

Thousands fleeing Russian mobilization

Associated Press

About 98,000 Russians have crossed into Kazakhstan in the week since President Vladimir Putin announced a partial mobilization of reservists to fight in Ukraine, Kazakh officials said Tuesday, as men seeking to avoid the call-up continued to flee by land and air into neighboring countries.

Meanwhile, Kremlin-orchestrated referendums that are expected to serve as a pretext for Moscow to annex Russian-held regions of Ukraine concluded Tuesday as the preordained outcome of the votes heightened tension between Russia and the West.

Moscow-backed officials in the four occupied regions in southern and eastern Ukraine said polls closed Tuesday afternoon after five days of voting and the counting of ballots had started.

The annexation of the regions, which could happen as soon as Friday, sets the stage for a dangerous new phase in the seven-month war in Ukraine. Russia warned it could resort to deploying nuclear weapons to defend its own territory, including newly acquired lands.

For those fleeing Russia's mobilization, Ka-

zakhstan and Georgia, both part of the former Soviet Union, appeared to be the most popular destinations for those crossing by car, bicycle or on foot.

Those with visas for Finland or Norway also have been coming in by land. Plane tickets abroad had sold out quickly despite steep prices.

Russia's Defense Ministry has said that only about 300,000 people with prior combat or other military service would be called up, but reports have emerged from various Russian regions that recruiters were rounding up men outside that description. That fueled fears of a much broader call-up, sending droves of men of all ages and backgrounds to airports and border crossings.

In announcing the number of Russians crossing the border, Kazakhstan Interior Minister Marat Akhmetzhanov said authorities will not send those who are avoiding the call-up back home, unless they are on an international wanted list for criminal charges.

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev ordered his government to assist Russians entering his country "because of the

current hopeless situation."

"We must take care of them and ensure their safety. It is a political and a humanitarian issue. I tasked the government to take the necessary measures," Tokayev said, adding that Kazakhstan will hold talks with Russia on the situation.

After the five days of balloting in the Russian-occupied areas, "the situation will radically change from the legal viewpoint, from the point of view of international law, with all the corresponding consequences for protection of those areas and ensuring their security," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday.

Putin has talked up Moscow's nuclear option since last week following a Ukrainian counteroffensive that led to recent battlefield setbacks and has the Kremlin's forces increasingly cornered.

The balloting that started Friday in the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk regions and a call-up of Russian military reservists ordered by Putin are other strategies aimed at buttressing Moscow's exposed position.

Air Force building mixed-sex facilities for trainees

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

The Air Force is creating a multimillion-dollar aquatic special warfare training center with mixed-sex restrooms, locker rooms and showers as part of its push to make elite jobs more appealing to a broader candidate pool.

The 76,000-square-foot aquatics center is slated for completion by August 2023. It has a \$66.6 million price tag and will accommodate more than 3,000 special warfare trainees annually, according to the service.

"The mixed-sex facilities built at our candidate course, where we first welcome special warfare airmen, are only the beginning," Col. Nathan Colunga, leader of the San Antonio-based Special Warfare Training Wing, said Saturday in a statement.

The overarching strategy is to build mixed-sex facilities throughout the wing's training footprint across the United States, Colunga said.

Plans include some facilities that are spe-

cially designed to ensure privacy but also involve open-bay dormitories where male and female trainees bunk together. Mixed locker rooms, meanwhile, incorporate individual shower rooms and restrooms for each trainee, the Air Force said.

In 2015, the service began integrating women into special warfare fields, which include jobs such as combat controller, pararescue, special reconnaissance and tactical air control. Mixed-sex facilities are an outgrowth of that decision.

The decision to make special warfare facilities more inclusive comes as the Air Force has grappled with a recruiting crisis that, as is the case in every other military branch, has the service falling short on recruiting benchmarks.

"We continuously struggle to recruit enough people who have the potential to meet our standards in Air Force special warfare," Maj. Gen. Michele Edmondson, Second Air Force commander, said in a Saturday statement. "I want to leave no stone

untuned. We need to be more deliberate about bringing in anyone who has the propensity to serve in these career fields and meets the standards it takes to graduate."

The Special Warfare Training Wing has graduated five women to date, and two female trainees are now in the pipeline, the service said.

The inclusivity push hasn't been without controversy, however. In January, Air Force Times reported that the service's top special operations chief, Lt. Gen. Jim Slife, had ordered an investigation after allegations emerged of attempts to push a female airman through special tactics officer training despite her failure to meet all the standards.

After a four-month investigation, though, the Air Force inspector general concluded that leaders had not relaxed the rules to make it easier for the woman to qualify. "Facts did not support the ... claims of gender-based preferential treatment," the IG report stated.

Case dropped for Marine who refused vaccine

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — The Marine Corps has dismissed its case against a lance corporal who faced special court-martial charges stemming from her refusal to take a COVID-19 vaccine.

Lance Cpl. Catherine Arnett, 24, of Fort Worth, Texas, had been charged with two counts under article 87 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, missing troop movements on May 27 and May 14, and one count under article 92, disobeying a direct order on May 7.

Arnett was not charged with refusing the vaccine, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing spokesman Maj. Rob Martins told Stars and Stripes in July. The court-martial was from her refusal “to board multiple flights to complete the separation process which occurred after she refused the COVID-19-vaccine,” he wrote.

Arnett said she would not board those flights because the orders stemmed from the 2021 Defense Department mandate on COVID-19 vaccination, which she considers unlawful.

Her court-martial was placed on an indefinite delay on Aug. 22 after her lawyer cited a federal judge’s Aug. 18 order that temporarily bars the Corps from punishing or discharging Marines who refused the vaccine on religious grounds.

A status hearing for Arnett’s case was scheduled for Tuesday, but the aircraft wing’s commander, Maj. Gen. Eric Austin, decided on Wednesday to dismiss it.

“In weighing the considerations for both the Marine Corps and the Marine, within the context of the most recent injunction for COVID-19 vaccine refusal cases, the commanding general has decided to dismiss [Arnett’s]

COVID-19 related charges,” Martins, the wing spokesman, said in an email Monday.

The Marine said she refused the COVID-19 vaccines because they are tested or produced using stem cell lines that descend from fetuses aborted in the 1970s and ’80s. Her request as a Catholic for a religious exemption, she said, was denied by the Marine Corps and again on appeal.

Arnett said that she’s been at MCAS Iwakuni since May 2019, first with Marine Air Logistics Squadron 12, then with Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152 for 2 ½ years. She’s back with the logistics squadron, but not in the job she trained for, aviation supply specialist, she told Stars and Stripes in late July.

“This gives Lance Cpl. Arnett the option to execute her contractual End of Active Service, if she desires,” Martins said Monday.

US Coast Guard on alert after Russian, Chinese warships sighted near Alaska

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Coast Guard cutter sighted a formation of Russian and Chinese warships near an Alaskan island last week, triggering the crew to commence an ongoing monitoring operation, the Coast Guard reported Monday.

The crew of the Honolulu-based cutter Kimball was on a routine patrol of the Bering Sea on Sept. 19 when they encountered the Chinese guided-missile cruiser Renhai about 75 nautical miles north of Kiska Island, Alaska, the service said in a news release.

Kiska Island is part of the Aleutian Islands and lies roughly 1,300 miles southwest of Anchorage. The island is about 700 miles from Russia.

The crew later identified the Renhai and two additional Chinese naval vessels in formation with four Russian naval vessels — including a Russian destroyer — operating within the United States’ exclusive economic zone, or EEZ, the Coast Guard said.

The formation was operating as a “combined surface action group,” the Coast Guard said.

The Coast Guard sightings last week were likely part of a joint Russian-Chinese naval exercise announced by Russia’s de-

fense ministry Sept. 15.

The exercises were to include tactical maneuvering, communications, firing of artillery and helicopter operations, according to a Sept. 14 report by Russia’s Tass news agency.

As a result of the sightings, the Kimball began operating under Operation Frontier Sentinel, which is “designed to meet presence with presence when strategic competitors operate in and around U.S. waters,” the Coast Guard said.

Kimball is a 418-foot Legend-class national security cutter.

“While the surface action group was temporary in nature, and Kimball observed it disperse, the Kimball will continue to monitor activities in the U.S. EEZ to ensure the safety of U.S. vessels and international commerce in the area,” the Coast Guard said.

An EEZ is an area of sea in which a sovereign state, based on international law, has special rights regarding the exploration and use of marine resources.

Rear Adm. Nathan Moore, commander of the Coast Guard’s 17th District based in Alaska, said in the news release that the formation had been operating in accordance with international rules.

It is not unusual for Russia to conduct naval maneuvers in the Bering Sea.

‘Fat Leonard’ seeks asylum in Venezuela

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The fugitive defense contractor nicknamed “Fat Leonard” who orchestrated a huge bribery scheme involving dozens of U.S. Navy officials, has requested asylum in Venezuela, a law enforcement official said Monday, nearly a week after he was captured in the South American country.

Leonard Glenn Francis slipped away from house arrest in San Diego on Sept. 4, only weeks before he was to be sentenced.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not permitted to speak to the press about the closed proceedings, did not provide any additional details about the Malaysian businessman’s moves.

By law, the Venezuelan government must consider the asylum request.

Francis pleaded guilty in 2015 and faced up to 25 years in prison. While awaiting sentencing, he was given home confinement to receive medical care as he cooperated with the prosecution. U.S. and Venezuelan officials said Francis cut off his ankle monitor, fled to Mexico and to Cuba before turning up in Venezuela. He was arrested there Tuesday.

Libertarian group sues against debt cancellation

Associated Press

A libertarian group in California filed a legal challenge to President Joe Biden's plan for student debt cancellation on Tuesday, calling it an illegal overreach that would increase state tax burdens for some Americans who get their debt forgiven.

The lawsuit, believed to be the first targeting Biden's plan, was filed by the Pacific Legal Foundation, a Sacramento law firm. It was filed in federal court in Indiana, one of several states that plan to tax any student debt canceled by Biden's plan.

"Congress did not authorize the executive branch to unilat-

erally cancel student debt," said Caleb Kruckenberg, an attorney at Pacific Legal Foundation. He said it's illegal for the executive branch to create the policy "by press release, and without statutory authority."

The suit's plaintiff is Frank Garrison, described as a public interest attorney who lives in Indiana and is employed by the libertarian group.

Garrison is on track to get his student debt erased through a separate federal program for public servants. Although most borrowers will need to apply for Biden's plan, Garrison and many others in that program will automatically get the relief because the Education Depart-

ment has their income information on file.

Biden's plan would automatically cancel \$20,000 of Garrison's debt, which in turn would trigger an "immediate tax liability" from the state of Indiana, according to the suit. Under the debt forgiveness program he's enrolled in now, canceled debt can't be taxed.

"Mr. Garrison and millions of others similarly situated in the six relevant states will receive no additional benefit from the cancellation — just a one-time additional penalty," the suit argues.

Any student debt forgiven under Biden's plan would also be subject to state taxes in Ar-

kansas, California, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina and Wisconsin, unless lawmakers in those states change their current laws.

Biden's plan promises to cancel \$10,000 in federal student debt for borrowers with incomes of less than \$125,000 per year or households making less than \$250,000. Those who received federal Pell Grants to attend college would get an additional \$10,000 erased.

An application to receive the benefit is expected by early October.

The Biden administration did not immediately comment on the suit but has argued that the plan is on solid legal ground.

Florida braces for damage after hurricane hits Cuba

Associated Press

Hurricane Ian tore into western Cuba on Tuesday as a major hurricane, with nothing to stop it from intensifying into a catastrophic Category 4 storm before it hits Florida on Wednesday.

Ian made landfall at 4:30 a.m. EDT Tuesday in Cuba's Pinar del Rio province, where officials set up 55 shelters, evacuated 50,000 people, rushed in emergency personnel and took steps to protect crops in Cuba's main tobacco-growing region.

The U.S. National Hurricane Center said "significant wind and storm surge impacts" were occurring Tuesday morning in western Cuba. Ian's sustained top winds were 125 mph, and as much as 14 feet of storm surge was predicted along Cuba's coast.

Ian was forecast to strengthen even more over warm Gulf of Mexico waters, reaching top winds of 140 mph as it approaches Florida's southwest coast. Tropical storm-force winds were expected across

the southern peninsula late Tuesday, reaching hurricane force Wednesday morning.

"Right now we're focusing on west central Florida area as the main area for impact," hurricane specialist Andy Latta told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

"This is a really, really big hurricane," Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said, warning of damage all across the state.

Hundreds of thousands of Floridians faced mandatory evacuation orders as the center expanded its hurricane warning to include Bonita Beach north through Tampa Bay to the Anclote River. Fort Myers is in the hurricane zone, and Tampa and St. Petersburg could get their first direct hit by a major hurricane since 1921.

"People on the barrier islands who decide not to go, they do so at their own peril," Roger Desjarlais, Lee County's county manager, said early Tuesday. "The best thing they can do is leave."

Dems' spending bill would aid Ukraine, finance government

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democratic lawmakers have unveiled a stopgap spending measure to finance the federal government through Dec. 16, provide additional support to Ukraine and help communities respond to recent natural disasters.

Both chambers of Congress must approve legislation by the end of Friday, which is the end of the fiscal year, to prevent a partial government shutdown. It represents the last bit of unfinished business for lawmakers before the midterm elections in November. Both sides are eager to wrap up and spend time on the campaign trail, lowering the risk of a federal stoppage.

The bill provides about \$12.3 billion in assistance related to Ukraine, including training, equipment, weapons and direct financial support for the Ukraine government. The assistance would be on top of some \$53 billion Congress has already approved through two previous bills.

The measure excludes the

White House call for spending \$22 billion to respond to COVID-19, and \$3.9 billion to fight against an outbreak of the monkeypox virus. Republican lawmakers were overwhelmingly opposed to the health funding. At least 10 Republican senators would have to support the measure for it to overcome procedural hurdles and advance in that chamber.

The legislation also includes Sen. Joe Manchin's legislation to streamline the permitting process for energy projects and makes it easier for a pipeline project in his home state and Virginia to proceed.

Manchin, a West Virginia Democrat who chairs the Senate Energy Committee, secured a commitment from President Joe Biden and Democratic leaders to have a vote on the permitting package in return for his support of a landmark law to curb climate change. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., had announced he intended to include it in the must-pass continuing resolution.

NASA spacecraft crashes into asteroid during test

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A NASA spacecraft rammed an asteroid at blistering speed Monday in an unprecedented dress rehearsal for the day a killer rock may menace Earth.

The galactic slam occurred with a harmless asteroid 7 million miles away, with the spacecraft named Dart plowing into the space rock at 14,000 mph. Scientists expected the impact to carve out a crater, hurl streams of rocks and dirt into space and, most importantly, alter the asteroid's orbit.

"We have impact!" Mission Control's Elena Adams announced, jumping up and down and thrusting her arms skyward.

Telescopes around the world and in space aimed at the same point in the sky to capture the spectacle. Though the impact was immediately obvious — Dart's radio signal abruptly ceased — it will be days or even weeks to determine how much the asteroid's path was changed.

"Now is when the science starts," said NASA's Lori Glaze, planetary science division director. "Now we're going to see for real how effective we were."

The \$325 million mission was the first attempt to shift the position of an asteroid or any other natural object in space.

"What an amazing thing. We've never had that capability before," Glaze noted.

Earlier in the day, NASA Administrator Bill

Nelson reminded people via Twitter that, "No, this is not a movie plot." He added in a prerecorded video: "We've all seen it on movies like 'Armageddon,' but the real-life stakes are high."

Monday's target: a 525-foot asteroid named Dimorphos. It's actually a moonlet of Didymos, Greek for twin, a fast-spinning asteroid five times bigger that flung off the material that formed the junior partner.

The pair have been orbiting the sun for eons without threatening Earth, making them ideal save-the-world test candidates.

Launched last November, the vending machine-size DART — short for Double Asteroid Redirection Test — navigated to its target using new technology developed by Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Laboratory, the spacecraft builder and mission manager.

DART's onboard camera, a key part of this smart navigation system, caught sight of Dimorphos barely an hour before impact.

With an image beaming back to Earth every second, Adams and other ground controllers in Laurel, Md., watched with growing excitement as Dimorphos loomed larger and larger in the field of view alongside its bigger companion. Within minutes, Dimorphos was alone in the pictures; it looked like a giant gray lemon, but with boulders and rubble on the surface.

The last image froze on the screen as the radio transmission ended.

Poland's PM: Baltic Sea gas pipeline leaks are 'sabotage'

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — A series of unusual leaks on two natural gas pipelines running from Russia under the Baltic Sea to Germany triggered concerns about sabotage Tuesday, overshadowing the inauguration of a long-awaited pipeline that will bring Norwegian gas to Poland to bolster Europe's energy independence from Moscow.

Seismic stations registered two explosions Monday near the leaks.

Bjorn Lund, a seismologist with Uppsala University who is part of Sweden's national seismic network, said the first explosion was recorded in the early hours southeast of the Danish island of Bornholm. The latter and stronger blast that night was northeast of the island and equivalent to a magnitude-2.3 earthquake.

"We know very well what an underwater blast looks like. And so in this case, there's no doubt this is not an earthquake," Lund said.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki called the events "an act of sabotage," while Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said she could not rule it out after three leaks were detected over the past day on the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, which are filled with gas but not delivering the fuel to Europe. An energy standoff over Russia's war in Ukraine halted flows on Nord Stream 1 and prevented them from ever starting in the parallel Nord Stream 2.

Frederiksen, Morawiecki and Polish President Andrzej Duda symbolically opened a valve belonging to the Baltic Pipe, a new system that will bring Norway's gas across Denmark and the Baltic to Poland.

Russia grants citizenship to Snowden, ex-contractor who leaked classified info

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia on Monday granted citizenship to former American intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, who fled prosecution after he revealed highly classified U.S. surveillance programs to capture communications and data from around the world.

A decree signed Monday by Russian President Vladimir Putin listed Snowden as one of 75 foreign citizens listed as being granted Russian citizenship. After fleeing the United States in 2013, Snowden was granted permanent Russian residency in 2020.

Ties between Washington and Moscow are already at their lowest point in decades following

Putin's decision to launch what the Kremlin has dubbed a "special military operation" in Ukraine.

While Snowden, 39, is considered by supporters to be a righteous whistleblower who wanted to protect American civil liberties, U.S. intelligence officials have accused him of putting U.S. personnel at risk and damaging national security. He currently faces charges in the U.S. that could result in decades in prison.

"Our position has not changed," State Department spokesman Ned Price said Monday. "Mr. Snowden should return to the United States where he should face justice as any other American citizen would."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Torah stolen from Vegas convention room found

NV LAS VEGAS — A Torah that was reported stolen in June from a convention room has been recovered and returned to its owner, according to police.

Las Vegas Metropolitan Police detectives said the owner had left his ancient artifact inside of a convention room that had been converted into a Synagogue.

Police said the Torah was taken four days later during a grand larceny at a hotel property.

The Torah was returned to the owner.

Police said they have a description of a possible suspect in the theft, but no arrests have been made and the case remains under investigation.

2 killed amid crashes during pop-up car rally

NJ WILDWOOD — A pop-up car rally in southern New Jersey led to multiple crashes and the deaths of at least two people riding in a golf cart, officials said.

Wildwood Mayor Pete Byron told NJ Advance Media that there were a series of car crashes related to the “unsanctioned” car meet-up event, NJ.com reported. Byron said the two victims “were in a golf cart” but weren’t believed to be taking part in the event. The mayor didn’t have additional information on the identities of those killed or the nature of the crash.

WCAU-TV reported damage to storefronts and knocked-over traffic meters, seen during cleanup efforts, and said Cape May prosecutors reported one person

was in custody in connection with a fatal crash.

NJ Advance Media reported three damaged vehicles at the scene of one accident where a car struck a building.

Corporal punishment cases found at schools

NY ALBANY — State investigators have substantiated more than 1,600 instances of corporal punishment in New York schools over the last five years, The Times Union in Albany reported.

A substantial number of the complaints were in New York City public schools, the newspaper reported.

Other incidents included a substitute teacher in Watertown who was fired and arrested for grabbing a student by the throat and forcing him against a wall and a teaching assistant in Syracuse who was transferred and retrained after spanking a non-verbal student.

Corporal punishment is generally banned and can be classified as child abuse.

Black bear dies after being struck by car

CA BAKERSFIELD — A black bear died after being struck by a car on a remote highway in Southern California, authorities said.

The collision happened on State Route 178 near Lake Isabella at the southern end of the Sierra Nevada, the Kern County Fire Department said.

The driver was not hurt, but the airbags deployed and the car sustained front-end damage, the fire department said.

The state Department of Fish

and Wildlife was notified.

Fire officials said this was the second bear to be hit by a vehicle on State Route 178 in the past two months, KBAK-TV reported.

60-ton crane topples onto downtown building

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — A 60-ton crane being used to remove a video display board from a downtown Oklahoma City building toppled onto the building that houses several news offices, officials said.

The crane’s operator suffered minor injuries in the accident. Two other men working in the bucket of a small crane and the building’s occupants were not injured, police said.

Oklahoma City police Detective Jonathan LaPuzza said the collapse caused some structural damage to the building that houses The Oklahoman newspaper, the Oklahoma Watch news website and television station KWTW. He said the extent and cost of the damage, however, couldn’t be determined immediately.

Citizens stop kidnapping of toddler, alert police

SD SIOUX FALLS — Some concerned citizens in South Dakota are being credited with stopping a kidnapping by flagging down police about a suspicious man carrying a young child.

Sioux Falls police said a group of people flagged down officers on patrol and directed them to the man and child.

Officers stopped the 36-year-old man who told them he was the uncle of the 1-year-old child, but couldn’t identify the parents.

Officials also said he told police that he was being shot at and was concerned for his safety, KOTA-TV reported.

Officers arrested the man on an outstanding warrant. A short time later, police received a call saying the 1-year-old had been taken from her home after a man forced his way inside, pushed past the babysitter, took the child and left.

Police said the man was loosely acquainted with the child’s parents and went to their apartment while they were at work. Officials have not released a motive. The man is facing charges of second-degree kidnapping and drug possession.

Man throwing rocks at officers fatally shot

AZ PHOENIX — A man was fatally shot by Phoenix police after he allegedly threw rocks and other items at officers and patrol cars, authorities said.

Two patrol cars were driving through an intersection after responding to an unrelated call when one vehicle was hit by something that caused damage, according to police.

Police said the officers drove back to the intersection to investigate when a man — later identified as 34-year-old Ali Osman — reportedly started throwing rocks at the patrol cars for an unknown reason.

The officers tried to talk to Osman, but he allegedly began throwing rocks at them and wouldn’t stop, police said.

Osman was shot and then taken to a hospital where he died, according to police who said the shooting was being investigated.

— From wire reports



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Injured NBA stars eager to get back

Associated Press

Kawhi Leonard was in the Los Angeles Clippers' facility on Monday. That wasn't exactly a surprise development.

The news was his attire. He was wearing a basketball uniform. Finally.

Welcome back, Kawhi. You, too, Denver's Jamal Murray, Brooklyn's Ben Simmons, New Orleans' Zion Williamson, the Clippers' John Wall and plenty of others around the NBA.

As training camps open around the NBA — most teams started practice Tuesday — it marks the long-awaited return to work for some of the league's biggest names who couldn't play last season because of injury or other issues.

"I'm blessed to be healthy, blessed to be walking up the stairs and not thinking about it," said Murray, the Nuggets' high-scoring guard who tore his left ACL in April 2021. "I've come a long way."

He's not alone.

Leonard tore his right ACL during a playoff game with the Clippers in June 2021. Williamson missed the entirety of last season while dealing with a foot injury and other setbacks. Wall didn't play last season for Hous-

ton — he wasn't in the Rockets' rebuilding plans — and recently revealed that years of battling injuries also adversely affected his mental health. Same goes for Simmons, who didn't play last year for Philadelphia or Brooklyn following his trade there while dealing with his own mental health issues.

Yet here they are, eager for a new season. Leonard, a two-time NBA Finals MVP, said he'll be participating in training camp and is hoping to make it through the regular season with no limitations.

"It's been 14 months of me just trying to better myself and just trying to focus on my overall body," Leonard said. "Yeah, I'm excited. I'm tired of going through these rehab workouts and listening to doctors and trainers for the most part — even though I'm still going to have to go forward."

Williamson — an absolute force when he's healthy — said he's feeling great, moving faster and jumping higher. Physically, he's at his best again.

"I've never dealt with a (layoff) like this," said Williamson, who hasn't seen any NBA action since May 4, 2021. "That's a long time without

playing a game. But my excitement level is through the roof. I'm just ready to get back on the court."

Leonard, Wall, Williamson and Murray were all among the players listed as inactive for all 82 of their team's games last season. For Golden State's James Wiseman, who had a knee injury, it was even more — 82 in the regular season, 22 more in the playoffs. The Warriors had 104 games in their run to the NBA championship.

He, too, sought some mental help.

"It was a hard time for me, especially going through that injury because I love basketball so much," Wiseman said. "I just want to be out there with my team. When I wasn't out there, it was very hard for me, but I just pushed through. I got that resilience just to keep going. It's in my DNA, and I'm not going to ever give up no matter how hard the situation is."

Simmons was dealing with a disastrous playoff performance with Philadelphia in 2021, then fallout from the widespread belief that he didn't want to play last season. He said he's gotten to a better mental place and is set to finally play again with the

Nets.

"Everybody has dark days," Simmons said. "You're able to address it and work toward getting to a place where you need to be. That's where I am. For me, I work on myself every day."

He pronounced himself ready to go. For others, the wait continues.

T.J. Warren — then of Indiana, now of Brooklyn — and Orlando's Jonathan Isaac were both newsmakers in the restart bubble in 2020. Warren scored 53 points in his bubble debut that season, had three other games where he scored at least 32, but has played in exactly four games since, the last of those on Dec. 29, 2020.

"I'm healed," Warren said, "but not cleared."

Isaac is in a similar situation. He hurt his left knee on Jan. 1, 2020, in a game at Washington. He returned and played two games in the bubble seven months later, blew out his left ACL in the second of those appearances, had other setbacks along the way in recovery and hasn't played since. Out of Orlando's last 198 games, Isaac has appeared in exactly two, and he isn't yet ready for 5-on-5, either.

Last lap: Johnson retires from full-time racing

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Seven-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson is retiring from full-time racing and will turn his focus toward spending time with family.

He figures his future schedule will include no more than 10 bucket-list events, but the 47-year-old had no idea Monday what that will look like in 2023.

Johnson said he was excited to announce "I've got a blank sheet of paper, and we can now see what opportunities exist and start making a calendar." Carvana has already told Johnson it will back whatever racing he pursues.

Johnson took two weeks from the IndyCar finale — with a weekend spent in En-

gland with Ganassi teammates Scott Dixon and Dario Franchitti at the Goodwood Revival — before finalizing his decision to scale back. He said he didn't really need the time to ponder his future.

"It's been an interesting process to feel so fulfilled with the experience and then also try to make a decision," Johnson said. "In the big scheme of things, there is so much life-planning going on with the kids. We've always had an idea of trying to live abroad for a year or two. We love Colorado and want to spend more time there, and there's just so much swirling personally and professionally that I just wanted to take some time and make the decision not on the back of a positive or negative experience on the

racetrack."

So what is Johnson, who retired from NASCAR in 2020, thinking?

Racing Le Mans

The 24 Hours of Le Mans would be part of the NASCAR and Hendrick Motorsports special "Garage 56" entry. Johnson has said from the start he wants to be part of the three-driver Le Mans lineup, even though it's an exhibition for the Next Gen and the car will be alone in its class.

He'd been awaiting the 2023 IndyCar schedule to see if he'd even be available, but will ensure his schedule is clear should NASCAR want its future Hall of Famer to be part of the project.

Lamb's one-handed catch lifts Cowboys

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — CeeDee Lamb was angry with himself in the second quarter after dropping a wide-open pass and costing the Dallas Cowboys a possible touchdown. It was just embarrassing.

The star receiver more than made up for it with the game on the line, making a one-handed TD catch with 8:30 to play to cap a go-ahead drive that gave the Cowboys a 23-16 win over the New York Giants on Monday night.

"He's CeeDee Lamb," Dallas quarterback Cooper Rush said after hitting Lamb four times on the 89-yard drive. "Guy's open a lot. Makes big-time catches. That fade catch was unbelievable. I'm sure he wants that other one back, but made tons of plays for us, like usual."

Ezekiel Elliott scored on a 1-yard run to ignite a comeback

from a seven-point deficit and Brett Maher kicked three field goals as the Cowboys (2-1) beat the Giants (2-1) for the 10th time in 11 games and handed coach Brian Daboll his first loss.

"Didn't get it quite done tonight," Daboll said. "They made more plays than we did. Give them credit."

Rush threw for 210 yards, including the 1-yard touchdown to Lamb, in winning his second straight game filling in for injured Dak Prescott (thumb).

Lamb finished with eight catches for 87 yards, but also dropped a potential 52-yard TD pass. He paced the sideline after the play and teammates walked over to encourage him.

"It was situation I had to deal with on my own. Obviously I'm the one that dropped the ball for the guys," Lamb said. "So knowing that I had to make this

up in the back end of the game, I just wanted to step up."

Lamb actually made three plays at the end of the drive. He caught a 4-yard pass on fourth-and-4 from the Giants 41 with 10:27 to go. He added a 26-yard grab to the 1 and followed that with his great catch on the fade pattern for a 20-13 lead.

Saquon Barkley scored on a weaving 36-yard touchdown run that gave the Giants a brief 13-6 lead. Graham Gano added three field goals, including a 51-yarder with 3:37 to play to make it a one-score game.

The Giants got the ball back with 1:45 left, but the series ended quickly with an interception by Trevon Diggs.

The Cowboys outgained the Giants 391-336 in an NFC East rivalry game that saw the teams rush for almost as much as they gained passing. Dallas ran for 176 yards — Tony Pol-

lard had 105 — and the Cowboys threw for 215. The Giants gained 167 on the ground and 196 in the air.

Dallas came into the game having allowed only one touchdown in each of its first two games, and the trend continued Monday night. The defense hounded Daniel Jones, sacking him five times, with DeMarcus Lawrence tying his career high with three.

Jones finished 20-for-37 for 196 yards and ran nine times for 79 yards. Barkley finished with 81 yards on 14 carries.

Maher sandwiched field goals of 26 and 28 yards around a 42-yarder by Gano to give Dallas a 6-3 halftime lead.

The Cowboys also got a big play on special teams as defensive lineman Dorance Armstrong blocked a 47-yard field-goal attempt by Gano on New York's opening possession.

American women run winning streak to 27th straight

Associated Press

SYDNEY — There's been a long legacy of success for the U.S. women's basketball team at the World Cup.

The names change over time, but the results don't seem to.

Kelsey Plum scored 20 points, Chelsea Gray added 16 and the United States routed Bosnia and Herzegovina 121-59 on Tuesday to break the team record for consecutive wins at the World Cup.

The victory was the 27th in a row in World Cup play for the Americans, who haven't lost since the 2006 semifinals against Russia. The U.S. won 26 in a row from 1994-2006 leading up to that game. The Soviet Union holds the World Cup record with 56 straight wins from 1959-86.

"It's kind of amazing," said Breanna Stewart, who has been part of the last three World Cup teams. "Obviously, been here

for some of it, but you understand the legends before that who really kind of started the streak. It goes to show that no matter who is playing on USA Basketball, we're always trying to chase excellence.

"This streak doesn't mean much right now because we're going into the quarterfinals and focusing on winning a gold medal, but it's something to kind of hang your hat on later."

What started with Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi and Sylvia Fowles has now been passed on to Stewart and A'ja Wilson. A legacy of excellence that doesn't appear will end anytime soon.

"The players change and, you know, there was a lot of concern about who's next," U.S. coach Cheryl Reeve said. "It was a concern when Dawn Staley and Lisa Leslie were playing and who was going to be next. Then it was Sue and (Taurasi) and then other great players, too.

Now with this group they are saying, hey, we're pretty good, too."

After going unbeaten in pool play again, the U.S. hasn't lost a game prior to the semifinals since 1983.

"We know the responsibility when you put on this jersey. There's a lot more than yourself," Plum said. "Everyone puts pride to the side. We have a common goal. We have some amazing players on this team."

The Americans (5-0) won their pool games by an average of 46.2 points and never trailed in any of them. Now they will wait to see who they draw in the quarterfinals.

The U.S. was coming off a record rout of South Korea in which the team broke the World Cup record for points with 145. While the Americans didn't match that number, they put the game out of reach in the first 10 minutes, going up 33-15.

The lead ballooned to 63-31 at halftime. Bosnia and Herzegovina put together a small run to start the third quarter, but the U.S. scored the final 19 points of the period.

Once again the Americans used a dominant inside performance, outscoring Bosnia and Herzegovina 84-28 in the paint led by Wilson, Stewart and Brionna Jones.

"It's a huge part of our identity," Reeve said. "Ninety-whatever we had yesterday and 84 today, we just know what we're good at and we have players that are really understanding their opportunities for that."

The U.S. was missing Jewell Loyd, whom the team said was resting. Kahleah Copper started in her place and finished with 11 points.

Nikolina Elez scored 19 points to lead the Bosniaks (0-5), who were playing in their first World Cup. Their tournament is over.

AL MVP race is down to Ohtani, Judge

Associated Press

When Shohei Ohtani is pitching impressively and hitting more than 30 homers, he might always be the MVP favorite unless another player in his league comes up with something awfully special.

Like hitting 60 home runs, for example.

Ohtani vs. Aaron Judge for the American League MVP figures to be the most hotly debated postseason award this year. Judge is closing in on Roger Maris' AL record of 61 homers and might also win the Triple Crown. He's done it while playing quite a bit of center field for a team that's nearing a division title.

Ohtani, on the other hand, is pitching better than he did when he was the unanimous MVP last year. He may even be putting himself in the Cy Young conversation, to go along with his 34 homers.

According to Baseball-Reference's wins above replacement stat, the two are pretty close. Judge was at 9.9 entering Sunday,

with Ohtani at 9.0.

As phenomenal as he is, there are a couple of factors — both last year and this year — that keep Ohtani's WAR a bit below the Barry Bonds/Babe Ruth stratosphere. As well as he's pitched, the Angels are careful about not overusing him. He threw only 130⅓ innings last year and has 153 this year. His lack of defensive value also works against him.

That's just nitpicking. If Ohtani doesn't win MVP this time, it will have taken a truly spectacular performance to beat him.

Here are a few other famous head-to-head MVP races through the years:

1941 (AL): Joe DiMaggio over Ted Williams. Perhaps the most famous MVP race came in the year DiMaggio had his 56-game hitting streak and Williams hit .406.

1961 (AL): Maris over Mickey Mantle. This was a close race even though Maris — who beat out Mantle for the 1960 MVP as well — hit his 61 home runs to break Ruth's record. Mantle played a tougher position

and, while this obviously wasn't a factor back then, he had a significant 10.4-6.9 edge on Maris in WAR.

1987 (AL): George Bell over Alan Trammell. Trammell's Tigers rallied past Bell's Blue Jays for the AL East title, but the Detroit shortstop couldn't overcome the Toronto slugger's 47 home runs and 134 RBIs.

1998 (NL): Sammy Sosa over Mark McGwire. McGwire (70) outlasted Sosa (66) in the home run race after both broke Maris' record, but the MVP vote was lopsided in Sosa's favor. His Cubs made the playoffs, and he led the league in runs and RBIs.

2012 (AL): Miguel Cabrera over Mike Trout. In a contentious race pitting traditionalists against new-age stats, the Triple Crown-winning Cabrera took the MVP — and the vote wasn't all that close. Trout settled for second place despite producing 10.5 WAR as a rookie. After finishing second to Cabrera again the following year, Trout won three MVPs of his own.

Blue Jays beat Yankees in 10, Judge is stuck on 60

Associated Press

TORONTO — Aaron Judge stayed at 60 home runs, one shy of Roger Maris' American League record, and the New York Yankees' bid to clinch the AL East stalled when Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hit an RBI single in the 10th to give the Toronto Blue Jays a 3-2 win Monday night.

Judge led off the game with a single, then struck out twice and walked twice as New York's winning streak ended at seven. The Yankees would've sealed the division with a win.

Judge has gone six games without a home run. He'll try again Tuesday night to match the AL mark of 61 set by Maris in 1961.

Guerrero's two-out single off Clarke Schmidt (5-5) scored automatic runner Cavan Biggio from second base. Toronto won its third straight and increased its lead atop the AL wild card race by 2½ games over Tampa Bay.

Judge scored the opening run of the game on a first-inning sac-

rifice fly by Gleyber Torres.

With runners at first and second and two outs in the 10th, Blue Jays interim manager John Schneider replaced right-hander Anthony Bass and brought left-hander Tim Mayza (8-0) on to face Judge. Toronto intentionally walked Judge to load the bases for left-handed hitter Anthony Rizzo, who grounded out.

Braves 8, Nationals 0: Bryce Elder threw a six-hit shutout for his first career complete game, and Atlanta rolled to close within one game of the first-place New York Mets in the NL East and hand host Washington its 100th loss of the season.

Matt Olson and Orlando Arcia hit two-run homers and Marcell Ozuna added a solo shot for the Braves, who, like New York, have already clinched a playoff berth. Both teams have eight games remaining, including a head-to-head three-game series beginning Friday in Atlanta.

Elder (2-3) threw 106 pitches and allowed only one runner to reach third base while taming

Washington in his eighth career start. He struck out six for the Braves, who have won three in a row and eight of 11.

The Nationals are a major league-worst 53-100, their first 100-loss season since going 59-103 in 2009.

Washington starter Cory Abbott (0-4) set down 10 of the first 11 Atlanta batters. He allowed five runs (four earned) in five-plus innings while striking out a career-high seven.

Orioles 14, Red Sox 8: Cedric Mullins homered on the second pitch of the game, Anthony Santander went deep twice and visiting Baltimore outslugged Boston to gain a little ground in the playoff race.

Gunnar Henderson hit a two-run homer and Mullins tripled in two runs for the Orioles (80-73), who moved within 3½ games of idle Seattle for the final AL wild card. The surprising Orioles have nine games left in their turnaround season.

Austin Hays added a solo shot for Baltimore in a game delayed

by rain for 1 hour, 40 minutes.

Rob Refsnyder hit a three-run homer and J.D. Martinez had a solo shot for the last-place Red Sox (72-81). Boston dropped its season-high sixth consecutive game.

Spencer Watkins (5-6) got the victory with 4 1/3 innings of relief.

Mullins hit a pitch from Connor Seabold (0-4) into the Baltimore bullpen for his 16th career leadoff homer and fifth this season.

Pirates 8, Reds 3: Jack Suwinski hit a two-run double to key a four-run seventh inning, powering host Pittsburgh past Cincinnati.

Suwinski turned on a slider from Derek Law (2-1), sending it to right field. Fellow rookie Oneil Cruz, who opened the inning with his third of four straight singles, and Miguel Andújar scored to put the Pirates ahead 4-2. Law hit Ke'Bryan Hayes with a pitch and walked Cal Mitchell before being replaced.