

Strikes by Hamas hit Gaza; war declared

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli government formally declared war Sunday and gave the green light for “significant military steps” to retaliate against Hamas for its surprise attack from the Gaza Strip, portending greater fighting ahead as the toll from the conflict passed 900 dead and thousands wounded on both sides.

More than 24 hours after Hamas launched its unprecedented incursion out of Gaza, Israeli forces were still trying to crush the last groups of militant fighters holed up in several towns of southern Israel. At least 600 people have reportedly been killed in Israel — a staggering toll on a scale the country has not experienced in decades — and more than 300 have been killed in Gaza as Israeli airstrikes pound the territory.

Authorities were still trying to determine how many civilians and soldiers were seized by Hamas fighters during the mayhem and taken back to Gaza. From videos and witnesses, the captives are known to include women, children, and the elderly.

As many as 1,000 Hamas fighters were involved in the assault, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on ABC’s “This Week”

— a high figure that underscored the extent of planning by the militant group ruling Gaza. The gunmen rampaged for hours, firing on civilians in towns, along highways and at a techno music festival being held in the desert near Gaza.

Civilians on both sides were already paying a high price.

A line of Israelis snaked outside a central Israel police station to supply DNA samples and other means that could help identify missing family members. Israeli TV news aired a stream of accounts from relatives of captive or missing Israelis who wept and begged for assistance.

In Gaza, the tiny enclave of 2.3 million people sealed off by an Israeli-Egyptian blockade for 16 years since the Hamas takeover, residents feared an intensified onslaught. Israeli strikes flattened a number of residential buildings. More than 20,000 people who fled their homes crowded into schools run by the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, UNWRA, the agency said.

Several Israeli media outlets, citing rescue service officials, said at least 600 people have been killed in Israel, including 44 soldiers. The Gaza Health Ministry said 313

people, including 20 children, were killed in the territory. Some 2,000 people have been wounded on each side. An Israeli official said security forces have killed 400 militants and captured dozens more.

An exchange of fire in northern Israel with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah raised fears of a spread of the conflict. Hezbollah fired dozens of rockets and shells Sunday at three Israeli positions in a disputed area along the border, and the Israeli military fired back using armed drones.

The declaration of war announced by Israel’s Security Cabinet was largely symbolic, said Yohanan Plesner, the head of the Israel Democracy Institute, a local think tank. But it “demonstrates that the government thinks we are entering a more lengthy, intense and significant period of war.”

Israel has carried out major military campaigns over the past four decades in Lebanon and Gaza that it portrayed as wars, but without a formal declaration.

The Security Cabinet also approved “significant military steps.” The steps were not defined, but the declaration appears to give the military and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a wide mandate.

Earthquakes kill thousands of people in Afghanistan

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — Men dug through rubble with their bare hands and shovels in western Afghanistan on Sunday in desperate attempts to pull victims from the wreckage left by powerful earthquakes that killed at least 2,000 people.

Entire villages were flattened, bodies were trapped under collapsed houses and locals waited for help without even shovels to dig out bodies.

Living and dead, victims were trapped under rubble, their faces grey with dust.

“Most people were shocked ... some couldn’t even talk. But there were others who couldn’t

stop crying and shouting,” photographer Omid Haqjoo, who visited four villages Sunday, told The Associated Press by phone from Afghanistan’s fourth largest city, Herat.

Saturday’s magnitude 6.3 earthquake hit a densely populated area near Herat. It was followed by strong aftershocks.

A Taliban government spokesman on Sunday provided the toll that, if confirmed, would make it one of the deadliest earthquakes to strike the country in two decades.

An earthquake that hit eastern Afghanistan in June 2022, striking a rugged, mountainous region, flattened stone and

mud-brick homes and killed at least 1,000 people.

People in Herat freed a baby girl from a collapsed building after she was buried up to her neck in debris. A hand cradled the baby’s torso as rescuers eased the child out of the ground. Rescuers said it was the baby’s mother.

It was not clear if the mother survived. The video was shared online and verified by The Associated Press.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake’s epicenter was about 25 miles northwest of Herat. It was followed by three very strong aftershocks, measuring magnitude 6.3, 5.9 and

5.5, as well as lesser shocks.

Abdul Wahid Rayan, a spokesman at the Ministry of Information and Culture, said Sunday the death toll is higher than originally reported. Villages have been destroyed, and hundreds of civilians are buried under the debris, he said while calling for urgent help.

“Besides the 2,060 dead, 1,240 people are injured and 1,320 houses are completely destroyed,” said Rayan.

At least a dozen teams have been scrambled to help with rescue efforts, including from the military as well as nonprofit organizations like the Red Crescent.

Group sues Naval Academy over factoring race into admissions

The Washington Post

A group that recently sued to block the consideration of race in admissions to West Point filed a similar lawsuit Thursday against the U.S. Naval Academy.

The latest lawsuit from Students for Fair Admissions was filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland. It seeks to prevent the Naval Academy, in Annapolis, Md., from taking race into account in the selection of an entering class of midshipmen.

Students for Fair Admissions sued the U.S. Military Academy, in West Point, N.Y., on Sept. 19. Both suits are seeking to build on the group's victory at the Supreme Court in June.

The high court delivered a landmark opinion striking down race-conscious admissions pro-

grams at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a ruling that affects colleges and universities throughout the country.

But a footnote in the ruling left open the question of race in admissions to the military service academies.

It stated that no military academies were a party to the lawsuits against Harvard and UNC and that courts had not addressed "the propriety of race-based admissions systems in that context."

Leaders at West Point, Annapolis and the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., say that their admissions process is holistic and takes many factors into account, especially academic credentials and leadership potential.

They also indicated at a con-

gressional hearing in July that the Defense Department is reviewing the Supreme Court decision and assessing any potential impact.

Last fall, U.S. Solicitor General Elizabeth B. Prelogar, representing the Biden administration in the Harvard and UNC cases, argued to the Supreme Court that racial and ethnic diversity is crucial for military readiness.

It is "a critical national security imperative to attain diversity within the officer corps," she said at the time. "And, at present, it's not possible to achieve that diversity without race-conscious admissions, including at the nation's service academies."

The Naval Academy said Thursday it does not comment on pending litigation.

Submersibles used in NATO drill focusing on sabotage

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Unmanned underwater vehicles that were used in recent experimentation with an array of new tactics could transform how NATO allies defend critical infrastructure from attack.

Dynamic Messenger, which was held off the coast of Portugal and concluded late last month, was the first NATO exercise to have a specific focus on protecting critical undersea infrastructure, the alliance's Maritime Command said in a statement Wednesday. For NATO, defending infrastructure such as gas pipelines has become a high priority in light of the sabotage last year of Nord Stream 1, a Baltic Sea pipeline that previously delivered natural gas from Russia to Germany.

Russia shut off the flow of gas through Nord Stream 1 in retaliation for sanctions imposed by the West over Kremlin forces' invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The statement did not say which countries participated in the exercise or how many service members were involved.

Allies also have raised alarms about Russia's ability to target undersea cables that are responsible for transmitting internet traffic around the world and carrying trillions of dollars in financial transactions on a daily basis.

"There are heightened concerns that Russia may target undersea cables and other critical infrastructure in an effort to disrupt Western life, to gain leverage against those nations that are providing security to Ukraine," NATO's intelligence chief, David Cattler, told reporters.

Senator says he will block promotions over housing at Fort Leonard Wood

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri said Thursday that he will put a hold on Army civilian nominations that require Senate approval until the service earmarks \$41 million for new housing at Fort Leonard Wood.

Hawley informed Army Secretary Christine Wormuth of his intentions in a letter, writing he was left with no other choice after years of pressing the Army to replace aging homes at the 83-year-old garrison in Missouri's Ozark Mountain region.

"The Army's inability to meet its own deadlines is unacceptable, and I will wait no longer," Hawley wrote. "The soldiers and families at Fort Leonard Wood deserve better, and it is your responsibility to deliver for them."

Hawley's hold would add Army civilians to the 300-plus senior military officer nominees being

blocked from promotion by Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala. Tuberville is preventing the Senate from proceeding with unanimous confirmation votes on groups of nominees due to the Pentagon's abortion access policies.

The Senate last month bypassed Tuberville's blockade by confirming top nominees for the Joint Chiefs of Staff one by one.

Hawley said he is instituting his hold because Army leaders did not keep their promises to spend \$41.4 million on improving Fort Leonard Wood housing in fiscal 2023, which ended Sept. 30. The Army has identified 1,142 family homes at the post that require repair, Hawley said.

He accused Wormuth of offering her commitment to the expenditure months ago and failing to produce a housing replacement plan.

Hawley said the Army told his office no funds will be available for the project until Dec. 15 at the earliest.

Sergeant's rape conviction is set aside

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military's top appeals court has set aside the conviction of an Army sergeant for raping his foreign wife after ruling that the government deprived him of a fair trial by refusing to provide the defense with her immigration records.

Sgt. Ashraf Warda was convicted in October 2020 of raping his wife, whom he had married in Jordan and who has been living in the United States since 2017.

Warda's brother testified that she threatened unspecified consequences after he refused to help get her U.S. citizenship and pay a promised \$13,000 to \$15,000 dowry after Warda said he wanted a divorce.

Warda's trial attorney asked the judge to dismiss the charges or suspend the proceedings until immigration officials handed

over her records.

In a Sept. 29 decision, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces overruled a July 2022 ruling by the Army's appellate court upholding Warda's conviction.

The higher court said in a 4-1 ruling that the trial judge had abused his discretion by refusing to stop the proceedings until the records were in hand.

The case was returned to the Judge Advocate General of the Army, who can retry the defendant, ask the appellate court to revisit its decision, appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court or drop the charges, according to Warda's appeals attorney, William Cassara.

"We're obviously elated," Cassara said Thursday. "We believe Sgt. Warda was denied a fair trial. We are grateful the court of appeals agreed with us."

Cassara said it was unclear

what option the Army would take. In the meantime, Warda, who was assigned to the 10th Brigade Support Battalion, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, N.Y., remains in prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

In denying the request to halt the trial, the court-martial judge at Fort Drum noted that "considerable efforts" were made to obtain the wife's records, but immigration officials refused the request, citing privacy issues.

In addition to the prison sentence, Warda, who is an Egyptian-born Muslim, received a reduction to E-1, forfeiture of all pay and allowances and a dishonorable discharge. He was acquitted of sexual assault and of communicating a threat.

The case introduced the concept of a "talaq," a Muslim verbal declaration of divorce that be-

comes valid after a husband delivers it to his wife three times.

According to court records, Warda met his wife on Facebook in 2012 and married her three years later in her native Jordan. She joined him in New York in May 2017 after obtaining her green card.

By September of that year, the marriage had dissolved after he declared the third and final talaq. When her demand for dowry money and help with citizenship was denied, she said, "You will see what I am going to do, and you will regret it," Warda's brother testified.

The woman made the rape allegation the following month, and the divorce was finalized in April 2018, court documents said. Her green card expired in 2019, but she remained in the United States, according to court documents.

Ex-soldier is charged with trying to give info to China

By GARY A. WARNER
Stars and Stripes

A former Army sergeant last assigned at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., with a military intelligence unit with access to top secret documents was arrested Friday on charges of attempting to deliver national defense information to China, the U.S. Justice Department announced.

Joseph Daniel Schmidt, 29, was taken into custody by federal agents at San Francisco International Airport as he arrived on a commercial flight from Hong Kong.

The arrest is based on an indictment issued Oct. 3 by a federal grand jury in Seattle. It charges two felonies: Attempting to deliver national defense information and retention of national defense information. Each charge carries a punishment of up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Schmidt was stationed at Le-

wis-McChord from January 2015 to January 2020, according to FBI reports. His primary assignment was the 109th Military Intelligence Battalion. In his role, Schmidt had access to "secret" and "top secret" information.

After Schmidt's separation from the military in early 2020, he allegedly tried to contact the Chinese Consulate in Turkey, according to the FBI report. He later tried to contact Chinese security services directly via email and offered national defense information to them.

The FBI investigation said Schmidt retained a device that allows for access to secure military computer networks and offered the device to the Chinese to gain access to internal Defense Department networks.

Schmidt remained in China, primarily Hong Kong, until Friday when he flew to San Francisco.

Austin, Brown to help size up Ukraine troops' needs

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Air Force Gen. CQ Brown will travel to Europe this week to size up what weapons Ukrainian troops need now to fight Russian forces as Pentagon funds used to supply Ukraine military aid begin to run dry.

Austin and Brown, who was confirmed recently as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will travel to Belgium for a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group — a coalition of about 50 allied countries that meet regularly to assess what the embattled country needs most to drive the Russians from its territory.

"I know the questions come up: 'How long is [existing aid] going to last?'" Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's top spokesman, said Thursday.

"It is all relative to what Ukraine's most urgent security assistance needs are."

"We have enough funding to last for a bit longer," he added.

The contact group meeting Wednesday will be the first since Congress passed a 45-day temporary government funding bill that did not include new military aid for Ukraine. The funding was passed last weekend to avoid a government shutdown, but aid was stripped from the deal so enough Republicans would vote for it.

President Joe Biden and most congressional lawmakers agree that it's important to keep aid to Ukraine flowing, but a group of far-right Republicans in the House are opposed to sending more.

Biden said Wednesday that he expects more aid to come when Congress finally authorizes a full budget for 2024.

Russia to set up naval base in Georgian region

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

News that Russia will establish a permanent naval base in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia is likely further proof that Ukraine is effectively winning the battle of the Black Sea off its coast, experts say.

On Thursday, Abkhazia's leader, Aslan Bzhania, said his government had signed an agreement with Moscow to set up a base in the seaside Ochamchira district "in the near future."

It's part of wider efforts to increase the defense capabilities of both sides, Bzhania told Russian newspaper *Izvestia*.

The news follows repeated attacks by Ukraine on Russia's Black Sea Fleet, based in Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow illegally annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

Recent satellite imagery obtained by the Institute for the Study of War indicates Russia has been relocating some of its ships from Sevastopol to the Russia port city of Novorossiysk, near Crimea's eastern coast.

The Washington, D.C.-based research group described the move as a likely effort to avoid further Ukrainian strikes.

Ochamchira is about 300 miles southeast of Novorossiysk on the Black Sea. Russia already has a coast guard station in the district and had discussed opening a naval base there for years.

"Moscow's decision to enlarge a naval facility at Ochamchira may best be viewed as a Russian retreat, reflecting a realization that never again will Sevastopol be safe anchorage for Russia's Black Sea Fleet," said William Courtney, a former U.S. ambassador to Georgia and senior fellow at the Rand Corp.

As of Friday afternoon, the Kremlin had not commented on the base.

If the reports are true, the Russian actions would represent "a gross violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia," the country's Foreign Affairs Ministry said in a statement Thursday.

Russia recognized Abkhazia and another breakaway region, South Ossetia, as independent states in 2008 after a five-day war

with Georgia in which Russian troops supported the separatists.

Russia has kept troops in both regions since, and Georgia has continually accused Moscow of illegally occupying them.

At a 2008 summit, NATO promised to one day allow Georgia to join the alliance. The small country sent troops to support U.S.-led coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq and regularly hosts a military exercise for NATO members.

But the government in Tbilisi has taken an increasingly anti-Western stance in recent months, describing NATO expansion as the main cause of Russia's war in Ukraine, refusing to supply weapons to Kyiv and refusing to sanction Moscow over the February 2022 invasion.

Russia may therefore assume that the United States and its allies are less likely to come to Georgia's defense in the event of sharper Russian pressure, Courtney said.

"Georgians will now have to decide how they wish to balance relations between Russia, which threatens their country, and the West, which does not," Courtney said.

2 sailors get prison in overdose death of 3rd

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Two sailors pleaded guilty to providing a lethal dose of fentanyl to a fellow sailor at Naval Station Great Lakes, Ill., and were sentenced to more than two years in prison, according to the Navy.

Seaman Brandon R. Ledesma pleaded guilty last month to negligent homicide, obstruction of justice and distributing fentanyl to another sailor who died of an overdose Nov. 6, 2021, the Navy said in a statement and court documents. The name of

the victim was redacted in the charge sheet for Ledesma, who was sentenced to 28 months in the brig, reduction in rank to E-1 and a dishonorable discharge.

Seaman Recruit Caleb J. Taper pleaded guilty in a Sept. 15 court-martial to accessory after the fact, breaking restrictions, failure to obey an order, nine counts of possession of illegal drugs and larceny, according to the Navy. He was sentenced to 37 months in the brig, total forfeiture of pay and dishonorable discharge.

Taper's conviction included possession of fentanyl, cocaine and delta-9, according to court records. His larceny conviction stemmed from stealing more than \$150 worth of video games and a teeth-whitening pen from an on-base store Feb. 8.

At the time of the 2021 death, Ledesma and Taper were assigned to Naval Station Great Lakes and awaiting orders to attend Naval Submarine School in Groton, Conn., according to Katie Hewett, spokeswoman for Navy Region Mid-Atlantic. The three sailors were in train-

ing together and lived in the same barracks building.

A brief narrative included in court documents stated Ledesma and Taper provided the victim with fentanyl, and the sailor collapsed after ingesting it. Neither sailor called emergency services. Instead, they moved the third sailor from one location on the base to a bed within the same building because they feared criminal charges, according to the charge sheets.

The location where the incident occurred was redacted from the charge sheets.

Powerball jackpot at \$1.55B as lottery losing streak continues

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — The Powerball jackpot climbed to an estimated \$1.55 billion after no one matched the game's six numbers Saturday and won the giant prize.

The numbers drawn Saturday night were: 47, 54, 57, 60, 65 and red Power-

ball 19.

The \$1.55 billion prize is for a sole winner paid through an annuity, with annual checks over 30 years. Most jackpot winners opt for cash, which for the next drawing Monday night would be an estimated \$679.8 million.

The jackpot is now the world's fourth-

largest lottery prize after rolling over for 34 consecutive drawings, since the last time someone won the top prize on July 19. That streak trails the record of 41 draws set in 2021 and 2022.

The scarcity of Powerball jackpot winners reflects the game's daunting odds of 1 in 292.2 million.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Biden's dog no longer at White House after bites

DC WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden's dog, Commander, is "not presently on the White House campus" following a series of biting incidents involving White House staff and U.S. Secret Service officers, a spokesperson for first lady Jill Biden said last week.

Elizabeth Alexander, the first lady's communications director, said Biden and his wife care deeply about the safety of White House staff and those who protect them.

Alexander did not say where the dog was sent. The 2-year-old German shepherd was last seen Saturday on an upper balcony of the White House.

Commander had been involved in a series of biting incidents, most recently on Sept. 25. A uniformed Secret Service officer was bitten at the White House that night and was treated by on-site, said Secret Service chief of communications Anthony Guglielmi.

Indianapolis police capture cheeky monkey

IN INDIANAPOLIS — Momo the monkey's taste of freedom is over.

The primate spurred a search on Indianapolis' east side after he escaped last week from his owner's property. But the male patas monkey was finally captured safely the next morning, police said.

Momo was captured by the brother of the monkey's owner after police tracked the primate to the bathroom of a house under construction, said Lt. Wil-

liam Carter of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department.

"That was more than enough monkey business for us," the department said in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter, to announce Momo's capture.

After his capture, Momo was turned over to the Indianapolis Zoo, said Katie Trennepohl, deputy director of Indianapolis Animal Care Services. While a permit is not required in Marion County to own such an animal, she said the prosecutor's office will work with Animal Care Services to determine whether Momo will be returned to his owner.

Court takes case against baker who refused job

CO DENVER — On the heels of a U.S. Supreme Court victory this summer for a graphic artist who didn't want to design wedding websites for same-sex couples, Colorado's highest court said it will now hear the case of a Christian baker who refused to make a cake celebrating a gender transition.

The move by the Colorado Supreme Court is the latest development in the legal saga involving Jack Phillips and LGBTQ+ rights. Phillips won a partial victory before the U.S. Supreme Court in 2018 after refusing to make a gay couple's wedding cake.

He was later sued by Autumn Scardina, a transgender woman, after Phillips and his suburban Denver bakery refused to make a pink cake with blue frosting for her birthday and to celebrate her gender transition.

Scardina, an attorney, said

she brought the lawsuit to "challenge the veracity" of Phillips' statements that he would serve LGBTQ+ customers.

Subway shooter who hurt 10 receives life sentence

NY NEW YORK — A man who sprayed a New York City subway car with bullets during rush hour, wounding 10 people and sparking a citywide manhunt, was sentenced last week to life in prison after several of his victims tearfully and angrily recounted their ongoing trauma.

Frank James, 64, pleaded guilty earlier this year to terrorism charges in the April 12, 2022, mass shooting aboard a Manhattan-bound train. He received a life sentence on 10 counts and 10 years for an 11th count of discharging a firearm during an act of violence.

Three of his victims spoke in court of the physical and emotional pain they continue to experience more than a year after the attack in a packed subway car. They described the panic and the splattered blood on the train, and how they used their own clothes as tourniquets to stanch the bleeding from victims' wounds.

During his own 15-minute address to the court, James expressed contrition for his actions but criticized the country's mental health system, saying it had failed especially people of color like him.

Giraffe feces seized from woman at airport

MN MINNEAPOLIS — Federal customs agents pooh-poohed the plans of an Iowa woman who wanted to make jewelry from giraffe feces

she picked up in Kenya and brought to the U.S. in her luggage.

The woman declared the small box of feces when she was selected to have her belongings inspected upon arriving at the Minneapolis-Saint Paul Airport on Sept. 29, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

The woman, who was not identified, told officials she planned to use the waste to make a necklace, as she had done in the past with moose poop.

Giraffe poop can be brought back to the U.S. with the proper permits and inspections, according to Minnesota Public Radio. The station reported that the woman won't face sanctions because she declared the feces and gave it to Customs.

Ex-Coast Guard Academy professor resigns post

MA DUDLEY — A former Coast Guard Academy professor whose tenure coincided with a sexual harassment scandal has resigned as president of Nichols College in Massachusetts.

Glenn Sulmasy stepped down Tuesday amid an investigation initiated by Nichols after accusations from Sulmasy's time at the academy came to light.

A Coast Guard investigation was first reported by CNN, which later reported that a performance evaluation during Sulmasy's time at the academy cited inappropriate communications with cadets and subordinates. CNN reported that the Coast Guard considered charging him with conduct unbecoming of an officer.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

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

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Top 25 takeaways: 7 unbeaten teams lose

Associated Press

Actually, it's Oklahoma that's back.

Of course, the Sooners haven't been gone for long.

The final Red River Rivalry in the Big 12 before it moves to the Southeastern Conference felt like a chance for No. 3 Texas to lay claim to being the best team in the country.

Instead, at the Cotton Bowl on Saturday, second-year Oklahoma coach Brent Venables got his first signature win and the 12th-ranked Sooners stamped themselves as College Football Playoff contenders.

On a day when No. 1 Georgia re-asserted itself; No. 11 Alabama overcame itself; No. 10 Notre Dame ran out of gas at No. 25 Louisville; seven teams lost for the first time, including No. 17 Miami in the most unfathomable way — but somehow not No. 9 USC, which needed a 17-point comeback, three overtimes and more Caleb Williams magic to beat Arizona — the Sooners made the loudest statement.

The Longhorns looked pretty good, too. No need to panic, Tex-

as fans. The way the rest of the Big 12 is playing out, the Longhorns and Sooners could be heading for a rematch down the road at Jerry World on Dec. 2 in the Big 12 championship game.

Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark will have to be in attendance for that one. Right?

He understandably skipped Red River, but SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey was at the Texas State Fair to have a funnel cake and check out one of the most storied rivalries in college football at the Cotton Bowl, 22 miles east from that fancy stadium where the Dallas Cowboys play.

Long ago, Sankey was the Commissioner of the Southland Conference and lived not far from the fairgrounds in Allen, Texas, but he had never been to Red River.

"I would drive by with great admiration and wonder what's going on in there. So it's a fun chance to see it today," Sankey said.

Indeed.

Texas and Oklahoma were both undefeated coming into the game for the first time since

2008. But it was the Longhorns, in Year 3 under coach Steve Sarkisian, who garnered more attention in the first month of the season, winning at Alabama and romping over three straight opponents since.

Oklahoma had been dominant, too, leading the nation in margin of victory at 36 points per game, but had not yet played another ranked team. So how good are these Sooners, many wondered? They ain't played nobody!

It was a good lesson: It's not who you play as much as how you play. The Sooners were a top-10 team hiding in plain sight.

Venables has quickly eased OU fans fears after the former Clemson defensive coordinator fielded a team that couldn't tackle last year.

Venables aggressively flipped the roster left behind by Lincoln Riley this offseason, bringing in a top-10 recruiting class and 17 transfers to rebuild around quarterback Dillon Gabriel.

The UCF transfer who arrived last season, and missed

the Texas game with an injury, threw for 285 yards and ran for 113 to become the first player in Red River history to throw for at least 250 yards and run for at least 100.

Rising Tide

While the future of the SEC was on display in Dallas, it's the same old song with the current members of the conference.

No. 11 Alabama (5-1, 3-0) sits atop the West Division standings, the only team in the division without a league loss, after the Tide got another encouraging game from Jalen Milroe and beat Texas A&M.

No one is selling this Crimson Tide team as anything other than flawed; limited on offense, solid on defense and mistake-prone. Alabama had 14 penalties against A&M, including one that wiped out a touchdown on a blocked field-goal return.

"This game might be a record for me, for mess-ups, and still winning," Tide coach Nick Saban told reporters.

But the more you watch the rest of the SEC West, the better Bama looks.

Etienne's two touchdowns lift Jaguars over Bills

Associated Press

LONDON — Travis Etienne rushed for 136 yards and two fourth-quarter touchdowns and the Jacksonville Jaguars beat the jet-lagged Buffalo Bills 25-20 on Sunday at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

The Jaguars (3-2) may not want to leave London after getting back-to-back wins in the British capital, ending Buffalo's three-game winning streak and proving they can hang with an AFC powerhouse.

The Bills (3-2) had routed their past three opponents but looked tired at times, rushed for only 29 yards, and had a rash of injuries.

Etienne scored on a 35-yard

run with just under three minutes left after carrying it in from 6 yards earlier.

Josh Allen twice brought the Bills back late in the fourth quarter. He ran it in from 3 yards to complete a 75-yard drive that took just 45 seconds, making it 25-20 before the two-minute warning.

With the Bills out of timeouts, the Jags punted to the Buffalo 6, leaving the Bills just 22 seconds. Stefon Diggs caught a pass and tried to lateral it, but Jacksonville recovered the fumble.

In between Etienne's touchdowns, Allen completed a 19-yard touchdown pass to Gabe Davis to cut the deficit to five

points with 4:03 to play.

Allen was 27-for-40 for 359 yards and two touchdowns. Diggs had eight catches for 121 yards and a touchdown and Davis had six catches for 100 yards and a score.

The Jags survived two costly strip-sack lost fumbles by Trevor Lawrence, both times in Buffalo territory.

The Jags led early when Zay Jones made an acrobatic play to haul in a 6-yard touchdown pass in the back of the end zone in the first quarter and Etienne added the two-point conversion.

Lawrence finished 25-for-37 for 315 yards, with the touchdown and two lost fumbles.

Diggs channeled his inner Ronaldo after catching a 15-yard touchdown pass to get Buffalo on the board with 1:14 left in the half. The wide receiver, who had promised fans a soccer-style celebration if he scored, beat cornerback Tyson Campbell off the line of scrimmage.

The Jags quickly moved the ball to the Buffalo 12, but edgerusher A.J. Epenesa's strip-sack and fumble recovery ended the Jacksonville threat with 10 seconds left in the half. Epenesa beat left tackle Cam Robinson — just back from suspension — on Lawrence's blind side.

Epenesa and Leonard Floyd each finished with two sacks.

Phillies shut down slugger Braves

Associated Press

ATLANTA — This is Bryce Harper's favorite time of year.

Ranger Suárez and a parade of hard-throwing Philadelphia relievers are enjoying themselves, too.

Harper hit his 12th career postseason homer, Suárez and a half-dozen teammates combined on a five-hitter, and the Phillies stifled baseball's most prolific offense for a 3-0 victory over the Atlanta Braves in Game 1 of the NL Division Series on Saturday night.

In a playoff rematch between division rivals, the 104-win Braves find themselves in exactly the same position as a year ago: trailing the Phillies after the opener at Truist Park.

"This team, to a man, has this innate toughness to them," Philadelphia manager Rob Thomson said. "They're really resilient, and they just keep fighting. So it's a great combination of talent and makeup that we have on this club."

In 2022, the Phillies knocked

off the Braves 3-1 on the way to an improbable World Series appearance. Now, they're up again heading to Game 2 of the best-of-five series Monday night in Atlanta.

As usual, Harper was right in the middle of things. He reached base in all four at-bats and gave the Phillies some breathing room with a liner into the right-field seats off 20-game winner Spencer Strider in the sixth inning.

"This is his time of year," Thomson said. "This is where he kind of shines."

The Braves' offense had been shining all season, tying the major league record with 307 homers while averaging more than 5.8 runs per game.

They came up empty to start the postseason, enduring their first shutout since May 12 — and their first all season at Truist Park. They became the first team to lead the majors in runs and get shut out in their postseason opener since the 2001 Mariners.

"I think it was more their pitching than our hitting," Braves manager Brian Snitker said.

Wild-card series hero Bryson Stott broke a scoreless tie with a run-scoring single in the fourth, driving in Harper with an unearned run after a wild pickoff throw by Strider.

Harper padded the lead all by himself by going deep off Spencer, who is 8-0 with 1.90 ERA against the Phillies in the regular season but dropped to 0-2 against them in the postseason.

"Strider, man, he's one of the best in the game," Harper said. "You know he's going to come at you and throw his best at you. So just trying to get a pitch over and was able to get the slider up and do some damage."

Strider went seven innings, allowing one earned run on five hits with eight strikeouts.

The mood turned ugly in the eighth when the Phillies tacked on their final run courtesy of catcher interference against Sean Murphy. J.T. Realmuto

fouled off a pitch with the bases loaded, but his bat barely nicked Murphy's mitt to force in a run.

After the call was reviewed and upheld, there was a brief delay when a handful of fans threw trash on the field.

Snitker and Murphy had no complaints about the call, and the Braves manager ripped the fans who littered the outfield.

"There's no excuse for that," Snitker said. "It's scary because those water bottles, when they come, they're like grenades. It could really seriously injure one of our players."

Many in the crowd of 43,689 — the largest turnout in Truist Park's seven-year history — headed for the exits after Trea Turner's diving stop on Ozzie Albies' sharp grounder turned into an inning-ending double play in the bottom half of the inning.

Suárez allowed just one hit in 3⅓ innings. Still, with an off day between the first and second games, the Phillies quickly turned to their bullpen at the first sign of trouble.

D-backs chase Kershaw in 1st inning, rout Dodgers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Merrill Kelly and Clayton Kershaw had their backs to each other in the outfield while they were long-tossing before Game 1 of the NL Division Series.

"He kind of gave me a little acknowledgment and I gave it back," Kelly said.

Then Arizona went out and clobbered the Los Angeles Dodgers ace in the first inning on the way to an 11-2 victory for Kelly and the Diamondbacks on Saturday night.

Gabriel Moreno's three-run drive highlighted a six-run first for Arizona, which also got homers from Corbin Carroll, Alek Thomas and Tommy Pham. Kelly used the support to beat the Dodgers for the first time.

"I'm watching our guys beat up on one of the best pitchers that we've ever seen in our lives and watching them do it in the first game I've ever pitched in the playoffs," Kelly said.

Making his first career postseason start at

age 34, Kelly came in with an 0-11 record and a 5.49 ERA in 16 starts against LA.

"I felt if I gave those games any attention, I was going out there behind the eight-ball before I even stepped on the mound," he said.

Kelly limited the NL West champions to three hits in 6⅓ innings, the last one leading off the third on Miguel Rojas' single. He retired 11 in a row during one stretch.

"We just never really had a chance to get to Kelly," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "He was attacking us and making us put the ball in play and we just couldn't do it."

Game 2 of the best-of-five series is Monday night in Los Angeles.

The loss was tied for the fifth-largest postseason defeat in Dodgers' franchise history. They've now dropped Game 1 of the NLDS in two of their last three seasons.

Kershaw staggered through the worst start and shortest of his 16-year career. The three-time Cy Young Award winner got

tagged for six runs and recorded just one out in the 100th postseason game at Dodger Stadium.

"It's just embarrassing really," Kershaw said. "I just feel like I let everybody down."

He walked off the mound with his head down. He sat down in the dugout, removed his cap and buried his face in his hands.

"I don't think anybody in the baseball world was expecting that," teammate Freddie Freeman said.

Kershaw dropped to 13-13 with a 4.49 ERA in the postseason, compared to 210-92 with a 2.48 ERA in the regular season.

Arizona rapped out 13 hits. The only Diamondback who didn't get on base was Gerardo Perdomo, who went 0-for-4 with three strikeouts.

"I just think this team was very focused," D-backs manager Torey Lovullo said. "We talked about what our game plan was going to be, and I watched this group go out and execute it to a T."

Rangers' shaky bullpen holds off Orioles

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — For the first time this postseason, the maligned Texas bullpen had to protect a slim lead in the late innings.

Josh Sborz, Aroldis Chapman and José Leclerc wobbled but didn't fall.

Andrew Heaney and Dane Dunning helped Texas reach the sixth inning ahead, and the Rangers held on through some anxious moments for a 3-2 victory over the Baltimore Orioles in Game 1 of their AL Division Series on Saturday.

"The bullpen did a great job," manager Bruce Bochy said. "Got bumpy, but found a way to get through it."

Josh Jung homered and made a nice play at third base to start a critical double play for Texas, which improved to 3-0 in these playoffs — all on the road.

Game 2 in the best-of-five series was Sunday at Camden Yards.

After leading the AL West most of the season but squandering the division crown on the final weekend, the wild-card Rangers entered the postseason without Jacob deGrom and Max Scherzer — and with a bullpen largely considered a weak link. But they've allowed only three runs in three games against the Orioles and Rays.

The late innings weren't all that stressful in the Wild Card Series against Tampa Bay, as Texas outscored the Rays 11-1 for a two-game sweep. It was a more nervous finish against the Orioles.

Heaney held Baltimore to a run and two hits in 3½ innings. Dunning relieved him and went two innings for the win, allowing a run in the sixth. Will Smith, Sborz, Chapman and Leclerc combined for the final 10 outs — but not without some drama.

Sborz threw seven straight balls to start the seventh but pitched around a leadoff walk.

Chapman walked the first two batters in the eighth before Jung ranged to his left and snagged Anthony Santander's high bouncer on a short hop to start a 5-4-3 double play. Chapman then struck out Ryan Mountcastle with a runner on third to end the inning.

Leclerc earned the save, although he allowed a leadoff single in the ninth to Gunnar Henderson. All-Star catcher Jonah Heim threw out Henderson trying to steal second, and the Orioles didn't manage another baserunner.

Baltimore manager Brandon Hyde didn't appear happy in the dugout with Henderson's decision to go.

"A little miscommunication there," Hyde said.

Kyle Bradish struck out nine in 4½ innings for the Orioles but allowed two runs in the fourth to take the loss. Jung and Santander traded solo homers in the sixth.

Texas has been without de-

Grom for a while, and the Rangers left Scherzer off their ALDS roster Saturday because of shoulder problems that have kept him out since mid-September. So far, however, the Rangers' pitching has held up.

Jordan Montgomery and Nathan Eovaldi kept the Rays at bay in the Wild Card Series, and then the Heaney-Dunning tandem gave the Rangers a chance to win again.

The Orioles won 101 games and a division title this year, but it's been a rough start to the playoffs for the AL East. Tampa Bay and Toronto were swept in the first round, and now Baltimore is trailing after its postseason opener.

This was the first playoff game at Camden Yards since 2014, and a crowd packed with orange-clad fans saw former Orioles star Adam Jones throw out the first pitch and longtime fan Joan Jett sing the national anthem.

Verlander, Astros power past Twins in ALDS opener

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Justin Verlander was wearing a New York Mets uniform when the season began.

But on Saturday night, he was right back where he's been so many times before, on the mound for the Houston Astros helping them to another playoff win.

Verlander pitched six shutout innings, Yordan Alvarez homered twice and the Astros held on for a 6-4 victory over the Minnesota Twins in their AL Division Series opener.

Jose Altuve hit a leadoff home run and Alvarez had three RBIs as the defending World Series champions won their 2023 playoff debut to earn their 10th straight victory in Game 1 of a Division Series.

Verlander first joined the As-

trots in August 2017 and won his second World Series title with the team last year. He signed with the Mets in the offseason, then returned to Houston in a July trade after a very brief stint in the Big Apple.

"It's been a whirlwind of a year, season for me," Verlander said. "To find myself back here in Houston and pitching in the playoffs is not something I foresaw, but happy to be here, happy to help contribute and happy to be in the playoffs."

The 40-year-old Verlander allowed four hits and walked three with six strikeouts to get his 17th win in 35 postseason starts. It was his 10th playoff win with the Astros, the most in franchise history.

"He gave us all he had like he usually does, and he gave us quality," manager Dusty Baker

said. "Even when he doesn't have his great stuff, he still manages to get people out."

Especially against the Twins. Since 2018, Verlander is 6-1 in seven starts versus Minnesota and has a 23-inning scoreless streak.

Former Astros star Carlos Correa had two hits for the Twins, who continued to struggle at the plate with runners in scoring position. They went 1-for-12 after going 1-for-10 in the Wild Card Series against Toronto.

"We had a lot of traffic out there," manager Rocco Baldelli said. "We're one good swing or even one well-placed swing away from getting some real action going, putting some runs up, and we just didn't get that."

Verlander settled in after a shaky start and the Astros built

a 5-0 lead through six innings with big swings from Altuve and Alvarez.

Héctor Neris took over for Verlander to start the seventh. With two outs, Jorge Polanco hit a soaring three-run homer to right field. Two pitches later, rookie Royce Lewis launched his third homer in three playoff games to make it 5-4.

In the bottom half, lefty Caleb Thielbar entered to face Alvarez with one out. The slugger became the first left-handed hitter to homer off Thielbar this season when he smacked an off-speed pitch off the foul pole in right to give Houston an insurance run.

"When I go up there, try not to think about the situation, try not to think about the noise," Alvarez said in Spanish through a translator.