US troops back to aid elite forces in Somalia

By Katharine Houreld
The Washington Post

BALEDogle Military Air Base, Somalia — The U.S. military is scrambling to make up for lost time in Somalia after President Joe Biden this spring reversed his predecessor’s order to pull American soldiers out of the country and returned hundreds of them to the fight against one of al-Qaeda’s most powerful global affiliates.

The decision by President Donald Trump in the final weeks of his administration to withdraw the troops helped the militant al-Shabab movement grow in strength and size, hampered U.S. ability to provide operational intelligence and air support to Somali troops and delayed the construction of military facilities such as a clinic and training sites, U.S. and Somali officials said.

These officials described the costly and dangerous lengths to which U.S. forces went after the withdrawal order to keep supporting their Somali military partners: the Danab, or “Lightning,” special forces brigade. U.S. troops, for instance, would rotate through the country for three or four weeks at a time, then leave for two before returning, with such frequent movements exposing American personnel to greater risks, according to five U.S. service members.

Despite the official U.S. pullout, the Danab force continued to carry out operations, said commanders from both countries, pointing to its battlefield progress after nearly a decade of U.S.-funded training. U.S. and Somali officials said Danab is slowly helping to change the image of a military often viewed by civilians as bandits called combat town.

The training scenario tasked Alpha Company with reclaiming the town and a nearby dam that supplies hydroelectric power. The exercise tested the “stand-in force” concept laid out by Commandant Gen. David Berger in his Force Design 2030 as a means of fighting on islands in the Western Pacific.

“We’re a force-design battalion for the Marine Corps,” battalion commander Lt. Col. Aaron Awtry told Stars and Stripes before boarding a Super Stallion. “We’re...
FTC sues to block Microsoft-Activision Blizzard merger

Associated Press

The Federal Trade Commission on Thursday sued to block Microsoft’s planned $69 billion takeover of video game company Activision Blizzard, saying it could suppress competitors to its Xbox game consoles and its growing games subscription business. The National Labor Relations Board is expected to take the complaint to court.

The Federal Trade Commission’s challenge could be a test case for President Joe Biden’s mandate to scrutinize big tech mergers. The commission voted 3-1 to issue the complaint after a closed-door meeting. The complaint points to Microsoft’s previous game acquisitions, especially of well-known developer Bethesda Softworks and its parent company ZeniMax, as an example of where Microsoft is making some upcoming game titles exclusive to Xbox despite assuring European regulators it had no intention to do so.

The commission said Microsoft has shown through past acquisitions that it will withhold game content from rivals. Microsoft’s president, Brad Smith, signaled in a statement Thursday that the company is likely to challenge the FTC’s decision.

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MILITARY

Monday, December 12, 2022

Far East marksmanship contest seeks best Marine Corps shooters

By Matthew M. Burke

CAMP HANSEN, Okinawa — Marines from five regions around the world compete each year with pistols and rifles, as individuals and in teams, in precision shooting and shooting on the move, said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Bryan Hagan, the officer-in-charge of Hansen’s marksmanship training center.

This year, the Marines added night shooting and shooting at moving, autonomous robotic targets made by Marathon Targets of Huntsville, Ala., to the competition.

Marines may qualify for marksmanship badges and earn individual awards. The top 10 percent of shooters by score are invited to the Marine Corps Championships from March 28 to April 7 at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., Hagan said.

Cpl. Bels Szabo, 22, of Virginia Beach, Va., said he loves shooting and wanted to test himself against other Marines and units. Szabo, from 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion, is the only reconnaissance Marine in this year’s competition.

“I’m out here representing my company, Force Company, and I’m also representing my platoon, Force-1, back at 3rd, so I’m going to try really hard to get first and win this competition for them and everyone in my unit,” Szabo said during a break in offhand rifle shooting.

Reconnaissance Marines are some of the best shooters in the service because they are constant shooting, Szabo said. Winning the competition would be “a very respectful achievement,” but he isn’t looking past anyone.

“I would say I’m an advanced shooter just because of the training I’ve had and been able to get through being a recon Marine,” Szabo said. “I’ve seen other Marines in units that don’t specialize in shooting and they’re phenomenal shooters, so I think it really comes down to the individual and how much work you put into it.”

Weimer serves as the senior enlisted leader for the Army Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, N.C. He took that job last year after serving in other top enlisted roles in the special operations field in recent years.

Before arriving at USASOC, Weimer served as the top enlisted leader for U.S. Special Operations Command Central based at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla. Before that, he was the top enlisted leader for the Special Operations Joint Task Force Afghanistan, according to his Army biography.

Weimer enlisted in the Army in 1993, completed the Special Forces Selection and Assessment course in 1994 and earned his Green Beret in 1996 upon graduation from the Special Forces Weapons Sergeant Course, according to his biography. He served tours with 7th Special Forces Group at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., and some 19 years with USASOC at Fort Bragg, including as its operations sergeant major, according to the Army.

Weimer has “served numerous tours in the U.S. Central Command and U.S. Southern Command areas of responsibility” among other assignments across the globe, his biography reads.

He has earned several medals, including the Bronze Star Medal with “V” device, an Army Commendation Medal with “V” device, and a Defense Superior Service Medal with combat “C” device, according to his biography. He has earned the Combat Infantryman Badge and the Military Free Fall and Jumpmaster badges.

In his new role, Weimer will serve as the service’s chief of staff and U.S. Army Europe’s top enlisted leader after taking over for the Army’s outgoing senior enlisted leader, Army Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Grinston, in August. Grinston, who served as the Army’s top enlisted leader from 2019 to 2022, will retire in March.

He will assume the top enlisted post after serving over 35 years in the Army, 20 of which were overseas in various roles including as its operations sergeant major.

In addition to his experience overseas, Weimer has served as the Army’s top enlisted leader at Fort Bragg since 2019.

He has focused much of his tenure on improving quality of life for enlisted soldiers, including recently leading efforts to improve conditions in barracks plagued with mold. It was after his own inspection in the summer of Fort Bragg’s Smoke Bomb Hill barracks that service leaders agreed to rapidly shutter the 1970s-era barracks and move soldiers elsewhere on post or into off-post housing.

Army offers $5,000 for information on stolen Humvee at Texas reserve

By Doug G. Ware

WASHINGTON — The Army is offering cash for credible information that leads to the arrest of the thief who stole a Humvee at a reserve center in Texas, officials said Thursday.

Officials said the Humvee — formally known as a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle — was taken two weeks ago at the Army Reserve Center in San Marcos, located in south-central Texas near Austin and San Antonio.

Officials said the Humvee was taken from the reserve center sometime between Nov. 22 and Nov. 28. Its identifying number — 399 TPC A1-6 — should be displayed on its front and rear bumpers.

The Army’s Criminal Investigative Division is offering $5,000 for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of the thief.

“Information will be held in the strictest confidence allowable,” the Army’s CID states on a reward poster for the vehicle.


The U.S. military has used the Humvee as a primary utility vehicle for nearly 40 years. There are many Humvee variants, and many foreign military services also use it as a utility vehicle.
**TRICARE DROPPING CHILDREN’S CLINIC TO DISMAY OF FAMILIES**

**By Alison Bath**

Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — More than a hundred military families in Italy and Spain said they’ll have to start choosing new clinics for their children’s well-being and their financial stability after government insurer Tricare stripped a longtime pediatric clinic of its in-network status.

Joy Center, a U.S.-based clinic founded in Naples in 2010 that offers psychological, psychiatric, speech-language and occupational therapy for children and their families, will no longer be a Tricare in-network provider as of Sunday, clinic founder and supervisor Amy Zier told Stars and Stripes on Thursday.

As a result, parents who want coverage for those services must switch to a different provider that now appears to be the only authorized similar clinic in Italy and Spain.

Based on a search of Tricare’s online list of in-network overseas providers.

That Italy-based provider, Reach Aut, was founded by at least one former employee of Joy Center in 2020, Zier said. Reach Aut now has clinics in each of the same cities overseas as Joy Center.

Natalia Stiefel, who is married to 1st Lt. Michael Carreiro said.

“They are messing with our kids. They are messing with all these children, all of the services they need to thrive and ... be successful at life.”

Stiefel said she visited the other clinic and did not find it suitable.

“I feel at this point, if I don’t stay with Joy Center, it’s pretty much there’s not going to be any therapy (for my son),” she said.

Tricare offers health plans and other services for active-duty service members, retirees and their families. As of Friday, the insurer had not answered questions posed by Stars and Stripes last month and Wednesday seeking information about the change, the reasons behind it and the impact for patients.

Cunningham, Stiefel and other parents who spoke with Stars and Stripes said Tricare did not tell them about the change.

But in a Nov. 23 post to its official Facebook page, the U.S. naval hospital in Rota, Spain, said it had been notified by Tricare that Joy Center was no longer an authorized provider and would not be for the “foreseeable future.” The post had no explanation for the decision.

As a result, military hospitals in Italy and Spain will no longer refer patients to Joy Center. Parents who want to keep their children enrolled in the center’s programs will likely have to pay part of the cost of services previously covered in full by Tricare.

Zier said she was notified of the termination in November by Tricare.

“Joy Center offers behavioral, mental health and other services for military and Defense Department civilian families.”

Joy Center offers behavioral, mental health and other services for military and Defense Department civilian families.

The decision was surprising because Joy Center had not received any criticism of its programs from Tricare and there had been no mention of challenges or improvements needed, Zier said. Previously, Tricare had asked Joy Center to add services in Vicenza and Aviano, in 2015 and 2019 respectively, because there was no other provider, she said.

But there were indications that the clinic’s position in those locations had changed. A January 2021 letter from Tricare’s overseas management division said there wasn’t a need for Joy Center in Aviano, she said.

“It was confusing because we had so many people coming to us for help, either for their children or for themselves,” she said.

Cunningham said that despite the potential of having to pay for her daughter’s care, the family will continue to go to Joy Center.

The clinic not only helped her daughter but also offered Cunningham skills and insight to better understand her daughter’s needs, she said.

“She loves it there,” Cunningham said. “We love going there, learning so much about her and what makes her tick and how to help her.”

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**DESIGN: OKINAWA DRILLS TO LAST 10 DAYS ACROSS DOZENS OF SITES**

**From Page 1**

Conducting experiments based on what the Marine Corps is looking to make changes in its force structure.

“The North Carolina Marines are playing the title role over 10 days at dozens of sites across Okinawa and at the Marines’ Combined Arms Training Center Camp Fuji southwest of Tokyo.

A stand-in force, according to Berger’s Force Design 2030, is a tactical unit operating within range of an adversary’s long-range, precision weapons to inflict casualties, open the door for larger joint forces and generally undermine enemy operations.

“The force structure is a big deal,” Awtry said. “I’ve got different ranks in my squad leaders and platoon sergeants than most Marines do. The way our companies are organized and the additional capabilities we have in the battalion that other battalions don’t normally have, small unmanned aerial systems; and then some of our targeted engagement, Callum said a little bit different, so that’s new, and how we incorporate those into our operations is somewhat unique.”

Other Marine and Navy units in the exercise played an adversarial role against the 800-man 1st Battalion, including large-scale force-on-force combat, amphibious assault and sea denial, according to a Nov. 30 email from 2nd Lt. William McCadden, spokesman for 3rd Marine Division.

On the outskirts of combat town, within the Central Training Area on Okinawa, the Marines split into three, 60-man platoons and moved through the jungle toward their objectives.

First and 3rd Platoons simultaneously flank the town from the east and west sides, seized it and a command-and-control node while 2nd Platoon maneuvered to the west side of the dam and captured it.

“The mock takeover is templated as if the host nation’s town and dam were seized by an occupa-

Marines from Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., board a CH-53E Super Stallion for an exercise at the Central Training Area in Okinawa on Wednesday.

Frank Andrews/Stars and Stripes

Twitter: @frankandrews
**DOJ ready to commit to new Africa strategy**

**By Doug G. Ware**

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The United States has engaged in Africa for decades, though it needs a more modern approach to defending interests and allies there, the Defense Department said Thursday, particularly because China and Russia are expanding their reach into the world’s second-largest continent.

That’s the message that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will bring to the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit this week, a senior defense official told reporters at the Pentagon. The event’s main purpose is to implement a new American strategy jointly with Sub-Saharan Africa that aims to add long-term stability and deepen relations — especially in places where Russia and China are making inroads.

“This strategy reframes the region’s importance to U.S. national security interests,” the White House states in its 17-page U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa. “This strategy articulates a new vision for how and with whom we engage.”

“The United States firmly believes that it’s time to stop treating Africa as a subject of geopolitics — and start treating it as the major geopolitical player it has become,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a Feb. 23 speech. “The United States knows that, on most of the urgent challenges and opportunities we face, Africa will make the difference.”

The summit opens Tuesday and will conclude Thursday. It’s being hosted in Washington.

On Thursday, the Pentagon stressed the importance of the meetings and their focus on issues such as defense, climate change, economic growth and ongoing coronavirus recovery.

A senior defense official told reporters that the Pentagon is taking a “3D approach” to the summit — defense, development and diplomacy — during this time of heightened conflict in the world and rising influence and aggression from Russia and China, countries that the U.S. views as two of its top challengers.

“Our focus is to make sure we work with partners so they understand challenges when they work with strategic partners,” said the defense official who spoke on condition of anonymity. “We respect African sovereignty.”

The defense official said there’s ongoing concern about basing efforts by Russia and China in parts of Africa. CNN reported in the summer that Russia was mining gold in Sudan to help finance its war in Ukraine and Moscow made a deal in 2019 allowing its naval forces to use Sudan’s ports. There was also an agreement to build a Russian naval base in Sudan, though the status of that deal is unclear.

For China, there’s concern about Beijing’s basing efforts in Djibouti and Equatorial Guinea, and loans money to African nations as leverage. Wednesday’s summit.

“My study finds China’s basing potential grows the longer they build the base and the more they control the surrounding area,” the report’s conclusions. “The cost of China’s basing potential is increasing but will be relatively low if it wants to leverage the area for a minimal presence.”

For the U.S., it’s important to understand how China has driven this strategy, as it has been doing for many years. China’s basing efforts are driven by its desire to project power and influence in Africa, as well as its desire to access key strategic locations.

The U.S. is concerned about China’s growing military presence in Africa, and it is working to counteract China’s efforts to establish basing facilities. The U.S. has invested heavily in Africa to protect its interests and counter China’s influence.

China is one of the main competitors for overseas basing in Africa, and the U.S. is focusing on building a new approach to counter China’s efforts. The U.S. has been working with African countries to develop basing facilities, and it has been successful in gaining support for its approach.

China, on the other hand, has a much larger military presence in Africa, and it has been successful in establishing basing facilities in several countries. However, the U.S. is working to counter China’s efforts, and it is making progress.

The U.S. is committed to working with African countries to counter China’s basing efforts. The U.S. is also working to increase its presence in Africa, and it is making progress in several areas.

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**Helicopter raid kills two ISIS militants in Syria**

**Court dismisses Okinawa’s bid to halt runway**

**forces**

**TROOP WITHDRAWAL HELPED AL-SHABAB MILITANT MOVEMENT GROW**

**From Page 1**

in uniforms.

“I felt like it was a real tribute to Danab that they were able to carry on the fight despite the almost abrupt withdrawal of U.S. military support,” said one U.S. service member. He and five other U.S. service members spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

An operation in central Somalia in 2021 illustrated Danab’s capacity to succeed even without U.S. boots on the ground. Acting on a tip from a resident, Danab soldiers say they arrested a man accused of kidnapping a French intelligence agent a decade ago and killed scores of insurgents. The soldier also flabbergasted the local population in the town of Caamaare during the seven-week operation by renting housing and buying food instead of commandeering it, said 2nd Lt. Hamir Salim Omar.

The success of this specially trained force in seizing territory from al-Shabab and capturing some of its commanders has been the result of hard-won changes in the Somali military that began before the U.S. withdrawal, according to a dozen interviews with Danab soldiers of various ranks at their training facilities, headquarters in the capital, Mogadishu, and at sites of recent battles as well as with U.S. and Somali defense officials, military trainers, and civilians and other Somali military and militia forces.

The interviews also reveal the damage the pullout did to the campaign against al-Shabab. A senior U.S. defense official said in an interview that he had no doubt that the troop pullout — coupled with political turmoil inside Somalia over delayed elections — strengthened the insurgency over the past few years.

“Al-Shabab increased in size, so the physical size number of operators. Al-Shabab increased their cash flow — their resourcing went up,” said a U.S. military official.

Many of Somalia’s military units were originally clan militias. Until a few years ago, commanders often pocketed soldiers’ pay, forcing them to sell their ammunition or guns for food. Recruits trained with sticks, weapons being in short supply.

When the United States donated food, fuel and other supplies, they were often stolen. But the United States needed a reliable partner. So it set up Danab. In 2013, the first group of 100 soldiers was recruited.

“None wanted to join the military back then. It was just for banditry,” said Lt. Col. Abdullahi Nur, known as Beereyare — the commander now in charge of the Danab brigade. Angered by al-Shabab’s closure of his mosque and school and the jailing of his teacher, he volunteered to be among the initial Danab trainees. He is the first commander Danab has had who has risen all the way through the ranks, a rarity in a country where plum positions have often gone to those with political connections.

At the beginning, recruits lived in and out of the country. That was absolutely the worst way to try to advise a foreign army. Awful, absolutely awful,” said one service member.

Helicopter raid kills two ISIS militants in Syria

**By Matthew M. Burke and Hana Kasumoto**

TOkyo — Japan’s highest court dismissed without debate last week a lawsuit brought by Okinawa Prefecture to halt construction of a Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab.

A five-justice panel of Japan’s Supreme Court on Thursday upheld lower court decisions that force Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki to accept construction permits issued in 2013 by then-Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima.

The panel disregarded Okinawa’s argument and held instead that the prefecture was not a “qualified plaintiff.”

“The court ‘rejects this final appeal,’ Presiding Justice Atsushi Yamaguchi told the half-filled courtroom Thursday.

The runway at Camp Schwab on Okinawa’s rural northern coast is decades behind schedule. It is meant to replace Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in urban Ginowan, which Japanese officials consider inherently dangerous due to its central location in a densely populated area.

Tamaki said he was disappointed with the “unacceptable” verdict, according to a post on the prefecture’s website.

“When this decision, the Supreme Court is judging that the government is in an upper-class and the municipalities are in a lower-class,” Tamaki said. “It is a problem in the aspect of local autonomy.”

He warned other municipalities that they, too, could be forced to bend to Tokyo’s will.

Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said Thursday that the central government will continue “working hard” to gain Okinawans’ understanding, according to Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s website.

“We want to realize the rever­

Turing permits issued in 2013 by Okinawa’s website.

Another lawsuit trying to halt construction of a Marine Corps runway on the island was also rejected last week a lawsuit brought by a municipality in Japan’s southern island of Okinawa.

The case against Futenma Air Station was filed by the central government, and the prefecture’s website. The prefec­

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Helicopter raid kills two ISIS militants in Syria

BEIRUT — American forces on Sunday killed two Islamic State militants in eastern Syria in a heli­

**Court dismisses Okinawa’s bid to halt runway**

**BY MATTHEW M. BURKE AND HANA KASUMOTO**

**Stars and Stripes**

**Monday, December 12, 2022**

**MILITARY**

**Two Islamic State officials were killed in an operation conducted by the United States in Syria, officials said.**

**The militants refused to turn themselves in before U.S. helicopters fired at the house they were in, it added.**

**There are some 900 U.S. forces in Syria supporting the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against ISIS. They have frequently targeted ISIS militants mostly in parts of northeastern Syria under Kurdish control.**

**On Nov. 30, ISIS announced that 2021, the website said.**

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**day that the central government will continue “working hard” to gain Okinawans’ understanding, according to Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s website.**

**“We want to realize the rever­

**sion of Futenma air station, which is said to be the most dangerous in the world,” Matsuno said. “We will work hard to remove risks.”**

**The lawsuit, originally filed in Naha District Court on Aug. 7, 2019, sought to reinstate then-vice-­

**government Kiichiirou Jahan’s deci­

**sion a year earlier to revoke the construc­tion permits. Jahan cited an unstable seabed and envi­

**ronmental concerns at the runway location.**

**Jahan was overturned in April 2019 by Keiichi Ishii, at the time Japan’s minister of land, infras­

**tructure, transport and tourism, according to the prefectural website.**

**A three-judge panel from Naha District Court ruled in November 2020 that Okinawa lacked stand­

**ing because its lawsuit did not seek protection or remediation over rights or profits, the website said.**

**That decision was upheld by the Fukuoka High Court in December 2021, the website said.**

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**Stars and Stripes reporter Keishi Koja contributed to this report.**

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**Twitter: @buckiihokokus @HanaKasumoto**

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Vets receive free vehicles ahead of Army-Navy game

By Carlos Bongioanni
Stars and Stripes

PHILADELPHIA — Thomas Brooks said it felt like “the universe” was mysteriously working on his behalf.

In October, his car was totaled. Then, two weeks later, he was surprised to get a call saying he would be given a free vehicle.

“It was kind of … like … meant to be. Down a car, up a car,” Brooks said.

Brooks was one of two wounded military veterans honored Friday in Philadelphia during a charitable event intended to align with Saturday’s 123rd matchup of the Army-Navy football game played at Philly’s Lincoln Financial Field.

It was the “last chapter” of an effort to give away 100 vehicles, said Wayne Peacock, president and chief executive officer of USAA, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary as a financial institution serving military members, veterans and their families.

“There’s no better way to do it than to have an Army vet and a Navy vet” here for the game.

Peacock said it felt like “the universe” was modified to have a truck-bed vehicle “for him” to be selected to get a free vehicle.

“Would be given a free vehicle. Down a car, up a car,” Brooks said.

Since June, USAA and its charitable partners have given away 98 vehicles. Friday’s giveaways brought it to 100.

Brooks, a wounded Army veteran who had one leg amputated below the knee from injuries he sustained in combat in Iraq in May 2004, got a Chevy Silverado 2500.

The heavy-duty pickup truck was modified to have a bed lift added to accommodate Brooks’ need to transport his 450-pound power wheelchair, said retired Maj. Gen. Kevin Pottinger, founder of the Freedom Mobility Foundation.

Pottinger said his organization found out that Brooks not only needed a replacement car but also had a desire for a vehicle that he could take off-road to go hunting and fishing. After USAA found a suitable vehicle, Pottinger’s group arranged to have the lift installed, at a cost of $14,500.

“Now he’s got himself the ability to get more independent,” said Pottinger.

Wounded Army veteran Thomas Brooks sits inside a Chevy Silverado that was given to him during a charity event in Philadelphia on Friday.

PHOTOS BY CARLOS BONGIOANNI/STARS AND STRIPES

From left, wounded Navy veteran Chris Andrieu, retired Philadelphia Eagles safety Brian Dawkins, retired Dallas Cowboys tight end Jason Witten and wounded Army veteran Thomas Brooks gather inside the Philadelphia Convention Center on Friday just prior to a charity event in which the two wounded veterans received free vehicles.

WASHINGTON — The United States on Friday authorized another $275 million in military aid to Ukraine to help it fight back Russian forces in a war that they have been fighting for more than 9 months.

The Defense Department said the new round of aid is being given under presidential drawdown authority, an option that allows the U.S. to send equipment to Ukraine quickly on an emergency basis.

Friday’s allotment is the 27th package of aid for Ukraine in the past 14 months.

Included in the new aid package are more generators to help Ukrainian troops through the winter, more ammunition, Humvees, ambulances, medical and field equipment, and new air defense capabilities.

The Pentagon said the new aid will bolster “critical security and defense needs” in Ukraine.

“This security assistance package will provide Ukraine with new capabilities to boost its air defenses in addition to providing critical equipment that Ukraine is using so effectively to defend itself on the battlefield,” the Defense Department said in a statement.

US monitoring China’s space activities

Associated Press

BELING — The U.S. is closely monitoring Chinese activities that potentially threaten American assets in space as debris rapidly accumulates in low Earth orbit, the head of United States military operations in space said Friday.

Commander of U.S. Space Command Army Gen. James Dickinson also cheered the overwhelming passage in the United Nations of a resolution that countries not conduct direct-ascent antisatellite tests that create vast fields of space debris, which endanger satellites and space stations.

Of the four countries that have conducted such ASAT tests, the United States was the only one that voted in favor, while China and Russia voted no and India abstained.
NATO chief fears war could spill outside Ukraine

BY JAMEY KEATEN
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — The head of NATO expressed worry that the fighting in Ukraine could spin out of control and become a war between Russia and NATO, according to an interview released Friday.

"Things go wrong, they can go horrifyingly wrong," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in remarks to Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

"It is a terrible war in Ukraine. It is also a war that can become a full-fledged war that spreads into a major war between NATO and Russia," he said. "We are working on that every day to avoid that."

Stoltenberg, a former prime minister of Norway, said in the interview that "there is no doubt that a full-fledged war is a possibility," adding that it was important to avoid a conflict "that involves more countries in Europe and becomes a full-fledged war in Europe."

The Kremlin has repeatedly accused NATO allies of effectively becoming a party to the conflict by providing Ukraine with weapons, training its troops and feeding military intelligence to attack Russian forces.

In comments that reflected soaring tensions between Russia and the West, President Vladimir Putin suggested Moscow might think about using what he described as the U.S. capacity of a preemptive strike.

"Speaking about a disarming strike, maybe it's worth thinking about whom we are dealing with," he said.

Long before the Ukraine war, the Kremlin had expressed concern about U.S. efforts to develop the so-called Prompt Global Strike capability that envisions hitting an adversary's strategic targets with precision-guided conventional weapons anywhere in the world within one hour.

Putin noted that such a strike could knock out command facilities.

"We are just thinking about it, they won't shy to openly talk about it during the past years," he said, claiming that Moscow's precision-guided cruise missiles outperform similar U.S. weapons and that Russia has hypersonic weapons the United States hasn't deployed.

Putin also said he was disappointed with former German Chancellor Angela Merkel's recent comments that a 2015 peace deal for eastern Ukraine negotiated by France and Germany had bought time for Ukraine to prepare for the 2022 war.

"I assumed that other participants of the process were sincere with us, but it turned out that they were cheating us," he said. "It turned out that they wanted to pump Ukraine with weapons and prepare for hostilities."

Putin argued that Merkel's statement showed Russia was right in launching what he has called the "special military operation" in Ukraine. "Perhaps we should have started it earlier," he said.

He also said her comments further eroded Russia's trust in the West, complicating any possible peace talks.

"Eventually we will have to negotiate an agreement," he said. "But after such statements there is an issue of trust. Trust is close to zero. I repeatedly have said that we are ready for an agreement, but it makes us think about whom we are dealing with."

Russia grinding on in eastern Ukraine; Bakhmut ‘destroyed’

BY JAMEY KEATEN
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces have turned the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut into ruins, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said, while Ukraine's military on Saturday reported missile, rocket and airstrike in multiple parts of the country that Moscow is trying to conquer after months of resistance.

The latest battles of Russia's 9 1/2-month war in Ukraine have centered on four provinces that Russian President Vladimir Putin triumphantly — and illegally — claimed to have annexed in late September. The fighting indicates Russia's struggle to establish control of those regions and Ukraine's persistence to reclaim them.

Zelenskyy said the situation "remains very difficult" in several frontline cities in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk provinces. Together, the provinces make up the Donbas, an expansive industrial region bordering Russia that Putin identified as a focus from the war's outset and where Moscow-backed separatists have fought since 2014.

"Bakhmut, Soledar, Maryinka, Kreminna. For a long time, there is no living place left on the land of these areas that have not been damaged by shells and fire," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address, naming cities that have again found themselves in the crosshairs. "The occupiers actually destroyed Bakhmut, another Donetsk city that the Russian army turned into burnt ruins."

Some buildings remain standing in Bakhmut, and the remaining residents still mill about the streets. But like Mariupol and other contested cities, it endured a long siege and spent weeks without water and power even before Moscow launched massive strikes to take out public utilities across Ukraine.

The Donetsk region's governor, Pavlo Kyrylenko, estimated seven weeks ago that 90% of the city's prewar population of over 70,000 had fled in the months since Moscow focused on seizing the entire Donbas.

The Ukrainian military General Staff reported missile attacks about 20 airstrikes and more than 60 rocket attacks across Ukraine between Friday and Saturday.

Special envoy provides details of Griner’s homecoming

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — WNBA star Brittney Griner didn't want any alone time as soon as she boarded a U.S. government plane that last week.

"I want to talk," Griner said, according to Roger Carstens, the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, who helped secure the basketball star's release and bring her back to the United States last week.

She walked throughout the plane, introducing herself to every member of the flight crew, shaking their hands, and "making a personal connection with them," Carstens recalled.

Ultimately, Griner spent about 12 hours of an 18-hour flight talking with others on the plane, Carstens said. The two-time Olympic gold medalist and Phoenix Mercury professional basketball star spoke about her time in the Russian penal colony and her months in captivity, Carstens recalled, although he declined to go into specific details.

"I was left with the impression this is an intelligent, passionate, compassionate, humble, interesting person, a patriotic person," Carstens said. "But above all, authentic. I hate the fact that I had to meet her in this manner, but I actually felt blessed having had a chance to get to know her."

Although Griner is undergoing a full medical and mental evaluation, Carstens said she appeared “full of energy, looked fantastic.”

Griner, who also played pro basketball in Russia, was arrested at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport in February after Russian authorities said she was carrying vape canisters with cannabis oil. The U.S. Department declared Griner to be "wrongfully detained" — a charge that Russia has sharply rejected.

Russia's grinding eastern offensive succeeded in capturing almost all of Luhansk during the summer. Donbas eluded the same fate, and the Russian military in recent weeks has poured manpower and resources around Bakhmut in an attempt to encircle the city, analysts and Ukrainian officials have said.

After Ukrainian forces recaptured the southern city of Kherson nearly a month ago, the battle heated up around Bakhmut, demonstrating Putin's desire for visible gains following weeks of clear setbacks in Ukraine.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Saturday that Russian troops also pressed their Donbas offensive in the direction of the Donetsk city of Lyman, which is 40 miles north of Bakhmut. According to the ministry, they "managed to take more advantageous positions for further advance."
Heavy rain, wind and snow hit Sierra

By Scott Sonner
Associated Press
RENO, Nev. — A winter storm packing powerful winds, heavy rain and potentially several feet of snow in the Sierra Nevada shut down mountain highways, toppled trees and triggered flood watches and avalanche warnings on Saturday from the coast of Northern California to Lake Tahoe.

More than 250 miles of the Sierra remained under a winter storm warning at least until Sunday night or early Monday from north of Reno to south of Yosemite National Park.

As much as 4 feet of snow is expected to fall by the end of the weekend in the upper elevations around Lake Tahoe, and as much as 6 feet in more remote parts of the Sierra to the north and south.

A 70-mile stretch of eastbound U.S. Interstate 80, "due to zero visibility" from Colfax, Calif., to the Nevada state line, transportation officials said. Chains were required on much of the rest of I-80 in the mountains from Reno toward Sacramento.

A stretch of California Highway 89 also was closed due to heavy snow between Tahoe City and South Lake Tahoe, California, the highway patrol said.

The U.S. Forest Service issued an avalanche warning for the backcountry in the mountains west of Lake Tahoe where it said "several feet of new snow and strong winds will result in dangerous avalanche conditions."

Gusts of wind up to 50 mph that sent trees into homes in Sonoma County, firefighers responded to several reports of downed trees crashing into homes in 50 mph wind gusts.

In the Sierra, about 10 inches of snow already had fallen Saturday afternoon at Mammoth Mountain ski resort south of Yosemite where more than 10 feet of snow has been recorded since early November.

As much as 18 to 28 inches of snow was forecast through the weekend at lake level, and up to 4 feet at elevations above 7,000 feet with 50 mph winds and gusts up to 100 mph.

Scientists lower Mauna Loa alert, say eruption could end

By Marcia Dunn
Associated Press
HONOLULU — Scientists lowered the alert level for the Mauna Loa volcano on Hawaii's Big Island from a warning to a watch on Saturday and said the mountain's first eruption in nearly 40 years may soon end.

The U.S. Geological Survey's HVO neither confirmed nor denied an eruption, but said the decreased activity was "due to an inflationary trend soon," the observatory said.

"However, an inflationary trend on the mountain's northeast rift zone was continuing, but lava output and volcanic gas emissions were "greatly reduced."

"High eruption rates will not resume based on past eruptive behavior and current behavior suggests that the eruption may end soon," the observatory said.

"Nevertheless, an inflationary trend of Mauna Loa's summit is accompanying the decreased activity and there is a small possibility that the eruption could continue at very low eruption rates."

Meanwhile, it said, a lava flow front had "stagnated" nearly 2 miles from Saddle Road, the vital highway that residents and tourists alike use to travel between the city of Hilo on the east side of the island and coastal resorts to the west.

Scientists said earlier in the week that the road was no longer under imminent threat from the lava, allaying fears previously that it could be cut off.

Mauna Loa began spewing molten rock Nov. 27 after being quiet for 38 years, drawing onlookers to take in the incandescent spectacle and setting some nerves on edge early on among people who've lived through destructive eruptions.

For many Native Hawaiians, the phenomenon has a deep and very personal cultural significance.

The observatory said its scientists were continuing to monitor the volcano closely, and flight restrictions remained in place in the area up to 1,500 feet above ground level.

By contrast, NASA's Orion crew capsule with test dummies took five days to reach the moon last month. The lunar flyby mission ends Sunday with a Pacific splashdown.

The ispace lander will aim for Atlas crater in the northeastern section of the moon's near side, more than 50 miles across and just over 1 mile deep. With its four legs extend the lander is more than 7 feet tall.

With a science satellite already around Mars, the UAE wants to explore the moon, too. Its rover, named Rashid after Dubai's royal family, weighs just 22 pounds and will operate on the surface for about 10 days, like everything else on the mission.

Emirates project manager Hamad AlMarzooqi said landing on an unexplored part of the moon will "yield novel and highly valued" scientific data. In addition, the lunar surface is "an ideal platform" to test new tech that can be used for eventual human expeditions to Mars.

Plus there's national pride — the rover represents "a pioneering national endeavor in the space sector and a historic moment that, if successful, will be the first Emirati and Arab mission to land on the surface of the moon," he said in a statement.

In addition, the lander is carrying an orange-sized sphere from the Japanese Space Agency that will transform into a wheeled robot on the moon.

Scientists say eruption could end

By Marcia Dunn
Associated Press
CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A Tokyo company aimed for the moon with its own private lander Sunday, blasting off atop a SpaceX rocket first launched by the United Arab Emirates.

The first lunar rover and a toylike robot from Japan that's designed to roll around up close in the gray dust.

It will take nearly five months for the lander and its experiments to reach the moon. The company's spacecraft is designed to carry a moon rock to Japan on that's designed to roll around up close in the gray dust.

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With election over, effect of Georgia’s voting law unclear

Associated Press
WASHINGTON — Georgia’s 2022 election season ended dramatically this past week, but that was because of the closely watched Senate runoff that solidified Democratic control of the chamber and not for any large-scale problems with voting.

That led Republicans in the state to say concerns over a 2021 law that imposed several new restrictions on voting were overblown.

“Georgia’s election system has been challenged and scrutinized and criticized and passed every test,” Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said in a statement after Tuesday’s runoff, citing high turnout.

Voting rights and community groups say their grassroots efforts to work around the new restrictions were key to the relatively strong turnout. But they also caution that they don’t know how many people might have been deterred from voting.

In his victory speech, Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock said he did not share the rosy sentiment about this year’s election.

“Now there will be those both in our state, and across the country, who will point to our victory tonight and try to use it to argue there is no voter suppression in Georgia,” he said. “The fact that millions of Georgians endured hours in lines — and were willing to spend hours in line, lines that wrapped around buildings and went on for blocks, lines in the cold, lines in the rain — is most certainly not a sign voter suppression does not exist.”

The overhaul of the state’s election laws, known as Senate Bill 202, was passed by the Republican-controlled Legislature after Democrats won the 2020 presidential contest and two Senate runoff elections in early 2021.

The law shortened the time period to request an absentee ballot and addressed several issues that had arisen during the pandemic election of 2020. To ease the process for voters concerned about COVID-19, the state created an online portal for mail ballot requests while counties deployed drop boxes.

After the 2020 election, state lawmakers said voters should be required to sign absentee ballot applications by hand, meaning they needed access to a printer. And while lawmakers established drop boxes as legal, they put limits on how many could be used by each jurisdiction and when those boxes would be accessible. This resulted in fewer drop boxes in the state’s most populous counties.

The new law also required a driver’s license or other ID rather than a signature for requesting a mailed ballot.

Also under the law, the runoff period was shortened, creating more hurdles. Saturday voting almost didn’t occur during this year’s runoff, after state election officials interpreted state law to mean it could not be held if it followed a holiday — in this case Thanksgiving and the Friday afterward.

Democrats sued over the issue and won in state court.

Gabriel Sterling, a top official in the secretary of state’s office, said in an interview “the mechanics went through beautifully” while acknowledging the tight turnaround time between general elections and runoffs presented challenges for officials. That was especially true in processing mail-in ballot requests and dealing with postal delivery delays at some locations.

The new law shortened the runoff period from nine weeks to four weeks.

“No one thought about having to do audits and the amount of work and effort that takes, and then to re-recruit people to be poll workers,” Sterling said.

He said a main reason for long lines at early voting locations was that some local election offices had fewer locations for the runoff than during the general election.

Fulton County, which includes Atlanta, had 13 fewer early voting locations for the runoff than it did for the Nov. 8 general election, Sterling said.

Those decisions were made by local election officials, not the secretary of state’s office.

It’s impossible to determine whether Georgia’s new elections law discouraged anyone from voting, and turnout can be affected by a number of factors, including the weather and enthusiasm about the candidates.

Overall turnout during the general election was 56.9% of registered voters, according to the secretary of state’s office, which certified the results.

That roughly aligns with the turnout rate from the last midterm four years ago, even though a record number of midterm ballots were cast, given that more voters are on the rolls. That dropped to just over 50% for the runoff.

Democratic Senator Sinema switches to independent

Associated Press
WASHINGTON — Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona announced Friday she has registered as an independent, a renegade move that could bolster her political brand but won’t upend the Democrats’ narrow Senate majority.

She says she will not caucus with Republicans.

Sinema, who faces reelection in 2024, has been a vibrant yet often unpredictable force in the Senate, tending toward the state’s independent streak and frustrating Democratic colleagues at times with her overtures to Republicans and opposition to Democratic priorities.

“I just don’t fit well into a traditional party system,” Sinema said in an interview Friday.

In the interview, Sinema said she hasn’t decided whether she will run for reelection. But she said this was the time to “be true to myself and true to the values of the Arizonans I represent.”

“I don’t expect anything to change for me,” she said. “This will just be a further affirmation of my style of working across all the policy battles, working with anyone they want to try and get something done.”

While unusual for a sitting senator to switch party affiliation, Sinema’s decision may well have more impact on her own political livelihood than the operations of the Senate. She plans to continue her committee positions through the Democrats. Her move comes just days after Democrats had expanded their majority to 51-49 for the new year, following the party’s runoff election win in Georgia.

In a statement, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Sinema had informed him of her decision and asked to keep her committee assignments — effectively keeping her in the Democratic fold.

“Kyrsten is independent, that’s how she’s always been,” Schumer said. “I believe she’s a good and effective senator and am looking forward to a productive session in the new Democratic majority Senate.”

The Democrats “will maintain our majority on committees, exercise our subpoena power and be able to clear nominees without discharge votes,” he said.

In case of tie votes, Vice President Kamala Harris will continue to provide the winning vote for Democrats.

Sinema, who has modeled her political approach on the maverick style of the late Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona, will join a small but influential group of independent senators aligned with the Democrats — Sens. Angus King of Maine and Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

At the White House, press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre praised Sinema as a “key partner” in passing some of President Joe Biden’s priorities and said the switch “does not change the new Democratic majority control of the Senate. ... We have every reason to expect that we will continue to work successfully with her.” Sinema informed the White House on Thursday afternoon about her plans to formally leave the Democratic Party, according to a person familiar with the discussion and granted anonymity to disclose a private conversation.

Sinema has been at the center of many deals brokered during this session of Congress — from a big, bipartisan infrastructure package Biden signed into law to the land-mark bill approved this week to legally protect same-sex marriages.
**AMERICAN ROUNDPUP**

**Man with paintball gun shot in police station lot**

**CA** RIALTO — A man who was shot after entering a police station parking lot with what appeared to be an assault rifle was in stable condition Wednesday and the weapon he used was a realistic-looking paintball gun, authorities said.

Police said Gunther Elizalde Tellez, 35, of San Bernardino, remained hospitalized, police said.

The shooting happened after a police officer drove his cruiser through the security gate at the police station in Rialto, east of Los Angeles, and Tellez followed his vehicle inside, police said.

Tellez got out of his car and security camera footage showed him running up to the police car with the rifle in hand. He then began running back to the car but stopped and raised the rifle, pointing it at the officer, Police Chief Mark Klig said.

Tellez was shot several times. Investigators said the weapon turned out to be a paintball gun that looked like an AR-15-style assault rifle.

**SpaceX gives rival’s satellites ride to orbit**

**FL** CAPE CANAVERAL — SpaceX launched internet satellites for a competitor, stepping in to help after the London-based OneWeb company halted its flights with Russia over the invasion of Ukraine.

The Falcon rocket blasted off at sunset with 40 mini satellites bound for polar orbit. They will expand OneWeb’s constellation to just over 500, nearly 80% of the planned total of about 630 satellites.

Elon Musk’s SpaceX has more than 3,200 Starlink satellites in orbit, providing high-speed, broadband internet to remote corners of the world. The plan is to launch the first of its internet satellites early next year from Cape Canaveral.

SpaceX agreed to launch satellites for OneWeb after the British company broke ties with Russia in March. Russian Soyuz rockets already had launched 13 batches of OneWeb satellites.

**Dousing a blaze**

**Firefighters work to control a blaze at an agricultural plant owned by Heartland Crush, a soybean crushing company, Thursday in Marengo, Iowa. It was not clear what caused the explosion.**

**New area code coming to southern part of state**

**IL** SPRINGFIELD — A new area code overlaying the current 618 area code will be introduced in southern Illinois next month.

The new 618 area code will face southern part of state

**NEW YORK — New York City Mayor Eric Adams is such an enemy of rats that he once called a press conference to demonstrate a contraption for drowning them in poison. Now Adams finds himself contesting a $300 fine issued by his own administration over a rat infestation at a building he owns in Brooklyn.

Adams was issued a summons by the city health department on May 10 after a health inspector spotted “fresh rat droppings” at his townhouse on Lafayette Avenue in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood.

The New York Times reports that Adamsdialed into a city administrative court hearing on Tuesday to contest the $300 fine, which he was issued after first ignoring the summons.

Adams told the hearing officer that he had spent nearly $7,000 battling rats at the property and had even used the rat-drowning device that he promoted in 2019 when he was Brooklyn borough president, the Times said.

**US currency signed by female pair for first time**

**FORT WORTH — Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Thursday helped mark a milestone in U.S. history when she held up a newly minted $5 bill signed for the first time ever by two women.**

Yellen’s signature will appear alongside that of U.S. Treasurer Lynn Malera, the first Native American in that position.

Yellen joked during a stop in Texas about the bad handwriting of some of her male predecessors and said, “I will admit, I spent some quality time practicing my signature.”

“Two women on the currency for the first time is truly momentous,” added Malera, who traveled with Yellen to a Bureau of En-graving and Printing facility in Fort Worth to provide their signatures.

**Girl has unicorn license — in case she finds one**

**LA ** LOS ANGELES — A girl named Madeline, with a vivid imagination and remarkable awareness of how bu-reaucracy can dash dreams, got her wish when she asked Los Angeles animal control authorities for a license to own a unicorn — if she’s able to find one.

The first-of-its kind permit came with strings attached, however: The mythical creature must be provided ample exposure to sunlight, moonbeams and rainbows and have its horn polished at least once a month with a soft cloth.

Director Marcia Mayeda of the county Department of Animal Care and Control sent the girl a heart-shaped, rose-colored metal tag with “Permanent Unicorn License” emblazoned on it, along with a white fuzzy unicorn doll with pink ears, purple hooves and a silver horn.

The agency posted images of the correspondence, the license, the medallion and the stuffed toy on its social media accounts, with the girl’s last name obscured.

From The Associated Press
Hospitalizations signal rising risk for US seniors

By Carla K. Johnson and Laura Ungar, Associated Press

Coronavirus-related hospital admissions are climbing again in the United States, with older adults a growing share of U.S. deaths and less than half of nursing home residents up to date on COVID-19 vaccines.

These alarming signs portend a difficult winter for seniors, which worries 81-year-old nursing home resident Bartley O’Hara, who said he is “vaccinated up to the eyeballs” and tracks coronavirus hospital trends as they “zoom up” for older adults, but remain flat for younger folks.

“The sense of urgency is not universal,” said O’Hara of Washington, D.C. But “if you’re 21, you probably shouldn’t worry about your granny. We’re all in this together.”

One troubling indicator for seniors: Hospitalizations for people with COVID-19 rose more than 30% in two weeks. Much of the increase is driven by older people and those with existing health problems, said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The numbers include everyone testing positive, no matter why they are admitted.

When it comes to protecting seniors, “we’re doing a terrible job of that in this country,” said Dr. Eric Topol, head of Scripps Research Translational Institute.

As nursing home leaders redouble efforts to get staff and residents boosted with the new vaccine version, now recommended for those 6 months and older, they face complacency, misinformation and COVID-19 fatigue. They are calling on the White House for help with an “all hands on deck” approach.

Clear messages about what the vaccine can do — and what it can’t — are needed, said Katie Smith Sloan, president of LeadingAge, which represents nonprofit nursing homes.

Breakthrough infections do not mean the vaccine has failed, she said, but that false perception has been hard to fight.

“The sense of threat felt by younger adults, but remain flat for younger adults,” she said, but that false perception has been hard to fight.

“We need to change our messaging to be accurate about what it does, which is prevent serious illness and hospitalization and death,” Sloan said. “This virus is insidious, and it just keeps popping up everywhere. We just need to be real about that.”

Easing restrictions, broader immunity in the general population and mixed messages about whether the pandemic is over have softened the sense of threat felt by younger adults. That may be a welcome development for most, but the attitude has seeped into nursing homes in troubling ways.

Getting family consent for vaccinating nursing home residents has become more difficult, nursing home leaders say. Some residents who can give their own consent are declining the shots. Only 23% of nursing home staff are up to date on COVID-19 vaccinations.

Staff and visitors are potential entry points to nursing homes for the virus. The best facilities use a multi-layered approach, protecting residents with masks, screening questions, temperature checks and enhanced infection control.

“What we’ve learned during COVID is that the rate of spread is dependent on the community rate of spread,” said Tina Sandri, CEO of Forest Hills of D.C., a nursing home in the nation’s capital. “I feel safer in my building than anywhere else, including the grocery store.”

Meanwhile, hospitals across the country are seeing an influx of senior patients that Topol calls “pretty alarming.” Nationally, the rate of daily hospital admissions for those 70 and older with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 rose from 8.5 per 100,000 people on Nov. 15, to 12.3 per 100,000 people on Dec. 6, according to statistics from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Facing surge in COVID cases, China expanding hospitals, ICUs

By Joe McDonald

Associated Press

BEIJING — Facing a surge in COVID-19 cases, China is setting up more intensive care facilities and trying to strengthen hospitals as Beijing rolls back anti-virus controls that confined millions of people to their homes, crushed economic activity and set off protests.

President Xi Jinping’s government is officially committed to stopping virus transmission, the last major country to try. But the latest moves suggest the ruling Communist Party will tolerate more cases without quarantines or shutting down travel or businesses as it winds down its “zero-COVID” strategy.

A Cabinet meeting called Thursday for “full mobilization” of hospitals including adding staff to ensure their “combat effectiveness” and increasing drug supplies, according to state media. Officials were told to keep track of the health of everyone in their area aged 65 and older.

It isn’t clear how much infection numbers have increased since Beijing last week ended mandatory testing as often as once a day in many areas. But interviews and social media accounts say there are outbreaks in businesses and schools across the country. Some restaurants and other businesses have closed because too many employees are sick.

The virus testing site in Beijing’s Runfang Shuishang neighborhood shut down because all its employees were infected, the neighborhood government said Saturday on its social media account. “Please be patient,” it said.

Official case numbers are falling, but those no longer cover large parts of the population after mandatory testing ended Wednesday in many areas. That was part of dramatic changes that confirmed Beijing was testing gradually to join the United States and other governments that ended travel and other restrictions and are trying to live with the virus.

Protests erupted Nov. 25 after 10 people died in a fire in Urumqi in the northwest. Internet users asked whether firefighters or people trying to escape were blocked by locked doors or other anti-virus measures. Authorities denied that, but the disaster became a focus for public anger.

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Tensions run high in Kosovo as shots fired, Serbs block roads

Associated Press

PRISTINA, Kosovo — Tensions were high in northern Kosovo on Sunday, with Serbs blocking roads as shots and explosions rang out overnight, Kosovo police and media reported Sunday. No injuries were reported.

The blocking of the roads with heavy vehicles and trucks happened a day after the Serbian president said he would ask the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo to permit the deployment of 1,000 Serb troops in the Serb-populated north of Kosovo, claiming they are being harassed there.

The roadblocks, which Serbs say were erected to protest the recent arrest of a former Kosovo Serb police officer, came despite the postponement of the Dec. 18 municipal election to which the Kosovo Serbs were opposed.

Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic said Sunday in his message to the Serbs in Kosovo that “there is no surrender and there will be no surrender.” He claimed the Serbs had been “forced” to erect the road barricades to protect themselves from Kosovo security forces.

The Union of Migrants and WWII Veterans of Kosovo, an opposition group, said Sunday that “the interminable messages from the authorities regarding the arrest of the former police officer are fueling the situation.”

Local Serbs block a road near the ethnically divided town of Mitrovica, Kosovo, on Sunday. Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic said Sunday the Serbs had been “forced” to erect road barricades with heavy vehicles to protect themselves from Kosovo security forces.

Mauritanian indicted in Mali terror attacks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A Mauritanian national suspected of planning and coordinating three lethal attacks in 2015 on Westerners in Mali was arraigned in a New York federal court on Saturday, a day after being transferred to U.S. custody in Mali.

Fawaz Ould Ahmed Ould Abemide faces multiple terrorism charges in a six-count indictment, including for his alleged role in the attacks on a restaurant and two hotels that killed a total of 38 people. The victims included five United Nations workers and a U.S. citizen.

“Today, we have made clear that the United States is steadfast in our commitment to bring to justice those who commit barbaric acts of terrorism targeting innocent victims, including, as in this case, an American aid worker who was killed more than 4,000 miles from her home in Maryland,” U.S. Attorney Breon Peace said in a statement.

Abemide, 44, also known as "Ibrahim Idress" and "Ibrahim Dix," appeared in a federal court in Brooklyn, where U.S. Magistrate Judge James R. Cho ordered him to be detained, pending trial.

Abemide is charged with the murder of Anita Ashok Datar, the U.S. citizen who was among the 20 victims of a Nov. 20, 2015, attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, the capital of Mali. Datar, a 41-year-old public health expert from Takoma Park, Md., was a guest at the hotel and had been working for an international developing firm helping the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Abemide also faces charges of unlawful use of firearms and explosives and helping provide support to the terrorist groups al-Mourabitoun and al-Qaida.
Inside Trevor Noah’s goodbye

The Daily Show says farewell to its latest host of seven years

By Stephen Battaglio

The comedian was not widely known in the U.S. Being Black and not from the U.S. — or the U.K. — made him a rarity in late-night TV. Noah noted how when he started hosting after Stewart’s wildly successful 17-year run, Comedy Central was unable to fill the seats in the studio audience.

Noah brought a more global view to the program (early in his tenure he moved away from watching traditional TV in favor of streaming) and for what he believes is their biggest box-office hit, was named for Noah on “The Daily Show” since 2014, while Stephen Colbert has helmed NBC’s “The Tonight Show” since 2005, first on “The Colbert Report” for Comedy Central and CBS’s “The Late Show” starting in 2015.

No replacement has been named for Noah on “The Daily Show.” When the program returns from hiatus on Jan. 17, it will turn to guest hosts including Al Franken, Chelsea Handler, D. L. Hughley, Leslie Jones, John Leguizamo, Hasan Minhaj, Kal Penn, Sarah Silverman, Wanda Sykes and Marlon Wayans.

Nanjiani says ‘Eternals’ did not help relationship with food

By Alex Farrow

Kumail Nanjiani has shed more light about his time on Marvel’s “Eternals.” This time, he’s reflecting on how the action movie negatively affected his relationship with food. A striking lack of diversity among the group’s membership along following a 2021 Los Angeles Times investigation that revealed a striking lack of diversity among the group’s membership along

Warner Bros. axes ‘Wonder Woman 3’

Patty Jenkins’ “Wonder Woman 3” starring Gal Gadot is not moving forward at Warner Bros., according to a report last week from the Hollywood Reporter. The third installment in the superhero saga is the latest DC project to be scrapped following the recent Warner Bros. Discovery-led merger, which has resulted in mass layoffs and a controversial creative overhaul.

Representatives for Warner Bros. did not immediately respond to the Los Angeles Times’ request for comment.

According to anonymous sources cited by THR, director Jenkins recently submitted her plans for the sequel to DC Studios, now helmed by filmmaker James Gunn and producer Peter Safran. In October, Warner Bros. Discovery president David Zaslav hired the duo to spearhead a new, more unified strategy across film, television and animation.

Gunn and Safran were reportedly among the execs who brokered the news to Jenkins by telling the filmmaker that her vision for “Wonder Woman 3” did not line up with their plans for the future of DC.

Other news

• “Top Gun: Maverick,” 2022’s biggest box-office hit, was named the best film of the year by the National Board of Review. Though the National Board of Review, a long-running organization comprised of film enthusiasts and academics, has no overlap or correlation to other awards bodies, the win adds to the awards-season binnacle for “Top Gun: Maverick,” which was a $3.5 billion world-wide smash but a legitimate Academy Awards contender. Also on Dec. 8, the Producers Guild Awards announced that “Top Gun” star Tom Cruise will receive its David O. Selznick Achievement Award.

• Trevor Noah, a three-year veteran of NBC’s “The Carmichael Show” — will host the Golden Globe Awards in Beverly Hills, Calif., on Jan. 10. Last year’s Globes ceremony was a low-key event with no telecast or even a livestream as the Hollywood Foreign Press Association regrouped following a 2021 Los Angeles Times investigation that revealed a striking lack of diversity among the group’s membership along with self-dealing and other ethical lapses.

• “Monarch,” Fox’s effort to try to create a country version of “Empire,” didn’t stick. The network has canceled the family drama after just one season. Foxpromised Susan Sarandon as the queen of the country music family, but the show appeared sporadically in occasional flashbacks after the first episode.

From wire reports
ACROSS
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14 Eg. and Syr., once
15 “The Freshman” actor Matthew
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18 Roulette bet
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25 Sony rival
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55 — Park, Colorado
56 Geese formation
57 Biblical boat
58 Hide
59 Tofu source

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8 Start of a JFK quote
9 Lottery ticket type
10 Chore
11 “No seats” signs
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23 Measuring device
24 Actor Epps
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27 UFO fliers
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29 Paris notion
30 Shoulder muscle, for short
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47 — -Magnon
48 Tours pal
49 Area of expertise
54 Lobbying gp.
55 — Park, Colorado
56 Geese formation
57 Biblical boat
58 Hide
59 Tofu source

Answer to Previous Puzzle
PAL NOVA PROP
ALI EPEE OOPS
RTE LEER PLEA
EAVES DROPPERS
DOS BAY
OATEN MIX PAW
NOON ROC LENA
EEK POD READS
DUATIA
ISLAND HOPPERS
FAIR MORK DON
FRAN APSE AM
YAMS PEON MAG

CRYPTOQUIP
L T Q AOQLY UT KQYSGLAO
KOUNK GXCX EU ARUKX SUGY,
NXUNRX AUIRS KOUIE “LE’K
EOX XYS UT NQYXCQ!”

Saturday’s Cryptoquip: A BUNCH OF FEMALE FILM EDITORS WHO BANDED TOGETHER TO FORM A SINGING GROUP: THE SPLICE GIRLS.

Today’s Cryptoquip Clue: N equals P
I

More than a new government, Peru needed a stable one

By Mac Magilis
Special to The Washington Post

I

Russians negotiated a deal with the Syrian government and struck the Syrian-Northern Lebanon border. They have agreed to a ceasefire in the border region.

In April, the Russian military announced it would conduct a joint air raid with the Syrian government. This came after a series of Russian air strikes on rebel-held areas in the border region.

The joint air raid was carried out on April 10, targeting areas held by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The joint air raid was aimed at weakening ISIL's capabilities and reducing its ability to carry out attacks in the region.

The joint air raid was a significant development in the ongoing conflict in Syria, as it demonstrated the growing cooperation between Russia and Syria in the fight against ISIL. The joint air raid also highlighted the continued support of the Russian military for the Syrian government in its efforts to maintain control over the border region.

The joint air raid came as part of a broader campaign by Russia and Syria to strengthen their military cooperation in the region. This campaign has included a number of joint military exercises and operations, as well as the deployment of Russian military personnel to Syria.

The joint air raid was also seen as a sign of the growing influence of Russia in the region, as it continued to expand its military footprint in Syria and the broader Middle East. The joint air raid was seen as a way for Russia to assert its influence in the region and to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining a presence in the Middle East.

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Syracuse 86, Evansville 69
Bellarmine 69, Murray St. 58
Boise St. 83, Montana 53
Dayton 79, UNC-Ashville 56
DePaul 82, Mississippi State 64
Fort Wayne 65, Mississippi St. 61
Green Bay 71, Central Miss. 56
Illinois State 77-74 Edwardsville 71
Kansas St. 67-57 South Alabama 52
Kent St. 67, Cleveland St. 58
Midwestern State 82, Montana 72
Purdue 74, Penn St. 74
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Tennessee 64, South Alabama 52
University of South Alabama 64
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Virginia 67, Wisconsin 57
Wright State 68, Denver 63

Syracuse vs. Minnesota
Arkansas vs. Kansas
South Dakota St. vs. Montana
North Dakota St. at Samford

Memphis vs. Utah St.
Mount Union (14-0) vs. North Central
Missouri vs. Wake Forest
Ferris St. 38, West Florida 17
Fresno St. vs. Washington St.

NCAA Division II playoffs

Wednesday, Dec. 28

LendingTree Bowl

Saturday, Dec. 10

Friday, Dec. 16

Pinstripe Bowl

Friday, Dec. 23

Tampa, Fla.

Texas Bowl

Semifinals

Championship

East

Denver 3 9 0 . 250 166 204
L.A. Chargers 6 6 0 . 500 272 309
N.Y. Jets 7 5 0 . 583 252 223
Carolina 4 8 0 . 333 230 266
Philadelphia 11 1 0 . 917 338 226

West

Minnesota 10 2 0 . 833 289 279
L.A. Rams 4 9 0 . 308 218 296

NFL injury report

Thursday's game

San Francisco at Seattle

Saturday, Dec. 17

Indianapolis at Baltimore

Miami at Buffalo

Sunday, Dec. 18

Atlanta at Dallas

Jacksonville at Arizona

New York at Denver

Sunday's transactions

— Promoted S Raheem Layne and DL Christoph Hinton to the active roster from the practice squad.
— Promoted RB Godwin Igwebuike and WR James Washington to the active roster from the practice squad.
— Waived S Raheem Layne.
— Signed DL Zaven Collins.
— Placed RB Laquon Treadwell to the active roster from injured reserve.
— Promoted S Raheem Layne and DL Christoph Hinton to the active roster from the practice squad.
— Promoted S Raheem Layne and DL Christoph Hinton to the active roster from the practice squad.

NFL TV schedule

Sunday, Dec. 18

Atlanta at Dallas

Jacksonville at Arizona

New York at Denver

New England at Cincinnati

Miami at Jacksonville

Detroit at Houston

Washington at Arizona

Arizona at New England

Baltimore at Cleveland

Kansas City at Buffalo

Denver at New England

Tampa Bay at New York

Kansas City at Tennessee

Detroit at Buffalo

Minnesota at Cleveland

Philadelphia at Carolina

Indianapolis at Tennessee

Baltimore at Cleveland

Miami at Buffalo

NFL Picks

Baltimore at Cleveland

New England at Arizona

Kansas City at Buffalo

Tampa Bay at New York

Outside the NFL

NFL injury report

New York Giants at Philadelphia

Chicago Bears at Cleveland

Washington at Arizona

Baltimore at Jacksonville

Jacksonville at Tennessee

New York at Houston

Baltimore at Jacksonville

Jacksonville at Tennessee

New York at Buffalo

Chicago at Buffalo

Washington at Arizona

Baltimore at New England

Canterbury at Canberra (AFL)

Baltimore at New England

Canterbury at Canberra (AFL)

Baltimore at New England

Canterbury at Canberra (AFL)

Baltimore at New England

Canterbury at Canberra (AFL)

Baltimore at New England

Canterbury at Canberra (AFL)

Baltimore at New England

Canterbury at Canberra (AFL)

Baltimore at New England

Canterbury at Canberra (AFL)
**Alabama just 2nd team to beat two No. 1s in season**

**Associated Press**

HOUSTON — No. 8 Alabama could have called it a day when it was trailing by double figures early in the second half.

The Crimson Tide didn’t, and earned another marquee win this season.

Alabama rallied from a 15-point second-half deficit to stun No. 1 Houston 71-65 on Saturday, becoming just the second men’s team to beat two top-ranked teams in the same season.

Noah Clewney had 16 points and 11 rebounds, Jaden Bradley added 12 points and Mark Sears scored 11 points, including nine in the second half for the Crimson Tide (8-1). Alabama shot 50% from the field in the second half and 41% for the game. The Tide went 20-for-32 on free throws, including 15-for-21 in the second half.

“This is one of those character wins that shows that our guys are going to keep fighting no matter what the score is,” Alabama coach Nate Oats said. “We could have easily given up down 15. The start of the second half wasn’t great. We made some changes with the bench guys. Hung in there, kept clawing away at the lead, finally able to take the lead and then we pulled away from them.”

The Crimson Tide beat North Carolina 103-101 in four overtimes on Nov. 27 and join the 1990 Oklahoma-Carolina 103-101 in four overtimes “Not sure how many teams get the chance to beat two top-ranked teams in the same season. We just couldn’t take the lead and then we pulled away from them.”

No. 2 Texas 88, Arkansas-Pine Bluff 43: Christian Bishop scored 16 points and the host Longhorns held the Golden Lions to 13 points in the second half while coasting to a win.

Texas rose to its highest ranking in more than a decade after a 6-0 start before dropping an overtime loss against No. 17 Illinois earlier in the week in New York City.

Freshman Dillon Mitchell scored 13 points for Texas (7-1), most of them coming on dunks. Brock Cunningham scored a career-high 13 on 5-for-5 shooting, which included three three-pointers.

**No. 4 Purdue 65, Nebraska 62 (OT):** Fletcher Loyer scored a career-high 22 points and Branden Smith made four free throws in the last 28 seconds of overtime to give the visiting Boilermakers a hard-fought victory over the Cornhuskers.

Purdue (10-0, 2-0 Big Ten) has won two straight to open conference play for the first time since 2017-18.

Zach Edey had 11 points and 11 rebounds for the Wildcats, and Adama Sanogo added 16 points and Naheim Alleyne added 11.

It was Clingan’s second double-double of the season, and he was one of five UConn players who scored in double digits. Sophomore Jordan Hawkins had a team-high 22 points and was 6-for-9 on three-pointers.

No. 5 UConn 114, Long Island 61: Freshman Donovan Clingan had a career-high 21 points and 11 rebounds to lead the host Huskies over the Sharks.

He was followed with 20 points each, Seth Smith and Aarion Monroe.

Pelle Larsson had 15 points and 17 rebounds, K.J. Adams Jr. scored a career-high 24 points and was 6-for-9 on three-pointers. Freshman Alex Karaban turned in a career-high 22 points off the bench, while Adama Sanogo added 16 points and Neahim Alleyne added 11.

Jacob Johnson scored 19 points for Texas (1-8) and R.J. Greene added 17.

Texas made 11 three-pointers and shot 57.1% from the field.

Arkansas, which improved to 9-1 on the season, won by three at the break and gradually pulled away from Oklahoma throughout the second half.

Oklahoma (7-3) had just three scorers with 20 points each, Grant Sherfield leading the way with 23 points, including 3-for-6 on three-pointers. He was followed by Milos Uzan with 15 points and Jalen Hill with 11. The Sooners shot 57.1% from the field.

**No. 10 Arizona 89, No. 14 Indiana 75:** Anazas Tubelis scored 21 points and the Wildcats defeated the Hoosiers in the Vegas Clash.

Arizona (8-1) held off Indiana’s surge after the Hoosiers got within three points midway through the second half. Arizona responded with three straight threes to build its cushion back to double digits.

Oumar Ballo had 15 points and 12 rebounds for the Wildcats, while Pelle Larsson scored 16 and Kerr Kriisa finished with 14.

Memphis 82, No. 11 Auburn 73: Kendric Davis scored a career-high 27 points, and Memphis ended Auburn’s season-opening eight-game winning streak at the Holiday Hoopsgiving showcase in Atlanta.

The closest Auburn (8-1) got was an eight-point defeat on K.D. Johnson’s free throws with 3:04 left in the game.

Wendell Green Jr. and Johnson each finished with 14 points and Chris Moore had 12 for Auburn, which began the day as one of 10 unbeaten teams left in the nation.

No. 15 Duke 82, MD-Eastern Shore 55: Tye Proctor and DaQuin Whitehead each scored 15 points and the host Blue Devils rolled past the Hawks while using an all-freshman starting lineup for the first time in program history.

Kyle Filipowski added 14 points as Duke (10-2) won its fourth game in a row.

**No. 16 Kentucky 69, Yale 59:** Oscar Tshiebwe scored 28 points and had 12 rebounds to lead the host Wildcats over the Bulldogs.

Kentucky (7-2) pushed its winning streak to four games in a tougher-than-expected contest against Yale (8-3) from the Ivy League. The Bulldogs opened the second half with an 8-0 run to tie the score at 33 before Tshiebwe scored 12 straight to help the Wildcats regain control.

Penn State 74, No. 17 Illinois 59: Andrew Funk and Myles Dread combined for 11 three-pointers to help the visiting Nittany Lions beat the Illini.

Funk and Jalen Pickett led all scorers with 20 points each, Seth Lundy added 16 and Dread had 15 to give Penn State (7-1, 1-1 Big Ten) its first road Big Ten win against a top-20 team since beating No. 16 Michigan State in 2020.

No. 19 UCLA 87, Denver 64: Jaylen Clark scored 24 points, and the host Bruins opened the second half with a 17-0 run in a blowout of the Pioneers for their fifth straight victory.

BYU 83, No. 21 Creighton 80: Freshman guard Dallin Hall hit a go-ahead putback with 11 seconds left in Las Vegas, and the Cougars handed the Bluejays their fourth straight loss.

Saint Mary’s 68, No. 22 San Diego State 61: Aidan Mahaney scored 20 points, Alex Ducas added 17 and the Gaels knocked off the Aztecs in the Jerry Colangelo Classic in Phoenix.

No. 24 TCU 83, SMU 75: Mike Miles Jr. returned to the lineup with 18 points and the host Horned Frogs extended their winning streak to six with a win over the Mustangs.
Tenacity, penalties keys for Croatia

By James Robson  
Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — With a population of around 4 million people, the magnitude of Croatia’s win against Brazil wasn’t lost on the team’s coach, Zlatko Dalic.

To reach back-to-back World Cup semifinals was “unimaginable,” he said.

The runner-up from 2018 is going deep again in Qatar — defeating Neymar and Co. 4-2 on penalties after a 1-1 draw through extra time at Education City Stadium on Friday.

“To eliminate a massive tournament favorite and probably the best team as well ... Only Croatia could’ve done this,” added Dalic.

OK, this wasn’t Saudi Arabia shocking Argentina. But on the face of it, Croatia’s victory against Brazil was “unimaginable,” he said.

Croatia’s stunning win over Brazil was “unimaginable,” added Dalic. “This all comes from how we were raised,” said goalkeeper Dominik Livakovic, who was born in January 1995, seven months before Croatia took control of the city of Knin, which is commemorated annually as a key moment in the battle for independence.

“We always go all the way to the end, we leave everything we got on the pitch and we keep fighting,” he said. “That is the reason for our success.”

Croatia’s tenacity and penalties were keys to victory.”

The match wasn’t over yet, but France was leading 1-1 when Kane, England’s captain and its best player, stepped up to take a penalty that could even the score in the 34th minute of Saturday’s match at Al Bayt Stadium.

He sent his shot high over the bar and defending champion France held on to win 2-1 for a spot in the semifinals.

“Once we get to penalties, that’s when we become favorites. I sense that the opponent feels like they have lost the game already,” he said.

With three 0-0 score lines in regulation time and four draws from five games at this World Cup, Croatia hasn’t been the most entertaining team to watch at the tournament.

But when it comes to nerve, steel and sheer fight, it takes some beating.

One factor that can’t be discounted is the wider story of Croatia’s fight for independence following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s when thousands of its people died during the conflict.

The fighting spirit of the nation is a theme frequently referenced by the team’s players and Dalic.

“It’s the best, but the best are still 85% (accurate), so even the best are going to miss at times. I know in the past how much time to do that.”

Kane sank to his knees after the final whistle. His earlier goal put him in a tie with Wayne Rooney as his country’s leading scorer, but that wasn’t what mattered.

At the same time, an elated France team ran across the field in a blue wave of celebration before gathering together in a huddle, bouncing up and down joyously.

The singing and dancing continued into the locker room.

France, the first African team to reach the semifinals of a World Cup, now stands in the way of France’s bid to make history.

“Allow us to savour our victory tonight against a very good England team,” Deschamps said when faced with questions about his next opponent.

For Southgate, it’s time for reflection as he decides whether to carry on in the England job after leading the team through three tournaments since he was hired in 2016.

“Whenever I’ve finished these tournaments I’ve needed time to make the correct decision because emotionally you go through so many different feelings and the energy that it takes through these tournaments is enormous,” he said. “I want to make the right decision, whatever that is for the team, for England, the FA (Football Association).”

“I know in the past how much my feelings have fluctuated in the immediate aftermath of tournament. This all comes from how we were raised,” said goalkeeper Dominik Livakovic, who was born in January 1995, seven months before Croatia took control of the city of Knin, which is commemorated annually as a key moment in the battle for independence.

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“I know in the past how much my feelings have fluctuated in the immediate aftermath of tournament.”
Letang returns, Pens down Sabres

By Dan Scifo

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Kris Letang found another way to surprise Sidney Crosby and the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Crosby scored two goals, Letang returned 12 days after the second stroke of his career and the Penguins defeated the Buffalo Sabres 3-1 on Saturday night.

“He’s done similar things, but nothing like this,” Crosby said of the veteran defenseman. “He’s looking good for going through what he’s going through.”

Rickard Rakell also scored to help the Penguins win their fifth straight and improve to 12-2-2 in their last 16 games. Casey DeSmith, making his first start in six games, stopped 37 shots as Pittsburgh ended a home-and-home series after also winning 4-3 in overtime at Buffalo on Friday night.

Peyton Krebs scored for the Sabres, who lost for the third time in five games. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen finished with 28 saves.

Welcome back

Letang, who missed five games, led the Penguins with 22:14 of ice time. He played on the second defensive pairing with P.O. Joseph. Letang didn’t play on the team’s top power-play unit, but he saw time with the second group and committed a third-period holding penalty.

“The timing still needs to get a little bit better, but the legs were there and I felt pretty good out there,” Letang said.

The 35-year-old Letang suffered his second stroke on Nov. 28, a day after returning with a debil­itating headache. He skated on his own two days after the diagnosis and returned to practice with his teammates 10 days later.

“When I started feeling better, I ramped up the intensity in practice, but there were a couple things to wait on like blood tests and stuff like that to make sure I could go into contact,” Letang said. “Once it was clear, I got the green light.”

Letang missed more than two months in 2014 after his first stroke, which was caused by a small hole in the wall of his heart. The condition also led to his second stroke, which was described by team physician Dr. Dharmesh Vyas as “smaller” than the one Letang previously endured.

“Kris has a medical team of doctors that have put him through a litany of tests and these are some of the smartest doctors in the world in their respective fields,” Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said. “Kris’s health, first and foremost, is the utmost priority from everybody.”

Kochetkov, Hurricanes shut out Islanders

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Paul Stastny scored in the second period, Pyotr Kochetkov got his second career shutout, and the Carolina Hurri­canes beat the New York Islanders 3-0 Sat­urday night to extend their point streak to seven games.

Jesperi Kotkaniemi and Jordan Staal also scored, and Kochetkov had 16 saves as Car­olina improved to 5-4-2 on its current streak.

“Our from standpoint, we did a lot of the things we wanted to do,” veteran forward De­rek Stepan said. “We executed when we had the puck. That’s what we did. We defended extremely well when we didn’t.”

Ilya Sorokin finished with 28 saves as the Islanders lost for the fourth time in the six games. Maple Leafs 5, Flames 4 (OT): Mitch Marner scored 43 seconds into overtime to send host Toronto past Calgary.

Marner also picked up an assist in the first period to extend his franchise-record point streak to 22 games. He has 11 goals and 19 as­sists within that stretch.

William Nylander had two goals and three assists for Toronto, and Auston Matthews had a goal and two assists.

Nathan Nairn finished twice for Calgary, and Andrew Mangiapane also had two assists.

Lightning 4, Panthers 1: Brayden Point, Mikhail Sergachev and Steven Stamkos scored in the third period, powering host Tampa Bay to the win.

Stamkos got his 496th career goal with 3:15 to play. The Lightning captain has eight goals and 19 assists within that stretch.

Senators 3, Predators 2: Claude Giroux, Alex DeBrincat and Drake Batherson scored, leading Ottawa past Nashville.

Shane Pinto had two assists and Cam Tal­bot made 27 saves for the Senators, who had dropped two in a row.


Nashville played the third period with just four defencemen. Jeremy Lauzon did not return after the five-minute mark of the second. He logged just 12 shifts in the game and 7-20 of ice time.

Wild 3, Canucks 0: Filip Gustavsson stopped 35 shots for his first NHL shutout as visiting Minnesota snapped a two-game skid.

Matt Boldy, Connor Dewar and Sam Steel scored in the third period, powering host Minnesota to a win.

Paul Stastny scored for the Sabres, who lost for the third time in five games. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen finished with 28 saves.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

GP W L OT Ps GF GA

Boston 26 21 4 1 43 103
Toronto 25 19 6 0 45 90
B.C. 27 17 9 1 35 95
Detroit 27 13 8 2 36 84
Florida 28 13 11 4 30 93
Montreal 27 13 12 2 28 82
Buffalo 28 12 14 2 26 109
Ottawa 27 12 17 4 28 83

Metro Division

GP W L OT Ps GF GA

New Jersey 27 21 5 1 43 100
Carolina 26 15 6 3 36 73
Pittsburgh 28 16 8 4 36 100
N.Y. Rangers 29 14 10 5 33 89
Washington 29 13 12 4 30 87
Philadelphia 26 8 13 4 26 66
Columbus 26 9 15 2 20 74

Central Division

GP W L OT Ps GF GA

Pittsburgh 27 16 9 2 35 97
Pittsburgh 27 16 9 2 35 97
Boston 27 15 10 2 32 106
Florida 27 15 10 2 32 106
Montreal 27 15 10 2 32 106
Tampa 27 15 10 2 32 106
New York 27 15 10 2 32 106
New Jersey 27 15 10 2 32 106

Western Conference

GP W L OT Ps GF GA

Washington 26 16 9 2 32 97
Pittsburgh 26 16 9 2 32 97
Chicago 26 16 9 2 32 97
Pittsburgh 26 16 9 2 32 97
Columbus 26 16 9 2 32 97
Minnesota 26 16 9 2 32 97

Scoring leaders

Through Saturday

GP G A PTS

Connor McDavid, EDM 26 34 37 71
Leon Draisaitl, EDM 28 29 47 76
Jason Robertson, DAL 26 16 32 48
Nikita Kucherov, TBL 27 28 33 61
Elias Pettersson, VAN 26 13 33 46
Nathan MacKinnon, COL 26 13 33 46
Nikita Zaitsev, DAL 26 16 34 50
Nathan MacKinnon, COL 26 13 33 46
Phil Kessel, CAR 26 13 33 46
Alexandar Georgiev, N.Y. 26 18 36 54
WARRIORS TOP CELTICS IN FINALS REMATCH

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Six months later, the Splash Brothers were still feeling it from all over the court against the Celtics and delivered one of their team's signature wins of the season so far. Keldon Johnson scored 21 points, Stephen Curry added 32, and the Golden State Warriors beat the Boston Celtics 123-107 on Saturday night in a rematch of this year's NBA Finals won by the Warriors in six games.

“We gutted it out,” Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. “Steph and Klay obviously had it rolling, and we made so many shots.”

Jordan Poole had 20 points starting in place of injured Andrew Wiggins despite shooting 1-for-9 from long range.

Thompson scored 12 of his points in the opening quarter shooting 5-for-9 and had 24 by halftime. Curry shot 12 for 21 and had seven assists and six rebounds playing 37 minutes.

The Warriors were coming off a 124-123 loss at Utah on Wednesday night that Thompson called a “collapse.”

“It’s always nice to respond with a great performance and we did that tonight,” Thompson said.


The Spurs were up 113-111 and used two timeouts with 14.7 seconds left to try to get the ball inbound.

But Zach Collins was called for a foul, giving Miami an 8-for-10 inbound attempt, and Miami missed a right-wing three as well, giving San Antonio a 115-113 lead.

Nicolas Batum made a tiebreaker three-pointer with 23.8 seconds remaining and visiting Los Angeles sent Washington to its sixth straight loss.

Paul George scored 36 points for the Clippers and John Wall added 13 in his return to Washington, but it was Batum who made big shots in the final quarter. He hit three three-pointers in the last 4:52 and finished with 12 points.

Cavaliers 110, Thunder 102: Caris LeVert scored 22 points, Evan Mobley had 21 points and nine rebounds and host Cleveland never trailed against Oklahoma City.

Trail Blazers 124, Timberwolves 118: Damian Lillard had 36 points and eight assists, Anfernee Simons added 31 points and host Portland beat Minnesota.

VAUGHN DEFENDS NETS CALL TO REST TOP SCORERS

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — First, Brooklyn Nets coach Jacque Vaughn had to convince All-Star forward Kevin Durant to stay home Saturday night.

Then he tried to explain why the Nets opted to rest their top seven scorers against Indiana. In the end, it didn’t matter as they rallied to beat the Pacers 136-133.

But for Vaughn, it came down to a simple calculation. With two games in two nights, most of those players fighting through injuries and only one game between Sunday and Friday, Vaughn felt it was the best thing to do for his players and the franchise.

“When you have two or three guys out, it’s a strain on two or three more guys and then we’re really not in a position of taking care of the team in total,” he said. “We think, how does it affect everyone else so we can get to a place where, next week we’re looking at ourselves in the mirror with pretty good health mentally and physically.”

As it turned out, Cam Thomas, Patty Mills and others took advant-

age of their chance. Thomas scored a career-high 33 points on 13-of-20 shooting, while Mills added 24 points, six rebounds and six assists, looking like he turned back the clock to his San Antonio days.

While it worked out this time for Vaughn, league officials have discouraged the roster management practice, especially for nationally televised games and road games because they want ticket-buying fans to see the players they want to watch.

That didn’t happen Saturday when Vaughn kept Durant and Kyrie Irving, Ben Simmons, Joe Harris, Royce O’Neale, Nic Claxton, Seth Curry and T.J. Warren all out.

None of the starters from a 120-116 victory Friday night over Atlanta played and Durant didn’t even make the trip — at Vaughn’s urging. Durant ranks among league leaders in minutes played.

In Brooklyn’s case, seven players including Durant, Irving and Simmons are either injured or rehabbing from injuries. O’Neale missed the game for personal reasons and is not expected to play Monday at Washington, either.
**Convroversial draw awards no belt for light heavyweights**

By Mark Anderson
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The light heavyweight title remained vacant Saturday night after judges awarded the main event in UFC 282 a draw so controversial that both fighters, Jan Blachowicz and Magomed Ankalaev, agreed Ankalaev should have won the belt.

During the post-fight interview in the octagon, No. 3 Blachowicz (29-9-1) walked over to fourth-ranked Ankalaev (18-1-1) and told him he deserved the belt.

Ankalaev was so upset over the decision he said through a Russian interpreter he didn’t know if he would “fight in this organization again.”

“I won that fight,” Ankalaev said. “I won the belt. Where is my belt?”

The co-main event also went to the scorecards, and there was far from widespread agreement among the fans about the results of that fight as well.

Even if Blachowicz-Ankalaev was the main event, much of the crowd came to see England’s Paddy Pimblett in the co-main fight. American Jared Gordon, 34, had other ideas, dictating the tempo in the light-heavyweight match even as the crowd repeatedly yelled, “Let’s go, Paddy!”

But even much of the crowd had trouble believing the decision, with many booing Pimblett (20-3) winning 29-28 on all three judges’ cards. Gordon shook his head and laughed when the scores were announced.

“It wasn’t that close,” Pimblett insisted. “I lost. In the third round because I knew I already won the first two.”

The 27-year-old has become a polarizing figure in the UFC, but has backed up his words with his performances in the cage to date, even getting a major benefit of the doubt from the judges over Gordon (19-6). This was the first time Pimblett has fought in the main event.

Ankalaev wasn’t expected to be the headline attraction, but has backed up his words with his performances in the cage to date, even getting a major benefit of the doubt from the judges over Gordon (19-6). This was the first time Pimblett has fought in the main event.

Jan Blachowicz, left, fights Magomed Ankalaev during their light heavyweight title bout Saturday at UFC 282 in Las Vegas. The fight was ruled a draw.

**Another pricey arm: Mets add Japanese ace Senga**

By Mike Fitzpatrick
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Japanese pitcher Kodai Senga and the New York Mets have agreed to a $75 million, five-year contract, according to a person familiar with the negotiations.

The person spoke to The Associated Press early Sunday on condition of anonymity because the deal was pending a physical.

It is the latest big move for free-spending owner Steve Cohen and the busy Mets during a dizzying week. Senga figures to slot into the middle of a revamped rotation headed by three-time Cy Young Award winners Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander.

Hours earlier, the Mets completed a $162 million, eight-year contract Saturday to bring back free-agent center fielder Brandon Nimmo.

New York also finalized deals with free agent pitchers Verlander, José Quintana and David Robertson in the past few days, after re-signing All-Star closer Edwin Díaz to a $102 million, five-year deal last month.

Within the last week, the Mets have committed $359.7 million to five free agents, including Senga. Throw in Díaz, who re-signed before other teams were permitted to negotiate with him, and it’s $461.7 million to six free agents this offseason — five pitchers.

Those moves push New York’s projected 2023 payroll to around $340 million right now — well beyond the highest luxury-tax threshold of $293 million. And that’s without any other major additions this winter.

Under Cohen, who bought the club in November 2020, the Mets became baseball’s biggest spenders this year for the first time since 1989. Their payroll was $273.9 million as of Aug. 31, with final figures that include bonuses yet to be compiled.

Senga, a hard-throwing right-hander, did not have to go through the posting system with the Japanese big leagues because he has 11 seasons of service time.

Several teams in the United States were said to be pursuing him, including the Boston Red Sox.

“I like him,” Mets manager Buck Showalter said Tuesday in San Diego at baseball’s winter meetings. “It’s tough to project those guys. But a good pitcher is a good pitcher.”

Senga, who turns 30 in January, was 11-6 with a 1.94 ERA in 22 starts for the Pacific League’s Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks last season.

He tossed three scoreless innings in two outings for Japan against the U.S. in the Olympics last year, allowing one hit and striking out six with two walks.

“You’re always thinking about the load of pitching every fifth day compared to (once a week in Japan), but they said that about some really good Japanese pitchers that came over here and did well,” Showalter said. “So he’s a good one. We’ve talked with him. And he’s impressive. You can see why they think so highly of him. I enjoyed our little talk with him.”

New York has been overhauling its pitching staff following a playoff loss to San Diego in the wild-card round.

Verlander got an $86.7 million, two-year contract that includes a conditional $35 million player option for 2025. Quintana, another experienced starter ticketed for the rotation, signed a $26 million, two-year deal.

Robertson, a veteran reliever, received $10 million for one year.

Senga, Verlander and Quintana replace the three 2022 Mets starters who became free agents this offseason: Jacob deGrom left for Texas, Taijuan Walker has a deal in place with Philadelphia pending a physical, and Chris Bassitt remains available on the open market.

The rotation also includes veteran Carlos Carrasco. New York picked up his $14 million option for next season after the 35-year-old right-hander went 15-7 with a 3.97 ERA.

David Peterson and Tylor Megill, both 27, provide depth.
USC’s Williams wins Heisman Trophy

QB becomes Trojans’ 8th recipient

By RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Caleb Williams brought sizzle, excitement and star power back to Southern California football. And now the Heisman Trophy, too.

Williams, the dynamic quarterback who was the catalyst for the Trojans’ turnaround season, won the Heisman on Saturday night to make USC the first school to take home college football’s most prestigious player of the year award eight times.

Williams received 541 first-place votes and 2,051 points to easily outpoint TCU quarterback Max Duggan (1,280). Williams, who played last season at Oklahoma, is the fourth transfer to win the Heisman.

USC offensive coordinator Graham Harrell said they knew when he got the call from Williams to come to USC that he was “the guy.”

Williams was fourth in the vote last season at Oklahoma and fifth in 2019 at LSU.

Williams was as meticulous and thorough with his 10-minute speech as he is preparing for a game. And almost as poised when he plays.

Williams got a little choked up talking about coach Lincoln Riley, who he followed from Norman to Los Angeles, and really had to hold it together when thanking his parents.

He called his mother, Dayna, who paints his nails with a motivational message before each game, the most important woman in his life.

He thanked his father, Carl, for instilling a relentless work ethic. “You’re always there for me making sacrifices in your life so I can achieve my dreams, which eventually became our dreams,” Williams said.

He finished with USC’s battle cry: “Dreams really do come true. Thank you, and fight on.”

Williams and No. 8 USC fell short of the Pac-12 championship and a spot in the playoff, but it was still a rebirth for a college football blue blood that has had only short spurts of success over the past decade.

The last time USC had a Heisman winner was 2005, when running back Reggie Bush was the second of consecutive Trojans players to win the award. Leinart won the Heisman in 2004 on the way to a national championship.

Bush’s Heisman win, the Trojans’ seventh, was later vacated for NCAA violations that began the descent of USC.

Notre Dame, Ohio State and Oklahoma each have seven Heisman victories.

History: Offense practically nonexistent for most of the game

FROM PAGE 24
toward the end zone and stood crestfallen as Maretzki prepared to kick the winner. Hall dropped to the ground as the kick sailed through the uprights and he was consoled by teammate Amin Hatefi. But the balldracker’s flub forced by Austin Hill and recovered by defensive lineman Nate Smith will forever be etched on the highlight reel of game-changing plays in the series.

“The game is not lost with him. That could happen to anyone that was carrying the ball on that one play,” Navy QB Xavier Arline said. “They made a good play. That’s football. That’s life. The game was not lost within that one play.”

Navy coach Ken Niumatalolo stood hunched on the sideline and could not stomach to watch the final field goal. “What do you tell them when you get your heart broken?” Niumatalolo said. “We were in the driver’s seat. We were feeling pretty good. Unfortunately, the game slipped out of our hands.”

The offense was stagnant throughout the game until the waning moments of regulation when Maretzki kicked the 37-yarder with 1:53 left to tie the game at 10-10.

A thrilling overtime followed. The NCAA instituted overtime in 1996, and the series had never had to go a little extra to settle one of the sport’s greatest rivalry games.

Army’s Markel Johnson ran 25 yards for a touchdown on the first play of overtime for a 17-10 lead, and Navy matched the Black Knights when Arline tossed a 25-yard touchdown pass to Maquel Haywood that made it 17-17.

It was Navy’s first completion of the game and Arline had perhaps the sweetest 1-for-1 for 25-yard game in Navy history. He also rushed for 102 yards.

Navy still leads the series against Army 62-54-7. The Black Knights, though, have won five of the last seven meetings.

Army finished 6-6; Navy is 4-8. “This team never stopping fighting, they never stopped believing,” Monken said. “Sometimes, some way, we found a way to get it done tonight. It was an epic battle. It was one I’ll remember for a long time, probably forever.”

The teams combined for only 53 yards passing.

One of Cade Ballard’s rare passing attempts for Army was a successful pass interference call brought the ball down to the 28 with 4 minutes left on a drive that set up Maretzki’s tying field goal.

Ballard was 2-for-10 passing for 26 yards.

Hall’s run up the middle in the third quarter was the biggest burst of offense of the game for either team — at that point, that run alone had outgained Army’s 69 total yards.

His run was a double gut punch for the Black Knights after QB Tyler Tyler had a 40-yard touchdown run wiped out on a penalty on the previous possession.

Hall provided one of the few highlights in a game full of wobbly punts, errant throws and a dearth of first downs.

The first spark came in the final seconds of the first half when Army’s Noah Short blocked Riley Riethman’s punt and Jabriel Williams recovered — after almost knocking the ball out of the end zone — for the touchdown and a 7-3 lead.

That bit of excitement in front of a packed house of 69,117 at Lincoln Financial Field just about made up for 29 minutes of two off-fences that could not move the ball down the field.

Up next

It was the 90th time the game was played in Philadelphia, including 38 straight times from 1945 to 1982.

The series is hitting the road starting with next season’s game in Foxboro, Mass. The 2024 game is at FedEx Field in Landover, Md., in 2025 is at MetLife Bank Stadium in Baltimore, and 2026 is at MetLife Stadium, the New Jersey home of the Jets and Giants just outside New York City. The game returns to Philly in 2027.
A history-making win for Army

Black Knights take first OT game in rivalry with Navy

By Dan Gelston
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Navy running back Anton Hall Jr. collapsed to the ground and buried his face in his hands. West Point cadets spilled from the stands onto the field and joined Army players who ripped off their helmets and ran around in celebration.

Hall’s push toward the end zone in the second overtime — and first OT game in Army-Navy history — resulted in a fumble that Army recovered. The Black Knights went from playing for a tie to simply playing for a winning score.

“Somehow, the ball got loose and we hit that thing when we needed to,” Army coach Jeff Monken said.

Quinn Maretzki kicked the game-winning, 39-yard field goal after he had sent the game into overtime with a 37-yarder late in the fourth quarter and led Army past The Midshipmen 20-17 on Saturday night in the first OT game in the 123 matchups of “America’s Game.”

“It’s obviously a big moment, but I try my best to put that aside,” Maretzki said. “Just being able to block everything out, (my teammates) just made that job so easy for me. So I just had to go out there and not even really think.”

Hall — who earlier raced 77 yards for a TD and 10-7 lead — coughed up the ball as he plunged...