

Zelenskyy warns of mines in Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — As Russian forces pull back from Ukraine's capital region, retreating troops are creating a "catastrophic" situation for civilians by leaving mines around homes, abandoned equipment and "even the bodies of those killed," President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned Saturday.

Ukraine and its Western allies reported mounting evidence of Russia withdrawing its forces from around Kyiv and building its troop strength in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian fighters reclaimed several areas near the capital after forcing the Russians out or moving in after them, officials said.

The visible shift did not mean the country faced a reprieve from more than five weeks of war or that the more than 4 million refugees who have fled Ukraine will return soon. Zelenskyy said he expects departed towns to endure missile strikes and rocket strikes from afar and for the battle in the east to be intense.

"It's still not possible to return to normal life, as it used to be, even at the territories that we are taking back after the fighting. We need wait until our land is demined, wait till we are able to assure you that there won't be new shelling," the president said during his nightly video address, though his claims

about Russian mines couldn't be independently verified.

Moscow's focus on eastern Ukraine also kept the besieged southern city of Mariupol in the crosshairs. The port city on the Sea of Azov is located in the mostly Russian-speaking Donbas region, where Russia-backed separatists have fought Ukrainian troops for eight years. Military analysts think Russian President Vladimir Putin is determined to capture the region after his forces failed to secure Kyiv and other major cities.

The International Committee of the Red Cross planned to try Saturday to get into Mariupol to evacuate residents. The Red Cross said it could not carry out the operation Friday because it did not receive assurances the route was safe. City authorities said the Russians blocked access to the city.

The humanitarian group said a team with three vehicles and nine Red Cross staff members was headed to Mariupol on Saturday to help facilitate the safe evacuation of civilians. It said its team planned to accompany a convoy of civilians from Mariupol to another city.

"Our presence will put a humanitarian marker on this planned movement of people, giving the convoy additional protection

and reminding all sides of the civilian, humanitarian nature of the operation," it said in a statement.

The Mariupol city council said Saturday that 10 empty buses were headed to Berdyansk, a city 52.2 miles west of Mariupol, to pick up people who manage to get there on their own. About 2,000 made it out of Mariupol on Friday, some on buses and some in their own vehicles, city officials said.

Mariupol, which was surrounded by Russian forces a month ago, has suffered some of the war's worst attacks, including on a maternity hospital and a theater that was sheltering civilians. Around 100,000 people are believed to remain in the city, down from a prewar population of 430,000, and they are facing dire shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine.

The city's capture would give Moscow an unbroken land bridge from Russia to Crimea, which it seized from Ukraine in 2014. But its resistance has also taken on symbolic significance during Russia's invasion, said Volodymyr Fesenko, head of the Ukrainian think-tank Penta.

"Mariupol has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance, and without its conquest, Putin cannot sit down at the negotiating table," Fesenko said.

Number of virus patients in US hospitals at record low

Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. — COVID-19 hospitalization numbers have plunged to their lowest levels since the early days of the pandemic, offering a much needed break to health care workers and patients alike following the omicron surge.

The number of patients hospitalized with the coronavirus has fallen more than 90% in more than two months, and some hospitals are going days without a single COVID-19 patient in the ICU for the first time since early 2020.

The freed up beds are expected to help U.S. hospitals retain exhausted staff, treat non-COVID-19 patients more quickly and cut down on inflated costs. More family members can visit loved ones. And doctors

hope to see a correction to the slide in pediatric visits, yearly checkups and cancer screenings.

"We should all be smiling that the number of people sitting in the hospital right now with COVID, and people in intensive care units with COVID, are at this low point," said University of South Florida epidemiologist Jason Salemi.

But, he said, the nation "paid a steep price to get to this stage. ... A lot of people got sick and a lot of people died."

Hospitalizations are now at their lowest point since summer 2020, when comprehensive national data first became available. The average number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 in the last week nationwide dropped to 11,860, the lowest since

2020 and a steep decline from the peak of more than 145,000 set in mid-January. The previous low was 12,041 last June, before the delta variant took hold.

The optimistic trend is also clear in ICU patient numbers, which have dipped to fewer than 2,000, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"We're beginning to be able to take a breath," said Dr. Jeffrey Weinstein, the patient safety officer for the Kettering Health hospital system in western Ohio.

COVID-19 patients had filled 30% of Kettering Health's nearly 1,600 hospital beds back in January, Weinstein said. Kettering's eight hospitals now average two to three COVID-19 admissions a day — and sometimes zero.

US Navy officer, last of Filipino recruits, retires

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Growing up in the Philippines, Jules Amores loved to read about science and medicine, thinking he might become a doctor one day. But he also pined for life in America, which was fueled through copies of the U.S. Navy's All Hands magazine that his uncle would bring home from his job at the American Embassy.

Amores would pour over photographs of ships and planes, daydreaming about life aboard an aircraft carrier. He never imagined he would one day enlist in the U.S. Navy himself and that his 1992 enlistment ceremony would be featured in that magazine.

"Along the years, I kind of wished I could be there. Life in the Philippines is hard," he said. "Going to the U.S. has always been my dream."

Amores, then 21 years old, earned his shot through a competitive recruitment program that enlisted Filipino men into the U.S. Navy. He took the oath on March 13, 1992, as part of the last group to do so. All Hands magazine ran a short article about the program, which began in 1947 and enlisted more than 35,000 Filipino men into the Navy, with the headline, "The last recruits."

Amores said only the sleeve of his shirt is visible in the far-left edge of the accompanying photo of men with their right hand raised as they recite the oath of enlistment.

Thirty years later, Amores, an aircraft mechanic, retired March 25 as a chief warrant officer 4, and believes he might be the last person recruited from the Philippines program who was still serving on active duty. The Navy couldn't verify if that is correct.

The retirement ceremony

was held at Naval Air Station Lemoore, Calif. Standing by his side were his wife, Jennifer, their three children, Jules, Julianna and Jerrick, and their dog CoCo.

"I'm an example of an American dream. From E-1, I made it to a [warrant] officer, coming from a third-world country," he said late month as he prepared for the ceremony. "I'm not doing this [ceremony] for myself. I'm doing for my family, and for the Navy as well, to put a spotlight on what it's done for me and for my family."

While immigrants legally living in the U.S. can enlist in the military, the Navy's recruitment of Filipino citizens living in their own independent country was unique, said Chris Capozzola, professor of history at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of the book, "Bound by War: How the United States and the Philippines Built America's First Pacific Century."

"This was a pipeline for ambitious, young, usually super-talented sailors to enlist directly into the U.S. Navy," he said.

The only similar program that Capozzola said he has seen among the service branches is the U.S. Army's ongoing partnership in Korea that allows Korean soldiers to augment American troops. However, they are not direct members of the Army, as the men recruited out of the Philippines were in the Navy.

The partnership developed out of an agreement in 1947 between America and the Philippines that allowed several U.S. military bases to operate on the island. It was a year after the Philippines became independent from the U.S., and there had already been an established history of service dating back to 1901, when President William

McKinley authorized up to 500 Filipinos a year to join U.S. forces as part of the Philippine Scouts.

The Philippine islands were then a U.S. territory, and the scouts were considered part of the U.S. Army. The units were disbanded when the Philippines became independent in 1946.

By the time Amores looked to enlist in the Navy, it had become highly competitive, with about 250 men applying for each of the 400 slots available per year, according to an LA Times article published in 1992 about the end of the program.

During his first year of college in 1988 in Cebu, Amores and his brother decided to apply. They responded to a small, classified ad in the newspaper that instructed them to send in a 2x2 photograph of themselves with specific information written on the back.

And then they waited.

About a year later, Amores' older brother got called to report for testing, but didn't make the cut. Amores finally got a call more than six months later, arriving to the base with thousands of other men. After a test weeding out many of the applicants, he said he then had to be interviewed.

Amores had attended an English-language high school and worked part-time as a radio DJ, playing rock music for two hours in the evenings. He said he believes his language skills helped him through the interview process to earn a spot among the final 10 that day.

Amores was able to enlist on March 13, 1992. The group of 29 men were the last Philippine citizens to enlist through the program, according to the All Hands magazine article.

In the months that followed, the Philippines ended the base agreement with the U.S. mili-

tary, which closed Subic Bay. However, it remains a functioning base under the Philippines navy and an important site for visiting U.S. personnel, Capozzola said. The end of that agreement is also what brought an end to the enlistment program.

But for Amores, the story continued. He earned recognition in basic training, which allowed him to select a rating, he said. He chose structural mechanic for aircraft, and took every opportunity that he could to serve at sea.

When he boarded an aircraft carrier for the first time, the USS Kitty Hawk, the moment brought to reality what he had dreamed about as a child.

"It was a different feeling because you used to just be watching this huge, extraordinary machine that floats in the ocean," he said. "Now you're actually on it. I was happy, but at the same time I had anxiety of what to expect."

Over time, Amores climbed the enlisted ranks to senior chief petty officer and earned his American citizenship, a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. He commissioned as a warrant officer, serving in his final days as Lemoore's site leader of the Naval Aviation Technical and Engineering Command.

While he will miss the Navy, retiring after 30 years, "that should be enough," he said. "It's been a long time coming. I had fun. I had some bad experiences and good experiences as well. It's all up to how you face the challenges of the military, being away from family and stuff like that."

Amores plans to stay in the Lemoore area and take some time to decide on his next chapter in life. In the meantime, he plans to dedicate more time to a group he founded, the Filipinos of Kings County.

Taliban frees Navy reservist, brother

Washington Post

A U.S. Navy reservist and his brother were released by the Taliban on Friday after a monthslong campaign by the Biden administration to secure their freedom, the State Department said.

Safi Rauf and Anees Khalil, a U.S. green-card holder, were detained in December. The former Afghan refugees founded the Human First Coalition, which worked to evacuate people fleeing the country after the

Taliban took over Kabul last year. The group later shifted to providing humanitarian aid to the war-ravaged country.

In a statement, Rauf credited officials in the British, Qatari and U.S. governments, along with “our family and loved ones” and “our team at Human First Coalition, and countless friends in country, in the region, and all over the world.”

The two brothers are in Qatar, pending travel to the United States, said State Department

spokesman Ned Price.

“We are grateful for the efforts of all those who worked to secure their release, but more work remains,” Price said. “Unjustly holding Americans captive is always unacceptable, and we will not stop until every American who is being unjustly held against their will is able to hug their families once again.”

Rauf enlisted in the Navy Reserve in 2017 and serves as a hospital corpsman, according to his service records provided by

the Navy. He is assigned to Joint Base Andrews in Maryland. CNN first reported the release of the brothers.

The Biden administration also is seeking the release of Mark Frerichs, a Navy veteran, who has been detained by the Taliban since before the Trump administration struck a deal with the militants in February 2020 to end the 20-year war.

The New Yorker published a video of Frerichs pleading for his freedom on Friday.

Ex-ICC prosecutor urges Putin be arrested

Associated Press

GENEVA — The former chief prosecutor of United Nations war crimes tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda has called for an international arrest warrant to be issued for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“Putin is a war criminal,” Carla Del Ponte told the Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* in an interview published Saturday.

In interviews given to Swiss media to mark the release of her latest book, the Swiss lawyer who oversaw U.N. investigations in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia said there were clear war crimes being committed in Ukraine.

She said she was particularly shocked

by the use of mass graves in Russia’s war on Ukraine, which recalls the worst of the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

“I hoped never to see mass graves again,” she told the newspaper *Blick*. “These dead people have loved ones who don’t even know what’s become of them. That is unacceptable.”

Other war crimes she identified in Ukraine included attacks on civilians, the destruction of civilian buildings and even the demolishing of entire villages.

She said the investigation in Ukraine would be easier than that in Yugoslavia because the country itself had requested an international probe. The current ICC chief prosecutor, Karim Khan, visited Ukraine last month.

If the ICC finds proof of war crimes, she said, “you must go up the chain of command until you reach those who took the decisions.”

She said it would be possible to bring even Putin to account.

“You mustn’t let go, continue to investigation. When the investigation into Slobodan Milosevic began, he was still president of Serbia. Who would have thought then that he would one day be judged? Nobody,” she told *Blick*.

Del Ponte added that investigations should be carried out into possible war crimes committed by both sides, pointing also to reports about the alleged torture of some Russian prisoners of war by Ukrainian forces.

US sending \$300M more in military aid to Ukraine

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon notified Congress on Friday that it is sending Ukraine an additional \$300 million of warfighting equipment that includes laser-guided missiles and drones.

The Defense Department is providing the equipment under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, said in a news release Friday.

“This decision underscores the United States’ unwavering commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in support of its heroic efforts to repel Russia’s war of choice,” Kirby said.

Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24 and has pummeled some of its major cities with missiles and artillery attacks, triggering a mass exodus of refugees from the country.

Ukrainian forces, however, have largely stymied the Russian advance, and in some locations the defenders have even regained territory lost earlier in the conflict.

The new package of assistance for Ukraine that Kirby described includes laser-guided rocket systems, Switchblade tactical drones that in some cases are capable of taking out armored vehicles, Puma drones for surveillance and intelligence gathering, small and large caliber ammu-

munition, night-vision devices, machine guns, communications equipment, medical supplies and other items.

The U.S. has provided Ukraine \$1.6 billion in security assistance since the invasion began, Kirby said.

Under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, supplies and equipment are procured directly from defense industry contractors rather than drawing from Defense Department stocks, Kirby said.

Some Republican lawmakers have criticized the Biden administration for taking too long to get warfighting equipment to Ukraine, claims the Pentagon pushed back on last week.

Israeli troops kill 3 Palestinian militants

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israeli forces killed three Palestinian militants in a firefight in the occupied West Bank early Saturday, police said, raising fears of further escalation of violence during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Israeli media said four members of a police counterterrorism unit of the Israeli police were wounded, one of them seriously. The troops came under fire as they attempted to arrest suspected militants in the northern West Bank.

Tensions have soared in recent days after Palestinian assailants killed 11 Israelis in

separate attacks across the country. Saturday marks the start of Ramadan, a month of dawn-to-dusk fasting, prayer and religious devotion for hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Ramadan has often been a period of increased friction and confrontation.

The Israeli police said the three militants were members of a cell that was involved in recent attacks against Israeli forces and were planning another attack that was thwarted during early Saturday's joint operation with the military and intelligence.

Live videos by witnesses on social media showed a crowd of Palestinians inspecting

the scene of the clashes near the city of Jenin after the Israeli troops withdrew. The street was covered with blood stains and the men chanted slogans calling for revenge.

Palestine TV reported that Israeli forces seized the bodies of the militants.

In response to the recent Palestinian attacks, more Israeli forces were sent to the West Bank in recent days for increased searches, patrols and arrest raids.

With Saturday's deaths, seven Palestinians were killed over three days, including two in a gun battle Thursday and one after he stabbed and wounded an Israeli on a bus in the West Bank.

US to aid China with plane crash probe

Associated Press

BEIJING — U.S. accident investigators have flown to China to help authorities there probe last month's deadly crash of a Boeing jetliner.

The seven-member team from the National Transportation Safety Board will participate in the Civil Aviation Administration of China's investigation of the March 21 crash of a China Eastern Airlines Boeing 737-800 because the aircraft was manufactured in the U.S.

As part of that assistance, the plane's cockpit voice recorder is being downloaded and analyzed

at a U.S. lab in Washington, federal officials said Friday.

Investigators hope the recording will explain why the plane went into a nosedive from about 29,000 feet over a mountainous region in southeastern China.

Chinese officials have said that air traffic controllers were unable to get a response from the pilots while the plane was descending.

The cockpit voice recorder would pick up voices and other sounds from microphones worn by the pilots and another stationed over their heads.

Searchers also recovered the

plane's flight-data recorder, which constantly captures speed, altitude, heading and other information and the performance of key systems on the aircraft, but that recorder was not being evaluated in Washington on Friday.

The NTSB said its investigators will limit contact with people outside the investigation so that they can start their work immediately without going through a quarantine period.

The plane that crashed was not a 737 Max, a newer model that was temporarily grounded worldwide following two deadly

crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia.

The impact caused by the crash in China created a 65-foot-deep crater, set off a fire in the surrounding forest and smashed the plane into small parts scattered over a wide area, some of them buried underground. More than 49,000 pieces of debris have been recovered, along with some human remains and personal items.

A Chinese aviation safety official said a preliminary investigation report would be completed within 30 days of the March 21 crash.

COVID-19 asylum limits at border to end May 23

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Friday that it is ending a policy that limited asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The government said it was already making plans to erect tents and take other steps to prepare for an expected influx of migrants.

The continued use of public health powers had been widely criticized by Democrats and immigration advocates as an excuse for the United States to shirk its obligations to provide haven to people fleeing persecution. The policy went into effect under President Donald Trump in March 2020. Since then, migrants trying to enter the U.S.

have been expelled more than 1.7 million times.

The policy, known as the Title 42 authority, is named for a 1944 public health law to prevent communicable disease. The termination of the policy takes effect May 23, to give border officials time to prepare.

The administration's decision appeared to be an attempt to strike a balance in a difficult situation: An immediate end to the asylum ban could have sparked a rush on under-staffed border and immigration facilities. Any further delay would have only increased impatience with the government's reliance on health-related authorities meant to combat a virus that is swiftly receding.

The seven-week delay before the policy expires is meant to allow officials to step up staffing at the border. In the interim, nearly all migrants seeking to cross into the U.S. are expected to be turned away under a health authority that U.S. officials acknowledge is "no longer necessary."

U.S. officials said Friday they had been preparing for months for the eventual expiration of the health-related asylum ban, including plans to vaccinate migrants and improve health and safety conditions along the border. Yet they said they still needed until May 23 to put those plans into place. The CDC order states that the virus is no longer cause for turning away migrants seeking asylum in the U.S.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Oldest active US park ranger retires at 100

CA RICHMOND — The nation’s oldest active park ranger is hanging up her Smokey hat at the age of 100.

Betty Reid Soskin has retired after more than 15 years at the Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, Calif., the National Park Service announced.

She led tours at the park and museum honoring the women who worked in factories during wartime and shared her own experience as a Black woman during the conflict. She worked for the U.S. Air Force in 1942 but quit after learning that “she was employed only because her superiors believed she was white,” according to a Park Service biography.

Soskin won a temporary Park Service position at the age of 84 and became a permanent Park Service employee in 2011.

Woman charged after driving onto runway

FL FORT MYERS — A Florida airport shut down for about a half-hour after a woman crashed her car through a secured gate and drove across a runway, officials said.

The 42-year-old Clewiston woman sped through a marked and restricted gate at Southwest Florida International Airport near Fort Myers, according to an airport police report.

After entering airport property, the woman drove across an active runway and headed toward a Spirit Airlines plane, officials said.

The woman was charged with

reckless driving, criminal mischief, violating a designated operational area of an airport and threatening a public servant.

Police to pay Black teen \$325K after arrest

MO KANSAS CITY — A Black Kansas City teenager will receive a \$325,000 settlement after three white officers hit him more than 10 times and used a stun gun on him, according to an excessive force lawsuit.

It is the third settlement this year against Kansas City police in cases involving Black teenagers, with a total payout of \$1.3 million, The Kansas City Star reported.

The lawsuit alleged the 17-year-old was sitting in his car in a parking lot waiting for friends after homecoming at Hogan Preparatory Academy on Oct. 12, 2019.

Two officers approached the car and ordered him to get out. When the teen got out of the car, he was thrown to the ground, punched, knelt on by two officers and hit with a stun gun by a third, according to the lawsuit.

The teenager had not committed any traffic violations. He was arrested but never charged with a crime.

Truck crashes into library built in 1901

NH CONWAY — A truck crashed into the Conway Public Library, resulting in the collapse of two of its brownstone columns, the library’s board of trustees said.

“A full assessment of the damage and resultant plan for repairs are underway with a goal to restore the historic

building to its original condition,” the board said in a statement.

The library was completed in 1901 and opened to the public the following year, according to its website.

Nearly 300 defendants released due to glitch

TX HOUSTON — Nearly 300 Houston-area defendants were ordered released after a computer glitch prevented them from getting an initial court hearing within the time period required by state law, according to officials.

The computer system that is used by all law enforcement agencies in Harris County, where Houston is located, to file charges with prosecutors crashed on March 24 and was down for about a couple of days, according to the Harris County District Attorney’s Office.

Under Texas law, defendants are generally not to be held for processing for more than 24 hours in misdemeanor cases and 48 hours in felony cases. The glitch prevented defendants from appearing before a magistrate judge for a probable cause hearing within these time periods.

Most of the defendants released had been arrested on nonviolent charges. In a letter to local law enforcement agencies, the district attorney’s office said that officers will need to refile charges and some individuals might need to be rearrested.

Woman ordered to pay for stealing from charity

WV HUNTINGTON — A former employee of a West Virginia nonprofit

group that assists children and their families has been ordered to pay more than \$4.65 million for stealing federal funds.

Ruth Marie Phillips, 69, of Chesapeake, Ohio, was ordered to pay the restitution in federal court in Huntington.

Phillips admitted in September that she stole more than \$4.7 million from the River Valley Child Development Services in Huntington from December 2013 through August 2020. She worked at the organization for more than 30 years, was director of business and finance and was responsible for all financial operations, according to court records.

Phillips previously agreed to forfeit hundreds of thousands of dollars from the sale of homes, airplanes and several vehicles.

Mom accused of trying to kill students with SUV

NV LAS VEGAS — A woman in Nevada is accused of trying to kill two schoolgirls by driving her vehicle into them to prevent them from fighting her daughter after an on-campus dispute at a Las Vegas-area high school.

Fatima Maria Mitchell, 36, was arrested by Henderson police after her SUV struck a tree, a concrete sign and the two girls at an off-campus crossroads near Basic High School in Henderson.

Mitchell “went searching for the juveniles that were fighting with her daughter,” Henderson police said in an arrest report submitted to the judge.

The injured girls were treated at a hospital for broken bones but were expected to recover, police said.

-From Associated Press

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UConn ousts defending champ Stanford

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Paige Bueckers scored 14 points and UConn advanced to the national championship game with a 63-58 win over defending champion Stanford on Friday night.

The Huskies will face South Carolina for the national championship on Sunday night. The Gamecocks beat Louisville 72-59 in the first game of the Final Four. UConn and South Carolina met in November in the championship game of a tournament in the Bahamas, and the Gamecocks used a strong fourth quarter to win.

It's UConn's first trip to the championship game since 2016, when the Huskies won the last of four straight championships. Since then, the team has suffered heartbreaking defeats in the national semifinals, losing twice in overtime.

"We didn't play our A-game on the offensive end, but we did the things we needed to do when we had to do them," UConn coach Geno Auriemma

said. "We came up big. Don't know what more I can say about this group than we have been saying. Pretty remarkable, to be honest with you."

UConn (30-5) is seeking its 12th national championship, and the Huskies have never lost in an NCAA championship game.

"We know everybody in the world doesn't think we're going to win, so we're like, we might as well just prove everybody wrong and prove ourselves right. We've got one more game. We're not satisfied with this," Bueckers said. "We're just trying to win a national championship and leave everything out on the line and it's our last game of the season, so we have nothing left to give."

They had to work to get to the finals. Leading by 52-44 with 1:26 left, Stanford made a furious rally thanks to a few costly UConn turnovers.

Cameron Brink's layup with 18.4 seconds left got the Cardinal within 60-58. UConn was able to work seven seconds off

the clock before Christyn Williams was fouled with 11 seconds left. The senior guard calmly swished both free throws to restore a two-possession lead.

Ashten Prechtel completely missed a tough-contested three-pointer from the wing with 5.4 seconds left and the Huskies held on for the win.

Haley Jones led the Cardinal (32-4) with 20 points.

This has been the most challenging year of Geno Auriemma's Hall of Fame coaching career. Eight players had to sit out at least two games this season with injury or illness, including Bueckers, who missed nearly three months with a left knee injury suffered in early December.

In the fourth quarter, Bueckers came up grimacing when she went down hard going for a defensive rebound. She left the game for a few minutes, and every time she hit the floor, she seemed to check on her knee.

This was the latest matchup on the biggest stage between

Hall of Fame coaches Tara VanDerveer and Auriemma, who are first and second on the all-time wins list in women's basketball. Their two teams met 27 years ago to the day in Minneapolis in the national semifinals and the Huskies also won that one. They went on to win their first title that year.

The game got off to a slow start as neither team really could find its shooting touch. UConn led 12-9 after one quarter and was up 27-26 at the half. The teams combined to shoot 36% (23-for-64) in the opening 20 minutes. Stanford was able to keep it close by outscoring UConn 20-6 in the paint.

The low-scoring half was reminiscent of the 2010 title game when the teams played in the Alamodome in San Antonio. The Cardinal led that one 20-12 at the half. UConn went on to win that one 53-47 — one of four victories for the Huskies over the Cardinal in the Final Four or championship rounds.

South Carolina cruises past Louisville, into title game

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — This time, Aliyah Boston and the South Carolina Gamecocks were smiling as they strutted off the court at the Final Four.

The only crying came from relief and joy, one year after a painfully opposite finish in the national semifinals.

Boston took over after halftime and finished with 23 points and 18 rebounds to back up her AP National Player of the Year award, carrying South Carolina to the NCAA championship game with a 72-59 victory over Louisville on Friday night.

"You see happy tears, happy tears right now," Boston said in her postgame TV interview. "I'm just thanking God we

have one more game."

Brea Beal matched her season high with 12 points and helped hold Cardinals star Hailley Van Lith to nine points on 4-for-11 shooting as the Gamecocks (34-2) delivered another stifling defensive performance and advanced to meet Connecticut, a 63-58 semifinal winner over Stanford, on Sunday night.

"Life in general, it's going to throw tests at you. You're going to have to pass the tests or you're going to have to retake them," said coach Dawn Staley, who will try to win her second national championship with South Carolina eight months after the Hall of Famer led the U.S. team to a gold medal in the Tokyo Olympics.

Destanni Henderson scored 11 points with 3-for-6 shooting from three-point range for South Carolina, which had a 19-5 assists advantage and improved to 13-0 this season against AP-ranked opponents.

Emily Engstler led Louisville with 18 points and nine rebounds as the Cardinals went 1-for-8 from three-point range and were never able to find a rhythm in the half court against the No. 1 overall seed in this tournament.

South Carolina, which won it all in 2017, was ousted in the semifinals last season by one point to eventual champion Stanford when Boston's put-back attempt bounced off the rim at the buzzer. The 6-foot-5 junior from the U.S. Virgin Is-

lands has bounced right back a year later, and the Gamecocks have followed her lead.

"We knew that we were going to be tested, and this is the hump that we need to get over," Boston said.

Kianna Smith and Olivia Cochran each scored 14 points for the Cardinals (29-5), who were the only team in this Final Four without an NCAA championship in their trophy case. This was the program's fourth trip to the national semifinals in coach Jeff Walz's 15 seasons.

"You don't ever want to say that's your favorite team, because then all your past teams get mad at you, but I'd put this group right up there at the top," Walz said. "It was just an absolute joy to coach."

Kentucky's Tshiebwe voted player of year

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Kentucky's Oscar Tshiebwe spent an entire season relentlessly chasing and pulling down seemingly every rebound that came his way — and plenty that didn't, too.

"I want to be the greatest rebounder I can be," Tshiebwe said.

The 6-foot-9, 255-pound junior put up better rebounding numbers than anybody in Division I in decades. And it's a big reason why he is The Associated Press men's college basketball national player of the year.

Tshiebwe was the clear choice for the award announced Friday, receiving 46 of 60 votes from AP Top 25 voters. Johnny Davis, a 6-5 sophomore who averaged 19.7 points and led Wisconsin to a share of the

Big Ten regular-season title, was second with 10 votes. Iowa sophomore Keegan Murray (three) and Illinois big man Kofi Cockburn (one) also earned votes.

Tshiebwe, a West Virginia transfer and native of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is only the second player in the storied history of the Wildcats program to win the AP's top honor. The other was one-and-done star Anthony Davis, who led Kentucky to its eighth NCAA title a decade ago before becoming the No. 1 NBA Draft pick.

"It is amazing to be join somebody like Anthony Davis," Tshiebwe said. "And that gives me confidence and gives me more help for my future, too, for what I'm trying to do and what I'm trying to accomplish.

I'm just putting God first because God knows what I need, and he has great plans for me."

Tshiebwe thrived all season while averaging 15.1 rebounds, the highest per-game output in Division I since 1980. He had five games of at least 20 rebounds this season and three games with at least 10 boards on the offensive glass alone.

The highlight came when he had a Division I high of 28 rebounds in a December win against Western Kentucky.

He also worked to expand his offensive game, adding range on a developing jumpshot to go with his relentless board work. Tshiebwe averaged 17.4 points and shot 60.6% from the floor, a big step forward from his freshman season when he averaged 11.2 points and 9.3 rebounds with the Mountaineers before

transferring after 10 games.

Tshiebwe said the rebounding success is a product of studying his opponents closely, playing the odds on where the ball is headed and the determination not to "let anybody move you."

"First of all, it's the position," he said. "You have to place yourself where you don't need to work too hard for the basketball just to come in your hands. You've got to read it. ... If somebody's shooting this angle, probably 75% it's going that way because the ball's coming in this way, 25% it's coming this way. You have to know that."

Now Tshiebwe is mulling whether to return to Kentucky or jump for his goal of playing in the NBA. If he returns, at least the Wildcats will know they're set on the glass.

Arizona's Lloyd named top coach in first season

Associated Press

Tommy Lloyd spent 22 years as Mark Few's right-hand man turning Gonzaga into a national powerhouse.

He needed just one season to return Arizona to prominence.

Lloyd was named The Associated Press men's college basketball coach of the year on Friday after leading the Wildcats to the Sweet 16 in his first season. He received 28 votes from a 61-person media panel that votes on the AP Top 25 to edge Providence's Ed Cooley, who got 21 votes. No other coach got more than three.

Lloyd joins Indiana State's Bill Hodges in 1979 and Drake's Keno Davis in 2008 in earning AP coach of the year in their first season as a head coach.

"I always tell people, it's an easy answer: I love coaching and teaching," Lloyd said. "Everything basketball-wise, I've done, basically I've been a part of doing before, so I had a real comfort level and a conviction

in what I wanted to do."

Lloyd was expected to take over for Few whenever he retires. He had no reason to look anywhere else. When the Arizona job opened up, Lloyd couldn't pass up the opportunity.

The Wildcats spent the previous three seasons embroiled in FBI and NCAA investigations that, in part, led to the firing of Sean Miller last April. The NCAA investigation is still pending, but it did little to impede Arizona's rapid ascent under Lloyd.

Expectations were lukewarm for Lloyd's first season; the Wildcats were not ranked in the AP preseason poll and picked to finish fourth in the Pac-12.

Arizona upended those perceptions quickly, winning its first 11 games. The Wildcats swept the Pac-12 season and tournament titles to reach the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2018. Lloyd joined Hodges and North Carolina's

Bill Guthridge in 1998 as the only first-year coaches to earn a No. 1 seed. Arizona lost to Houston in the South Region semifinals, finishing 34-3.

Arizona's run was a mix of having the right players to fit Lloyd's system and the 47-year-old coach's penchant for player development since the Wildcats had lost four of their top six scorers from last season.

"I think we really built some foundational pieces this year that are really going to serve us well moving forward," Lloyd said.

Lloyd brought what he learned at Gonzaga with him to the desert, made a few tweaks of his own and turned Arizona into a free-flowing offensive juggernaut. The Wildcats led the nation in assists with 19.8 per game, were third in scoring (84.6 points) and had at least one 10-0 run in 29 of 36 games.

Arizona's defense, anchored by 7-footers Christian Koloko and Oumar Ballo, was nearly as

dominating, finishing eighth nationally with 5.8 blocked shots per game.

"He knew what he wanted to do and came in with a plan," associate head coach Jack Murphy said. "Every step of the way, when any of us — myself or anyone on the staff — wanted to kind of speed things up or jump steps, he was always the voice of reason and was sticking to his plan."

Once a skinny, offensively-limited freshman, Koloko turned into a dominant defensive player with a more well-rounded offensive game under Lloyd's tutelage. Benedict Mathurin got a confidence injection from Lloyd and became the Pac-12 player of the year and a potential NBA lottery pick.

"He's a players' coach — he does everything for his players," Koloko said. "He's a very detail-oriented coach, goes into the detail to really teach you the game."

Short-handed Grizzlies halt Suns' streak

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Dillon Brooks scored 30 points and the Memphis Grizzlies beat the Phoenix Suns 122-114 on Friday night in a matchup of the NBA's top two teams, extending their winning streak to seven.

Brooks converted a three-point play with 32 seconds left for an eight-point lead and the short-handed Grizzlies held on to snap the Suns' nine-game winning streak. Ziaire Williams scored 19 points for Memphis and De'Anthony Melton added 17, including six straight free throws in the final 20 seconds.

The Suns have clinched the top seed and the Grizzlies the second spot in the Western Conference.

Pelicans 114, Lakers 111: CJ McCollum scored 32 points, Brandon Ingram added 29 against his former team and visiting New Orleans spoiled Anthony Davis' return from injury with another fourth-quarter rally in a victory over Los Angeles.

Jonas Valanciunas had 17

points and 12 rebounds for the ninth-place Pelicans, who won for the sixth time in eight games.

Clippers 153, Bucks 119: Robert Covington scored a career-high 43 points and shot 11-for-18 from three-point range to help hot-shooting Los Angeles trounce host Milwaukee as each team rested its top players.

Both teams had played Thursday night games that reached overtime. Among the players sitting out Friday's game were Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo, Khris Middleton and Jrue Holiday, and the Clippers' Paul George, Reggie Jackson and Marcus Morris.

Celtics 128, Pacers 123: Jaylen Brown scored 32 points and Jayson Tatum had 31 to help host Boston stop a rare late-season stumble and beat Indiana.

The Pacers lost their sixth straight game despite getting 30 points from Tyrese Haliburton.

Timberwolves 136, Nuggets 130: Karl-Anthony Towns scored 32 points and visiting Minnesota overcame Nikola

Jokic's 38-point, 19-rebound performance in a win over Denver.

D'Angelo Russell added 24 points and Anthony Edwards scored half of his 18 points on a trio of clutch three-pointers in the closing minutes to help the Wolves fend off Denver's comeback.

Spurs 130, Trail Blazers 111: Devin Vassell had 22 points, Keldon Johnson added 21 points and host San Antonio maintained its hold on 10th place in the Western Conference by defeating Portland.

Dejounte Murray, San Antonio's All-Star point guard, was a late scratch due to a non-COVID-19 upper respiratory illness.

Wizards 135, Mavericks 103: Kristaps Porzingis had 24 points and nine rebounds in his first game against his former team, helping host Washington defeat Dallas.

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored a season-high 35 points and Rui Hachimura added 21 for

Washington.

Raptors 102, Magic 89: Fred VanVleet and Scottie Barnes scored 19 points apiece, Pascal Siakam added 16 points and 11 rebounds and visiting Toronto beat Orlando for its fifth straight win.

Gary Trent Jr. finished with 17 points for Toronto, which took advantage of 21 Orlando turnovers.

Kings 122, Rockets 117: Harrison Barnes scored 25 points, Damian Jones had 17 points, 17 rebounds and six blocks, and visiting Sacramento beat Houston for the second time in three days.

Houston rookie Jalen Green scored a career-high 33 points and had six three-pointers.

Pistons 110, Thunder 101: Killian Hayes scored a career-high 26 points and Frank Jackson also had 26 to lead visiting Detroit over Oklahoma City in a matchup of teams near the bottom of the NBA standings.

Theo Maledon led the Thunder with 28 points.

Zegras helps Anaheim snap 11-game skid

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Trevor Zegras scored another lacrosse-style goal, Isac Lundestrom had two goals and an assist, Anthony Stolarz made 22 saves for his third shutout of the season and the Anaheim Ducks snapped an 11-game losing streak with a 5-0 victory over the Arizona Coyotes on Friday night.

Stolarz, in his first start since March 12 after missing eight games, had his sixth shutout in 56 career games.

Cam Fowler had a goal and an assist, and Gerry Mayhew also scored for the Ducks, who had three goals in the first 10 minutes. The Ducks had only three points since their last victory March 6.

Cam Fowler had a goal and an assist, and Gerry Mayhew also

scored for the Ducks, who had three goals in the first 10 minutes.

Senators 5, Red Wings 2: Recently acquired Mathieu Joseph scored three times in the third period for his first career hat trick, Mads Sogaard made 27 saves in his NHL debut and visiting Ottawa defeated Detroit.

Joseph's three goals were his first for Ottawa since being dealt from Tampa Bay at the trade deadline.

Islanders 3, Rangers 0: Mathew Barzal had a goal and an assist, Semyon Varlamov stopped 27 shots for his 36th career shutout and the Islanders beat the rival Rangers.

Casey Cizikas and Matt Martin also scored for the Islanders, who have won three straight

and seven of 10.

Lightning 5, Blackhawks 2: Ross Colton scored two goals and added an assist, Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point both had a goal and an assist, and host Tampa Bay beat Chicago.

Tampa Bay's Jon Cooper coached his 700th NHL game, becoming the 49th to do it. He is 426-215-59.

Sabres 4, Predators 3: Victor Olofsson scored the go-ahead goal with 5:35 left in the second period, and host Buffalo extended its point streak to eight games with a win over Nashville.

Tage Thompson scored twice, including his Sabres-leading 30th goal, and Buffalo continued its late-season surge (5-0-3) despite being all but mathemat-

ically out of playoff contention.

Golden Knights 5, Kraken 2: Jack Eichel scored twice in his first multigoal game since being traded, Logan Thompson made 26 saves and visiting Vegas beat Seattle.

The victory pushed Vegas back into a playoff spot in the Western Conference, one point ahead of Dallas for the second wild-card spot.

Oilers 6, Blues 5 (OT): Connor McDavid's second goal of the game 1:11 into overtime lifted host Edmonton over St. Louis.

Zach Hyman also scored two goals, Evander Kane had a goal and two assists, Darnell Nurse had a goal and an assist, and Mike Smith made 31 saves in the Oilers' ninth straight home victory.