

Israel airstrikes pound Gaza Strip

Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Israeli airstrikes pounded locations across the Gaza Strip on Thursday, including parts of the south that Israel told Palestinians to take refuge, heightening fears among more than 2 million Palestinians trapped in the territory that nowhere was safe. Israel's defense minister told ground troops to be ready to enter Gaza, though he didn't say when the invasion will start.

With authorities still working out logistics for a delivery of aid into Gaza from Egypt, overwhelmed hospitals tried to stretch out ebbing medical supplies and fuel for diesel generators to keep the equipment running. Doctors in darkened wards stitched wounds by cellphone light. A doctor at the largest hospital said staff were using vinegar from the corner store to treat infected wounds.

The Israeli military has relentlessly attacked Gaza in retaliation for a devastating Hamas rampage in southern Israel al-

most two weeks ago. Even after Israel told Palestinians to evacuate the north of Gaza and flee south, strikes extended across the territory and Palestinian militants continued firing rockets into Israel.

Meeting with Israeli infantry soldiers on the Gaza border Thursday, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant urged the forces to "get organized, be ready" for an order to move in. Israel has massed tens of thousands of troops along the border.

"Whoever sees Gaza from afar now, will see it from the inside," he said. "I promise you."

Israel's consent for Egypt to let in food, water and medicine provided the first possibility for an opening in its sealing off of the territory. Many among Gaza's 2.3 million residents are down to one meal a day and drinking dirty water.

Israel did not list fuel as a permitted item, but a senior Egyptian security official said Egypt was negotiating for the entry of fuel for hospitals. The official

spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press.

With the Egypt-Gaza border crossing in Rafah still closed, the already dire conditions at Gaza's second-largest hospital deteriorated further, said Dr. Mohammed Qandeel of Nasser Hospital in the southern town of Khan Younis. Power was shut off in most departments to save it for intensive care and other vital functions, and staff members were using cellphones for light.

At least 80 wounded civilians and 12 dead flooded into the hospital Thursday morning after witnesses said a strike hit a residential building in Khan Younis. Doctors had no choice but to leave two of the incoming to die because there were no ventilators left, Qandeel said.

"We can't save more lives if this keeps happening, meaning more children ... more women will die," he said.

The Gaza Health Ministry pleaded with gas stations to give

whatever fuel they had left to hospitals. The U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, gave some of its little remaining fuel stores to hospitals, according to spokesperson Juliette Touma.

The agency's donation to Gaza City's Shifa Hospital, the territory's largest, would "keep us going for another few hours," hospital director Mohammed Abu Selmia told The Associated Press.

The Gaza Health Ministry said 3,785 people have been killed in Gaza since the war began, the majority of them women, children and older adults. Nearly 12,500 others were injured, and another 1,300 people were believed buried under the rubble, health authorities said.

More than 1,400 people in Israel have been killed, mostly civilians slain during Hamas' deadly incursion on Oct. 7. Roughly 200 others were abducted. The Israeli military said Thursday it had notified the families of 203 captives.

Drones target US troops in Middle East for second day

From staff and wire reports

WASHINGTON — Drone attacks targeted American troops in the Middle East for the second day in a row Thursday, two U.S. officials told The Associated Press.

One drone was shot down, but another caused minor injuries, said one of the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the matter before an official announcement about the incident.

The attacks follow similar drone strikes over the past few days against U.S. and coalition

bases in Iraq amid simmering anger in the region after an explosion at a Gaza hospital killed hundreds of people.

The al-Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria is at a sensitive juncture often used by Iranian-backed militants to ferry weapons to Hezbollah.

In its report on the al-Tanf attack, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Iranian-backed militants launched three one-way attack drones in an early morning strike on the garrison.

The report did not specify the

group responsible.

The attacks resulted in no injuries, and the drones were shot down, the Syrian opposition group based in Britain said.

Iranian-backed militias are said to be planning attacks on U.S. forces in the Middle East under the slogan of "Revenge for Gaza," the report said.

Syrian opposition activists also said Thursday a drone attack was conducted on an oil facility in eastern Syria that houses American troops.

Omar Abu Layla, a Europe-based activist who heads the

Deir Ezzor 24 media outlet, said three drones with explosives struck the Conoco gas field in the eastern province of Deir el-Zour that borders Iraq.

The reports followed two attacks Wednesday aimed at U.S. troops in western Iraq that used one-way attack drones, which are cheap unmanned aircraft with explosive payloads.

U.S. troops at al Asad Air Base were attacked by drones early Wednesday morning, with air defenses destroying one and damaging the other, the U.S. military said in a statement.

More commercial pilots reporting UFOs

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

A growing number of commercial pilots are contributing sightings of so-called unidentified anomalous phenomena to the federal government's annual report that tracks such objects, according to the latest unclassified version released Tuesday.

The report — a collaboration between the Department of Defense and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence — includes UAP sightings from Aug. 31, 2022, to April 30, as well as any not included in earlier reports. Such unidentified pheno-

mena have long been referred to as UFOs, or unidentified flying objects, by the public

“Most reports still reflect a bias towards restricted military airspace, a result of reporting from military personnel and sensors present in such areas,” the report states. “This bias has been lessened by reporting from commercial pilots showing a more diverse geographic distribution of UAP sightings across the United States.”

Most sightings are over U.S. airspace and littoral waters, however, because of “U.S.-centric collection bias,” the report

states.

The All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office, which leads the Defense Department's efforts in tracking such sightings, received 291 UAP reports during the reporting period, 17 of which had occurred between 2019 and 2022 but had not been previously reported.

The latest report brings the total number of UAPs cited in the annual reports to 801.

While none of the sightings in the new report were associated with “adverse health effects” or injuries, “many reports from military witnesses do present

potential safety of flight concerns, and there are some cases where reported UAP have potentially exhibited one or more concerning performance characteristics such as high-speed travel or unusual maneuverability.”

None of the reported UAPs, however, “maneuvered to an unsafe proximity to civil or military aircraft, positioned themselves in flight paths, or otherwise posed a direct threat to the flight safety of the observing aircraft.”

The 15-page report does not include any details or narratives of particular sightings.

Pentagon report: Complex China threats are growing

By **DOUG G. WARE**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — China is ramping up production of nuclear weapons, increasing pressure on Taiwan and becoming more distrustful of other nations, the Pentagon revealed Thursday in its annual report on the strength of the Chinese military.

“This report illustrates the importance of meeting the pacing challenge presented by [China’s] increasingly capable military,” the Defense Department said in an executive summary of the report, formally known as the Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China. “As China seeks to achieve ‘national rejuvenation’ by its centenary in 2049, Chinese Communist Party leaders view a modern, capable and ‘world-class’ military as essential to overcoming what Beijing sees as an increasingly turbulent international environment.”

The Pentagon report, which studies developments in China in 2022 and 2023, states some of the top concerns involve Chi-

nese efforts to expand its national power, strengthen its nuclear weapons, deepen a “no limits” partnership with Russia and resist direct communications with the U.S. military. The report outlines various destabilizing moves China has made recently in the Indo-Pacific region, a vast portion of the world that includes three dozen countries and the Pacific and Indian oceans.

“In 2022, [China] adopted more dangerous, coercive and provocative actions in the Indo-Pacific,” according to a Defense Department fact sheet on the report. “For example, between the fall of 2021 and fall of 2023, the United States documented more than 180 instances of [Chinese] coercive and risky air intercepts against U.S. aircraft in the region.”

On Tuesday, the Pentagon released dozens of images and videos documenting some of those incidents, which included Chinese fighter jets flying dangerously close to U.S. planes. Some Chinese aircraft got so close that the pilots are clearly seen in the images.

Part of China’s recent destabilizing moves in the Indo-Pacific, the report states, involve ratcheting up pressure against Taiwan, an island that Beijing considers a breakaway territory. Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping, have repeatedly stated a desire to unify with Taiwan, a move that U.S. officials believe would almost certainly require a military invasion. Throughout 2022, China’s military increased “provocative” actions in and around the Taiwan Strait, including ballistic missile overflights across the island, sending more Chinese aircraft into Taiwanese airspace and simulating large-scale blockade and firepower strike operations, according to the report.

The report also includes concerns by U.S. military commanders that China might be eyeing the late 2020s as a time to try and unify with Taiwan. The Chinese government is aiming to finish modernizing its military by 2027, which could make it a “more credible military tool” for Taiwan unification efforts.

“At the 20th Party Congress in

2022, Xi Jinping repeated ... that China seeks peaceful unification with Taiwan but would never renounce the use of force as an option,” the fact sheet states.

Many of China’s destabilizing efforts are based on a belief in Beijing that much of the international community is working to isolate and suppress the communist country.

“Beginning [in] late 2022, Beijing launched a diplomatic ‘charm offensive’ targeting European countries in an apparent effort to improve perceptions of Beijing following years of ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy and COVID isolation,” according to the report’s summary. “In March 2023, Xi Jinping told [Chinese] delegates ... that ‘Western countries led by the United States have implemented comprehensive containment, encirclement and suppression against us, bringing unprecedented severe challenges to our country’s development.’”

That distrust has led China to avoid direct communication with the U.S. military, the report states.

Hamas militants likely used N. Korean arms

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Hamas fighters likely fired North Korean weapons during their Oct. 7 assault on Israel, a militant video and weapons seized by Israel show, despite Pyongyang's denials that it arms the militant group.

South Korean officials, two experts on North Korean arms and an Associated Press analysis of weapons captured on the battlefield by Israel point toward Hamas using Pyongyang's F-7 rocket-propelled grenade, a shoulder-fired weapon that fighters typically use against armored vehicles.

The evidence shines a light on the murky world of the illicit

arms shipments that sanctioned North Korea has used as a way to fund its own conventional and nuclear weapons programs.

Rocket-propelled grenade launchers fire a single warhead and can be quickly reloaded, making them valuable weapons for guerrilla forces in running skirmishes with heavy vehicles. The F-7 has been documented in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, said N.R. Jenzen-Jones, a weapons expert who works as the director of the consultancy Armament Research Services.

"North Korea has long supported Palestinian militant groups, and North Korean arms

have previously been documented amongst interdicted supplies," Jenzen-Jones told the AP.

Hamas has published images of their fighters with a launcher with a rocket-propelled grenade with a distinctive red stripe across its warhead, and other design elements matching the F-7, said Matt Schroeder, a senior researcher with Small Arms Survey who wrote a guide to Pyongyang's light weapons.

"It is not a surprise to see North Korean weapons with Hamas," Schroeder said.

The North Korean F-7 resembles the more widely distributed Soviet-era RPG-7 rocket-

propelled grenade, with a few noticeable differences. Jenzen-Jones described the F-7 rocket-propelled grenade as "intended to offer a lethal effect against personnel" given its shape and payload, rather than armored vehicles.

In a background briefing with journalists Tuesday, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff specifically identified the F-7 as one of the North Korean weapons it believed Hamas used in the attack. The Israeli military declined to answer questions from the AP about the origin and the manufacturer of those rocket-propelled grenades, saying the ongoing war with Hamas prevented it from responding.

USS Whitney sails to Mideast; US looks to deter wider clash

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A Navy command and control ship departed its southern Italy base to support U.S. military operations in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, where thousands of Marines are also sailing, as U.S. military operations build up in response to the Israel-Hamas war.

USS Mount Whitney departed Gaeta, Italy, on Wednesday, the Naples-based 6th Fleet said in a statement. The ship is part of a rapidly expanding fleet in the region, where the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier group is already positioned and the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower carrier group is headed on a mission to deter the possibility of a wider conflict.

The Mount Whitney provides added flexibility to the military because it ensures command and control missions can be carried out in international waters, not just ashore.

The ship executed that role in 2011 as the U.S. command hub during the bombardment of Li-

bya, which led to the ouster of Col. Moammar Gadhafi.

Still, the Pentagon has emphasized that the role of the growing military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is about preventing escalation of the war between Israel and Hamas rather than participating in it.

The range of military assets "shows our seriousness and commitment to deterrence," Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh said.

The 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which consists of about 2,000 Marines and sailors, has also left the Gulf of Oman, where it had been operating. That force includes a mix of infantry, aviation and logistics components.

"Positioned at sea, the 26th MEU is equipped to execute amphibious missions, respond to crisis and engage in limited contingency operations across a spectrum of military scenarios," Singh said.

The Marines plan to link up with the Navy's two assigned carrier strike groups.

Kosovo seeks more help from NATO at border with Serbia

Associated Press

PRISTINA, Kosovo — Kosovo's prime minister on Wednesday asked NATO-led peacekeepers to increase their presence on the northern border with Serbia, saying the area was the entry point for illegal weapons and threats to stability.

"Such an increased presence should be focused in guarding the border between Kosovo and Serbia where all Serbia's weaponry has arrived from and the threat to Kosovo comes," Prime Minister Albin Kurti told Maj. Gen. Ozgan Ulutas, the new commander of the Kosovo Force mission, or KFOR.

Kurti has repeatedly said Kosovo police cannot fully guard the 220-mile long border with Serbia and its many illegal crossings used by criminals.

On Sept. 24, about 30 Serb gunmen crossed into northern Kosovo, killing a police officer and setting up barricades before launching an hourslong gunbattle with Kosovo police. Three gunmen were killed.

The incident sent tensions soaring in the region.

Kosovo has a limited number of law enforcement officials in its four northern municipalities where most of the ethnic Serb minority lives, after Kosovo Serb police walked out of their jobs last year.

Fearing an escalation, NATO has reinforced KFOR, which normally has a troop strength of 4,500, with an additional 200 troops from the United Kingdom and more than 100 from Romania. It also sent heavier armaments to beef up the peacekeepers' combat power.

KFOR, which is made up of peacekeepers from 27 nations, has been in Kosovo since June 1999, basically with light armament and vehicles. The 1998-99 war between Serbia and Kosovo ended after a 78-day NATO bombing campaign forced Serbian forces to withdraw from Kosovo. Over 10,000 people died, mostly Kosovo Albanians.

The international pressure has increased recently over the implementation of a 10-point plan put forward by the European Union in February to end months of political crises.

Jordan will back a temp speaker, keep trying

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Refusing to drop out, Republican Rep. Jim Jordan told GOP colleagues Thursday he would back a temporary U.S. House speaker for the next several months as he works to shore up support to win the gavel himself.

Jordan delivered the message at a closed door meeting at the Capitol as the Republican majority considered an extraordinary plan to give the interim Speaker Pro-tempore Rep. Patrick McHenry more powers to reopen the House and conduct crucial business until January.

That's according to Republicans who attended the private meeting and insisted on anonymity to discuss it.

The House was convening at midday Thursday, but it's doubtful now that Jordan will immediately try again to win a vote to become speaker. The hard-fighting ally of Donald Trump has been unable to win,

but he and his far-right allies won't step aside for a more viable GOP nominee.

At the same time, there is a sinking realization that the House could remain endlessly stuck, out of service and without a leader for the foreseeable future as the Republican majority spirals deeper into dysfunction. The impasse has left some Republican lawmakers settling in for a protracted stretch.

McHenry has brushed off attempts to take the job more permanently after he was appointed to the role after the unprecedented ouster of Kevin McCarthy more than two weeks ago.

"I did not ask for additional powers," McHenry said as he entered the morning session. "My duty is to get the next speaker elected. That's my focus."

Elevating McHenry to an expanded speaker's role would not be as politically simple as it might seem. While Democrats

have suggested the arrangement, Republicans are loath to partner with the Democrats in a bipartisan way.

And it's highly unlikely Republicans could vote to give McHenry more powers on their own, even though they have majority control of the House. The affable North Carolina Republican is well-liked by his colleagues and viewed as a highly competent legislator, but the hard-right lawmakers, including some who ousted McCarthy, don't like the idea.

"Asinine," said Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, a leader of far-right House Freedom Caucus.

"It's a bad precedent and I don't support it," said Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., the Freedom Caucus chairman.

Still, installing a temporary speaker for the next few months is backed by many of Jordan's opponents and would give him an offramp so he would not have to declare defeat.

Next steps were highly uncertain Thursday as angry, frustrated Republicans looked at other options. Some predict the House could stay essentially shuttered, as it has been almost all month, until the mid-November deadline for Congress to approve funding or risk a federal government shutdown.

"I think clearly Nov. 17 is a real date," said Rep. Kevin Hern, R-Okla., who leads a large conservative caucus, referring to the next deadline.

What was clear was that Jordan's path to become House speaker was almost certainly lost.

On Wednesday, Jordan failed in a crucial second ballot, opposed by 22 Republicans, two more than he lost in first-round voting the day before. Many view the Ohio congressman as too extreme for a central seat of U.S. power and resented the harassing hardball tactics from Jordan's allies for their votes.

Powell pleads guilty in Georgia election case involving Trump

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Lawyer Sidney Powell pleaded guilty to reduced charges Thursday over efforts to overturn Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 election in Georgia, becoming the second defendant in the sprawling case to reach a deal with prosecutors.

Powell, who was charged alongside Trump and 17 others with violating the state's anti-racketeering law, entered the plea just a day before jury selection was set to start in her trial. She pleaded guilty to six misdemeanors accusing her of conspiring to intentionally interfere with the performance of election duties.

As part of the deal, she will serve six years of probation, will be fined \$6,000 and will have to write an apology letter to Georgia and its residents. She al-

so agreed to testify truthfully against her co-defendants at future trials.

Powell, 68, was initially charged with racketeering and six other counts as part of a wide-ranging scheme to keep the Republican president in power after he lost the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden. Prosecutors say she also participated in an unauthorized breach of elections equipment in a rural Georgia county elections office.

The acceptance of a plea deal is a remarkable about-face for a lawyer who, perhaps more than anyone else, strenuously pushed baseless conspiracy theories about a stolen election in the face of extensive evidence to the contrary.

Barry Coburn, a Washington-based lawyer for Powell, declined to comment on Thursday.

Netflix's crackdown on sharing passwords reels in subscribers

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Netflix on Wednesday disclosed summertime subscriber gains that surpassed industry analysts' projections, signaling the video streaming service's crackdown on password sharing is converting former free-loaders into paying customers.

In an effort to bring in even more revenue, Netflix also announced it's raising the price for its most expensive streaming service by \$2 to \$23 per month in the U.S. — a 10% increase — and its lowest-priced, ad-free streaming plan to \$12 — another \$2 bump. The \$15.50 per month price for Netflix's most popular streaming option in the U.S. will remain unchanged, as will a \$7 monthly plan that includes commercials.

It also raised its prices for subscribers in the U.K. and France.

The Los Gatos, Calif., company added nearly 8.8 million worldwide subscribers during the July-September period, more than tripling the number gained during the same time last year. The increase left Netflix with about 247 million worldwide subscribers, well above the 243.8 million projected by analysts surveyed by FactSet Research.

This year's subscriber inroads have been made despite entertainment labor strife centered in part on writers' and actors' complaints about low payments doled out by video streaming services such as Netflix. The company has been able to withstand the recently settled writers' strike and ongoing actors strike by drawing upon a backlog of already finished TV series and movies in the U.S., as well as productions made in international markets.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police officer gets 12 years for casino heists

NV LAS VEGAS—A Las Vegas police officer was sentenced Tuesday to 12 years in federal prison for stealing nearly \$165,000 in a trio of casino heists, including one in which he was found guilty of brandishing a department-issued weapon.

Caleb Rogers, who has been on unpaid suspension in a solo jail cell since his arrest nearly 20 months ago, apologized before sentencing.

Rogers, 35, brandished the gun during his arrest in February 2022 following a brief struggle with casino security officers in a parking lot not far from the Las Vegas Strip.

U.S. District Judge Andrew Gordon said he understood that Rogers struggled with a gambling addiction and financial troubles and credited him with service to the community.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department said Tuesday that Rogers' job status will be determined by an internal investigation that has not yet been completed.

The judge ordered Rogers to pay \$85,310 in restitution to the casinos.

Rogers was a patrol officer at the time of the heists, which targeted casinos off the Strip beginning in November 2021.

Disneyland fight breaks out in Fantasyland

CA SANTA ANA—Kids were caught in the middle of a brawl at Disneyland as adults threw punches and delivered kicks while bumping into baby strollers during a fistfight in Fantasyland between

the Monstro whale and the spinning teacup ride.

A fight involving at least five adults broke out Sunday in the kiddie land of the Anaheim, Calif., theme park, according to video posted to WDW News Today.

Disneyland security responded quickly to the brief incident between guests in Fantasyland, and the party that initiated the incident was immediately removed from the park, according to Disneyland officials.

2 employees convicted in fatal corn mill explosion

WI MADISON—A federal jury has convicted two senior employees at a Wisconsin corn plant of falsifying records and obstructing an investigation into a fatal corn dust explosion in 2017, Justice Department officials announced on Tuesday.

Corn dust is explosive, and high concentrations are dangerous. Federal regulations require grain mill operators to perform regular cleanings to reduce dust accumulations that could fuel a blast.

Jurors found Derrick Clark, vice president of operations at Didion Milling, and Shawn Mesner, a former food safety superintendent at the company, guilty of multiple safety, environmental and fraud charges. The two men are the latest in a growing list of Didion employees found guilty in association with the 2017 explosion that killed five people at the company's Cambria corn mill.

Didion Milling pleaded guilty in September to charges that its employees falsified environmental and safety compliance records for years leading up to the explosion. The company

agreed to pay a \$1 million fine and \$10.25 million to the estates of the five workers who were killed.

Marker to honor students who integrated university

MS COLUMBUS—In the spring of 1966, Laverne Greene-Leech, along with her best friend, Diane Hardy, and Barbara Turner Bankhead had just graduated from Hunt High School, where Black students attended the segregated school system in Columbus, Miss.

That fall, the three 17-year-olds arrived at the Mississippi State College for Women, along with three graduate students—Mary Flowers, Jacqueline Edwards and Eula Houser— as the school's first Black students.

This week the state will unveil a historical marker on the campus, now known as the Mississippi University for Women, honoring their journey.

Greene-Leech said she and her friends never set out to make history.

"We just wanted an education," she said.

Troopers save deer from cold swim in strait

AK ANCHORAGE—Two deer struggling in the waters of southeast Alaska's famed Inside Passage finally made it to land, thanks to two Alaska Wildlife Troopers who gave the deer a lift in their boat.

Sgt. Mark Finses and trooper Kyle Fuege were returning from a patrol in nearby Ernest Sound to Ketchikan on Oct. 10 when they spotted the deer, agency spokesperson Justin Freeman said in an email.

The deer were about 4 miles

from any island in the channel, floating down Clarence Strait about 14 miles northwest of Ketchikan, Freeman said. They were fighting the current during midtide.

The troopers stopped their 33-foot patrol vessel and shut off the engines about 150 yards from the two deer, which saw the boat and headed toward it.

When the deer reached the boat, they butted their heads against it, then swam up the swim step, at which point the troopers helped them get onboard.

It's common to see deer swimming in southeast Alaska waters, going from one island to another; what's not common is to have deer swim up to a boat and try to get on it, Freeman said.

Once back on land, the deer initially had difficulty standing and walking, Freeman said. But eventually, they were able to walk around slowly before trotting off.

Retired colonel seeking to flip US House seat

AR LITTLE ROCK—A retired Army colonel has announced he's running as a Democrat for a Republican-held U.S. House seat that includes Little Rock and central Arkansas.

Marcus Jones filed paperwork with the Federal Election Commission Monday night for the 2nd Congressional District seat held by Republican Rep. French Hill, who was first elected to the seat in 2014.

Jones retired Sept. 30 from the Army after 29 years of active service, including deployments to Iraq and Kuwait.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

College football has had 1st-half surprises

Associated Press

Halfway through the 2023 season, the national championship race feels more wide open than it has been in years.

But is it really?

"I think I would say if there was a 12-team playoff this year, it would be tremendous," Fox analyst and former Washington quarterback Brock Huard said.

That will have to wait until 2024. For now, the College Football Playoff is still a four-team bracket (and the first rankings are coming up on Oct. 31).

The CFP era has been mostly dominated by super teams. An exclusive group of programs have had a realistic shot at winning a national title. Five teams have split up the nine CFP championships: Alabama has three, Clemson and Georgia have 2 each and LSU and Ohio State each have one.

Coming into this year it looked like defending national champion Georgia and Michigan, coming off two straight playoff appearances, would be a cut above the rest with the usual suspects of Ohio State and Alabama closest behind.

With half the season in the books, No. 1 Georgia and No. 2 Michigan have not lost or budged from their spots at the top of the AP Top 25. But in the eyes of poll voters, the field has gained on the Bulldogs and Wolverines. This week, No. 3 Ohio State, No. 4 Florida State and No. 5 Washington all received first-place votes. No. 8 Texas also made a case for No. 1 before being losing to No. 6 Oklahoma.

The top teams in the country are either unbeaten or in the case of No. 9 Oregon and No. 11 Alabama, beaten only by another highly ranked team.

"NIL has kept players like (Washington quarterback) Michael Penix on campus. The transfer portal has leveled the playing field as far as depth goes in a lot of places," Huard said.

Midseason highlights, lowlights and awards

Surprise team: No. 16 Duke

It has been a chalky season so far. Twenty of the 25 teams currently ranked were in the pre-season poll.

The Blue Devils (5-1) get the nod as the most pleasant sur-

prise halfway through the season. Regression was predicted for coach Mike Elko's team after it won nine games in his debut last year. Instead, Duke started the season by beating Clemson and went toe-to-toe with No. 15 Notre Dame. The back half of the schedule is tough but even an eight-win season would exceed expectations.

Disappointing team: Clemson.

This might be overly harsh, and look foolish in a few weeks. The Tigers (4-2) still look capable of closing strong behind a really good defense. But when Clemson is eliminated from playoff contention and buried in the ACC standings before the end of September it's a disappointment.

Most frustrating for Clemson fans is the offense is still mediocre after the splashy off-season hiring of coordinator Garrett Riley.

In a couple weeks the answer to this question might be No. 18 Southern California.

Best game: Washington 36, Oregon 33.

The Huskies and Ducks played 60 minutes of intense and intriguing football and did so at a remarkably high level. The Pac-12 (and soon-to-be Big Ten) rivals combined to run 145 offensive plays and committed one turnover and 10 penalties.

September sensation: Colorado.

Coach Deion Sanders' transfer-heavy team became must-see TV while getting off to a 3-0 start. Reality has set in since, but the Buffaloes were great for the content business for a few weeks.

Halfway Heisman: Jayden Daniels, LSU.

Washington quarterback Michael Penix Jr. emerged from the Oregon game as the new favorite to win the Heisman Trophy after USC's Caleb Williams played the worst game of his career against Notre Dame on the same day.

Still, Daniels is the choice here. No. 19 LSU (5-2) has serious defensive issues, and if not for Daniels, who leads the nation in total offense at 401 yards per game, the Tigers would likely have another loss or two.

Astros get back into ALCS with big win over Rangers

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Cristian Javier knew right away his fastball was working in Game 3 of the AL Championship Series. Then again, it's October, when he always seems to be at his best for the Houston Astros.

"There's not a better feeling than knowing that your teammates instill their confidence in you," Javier said through his translator. "They expect good things in you and put their trust in you."

The 26-year-old Dominican right-hander known as "El Reptil" delivered again, working into the sixth inning of another solid postseason start, and the Astros beat the Texas Rangers 8-5 on Wednesday night to close to 2-1 in the best-of-seven series.

"He was good. He was very good," Astros manager Dusty Baker said.

Javier held Texas to two runs and three

hits in 5½ innings. He threw 51 of 85 pitches for strikes and walked only one batter.

"These moments are extremely special for me," said Javier, who won for the second time these playoffs, and is 4-0 in his four career postseason starts while allowing only five total hits.

Texas lost for the first time this postseason after a 7-0 start. Three-time Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer was gone after four innings in his first outing in more than a month after recovering from a strained shoulder muscle.

Javier set a franchise record for the defending champion Astros by extending his postseason scoreless streak to 20½ innings until the fifth, when rookie All-Star starting third baseman Josh Jung hit the first of his pair of two-run homers.

"He's got that fastball, his rises a little bit, and hitters have a tough time," Rangers

manager Bruce Bochy said. "He's been throwing well in the postseason. We knew that coming in, we had our hands full."

After going 7-1 in his first 14 starts this year, Javier had a 7.27 ERA over a 13-game stretch. He went more than a month without a win before six scoreless innings in the regular-season finale Oct. 1 at Arizona, an 8-1 victory that clinched the AL West title.

Ryan Pressly, the third reliever, worked the ninth and induced Jung's game-ending, double-play grounder for his third save this postseason.

Jose Altuve homered while Martín Maldonado, the catcher wearing reptile-skin spikes as a nod to his pitcher's nickname, and Yordan Alvarez both had two-run singles for the Astros. They scored five runs with two outs.

Jung hit his second homer in the seventh for the wild-card Rangers.

Goodell: NFL working on minority hires

Associated Press

NEW YORK — NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said the league still needs to hire more minority head coaches.

The latest rule change was aimed at increasing opportunities.

Owners voted Tuesday to push in-person head coaching interviews back one more week until after all divisional playoff games have been completed to slow down the hiring process.

“(Diversity, equity, inclusion) has received more attention in our owners’ meetings than probably any subject we have been discussing in the last five years, and I think that focus has been helpful to the clubs as well as to all of us,” Goodell said Wednesday after the conclusion of the league’s fall meetings. “Our understanding of the priorities, the need to do this and how we do it better. I know the focus is on head coaches, we understand that, but we’re focused on the entire league. How do we con-

tinue to have diversity be a part of our league and make us better?”

“And we reported on the broader diversity numbers both at the league level and the club level, and there is significant progress. But, when you say frustration, I’m probably always frustrated by the pace of progress. Right? It’s never enough for yours truly. So we obviously know we have work to do here, and the clubs are very focused on this, and it has to be a sustainable change, and I think that’s where the ownership is.”

NFL executive Dasha Smith said the league office and the 32 teams are 50% diverse. There are six minority head coaches, including three who are Black. The goal of pushing the in-person interviews back one week is to create more opportunities for candidates.

“We feel like that is a big step forward and, again, enhances our hiring process and that starts obviously this hiring cy-

cle,” league executive Jonathan Beane said.

Brady waits

Colts owner Jim Irsay said there was no conversation at the meetings about approving Tom Brady’s offer to purchase a percentage of the Las Vegas Raiders. Brady already is a part-owner of the WNBA’s Las Vegas Aces, who are also owned by Mark Davis. Brady has reportedly received a discounted purchase price to buy into the Raiders.

“The number just had to be a reasonable number for purchase price,” said Irsay, who is a member of the finance committee that would approve the deal.

The NFL created a special committee on ownership policy several months ago to oversee these matters. Goodell said they’ve met five times in the past 45 days.

Gambling policy

The league recently changed

its gambling policy to increase the penalty for betting on the NFL and decreased it for betting on other sports. The league also reduced suspensions for several players, including Lions wide receiver Jameson Williams.

“We want to try to be as clear as we can with our policies,” Goodell said. “I heard feedback from our players about really understanding that and trying to be a little bit more clear on that. So it was an initiative we undertook. We obviously met with the union about it and we wanted to make sure it was clear that if you bet on the NFL, that’s not acceptable. That’s the key takeaway. We obviously believe that betting inside our facilities or on business is something that’s inappropriate. We monitor that and we’ve actually adjusted that discipline so that that’s lower, but the other one is betting on the NFL and that is the highest violation you can have. And we want to make sure people understand that.”

Source: Jets trading Hardman back to Kansas City

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The New York Jets are trading seldom-used wide receiver Mecole Hardman back to the Kansas City Chiefs, where he was part of two Super Bowl-winning teams, a person with knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The Jets are also sending a seventh-round pick in the 2025 draft to the Chiefs and getting a sixth-rounder that year in return, according to the person who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the teams had not announced the trade, which was first reported by ESPN.

The Chiefs selected the 25-year-old Hardman in the second round of the 2019 draft, and he made the Pro Bowl as a roo-

kie return specialist. Hardman gradually became a bigger part of the Kansas City offense, taking advantage of prolific passer Patrick Mahomes, and wound up making 151 catches for 2,088 yards and 16 touchdowns over four seasons with the Chiefs.

He became a free agent last offseason and signed a \$4 million contract with the Jets, who hoped he could incorporate his speed and versatility into their offense. The deal included a \$2.5 million signing bonus and \$3.6 million in guarantees.

Hardman had a quiet training camp, and undrafted rookie Xavier Gipson eventually surpassed him on the depth chart as a returner and wide receiver. Gipson had the winning punt return in overtime of New York’s season-opening win over Buffa-

lo and has become more involved in the offense, including running the ball out of the backfield on reverses and end-arounds.

Meanwhile, Hardman played only 28 snaps on offense — with one 6-yard catch — and two snaps on special teams. He was a healthy inactive in Week 5 at Denver when the Jets instead elevated wide receiver Irvin Charles from the practice squad because of his special teams skills.

Hardman acknowledged last week that his lack of playing time has been “hard sometimes mentally,” but said he was focused on contributing however he could.

“As of now, I guess there’s just maybe better options,” he said. “Or they just haven’t

called my number yet.”

Trade speculation centering on Hardman began circulating during the past few weeks.

“I just want to play,” Hardman said. “Whether it’s here or somewhere else, I don’t make that call.”

Kansas City became a natural fit given his background with the Chiefs and their own problems at wide receiver.

They allowed Hardman and veteran JuJu Smith-Schuster to sign elsewhere in free agency, and they were confident that a young and untested group of wide receivers would be able to step up. But while rookie Rashae Rice has started to make more plays, the Chiefs have still gotten little from second-year pro Skyy Moore or oft-injured Kadarius Toney.

Aces top Liberty to repeat as WNBA champs

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A'ja Wilson and the Las Vegas Aces secured their place as one of the greatest teams in WNBA history.

The Aces became the first team to repeat as champions in 21 years, getting 24 points and 16 rebounds from Wilson and a defensive stop in the closing seconds to beat the New York Liberty 70-69 in Game 4 of the Finals on Wednesday night.

"It's not easy, as you know. This is what it's all about," said Wilson, who was named the 2023 Finals MVP. "Not a lot of people get to do it. To be short-handed and win is amazing. It makes the win that much better. It's hard to get back to the Finals to win again."

The Aces joined the Los Angeles Sparks (2001-02) and the

Houston Comets (1997-2000) as the only teams in league history to win consecutive titles.

Las Vegas did it without starters Chelsea Gray and Kiah Stokes, who were sidelined with foot injuries suffered in Game 3. Gray, the 2022 WNBA Finals MVP, was constantly in the ear of her teammates during timeouts and shouting encouragement from the sideline. Las Vegas was also still missing veteran Candace Parker, who had foot surgery in late July.

"We've been facing adversity all season, playing without different players. ... We have some professional fighters," said Alysha Clark, who was pressed into the starting lineup Wednesday. "To weather the storm of everything we went through, to show up every sin-

gle day. To be in this moment right now and do it together, it speaks volumes about us, our chemistry."

With the game tied at 64, Las Vegas scored six straight points, including the first four by Jackie Young, to go ahead 70-64 with 1:26 left.

Courtney Vandersloot hit a three-pointer on New York's next possession, then stole the ball from Kelsey Plum, which led to Sabrina Ionescu's foul-line jumper to get the Liberty within one with 41.7 seconds left.

On the ensuing possession, Las Vegas coach Becky Hammon called timeout with 3 seconds left on the shot clock. The Aces got the ball to Wilson on a lob, but Breanna Stewart blocked the shot, giving New

York one last chance.

After a timeout with 8.8 seconds left, the Liberty got the ball to Stewart, who was double-teamed. The ball swung over to Vandersloot in the corner, but her shot missed badly, setting off a wild celebration by the Aces at midcourt.

"It's a play we've ran before, get the ball to Stewie's hand," Liberty coach Sandy Brondello said. "Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. We got it where we wanted to, but didn't make it."

Hammon started WNBA Sixth Woman of the Year Clark and Cayla George in place of Gray and Stokes. Clark did a stellar job on her former Seattle Storm teammate Stewart, holding her to 10 points. George had 11 points.

Brown ready to step up as leader on retooled Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — Early in his NBA career, Jaylen Brown was largely viewed as a player who would be a component of the Boston Celtics' long-term success, rather than a pillar of its foundation.

When big-name stars would become available during free agency, Brown was often a potential trade chip.

As he prepares for his eighth season, his play has forced the narrative to be rewritten.

Last season was defining for Brown, who garnered his second All-Star selection and second-team All-NBA nod while helping lead the Celtics within a game of back-to-back NBA Finals appearances.

In July he cashed in, signing a five-year, \$304 million extension, the richest contract in NBA history. It immediately thrust him onto a tier reserved for only the league's most elite stars.

It comes with expectations and a weight that Brown has yet to experience. Not as the No. 3 overall draft pick in 2016, or even as a teammate of four-time All-Star and teammate Jayson Tatum. But on a new-look Celtics' roster that has lost some of its loudest locker room voices, Brown says he is ready and willing to be the playmaker and leader the Celtics need to make the most of their current championship window.

"I feel great. I feel poised. I feel ready to have a great year," Brown said. "I put in a lot of work trying to make plays, trying to get guys open. Trying to get our offense set. Seeing the game, reading the game. Overall, just being a better basketball player. Can't wait to show it this year."

In addition to locking up Brown long-term, Boston dramatically remade its core this offseason, flipping former Defensive Player of the Year Marcus Smart, reigning Sixth Man of the Year Malcolm Brogdon and rim protector Robert Williams III in a series of trades that netted 7-footer Kristaps Porzingis and defensive stalwart Jrue Holiday.

This all while second-year coach Joe Mazzulla shook up his coaching staff, bringing in assistants Charles Lee and Sam Cassell to help put Mazzulla's stamp on the team in his second season.

It has required a reset of the locker room culture and called for new voices to step up. For most of their careers, Brown and Tatum have been mostly content to let their play speak for them. But Brown acknowledged that this new group will need their voices to be louder than ever.

Still, his approach to this new team dynamic will be straightforward.

"Just stepping into it," Brown said. "I

think we've got a lot of voices that are no longer with us — Blake (Griffin), Grant (Williams), Smart. All very vocal guys. So, I think, definitely, hearing my voice, JT's voice a little bit more this season."

It's what will help turn a collection of talent into a formidable team.

"Can't just throw some guys out there and expect everything to work. Our habits are going to create our future and our success," Brown said. "I'm excited about the journey."

Last season, Brown averaged career highs in points (26.6), rebounds (6.9) and assists (3.5). The same is true for Tatum (30.1 points, 8.8 rebounds and 4.6 assists).

Yet both should benefit from the defensive length and ability to stretch provided by Porzingis and the defense and floor command Holiday brings.

Neither Brown nor Tatum will have to facilitate as much on offense with Holiday's proven ability to create for his teammates.

Still, there will likely be an odd man out at times with a top six featuring Brown, Tatum, Porzingis, Holiday, Derrick White and veteran Al Horford, who are all used to garnering a certain amount of playing time.

"We're all going to have to give up little pieces of ourselves until we get to where we want to get to," Mazzulla said.