

Separatist regions push to join Russia

From wire reports

The Kremlin is moving hastily to stage sham votes on annexing the regions of Ukraine its forces still control, after Kyiv's military drove Russian troops from large areas of territory taken in their seven-month-old invasion.

The so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, as well as Kherson, may hold their votes as soon as this weekend, Interfax quoted officials as saying Tuesday. Ukraine and its allies have denounced the referendums as illegal and few countries are likely to recognize the results. Russian-backed officials in Zaporizhzhia, where they don't hold even the regional capital, still vowed to move quickly toward a vote.

In Moscow, officials said they'd grant the regions' requests to be annexed if they made them. Former President Dmitry Medvedev, who is now deputy head of the Security Council, said the annexation would be "irreversible" and enable Russia to use "all possible force in self-defense" in the newly-acquired territory.

The move threatens to escalate the conflict even further, potentially giving Presi-

dent Vladimir Putin the formal legal basis to use nuclear weapons to defend what Moscow would consider Russian territory. Annexation, even though it's sure to be rejected internationally, would likely torpedo any future peace talks, as Russia has said it won't cede territory it considers its own while Kyiv has refused to give up any land taken by Moscow.

Putin is laying down another ultimatum to Kyiv and its U.S. and European allies with the implicit threat of nuclear escalation, said Tatiana Stanovaya, founder of the R.Politik research group.

"To guarantee 'victory,' Putin is ready to immediately hold referendums to gain the right [as he understands it] to use nuclear weapons to defend Russian territory," she said. "Either Ukraine retreats, or it's nuclear war."

President Joe Biden over the weekend said any use by Russia of chemical or tactical nuclear weapons would draw a "consequential" response. "They'll become more of a pariah in the world than they ever have been," he told 60 Minutes. "And depending on the extent of what they do will determine

what response would occur."

Annexation would help the Kremlin reassure supporters there worried by its hurried retreat from other territories in the face of the Ukrainian advance in the last few weeks.

"We're absolutely certain of the results of the referendum and determined to carry it out as soon as possible," Denis Pushilin, Russian-backed head of the Donetsk separatist republic, said on his Telegram channel as he made a televised appeal to Putin to accept the region as soon as possible.

By making the occupied zones formally part of Russia under the country's laws, the votes may also allow the Kremlin to deploy conscript troops there, in addition to the current force of contract soldiers and military contractors. The Kremlin so far has avoided full mobilization, aiming to limit the impact of the war on the broader population.

But with the referendums, Russia is "moving at full speed to create the legal basis for partial mobilization," said Igor Girkin, a former Russian intelligence colonel who became a commander of the Moscow-backed separatist forces in Donbas in 2014.

AFN invites Pacific audiences to test streaming app

By KELLY AGEE

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Get your electronic devices ready because American Forces Network is inviting audience members in Japan and South Korea to test its new video-on-demand and live-streaming app starting Tuesday.

AFN Now is the biggest technological leap for the network since its multichannel, satellite-delivered television services were launched in 1997, according to a news release Tuesday from the Defense Media Activity.

"It gives us the opportunity to accelerate AFN digitally with content delivery and customer experience while preserving the integrity and history of the AFN brand," DMA director Hal Pittman said in the release.

AFN Now will deliver AFN television programming to U.S. service members, fam-

ilies and retirees living overseas on devices they use every day, such as smartphones, tablets and computers. The app is free to download and use to watch AFN programming with internet access, according to the release.

Typical AFN programming consists of TV shows popular in the United States, along with professional sports, movies and news programs.

"We're looking for as many people as possible to register, download, and test AFN Now before the worldwide release," Mike Drumheller, director of the AFN Broadcast Center in Riverside, Calif., said in the release. "We want honest and useful audience feedback on the app's performance to make it the best media platform possible for the greatest audience in the world."

Verizon Media built the streaming service which has been in the works for three years due to AFN's negotiations with more

than 40 major program owners to get licensing approval to place their shows on the app, the release states.

"Some of the shows on AFN Now can be viewed no matter where you are, while others are limited to U.S. military installation IP ranges and restricted to on base or on post viewing," AFN chief of television Karreem Lowe said in the release.

AFN Pacific's commander, Air Force Maj. Kenneth Scholz, said he did not know which programs would be available off base, or when the AFN Now trial would conclude.

During the app's testing period the AFN team will evaluate the app's functionality and performance on devices including Apple iPhones, tablets and Apple TVs; Android phones and tablets; and in-home digital media platforms including Amazon Fire, Roku and smart TVs with app serviceability.

Sailors struggle to remember warship fire

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — More than a half dozen former crewmembers of the USS Bonhomme Richard gave testimony on the first day of the arson trial of a young sailor Monday, describing a harrowing, chaotic scene as they confronted an inferno on the Navy warship with shoddy equipment.

With the thick black smoke quickly enveloping the ship, many said it was difficult to know what was going on. Now more than a year later, several of them who testified at the court martial of 21-year-old Ryan Sawyer Mays said that they are struggling to recall details from that July 12, 2020 morning, posing a challenge to the prosecution.

The prosecution has presented no physical evidence proving the 21-year-old sailor set the USS Bonhomme Richard on fire, something the defense has highlighted. Key witnesses have also changed their stories or their testimonies have contradicted each other, including on Monday.

According to prosecutors, Mays was an arrogant sailor angry about being assigned to deck duty after failing to become a Navy SEAL — and he made the Navy pay in a big way.

“Your honor, it was a mischievous act of defiance gone wrong,” Cmdr. Leah O’Brien told the judge during opening statements for the prosecution at Naval Base San Diego.

Mays’ military defense counsel, Lt. Taylor Haggerty, countered in her opening remarks that it’s the Navy who is wrong. Haggerty said investigators concluded Mays did it before the probe was complete and then ignored evidence and witness accounts that didn’t fit into that narrative so they could find a scapegoat for the loss of a billion-dollar ship that was mismanaged by senior officers.

Once investigators pinned the blame on Mays, who was known for being sarcastic and flippant, “nothing else mattered,” Haggerty said.

“Just because the government eliminates, ignores pieces of evidence, it doesn’t mean the court should,” she told the court. Haggerty told the judge by the end of the trial, which is supposed to last two weeks, “you will exonerate this sailor and find him not guilty of both charges.”

Mays is charged with aggravated arson and the willful hazarding of a vessel. He has denied any wrongdoing. He waived his right to a jury and has put his fate in the hands of the Navy judge, Capt. Derek Butler.

The July 2020 blaze burned for nearly five days and sent an acrid smoke over San Diego, damaging the amphibious assault ship so badly that it had to be scuttled. It marked one of the worst noncombat warship disasters in recent memory.

About 115 sailors were on board, and nearly 60 were treated for heat exhaustion, smoke inhalation and minor injuries.

The Navy warship’s former fire marshal became emotional Monday when asked by the prosecution to recall what he did that day.

He took a moment before responding.

“I’m still trying to work through this in therapy myself,” Petty Officer Jeffrey Garvin told the court at Naval Base San Diego. “I apologize.”

Later, he repeated, “I can’t remember a lot.”

Defense lawyers say investigators brushed aside the fact that lithium batteries were stored next to highly combustible material such as cardboard boxes, in violation of ship protocol.

The prosecution said one sailor told investigators he saw Mays go down to the ship’s lower vehicle storage area before the fire broke out there, while another sailor who escorted Mays to the brig said she overheard Mays say he did it. The defense said he was being sarcastic after denying any wrongdoing during over 10 hours of questioning by investigators.

The defense said investigators, meanwhile, dismissed details that pointed to another sailor, who was later fired from the Navy.

Navy exchange ordering thousands more rank tabs

By KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

Some sailors are concerned that rank tabs will be in short supply as the Oct. 1 deadline approaches for wearing the insignia on their uniforms.

The black rank insignia, normally associated with the Navy parka, became an optional uniform item in October 2020 as easier to recognize on the Navy camouflage working uniforms, according to a Navy administrative change.

But the Navy on May 27 made the rank tabs mandatory on all working uniforms. The one exception is for sailors in tactical training and operations who are not required to wear rank tabs, at their commander’s discretion.

Sailors poured out their concerns about a shortage of the black insignia tabs after MyNavy human resources posted the deadline

reminder on its official Facebook page on Friday.

“Attention Shipmates,” the post states. “Here’s your uniform reminder: Starting October 1, 2022, wear of the black cold weather parka rank insignia on all uniform components with rank tabs will be mandated. Follow the link for all the details!”

More than 1,200 comments were written in response to the MyNavy post, many of them expressing skepticism that supplies would conform to the deadline.

“How can we get them if they are sold out everywhere and backlogged,” wrote Petty Officer 3rd Class Luke Oberle, of Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Fla., in response.

In an email to Stars and Stripes on Monday, Oberle said he tried to buy the tab from his local exchange website and discovered it backlogged by orders by about five months.

The Navy Exchange Service Command in Virginia Beach, Va., is making plans to replenish its stock of rank tabs, a spokeswoman said.

“We recognize that stock levels at some Navy Exchange Uniform Shops may look sparse as locations are selling out in as little as 24 hours after being restocked,” exchange spokeswoman Kristine Sturkie told Stars and Stripes by email Tuesday. “The Navy Exchange Service Command team is aware and continues to track minute by minute stock levels, while updating replenishment schedules based on that data.”

Since May, sailors have purchased 276,000 black Navy rank tabs, nearly 20,000 per week, she said.

The exchange command has 59,000 black rank tabs in stock with 69,000 on order, 10,000 tabs short of the amount sailors have ordered, Sturkie said.

Ad spending shows Dems depending on abortion rights

BY STEVE PEOPLES AND
AARON M. KESSLER

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats are pumping an unprecedented amount of money into advertising related to abortion rights, underscoring how central the message is to the party in the final weeks before the November midterm elections.

With the most intense period of campaigning only just beginning, Democrats have already invested more than an estimated \$124 million this year in television advertising referencing abortion. That's more than twice as much money as the Democrats' next top issue this year, "character," and almost 20 times more than Democrats spent on abortion-related ads in the 2018 midterms.

The estimated spending figures, based on an Associated Press analysis of data provided by the nonpartisan research firm AdImpact, reveal the extent to which Democrats are betting their majorities in Congress and key governorships on one issue. That's even as large majorities of Americans think the country is heading in the wrong direction

and the economy is in poor condition.

The advertising numbers also reveal just how sharply Republicans have shied away from abortion in their paid advertising in the weeks since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, a decades-long goal of the GOP. (The AdImpact data captures every single time a campaign ad is aired on TV, and estimates a cost associated with those airings.)

Since the high court's decision in June to eliminate the constitutional right to abortion, roughly 1 in 3 television advertising dollars spent by Democrats and their allies have focused on abortion. Much of the spending is designed to attack Republicans on the ballot this fall who have long opposed abortion rights and are currently engaged in a state-by-state push to restrict abortion rights or outlaw the practice altogether.

The Democrats' unprecedented investment in abortion messaging on TV this year through Sept. 18 is larger than the Republican Party's combined national investment in ads relating to the economy, crime and immigration.

"With less than 60 days until the election,

we refuse to stand by while out-of-step, anti-choice Republicans try to control our bodies and our futures and simultaneously lie about it to voters," said Melissa Williams, executive director of Women Vote!, an outside group that has invested more than \$4 million in abortion-related ads this year. "We are ensuring that each voter knows the candidates that stand with them and against them in protecting this right."

The Democrats' overwhelming focus on abortion may not be surprising given the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* and the wave of Republican-backed abortion bans in more than a dozen states that followed. But the strategy still marks a sharp departure from the party's focus in recent years on former President Donald Trump and other issues like the economy, education and health care.

In the 2018 midterm elections, for example, Democrats spent less than \$6 million on abortion-related television advertising. That's compared to the \$51 million that Democrats invested in Trump-related ads, \$49 million on health care and \$46 million on education, according to AdImpact.

Congress eyes strongest response yet to Jan. 6 attack

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Democrats are voting this week on changes to a 19th century law for certifying presidential elections, their strongest legislative response yet to the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection and former President Donald Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 election defeat.

The vote to overhaul the Electoral Count Act, expected Wednesday, comes as a bipartisan group of senators is moving forward with a similar bill. Lawmakers in both parties have said they want to change the arcane law before it is challenged again.

Trump and his allies tried to exploit the law's vague language in the weeks after the election as they strategized how they could keep Joe Biden out of office, including by lobbying Vice President Mike

Pence to simply object to the certification of Biden's victory when Congress counted the votes on Jan. 6.

Pence refused to do so, but it was clear afterward that there was no real legal framework, or recourse, to respond under the 1887 law if the vice president had tried to block the count.

The House and Senate bills would better define the vice president's ministerial role and make clear that he or she has no say in the final outcome.

Both versions would also make it harder for lawmakers to object if they don't like the results of an election, clarify laws that could allow a state's vote to be delayed, and ensure that there is only one slate of legal electors from each state.

Even though they are similar, the House version is more expansive than the Senate bill.

Rising STD cases prompt call for prevention changes

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sharply rising cases of some sexually transmitted diseases — including a 26% rise in new syphilis infections reported last year — are prompting U.S. health officials to call for new prevention and treatment efforts.

"It is imperative that we ... work to rebuild, innovate, and expand (STD) prevention in the U.S.," said Dr. Leandro Mena of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in a speech Monday at a medical conference on sexually transmitted diseases.

Infections rates for some STDs, including gonorrhea and syphilis, have been rising for years. Last year the rate of syphilis cases reached its highest since 1991 and the total number of cases hit its highest since 1948. HIV cases are also on the rise, up 16% last year.

And an international outbreak of monkeypox, which is being spread mainly between men who have sex with other men, has highlighted the nation's problem with diseases spread mostly through sex.

David Harvey, executive director of the National Coalition of STD Directors, called the situation "out of control."

Officials are working on new approaches to the problem, such as home-test kits for some STDs that will make it easier for people to learn they are infected and to take steps to prevent spreading it, Mena said.

Another expert said a core part of any effort must work to increase the use of condoms.

"It's pretty simple. More sexually transmitted infections occur when people are having more unprotected sex," said Dr. Mike Saag, an infectious disease expert.

Fiona hits Turks, Caicos after Puerto Rico

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Hurricane Fiona blasted the Turks and Caicos Islands on Tuesday as a Category 3 storm after devastating Puerto Rico, where most people remained without electricity or running water.

Hurricane conditions were slamming Grand Turk, the small British territory's capital island, on Tuesday morning after the government imposed a curfew and urged people to flee flood-prone areas.

The storm was centered just 10 miles from the island, with hurricane-force winds extending up to 30 miles from the center.

"Storms are unpredictable," Premier Washington Misick

said in a statement from London, where he was attending the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. "You must therefore take every precaution to ensure your safety."

Fiona had maximum sustained winds of 115 mph and was moving north-northwest at 10 mph, according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center, which said the storm is likely to strengthen further into a Category 4 hurricane as it approaches Bermuda on Friday.

It was forecast to weaken before running into easternmost Canada over the weekend.

The broad storm kept dropping copious rain over the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, where a 58-year-old man

died after police said he was swept away by a river in the central mountain town of Comerio.

Another death was linked to a power blackout — a 70-year-old man was burned to death after he tried to fill his generator with gasoline while it was running, officials said.

Parts of the island had received more than 25 inches of rain and more was falling Tuesday.

National Guard Brig. Gen. Narciso Cruz described the resulting flooding as historic.

"There were communities that flooded in the storm that didn't flood under Maria," he said, referring to the 2017 hurricane that caused nearly 3,000 deaths. "I've never seen any-

thing like this."

Cruz said 670 people have been rescued in Puerto Rico, including 19 people at a retirement home in the north mountain town of Cayey that was in danger of collapsing.

"The rivers broke their banks and blanketed communities," he said.

Some were rescued via kayaks and boats while others nestled into the massive shovel of a digger and were lifted to higher ground.

He lamented that some people refused to leave their home, adding that he understood them.

"It's human nature," he said. "But when they saw their lives were in danger, they agreed to leave."

Texas sheriff investigating flights to Martha's Vineyard

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — A Texas sheriff on Monday opened an investigation into two flights of migrants sent to Martha's Vineyard by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, but did not say what laws may have been broken in putting 48 Venezuelans on private planes last week from San Antonio.

Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar, an elected Democrat, railed against the flights that took off in his city as political posturing. But he said investigators had so far only spoken to attorneys representing some of the migrants and did not name any potential suspects who might face charges.

He also did not mention DeSantis in a news conference that appeared to mark the first time a law enforcement official has said they would look into the flights.

"I believe there is some criminal activity involved here," Salazar said. "But at present we are trying to keep an open mind and

we are going to investigate to find out what exact laws were broken if that does turn out to be the case."

DeSantis' office responded with a statement that said the migrants had been given more options to succeed in Massachusetts.

"Immigrants have been more than willing to leave Bexar County after being abandoned, homeless, and left to fend for themselves," DeSantis spokesperson Taryn Fenske said. "Florida gave them an opportunity to seek greener pastures in a sanctuary jurisdiction that offered greater resources for them, as we expected."

The Venezuelan migrants who were flown to the wealthy Massachusetts island from San Antonio on Wednesday said they were told they were going to Boston. Julio Henriquez, an attorney who met with several migrants, said they "had no idea of where they were going or where they were."

Damage assessments begin in flooded remote Alaska villages

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Authorities in Alaska were making contact Monday with some of the most remote villages in the United States to determine their food and water needs, as well as assess the damage after a massive storm flooded communities on the state's vast western coast this weekend.

No one was reported injured or killed during the massive storm — the remnants of Typhoon Merbok — as it traveled north through the Bering Strait over the weekend. Damage to homes, roads and other infrastructure, however, is only starting to be revealed as floodwaters recede.

About 21,000 residents living in the small communities dotting a 1,000-mile stretch of Alaska's western coastline — a distance longer than the entire length of California's coast — were impacted by the storm.

Many homes throughout the region were flooded, and some were knocked off their founda-

tions by the rushing waters propelled by strong winds. Officials were starting the process of determining damage to roads, ports, seawalls and water and sewage systems.

The state transportation department said most airports in the area were open, and officials were making either temporary or permanent repairs to the runways that still have issues, said Jeremy Zidek, a spokesperson for the Alaska Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

Coastal flood warnings were extended for an area north of the Bering Strait since water will be slow to recede in towns like Kotzebue, Kivalina and Shishmaref, National Weather Service meteorologist Kaitlyn Lardeo said.

Shishmaref had seen water surges 5.5 feet above the normal tide level, while Kotzebue and Kivalina had smaller surges, but both were still without power Monday, she said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Court suspends lawyer who wanted nude photos

KY MOREHEAD — The Kentucky Supreme Court suspended an Eastern Kentucky prosecutor who promised to help a defendant in exchange for nude photos.

Ronnie Goldy is the commonwealth's attorney for Bath, Menifee, Montgomery and Rowan counties. Although the court temporarily suspended him, it said in its order that only the General Assembly can remove Goldy from office through impeachment, the Courier Journal reported.

The newspaper previously reported that Goldy exchanged 230 pages of Facebook messages with a female defendant. Goldy testified at a hearing that he didn't remember sending the messages but did not deny having done so. The woman has testified that in exchange for photos, Goldy withdrew warrants and had cases continued. She also said she had sex with the prosecutor.

Officials: Deputy shoots suspect in brick attacks

CA FRESNO — A sheriff's deputy shot and killed a man who attacked at least two people with a large rock or brick during a fight outside a home in central California, authorities said.

Following reports of a family disturbance with injuries, deputies found shattered windows and blood inside and outside the residence in an unincorporated area north of downtown Fresno, sheriff's officials said.

There was a fight involving up to eight people and two victims

— a man and a woman — were bleeding profusely, according to Lt. Arley Terrence with the Fresno County Sheriff's Office.

The deputies confronted the man believed to be responsible for the injuries, ordering him to drop a "large rock or brick," Terrence said. When the man refused to comply, one of the deputies opened fire, striking the man, officials said.

The man, who was not identified, died at a hospital, the Fresno Bee reported.

Menhaden dump brings calls for more regulation

LA BATON ROUGE — Louisiana conservation groups are renewing calls for tougher regulations on the state's least-regulated fishery after a fishing boat let loose huge numbers of dead fish off the state's southwest coast.

The Advocate reported that the dump of menhaden — also known as pogy or fatback — occurred Sept. 8. The resulting mass of rotting fish drew complaints from several charter boat captains. Charters target the redfish and other species that depend on menhaden for food.

The company Omega Protein estimates it lost about 900,000 menhaden when one of its crews cut free a bulging net near Cameron Parish.

Jason Adrian, of the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, said only about 2% of the Gulf of Mexico's menhaden stock is fished each year, so the incident doesn't matter much.

Still, it comes as conservation and recreational fishing groups worry that the largely unchecked fishery is taking food

from other species.

Suspect hurt when train crashes into police car

CO PLATTEVILLE — A 20-year-old road rage suspect was seriously injured when the parked police patrol vehicle she was detained in was struck by a freight train in northern Colorado.

The Colorado Bureau of Investigation said multiple law enforcement agencies responded to a report of a road rage incident involving a firearm in Fort Lupton. A Platteville police officer stopped the woman's car just past a set of railroad tracks and parked the patrol vehicle on the crossing.

The Greeley woman was placed in the back of the police vehicle, which was hit by the train as officers were searching her car. The suspect's name and details of her injuries have not been released.

The Fort Lupton Police Department is investigating the road rage report, while the Colorado State Patrol is investigating the crash. The Colorado Bureau of Investigation is looking into the woman's injury while she was in police custody.

Tribe, county reach \$5M deal over sewage spills

WA SEATTLE — Washington state's most populous county is set to pay more than \$5 million to settle a threatened lawsuit from the Suquamish Tribe over sewage spills that have overflowed from King County treatment plants into Puget Sound.

In 2020, the tribe filed an intent to sue the county, docu-

menting almost a dozen times in 2018 and 2019 when untreated or improperly treated sewage overflowed into the Sound from the West Point Treatment Plant in Seattle.

The facility is the largest sewage treatment plant in Washington and the third-largest on the West Coast. The discharges added up to more than 6 million gallons.

The settlement must be approved by the full council, which could happen later in September.

Woman pleads guilty to abandoning autistic son

IN CINCINNATI — An Indiana mother accused of having abandoned her 5-year-old autistic son on an Ohio street earlier this year has pleaded guilty to child endangerment.

Heather Adkins, 33, of Shelbyville entered the plea in Hamilton County Common Pleas Court. A kidnapping charge was dropped as part of a plea agreement and Adkins faces a term of five years probation to three years in prison, officials said.

Prosecutors said Adkins drove from Indiana to Tennessee in February to drop off two of her three children with a friend, but on the way back abandoned her son on a dead-end street in Colerain Township near Cincinnati, about 75 miles from her home.

Officials said the boy, who is nonverbal, was spotted by passing motorists as he tried to wave down cars in the rain. Adkins was arrested at a gas station in Georgetown, Ky., on an unrelated warrant.

— From wire reports

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Eagles' Hurts dominant in win over Vikings

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Jalen Hurts rolled to his right, scampered down the sideline and stutter-stepped to the 5-yard-line, where he was wrapped up by a defender with another in pursuit. Hurts twisted his body, lowered his head, dragged two defenders with him and powered his way in for an adrenaline-filled 26-yard touchdown run that about broke the game open.

Just maybe, or so the Eagles can hope, there are many more plays like that one ahead.

Hurts had 301 total yards in the first half in the breakout game of his young career, finishing with three total touchdowns as he led Philadelphia to a 24-7 win over the Minnesota Vikings on Monday night.

"Big-time performance on a big-time stage," Eagles coach Nick Sirianni said.

Trying to prove he can play like the best franchise QBs in

the NFL, Hurts looked downright unstoppable from the opening drive.

Hurts hit five receivers on 5-for-5 passing — highlighted by a 19-yard strike to A.J. Brown — and finished the drive himself with a 3-yard scoring run. In the opening win against Detroit, Hurts failed to complete a pass on five attempts and Philadelphia turned the ball over on downs on the first drive of the game.

Turn the ball over on downs?

That seemed like just a rumor against the Vikings. The TD was just the liftoff for the 24-year-old Hurts throwing, running and imposing his will with all his available tools against a Minnesota defense that could not solve him in his 21st career start. He finished with 333 yards passing and a touchdown, and 57 yards and two scores on the ground.

"Another outstanding performance. He threw some unbe-

lievable balls. He made a lot of plays," Eagles center Jason Kelce said. "This was a really great, well-rounded game for him."

On the first play of the second quarter, Hurts connected with a wide-open Quez Watkins for a 53-yard TD and the 14-0 lead.

"It always comes with time and as time goes on, you find more comfort with what you're doing," Hurts said.

Darius Slay, who had two interceptions against a hapless Kirk Cousins, had called each of Philadelphia's trio of talented receivers Batman.

There was Brown, the "swole" Batman who had five catches for 69 yards; DeVonta Smith was the "skinny" Batman who had seven for 80 yards; and Watkins was the "fast" Batman who had the burners on for the easy score (and 69 total yards receiving).

Why are they all Batman?

"No Robins. We've got no si-

dekicks," Slay said.

Hurts dazzled with the 26-yard TD with 1:58 left in the half and Jake Elliott still had time to kick a 38-yarder and the Eagles took a 24-7 lead into halftime.

Cousins and wide receiver Justin Jefferson — famously passed over by the Eagles in the 2020 draft — never got anything going of substance against Philadelphia and maligned defensive coordinator Jonathan Gannon. Slay had his second interception of the game in the fourth quarter as the scoreboard soon flashed "Big Play Slay."

"It felt at times, me included, like we pressed a little bit," Minnesota coach Kevin O'Connell said.

Hurts had 50 yards rushing and 251 yards passing in the first half. Cousins finished the game 27-for-46 for 221 yards and three interceptions. His lone TD was on a 2-yard pass to Irv Smith in the second quarter.

Diggs scores 3 touchdowns for Bills in rout of Titans

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — If the Buffalo Bills are making some sort of loud statement by opening their season with consecutive routs, quarterback Josh Allen isn't about to raise his voice.

As he did following their win two weeks ago over the defending Super Bowl champion Los Angeles Rams, Allen dismissed questions about the message the Bills sent by throttling the Tennessee Titans 41-7 in Buffalo's home opener on Monday night.

"When we execute how we know we're supposed to execute, success typically leads to success," Allen said. "We're just trying to be the best version of ourselves."

It made no difference to Allen whether the Bills earned some vindication against an opponent that had defeated them in each

of the past two seasons.

"It doesn't matter who it's against. Like, that's a good team that we played," he said. "For us to go do that was great."

Allen threw four touchdown passes, including three to Stefon Diggs, and Buffalo's defense did the rest, containing Derrick Henry and the Titans. The Bills forced four turnovers, including linebacker Matt Milano returning the second of Ryan Tannehill's two interceptions 43 yards for a touchdown.

Buffalo never trailed and blew the game open by outscoring Tennessee 24-0 in the third quarter. The surge began in the final minute of the second quarter when the Bills went ahead 17-7 on Allen's 4-yard touchdown pass to Diggs.

Allen topped 300 yards passing for the 15th time of his career, completing 26 of 38 at-

tempts for 317 yards, and sat out the entire fourth quarter. Diggs had 12 catches for 148 yards. He has exceeded 100 yards in each of his first two games, a feat accomplished previously for Buffalo only by Hall of Famer Andre Reed.

"It was a lot left on the bone, really," Diggs said with a shrug. "We had a lot of points. I think we had one punt and I think it came back to us. But just doing your job, and at this point we're doing OK, I guess."

The Titans, coming off a 21-20 season-opening loss to the New York Giants, opened 0-2 for the first time since 2012.

The two-time defending AFC South champions have faced numerous questions about a defense that gave up 313 yards passing a week after allowing 238 yards rushing. In the meantime, their offense mustered 187

yards, managed 12 first downs and had two of 11 drives finish in Bills territory.

"We got our (butts) kicked, plain and simple," coach Mike Vrabel said after the most lopsided loss in his four-plus seasons coaching Tennessee. "They outplayed us and they outcoached us, and that's the definition of it. We're going to go back to work and try to figure out how to win a football game."

While Tannehill was benched after throwing his second interception, the Titans' Henry-led running game continued to be grounded.

The two-time rushing champion was limited to 25 yards on 13 carries while scoring on a 2-yard plunge.

"I pride myself on making plays and being a playmaker for this team. And I didn't do that tonight," Henry said.

After Griner, WNBA players skip Russia

Associated Press

SYDNEY — Brittney Griner's highly publicized legal woes in Russia and the country's invasion of Ukraine has the top WNBA players opting to take their talents elsewhere this offseason.

For the past few decades, Russia has been the preferred offseason destination for WNBA players to compete because of the high salaries that can exceed \$1 million and the resources and amenities teams offered them.

That all has come to an abrupt end.

"Honestly my time in Russia has been wonderful, but especially with BG still wrongfully detained there, nobody's going to go there until she's home," said Breanna Stewart, a Griner teammate on the Russian team that paid the duo millions. "I think that, you know, now, people want to go overseas and if the money is not much different, they want to be in a better place."

Griner was arrested in February, then detained and later convicted on drug possession charges amid Russia's invasion of Uk-

raine. Griner was sentenced last month to nine years in prison.

Now, Stewart and other WNBA All-Stars, including Jonquel Jones and Courtney Vandersloot — who also have made millions of dollars playing in Russia — are going elsewhere this winter. All three played for Ekaterinburg, the same Russian team as Griner. That club won five EuroLeague titles in the past eight seasons and has been dominant for nearly two decades with former greats DeLisha Milton Jones and Diana Taurasi playing there.

Nearly a dozen WNBA players competed in Russia last winter and none of them are heading back this year.

After the World Cup tournament, Stewart is going to Turkey to play for Fenerbahçe. Top players can make a few hundred thousand dollars playing in Turkey, much less than their Russian salaries. Playing in Turkey also allows Stewart to be closer to her wife's family in Spain.

"You want to have a better lifestyle, a better off-the-court experience, and just con-

tinue to appreciate other countries," Stewart said.

Like Stewart, Vandersloot also isn't headed back to Russia, choosing to play in Hungary where she obtained citizenship in 2016.

"I am Hungarian. I thought it would be special since I haven't played there since I got the citizenship," Vandersloot said.

The 33-year-old guard said a lot would have to change before she'd ever consider going back to Russia to play even though she has many fond memories of the Russian people.

"The thing about it is, we were treated so well by our club and made such strong relationships with those people, I would never close the door on that," she said. "The whole situation with BG makes it really hard to think that it's safe for anyone to go back there right now."

Jones will be joining Stewart in Turkey, playing for Mersin. The 6-foot-6 Jones said she would consider going back to Russia if things change politically and Griner was back in the U.S.

Everything stacked in US favor for Presidents Cup

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The last Presidents Cup was so close the International team walked away with renewed hope that it had enough game and enough fight to conquer the mighty Americans.

That now seems so long ago.

Sure, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the Presidents Cup back a year. Far more disruptive was the Saudi-funded LIV Golf that depleted the experience from the International side.

"That's something that we've been looking forward to for the last three years," said British Open champion Cameron Smith, and then 20 days later he was officially announced as defecting to the rival league.

Joaquin Niemann of Chile and Marc Leishman of Australia also took the cash to sign with LIV Golf just two days before the 12-man International team was to be filled out. Louis Oosthuizen, so good in the Presidents Cup he had a winning record while nev-

er playing on a winning team, was among the first to go back in June.

U.S. captain Davis Love III was asked if he felt bad for Trevor Immelman, who was chosen International captain long before LIV was anything more than a Roman numeral.

"I feel bad for the game of golf right now that this is the story going in," Love said. "I feel bad for all of us, really. But Trevor has a job to do, and that's to take 12 guys in there ready to play, and he's going to be focused on that."

The 14th edition of the matches between Americans and an International team composed of players from outside Europe starts Thursday at Quail Hollow Club, and it looks to be as one-sided as the record suggests.

The Americans have lost only once, in 1998 at Royal Melbourne in Australia, matches that ended 12 days before Christmas. There was a tie in South Africa and then eight con-

secutive U.S. celebrations.

The U.S. is not quite a year removed from giving Europe its worst beating ever in the Ryder Cup, 19-9 at Whistling Straits, with a young and hungry team.

The Americans were not immune to the defections — Dustin Johnson, Brooks Koepka and Bryson DeChambeau were on that Ryder Cup team — though there was no certainty they would have made this team. Johnson hasn't won on U.S. soil since the November 2020 Masters, while the others are trying to return from injury.

And the state of American golf is such that replacements are easily found. All 12 players are among the top 25 in the world rankings.

The International team counters with only three players from the top 25 — former Masters champion Hideki Matsuyama, Sungjae Im and Tom Kim, the 20-year-old South Korean who wasn't even a consideration until he won the Wyndham

Championship six weeks ago.

Immelman brings eight Presidents Cup rookies to Quail Hollow. Only three players on his team have won tournaments this year. Only two — Matsuyama and Adam Scott — have won majors.

Love's team has only three players who haven't won this year. That includes two-time major champion Collin Morikawa and Cameron Young, the PGA Tour rookie who has been a runner-up five times and twice came within one shot of a chance to win a major.

The Americans have five Presidents Cup rookies, though two of them (Morikawa and Scottie Scheffler) played in the Ryder Cup, and two others (Sam Burns and Max Homa) have collected three PGA Tour victories in the last 12 months.

It's one-sided on paper. It's a one-sided history. If there is pressure on the Americans, it's about not being the team that finally loses.

Scherzer wins 200th as Mets clinch

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Max Scherzer was pulled from his 200th win with a perfect game intact, and the New York Mets clinched their first playoff berth in six years by beating the Milwaukee Brewers 7-2 on Monday night.

Reinstated from the injured list before the game, Scherzer (10-4) struck out nine in six innings. The 38-year-old ace threw only 68 pitches, but that was as far as the NL East leaders let him go in his first start in 16 days.

Brewers star Christian Yelich doubled leading off the seventh against Tylor Megill, making his first major league relief appearance after 27 starts. Megill also came off the injured list earlier in the day.

Pete Alonso hit a three-run homer off reigning NL Cy Young Award winner Corbin Burnes (10-8), and the Mets won their fifth straight to wrap up at least one of the three National League wild cards. They lead the NL East by one game over

defending World Series champion Atlanta.

“This is what you play the game for. You play the game to go to the postseason,” Scherzer said. “We have a lot of things in front of us and we understand that. But, man, you’ve got to celebrate the good times, too.”

Astros 4, Rays 0: Jose Altuve hit a leadoff homer and visiting Houston clinched its fifth AL West title in six years by beating Tampa Bay.

Headed to the postseason for the sixth straight season, Houston won for the eighth time in nine games and improved the AL’s best record to 97-51.

Braves 5, Nationals 2: Kyle Wright won his major league-leading 19th game, Austin Riley and Eddie Rosario homered and host Atlanta beat Washington.

The defending World Series champions won their ninth straight home game to improve to 92-55.

Dodgers 5, Diamondbacks 2: Clayton Kershaw struck out 10 and Chris Taylor blasted a

three-run homer when host Los Angeles successfully challenged a fan interference call.

The Dodgers have beaten Arizona in 19 of their last 20 meetings at Dodger Stadium. They improved to 12-3 against the Diamondbacks this season.

Giants 10, Rockies 7 (10): Thairo Estrada hit a go-ahead, three-run homer in the 10th inning after keying a tying rally in the ninth, and San Francisco won at Colorado.

Mike Yastrzemski homered and Wilmer Flores had three hits and two RBIs for the Giants, who snapped a three-game losing streak and overcame four errors that led to two unearned runs.

Marlins 10, Cubs 3: Bryan De La Cruz hit a grand slam in the third inning and host Miami beat Chicago.

Rookie Charles Leblanc and Jon Berti also went deep while Miguel Rojas had three hits for the Marlins. Berti also singled twice and stole two bases, giving him an NL-leading 36. Miami starter Edward Cabrera (6-3)

threw five innings of three-run ball. The rookie right-hander gave up three hits, walked three, struck out four and hit two batters.

Tigers 11, Orioles 0: Tyler Alexander held Baltimore hitless until the seventh inning and Riley Greene drove in three runs to lead visiting Detroit.

The Orioles fell five games behind Seattle in the race for the last of three AL wild-card spots. Both teams have 16 games left, and the Mariners own the tie-breaker advantage for winning the season series.

Guardians 11, Twins 4: Josh Naylor and Amed Rosario hit three-run homers, Cal Quantrill kept his home unbeaten streak intact and host Cleveland thumped Minnesota, taking four of five in the series from an AL Central pursuer.

Mariners 9, Angels 1: Carlos Santana homered twice, including his first grand slam in three years, Ty France drove in four runs and Seattle stopped a three-game losing streak with a win at Los Angeles.

Mets have top payroll, Dodgers drop with Bauer suspension

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Mets are on track to have baseball’s highest payroll for the first time since 1989, among a record-tying six teams set to pay a penalty for spending.

The Los Angeles Dodgers, who started the season as the top spender, fell into second due to Trevor Bauer’s suspension.

New York entered the last full month of the season with a \$273.9 million payroll, according to updated figures through Aug. 31 compiled by Major League Baseball. The Dodgers are second at \$267.2 million, followed by the New York Yankees at \$254.4 million.

The Mets hope to win their first World Series title since 1986.

“I have expectations of the Mets being the last team standing. What else is there? I mean, that’s why we get up in the morning every day,” New York manager Buck Showalter said Sunday. “It’s kind of cold. It’s kind of cruel, but I’d rather know it up front

what the end game’s supposed to be. Some people go through their whole life not knowing exactly what success is supposed to be. Nobody’s got to in here tell me how we’re doing. There is a scoreboard and standings. It’s right there. You don’t like it, play better.”

New York pitcher Max Scherzer, at a big league-high \$43.3 million, makes roughly \$5 million less than Oakland’s entire team and combines with teammates Jacob deGrom and Francisco Lindor for about \$103 million — more than eight of the 30 clubs.

When the Mets last topped MLB in payroll, their total was \$21.3 million.

Los Angeles’ payroll dropped when Bauer was suspended for two years without pay on April 29 for violating the sport’s domestic violence policy. Bauer’s 2022 salary was \$32 million but was reduced to what he was owed at the time of the suspension: \$3.8 million. He is challenging the discipline before an arbitrator.

The Dodgers led in payroll in both 2020 and 2021. They set a payroll record with \$291 million in 2015.

The Mets’ payroll has risen steadily since Steven Cohen bought the team from the Wilpon and Katz families after the 2020 season. The team’s spending rose from \$146 million in 2019 to \$199 million last year, the first season after the pandemic, and negotiators said last March a new tax threshold was aimed at him. Cohen then quipped: “It’s better than a bridge being named after you.”

For purposes of the luxury tax, which uses average annual values for players on 40-man rosters, the Mets are on track to set a record at \$298.8 million and eclipse the 2015 Dodgers’ \$297.9 million. Luxury tax payrolls include just over \$16 million per team for benefits and \$1.67 million for each club’s share of the new \$50 million pool for pre-arbitration players.

The Mets are in line for a tax of \$29.9 million.