

Ukraine probing alleged poisonous substance

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine investigated a claim that a poisonous substance was dropped on besieged Mariupol, as Western officials warned Tuesday that any use of chemical weapons by Russia would be a serious escalation of the already devastating war.

Thwarted in his apparent ambition to overrun the Ukrainian capital, Russian President Vladimir Putin is now building up forces for a new offensive in the eastern Donbas region, and insisted Tuesday that his campaign would continue until it achieves its goals. He said Russia “had no other choice” but to launch what he calls a “special military operation,” saying it was to protect civilians in the predominantly Russian-speaking Donbas.

Russia invaded on Feb. 24, with the goal, according to West-

ern officials, of taking Kyiv, toppling the government and installing a Moscow-friendly regime. In the six weeks since, Russia’s ground advance stalled, its forces lost potentially thousands of fighters and the military stands accused of killing civilians and other atrocities.

Putin insisted Tuesday that his invasion aimed to protect people in parts of eastern Ukraine controlled by Moscow-backed rebels and to “ensure Russia’s own security.”

For now, Putin’s forces are gearing up for a major offensive in the Donbas, which has been torn by fighting between Russian-allied separatists and Ukrainian forces since 2014, and where Russia has recognized the separatists’ claims of independence. Military strategists have said Russian leaders appear to hope local support, logistics and terrain in the region fa-

vor Russia’s larger and better-armed military, potentially allowing its troops to finally turn the tide in their favor.

In Mariupol, a strategic port city in the Donbas, a Ukrainian regiment defending a steel mill claimed a drone dropped a poisonous substance on the city. It indicated there were no serious injuries. The assertion by the Azov Regiment, a far-right group now part of the Ukrainian military, could not be independently verified.

It came after a Russia-allied separatist official appeared to urge the use of chemical weapons, telling Russian state TV on Monday that separatist forces should seize the plant by first blocking all the exits. “And then we’ll use chemical troops to smoke them out of there,” the official, Eduard Basurin, said. He denied Tuesday that separatist forces had used chemical weap-

ons in Mariupol.

Ukraine’s Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar said officials were investigating, and it was possible phosphorus munitions — which cause horrendous burns but are not classed as chemical weapons — had been used in Mariupol.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said the use of chemical weapons “would be a callous escalation in this conflict,” while Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said it would be a “wholesale breach of international law.”

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in a statement that the United States could not confirm the drone report. But he noted the administration’s persistent concerns “about Russia’s potential to use a variety of riot control agents, including tear gas mixed with chemical agents, in Ukraine.”

Sikh Marine, recruits claim religious discrimination

By ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

A Marine artillery officer and three prospective recruits, all of whom are Sikhs, are taking the U.S. military to court over rules prohibiting them from having a beard and long hair or wearing religious items.

In the lawsuit, Capt. Sukhbir Singh Toor and the three others contend the Marine Corps is unfairly and unevenly applying grooming standards — relaxed or eliminated in some cases for other religious, ethnic or racial groups — while serving in combat zones or attending boot camp.

The result violates the men’s religious, speech, due process and equal protection constitutional protections, the lawsuit states. It also forces them to abandon the tenets of their faith if they want to succeed in their military careers or serve their country, it states.

The lawsuit follows more than a year of efforts to engage with the Marine Corps, said Giselle Klapper, a senior staff attorney with the New York City-based Sikh Coalition, one of the groups representing the men.

“Treating a Sikh’s beard, a core tenet of the faith, as merely optional is unacceptable,” Klapper said in a statement Tuesday. “It is time for the USMC to recognize what the U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, and armed forces around the world already know: Articles of faith do not preclude Sikhs from capable military service.”

The lawsuit, filed Monday in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, also names Marine commandant Gen. David H. Berger, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro, among other officials, court records show.

It asks that the men be allowed to keep

their beards and long hair and be able to wear religious attire, such as a turban or ceremonial knife, at all posts without penalty or negative influence on their careers or the ability to join the Marines.

The Marine Corps typically says little about pending litigation and wasn’t immediately available for comment early Tuesday.

In court documents, the Marine Corps has maintained that the grooming standards, including shaven faces and short hair on men, are needed to establish discipline and order across the ranks to promote esprit de corps. It has also stated beards could interfere with the effectiveness of a gas mask from chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear agents.

In separate appeals and decisions, the Marine Corps also denied accommodations to prospective recruits Milaap Singh Chahal, Jaskirat Singh and Aekash Singh.

Report: Cavoli tapped to lead EUCOM

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — Gen. Christopher Cavoli, a Russian speaker who has led the Army in Europe for the past four years, has been tapped to serve as the next head of U.S. European Command, according to a Wall Street Journal report.

Cavoli would replace Gen. Tod Wolters, who is slated to retire, the Journal reported Monday, citing unnamed U.S. officials.

The shakeup comes at a crucial time in Europe, where Russia's war on Ukraine has

prompted the U.S. and its allies to send thousands more troops to NATO's eastern flank. If confirmed, Cavoli also would serve simultaneously as NATO's supreme allied commander.

During his tenure at U.S. Army Europe and Africa, Cavoli has overseen a mission that was growing even before Russia's Feb. 24 full-fledged invasion of Ukraine. Additional units, such as the Army's 56th Artillery Command, have taken up new positions in Germany, marking a reversal from the decadeslong post-Cold War drawdown of U.S. troops in Europe.

In October 2020, Cavoli was promoted in connection with U.S. Army Europe and Africa's elevation to a four-star headquarters.

Going forward as EUCOM chief, Cavoli is expected to play a key role in designing what the future U.S. mission in Europe will look like.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Army Gen. Mark Milley and other military leaders have said they anticipate more U.S. troops being based on NATO's eastern flank in the future in connection with concerns about further Russian aggression. That in-

crease could involve rotational forces or a mix of revolving and permanently based troops.

Cavoli, who was born to an Army family in Wuerzburg, Germany, during the Cold War, grew up at various military bases around Europe.

A graduate of Princeton University, he served multiple tours in Afghanistan. He also is a foreign area officer and held a previous staff job as director for Russia on the Joint Staff.

A replacement for Cavoli at Army headquarters in Wiesbaden, Germany, has not yet been announced.

Navy reaches its goal for fast-attack subs at Guam

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The fast-attack submarine USS Annapolis arrived at Naval Base Guam late last month, fulfilling a Navy goal as the service continues to bolster its presence in the Indo-Pacific.

The Los Angeles-class vessel completed its journey from Naval Base Point Loma in San Diego and steamed into Apra Harbor on March 28, the Guam-based Submarine Squadron 15 said in a Tuesday news release.

"I would like to personally extend a warm Hafa Adai to the Sailors and families of our fifth homeported submarine on Guam, USS Annapolis," Rear Adm. Benjamin Nicholson, commander of Joint Region Marianas, said in the release. Hafa adai is a greeting used by the Chamorro people of the Mariana Islands.

"Guam and the Mariana Islands are incredibly important to the overall defense of the region, and this additional capability further underscores our commitment to a free and open Indo-Pa-

cific," he said.

The Annapolis' arrival comes just one week after another Los Angeles-class submarine, USS Springfield, arrived on Guam on March 21. Joining submarines USS Asheville, USS Key West and USS Jefferson City, the Annapolis and Springfield fulfill the Navy's goal of having five fast-attack submarines on Guam by the end of this year, according to the news release. The Department of Defense considers Guam, the westernmost U.S. territory, to be a vital part of the United States' military presence in the Indo-Pacific. The DOD announced it would be "modernizing its force posture" on the island in its 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.

Like its sister ships, the Annapolis can take on multiple roles and missions, such as anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare and surveillance. The 360-foot-long nuclear-powered submarines carry armaments such as Tomahawk missiles and MK 48 torpedoes, according to the Navy.

Lincoln and its strike group steam off Korean Peninsula

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The USS Abraham Lincoln and its strike group are operating with Japanese forces near the Korean Peninsula amid speculation that North Korea will conduct another weapons test.

The carrier group was conducting "routine bilateral operations" with Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force in the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan, according to an email from the 7th Fleet to Stars and Stripes on Tuesday.

"Our training enhances the credibility of conventional deterrence by demonstrating the strength of our bilateral partnerships," wrote 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Mark Langford. Operations like this "reassure our allies and partners of the U.S. commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific," he said.

Langford, citing security concerns, declined to say how long the Abraham Lincoln and its

strike group will be in the region. South Korea's Yonhap News Agency, which first reported on the operation, reported Tuesday that the group will be in the area for three to five days.

U.S. Forces Korea also cited security concerns and declined to comment on upcoming military operations on Monday.

A South Korean official told Stars and Stripes on Tuesday that the military has been "maintaining close cooperation in the deployment of strategic U.S. assets" and directed questions to the U.S. Defense Department.

The operation marks the first time since 2017 that a U.S. carrier group has deployed to the East Sea. At the time, the USS Ronald Reagan, USS Theodore Roosevelt and USS Nimitz sailed together with their naval counterparts from South Korea and Japan for an exercise off the peninsula's coast.

The latest operation comes amid speculation that North Korea may soon conduct a nuclear test.

Philadelphia reinstates indoor mask rules

Associated Press

Philadelphia became the first major U.S. city to reinstate its indoor mask mandate Monday after reporting a sharp increase in coronavirus infections, with the city's top health official saying she wanted to forestall a potential new wave driven by an omicron subvariant.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases have risen more than 50% in 10 days, the threshold at which the city's guidelines call for people to wear masks indoors, said Dr. Cheryl Bettigole, the health commissioner. Health officials believe the recent spike is being driven

by the highly transmissible BA.2 subvariant of omicron, which has spread rapidly throughout Europe and Asia, and has become dominant in the United States in recent weeks.

"If we fail to act now, knowing that every previous wave of infections has been followed by a wave of hospitalizations, and then a wave of deaths, it will be too late for many of our residents," said Bettigole, noting about 750 Philadelphia residents died in the wintertime omicron outbreak. "This is our chance to get ahead of the pandemic, to put our masks on until we have more infor-

mation about the severity of this new variant."

Health inspectors will begin enforcing the mask mandate at city businesses on April 18.

Most states and cities dropped their masking requirements in February and early March following new guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that put less focus on case counts and more on hospital capacity. The CDC said at that time that with the virus in retreat, most Americans could safely take off their masks.

Gunman shoots multiple riders on New York subway

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A gunman filled a rush-hour subway train with smoke and shot multiple people Tuesday, leaving wounded commuters bleeding on a Brooklyn platform as others ran screaming, authorities said. Police were still searching for the shooter.

Officials said the gunfire wounded at least 10 people, and at least 16 in all were injured in some way in the attack that began on a subway train that pulled into the 36th Street station in the borough's Sunset Park neighborhood. Five people were in critical condition, New York Fire Department Acting Commissioner Laura Kavanagh said, but Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell said there were no life-threatening injuries.

Sewell added that the attack was not being investigated as terrorism, but that she was "not ruling out anything." The shooter

has not been identified.

A train rider's video shows smoke and people pouring out of a subway car. Wails erupt as passengers run for an exit as a few others limp off the train. One falls to the platform, and a person yells, "Someone call 911!"

In other video and photos from the scene, people tend to bloodied passengers lying on the platform, some amid what appear to be small puddles of blood, and another person is on the floor of a subway car.

"My subway door opened into calamity. It was smoke and blood and people screaming," eyewitness Sam Carcamo told radio station 1010 WINS, saying he saw a gigantic billow of smoke pouring out of the N train once the door opened.

According to multiple law enforcement sources briefed on the investigation, preliminary information indicated that the

gunman who fled was wearing a construction vest and a gas mask.

Investigators believe the gunman deployed a smoke device before opening fire, one of the law enforcement officials said. Investigators are examining whether he may have used that device in an effort to distract people before shooting, the official said.

Fire and police officials were investigating reports that there had been an explosion, but Sewell said at a press conference just after noon that there were no known explosive devices. Multiple smoke devices were found on the scene, said mayoral spokesperson Fabien Levy.

No MTA workers were physically hurt, according to a statement from the Transport Workers Union Local 100. Besides gunshot wounds, the injured were treated for smoke inhalation, shrapnel and panic.

Dem Finkenaueer knocked off Senate primary ballot

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — A state court judge has ruled that Democrat Abby Finkenaueer cannot appear on the June 7 Iowa primary ballot for U.S. Senate because she didn't gather enough petition signatures, potentially knocking off the candidate considered by many to be the party's best chance to unseat Republican U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley.

Judge Scott Beattie, a 2018 appointee of Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds, filed a ruling late Sunday that overturned a decision by a three-member panel of state elected officials. The panel concluded last week that Finkenaueer's campaign staffers had sub-

stantially complied with Iowa law that requires candidates to obtain 3,500 names, including at least 100 signatures from at least 19 counties.

Finkenaueer plans to appeal the decision and the Iowa Supreme Court scheduled a hearing Wednesday with a promise to rule on the matter by the end of the week to meet deadlines for sending ballots to overseas voters.

Two Republicans challenged Finkenaueer's petition papers, saying signatures from at least two counties did not have the required date accompanying them.

In the past, the panel, which includes the secretary of state, attorney general and

state auditor, has found petitions to be in substantial compliance with the law even though signatures were missing or difficult to interpret. Attorney General Tom Miller and Auditor Rob Sand, both Democrats, voted to allow Finkenaueer's petitions citing past precedent for giving deference to campaigns that used the proper forms and made efforts to comply with the law. Secretary of State Paul Pate, a Republican, voted against Finkenaueer's petition.

Kim Schmett and Leanne Pellett, former Republican county elections officials, challenged the signatures and then filed a court appeal of the Iowa Objection Panel's decision last week.

Okla. makes performing abortions illegal

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt signed a bill into law on Tuesday that makes it a felony to perform an abortion, punishable by up to 10 years in prison, as part of an aggressive push in Republican-led states across the country to scale back abortion rights.

The bill, which takes effect 90 days after the Legislature adjourns next month, makes an exception only for an abortion performed to save the life of the mother. Abortion rights advocates say the bill signed by the GOP governor is likely to face a legal challenge.

Its passage comes as the conservative U.S. Supreme Court considers ratcheting back abortion rights that have been

in place for nearly 50 years.

Under the bill, anyone convicted of performing an abortion would face up to 10 years in prison and a \$100,000 fine. It does not authorize criminal charges against a woman for receiving an abortion.

Sen. Nathan Dahm, a Broken Arrow Republican now running for Congress who wrote the bill, called it the “strongest pro-life legislation in the country right now, which effectively eliminates abortion in Oklahoma.”

Abortion rights advocates say the bill is clearly unconstitutional.

“It has never been more obvious that politicians are using tricks and games to pass these harmful laws,” Dr. Ghazaleh

Moayed, an obstetrician and gynecologist in Texas and Oklahoma and a board member at Physicians for Reproductive Health, said in a statement.

Similar anti-abortion bills approved by the Oklahoma Legislature and in other conservative states in recent years have been stopped by the courts as unconstitutional, but anti-abortion lawmakers have been buoyed by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to allow new Texas abortion restrictions to remain in place. The Texas law leaves enforcement up to private citizens, who are entitled to collect what critics call a “bounty” of \$10,000 if they bring a successful lawsuit against a provider or anyone who helps a patient obtain an abortion.

Inflation rose 8.5% in past year, highest since 1981

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Inflation soared over the past year at its fastest pace in more than 40 years, with costs for food, gasoline, housing and other necessities squeezing American consumers and wiping out the pay raises that many people have received.

The Labor Department said Tuesday that its consumer price index jumped 8.5% in March from 12 months earlier — the biggest year-over-year increase since December 1981. Prices have been driven up by bottlenecked supply chains, robust consumer demand and disruptions to global food and energy markets worsened by Russia’s war against Ukraine.

The government’s report also showed that inflation rose 1.2% from February to

March, up from a 0.8% increase from January to February.

The March inflation numbers were the first to capture the full surge in gasoline prices that followed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24. Moscow’s brutal attacks have triggered far-reaching Western sanctions against the Russian economy and have disrupted global food and energy markets. According to AAA, the average price of a gallon of gasoline — \$4.10 — is up 43% from a year ago, though it has fallen back in the past couple of weeks.

The escalation of energy prices has led to higher transportation costs for the shipment of goods and components across the economy, which, in turn, has contributed to higher prices for consumers.

The latest evidence of accelerating prices will solidify expectations that the Federal Reserve will raise interest rates aggressively in the coming months to try to slow borrowing and spending and tame inflation. The financial markets now foresee much steeper rate hikes this year than Fed officials had signaled as recently as last month.

Even before Russia’s war further spurred price increases, robust consumer spending, steady pay raises and chronic supply shortages had sent U.S. consumer inflation to its highest level in four decades. In addition, housing costs, which make up about a third of the consumer price index, have escalated, a trend that seems unlikely to reverse anytime soon.

Prosecutor reaches agreement with disciplinary panel

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner has reached an agreement with the Missouri Office of Disciplinary Counsel in which she acknowledges mistakes in her handling of the prosecution of former Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens but won’t face severe penalties for those mistakes.

The “joint stipulation” agreement was announced Monday at the outset of a disciplinary hearing before a three-person panel. In the agreement, Gardner concedes that she failed to produce documents and mistakenly maintained that all documents had been pro-

vided to Greitens’ lawyers in the 2018 criminal case.

The agreement states that Gardner’s conduct “was negligent or perhaps reckless, but not intentional.”

It calls for a written reprimand. A more severe punishment — suspension or disbarment — would likely cost Gardner her job because state law requires elected prosecutors to hold active law licenses.

The panel would still need to sign off on the agreement and make a recommendation within 30 days to the Missouri Supreme Court, which ultimately decides punishment. It’s un-

clear when the court might make a final decision.

Gardner, a 46-year-old Democrat, is St. Louis’ first Black female circuit attorney and is one of several progressive prosecutors elected in recent years with a focus on creating more fairness in the criminal justice system. She told the panel Monday that the mistakes were due to the fast-moving nature of the Greitens case.

“Yes, we had a process. But unfortunately, that process came up short,” she said, adding that her office has taken the case as a “lesson” moving forward.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Mechanic reaps windfall from art in dumpster

CT WATERBURY — A trove of paintings and other artwork found in an abandoned barn has turned out to be worth millions.

Notified by a contractor, Waterbury auto mechanic Jared Whipple retrieved the dirt-covered pieces in 2017 from a dumpster containing materials from a barn in Watertown. Whipple later found out they were by Francis Hines, an abstract expressionist who died in 2016 at 96 and had kept his work stored in the barn, Hearst Connecticut Media Group reported. Hines was renowned for his “wrapping” pieces, in which fabric is wrapped around an object.

The hundreds of pieces of art retrieved by Whipple included paintings, sculptures and small drawings. Art curator and historian Peter Hastings Falk estimated the “wrapped” paintings can be sold at around \$22,000 apiece and his drawings at around \$4,500.

Trooper uses vehicle to block wrong-way driver

NC RALEIGH — A North Carolina State Highway Patrol trooper used his car to block a wrong-way driver on an exit ramp on Interstate 40, authorities said.

News outlets reported the Johnston County Sheriff’s Office called the patrol to help stop a driver who was speeding more than 100 mph. The patrol said that in order to stop the driver being pursued, State Trooper Cody Thao parked his car at the top of the ramp near Rock Quarry Road to stop him from driving into on-

coming traffic on the interstate. Although he was inside the vehicle, Thao was not hurt, officials said.

Authorities charged Joshua Ray Bibey, 26, of Raleigh, with driving while impaired.

Pickpockets take phones at beach music festival

FL FORT LAUDERDALE — Patrons attending a South Florida music festival may have gone home with some things missing.

Police officers in Fort Lauderdale said they had arrested three men for pickpocketing cell-phones from patrons at the Tortuga Music Festival. Officers found two dozen phones on the men, who are facing charges of grand theft, and returned 18 phones to their proper owners.

Students petition school district for Eid holiday

GA LAWRENCEVILLE — Muslim students want Georgia’s largest school district to mark the holiday Eid al-Fitr with a day off on next year’s school calendar.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that the request by students at Gwinnett County Public Schools could be the first of its kind in Georgia.

Noor Ali, a freshman at the Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science and Technology, has spoken to the Gwinnett school board and started an online petition for the holiday that has more than 8,000 signatures, the newspaper reported.

Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan, a Muslim holy month during which observers fast. It falls on May 2 this year.

Crab fishery closing due to whale entanglements

CA SACRAMENTO — The commercial Dun-geeness crab fishery off all of California’s coast will be closed this month because humpback whales have been entangled in fishing gear, wildlife authorities said.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife said fishery zones from the Sonoma-Mendocino county line north to the Oregon state line will close at noon on April 20.

The department had already announced that commercial crab traps would have to be removed from fishery zones from the Sonoma-Mendocino county line south to the U.S.-Mexico border.

“We received reports of additional humpback whale entanglements and moved quickly to close the fishery to protect migrating humpback whales that are just starting to return to California waters,” department Director Charlton H. Bonham said in a statement.

2 men charged after beach town ‘takeover’

FL PANAMA CITY BEACH — Two Alabama men are accused of inciting or encouraging a riot after authorities said messages were spread online encouraging the spring break “takeover” of a Florida beach town, authorities said.

More than 160 people were arrested, about 75 illegal guns were confiscated and several businesses closed during a wild weekend in Panama City Beach, police said.

Social media influencers and others promoted “Panamanianiac”

on Facebook and other social media platforms, authorities said. Demarion Ty’Quan Cooper, 20, and Rashad Boyce Glasper, 25, were arrested at their homes in the Alabama cities of Troy and Wetumpka, police said.

“Law enforcement determined Cooper and Glasper played a substantial role in promoting and influencing their followers to create this disorder with a propensity for violence,” Panama City Beach police said in a statement.

Mayor vetoes cameras to ID uninsured drivers

MS COLUMBUS — A Mississippi mayor has vetoed a proposal to install cameras that would help police identify and ticket uninsured drivers.

Columbus Mayor Keith Gaskin said in his veto that the city lacks an attorney general’s opinion on whether using surveillance equipment for that purpose is allowed, the Commercial Dispatch reported. Gaskin also said such a program could be ineffective.

“Every person who drives a vehicle should have insurance, per state law,” Gaskin said. “However, fining a driver for lack of such insurance will not likely result in the purchase of more insurance policies.”

The Columbus City Council voted 5-1 Tuesday to contract with Atlanta-based Securix for cameras to photograph license plates of passing drivers. Tag numbers would be compared with a database to see if the vehicle was insured, and if not, a police officer would send the driver a citation.

— From wire reports



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NBA MVP race down to 3 foreign players

Associated Press

The votes are in. Over the coming days and weeks, the NBA will announce the various award-winners for this regular season. And while nobody knows with absolute certainty where any of the trophies are going yet, this much is known: The MVP is going to be an international player.

Again.

Prepare for history, because it's coming. The consensus seems to be that this season's MVP will be either Nikola Jokic, Joel Embiid or Giannis Antetokounmpo. Jokic is from Serbia. Embiid from Cameroon. Antetokounmpo from Greece, with ties to Nigeria. When the winner is revealed, it'll be the fourth consecutive season in which the MVP won't have been born in the U.S. — something that has never happened.

Nor has this: If Jokic, Embiid and Antetokounmpo finish 1-2-3 in the voting, in whatever order, it'll mark the first time in NBA history that the top

three MVP vote-getters are foreign players.

Jokic is the reigning MVP and made a brilliant case this season. Averages of 27 points, 14 rebounds and just under eight assists per game are crazy numbers. Nobody has ever finished a season with those averages, which only further strengthens the arguments for Jokic to go back-to-back.

"I know I'm very biased. I admit that wholeheartedly," Denver coach Michael Malone said. "The MVP isn't even a competition. I mean, there's other great players. I'm not saying they're not great players. But what Nikola Jokic has done this year, with this team, with everything we've had to go through, is incredible. He was good last year. He's even better this year."

Embiid won the scoring title, averaging 30.6 points and almost 12 rebounds. Throw in the four assists per game, and Embiid finished with averages that nobody has had since Bob McAdoo in 1975-76.

"I don't do a lot of campaigning," Philadelphia coach Doc Rivers said. "Joel has campaigned enough with his play."

Antetokounmpo's final numbers in a season in which Milwaukee is defending the NBA championship were 29.9 points, 11.6 rebounds and 5.8 assists per game.

The numbers are eerily similar — right down to his 55.3% field-goal rate — to Antetokounmpo's MVP season two years ago. And in terms of per-game averages, nobody has averaged that many points, rebounds and assists since Wilt Chamberlain in 1965-66.

"He sets the tone for everything," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said.

The international flavor of the NBA isn't so much of a flavor anymore. It's not a sprinkle, not a garnish. It's a very real — and highly talented — segment of the NBA player population, with the MVP leaders and Dallas' Luka Doncic among those deservedly carrying the superstar banner into

these playoffs that started with play-in games Tuesday and then in earnest with first-round games beginning Saturday.

Only Stephen Curry, who finished third last season, stopped the Jokic-Embiid-Antetokounmpo 1-2-3 finish in the MVP race a year ago. This year, nobody figures to have a real chance to break up the trio. FanDuel Sportsbook says Jokic is the heavy favorite, with Embiid and Antetokounmpo the only others with a realistic chance. After that: the fourth choice is Devin Booker of the Phoenix Suns, at 100-1.

It wasn't an easy choice. Most of the award choices weren't this season. The panel of 100 sports writers and broadcasters who cover the league and did the voting probably won't be in unanimous agreement on anything.

And serious arguments can be made in many cases, particularly defensive player of the year and the All-Defensive team, quite possibly the most subjective of all the categories.

Support shown for Griner as Howard drafted by Dream

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Moments before Rhyné Howard went to Atlanta with the No. 1 pick in the WNBA Draft, Commissioner Cathy Engelbert said the league is working very hard to help bring Brittney Griner back to the United States.

Griner, one of the league's biggest stars, has been detained in Russia since arriving at a Moscow airport in mid-February. Russian authorities said a search of her luggage revealed vape cartridges that allegedly contained oil derived from cannabis, which could carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

"I want to take a moment to reiterate the WNBA's support for Phoenix Mercury star Britt-

ney Griner," Engelbert said before the draft started. "Please know that getting her home safely continues to be our top priority and while we are facing an extraordinarily complex challenge, there is strength in community, especially the WNBA."

Engelbert said there will be a leaguewide charity initiative spearheaded by the Mercury to support Griner's philanthropic project, called BG's Heart and Sole Shoe Drive.

"This is an unimaginable situation for BG to be in," Engelbert said. "She continues to have our full support. Certainly, we're trying everything we can, every angle, working with her legal representation, her agent, elected leaders, the ad-

ministration. Just everybody in our ecosystem to try and find ways to get her home safely and as quickly as we can."

Howard, who was the first Kentucky player to go No. 1 in the draft, will be close to home, having grown up about 90 minutes from Atlanta.

"For it to be so close is huge. A lot of family and close friends can come and support me," Howard said. "To go first, I don't have words for it right now. Still shaking. Super exciting and proud of myself and thankful for everyone that has been on this journey with me and helped me get here."

The Dream traded up two spots last week to acquire the No. 1 pick from the Washington Mystics.

Atlanta finished 8-24 last season and has missed the playoffs four of the past five years. The franchise got new ownership last year and brought in a new coach in Tanisha Wright and new general manager Dan Padover. The Dream also had the No. 1 pick in 2009 and used it to draft Angel McCoughtry.

Indiana, which had four picks in the first round, drafted NaLyssa Smith from Baylor with the No. 2 pick and her Bears teammate Queen Egbo at 10. The Fever also snagged Louisville's Emily Engstler at No. 4 and Lexie Hull of Stanford at 6.

"We have four top picks, so there is the opportunity for this team to grow tremendously," Smith said.

Jays' Springer, Manoah stymie Yankees

Associated Press

NEW YORK — George Springer answered booing fans with a two-run homer and an RBI double, and the Toronto Blue Jays made three sparkling defensive plays in a 3-0 victory over the New York Yankees on Monday night.

Alek Manoah (1-0) struck out seven in six innings, helping the Blue Jays extend their Yankee Stadium winning streak to five.

Springer remains targeted by fans for his time on the 2017 championship Houston Astros, found guilty by Major League Baseball of stealing signs with an unauthorized camera.

Fans booed Springer before and during each at-bat, and he finished a triple short of the cycle in the leadoff spot. Jordan Romano earned his third save and No. 9 batter Santiago Espinal had three singles for the Blue Jays.

"I'm concentrating on the stuff that I can control, which is the swings and all that stuff," Springer said.

New York finished with four hits. Jameson Taillon (0-1) got the loss.

Phillies 5, Mets 4: J.T. Realmuto hit a two-run homer for host Philadelphia in the eighth inning, and Rhys Hoskins and Didi Gregorius followed with run-scoring doubles.

The Phillies trailed 4-0 before they scored five runs in the eighth against two New York relievers. Realmuto's first homer of the season deep into the left-field seats made it 4-3. Hoskins ripped a tying double to left off Seth Lugo (0-1), and Gregorius lined one into the

right-center gap for a 5-4 lead.

Seranthony Dominguez (1-0) tossed 1½ scoreless innings for the win. Brad Hand worked the ninth for a save.

Tigers 3, Red Sox 1: Javier Báez hit a tie-breaking two-run homer in the eighth inning, sending host Detroit to the win.

Báez drove in Austin Meadows with a 396-foot shot to left off Ryan Brasier. Báez and Meadows are two new additions for a team hoping to contend.

Guardians 10, Royals 7: Cleveland rookie Steven Kwan hit a bases-loaded triple while becoming the first player to reach base at least three times in each of his first four games in a win at Kansas City.

Kwan, who went 5-for-5 and safely reached six times a day earlier, finished the series 9-for-13. He got on base in 15 of 19 plate appearances and scored four times.

Twins 4, Mariners 0: Byron Buxton and Luis Arraez each had three hits, and Dylan Bundy earned his first win in a Minnesota uniform in a win over visiting Seattle.

After Jorge Polanco doubled in Buxton for the game's first run in the first inning, the Twins scored on three straight singles in the fifth. Arraez, Polanco and Gio Urshela all picked up RBI singles as Minnesota built a 4-0 lead.

Padres 4, Giants 2: Manny Machado's RBI groundout in the seventh inning put San Diego ahead, and Austin Nola hit his first home run of the season in a win at San Francisco.

Twin brothers relieving for opposing clubs, Taylor and Tyler Rogers, both

pitched and factored in — Taylor earning his third save and Tyler (0-1) taking the loss.

Angels 6, Marlins 2: Michael Lorenzen allowed one run on two hits over six innings in his debut for host Los Angeles and Brandon Marsh hit an early three-run homer.

Jo Adell also went deep for the Angels, who bounced back after losing three of four to defending AL champion Houston in the season-opening series.

Athletics 13, Rays 2: Paul Blackburn pitched five scoreless innings, and visiting Oakland handed Tampa Bay its first loss of the season.

Blackburn (1-0) struck out seven and walked one, helping the rebuilding A's under new manager Mark Kotsay win their second straight.

Nationals 11, Braves 2: Maikel Franco drove in five runs on four hits, including a two-run homer as Washington beat Huascar Ynoa and host Atlanta.

Franco's homer capped a five-run third inning. He added a three-run double off Tucker Davidson when the Nationals scored five runs in the eighth to turn the game into a rout.

Rockies 6, Rangers 4 (10): Jose Iglesias' fourth hit was a tiebreaking RBI single in the 10th inning, and Colorado won a game-ending replay challenge, spoiling Texas' home opener.

Orioles 2, Brewers 0: Cedric Mullins hit a two-run single, Bruce Zimmermann pitched four sharp innings and Baltimore won its opening game at a slightly altered Camden Yards.

Love 'em or hate 'em, Volunteers just keep winning

Associated Press

The beat goes on for Tennessee.

The top-ranked Volunteers (31-1) became the first Southeastern Conference team to open 12-0 in league play after they took three games from Missouri in Knoxville over the weekend.

Tennessee also has won an SEC record-tying 23 games in a row and 81 of their last 100.

The Vols are not lacking for confidence. In fact, fifth-year coach Tony Vitello said that one of his challenges is to get his players to further "tame"

their emotions.

Their home run celebrations have made them a target for critics the past year. The most high-profile example was Drew Gilbert's walk-off grand slam against Wright State in NCAA regionals last year. He flipped his bat high into the air, skipped and jumped down the first- and third-base lines and heaved his helmet like a discus before he touched home.

"We took that villain role and we fed off that," relief pitcher Redmond Walsh said. "We've got guys like Drew Gil-

bert who, legit, wants to fight everybody it feels like and be the guy that has a target on his back."

In the opener of the series at Vanderbilt on April 1, Jordan Beck's first-inning homer was disallowed because his bat was deemed illegal on a technicality and he was called out. When Luc Lipcius homered the next inning and crossed the plate, he put his bat up to his eyes and stared at the barrel as if to inspect it to make sure it was legal.

"I said some choice words to the umpire and their dugout

and ... it was one of those things you had to do, to get back at them and make it a little chippy," Lipcius said.

Tennessee is the consensus No. 1 team for the third straight week.

Miami (26-6), coming off an impressive home sweep of Virginia, is No. 2 by D1Baseball.com, Baseball America and the Collegiate Baseball newspaper.

The No. 3 team is Oregon State (24-7) by D1Baseball, Oklahoma State (23-9) by Baseball America and Louisville (23-8) by Collegiate Baseball.

Freeman puts Irish's hopes on lines

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Prior to his first spring practice as Notre Dame head coach, Marcus Freeman didn't mince his words to his Fighting Irish.

"I kind of told them in the team meeting, I have a vision and identity I want for our team," Freeman recalled. "And that's to be a team that can run the ball and stop the run. I believe in our O-line and D-line being the foundation of our team."

To accomplish that, the 36-year-old Freeman has turned to a couple of familiar faces to get the offensive and defensive lines ready for the season opener Sept. 3 at Ohio State, Freeman's alma mater.

Back as the offensive line coach, a position he held under Freeman's predecessor, is 63-year-old Harry Hiestand. Freeman then hired former Ohio State defensive line coach Al Washington to replace Mike Elston, who left for Michigan, his alma mater.

Following the eighth spring practice, Freeman praised both coaches.

"I'm really, really pleased with both sides," Freeman said. "They've been physical, tough,

They're making each other better. I don't even think it's technique or scheme as much as the mentality that I can whoop the man across from me. And I think both of those guys (Hiestand and Washington) brought that in here."

Hiestand was an easy hire for Freeman and offensive coordinator Tommy Rees. In his first stint with Notre Dame under Brian Kelly from 2012-17, Hiestand tutored future NFL first-round draft choices Zack Martin (Dallas 2014), Ronnie Stanley (Baltimore 2016), Quenton Nelson (Indianapolis 2018) and Mike McGlinchey (San Francisco 2018). As the team's quarterback in 2012 and 2013, Rees was protected by Hiestand's heroes.

During 2017, his final season with the Irish before re-joining the Chicago Bears as offensive line coach for a second time, Hiestand's charges, led by All-Americans Nelson and McGlinchey, won the Joe Moore Award as the nation's top line after producing 269.3 rushing yards a game.

Martin and Nelson have been among the visitors who have returned this spring to help Hiestand put his current charges

through their paces.

"They want to be a part of what coach Hiestand is trying to instill in us," said 6-foot-6, 305-pound right guard Josh Lugg, who has returned for a sixth season and moves over from right tackle, opening it for Blake Fisher.

Another true sophomore, Joe Alt, returns as a starter at left tackle, senior Andrew Kristofic returns at left guard and senior Zeke Correll is at center while center Jarrett Patterson, a graduate student, mends from surgery to repair a torn pectoral muscle. Junior tackle Tosh Baker and sophomore guard Rocco Spindler also have impressed Hiestand.

"The message of what (the former players) learned when they were here and the importance of the details in how we block is tremendously important to our success," Hiestand said.

The 37-year-old Washington spent the last three seasons as Ohio State's defensive line coach but worked under Freeman when both were at Cincinnati in 2017.

"We have a lot of experience in the (defensive line) room," Washington said. "The thing I appreciate is how well they recog-

nize there is another level and that's what we're in the hunt to accomplish."

Isaiah Foskey, a 6-foot-5, 260-pound end, turned down an NFL opportunity to return for his senior season after leading Notre Dame with 11 quarterback sacks, 12.5 tackles for loss and six forced fumbles in 2021.

"My main focus is just to be an all-around defensive player," Foskey said. "Everyone knows I can pass rush. I want to be able to stop the run. I like (Washington's) coaching style. He focuses on pass rushing and run stopping. That's why I came back."

Foskey is one of eight linemen with extensive playing time from last season. Washington has been particularly impressed with the work inside and outside by junior linemen Rylie Mills and senior tackles Jacob Lacey and Howard Cross III. Sophomore tackle Gabriel Rubio has impressed with his size (6-foot-5½, 290 pounds) and nastiness.

"There's a group of older guys that have taken the bull by the horns and become leaders," Washington said. "We have to keep building. Greatness is found in the details. That's our mentality."

Svechnikov, Jets rally to defeat Canadiens

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Evgeny Svechnikov scored a tiebreaking goal midway through the third period, and the Winnipeg Jets beat the Montreal Canadiens 4-2 on Monday night.

Morgan Barron had a goal and an assist and Paul Stastny also scored for Winnipeg. Adam Lowry added an empty-net goal, and Dylan Samberg had two assists. Starting back-to-back games, Connor Hellebuyck made 23 saves.

Jets interim coach Dave Lowry's reasoning for Hellebuyck's consecutive starts was

simple.

"We're still fighting for every game. We're in desperation mode right now," Lowry said. "It would be no different if we were in a playoff series and we were going back-to-back. That was the conversation, we had an understanding that we have to win every game here and just take care of business each and every night"

With the win, the Jets (35-28-11) are five points away from the Dallas Stars and the second wild-card spot in the Western Conference. Howev-

er, the Stars have two games in hand on the Jets.

Jets defenseman Josh Morrissey said players know what they're up against, but added that there's no sense of panic in the locker room.

"I don't think you can really afford to talk about that," Morrissey said. "I mean, we're just trying to win games, get two points, one point, whatever we can do. (We) hope to get some help from other teams, but I don't think we really talk about anything bigger than the next game."

"You can't really look too

far in the future. We know where we're at."

Josh Anderson scored his 100th career goal for Montreal, and Joel Armia added a goal against his former team. Samuel Montembeault kept the Canadiens in the game with 31 saves, including 15 in the second period.

"I liked our group today, nothing seemed to bother us," Lowry said. "When we did give up a goal, we went right back out the next shift and we were able to continue to generate, to continue to get the momentum back."