

Ukraine claims success in downing drones

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian authorities on Monday tried to dampen public fears over Russia's use of Iranian-built drones on its neighbor by claiming increasing success in shooting down the small aircraft, while talk of a "dirty bomb" attack has added another worrying dimension to the conflict that's entering its ninth month.

Ukrainians are bracing for less electric power this winter following a sustained Russian barrage on infrastructure across their country in recent weeks. Meanwhile, citizens in the southern city of Mykolaiv lined up for water and essential supplies as Ukrainian forces continued their advance on the nearby Russian-occupied city of Kherson.

Ukraine's forces have shot down more than two-thirds of the approximately 330 Shahed drones that Russia has fired through Saturday, the head of Ukraine's intelligence service, Kyrylo Budanov, said in a published interview on Monday. Budanov said that Russia's military had ordered about 1,700 units of various types of drones, and a second batch of about 300 Shaheds is currently being rolled out.

"Terror with the use of 'Shaheds' can actually last for a long time," he was quot-

ed as saying in *Ukrainska Pravda* newspaper adding: "Air defense is basically coping, 70% are shot down."

Both Russia and Iran deny that any Iranian-built drones have been used in the war.

Budanov also played down speculation that Russian forces are preparing an immediate exit from Kherson, even though an evacuation of civilians and others including banking personnel and teachers is underway. Budanov said statements to that effect by Russia's newly appointed commander in Ukraine, Gen. Sergei Surovikin, were aimed at "preparing the ground" in case a full pullout does take place, which the Ukrainian official predicted would happen by year's end.

"But at the same time I cannot tell you that right now they are fleeing from Kherson," Budanov said.

Meanwhile, Russian authorities have removed monuments of 18th-century Russian military chiefs Alexander Suvorov and Fyodor Ushakov from Kherson, saying that the action was intended to save them from Ukrainian shelling of the city.

On Saturday, Russian-installed authorities told all residents of Kherson to leave "immediately" ahead of an expected advance by Ukrainian troops waging a coun-

teroffensive to recapture the city — a key route to Russian-occupied Crimea — which has been in Russian hands since the early days of the war.

Ukraine's relentless artillery strikes on Kherson have cut the main crossings across the Dnieper River, which bisects southern Ukraine, leaving Russian troops on the west bank short of supplies and vulnerable to encirclement. The region is one of four that Russian President Vladimir Putin illegally annexed last month and put under Russian martial law last week.

Britain's Ministry of Defense, in an intelligence update posted on Twitter, said Russia was 'likely' to use a high number of Shahed drones to penetrate "increasingly effective Ukrainian air defenses" in part to substitute for Russian-made long-range precision weapons "which are becoming increasingly scarce."

That assessment came on top of a stark warning by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to key Western and Turkish counterparts over the weekend that Ukrainian forces were preparing a "provocation" involving a radioactive device — a so-called "dirty bomb."

Britain, France and the United States — who got calls from Shoigu on the matter, along with Turkey — rejected that claim.

Spain and US to discuss expanded Navy presence

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. and Spain will soon launch negotiations on a new defense pact for an expanded naval presence in Spain, while elsewhere in Europe, the Army plans to set up additional units by next year, according to officials.

Spain's foreign minister, Angeles Moreno, told the country's parliament last week that a bilateral defense agreement with the U.S. must be updated to allow for an expansion at the U.S. Navy's base in Rota.

Moreno said negotiations on

the pact would soon begin, Spanish media reported Wednesday.

The talks are connected to the June announcement at the NATO Summit in Madrid that the U.S. will increase the number of destroyers based in Spain from four to six.

While an official timeline for the ships' arrival in Spain hasn't been set, U.S. military commanders have put 2025 or 2026 as target years.

Some other U.S. military moves announced in Madrid are running up against lengthier timelines.

Upcoming Army unit additions in Europe include a short-range air defense battalion, engineer brigade headquarters and short-range air defense battery, all of which are expected to be activated in the summer or fall of next year, U.S. Army Europe and Africa said Friday.

Earlier this month in the German town of Sembach, the command stood up the 52nd Air Defense Artillery Brigade, which now oversees multiple artillery units based in Europe.

And in September, the 95th Combat Sustainment Support

Battalion was activated in Baumholder, Germany, to support logistics efforts on the Continent, USAREUR-AF said.

The expansion of the U.S. military mission in Europe coincides with Russia's war on Ukraine, which has ushered in a wave of American reinforcements.

There are now roughly 100,000 U.S. troops operating in Europe, drawn from a mix of permanently based and rotational units. That is up from about 80,000 before Russia's late February invasion.

World wary as China's Xi extends reign

Associated Press

BEIJING — The world faces the prospect of more tension with China over trade, security and human rights after Xi Jinping, the country's most powerful leader in decades, awarded himself another term as leader of the ruling Communist Party.

Xi has tightened control at home and is trying to use China's economic heft to increase its influence abroad. Washington accused Beijing this month of trying to undermine U.S. alliances, global security and economic rules. Activists say Xi's government wants to deflect criticism of abuses by changing the U.N.'s definition of human rights.

Xi says "the world system is broken and China has answers," said William Callahan of the London School of Economics. "More and more, Xi Jinping is talking about the Chinese style as a universal model of the world order, which goes back to a Cold War kind of conflict."

On Sunday, Xi was awarded a third five-year term as party leader in a break with tradition that called for him to step down after 10 years. The party named a seven-member ruling Standing Committee of Xi and his allies, which gives him a free hand to carry out his plans.

POLITICS: Xi calls for the "great rejuvenation of the Chi-

nese nation" based on reviving the Communist Party's role as the economic, social and cultural leader in a throwback to what he sees as a golden age after the 1949 revolution. "Xi's embrace of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy should put to rest any wishful thinking that Xi's China might peacefully liberalize its politics and economy," Kevin Rudd, president of the Asia Society and a former Australian prime minister, wrote in Foreign Affairs. Xi's government has jailed dissidents, stepped up internet censorship and crushed a pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Its "social credit" initiative tracks the public and punishes infractions from fraud to littering.

ECONOMY: By 2035, the Communist Party wants economic output per person to match a "medium-level developed country," Xi said in a report to the congress. That suggests doubling output from 2020 levels, according to Larry Hu and Yuxiao Zhang of Macquarie, an Australian financial services group. Meanwhile, however, the ruling party is building up subsidy-devouring state industry and tightening control over entrepreneurs who generate wealth and jobs. That prompts warnings that economic growth that sank to 2.2% over a year earlier in the first half of 2022 will suffer.

TECHNOLOGY: Xi promised to "build China's self-reliance and strength in science and technology." He gave no details, but earlier efforts to reduce reliance on the West and Japan by creating Chinese sources of renewable energy, electric vehicle, computer and other technologies have prompted complaints that Beijing violates its free-trade commitments by shielding its companies from competition. American officials worry Chinese competition might erode U.S. industrial leadership. China faces growing limits on access to Western technology, especially from the United States, which warns it might be used to make weapons. China is building its own chip industry, but analysts say it is generations behind global leaders.

SECURITY: Xi says "external and internal security" are the "bedrock of national rejuvenation." In a speech that used the word security 26 times, he said Beijing will "work faster" to modernize the party's military wing, the People's Liberation Army, and "enhance the military's strategic capabilities." China already has the world's second-highest military spending after the United States and is trying to extend its reach by developing ballistic missiles, submarines and other technologies. Xi refused to re-

nounce the use of force to unite Taiwan with the mainland.

FOREIGN RELATIONS: Beijing increasingly uses its economic muscle as the biggest trading partner for all of its neighbors as leverage in politics and security. China blocked imports of Australian wine, meat and other goods after its government called for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19. Beijing tried unsuccessfully to persuade 10 Pacific island governments to sign a security pact this year, but is making inroads with some. Police officers from the Solomon Islands are being trained in China. Beijing wants a "China-centered security system," said Callahan. "Beijing wants to be a world leader, and part of that, according to Beijing, is to be a leader in the hard politics of global security."

COVID-19: Xi gave no indication China's "zero-COVID" strategy might ease despite public frustration with its costs. While other countries have eased travel curbs, China is sticking to a strategy that has kept infection rates low but shut down major cities.

CLIMATE: Xi promised a "proactive and steady" approach to reducing climate-changing carbon emissions, but at the same time the ruling party is increasing coal production to avert a repeat of last year's power shortages and blackouts.

Koreas exchange warning shots amid allies' drills

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North and South Korea exchanged warning shots along their western sea border Monday, the same day Seoul and Washington kicked off four days of naval drills "in preparation for enemy provocations," the South's Ministry of National Defense said.

A North Korean merchant ship crossed the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea, also known as the West Sea, that morning, according to the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff. The South fired warning shots, to which North Korean forces responded by firing 10 artillery rounds into the water.

No injuries were reported by the South Korean military.

The North's state-run Korean Central News Agency claimed in a report Monday it had issued a "grave warning" after a South Korean vessel crossed the maritime border.

The Northern Limit line is a de facto maritime boundary separating the two Koreas since the 1950-53 Korean War. The area has been marked with clashes in the past, including a 2010 inci-

dent in which 46 South Korean navy sailors were killed after their warship was hit by what international investigators concluded was a North Korean torpedo. Pyongyang denied involvement in the ship's sinking.

The Sohae Joint Exercise, which involves military forces and law enforcement in the area, was planned prior to the incident, the Defense Ministry said.

Test scores show COVID setbacks for US kids

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The COVID-19 pandemic spared no state or region as it caused historic learning setbacks for America's children, erasing decades of academic progress and widening racial disparities, according to results of a national test that provide the sharpest look yet at the scale of the crisis.

Across the country, math scores saw their largest decreases ever. Reading scores dropped to 1992 levels. Nearly four in 10 eighth graders failed to grasp basic math concepts. Not a single state saw a notable improvement in their average test scores, with some simply treading water at best.

Those are the findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress — known as the “nation's report card” — which tested hundreds of thousands of fourth and eighth graders across the country this year. It was the first time the test had been given since 2019, and it's seen as the first nationally representative study of the pandemic's impact on learning.

“It is a serious wakeup call for us all,” Peggy Carr, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, a branch of the Education Department, said in an interview. “In NAEP, when we experience a 1- or 2-point decline, we're talking about it as a significant impact on a student's achievement. In math, we experienced an 8-point decline — historic for this assessment.”

Researchers usually think of a 10-point gain or drop as equivalent to roughly a year

of learning.

It's no surprise that children are behind. The pandemic upended every facet of life and left millions learning from home for months or more. The results released Monday reveal the depth of those setbacks, and the size of the challenge facing schools as they help students catch up.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said it's a sign that schools need to redouble their efforts, using billions of dollars that Congress gave schools to help students recover.

“Let me be very clear: these results are not acceptable,” Cardona said.

The NAEP test is typically given every two years. It was taken between January and March by a sample of students in every state, along with 26 of the nation's largest school districts. Scores had been stalling even before the pandemic, but the new results show decreases on a scale not seen before.

In both math and reading, students scored lower than those tested in 2019. But while reading scores dipped, math scores plummeted by the largest margins in the history of the NAEP test, which began in 1969.

Math scores were worst among eighth graders, with 38% earning scores deemed “below basic” — a cutoff that measures, for example, whether students can find the third angle of a triangle if they're given the other two.

That's worse than 2019, when 31% of

eighth graders scored below that level.

No part of the country was exempt. Every region saw test scores slide, and every state saw declines in at least one subject.

Several major districts saw test scores fall by more than 10 points. Cleveland saw the largest single drop, falling 16 points in fourth-grade reading, along with a 15-point decline in fourth-grade math. Baltimore and Tennessee's Shelby County also saw precipitous declines.

“This is more confirmation that the pandemic hit us really hard,” said Eric Gordon, chief executive for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. To help students recover, the school system has beefed up summer school and added after-school tutoring.

“I'm not concerned that they can't or won't recover,” Gordon said. “I'm concerned that the country won't stay focused on getting kids caught up.”

The results show a reversal of progress on math scores, which had made big gains since the 1990s. Reading, by contrast, had changed little in recent decades, so even this year's relatively small decreases put the averages back to where they were in 1992.

Most concerning, however, are the gaps between students.

Confirming what many had feared, racial inequities appear to have widened during the pandemic. In fourth grade, Black and Hispanic students saw bigger decreases than white students, widening gaps that have persisted for decades.

Cheney: Trump won't turn 1/6 trial into circus

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House committee investigating the Capitol riot won't give Donald Trump the chance to turn a possible live TV appearance of his subpoenaed testimony into a “circus” and “food fight” as lawmakers try to ensure he complies with their demands, the panel's vice chair said Sunday.

The committee is demanding Trump's testimony under oath next month as well as records relevant to its investigation. To avoid a complicated and protracted legal battle, Trump reportedly had told associates he might consider complying with the subpoena if he could answer questions during live testimony.

When asked if the committee would consider taking his testimony live, Rep. Liz

Cheney on Sunday did not directly respond. She said the committee would not allow Trump's testimony to turn into a “food fight” on TV — much as was seen, she said, in Trump's broadcast appearances such as one of his 2020 presidential debates — and she warned that the committee will take action if he does not comply with the subpoena.

“We are going to proceed in terms of the questioning of the former president under oath,” Cheney, R-Wyo., said on “Meet the Press” on NBC. “It may take multiple days, and it will be done with a level of rigor and discipline and seriousness that it deserves. We are not going to allow — he's not going to turn this into a circus.”

“We have many, many alternatives that we will consider if the former president de-

clines he is not going to comply with his legal obligation, a legal obligation every American citizen has to comply with a subpoena,” she said.

Her office made clear later that she and the Jan. 6 committee were not ruling out the possibility of live testimony. It did not indicate what form that might take to avoid the “food fight” or “circus” that Cheney said would not happen.

The subpoena, issued Friday, calls on Trump to hand over documents by Nov. 4 and provide testimony “on or about” Nov. 14.

It is unclear how Trump and his legal team will respond. He could comply or negotiate with the committee, announce he will defy the subpoena or ignore it altogether. He could go to court and try to stop it.

Sunak to replace Truss as UK leader

Associated Press

LONDON — Former Treasury chief Rishi Sunak won the race to be leader of the Conservative Party on Monday and will become Britain's next prime minister — the third this year.

The former Treasury chief will be Britain's first leader of color, and faces the task of stabilizing the party and country at a time of economic and political turbulence.

His only rival, Penny Mor-daunt, conceded and withdrew.

As leader of the governing party, he will take over as prime minister from Liz Truss, who quit last week after 45 tumultuous days in office.

Sunak will be the first British prime minister with South Asian roots and its first Hindu leader — a milestone for a country with an extensive colonial past, and one that is still contested.

Sunak had been the strong favorite as the governing Conservative Party sought stability at a time of immense economic challenges and after months of chaos that consumed the past two leaders.

Sunak's position strengthened after former leader Boris Johnson dropped out of the Conservative Party leadership contest.

Sunak lost out to Truss in the last Conservative election, but his party and the country now appear eager for a safe pair of hands to tackle soaring energy and food prices and a looming recession. The politician steered the economy through the coronavirus pandemic, winning praise for his financial support for laid-off workers and shuttered businesses.

He has promised "integrity, professionalism and accountability" if he forms a government

— a nod to the growing desire for a leader who can tackle the country's problems.

Earlier in the day, the 42-year-old was the only candidate with confirmed support from more than 100 lawmakers, the number needed to run in the election, with his backers claiming he has been endorsed by more than half the 357 Conservative lawmakers in Parliament. Mordaunt had hoped to reach the threshold by the time nominations closed — but she backed out.

That means Sunak is now the Conservative Party leader and will be asked by King Charles III to form a government.

Sunak, who was Treasury chief from 2020 until this summer, quit in July in protest at Johnson's leadership.

Johnson dramatically quit the race on Sunday night, ending a short-lived, high-profile attempt

to return to the prime minister's job he was ousted from little more than three months ago amid ethics scandals.

Johnson spent the weekend trying to gain support from fellow Conservative lawmakers after flying back from a Caribbean vacation. Late Sunday he said he had amassed the backing of 102 colleagues. But he was far behind Sunak in support, and said he had concluded that "you can't govern effectively unless you have a united party in Parliament."

The prospect of a return by Johnson had thrown the already divided Conservative Party into further turmoil. He led the party to a thumping election victory in 2019, but his premiership was clouded by scandals over money and ethics that eventually became too much for the party to bear.

Judge rules for Calif. baker over same-sex wedding cake

Associated Press

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. — A California judge has ruled in favor of a bakery owner who refused to make wedding cakes for a same-sex couple because it violated her Christian beliefs.

The state Department of Fair Housing and Employment had sued Tastries Bakery in Bakersfield, arguing owner Cathy Miller intentionally discriminated against the couple in violation of California's Unruh Civil Rights Act. Miller's attorneys argued her right to free speech and free expression of religion trumped the argument that she violated the anti-discrimination law. Kern County Superior Court Judge Eric Bradshaw ruled Friday that Miller acted lawfully while upholding her beliefs about what the Bible teaches regarding marriage.

The decision was welcomed as a First Amendment victory by

Miller and her pro-bono attorneys with the conservative Thomas More Society.

"I'm hoping that in our community we can grow together," Miller told the Bakersfield Californian after the ruling. "And we should understand that we shouldn't push any agenda against anyone else."

A spokesperson said the fair housing department was aware of the ruling but had not determined what to do next. The couple, Eileen and Mireya Rodriguez-Del Rio, said they expect an appeal.

The decision comes as a Colorado baker is challenging a ruling he violated that state's anti-discrimination law by refusing to make a cake celebrating a gender transition. That baker, Jack Phillips, separately won a partial U.S. Supreme Court victory after refusing on religious grounds to make a gay couple's wedding cake a decade ago.

Author Rushdie lost use of eye, hand after attack

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Salman Rushdie's agent says the author has lost sight in one eye and the use of a hand as he recovers from an attack from a man who rushed the stage at an August literary event in western New York, according to a published report.

Literary agent Andrew Wylie told the Spanish language newspaper El Pais in an article published Saturday that Rushdie suffered three serious wounds to his neck and 15 more wounds to his chest and torso in the attack that took away sight in an eye and left a hand incapacitated.

Rushdie, 75, spent years in hiding after Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a 1989 edict, a fatwa, calling for his death after publication of his novel "The Satanic Verses," which some Muslims consider

blasphemous. Over the past two decades, Rushdie has traveled freely.

Hadi Matar, 24, of Fairview, N.J., has been incarcerated after pleading not guilty to attempted murder and assault in the Aug. 12 attack on Rushdie as he was being introduced at the Chautauqua Institution, a ruraly located center 55 miles southwest of Buffalo that is known for its summertime lecture series.

After the attack, Rushdie was treated at a Pennsylvania hospital, where he was briefly put on a ventilator to recover from what Wylie told El Pais was a "brutal attack" that cut nerves to one arm.

Wylie told the newspaper he could not say whether Rushdie remained in a hospital or discuss his whereabouts.

"He's going to live ... That's the important thing," Wylie said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

230 pythons removed in annual contest

FL MIAMI — More than 230 pythons were removed from the Florida Everglades as part of an annual competition to eliminate the invasive species from the South Florida wetlands preserve.

Florida wildlife officials said that 1,000 hunters from 32 states and as far away as Canada and Latvia removed 231 Burmese pythons during the 10-day competition known as the Florida Python Challenge.

Matthew Concepcion won the \$10,000 top prize for removing 28 Burmese pythons. Another hunter, Dustin Crum, won a \$1,500 prize for removing the longest python, a snake that measured over 11 feet.

Since 2000, more than 17,000 wild Burmese pythons have been removed from Florida, where they are a destructive presence for native species, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Woman blinded in jail awarded \$4M in damages

CA SAN DIEGO — A woman who blinded herself in jail while under the influence of drugs as a deputy watched will receive \$4.35 million in a settlement with San Diego County, her lawyer said.

Tanya Suarez had sued the county, alleging jail staff failed to protect her from harming herself after she was arrested in 2019, The San Diego Union-Tribune reported.

When she was taken into custody at the Las Colinas women's jail, she was acting oddly and clawing at her eyes, according to

jail paperwork, and staff placed her in a cell by herself.

Suarez said in her lawsuit that a deputy was watching as she tried to remove her eyeball and failed to intervene after she succeeded.

Official: Track was to be closed before 2 killed

NJ CAMDEN — Federal authorities said two construction workers struck and killed by a train earlier this month on a bridge between New Jersey and Pennsylvania were on a track that was supposed to have been taken out of service for planned concrete work.

The National Transportation Safety Board said two contractor employees from JPC Group Inc. were hit by a westbound Port Authority Transit Corp. train Oct. 14 on the Benjamin Franklin Bridge in Camden.

A safety board spokesperson said there was a planned outage on the track at the time for concrete work. But she said "preliminary information indicates that at the time of the accident, track 2 had not been taken out of service when the contractors entered the bridge in a close clearance area."

The safety board said it expects to have a preliminary report on the accident in about 45 days.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration is also investigating.

School staff accidentally broadcast prayer meeting

TN CHATTANOOGA — Employees of Chattanooga's Bess T. Shepherd Elementary School blasted a prayer meeting over the school's exterior loudspeaker during the

night, although district officials said it was an accident.

An unidentified neighbor who could hear the praying from inside their home posted a video on the Reddit website that recorded about two minutes of a speaker praying over the intercom, the Chattanooga Times Free Press reported.

The video included a woman's voice repeatedly saying, "We need you in this school, God. We need you in every school, God."

"There were staff members inside the building praying who were unaware the external intercom system was enabled," district spokesperson Steve Doremus said in an email. "As soon as they were made aware, the intercoms were turned off."

Judge suspended for abusing power

LA NEW ORLEANS — The Louisiana Supreme Court suspended a Baton Rouge judge without pay for 180 days for abusing her power to hold people in contempt.

East Baton Rouge Parish Family Court Judge Charlene Charet Day, who has held the seat since 2011, violated the law when she issued a bench warrant that resulted in a teacher being arrested at the school where she works, the high court ruled.

The Louisiana Judiciary Commission, which investigates complaints of judicial conduct, recommended the six-month suspension in July, finding that Day violated rules of conduct and committed "willful misconduct" when she locked up litigants for contempt of court. Day was directed to pay the commission a \$6,260 fine.

Duck hunter finds human skeletal remains

IN GRIFFITH — Human skeletal remains were found by a waterfowl hunter in a northwest Indiana marsh.

The hunter was searching for a downed duck in Lake County when the hunter saw what appeared to be a bone protruding from clothing, Indiana's Department of Natural Resources said.

The remains later were confirmed to be human and were recovered by Indiana conservation officers and members of the Lake County sheriff's office dive team.

Griffith police and state conservation officers are investigating the case.

Forest service worker arrested for planned burn

OR SALEM — A U.S. Forest Service employee in Oregon was arrested by a county sheriff after a planned burn in a national forest spread onto private land.

Rick Snodgrass, the U.S. Forest Service "burn boss," was arrested and transported to the Grant County Jail, where he was conditionally released, District Attorney Jim Carpenter said in a statement.

Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley said in a statement that the controlled burn escaped U.S. Forest Service lands and burned about 20 acres of land belonging to Holiday Ranches.

McKinley's initial investigation led the sheriff to believe he had probable cause to arrest Snodgrass, who supervised the planned burn, for reckless burning, Carpenter said.

— From wire reports



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Astros sweep Yankees in ALCS, advance to World Series again

Associated Press

NEW YORK — In recent years, it has almost become an October ritual: Astros top Yankees. Astros take pennant.

Yordan Alvarez and Alex Bregman delivered big hits and Houston advanced to the World Series again, finishing a four-game sweep in the AL Championship Series with a 6-5 victory Sunday night aided by another defensive gaffe from New York.

Taking advantage of a costly error by second baseman Gleyber Torres to produce the go-ahead rally in the seventh inning, the Astros won their second consecutive pennant and fourth in six years.

Rookie shortstop Jeremy Peña hit a three-run homer off Yankees starter Nestor Cortes to help the AL West champs overcome an early 3-0 deficit. Peña was picked as the ALCS MVP.

“It’s surreal. You dream about this stuff when you’re a kid,” he said.

“We’re a step away from the ultimate goal.”

Perfect in the playoffs, Houston opens the World Series at home Friday night against

Bryce Harper and the wild-card Philadelphia Phillies, who beat San Diego to close out the best-of-seven NLCS in five games.

It was the first time both pennants were decided on the same day since 1992.

After losing to Atlanta in last year’s World Series, Houston is 7-0 this postseason, earning the fifth pennant in franchise history and another chance at its second championship.

The team’s 2017 title was tainted by a cheating scandal.

“A lot has been said but there’s not a lot to say anymore, man. We keep coming here. We keep facing the best of the best and we keep winning,” pitcher Lance McCullers Jr. said. “When everything happened a few years ago, we knew the one thing that we could do is we could win and we could win and win a lot. I understand people are still not going to like us. They’re going to boo us, but at some point you have to respect what we’re doing.”

New York remained without a World Series appearance for 13 years as Aaron Judge’s sensational season ended with a whim-

per. After setting an AL record with 62 home runs, the star slugger can become a free agent next month.

After racing to a 61-23 record by early July, AL East champion New York was no match for the Astros in October.

Houston went 9-2 overall against the Yankees this year and has eliminated them from the playoffs four times in the past eight seasons, including in the ALCS in 2017 and 2019.

New York has lost in its past five trips to the ALCS and hasn’t claimed a pennant since winning its record 27th World Series championship in 2009.

Harrison Bader had three hits and scored three times for New York. He connected off winning pitcher Hector Neris for his fifth home run of the playoffs, giving the Yankees a 5-4 lead in the sixth.

They couldn’t hold it.

Peña hit what should have been an inning-ending double-play ball to Torres in the seventh. But his flip to second base went wide of shortstop Isiah Kiner-Falefa, and the Astros stayed alive with two runners on.

Harper’s homer powers Phillies into Fall Classic

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Bryce Harper broke up the Phillies postseason party on the mound and directed his team to where the true revelry was about to begin for the National League champs.

“C’mon, let’s go inside! Let’s go!” he ordered.

Harper walked toward the dugout and raised his arms in jubilation to the soundtrack of Phillies fans screaming “MV3! MV3! “The Phillies scrambled inside for the Broad Street Bubbly that awaited in the clubhouse.

Harper made the scene possible because he rose to the moment Philly demanded of him from the time he signed the richest free-agent deal in baseball history. Harper has made the monumental feat of hitting a baseball look so easy in the postseason and with the NL pennant at stake, he delivered with the defining moment of his four-year Philadelphia career.

Harper slugged his fifth homer of the postseason, a two-run blast in the eighth inning that turned Citizens Bank Park into a madhouse, and the \$330 million slugger powered the Phillies past the San Diego Padres 4-3 on Sunday and into the World Series for the first the time since 2009.

One swing. One opposite-field shot. One game-winning homer that about seemed destined from the moment he came to the plate in the eighth with the Phillies and their fans beckoning Bryce to deliver in the clutch one more time.

“I hit the ball, and I just looked at my dugout and kind of it’s for all of them,” Harper said. “It’s for this whole team. It’s for this whole organization.”

Rhys Hoskins also hit a two-run homer in Game 5 to spark Philadelphia’s improbable run to the pennant and a shot at its first championship since 2008.

The Phillies will open the World Series on Friday night at Houston. The Astros com-

pleted a sweep of the Yankees on Sunday night in New York.

Harper, who turned 30 last week, was named NLCS MVP. He is batting 439 (18-for-41) with six doubles, five homers, 11 RBIs and 10 runs scored in 11 postseason games. He has hit in 10 straight and has reached base in 11 straight.

Philadelphia trailed 3-2 when J.T. Realmuto began the eighth with a single off reliever Robert Suarez. Harper then lined a 2-2, 98 mph sinker into the left-field seats as another sellout crowd of 45,485 shook the stadium.

Even after Harper’s homer, it wasn’t an easy ending.

Phillies reliever David Robertson was pulled after two one-out walks in the ninth. Ranger Suárez made his first relief appearance of the season and retired Trent Grisham on a bunt and got Austin Nola — brother of Phillies ace Aaron Nola — on a routine fly to finish it for a huge save.

Hall injures knee after TD in Jets' win

Associated Press

DENVER — The New York Jets didn't feel much like celebrating their 16-9 escape of the punchless Denver Broncos on Sunday.

The Jets lost Breece Hall to a left knee injury in the second quarter and coach Robert Saleh said the initial diagnosis is an ACL tear that would end the running back's rookie sensational season.

"We'll see tomorrow," Saleh said. "I'm going to stay as optimistic as I can, but yeah, he's a heck of a football player."

The Jets (5-2) lost Hall when he was tackled near their sideline by Patrick Surtain II and Jonas Griffith after a short run in the second quarter. He was helped off the field and carted to the locker room.

Hall finished with 72 yards on four carries, including the Jets' only touchdown, a 62-yard masterpiece in which he hit a top speed of 21.87 mph according to NextGen Stats, the fastest by a ballcarrier this season.

Rookie cornerback Sauce Gardner helped secure the surprising Jets' fourth straight victory by breaking up Brett Rypien's fourth-down pass into the end zone to Courtland Sutton with just under 2 minutes remaining. Rypien's final heave in the closing moments fell woefully short of KJ Hamler's grasp at the goal line.

Denver quarterback Russell Wilson sat this one out with a pulled hamstring, missing a game for just the fourth time in his 11-year career.

The Jets are off to their best start since 2010, have their first four-game winning streak since 2015 and already surpassed their win total from last year when they went 4-13. New York also improved to 4-0 on the road.

Panthers 21, Buccaneers 3: Tom Brady and Tampa Bay fell below .500 with a stunning loss to host Carolina, which won its second game of the season despite playing with a third-string quarterback and interim head coach.

Brady was 32-for-49 passing for 290 yards for the Bucs (3-4). One of those incompletions came when a wide-open Mike Evans dropped what would have been a 64-yard TD on the third play of the game.

P.J. Walker threw for 177 yards and two touchdowns for Carolina (2-5) in place of injured Baker Mayfield and Sam Darnold. The Panthers won for the first time under interim coach Steve Wilks, who replaced Matt Rhule when he was fired Oct. 10.

Commanders 23, Packers 21: Aaron

Rodgers and the Green Bay offense sputtered and host Washington handed the Packers their third straight loss.

Taylor Heinicke, making his first start of the season in place of injured Carson Wentz, threw for two TDs — including a perfect 37-yard pass to Terry McLaurin — and was 20-for-33 for 200 yards.

Dolphins 16, Steelers 10: Tua Tagovailoa got Miami off to a fast start in his return from a concussion, and the Dolphins held on throughout a scoreless second half to beat visiting Pittsburgh.

The Dolphins (4-3) snapped a three-game skid that began on Sept. 29, when Tagovailoa was concussed in a loss at Cincinnati.

Tagovailoa finished 21-for-35 for 261 yards and an 8-yard touchdown pass to Raheem Mostert on the Dolphins' opening drive. Miami added two field goals by Jason Sanders to lead 13-.

Chiefs 44, 49ers 23: Patrick Mahomes threw for 423 yards and three touchdowns as visiting Kansas City rallied from a double-digit deficit to beat San Francisco.

Mahomes got off to a rough start in this Super Bowl rematch with his early interception putting Kansas City (5-2) in a 10-0 hole. He led the Chiefs to touchdowns on six of the next seven drives.

Giants 23, Jaguars 17: Two New York defenders tackled Christian Kirk inside the 1-yard line as time expired to preserve the win over host Jacksonville.

The Giants matched their best start since 2008. Quarterback Daniel Jones ran for a career-high 107 yards and a touchdown, turning to his legs to carry the Giants (6-1) down the stretch.

Jacksonville had a final shot and reached the New York 1-yard on Trevor Lawrence's pass to Kirk. But Julian Love and Xavier McKinney stopped Kirk short of the goal line, even as Jaguars players tried pushing the pile into the end zone.

Ravens 23, Browns 20: Gus Edwards ran for two touchdowns in his first game back from a major knee injury, and host Baltimore avoided another fourth-quarter collapse thanks to a couple huge Cleveland penalties.

Edwards missed all of last season and the first six games of this one, but he rushed for 66 yards scored on runs of 7 and 1. Baltimore remained tied with Cincinnati atop the AFC North.

The Ravens' Lamar Jackson was sacked three times and threw for only 120 yards.

Cowboys 24, Lions 6: Ezekiel Elliott ran

for two 1-yard touchdowns and Dak Prescott threw for a score in his return from injury while host Dallas leaned on its defense to beat Detroit.

The Cowboys (5-2) recovered Jamaal Williams' fumble inside their 1 with a four-point lead early in the fourth quarter. Jared Goff was responsible for four other Detroit turnovers — he threw two interceptions and lost two fumbles.

Seahawks 37, Chargers 23: Rookie Kenneth Walker III rushed for 168 yards and two touchdowns, Marquise Goodwin caught two scores, and visiting Seattle jumped out to a 17-point first-quarter lead and beat Los Angeles.

Geno Smith completed 20 of 27 passes for 210 yards and two touchdowns, his fifth multi-TD game of the season.

It was the third straight week the Chargers (4-3) fell behind by double digits in the first quarter. They rallied against Cleveland and Denver, but were unable to pull it off this time and had a three-game winning streak snapped.

Titans 19, Colts 10: Andrew Adams returned an interception 76 yards for the first pick-6 of his career, and host Tennessee never trailed while completing its second straight sweep of AFC South rival Indianapolis.

The reigning two-time division champion Titans (4-2) won their fourth straight overall, and they've now beaten the Colts five straight times.

Derrick Henry helped seal the win with his third straight 100-yard rushing game, finishing with a season-high 128 on 30 carries.

Bengals 35, Falcons 17: Joe Burrow passed for 345 yards and three touchdowns in the first half as host Cincinnati scored on its first four possessions to roll past Atlanta.

The Bengals quarterback played his best game of the season, finishing 34-for-42 for 481 yards and three touchdowns and running for a 1-yard score.

Receivers Ja'Marr Chase and Tyler Boyd both eclipsed the 100-yard mark in the first half.

Raiders 38, Texans 20: Josh Jacobs rushed for 143 yards and three second-half TDs as host Las Vegas ran away from Houston.

In a battle of one-win teams coming off byes, the Raiders (2-4) dominated the Texans (1-4-1) after halftime, outscoring them 28-10 behind 227 yards of offense, including 98 from Jacobs on the ground.

Lillard, Blazers keep Lakers winless

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Damian Lillard scored 41 points, Jerami Grant made a driving lay-up with three seconds left, and the unbeaten Portland Trail Blazers kept the Los Angeles Lakers winless under new coach Darvin Ham with a 106-104 victory Sunday.

Portland trailed 102-95 with 1:56 to play, but ended the game on an 11-2 run and won it when LeBron James missed a 17-footer at the buzzer.

Lillard carried the Blazers for long stretches, scoring 12 points in the final 5:06 before Grant finished it. After missing the final 47 games last season with injuries, Lillard has scored 41 points in Portland's second and third games of the new season. He also continued his longtime domination of the Lakers, improving his career average of 28 points per game.

Patrick Beverley, James and Russell Westbrook all missed shots for LA down the stretch. After Anfernee Simons hit a leaning layup over Anthony Davis with 36 seconds left to trim Portland's deficit to 102-101, Westbrook shot and missed a 15-footer with 27 seconds to play and about 16 seconds left on the shot clock, capping his 4-for-15 day from the field.

Jazz 122, Pelicans 121 (OT): Lauri Markkanen capped a 31-point performance

with clutch free throws late in overtime, Kelly Olynyk hit a go-ahead, driving scoop with 3 seconds to go in the extra period, and overhauled Utah beat host New Orleans to remain unbeaten through three games under new coach Will Hardy.

Utah had to regroup after losing a 17-point lead in the fourth quarter and trailing 110-107 when CJ McCollum hit a three-pointer in the final minute of regulation. But Jordan Clarkson hit a tying three to force overtime.

Suns 112, Clippers 95: Devin Booker scored 35 points, Chris Paul became the third player in NBA history to reach 11,000 assists, and visiting Phoenix beat Los Angeles.

The Suns didn't waste any time getting started on the blowout. They raced to an 11-0 lead from the opening tip and led by 20 points at halftime and again in the third.

Marcus Morris scored 22 points, John Wall added 17 points and Paul George had 16 points in the Clippers' home opener after winning their first two games on the road.

Cavaliers 117, Wizards 107 (OT): Donovan Mitchell scored 37 points in his home debut and atoned for critical mistakes in the final minute of regulation with two big plays in overtime, leading Cleveland over Washington.

Mitchell had a three-point play and steal in the final 1:43 of OT as the Cavs thrilled a sellout crowd that got its first look at the three-time All-Star since he came over from Utah in a blockbuster offseason trade.

Bradley Beal scored 27 points and Kristaps Porzingis 18 for the Wizards.

Warriors 130, Kings 125: Stephen Curry scored 28 of his 33 points during an 89-point first half, and host Golden State beat former top assistant Mike Brown and Sacramento.

Curry, who recorded his third straight 30-point performance to start the season, scored 21 in the second quarter with five three-pointers. The reigning NBA Finals MVP helped Golden State to its third-most points in any half in franchise history and second-most in a first half.

Hornets 126, Hawks 109: Kelly Oubre Jr. scored 24 points, Nick Richards added a career-high 20 points and grabbed 11 rebounds in a reserve role, and visiting Charlotte coasted past Atlanta.

Trae Young scored 28 points and Dejounte Murray had 19 for Atlanta.

Timberwolves 116, Thunder 106: Anthony Edwards scored 30 points as visiting Minnesota beat Oklahoma City.

Rudy Gobert had 15 points and 15 rebounds, and Karl-Anthony Towns added 15 points, eight rebounds and five assists.

Larson holds off Chastain for Cup win at Homestead

Associated Press

HOMESTEAD, Fla. — Kyle Larson found his way back into NASCAR's headlines. This time, for a much more pleasant reason.

Larson held off Ross Chastain to cap a dominant showing at Homestead-Miami Speedway on Sunday, after leading 199 of the 267 laps over the 1½ mile course.

It was Larson's third win of the season, coming two weeks after the reigning Cup champion was eliminated from the playoffs — and a week after he was intentionally spun by Bubba Wallace in an act of retaliation at Las Vegas.

On Sunday, the suspended

Wallace was watching. Larson, meanwhile, was winning.

"Definitely the best run we've had all year long," Larson said.

AJ Allmendinger was third and Austin Dillon fourth, as Chevrolets took the top four spots.

Even though Larson can't win the title, his Hendrick Motorsports team still can — now having clinched a spot in the field that will decide the owners' championship in Phoenix.

"We're still technically not out of it," Larson said. "I can't win the championship, but it means more to me to win it as a team. We're going to go to Phoenix and try to get another championship."

Blackhawks rally for 3rd straight win

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Jason Dickinson and Tyler Johnson scored 13 seconds apart late in the third period, and the Chicago Blackhawks beat the Seattle Kraken 5-4 on Sunday for their third straight win.

Max Domi and Jujhar Khaira also scored for Chicago (3-2-0), which trailed 2-0 midway through the first period and 4-3 going into the third. The Blackhawks erased a two-goal deficit in their previous two victories.

Johnson tied it at 4 with his second goal of the game with 7:03 left. He beat Martin Jones from the slot after taking a feed from Jonathan Toews.

Panthers 3, Islanders 2:

Ryan Lomberg scored early in the third period and host Florida held on to beat New York.

Sharks 3, Flyers 0: Eric Karlsson and Steven Lorentz scored in the second period, James Reimer stopped 31 shots for his 26th career shutout, and visiting San Jose got its second win in three games.

Blue Jackets 5, Rangers 1: Defensemen Zach Werenski and Andrew Peeke scored, and Daniil Tarasov made 30 saves for his first NHL win as visiting Columbus beat New York.

Red Wings 5, Ducks 1: Dominik Kubalik had a goal and two assists as host Detroit won.