

US aims for deterrence with aid to Israel

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Within hours of the horrific attack by Hamas, the U.S. began moving warships and aircraft to the region to be ready to provide Israel with whatever it needs to respond.

A second U.S. carrier strike group departs from Norfolk, Va., on Friday. Scores of aircraft are heading to U.S. military bases around the Middle East. And special operations forces are now assisting Israel's military in planning and intelligence.

The buildup reflects U.S. concern that the deadly fighting between Hamas and Israel could escalate into a more dangerous regional conflict.

So the primary mission for those ships and warplanes for now is to establish a force presence that deters Hezbollah, Iran or others from taking advantage of the situation. But the forces the U.S. sent are capable of more than that.

The U.S. is also expediting the shipment of munitions and interceptors for Israel's fight against Hamas.

A look at what weapons and options the U.S. military could provide:

Weapons, special ops

The U.S. is providing some personnel and much-needed munitions to Israel. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced that a small cell of special operations forces was

now assisting Israel with intelligence and planning.

They have not been tasked with hostage rescue, contrary to some reporting, a defense official said, but could if they were requested to do so.

The U.S. is also getting U.S. defense companies to expedite weapons orders by Israel that were already on the books. Chief among those is getting munitions for Israel's Iron Dome air defense system sped along.

President Joe Biden said Tuesday that resupplying Iron Dome munitions and air defense systems was an immediate priority.

Navy ships and planes

One of the most visible examples of the U.S. response was the announcement Sunday by the Pentagon to redirect the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group to sail toward Israel. The carrier had just completed an exercise with the Italian navy when the ship and its crew of about 5,000 were ordered to quickly sail to the Eastern Mediterranean.

The carrier provides a host of options. It's a primary command and control operations center and can conduct information warfare. It can launch and recover E2-Hawkeye surveillance planes, recognized by their 24-foot diameter disc-shaped radar. The planes provide early warnings on mis-

sile launches, conduct surveillance and manage the airspace, detecting not only enemy aircraft but also directing U.S. movements.

The Ford carries F-18 fighter jets that could fly intercepts or strike targets.

The carrier also has significant capabilities for humanitarian work, including an onboard hospital with an ICU and emergency room and about 40 medics, surgeons and doctors. It sails with helicopters that can be used to airlift critical supplies in or victims out.

Air Force warplanes

The Pentagon has also ordered additional warplanes to bolster existing squadrons of A-10, F-15 and F-16 squadrons at bases throughout the Middle East and is ready to add more if needed.

Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said Tuesday at an Atlantic Council event that the service was doubling up by directing units that were about to come home to remain in place and stay there along with their replacements.

The U.S. Air Force already has significant airpower in the region to conduct manned and unmanned operations, most notably in Syria where an Air Force F-16 last week was ordered to shoot down a Turkish drone that was posing a threat to U.S. ground forces operating there.

Ex-Navy officer wins appeal on claim of racial bias

By JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

A former Navy officer who argued that minorities were excluded purposefully from the jury that convicted him of sexual assault won his appeal before the U.S. military's top court.

An all-white jury of five men convicted Lt. j.g. Willie Jeter, who is Black, in 2017 of sexually assaulting two women on separate occasions.

He also was found guilty of extortion, burglary and other charges at a court-martial at Norfolk Naval Station, Va. Jeter was sentenced to 20 years in prison and dismissed from the service.

In his appeal, Jeter contended that his rights had been violated when the pool of prospective jury candidates was stacked with white men.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces on Sept. 25 reversed the Navy-Marine Corps appellate court's 2021 decision upholding Jeter's conviction and sentence.

In a 4-1 opinion, the justices cited the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Batson v. Kentucky*, which held that jurors cannot be excluded based on race.

"We must carefully examine member selection practices to protect the military accused from procedures that may operate to exclude persons on racial grounds, regard-

less of the race of the accused," they said.

Jeter, who was 27 at the time of his trial, was convicted of sexual assault and extortion for a 2014 incident on board the Norfolk-based USS Truxtun.

After discovering a female enlisted subordinate having sex with another sailor in the destroyer's electrical switchboard room, Jeter abused his authority by telling her he wouldn't report the incident if she had sex with him as well, prosecutors said.

He also was found guilty of sexually assaulting a student at Hampton University in Virginia in 2016. The woman testified that she woke up in her apartment to find Jeter, a stranger to her, in her bedroom.

Navy surveillance plane transits Taiwan Strait

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon surveillance aircraft flew over the contentious Taiwan Strait on Thursday, demonstrating the United States' "commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," according to the U.S. 7th Fleet.

The aircraft flew south through the 110-mile-wide waterway that separates mainland China from Taiwan, entering from the East China Sea and exiting over the South China Sea, as part of a "routine transit," said 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Luka Bakic.

"U.S. Navy ships and aircraft routinely use the Taiwan Strait to transit between the two [seas] and have done so for many years," he told Stars and Stripes in an email Thursday.

The flight was not a response to any particular event, Bakic said. The Navy routinely sends guided-missile destroyers and cruisers through the strait; Navy aircraft also regularly transit there, although the Navy reports such activity less frequently.

Bakic did not specify if the aircraft encountered or interacted with Chinese or other foreign military ships and aircraft but said U.S. ships and aircraft routinely

interact with their foreign counterparts.

"All interactions with foreign military forces during the transit were consistent with international norms and did not impact the operation," he said.

China, which typically condemns such transits as provocative, had not publicly responded to the Poseidon's flight as of Thursday afternoon.

The Chinese military went on "high alert" following a similar flight on April 28. The transit proved the U.S. is a "disruptor of peace and stability" in the region, China's Eastern Theater Command said in an April 29 news re-

lease.

Beijing views Taiwan, a functioning democracy that split from China in 1949, as a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland.

A record 103 Chinese aircraft were active around Taiwan on Sept. 18, outnumbering the previous high of 91 planes and a dozen ships reported by the island's military on April 11.

China's activity around Taiwan has returned to typical levels.

The island spotted 14 aircraft and five warships Thursday, the Ministry of National Defense said in a post X, formerly Twitter.

Hospital ship begins annual Pacific Partnership tour

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy hospital ship steamed out of San Diego Bay this week and began a trip across the Pacific, where it plans to stop at island nations as part of an annual disaster preparedness mission.

The USNS Mercy leads Pacific Partnership 2024. Equipped with 1,000 hospital beds and a crew of 800 civilian and military personnel, including doctors and dentists, the ship will host symposiums and training events throughout the region, the Navy said in a Wednesday news release.

The Mercy plans stops in the Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Palau and Micronesia during the multi-month mission, which aims to improve "disaster response preparedness, resiliency and capacity" and strengthen international relationships, according to the release.

"This mission reflects the continued commitment to the region and dedication to disaster-response-readiness from the United States, our partners and allies,

and the host nations," U.S. Navy Capt. Brian Quin, the mission commander, said in the release.

In August 2022, the Solomon Islands government welcomed the Mercy on its Pacific Partnership tour, but the same day denied entry to the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Oliver Henry and British patrol vessel HMS Spey.

The U.S. at the time suspected the Solomons' warming ties with China lay behind the denial.

The Navy and Coast Guard stepped up outreach efforts to Pacific island nations partly to offset China's campaign to extend its influence in the region.

This year, the 2024 mission overlaps the 2023 visits, which kicked off Aug. 9 in Phu Yen, Vietnam, according to a Pacific Partnership press release that day. The overlap is a first in the mission's 18-year history, according to Ensign Madison Kwok, spokeswoman for Pacific Partnership.

More than 1,500 personnel are traveling aboard USS Pearl Harbor and the USS Jackson, Kwok said in an email Thursday.

Students learn of Peralta's heroism from his family

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Students and teachers gathered here this week for a bittersweet conversation with the family of a fallen Marine who became the namesake of a guided-missile destroyer.

Sgt. Rafael Peralta, originally of Mexico City, was killed in 2004 during the Second Battle of Fallujah, shot by insurgents while clearing houses in the war-torn city. Before he died, the 25-year-old covered a fragmentation grenade with his body, saving several Marines nearby.

For his actions, Peralta was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and Navy Cross, the second highest award for Marines and sailors.

In 2012, the USS Rafael Peralta was named in his honor.

The ship is homeported at Yokosuka, where Peralta's mother and sister discussed his life, service and legacy with about 100 students at Yokosuka Middle School. The conversation, held in

English and Spanish via video conference, was part of Hispanic Heritage Month.

All students in attendance are part of Team Rafael Peralta. The middle school divides its approximately 750 pupils into teams named for the ships assigned to the U.S. 7th Fleet, headquartered at Yokosuka.

Karen Peralta described how her brother knew from a young age that he wanted to be a Marine.

"He loved this country. He was born in Mexico, but he is just a person of love," she said. "For him, there is no culture difference, no racism. He saw everybody as one."

Seventh-grader Angelina Falcon, of Honolulu, described the conversation as an emotional roller coaster.

"It made me feel a bit sad; it was kind of heartbreaking," she told Stars and Stripes after the event. "It was like, just wow, with all the awards he had and everything, it was pretty exciting there. And then those other moments are kind of sad. It was back and forth."

Austin: Israel arms come with no curbs

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. is not putting any special restrictions on how weapons being delivered to Israel can be used in its war against Hamas, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Thursday as the Israeli military prepares for a likely ground offensive in Gaza.

“This is a professional military, led by professional leadership, and we would hope and expect that they would do the right things in the prosecution of their campaign,” Austin said at the end of high-level discussions at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

Austin and allied defense chiefs were briefed Thursday by Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who presented them with images of the carnage caused by Hamas’ attack this month, which killed about 1,200 people in Israel, including at least 27 Americans.

“Allies strongly condemned Hamas’ indefensible attacks on civilians, and called for the immediate release of all hostages,” NATO Secretary-General Jens

Stoltenberg said.

But as the war has unfolded, Muslim countries in the region and some human rights organizations have criticized Israel for the scale of its retaliation. The bombardment of Gaza has turned many areas into rubble, raising concerns for civilian welfare. At least 1,417 people have been killed in Gaza since the latest war began, health authorities there said Thursday.

The White House announced Thursday that the U.S. government will begin operating evacuation flights as early as Friday to help Americans leave Israel as Israel prepares to escalate retaliatory action against Hamas militants, according to The Associated Press.

Austin said the U.S. is committed to getting Israel what it needs to defend itself. And while he said the response should be proportionate, Austin declined to define what that means.

“We’re moving rapidly to provide Israel what it needs to continue to protect its citizens and to protect its territory,” Austin said.

Brutal attack shifts Israel’s focus to destroying Hamas

The Washington Post

TEL AVIV — Israel’s army said Thursday that it would seek the end of Hamas in Gaza as airstrikes on the besieged enclave targeted the group’s senior leaders and caused widespread civilian casualties.

The intensifying conflict with Hamas comes as a shaken Israel wrestles with the aftermath of an attack that saw the group’s militants stalking civilians and soldiers throughout Israeli-border communities on Saturday, killing more than 1,000 people and kidnapping scores more, in one of the deadliest attacks in Israeli history.

The unprecedented incursion has left the region reeling, upending a years-long stalemate between Israel and Hamas, which effectively rules the Gaza Strip and its population of more than 2 million civilians. Israeli leaders are foreshadowing a ground invasion that seeks to change the status quo forever — in marked contrast to past incursions that left Hamas in place.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, a spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces, said in a televised briefing Thursday that Israel would no longer allow Hamas to exist as an entity next door.

“Unlike other operations, we are collapsing the governance and sovereignty of the Hamas organization,” he said. Israel has mobilized 360,000 reservists in recent days and armored divisions are massing near the border with Gaza. The toll in Gaza from six days of airstrikes had reached 1,417 killed, including 447 children and 248 women, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry — rapidly approaching the more than 2,000 killed in the 2014 war even before the start of the invasion.

Humanitarian groups are issuing increasingly dire warnings about the consequences of a military campaign in a densely populated urban area already throttled by an Israeli and Egyptian blockade, which prevents many goods from entering the territory and most people from ever leaving.

Israel has not let any goods into Gaza since airstrikes began, describing the intended conditions as total siege — a tactic outlawed under international law. On Thursday, Israel’s energy minister, Israel Katz, doubled down on that threat, saying there would be no pause in the siege unless Hamas released the hostages that are believed to be in Gaza.

Bodies still being found in battle-scarred kibbutz

The Washington Post

BE’ERI, Israel — Before you see what happened here, you can smell it, lingering among the palm trees and carrying past the yellow security gates that were meant to keep out intruders.

“There is nothing, nothing that this even compares to,” said a rescue worker with Zaka, a volunteer group of ultra-Orthodox men that has helped to clear the bodies of around 120 residents from the streets and houses of this once-tranquil

kibbutz.

They have been doing this for days, going from one devastated community to the next. They are exhausted.

But the work continues. “In Judaism it’s important to bury someone as fast as possible, otherwise their soul can’t continue on,” he explained, before moving on.

The Be’eri kibbutz, home to about 1,000 people, was established in 1946, before the state of Israel was founded. It lies just a few miles from the block-

aded enclave of Gaza, over the border fence that residents had assumed was impenetrable. When Hamas attacked Saturday, desperate residents called for help, but it came too late for many of them. Families tried to hide but were hunted down and killed in their homes.

Others were held hostage for hours before the soldiers arrived. Some, no one knows how many, were kidnapped and taken back to Gaza.

The acting U.S. ambassador made an unannounced visit to

the community Wednesday and was overcome by what she saw.

“I’m emotional being here as a mom, especially,” Chargé d’Affaires Stephanie Hallett said, “and hearing the stories of children who were killed and abducted from here.”

Most of the bodies of Be’eri’s residents have been removed, but some were still being found Wednesday. At least 103 militants died here, too, the military said. An earthmover filled with their corpses ferried out a load in its front-mounted bucket.

Iran prohibited from accessing \$6B fund

The Washington Post

U.S. officials and the Qatari government have agreed to stop Iran from accessing a \$6 billion account for humanitarian assistance in light of Hamas' attack on Israel, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo told House Democrats on Thursday, according to two people who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private remarks.

The decision not to permit access to the money comes just a few weeks after the U.S. and Iranian governments announced a deal to set up the humanitarian assistance as part of a prisoner

swap aimed at easing hostilities in the region. U.S. officials had to approve each transaction under the agreement. The fund is financed by Iranian oil sales.

But President Joe Biden has faced mounting bipartisan pressure on Capitol Hill to prevent the funds from being used by Iran, amid scrutiny of Tehran's links to Hamas.

U.S. officials have said Hamas has received weapons and training from Iran, but there has been no evidence of Iran's direct role in the slaughter, *The Washington Post* previously reported.

Adeyemo told House Democrats the money "isn't going any-

where anytime soon," according to three House Democratic aides, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal conversations. That comment was first reported by *Punchbowl*.

Senators of both parties, including Senate Banking Committee Chairman Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, have called on the Biden administration to renege on the agreement.

Asked about the push to freeze the aid, Iran's mission to the United Nations responded in a statement: "The senators in question and the U.S. government are all acutely aware that

they can NOT renege on the agreement. The money rightfully belongs to the people of Iran, earmarked for the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to facilitate the acquisition of all essential and non-sanctioned requisites for the Iranians."

Rescinding the aid would embolden hard-line voices in Iran that have rejected working with the West, said Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Staccraft, a foreign policy think tank. Parsi also speculated that such a move could shift opinion within the regime in favor of building a nuclear bomb.

Putin, on rare trip abroad, arrives in Kyrgyzstan

Associated Press

President Vladimir Putin arrived in Kyrgyzstan on Thursday on a rare trip abroad for the Russian leader who was indicted earlier this year by the International Criminal Court for war crimes in Ukraine.

Putin met with Kyrgyz President Sadyr Zhaparov and was to take part on Friday in the Commonwealth of Independent States summit, which Kyrgyzstan is hosting. Leaders of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan will also attend the summit.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan will skip it, as Yerevan's relationship with Moscow has frayed amid mutual accusations.

It is the first time this year that Putin has traveled outside Russia and Russian-held territories of Ukraine. Earlier this year, he visited the partially occupied Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk and Kherson, as well as the annexed Crimean Peninsula.

In March, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Putin over the deportation of children from Ukraine. Countries that have signed and ratified the Rome Statute,

which created the ICC, are now bound to arrest the Russian leader if he sets foot on their soil.

The move caused Putin to skip an economic summit in South Africa in August and further strained Moscow's ties with Armenia after it moved to ratify the Rome Statute earlier this month, even as Armenian officials sought to assure the Kremlin that the Russian leader would not be arrested if he entered the country.

The Kremlin has said that Russia does not recognize the jurisdiction of the ICC and considers the warrant null and void.

Auto workers escalate strike, walk out of Ford plant

Associated Press

DETROIT—The United Auto Workers union significantly escalated its walkout against Detroit's Three automakers, shutting down Ford's largest factory and threatening Jeep maker Stellantis.

In a surprise move Wednesday night, 8,700 members left their jobs at Ford's Kentucky truck plant in Louisville.

And Thursday morning, union President Shawn Fain hinted at further action against Stellantis. "Here's to hoping talks at Stellantis today are more productive

than Ford yesterday," Fain wrote on X, formerly Twitter, without saying what might happen.

Ford's truck plant makes heavy-duty F-Series pickup trucks and large Ford and Lincoln SUVs, hitting the company's most lucrative products. The vehicles made at the plant generate \$25 billion per year in revenue, the company said in a statement.

Fain said in a statement that the union has waited long enough "but Ford hasn't gotten the message" to negotiate a fair contract.

"If they can't understand that after four weeks, the 8,700 workers shutting down this extremely profitable plant will help them understand it," Fain said.

The strike came nearly four weeks after the union began its walkouts against General Motors, Ford and Stellantis on Sept. 15, with one assembly plant from each company.

The company, however, called the strike expansion "grossly irresponsible" and said it has made strong wage and benefit offers to the union.

It said the move puts about a

dozen other Ford facilities at risk, as well as parts supply plants that together employ over 100,000 people.

A Ford executive said the union called a meeting at the company's Dearborn, Mich., headquarters Wednesday afternoon where Fain asked if the company had another offer.

High-ranking Ford executives responded that they are working toward possibly bringing electric vehicle battery plants into the UAW national contract, essentially making them unionized.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Official: Teacher resigned after OnlyFans scandal

MO ST. CLAIR — A Missouri high school teacher who was suspended after officials discovered that she had performed on a subscription-based website known for sexually explicit content has resigned, a school district official said.

St. Clair High School English teacher Brianna Coppage was placed on leave last month after school officials discovered her page on the OnlyFans website, which she said she joined to supplement her second-year teaching salary of about \$42,000. She recently tendered her resignation, Superintendent Kyle Kruse told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Coppage, 28, said she earned up to \$10,000 a month on the OnlyFans website — before the story of her suspension made international news.

Fiery crash during race injures 2 balloon pilots

NM ALBUQUERQUE — Two balloon pilots from Poland who were competing in the prestigious Gordon Bennett Cup long-distance race were recovering Tuesday from burns, broken bones and other injuries after their hydrogen-filled balloon struck a high-voltage power line over Texas and exploded before falling to the ground.

Race organizers said the team was flying at an altitude of 12,000 feet to pass over the Dallas-Fort Worth airspace around 3:30 p.m. Monday and started their descent a short time later. Within a few hours, the balloon's tracking device indicated

that the aircraft's motion had stopped.

Night already had fallen when the crash happened, according to authorities in Kaufman County, Texas. Flames were leaping from the side of the road where pieces of the balloon and basket had landed, not far from an electrical substation.

Steve Howie, the county's emergency management coordinator, said it's believed that the balloon first hit a 138,000-volt transmission line as it was floating about 90 feet above the ground. Then it hit a distribution line that was lower to the ground.

The pilots — Krzysztof Zapart and Pjotr Halas — had been aloft since launching Saturday night from the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta along with 16 other teams. Competitors were aiming to fly the farthest distance in what is known as the world's oldest air race.

Teachers union challenges law prohibiting strikes

NV RENO — Nevada's largest teachers union filed suit Monday against a state law making it illegal for teachers and other public school employees to go on strike over pay and working conditions in the country's fifth-largest school district, which includes Las Vegas.

The Clark County Education Association argues in its lawsuit that the 1969 state law prohibiting public employee strikes is unconstitutional. They said it also infringes on the First Amendment rights of its approximately 18,000 members who are waging a contentious monthslong contract battle.

In emailed statements, the

Clark County School District said it is evaluating the complaint, and the Nevada Attorney General's office said it would not comment on pending litigation.

Last month, waves of teachers called in sick over a number of days, forcing many Las Vegas-area schools to close. The school district filed a lawsuit against the union and a judge ordered the union to put an end to the teacher absences, calling them "very clearly a strike."

Judge exonerates man who served 30 years

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — An Oklahoma judge on Tuesday exonerated a man who spent 30 years in prison for a 1987 rape and burglary, after post-conviction DNA testing from a rape kit showed he did not commit the crime.

Pontotoc County District Judge Steven Kessinger issued a final order that vacates Perry Lott's conviction and permanently dismisses the case.

"I have never lost hope that this day would come," Lott, 61, said in a statement. "I had faith that the truth would prevail, even after 35 long years."

Lott was released from prison in 2018 after the DNA results first came to light, but only after agreeing to a deal with former District Attorney Paul Smith to modify his sentence. The agreement allowed Lott to leave prison and remain free while his motion to vacate was litigated. At the time, Smith said the DNA evidence did not exclude Lott as a suspect.

But earlier this year, the Innocence Project, which helped to free Lott, approached newly elected District Attorney Erik

Johnson, who reviewed the case and agreed the conviction should be vacated.

Deputies injured after fire broke out during training

CA LOS ANGELES — Multiple Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies were taken to the hospital Tuesday morning after a fire during a "training incident" in Castaic, north of Los Angeles, authorities said.

The extent of the deputies' injuries weren't immediately known, said sheriff's department spokesperson Nicole Nishida.

The exact number of people injured was also unclear. Fire department officials said four deputies were taken to the hospital before firefighters were on the scene, while Nishida initially said at least two deputies were transported to the hospital.

Juneteenth to be holiday in Sunflower State

KS TOPEKA — Kansas will designate Juneteenth as a state holiday, joining 28 other states and the District of Columbia, Gov. Laura Kelly said Tuesday.

Juneteenth marks the day in 1865 when the last enslaved people in the United States learned they were free. For generations, Black Americans have recognized the end of one of the darkest chapters in U.S. history with joy, in the form of parades, street festivals, musical performances or cookouts.

In 2021, President Joe Biden signed a bill passed by Congress to set aside Juneteenth, or June 19th, as a federal holiday.

— From wire reports

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Ovechkin resumes pursuit of goals mark

Associated Press

Multiple times over their years playing together with the Washington Capitals, Alex Ovechkin told Tom Wilson he's never going to change how he trains.

"He's stubborn," Wilson recalled. "He's Ovi through and through."

Still, Wilson acknowledged, Ovechkin has adapted his training regimen and preparation as well as, if not better than, anyone in the NHL as he has climbed the NHL career goals list, where he is now second behind only Wayne Gretzky. Now 38, old and gray by hockey standards, Ovechkin has stayed on top of his game long enough to reach 822 goals, just 73 from passing Gretzky's record that long seemed unapproachable.

"Everybody in the sports world is on a pretty incredible

ride right now watching him take a run at this," Wilson said. "You feel it. You want him to do it."

Ovechkin has scored at least 40 goals in each of the last five 82-game seasons, a testament to his consistency and durability. He has no realistic milestones to reach this season, but just about everybody from his teammates and coaches to former opponents expect the Russian superstar to keep doing what he does: score goals in bunches.

"Every year, people wonder if this is the year that he's not going to be able to score," Capitals winger T.J. Oshie said. "I just don't doubt him anymore. I think he's going to be great like he always is, and I think he's going to lead us off like he usually does."

Ovechkin is coming off a season in which he was hampered

by injury and missed four games after the death of his father. He hopes the injury is behind him, like others around one of the oldest teams in the league, and is ready to get back to playing after his longest offseason in nearly a decade.

The first several weeks of the season will be a good indicator of how strong a chance Ovechkin has at catching Gretzky. History is on his side: Ovechkin has averaged 0.70 goals per game in October, more than any other month.

"You prepare yourself for a long year," Ovechkin said this week. "First couple games is going to be hard because you don't get that game rhythm and intensity in games in a long time. But you just have to fight it. You have to do your best to feel good."

The Capitals are trying to do

their best to contend after missing the playoffs for the first time since 2014 and put Ovechkin in position to challenge Gretzky. They have a new coach in Spencer Carbery who wants to play with faster pace and create scoring chances, which sounds like just the recipe for Ovechkin piling up goals.

"We'll work to figure out how to generate as many scoring chances (and) looks as possible for Alex Ovechkin," Carbery said. "I expect (to) put him in spots to set him up for success offensively, and that's what I imagine he'll continue to do."

That starts with playing Ovechkin alongside longtime running mate Nicklas Backstrom, perhaps in Washington's season opener Friday against Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and the rival Pittsburgh Penguins.

Astros earn spot in seventh consecutive ALCS

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The Houston Astros gathered in the clubhouse with their bottles and goggles to toast another postseason victory, when manager Dusty Baker called Justin Verlander forward to lead the celebration.

"I'm doing the World Series!" Baker said. "You do this one!"

Verlander, after a profanity-punctuated speech that had teammates roaring with laughter, started the cork-popping countdown at seven — one for each consecutive AL Championship Series appearance.

José Abreu homered for the third time in two games, a two-run rocket in the fourth inning that launched the Astros to their seventh straight ALCS with a 3-2 win that eliminated the Minnesota Twins in Game 4 of their Division Series on Wednesday night.

"We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the bond that we

have and the relationships that we have in this locker room, and we hold each other accountable in a good way," said Verlander, who returned to the Astros in August via trade from the New York Mets. "Obviously, this team is built different. These guys are built different. When it's time to step up, we play our best baseball."

José Urquidy gave the defending World Series champion Astros another solid postseason start, withstanding home runs by Royce Lewis in the first and Edouard Julien in the sixth before handing the ball to the bullpen.

Hector Neris and Bryan Abreu combined for five strikeouts over 2½ hitless innings. Ryan Pressly, who pitched five-plus years for the Twins before a trade to Houston in 2018, struck out the side in the ninth for the save. He froze Max Kepler with a full-count fastball to end it, leaving former Astros

star Carlos Correa on deck.

"Oh yeah, we knew, and I was trying not to have nightmares, because I remember when Carlos was with us he hit that ball up in the right-center field seats up there," Baker said, referring to Correa's homer at Minnesota in a 2020 Wild Card Series. "But we never got to Carlos, so that was a great, great victory."

Correa hit .409 with three doubles and four RBIs in the series.

"I wanted that at-bat so bad. I know Pressly very well, and it would've been a fun matchup," Correa said. "It didn't get there, but it's the way it was supposed to be."

Houston will host in-state rival Texas in Game 1 of the ALCS on Sunday, when Verlander is scheduled to make his 36th career postseason start.

"They know us, and we know them," Baker said, "and it's going to be a heck of a series."

The Astros, who are 56-34 in

the playoffs since 2017, hit 10 homers in the series. Abreu had eight RBIs.

"They never give up, and they understand that this is the time where the greats need to be good," Abreu said through an interpreter.

Michael Brantley got the Astros started with a solo shot in the second against Twins starter Joe Ryan, who was pulled after that inning in manager Rocco Baldelli's all-out attempt to extend the series.

The bullpen gave the Twins some energy back from the crowd, particularly when Chris Paddack pitched 2½ hitless innings with four strikeouts. But the home team just didn't have enough hits to overcome all those swings and misses.

"We didn't get it done in this series," Baldelli said. "We got beat, but I couldn't be happier with what I saw from so many of our guys, and I told them that."

Diamondbacks sweep Dodgers, move to NLCS

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Geraldo Perdomo got the Arizona Diamondbacks started with an unexpected homer, then Ketel Marte made the 48,000-plus at Chase Field giddy with another blast.

Christian Walker followed with a line-drive shot into the left-field seats and then Gabriel Moreno polished off the onslaught with a 420-foot moonshot into left-center.

One inning. Four hitters. Four solo homers.

“That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Walker said.

The hard-hitting Diamondbacks rode a record-setting barrage of homers in the third inning to a 4-2 win in Game 3 of their NL Division Series on Wednesday night, sweeping the 100-win Los Angeles Dodgers out of the playoffs.

The D-backs return to the NL Championship Series for the first time since 2007, where they’ll face either the Phillies or Braves.

“This is what we worked all year for,” rookie sensation Corbin Carroll said. “It’s amazing to be here. It doesn’t feel real.”

Arizona — the No. 6 seed after squeezing into the NL playoff bracket with an 84-78 record — has won all five of its games during the postseason, sweeping aside both the Brewers in a best-of-three series and the Dodgers in a best-of-five.

The wild-card Diamondbacks won with brawn in this one, slugging a postseason-record four homers in the third off veteran righty Lance Lynn. That gave Arizona a 4-0 lead it never relinquished.

“It’s almost unbelievable, right? I’m a fan, too, and I was looking at it thinking, what in the world is happening here?” Diamondbacks manager Torey Lovullo said.

The NL West champion Dodgers rallied for two runs in the seventh on two-out RBI singles from Chris Taylor and Kiké Hernández off side-armor Ryan Thompson, but lefty Andrew Saalfrank entered and retired Austin Barnes on a groundout.

Will Smith had a one-out single in the ninth off closer Paul Sewald, but Taylor hit a flyout to deep center in front of the 413-foot sign and Hernández flied out to left to end it.

Sewald, acquired from Seattle in a trade-deadline deal on July 31, earned his fourth save of the postseason.

“You look at the game, the series, they outplayed us, and there’s no other spin to it,” Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. “As far as our clubhouse, it’s just a lot of disappointment.”

Lynn cruised through the first two innings of a scoreless game — giving little indication what was about to come.

Perdomo started the scoring with a leadoff homer, his first long ball since Aug. 13. One out later, Marte hit a 428-foot drive to right on a 1-0 cutter. With two outs, Walker pulled a 3-1 cutter to left for a 3-0 lead.

Then came No. 4: Moreno sliced a 2-1 fastball down the line to the opposite field that right field umpire Gabe Morales called fair. But the umpires huddled and crew chief Todd Tichenor reversed the call to foul, a decision upheld by a video review.

Moreno then drove Lynn’s very next pitch — a hanging slider — over the left-field wall, flipping his bat high in the air as he started his trot.

“The one that was really im-

pressive for me was Gabby Moreno. He hits one foul, then he hits one fair. It’s a great moment for us,” Lovullo said.

A few moments later, a dejected Lynn handed the ball to Roberts and trudged toward the dugout.

Lynn gave up 44 homers in the regular season, the most in the majors. The previous mark of three homers in a postseason inning had been accomplished 12 times, most recently by the Dodgers against Atlanta in 2020.

Arizona rookie right-hander Brandon Pfaadt threw 4⅓ scoreless innings, giving up two hits and striking out two.

While the D-backs thrived, the Dodgers had no answers for a third straight game. A stacked lineup with a pair of former MVPs — Mookie Betts and Freddie Freeman — couldn’t make much of an impact throughout the series.

Both All-Stars struck out in the eighth against Kevin Ginkel with a runner on first. Betts finished the series 0-for-11 while Freeman was 1-for-10.

“The bottom line is that they outplayed us in every facet of the game,” Roberts said.

Harper powers Phillies to 2-1 series lead over Braves

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — When gossip spread among the Phillies that Bryce Harper — of all the superstars to poke — had been laughed at inside the Braves clubhouse, his teammates dared the slugger to deliver.

“They looked at me,” Harper said, “and they were like, ‘What are you going to do?’”

Well, how about two homers, two strikeouts, four RBIs and one more marvelous game to add to his growing October lore.

Harper answered Orlando Arcia’s mockery with a mammoth three-run homer and a solo shot, glaring at the shortstop on each trot around the bases, and Philadelphia beat Atlanta 10-2 in Game 3 of their NL Division Series on Wednesday night.

Message sent?

“Yeah, I mean, I stared right at him,” Harper said.

Aaron Nola (2-0) and four relievers combined to push the 104-win Braves to the brink of elimination. The Phillies had a chance to advance to the NL Championship Series for the second straight season with a win at home Thursday.

Nola, eligible for free agency after the World Series, tipped his cap in appreciation of a roaring standing ovation after 5⅓ innings. He struck out nine and allowed Ozzie Albies’ RBI single in the third.

Nick Castellanos also homered twice as Philadelphia rebounded from its disappointing loss at Atlanta on Monday night. With Trea Turner and Brandon Marsh going deep as well, the Phillies set a franchise postseason record with six homers in all.

The Chicago Cubs (Game 3, 2015 NLDS) are the only other team to hit six homers in a postseason game. Castellanos and Marsh al-

so hit back-to-back homers in the eighth inning, the fifth time the Phillies achieved that feat in postseason history.

Harper and Castellanos are the fourth pair of teammates in postseason history to each hit multiple home runs in a game, a list topped by Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig in the 1932 World Series.

“(Harper’s) one of the best in the world for a reason,” Phillies slugger Kyle Schwarber said. “When we’re in these moments, this is baseball at its best for him. When it’s at his best for him, anything can happen.”

Harper’s 10 career homers in the NLDS are now tops in baseball history.

“He’s a Hall of Famer,” Braves manager Brian Snitker said. “He’s one of those guys that loves that stage. He’s a special player. You put him in the spotlight, and he’s going to shine.”

Kansas hoops escapes major penalties

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — The Kansas men's basketball program was put on probation and ordered to take down its 2018 Final Four banner but escaped a postseason ban Wednesday, when an independent panel created by the NCAA to handle complex cases downgraded five Level I violations lodged against the Jayhawks.

The violations stem from a 2017 federal investigation into college basketball corruption, and hinged on whether representatives of the apparel company Adidas were considered boosters when two of them arranged payments to prospective recruits.

Kansas officials never disputed that payments were made, only that they had any knowledge of them, and they appealed the violations through the Independent Accountability Resolution Process. Their

hearing took place in April and the ruling was announced less than a month before the start of the season, in which the powerhouse Jayhawks will be a national championship contender.

"Today's decision by the Independent Resolution Panel confirms what we've said since the beginning: the major infractions of which we were accused were unfounded," Kansas Chancellor Douglas Girod and athletic director Travis Goff said in a statement. "Most importantly, the panel decision unequivocally confirms our coaches were not involved in — or had knowledge of — payments to student-athletes."

In a campus news conference with Goff on Wednesday, coach Bill Self said he was eager to move forward "without this cloud hovering above our program."

"I'm very happy that it's over," Self said. "I'm certainly

happy with the end result, and at the same time, don't feel like a celebration mode because this is exactly what we thought the end result would be years ago. And it's taken such a long period of time to get here. But I am pleased with the findings because the findings are accurate."

The panel concluded the apparel company's consultant "was a representative of Kansas' athletics interests" beginning in August 2017, resulting in multiple Level II and Level III violations. But it found "no credible and persuasive information" to suggest that Kansas officials failed to cooperate, lacked institutional control or failed to monitor the basketball program.

Among the penalties, the 2018 Final Four banner was ordered to be removed from Allen Fieldhouse, and any wins involving forward Silvio De

Sousa — identified as "student-athlete No. 1" and central to the case — would be stripped from all records. The school was also given a variety of recruiting restrictions, adding to penalties that were self-imposed last year.

The panel made a point to avoid giving Kansas a postseason ban, though. The Jayhawks, led by Michigan transfer Hunter Dickinson and with several key players returning, are expected to be ranked No. 1 when the preseason AP poll is released next week.

"We have the penalties we've imposed, but we don't want that to be a reflection on current student-athletes, or impose any limitations on current student-athletes," Christina Guerola Sarchio, the chief member for the Independent Resolution Panel hearing the case, said on a Zoom meeting to discuss the case.

Wilson, Aces rout Liberty for a commanding 2-0 lead

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — It's rare that the Las Vegas Aces leave their coach Becky Hammon speechless. After Wednesday night's dominant performance in Game 2 of the WNBA Finals, she was in awe.

A'ja Wilson scored 26 points, grabbed 15 rebounds and the Aces routed the New York Liberty 104-76 to take a 2-0 lead in the best-of-five series.

"The character of this team and their absolute buy into the person to the left or right's success is authentic," Hammon said. "And it's tough to deal with when you share the ball and people are skilled and competitive. They were good tonight. They don't leave me speechless very often, but they executed defensively, offensively shared it — everything we've been asking them to do."

Wilson finished 10-for-16 from the field on her way to recording her 26th double-double this season — including her fourth of the playoffs. She's the third player in WNBA Finals history to have at least 25 points and 15 rebounds in a game.

The defending champion Aces are now one win away from becoming the first team since the 2001-02 Los Angeles Sparks to repeat as champions. Game 3 is Sunday in New York. No team has ever rallied from a 0-2 deficit in the WNBA Finals.

"We know what's on the line and we had to make sure we came out and took care of home court," Wilson said.

Chelsea Gray also had a double-double with 14 points and 11 assists, throwing some beautiful no-look passes for easy baskets. Jackie Young finished with 24 points and Kelsey Plum

had 23. It was the second straight game that the guard trio dominated the Liberty.

Jonquel Jones (22), Breanna Stewart (14), Betnijah Laney (12), and Sabrina Ionescu (10) accounted for 76.3% of New York's points, as the Liberty got just 18 points from six others who played.

New York, which lost by 17 in Game 1, came into the game a perfect 9-0 after losses this year. The Aces made sure that streak ended with a dominant first and third quarter. They opened the game scoring 19 of the first 21 points, with 12 points coming from three-point range. Las Vegas hit seven of its first nine shots — a blistering 77.8% clip — including four three-pointers.

New York, meanwhile, missed nine of its first 10 attempts. "It started with our defense,"

Gray said. "We kept our pressure up, our physicality and we were able to play with our flow offensively."

The Aces' lead grew as high as 21 points in the opening period before taking a 38-19 lead into the second quarter. Las Vegas set a new record for most points in the first quarter of a WNBA Finals. It was also the most points the Aces scored in any quarter all season.

The Liberty came charging back from a 22-point second-quarter deficit behind a 12-0 run, and outscored the Aces 25-14 in the period to cut Las Vegas' lead to eight, 52-44 at halftime. Jones scored 16 of her points in the second quarter.

New York couldn't carry its momentum into the third, however, as the Aces used a 17-3 run to extend their lead to 69-47.