

Commander: Palawan ‘key terrain’ to defend

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

PUERTO PRINCESA, Philippines — U.S. Marines are strengthening ties with their Philippine counterparts on an island that borders the South China Sea as the U.S. ally faces an ever-assertive Beijing.

The strategic importance of Palawan, a narrow, 280-mile-long island where Marines have been training this month with the Philippine 3rd Marine Brigade, is “obvious,” said 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit commander Col. Sean Dynan.

“It controls the straits into the Sulu Sea and into the South China Sea and West Philippine Sea,” he told Stars and Stripes while standing on Palawan’s western shore Tuesday.

American and Filipino marines spent that morning on live-fire coastal defense training there as part of the annual

Kamandag exercise.

This year’s training involves more than 1,000 Marines and sailors of Marine Rotational Force-Southeast Asia and the 15th MEU from Camp Pendleton, Calif. Kamandag began Oct. 15 and concludes Friday.

The live-fire training on Palawan took place in Aborlan, a municipality facing the South China Sea that’s about 125 miles east of Sabina Shoal, where Philippine and Chinese coast guard vessels collided Aug. 31.

Philippine authorities allege a Chinese vessel rammed a Philippine ship three times; China claims the Philippine ship instigated the clash. It was the latest in a series of incidents involving the two nations’ vessels in or near the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone.

“It’s key terrain to defend from and key terrain to operate from,” Dynan said of Palawan,

noting that the island hosts two sites approved for use by American forces.

Antonio Bautista Air Base in Puerto Princesa, the provincial capital, and Naval Station Narciso Del Rosario, on Balabac Island in the southern part of the province, are two of nine sites identified for U.S. use under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.

U.S. Marine units have been on Palawan often in recent years, while the 3rd Marine Brigade, based on the island, has grown in capabilities, Dynan said.

“The majority of countries around this area recognize that amphibious capability is a requirement in this environment,” he said. “The U.S. has the longest-standing amphibious force, so this is our time to shine and help.”

Philippine forces on Palawan

have asked for help building skills to coordinate fires, counter-drone training, nonlethal training and establishing ranges, Dynan said. Those forces are also focused on Palawan, said Vice Adm. Alfonso Torres, head of the Western Command at Puerto Princesa, which oversees operations on the island and in the disputed bits of territory in South China Sea.

“We are not just monitoring (the disputed waters),” he said at the coastal defense training event. “We are operating also.”

Palawan’s strategic importance is growing as the Philippine armed forces shift focus from internal to external security, Torres said.

Western Command is at the forefront of that shift, he added.

“We are slowly shifting our forces from the south to the west because of the declining issues with insurgency,” he said.

South: N. Korean troops in Russia are ‘cannon fodder’

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — The 12,000 North Korean troops sent to Russia in support of Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine are not a legitimate force, only cannon fodder, South Korea’s national defense minister said Thursday.

To refer to the North Koreans as “deployed troops” is “merely a phrase,” National Defense Minister Kim Yang-hyun told lawmakers during a televised parliamentary hearing in Seoul.

“Normally when troops are deployed, they ... proudly perform wearing their country’s military uniforms, insignia and national flag,” he said.

The North Koreans, Kim said,

are instead disguised in Russian uniforms, are under Russian military control and doing as they are told.

“I believe that, in reality, the North Korean troops are cannon fodder mercenaries,” he said.

Approximately 1,500 North Korean special forces troops arrived in Russia earlier this month via Russian navy vessels, according to the South Korean National Intelligence Service on Oct. 18.

They were the first wave of 12,000 troops and were issued Russian uniforms, weapons and fake identification cards, according to the spy agency.

A North Korean representative to the U.N. General As-

sembly on Monday said his country’s cooperation with Russia is “friendly, legitimate” and attempts to suggest otherwise were “groundless, stereotyped rumors aimed at smearing the image” of North Korea.

The Korean Central News Agency, the North’s state-run media organization, by Thursday had yet to address reports of the country’s troop deployment.

Kim Yang-hyun told lawmakers he believed North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had “sold out” his forces to Russia and was “not informing his people to prevent it from being exposed.”

Russia may have supplied the North with food and weapon manufacturing supplies in ex-

change for around 3 million artillery rounds, Shin Won-sik, the previous South Korean national defense minister, said in February.

In June, Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged mutual support in the event either country went to war.

The U.S. State Department and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol’s office have alleged the North had been exporting ballistic missiles and artillery shells to Russia for use against Ukrainian forces since 2023.

The U.S. confirmed the existence of North Korean forces in Russia for the first time Wednesday.

Ex-Navy supervisor cited for abuse of power

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A supervising Navy service member was cited for abuse of power after a recommendation to revoke a subordinate's security clearance was determined to be an act of retaliation, a Defense Department inspector general investigation found.

The report from the Office of the Inspector General, which was released Oct. 15, detailed a series of events dating to Oct.

28, 2020, when an employee of the Navy Cyber Warfare Development Group informed his supervisor of a potential mistake in a report provided to the U.S. Fleet Cyber Command, U.S. 10th Fleet.

The supervisor later recommended the subordinate's security clearance be revoked following months of initiating punitive action, which the report said "demonstrated animosity" toward the subordinate.

"Individuals must be free to

come forward to make protected disclosures without fear of reprisal," DOD Inspector General Robert Storch said in a statement. "A culture in which a [Defense Department] official uses a security clearance action as a weapon to silence those who report alleged wrongdoing is antithetical to this core principle. Whistleblowers should be commended for coming forward, not punished."

The subordinate was a program manager from 2018-21 for

the cyber command based at Fort George G. Meade, Md. The supervisor and subordinate were involved in a weekly project called Commander's Update Brief, according to the report. The updates would indicate if a "mission area" was capable, partially capable or not capable.

The subordinate voiced concerns during an October 2020 meeting about misreporting signal intelligence missions as capable when they were not.

Turkey strikes Kurdish targets for second day

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey struck suspected Kurdish militant targets in Syria and Iraq for a second day on Thursday following an attack on the premises of a key defense company that killed at least five people, the state-run news agency reported.

The National Intelligence Organization targeted "strategic locations" used by the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK, or by Syrian Kurdish militia that are affiliated with the militants, the Anadolu Agency reported. The targets included military, intelligence, energy and infrastructure facilities and ammunition depots, the report said. A security official said armed drones were used in Thursday's strikes.

On Wednesday, Turkey's air force carried out airstrikes against similar targets in northern Syria and northern Iraq, hours after government officials blamed the deadly attack at the headquarters of the aerospace and defense company TUSAS, on the PKK.

Defense Minister Yasar Gul-

er said Thursday that 47 alleged PKK targets were destroyed in Wednesday's airstrikes — 29 in Iraq and 18 in Syria.

The assailants — a man and a woman — arrived at the TUSAS premises on the outskirts of Ankara in a taxi they commandeered after killing its driver, reports said. Armed with assault rifles, they set off explosives and opened fire, killing four people at TUSAS, including a security guard and a mechanical engineer. Security teams were dispatched as soon as the attack started at around 3:30 pm, the interior minister said. The two assailants were also killed and more than 20 people were injured in the attack.

There was no immediate statement from the PKK on the attack or the Turkish airstrikes.

In Syria, the main U.S.-backed force said Turkish strikes in the north of the country killed 12 civilians and wounded 25. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said Turkish warplanes and drones struck bakeries, power stations, oil facilities and police checkpoints.

Gaza shelter hit by Israel; cease-fire talks to resume

Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — An Israeli strike on a school where displaced people were sheltering in the central Gaza Strip killed at least 17 people on Thursday, nearly all women and children, Palestinian medical officials said.

The strike came as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Israel had accomplished its objective of "effectively dismantling" Hamas, and that negotiations over a cease-fire and the release of dozens of Israeli hostages would resume in the coming days.

Another 42 people were wounded in the strike in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp, according to the Awda Hospital, which received the casualties. Among the dead were 13 children under the age of 18 and three women, according to the hospital's records.

The Israeli military said it targeted Hamas militants inside the school, without providing evidence. Israel has carried out several strikes on schools-turned-shelters in recent months, saying it precisely tar-

gets militants hiding out among civilians. The strikes often kill women and children.

Blinken, speaking to reporters in Qatar, which has served as a key mediator between Israel and Hamas, said negotiators would reconvene "in the coming days."

"What we really have to determine is whether Hamas is prepared to engage," he said on his 11th visit to the region since the start of the war.

The United States hopes to renew the negotiations after Israeli forces killed top Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza last week, but neither side has shown any sign of moderating its demands from months of negotiations that sputtered to a halt over the summer.

Blinken also announced an additional \$135 million in U.S. aid to the Palestinians, while again urging Israel to allow more assistance to enter the territory.

Health workers in besieged northern Gaza meanwhile warned of a catastrophic situation there, where Israel has been waging an air and ground offensive for more than two weeks.

Harris at town hall: Trump is a 'fascist'

Associated Press

ASTON, Pa. — Vice President Kamala Harris said Wednesday that she believes that Donald Trump “is a fascist” after his longest-serving chief of staff said the former president praised Adolf Hitler while in office and put personal loyalty above the Constitution.

Harris seized on comments by former chief of staff John Kelly, a retired Marine Corps general, about his former boss in interviews with The New York Times and The Atlantic published Tuesday warning that the Republican nominee meets the definition of a fascist and that while in office he suggested that the Nazi leader “did some good things.”

Speaking at a CNN town hall, Harris said they offer a window into who the former president “really is” and the kind of commander in chief he would be.

When asked if she believed that Trump is a fascist, Harris replied twice, “Yes, I do.” Later, she brought it up herself, saying Trump would, if elected again,

be “a president who admires dictators and is a fascist.”

The Democratic presidential nominee said Kelly’s comments, less than two weeks before voters will decide whether to send Trump back to the Oval Office, were a “911 call to the American people” by the former chief of staff. They were quickly seized by Harris as part of her closing message to voters as she works to sharpen the choice at the ballot box for Americans.

“I believe Donald Trump is a danger to the well-being and security of the United States of America,” she said, saying the American people deserve a president who maintains “certain standards,” which include “certainly not comparing oneself, in a clearly admiring way, to Hitler.”

She added that if reelected, Trump would no longer be tempered by people who would “restrain him” from his worst impulses.

Earlier Wednesday, Harris repeated her increasingly dire

warnings about Trump’s mental fitness and his intentions for the presidency.

The comments from Kelly, the retired Marine general who worked for Trump in the White House from 2017 to 2019, built on past warnings from former top Trump officials as the election enters its final two weeks.

Kelly has long been critical of Trump and previously accused him of calling veterans killed in combat “suckers” and “losers.” His new warnings emerged as Trump seeks a second term vowing to dramatically expand his use of the military at home and suggesting he would use force to go after Americans he considers “enemies from within.”

“He commented more than once that, ‘You know, Hitler did some good things, too,’” Kelly recalled to the Times. Kelly said he would usually quash the conversation by saying “nothing (Hitler) did, you could argue, was good,” but Trump would occasionally bring up the topic

again.

In his interview with The Atlantic, Kelly recalled that when Trump raised the idea of needing “German generals,” Kelly would ask if he meant “Bismarck’s generals,” referring to Otto von Bismarck, the chancellor who oversaw the unification of Germany. “Surely you can’t mean Hitler’s generals,” Kelly recalled asking Trump. To which the former president responded, “Yeah, yeah, Hitler’s generals.”

Trump said on his Truth Social media platform that Kelly had “made up a story” and went on to heap insults on his former chief of staff, including that Kelly’s “toughness morphed into weakness.”

Trump’s campaign also denied the accounts. Campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said Kelly had “beclowned himself with these debunked stories he has fabricated” and, after Harris’ statement, accused the Democratic candidate of sharing “outright lies and falsehoods.”

Trump tells supporters to ‘just vote’ at Georgia rally

Associated Press

DULUTH, Ga. — Donald Trump pushed supporters at a rollicking rally Wednesday in Georgia to vote for him — with an early ballot or in-person on Election Day — in a state that will be crucial in the presidential election.

“Just vote — whichever way you want to do it,” Trump told the capacity crowd at an event organized by conservative provocateur Charlie Kirk and the group he founded.

But the rest of former president’s speech and the hours-long lineup that preceded him framed the 2024 presidential election in the starkest terms: Trump, the Republican nominee, lobbed hyperbolic insults at his rival, Vice President Kamala Harris, while a parade of

other speakers, Kirk included, invoked unapologetically religious tones and described Harris and her Democratic Party as evil.

Democrats “stand for everything God hates,” Kirk said, calling the Trump vs. Harris choice “a spiritual battle.”

“This is a Christian state. I’d like to see it stay that way,” Kirk told the 10,000 or so Georgians, who at one point joined Kirk in a deafening chant of “Christ is King! Christ is King!”

Meanwhile, Harris, who is a Baptist, used a CNN town hall in Philadelphia to describe Trump as fascistic, further crystallizing the nation’s polarized posture with less than two weeks until Election Day.

The Trump campaign strate-

gy of encouraging supporters to consider every voting method is a turn from when the former president blamed his 2020 election loss on mail ballots; the number of people voting early has surged this year.

Over 1.9 million voters have cast early ballots in Georgia, where Trump lost by a mere 11,779 votes four years ago to Democrat Joe Biden. Voters nationwide have returned a total of over 23 million advance ballots in the 2024 general election. That’s broken records in multiple states, partly driven by Republicans embracing early voting at Trump’s direction.

Yet as the contest enters its final days, allies like Kirk are searching for people who lean toward Trump but may still sit the election out when it comes

to casting a ballot.

“You need to go to every single person you know and say, ‘Are you voting for Trump?’” Kirk told the crowd.

The 31-year-old Kirk has an outsize role in this year’s election, using his online presence and the organization he founded, Turning Point Action, to make himself one of the nation’s most recognizable conservatives and a central part of Trump’s operation. The former president has put a particular emphasis on courting younger men, the “bro vote,” trying to reach them through podcasts, social media and influencers such as Kirk.

The rally, at the Gas South Arena in Duluth, was filled with Turning Point’s signature pyrotechnics.

Researchers: Russia worsened US storm crisis

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Russia has helped amplify and spread false and misleading internet claims about recent hurricanes in the United States and the federal government's response, part of a wider effort by the Kremlin to manipulate America's political discourse before the presidential election, new research shows.

The content, spread by Russian state media and networks of social media accounts and websites, criticizes the federal response to hurricanes Helene and Milton, exploiting legitimate concerns about the recovery effort in an attempt to paint U.S. leaders as incompetent and corrupt, according to research from the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which tracks disinformation and online extremism.

In some cases, the claims about the storms include fake images created using artificial intelli-

gence, such as a photo depicting scenes of devastating flooding at Disney World that never happened, researchers say.

The approach is consistent with the Kremlin's long-standing practice of identifying legitimate debates and contentious issues in the U.S. and then exploiting them. Previous disinformation campaigns have harnessed debates about immigration, racism, crime and the economy in an effort to portray the U.S. as corrupt, violent and unjust.

U.S. intelligence officials and private tech companies say Russian activity has increased sharply before the Nov. 5 election as Moscow tries to capitalize on an opportunity to undermine its chief global adversary.

By seizing on real concerns about disaster recovery, Russia's disinformation agencies can worm their way into U.S. discourse, using hot-button issues to

undermine Americans' trust in their government and each other.

"These are not situations that foreign actors are creating," said Melanie Smith, director of research at ISD. "They're simply pouring gasoline on fires that already exist."

The content identified by ISD included English-language posts obviously meant for Americans, as well as Russian-language propaganda intended for domestic audiences. Much of the disinformation took aim at the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Democratic administration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. She is her party's nominee in the White House race against former President Donald Trump.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains the Kremlin's prime motivation for spreading lies about the hurricane response. If Russia can persuade enough Americans

to oppose U.S. support for Ukraine, that could ease the way for a Moscow victory, officials and analysts have said.

U.S. intelligence officials have said Russia's disinformation seems designed to support Trump, who has praised Russian President Vladimir Putin and disparaged the NATO alliance and Ukraine's leaders. Posts linked to Russia routinely denigrate Harris, saying she is ignoring storm victims. By contrast, a recent post from Russian state media company RT called Trump "a mystical figure of historic proportions."

Intelligence officials confirmed Tuesday that Russia created a manipulated video to smear Harris' running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz.

The Russian Embassy hasn't responded to messages this week seeking comment about recent allegations by researchers and intelligence officials.

No end for Boeing strike as workers reject latest offer

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Boeing factory workers voted against the company's latest contract offer and remain on the picket lines six weeks into a strike that has stopped production of the aerospace giant's bestselling jetliners.

Local union leaders in Seattle said 64% of members of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers who cast ballots Wednesday voted against accepting the offer.

"After 10 years of sacrifices, we still have ground to make up, and we're hopeful to do so by resuming negotiations promptly," Jon Holden, the head of the IAM District 751 union, said in a statement Wednesday evening. "This is workplace democracy—and also clear evidence that there are consequences when a company mistreats its workers year after year."

A spokesperson for Boeing said officials didn't have a comment on the vote.

The labor standoff comes during an already challenging year for Boeing, which became the focus of multiple federal investigations after a door panel blew off a 737 Max plane during an Alaska Airlines flight in January.

The strike has deprived the company of much-needed cash that it gets from delivering new planes to airlines. On Wednesday, the company reported a third-quarter loss of more than \$6 billion.

Union machinists assemble the 737 Max, Boeing's best-selling airliner, along with the 777 or "triple-seven" jet and the 767 cargo plane at factories in Renton and Everett, Wash.

The latest rejected offer included pay raises of 35% over four years.

NC: Helene caused at least \$53B in damage to state

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The catastrophic flooding and destruction caused by Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina likely caused at least a record \$53 billion in damages and recovery needs, Gov. Roy Cooper's administration said Wednesday.

The state budget office generated the preliminary figure for direct or indirect damages and potential investments to prevent similar destruction in future storms.

Cooper told reporters the state's previous record for storm damage was \$17 billion from Hurricane Florence, which struck eastern North Carolina in 2018.

"It is no exaggeration to describe Helene as the deadliest and most damaging storm ever to hit North Carolina," Cooper said while unveiling his request to the

General Assembly for \$3.9 billion to help pay for repairs and revitalization. He called it a "down payment on western North Carolina's future."

North Carolina state officials have reported 96 deaths from Helene, which brought historic levels of rain and flooding to the mountains in late September.

The storm and its aftermath caused 1,400 landslides and damaged over 160 water and sewer systems, at least 6,000 miles of roads, more than 1,000 bridges and culverts and an estimated 126,000 homes, the budget office said. Some 220,000 households are expected to apply for federal assistance.

The report with Cooper's spending request was released the day before the legislature planned to meet for a one-day session to advance additional Helene recovery legislation.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

No arrests yet in rampage at haunted hayride

NJ COLLINGSWOOD — Police said they made no arrests after hundreds of teenagers went on a rampage last weekend, disrupting a haunted hayride fundraiser, taking over and stealing from a convenience store and brawling through residential neighborhoods in a suburb of Philadelphia.

Collingswood, a western New Jersey town, said it “will be reviewing and revising plans for public events given this new riotous trend.”

Although no arrests were made immediately following the violence in and around Knight Park and the thefts from the Wawa convenience store, an investigation is continuing, the borough’s mayor and police chief said in a statement.

Officials said more than 200 teenagers were involved, including many dropped off by the carloads after 8 p.m. Saturday at the park where the borough’s parent-teacher association was sponsoring the Halloween-season event.

Official resigns, will plead guilty in funds probe

CA SANTA ANA — A high-ranking elected official in Orange County, Calif., has agreed to plead guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery as part of a scheme involving a charity and the misuse of COVID-19 relief funds, prosecutors said Tuesday.

Orange County Supervisor Andrew Do took hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes as he helped ensure that money went to an organization that

claimed to be feeding elderly and disabled people, federal authorities said. The group instead used much of the funds to buy real estate, officials said.

Do, a Republican, resigned his position on the board for the county of 3 million people, effective immediately.

The case comes after a long-running investigation into the Viet America Society, where Do’s daughter, Rhiannon Do, was listed as an officer.

U.S. Attorney Martin Estrada said Andrew Do signed an agreement to plead guilty to conspiracy to commit bribery in connection with the scheme.

Family’s dog is rescued 6 days after home explodes

VA HAYMARKET — The Prince William County rescuers moved cautiously Monday morning, slowly removing Sheetrock, lumber and roof shingles from the wreckage of what six days before had been a home in the Haymarket, Va., area.

From under the rubble, a constant stream of noise confirmed that a live rescue was their purpose.

“Once we heard the barking, and we knew she was alive,” said Gavin Morrison, a firefighter with the Prince William County fire department. “The way she was barking at us and her owners, she was just a scared dog.”

Six days after a gas explosion toppled the home, residents and neighbors led firefighters from Truck 504 in Gainesville to free Brandy, a pit bull mix who somehow survived under a pile of what appeared to be an interior wall, fire officials said.

The explosion happened

more than an hour after firefighters responded to an outdoor gas leak, officials said. Nearby homes were evacuated before the explosion, and no human injuries were reported.

Investigators said a private contractor ruptured the gas line while replacing a water line to the home.

Police: ‘Suspicious’ blast at apartment injured 2

UT LEHI — An early morning explosion in a Utah apartment injured two people and led to the temporary relocation of 90 families in the building because the sprinkler system was damaged, officials in Lehi said Tuesday.

The explosion, which police called “suspicious,” happened just after 4 a.m., spokesperson Jeanteil Livingston said. The couple in the apartment suffered minor injuries and were treated at the scene.

The explosion caused damage inside the apartment and to the building’s fire sprinkler system, leading to water damage in the apartment and some apartments below it, Livingston said.

The cause of the explosion is under investigation.

Exterminators: NY leads with 5 rat-infested cities

NY NEW YORK — New York State leads the nation in rat-infested cities with five, including third-ranked New York City.

Orkin released its annual rundown of 50 cities where it treated the most places for rodents in the year ending Sept. 1. They included Albany, which was 31st nationally, followed by Buffalo at number 41, Rochester at 43 and Syracuse, which narrowly

made the cut by landing the 48th spot on the list.

Earning the top-spot among ratty cities for the 10th year in a row was Chicago. Los Angeles finished second to The Windy City.

Ex-Bosnian prison guard lied to get US citizenship

MA BOSTON — A Bosnian man living in Massachusetts has been convicted of lying to get refugee status and U.S. citizenship by covering up his role as a supervisor of guards at a notoriously harsh and violent wartime prison camp where Serbians were killed, sexually assaulted, tortured and starved three decades ago.

Kemal Mrndzic, 52, had been living in the seaside town of Swampscott, north of Boston, before survivors of the Celebici prison camp identified him as being involved in the beatings and other abuses committed there in 1992, federal authorities said.

He was convicted in federal court on Friday of scheming to conceal his involvement in the persecution of those prisoners; making a false statement to Homeland Security agents about his role at the camp; possessing a fraudulently obtained naturalization certificate and Social Security card; and using a fraudulently obtained passport and certificate of naturalization. His sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 22.

The United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia found that guards at the camp killed, sexually assaulted and tortured Serbian prisoners.

— From wire reports

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World Series could be decided by role players

Associated Press

Aaron Judge, Juan Soto and Gerrit Cole.

Shohei Ohtani, Mookie Betts and Yoshinobu Yamamoto.

No doubt, many of baseball's biggest names will be center stage when the New York Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers square off in a dream World Series matchup between two of the sport's most successful and storied franchises.

Huge payrolls, massive media markets, enormous fan bases. New York with the best regular-season record in the American League at 94-68, and Los Angeles tops in the National League at 98-64.

But even with all that star power on the field, this Fall Classic could be decided by the less-celebrated players batting in front of Soto and Judge, and the grind-it-out guys hitting behind Ohtani and Betts.

Leading off

Yankees: Second baseman Gleyber Torres, who can become a free agent this fall, is playing inspired ball in October after looking lackadaisical at times the past few years. His .400 on-base per-

centage from the leadoff spot in nine postseason games has been critical to New York's offensive production, forcing opposing pitchers to face the likes of Soto, Judge and ALCS MVP Giancarlo Stanton with runners aboard. That leaves less margin for error and means fewer opportunities to work around any of the big sluggers.

Dodgers: Ohtani has struck out 17 times in his first postseason, but the \$700 million superstar has scored 12 runs in 11 games. He's batting .286 with three homers, 10 RBIs and a .934 OPS. He homered on consecutive swings at Citi Field in the NLCS, including a leadoff shot in Game 4. What he hasn't done yet is steal a base, after swiping 59 bags during the regular season to go with his 54 homers, making him the first major leaguer with a 50-50 season. The Yankees have a few left-handers they can use to try to neutralize Ohtani, including starter Carlos Rodón, relievers Tim Hill and Tim Mayza — and Nestor Cortes if he returns from an elbow injury as anticipated.

Who's on first?

Yankees: After missing the Di-

vision Series against Kansas City because of two fractured fingers on his right hand, first baseman Anthony Rizzo returned in the AL Championship Series versus Cleveland and batted .429 (6-for-14) with a double and two walks. The 35-year-old Rizzo has played in 54 postseason games and won a World Series ring with the 2016 Chicago Cubs.

Dodgers: It's hard to know what Freddie Freeman can provide even after six days off going into Game 1. The popular first baseman has been playing with a badly sprained right ankle that caused him to miss three NL playoff games, including two of the final three in the NLCS against the Mets. Los Angeles is averaging 9.3 runs per game without him in October. Can that possibly continue? Freeman, an eight-time All-Star and the 2020 NL MVP, is batting .219 with one RBI and no extra-base hits during the postseason. If he sits, the flexible Dodgers could again move Max Muncy from third base to first and put Kiké Hernández at third.

Short story

Yankees: Gold Glove short-

stop Anthony Volpe had nine hits and eight walks for a .459 on-base percentage during the AL playoffs — a huge improvement over his .288 career mark in two major league seasons. Volpe's newfound patience at the plate toward the bottom of the order has helped turn the lineup over and provide RBI chances for the hitters at the top.

Dodgers: Tommy Edman was acquired from St. Louis in late July and played in only 37 games this season because of wrist surgery and a sprained ankle. Filling in at shortstop for injured Miguel Rojas, the switch-hitter found himself in the cleanup spot a couple of times during the NLCS — an unusual choice at 5-foot-10 and 193 pounds with 59 regular-season homers in six big league seasons. But boy did he deliver. Edman batted .407 with a home run, 11 RBIs and a 1.022 OPS to earn NLCS MVP honors. All-Star catcher Will Smith and slugging outfielder Teoscar Hernández didn't get going against the Mets until Game 6. And with Freeman struggling or sidelined throughout the series, Edman's at-bats behind Ohtani and Betts were pivotal. Maybe they will be again.

Pearsall has chance to shine for 49ers with Aiyuk out

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The plan to ease rookie receiver Ricky Pearsall back into form as he worked his way back from being shot in the chest didn't last long for the San Francisco 49ers.

With Brandon Aiyuk out for the season after tearing ligaments in his right knee Sunday, Pearsall quickly goes from a luxury depth option on San Francisco's offense to one of the key pieces.

"There are definitely a lot of opportunities for us," Pearsall said Wednesday about him and fellow rookie receiver Jacob Cowing. "Obviously, it sucks seeing a guy like B.A. go down — one of our leaders on the team, big playmakers and one of my close buddies who I've known for a really long time. It hurt my heart to see him go down. ... Now we have a lot of rookies who need to step up like myself."

The Niners are short-handed when it comes to playmakers on offense with Aiyuk out for the season and All-Pro running back Christian McCaffrey being sidelined by Achilles tendinitis that has kept him out since August.

The status of two of the team's other top receivers is also in question this week with Deebo Samuel missing practice Wednesday, a day after being released from the hospital after spending two nights there with pneumonia, and Jauan Jennings out with a hip injury that could force him to miss a second straight game.

Pearsall had three catches for 21 yards in his debut, while playing 48 snaps on offense in a loss to the Kansas City Chiefs. There were also some mix-ups, including a bad route he ran on his first target of the game that went for an incompleteness late in the first half.

"It was just a communication error," Pearsall said. "Obviously, we haven't had many reps at that together, me being out. I was just a few yards too deep. I can cut that a little shorter, and the ball would've been right on my chest."

After getting most of his practice time at the "X" receiver spot that lines up on the line of scrimmage, Pearsall got opportunities to play out of the slot and off the line Sunday because of all the injuries.

Coach Kyle Shanahan said he was pleased with how Pearsall performed in that role and hopes to build on it this week when San Francisco plays Dallas.

"I think he's wired to run every route as a receiver," Shanahan said. "Ricky is a plug-and-play with all routes. It's not like he has a small route tree and can only do certain things, so he can run the whole tree."

Unbeaten Navy faces test vs. Notre Dame

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — It took Navy five years, five wins to start the season and a second-year coach to get back into the AP Top 25.

That No. 24 ranking could be on the line Saturday when the Midshipmen (6-0) face No. 12 Notre Dame (6-1) at MetLife Stadium in the New Jersey Meadowlands sports complex.

"It's a great opportunity for our team and our program," Navy coach Brian Newberry said. "These are the kind of games you want to play in. It's a great thing about coming to school here at Navy is you get to play a team like Notre Dame every year: a big game on national stage like that. That's what you want."

Beating Notre Dame will be a big ask for Navy, which lost 42-3 to the Irish in Dublin in August 2023. BetMGM Sportsbook has made Notre Dame a 12½-point favorite in this 97th meeting in a series that dates to 1927.

"We know who we are and what we're able to do, and we have to control that," Navy quarterback Blake Horvath said. "There's nothing that Notre Dame can do that will

change who we are. We can beat ourselves and that's for sure and that's something we haven't done so far this year."

Notre Dame coach Marcus Freeman said the Irish are playing an opponent that vastly improved from last season. The Midshipmen are averaging 44.8 points and 435.8 total yards, including 274.8 rushing.

"I love it," said Freeman, whose team beat Georgia Tech 31-13 last weekend. "We're looking forward to a great challenge. To play a 6-0 team, as the head coach you'd much rather do that than play a team that's 0-6, because it doesn't take much to motivate your guys."

Navy is just about as motivated.

"We can't treat this like it's the Super Bowl," senior linebacker Kyle Jacob said. "It's the next game."

Everyone knows the Super Bowl for Navy will be Dec. 14 against Army at the Washington Commanders' home stadium in Landover, Md.. The teams, each 6-0 for the first time since 1926, could also meet in the American Athletic Conference title game eight days earlier in either Annapolis

or West Point.

Notre Dame knows it is the biggest game on essentially every opponent's schedule. And while the list of longtime Irish rivals includes matchups with schools such as Michigan, Purdue, Southern California and Stanford, the one with Navy carries a different feel.

That's not because these teams have met on the football field every year since 1927, except the pandemic 2020 season. This one has been played in a variety of locations, including Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, San Diego, Cleveland and South Bend, Ind.

Heisman Horvath?

Charlotte coach Biff Poggi said after his team's 51-17 loss at Navy that Horvath deserved Heisman Trophy consideration. There is still a long way to go before that's a possibility, but Horvath and Alabama's Jalen Milroe are the only players in Football Bowl Subdivision with 10 touchdowns each rushing and passing.

"There's a lot of great guys out there with Travis Hunter and Ashton Jeanty," said Horvath, who has amassed 1,509 yards combined on the

ground and through the air through six games. "All I can do is just play my game and control what I can control."

Horvath, a sophomore who ran something similar to offensive coordinator Drew Cronic's system in high school, has been the key to a complete turnaround on that side of the ball. Navy is tied for the best red zone offense in the country, relying far more on the pass than the typical service academy.

New Navy look

Getting ready to face Navy's offense has been an adjustment for teams.

"I think we've been preparing for it since fall camp," Freeman said of Navy's triple-option system. "You're intentional about having certain periods on certain days in fall camp. We attacked it again during the bye week so we have a good foundation for what we've planned on doing and we've enhanced it."

There is one new change. With Horvath having an excellent season throwing, Navy uses a shotgun formation about 45% of the time. In years past, it was mostly on passing downs.

Playoff hopes on line when Boise State visits UNLV

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — If Friday night's game between No. 17 Boise State and UNLV had been played even a year ago, it would've been a notable regional matchup.

But because the College Football Playoff tripled in size to a 12-team field, the game now carries national implications.

The winner takes a major step toward securing a spot in the playoff, which takes the five highest-ranked conference champions, guaranteeing space for a Group of Five program.

"We know it's a big game,"

Rebels coach Barry Odom said. "Don't run from it. Don't make it bigger than it needs to be, but understand the moment that they've earned, they've created for not only our program but our conference. You look around the world of college football this week and in the top five games it's UNLV and Boise."

The Broncos (5-1, 2-0 Mountain West) have a little more margin for error for making the playoffs. Their only defeat was 37-34 to top-ranked Oregon on a last-second field goal, and a loss to UNLV could be made up by winning the league title game.

UNLV (6-1, 2-0) will have a nearly impossible task of trying to make the playoffs if the Rebels lose. Their loss was 44-41 in overtime to Syracuse on Oct. 4.

"I'm shocked they're not ranked in the Top 25," said Boise State coach Spencer Danielson, pointing out UNLV won at Houston, Kansas and Oregon State. "They deserve that for sure."

This game is not only an opportunity for the Broncos to make an impression on a national level, but also continue to push the Heisman Trophy case for Ashton Jeanty. He leads the nation with 1,248 yards rushing

and averages 9.9 per carry.

BetMGM lists Jeanty as the 2-1 favorite to become the first player from outside a power conference since BYU quarterback Ty Detmer in 1990 to hold college football's most coveted individual trophy.

Odom used several words to describe Jeanty, who averages 208 yards rushing per game, but found he couldn't come up with adequate words "to give him the respect of how great of a player he is. I don't know if there are any comparisons. People have asked me to compare him to someone. I can't. He's unique."

Bucks roll past 76ers in season opener

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Damian Lillard scored 30 points, Giannis Antetokounmpo added 25 and the Milwaukee Bucks defeated the Philadelphia 76ers 124-109 in the season opener for both teams Wednesday night.

Lillard scored 15 points in the third quarter and finished with six 3-pointers, nine rebounds and five assists.

Tyrese Maxey scored 25 points and Andre Drummond had 13 points and 11 rebounds for Philadelphia, which was without injured stars Joel Embiid and Paul George, who are sidelined due to knee injuries.

Pacers 115, Pistons 109: Myles Turner scored 20 points, Pascal Siakam and Benedict Mathurin had 19 each and visiting Indiana rallied to beat Detroit, spoiling coach J.B. Bickerstaff's debut.

Detroit led by 12 points and was ahead after each of the first three quarters in a closely contested game with 13 lead changes and four ties, but couldn't hang on for the win.

Cade Cunningham scored 22 of his 28 points in the second half for the Pistons, whose trio of veteran newcomers had solid performances.

Cavaliers 136, Raptors 106: Evan Mobley scored 25 points, Donovan Mitchell had 21 and visiting Cleveland routed Toronto.

Raptors forward Scottie Barnes shot 3-for-14 and scored nine points in a disappointing season debut.

Toronto's Chris Boucher scored 18 points off the bench, Gradey Dick added 16 and guard Immanuel Quickley scored 13 points in 14 minutes before exiting because of an injury.

Magic 116, Heat 97: Paolo Banchero scored 33 points and grabbed 11 rebounds, Franz Wagner scored 23 and visiting Orlando rolled past Miami in the opener for both teams.

Gary Harris added 18 for Orlando, all on 3-pointers. The Magic were 18-for-49 from 3-point range.

Terry Rozier scored 19 for Miami.

Hawks 120, Nets 116: Trae Young had 30 points, Onyeka Okongwu added a career-high 28 and host Atlanta opened the season with a victory over Brooklyn.

Cam Thomas led the Nets with 36 points, but it wasn't enough to prevent a loss for Jordi Fernández in his NBA head coaching debut.

Atlanta's Jalen Johnson, coming off a \$150 million contract extension, had 11 points and 10 rebounds.

Pelicans 123, Bulls 111: Brandon Ingram scored 33 points, icing the game with a baseline turnaround jumper

with 1:46 to go, and host New Orleans overcame Zion Williamson's absence to defeat Chicago in both clubs' season opener.

Williamson was ruled out shortly before the game because of an illness, marking his 207th missed regular-season game since he was drafted No. 1 overall in 2019.

Zach LaVine scored 27 points, and Nikola Vucevic had 21 points and 11 rebounds for the Bulls, who trailed for most of the second half and by as many as 16 points in the fourth quarter.

Hornets 110, Rockets 105: LaMelo Ball had 34 points and 11 assists in his return from an ankle injury and Grant Williams made a go-ahead 3-pointer with 40 seconds left to give visiting Charlotte a win over Houston.

Jalen Green scored five quick points to tie it before Williams put the Hornets on top with his step-back 3 to make it 106-103. Ball, who was playing in his first regular-season game since Jan. 26, added two free throws after that to secure the victory.

Green led Houston with 28 points and Alperen Sengun added 25 points and 18 rebounds in his return after missing the last 19 games of last season with a severely sprained ankle.

Grizzlies 126, Jazz 124: Ja Morant had 22 points, 10 assists and five rebounds in his return to action to lead visiting Memphis to a victory over Utah.

Morant appeared in just nine games last season after serving a 25-game league suspension before suffering a season-ending shoulder injury. Santi Aldama scored 27 points and Desmond Bane added 24 more for the Grizzlies.

Lauri Markkanen had 35 points and nine rebounds for Utah.

Warriors 139, Trail Blazers 104: Stephen Curry had 17 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds before sitting for the fourth quarter, and visiting Golden State opened the season with a rout of Portland.

Buddy Hield had 22 points off the bench for the Warriors, who missed out on the playoffs last year.

Portland was led by Scoot Henderson with 22 points off the bench. Shaedon Sharpe didn't play because of a shoulder injury.

Suns 116, Clippers 113 (OT): Kevin Durant scored 25 points, Bradley Beal added 24 and visiting Phoenix spoiled Los Angeles' Intuit Dome debut in the opener for both teams.

James Harden had 29 points and 12 rebounds for the Clippers. He had a chance to send it to double overtime, but missed the second of two free throws with 4.8 seconds remaining.

Ivica Zubac had 21 points for the Clippers, but fouled out with 2:15 remaining in overtime.

Caps win 5th in a row, hand Flyers 6th straight loss

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Connor McMichael scored twice, Alex Ovechkin got an empty-netter for the 855th goal of his NHL career and the Washington Capitals beat the Philadelphia Flyers 6-3 Wednesday night for their fifth consecutive victory.

The Flyers clawed back from a four-goal deficit to make things interesting, but they still lost their sixth in a row since winning their season opener. They have been outscored 29-14 during this skid that has continued to snowball thanks to a mix of turn-

overs, bad goaltending and not enough offense to compensate.

Washington was undisciplined in almost blowing a big lead but kept rolling after getting 26 saves from Logan Thompson and production from up and down the lineup. In addition to McMichael's second and third goals of the season, fourth-line forwards Taylor Raddysh and Nic Dowd also scored for the Capitals, and Pierre-Luc Dubois also had an empty-net goal.

Philadelphia's Ivan Fedotov allowed four goals on 24 shots in his fourth NHL start and

still has yet to win a game. Travis Konecny, Owen Tippett and Matvei Michkov had the Flyers' goals.

Ovechkin, who has two goals this season, is now 40 from breaking Wayne Gretzky's career record.

Thompson denied Morgan Frost on a breakaway late in the second period, then made a series of saves the following shift before intermission to maintain a two-goal lead when the Flyers were pressing.

The Flyers have been outscored 13-5 in second periods this season.