saints. He's fourth on that list.

This season, Steele, who came out of Texas Tech, is playing on a \$4.3 million second-round tender. Granderson, a former Wyoming standout who grew up in Northern California, is on a \$3.9 million deal.

Their salaries are about to jump threefold, or more than 10 times what they were making annually as rookies.

"It still doesn't even feel real, really," Steele said nearly two months after signing. "The first person I called was my mom and dad. They were super proud of me. All the hard work and all the dedication."

Implying these undrafted players have hit

the lottery would seem to put luck over all that hard work and dedication, not to mention the talent necessary to survive all the roster cuts along the way.

But they don't really scoff at the notion.

"Sometimes I sit and think about how far I've come, how no one wanted me 10 years ago and how all the hard work has paid off," Tampa Bay edge rusher Shaquil Barrett said. "I feel real fortunate for the opportunity to get a four-year deal. Now I just want to do everything I can to show the Bucs I deserved it."

Injuries cleared the way for Steele to play all 16 games, with 14 starts at right tackle, as a rookie in 2020. He was one of the few bright spots in a difficult debut season in Dallas for coach Mike McCarthy and now has 48 starts over three-plus seasons.

The 26-year-old hasn't missed a start this year after tearing a knee ligament in December last season.

Angels hire Washington as new manager

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The Los Angeles Angels hired Ron Washington to be their new manager Wednesday, turning to a veteran baseball mind in an attempt to end nearly a decade of losing.

The 71-year-old Washington became the majors' oldest current manager and only the second active Black manager, joining Dave Roberts of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

"I'm lost for words, but not the work it will take!" Washington told The Associated Press by text message.

Washington led the Texas Rangers from 2007-14, winning two AL pennants and going 664-611. He spent the past seven sea-

sons as Atlanta's third base coach, helping the Braves to their 2021 World Series title.

Washington replaced Phil Nevin, who wasn't re-signed last month after 1½ losing seasons in charge of the long-struggling Angels. Los Angeles is mired in stretches of eight consecutive losing seasons and nine straight non-playoff seasons, both the longest streaks in the majors.

Washington has never shied away from work: He's regularly among the first on the field, hitting hundreds of grounders to infielders.

Arte Moreno, the Angels' 77-year-old owner, clearly hopes the experienced Washington can get the most out of a long-

underachieving franchise with a big payroll and three-time AL MVP Mike Trout, but almost no team success to show for it. Shohei Ohtani, the team's superstar two-way player, became a free agent this week.

Washington got a two-year contract. He's the fourth manager in the last six seasons for the Angels following the departure of Mike Scioscia, who spent 19 years running the Halos' bench before walking away after the 2018 season. Brad Ausmus, Joe Maddon and Nevin have all tried and failed to reverse the Angels' slide.

Washington's successful tenure at Texas had plenty of bumps along the way. He tested positive for cocaine use during

the 2009 season and offered to resign, but he kept his job and led the Rangers to the World Series in 2010 and again in 2011.

Washington abruptly resigned from the Rangers on Sept. 5, 2014, surprising the baseball world. Two weeks later, he acknowledged having an extramarital affair and cited it as the reason for leaving Texas, which had intended to bring him back in 2015.

With a reputation as a personable, old-school manager with an ebullient personality and an exciting edge, Washington also knows the AL West well. Along with his time in Texas, he spent 13 seasons over two stints as a coach with the Oakland Athletics.

GMs careful with words on Ohtani sweepstakes

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — The race to add two-way baseball superstar Shohei Ohtani in a blockbuster free agency deal is off to a clandestine start.

"Special player, that's all I'll say," said Chris Young, general manager of the World Series champion Texas Rangers.

"We're going to be interested in looking at everything that's available that can make us better," New York Yankees general manager Brian Cashman said.

"We may ask some questions, but I can't tell you we're diving all in," Houston Astros general manager Dana Brown said.

All 30 Major League Baseball general managers have gathered this week at baseball's GM meetings in Scottsdale, though the meetings were cut short after a stomach virus that spread and affected over 30 executives. Privately, they're surely discussing the developing Ohtani sweepstakes, which could cost the winning team upward of \$500 million. But publicly, questions about the potentially historic bidding have been met with careful statements.

Even the team that employed the Japanese sensation the past six seasons — the Los Angeles Angels — doesn't seem to have a good read on his future.

"There's going to be a lot of attention on it and I understand why," Angels GM Perry Minasian said. "Great player. We'll see how

the offseason develops. We've got our plan and we're going to try to execute that plan and see where it leads us."

Ohtani is one of the most fascinating cases for baseball's free agency system since it began in 1976.

He's 29 years old and just produced one of the best two-way seasons in MLB history, batting .304 with 44 homers while also having a 10-5 record on the mound with a 3.14 ERA.

It's unclear how much value he'll provide as a pitcher in the coming seasons. He had Tommy John surgery in September for the second time in six years, and the list of pitchers who have successfully returned after having the procedure done twice is fairly short.

Recent World Series winner Nathan Eovaldi, Jameson Taillon and Daniel Hudson are a handful who have had success. Two-time All-Star Jason Istringhausen had the surgery three times and still came back to have a few more solid seasons. Current Dodgers star Walker Buehler — who recently had his second TJ surgery — hopes to join that group.

Even if Ohtani can't contribute much on the mound, he's one of the game's elite hitters. He's also a good enough athlete that he could be an option for first base or the outfield as he gets older.

There's also an off-the-field component

that can't totally be quantified. Ohtani has reached a celebrity status that few other current baseball players can even imagine, and his arrival in any city would undoubtedly mean a huge boost for fan interest.

Instead of setting the free-agent market this offseason, Ohtani is a market all his own.

"He brings so much to the game, so much excitement, he's got a fan base, he's an exciting player," said Brown, the Astros GM. "I would love to have him, but are we going to go out and pursue Ohtani? We may ask some questions, but I can't tell you we're diving all in."

Then he said what pretty much every GM in Arizona was saying this week.

"We will definitely ask questions, though."

Ohtani is the crown jewel of this year's free-agent class, which appears a little short on franchise-altering players, particularly among hitters. Cody Bellinger is a former MVP who had a great bounce-back year with the Cubs. Four-time Gold Glove winner Matt Chapman is a top-quality third baseman. Tim Anderson is a two-time All-Star who is looking for a change of scenery.

The pitching scene is a little more robust, with veterans Aaron Nola, Sonny Gray, Jordan Montgomery and Japanese star Yoshinobu Yamamoto on the market

But none of them come close to bringing the juice — on or off the field — that Ohtani provides.

Wembanyama's NBA education underway

Associated Press

Here's some of what San Antonio's Victor Wembanyama has experienced so far in the NBA: Scoring 38 points in a game, playing in a back-to-back for the first time, being part of two 40-point losses, wasting a huge lead and losing, overcoming a huge deficit and winning.

It's been an education.

And by all accounts, the French rookie who stands nearly 7-foot-4 is passing the tests.

Wembanyama's numbers so far: 19.4 points, 8.4 rebounds and 2.6 blocks per game. The last player to have such averages over the first seven games of his career was Shaquille O'Neal in 1992. Back then, the consensus was O'Neal was one of a kind. The refrains are familiar today.

"We've never seen anything like this," Indiana coach Rick Carlisle said.

It's a different game now, but it's hard to argue what Carlisle is saying when factoring in the inside-outside game that Wembanyama possesses. There's never been a rookie who averaged so many points and rebounds along with one 3-pointer made per game. Larry Bird was the closest; it's a small sample size, but Wembanyama is making nearly two 3s per contest so far.

The league is raving about the kid who goes by Wemby, and has been from the moment he got drafted — long before that night, really. That hasn't changed, nor has Wembanyama's humble approach.

"Every night is a challenge," Wembanyama said. "I've still got a lot to prove to my teammates and my coach."

His coach might disagree.

Gregg Popovich — the Hall of Famer, the winningest coach in NBA history and someone who just happened to sign a five-year extension shortly after Wembanyama came to the Spurs — makes no effort to downplay his new star's enormous potential.

"The first thing I would say is that his parents did a very good job," Popovich said. "He's one of the most mature 19-year-olds I've ever been around. His character is incredible. His view of the world is mature. He understands who he is, he feels comfortable in his own skin. He knows that all the hype that has been pretty thick, everywhere, is something to be ignored. He realizes he has work to do. Talent is talent, but he's going to channel that and figure out exactly what his game should be."

The lessons have come fast and furious in the first two weeks.

Actually, go back a little. Pre-season games are largely forgettable in the NBA, but Wembanyama made the Spurs' exhibitions must-see TV. They were spectacles; Golden State guard Stephen Curry — who is only about a foot shorter than Wembanyama — added to the circus of it all by trying to jump center in the Warriors' exhibition against the Spurs.

"The guy's going to be great," said Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James, who entered the league with great fanfare as the highly touted No. 1 pick in 2003 — and watched Wembanyama deal with the same otherworldly expectations 20 years later. "He's already damn good right now and I think every game, every opportunity he's on the floor, he's going to continue to get better and better and see the nuances of the game and ways he can play and ways he can exploit the competition. So, he's going to be great."

If he needed a coming-out party, Wembanyama probably had one last week with a pair of wins in Phoenix.

On Oct. 31, the Spurs rallied from 20 points down to beat the Suns 115-114 after trailing for 47½ of the 48 minutes; two nights later, Wembanyama had 38 points and 10 rebounds and

the Spurs beat the Suns again, 132-121.

There have been rough nights as well. The Spurs lost to the Los Angeles Clippers by 40 last week, then lost to Indiana by 41 on Monday night. They became just the second team in NBA history to have two 40-point losses in the first seven games of the season; the other was the 2017-18 Suns, who went on to be the league's worst team that year.

The Spurs have decidedly higher aspirations and so does Wembanyama. Popovich has never been one for false or effusive praise, but already raves about Wembanyama's coachability, his relationships with teammates, his outlook on life and calls him "a very special young man."

"He just comes to work every day, just like every other player," Popovich said. "You have a system and he's got to learn it. He's got to learn the league. He's never played against any of these guys or with any of these guys on our team. It's just a process. There's no formula. You just try not to skip any steps. Luckily, he's an intelligent, coachable young man and he'll eventually get there. He will be a great player. But he's got some learning to do first, just like any other player."

Balanced No. 10 FAU cruises past Loyola in opener

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Tenth-ranked Florida Atlantic came in with its highest ranking and the expectations to match. The Owls are off to a good start.

Vladislav Goldin tied a career-high 19 points and set one with 10 rebounds and FAU beat Loyola Chicago 75-62 in the teams' season opener on Wednesday night.

Goldin also set personal bests with five blocks and four steals.

Nick Boyd scored 13, while Johnell Davis and Brandon

Weatherspoon added 12 apiece. Boyd and Weatherspoon each hit three 3-pointers, and the balanced Owls showed why they have their sights on the NCAA championship coming off a surprising run to the Final Four. With all five starters back and only one player gone from a team that went 35-4 and got knocked out by San Diego State in the semis on a buzzer-beating jumper, FAU is off to a good start.

"Just to put closure on last year," coach Dusty May said.

"It was a special season, but as a coach, as a program and as a group of players still chasing their individual goals and dreams, it was nice just to move on to the next chapter and see what this team can become."

Goldin sounded as if he has turned the page.

"New team, new season, new chapter," he said.

May was an assistant at Florida during the 2017-18 season when Loyola knocked off the fifth-ranked Gators for their first win over a top-five team

since 1984. The Ramblers won 32 games and stunned the nation with a Final Four run.

There were no surprises this time, though FAU didn't exactly have an easy go of it. Though there were no lead changes, Loyola didn't go quietly.

The Owls went on a 17-2 run in the first half to break open a two-point game. They withstood several pushes in the second half by Loyola — no stranger to surprising Final Four runs — and opened their sixth season under May on a winning note.