

US and allies discuss more Ukraine aid

Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said allies must “move at the speed of war” to get more weaponry into the hands of Ukrainian forces, following meetings with dozens of foreign military leaders at Ramstein Air Base on Tuesday.

“I know that all the leaders leave today more resolved than ever to support Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression and atrocities,” Austin told reporters. “And I know we’re all determined to do even more to better coordinate our efforts.”

The gathering at Ramstein was the first monthly meeting of the “Contact Group,” which includes NATO and partner countries.

“The Contact Group will be a vehicle for nations of goodwill to intensify our efforts, coordinate our assistance and focus on winning today’s fight and the struggles to come,” Austin said.

Ukrainian forces have dealt

the Russian military a severe blow since Moscow’s full-fledged invasion in February, inflicting a high number of casualties, Austin said.

“They are weaker than when they started,” he said.

The aim of the Ramstein talks was to come to a common understanding on Ukraine’s changing military requirements as its war with Russia enters a new phase, said Austin, who led discussions with officials from more than 40 countries.

“Ukraine clearly believes it can win and so does everyone here,” Austin told the assembled defense leaders as the meeting began. “Ukraine needs our help to win today, and they will still need our help when the war is over.”

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also attended the gathering.

Since February, the United

States has provided Ukraine more than \$3.4 billion in security assistance. Among the weaponry that has been dispatched: anti-tank Javelins and Stinger missiles, tactical drones, howitzers and an array of ammunition.

Other countries made additional commitments to supply Ukraine with weapons and aid at Ramstein on Tuesday.

German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht said her country will deliver an unspecified number of Gepard “anti-aircraft cannon tanks” to Ukraine soon, without committing to a timeline. The systems meet priority requests by Ukrainian defense officials, Lambrecht said.

Krauss-Maffei Wegmann, a German defense contractor, said it had approximately 50 Gepards, also called Cheetahs, ready to deliver.

Germany’s plans represent a broad change from a couple of months ago, when the country was unwilling to donate weapon-

ry and received criticism for announcing it would contribute 5,000 helmets to Ukraine. Days after Russia’s full-scale invasion, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said his country would commit about \$113 billion to its national defense and would further support Kyiv.

Also on Tuesday, Canadian Defense Minister Anita Anand told reporters at Ramstein that Canada plans to give Ukraine M777 armored vehicles. Austin later said Ukraine would receive eight of them.

Canada will continue to send Ukraine weapons from its defense inventory and is signing contracts for more, including “cameras for drones that are being used in combat right now,” Anand said.

Meanwhile, a defense official from Finland indicated Tuesday that the country is more likely than ever to seek NATO membership, citing widespread public support.

Looming ground battle is crucial phase in Ukraine

The Washington Post

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — U.S. military officials have assessed that a crucial, and perhaps decisive, phase of the Ukraine war is shaping up in the eastern part of the country, where Russian troops may surround Ukrainian forces in hopes of pummeling them in an epic, long-distance ground battle reminiscent of the last century.

New U.S. shipments of heavy artillery and counter-artillery radar, tactical drones, armored vehicles and other equipment are being rushed to Ukraine before tens of thousands of troops, amounting to up to half of the Ukrainian army, are caught in what is known as a “double envelopment” maneuver that would bring them under simultaneous attack from two sides.

The Ukrainians are located in a north-south crescent between deep Russian lines

in the southeastern Donbas region, and a potential pincer movement to their west.

Russian success in the southern port city of Mariupol, where its forces have been battling Ukrainian resistance for weeks, would free up thousands of Moscow’s troops to head north and potentially meet up with additional Russian forces heading south from the area around Kharkiv, in the country’s northeast.

“I think it’s accurate that the next several weeks will be very, very critical ... for the outcome of this battle that’s shaping up,” said Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley, who met here Monday with U.S. European commanders.

It is anticipated that the battle will be fought at a distance. The Russians are using less armor than previously, without the blitzes that characterized some of their ear-

lier forays into Ukraine, and returning to their more traditional doctrine of using artillery and other long-range fire.

Their front line in the Donbas is heavily fortified with surface-to-air missiles that, from a Western perspective, underscore the belief that supplying the Ukrainians with more crewed, fixed-wing aircraft — despite their appeals for planes — would not enhance their prospects.

Where the front line of Russian forces ends up after what is expected to be a grueling battle lasting weeks, if not months, will go a long way to determining the West’s future force posture in Europe. If the Ukrainians cannot hold their positions — let alone push the Russians back — there would be little to stop Russian forces from again turning all of their attention to the central parts of the country and perhaps beyond.

6th Fleet flagship to be decommissioned

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy ship that drew Russia's ire, sailed multiple times in the Black Sea as a symbol of NATO strength and oversaw dozens of naval exercises is now on the chopping block.

USS Mount Whitney, the flagship of the Naples, Italy-based U.S. 6th Fleet and one of two Blue Ridge-class amphibious command-and-control ships in the Navy, is set to be decommissioned in 2026, according to the service's 2023 budget. The move would result in \$179.7 million in savings, the Navy said in its 2023 budget highlights book.

The Navy didn't go into detail about how it made the decision to decommission Mount Whitney. But in a section of the budget highlights book, the service said it was working to find "budgetary

efficiencies."

The Mount Whitney would be classified as out of commission in reserve and be kept on the Naval Vessel Register as a reactivation candidate, according to budget documents.

The other Blue Ridge-class ship, the USS Blue Ridge, is the flagship of U.S. 7th Fleet and is homeported in Yokosuka, Japan. It was commissioned in 1970.

Sebastian Bruns, McCain Fulbright scholar in residence at the U.S. Naval Academy and a maritime expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said while modern communications would enable an ashore staff to handle commanding a task group, task force or exercise, the wider political and diplomatic purpose of a command ship can't be as easily replaced.

"I have a difficult time imagin-

ing that rotational (destroyer) deployments into the European theater will alleviate the lack of a forward-present afloat platform that can deploy to allied countries in the region to send a signal of American naval presence," Bruns said.

Mount Whitney serves as the command ship for U.S. 6th Fleet, and Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO. The ship is currently deployed to U.S. 5th Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain, as part of Combined Task Force 153, which focuses on the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the connecting Bab el Mandeb waterway.

Commissioned in 1971, the Mount Whitney is homeported in Gaeta, Italy, near U.S. 6th Fleet headquarters. If decommissioned in 2026, the ship will have reached year 55 of an expected service life of 68 years, budget

documents show.

In November, the ship drew the attention of Russian President Vladimir Putin when it sailed in the Black Sea for routine NATO operations and port calls in Turkey, Georgia and Romania. At the time, tensions were running high amid a buildup of more than 150,000 Russian troops near the borders of Ukraine, along with signs of impending aggression by Russian ships in the Black Sea. The Kremlin launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24. At a November meeting with military leaders in Sochi, Putin used the ship's presence as justification for bolstering the country's air defense system.

In August 2008, the Mount Whitney was deployed to the Black Sea to deliver humanitarian aid during the war between Russia and Georgia.

Report details firm's failures on military housing in US

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Balfour Beatty Communities, which manages and maintains military housing on bases across the United States, has mishandled maintenance requests and threatened the health and safety of families at bases in Georgia and Texas, according to a Senate report released Tuesday.

The findings are similar to those of a federal criminal investigation made public in December. Balfour Beatty pleaded guilty to fraud charges that followed a Justice Department investigation and the company paid \$65 million in fines and restitution to the military. The report, which was compiled by a subpanel of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, detailed how Balfour Beatty continues to submit family housing paperwork with inaccurate or omitted information. The paperwork

is used by military officials to monitor how the company responds to maintenance requests. The report also found Balfour Beatty ignored or delayed urgent maintenance requests and failed to clean or make basic repairs to homes before leasing them to military tenants.

"These poor conditions persisted well after Richard Taylor, one of Balfour's two copresidents, publicly pledged in testimony before Congress on Dec. 5, 2019, to improve Balfour's ability to monitor repairs and responses to conditions such as mold, to prioritize the health and safety of residents, and to prepare homes for move-ins," according to the report from the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which spent eight months investigating the company's actions at Fort Gordon, Ga., and Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas. Investigators matched internal documents with the com-

pany's maintenance management system records to pinpoint instances where the company mislabeled requests, cut corners on repairs, or simply ignored military families' calls for help.

Those actions put medically vulnerable residents and children at risk, caused damage to the personal items of military families and subjected families to allergens, hazards or filthy conditions, according to the report.

"We have real evidence of what Balfour did and did not do in the time period we're looking at," said a subcommittee official speaking on the condition of anonymity.

The report, titled "Mistreatment of Military Families in Privatized Housing," focused on issues from 2019 to the present, which is after the time that the Justice Department investigated Balfour Beatty and charged the company with fraud. In December, Balfour Beatty pleaded

guilty to fraud that occurred between 2013 and 2019 at some of the 55 bases at which the company manages housing. As part of the plea, the company agreed to a three-year probationary period, which increases scrutiny to comply with regulations, according to the Justice Department.

The actions uncovered by the Justice Department involved altering maintenance records to appear as though Balfour Beatty was meeting goals required for financial bonuses from the military when the company was not.

A spokesperson for Balfour Beatty said the company is disappointed that the subcommittee's report "does not accurately reflect the company's level of commitment to its military residents and their families or acknowledge the significant steps that have been taken to address the small number of complaints that were discussed."

Texas National Guard soldier's body recovered

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — The body of Spc. Bishop E. Evans was found Monday, three days after the Texas National Guard soldier jumped into the Rio Grande to rescue two migrants trying to cross from Mexico into the Texas city of Eagle Pass, the state's military department reported.

"We are devastated by the loss of a member of our Guard

family," Maj. Gen. Thomas Suelzer, adjutant general for Texas, said in a statement. "We recognize the selflessness of this heroic soldier who put his life above others in service to our state and national security."

Evans, a 22-year-old from Arlington, took off his uniform jacket and radio before going into the water at about 8:30 a.m. Friday, Maverick County Sheriff Tom Schmerber said.

The Texas Military Department did not say where Evans' body was found or when. The Texas Rangers are investigating the incident.

Evans was on duty Friday along the river as part of a state-sponsored border security mission known as Operation Lone Star. About 10,000 troops are assigned to the mission, with about 6,500 of those working along the state's border with

Mexico, Texas National Guard officials have said.

Gov. Greg Abbott, who began the border mission one year ago, said he was heartbroken over Evans' death.

"Our National Guard soldiers risk their lives every day to serve and protect others, and we are eternally grateful for the way Spc. Evans heroically served his state and country," he said in a statement.

N. Korea flaunts 'nuclear abilities' in military parade

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea "advertised weapons and nuclear abilities" during a parade Monday, according to the South Korean president-elect, who promised "before everything else" to deter the communist regime's military threats.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un spoke at the evening parade in Pyongyang that celebrated the 90th anniversary of the North Korean army. He said his country ought to "strongly push ahead" with building a formidable army and acquire military technology, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

North Korea's nuclear arsenal is "the symbol of our national strength and the core of our military power," Kim said, according to KCNA. "If any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear forces will have to decisively accomplish its unexpected second mission."

The parade featured marching troops shouting "hurrah!" and an array of modern weapons including missiles potentially capable of reaching the U.S. homeland as well as shorter-range missiles that can be fired from land vehicles or sub-

marines and threaten South Korea and Japan.

One of the weapons showcased at the brightly illuminated Kim Il Sung Square, named after Kim's late grandfather and state founder, was North Korea's biggest, newly built intercontinental ballistic missile, the Hwasong-17.

The day after the parade, the transition committee of South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk Yeol, who is slated to take office May 10, said North Korea's display of weaponry belies its promises of peace.

"It has been proved through the military parade that North Korea has been actually immersing itself in developing means to threaten peace, not only on the Korean Peninsula, but also in Northeast Asia and the world, while insisting on peace and dialogue outwardly for the past five years," the Commission on Presidential Transition said in a statement.

North Korea's threats are "fraught and realistic" and deterring them is "an urgent task before everything else," according to the statement.

The president-elect pledged to develop a "super gap" in military technology between the North and South, while strengthening the Seoul-Washington alliance.

As cases decline, USFK drops mask requirement on bases

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The U.S. military in South Korea dropped its mask mandate Monday on its installations as cases of COVID-19 continue to decline throughout the country.

Masks are no longer required on any U.S. installation or facility, although individual commanders may mandate them in high-traffic indoor areas, such as gyms, commissaries, libraries and similar facilities, according to an announcement by U.S. Forces Korea on its website.

USFK personnel are advised to consult their garrisons for exceptions to the updated policy.

Anyone affiliated with the U.S. military must still wear a mask while outside U.S. installations. South Korea requires people to wear face masks while outdoors and indoors in public.

Defense Department schools on U.S. bases in South Korea are also doing away with the mask requirement starting Wednesday, although students may choose to wear masks at school or on school buses, according to memos from individual school principals.

At Camp Humphreys, the largest U.S. military base overseas, masks will still be required for children age 2 and ol-

der and staff at the Col. Dean Hess Child Development Center, Army Col. Seth Graves, the base garrison commander, said in a Facebook video. Masks will also be required at the base's medical and dental facilities.

USFK reported 252 new COVID-19 infections for the seven-day period ending Monday, the fourth straight week of falling case numbers. The command counted 326 cases between April 12 and 18. It reached a weekly pandemic high of 1,599 cases between Jan. 4 and 10.

"USFK will continue to monitor and assess the COVID-19 environment and will make additional adjustments to protect the force and our mission," said an April 19 USFK news release.

South Korea reported 80,361 new cases on Monday and 34,370 on Sunday, according to daily updates from the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency.

The recent figures represent a significant drop from an all-time high of 621,187 daily cases on March 17 and the monthly one-day high, thus far, of 286,294 cases on April 5.

The majority of Monday's new cases, 19,363, originated in Gyeonggi province, home of Camp Humphreys and Osan Air Base. Seoul, the capital city, counted the second-highest number of infections, 13,560.

Musk is buying Twitter for \$44 billion

Associated Press

Elon Musk reached an agreement to buy Twitter for roughly \$44 billion on Monday, promising a more lenient touch to policing content on the social media platform where he — the world's richest person — promotes his interests, attacks critics and opines on a wide range of issues to more than 83 million followers.

The outspoken Tesla CEO has said he wanted to own and privatize Twitter because he thinks it's not living up to its potential as a platform for free speech.

Musk said in a joint statement with Twitter that he wants to make the service "better

than ever" with new features while getting rid of automated "spam" accounts and making its algorithms open to the public to increase trust.

"Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated," the 50-year-old Musk said, adding hearts, stars and rocket emojis in a tweet that highlighted the statement.

The more hands-off approach to content moderation that Musk envisions has many users concerned that the platform will become more of a haven for disinformation,

hate speech and bullying, something it has worked hard in recent years to mitigate. Wall Street analysts said if he goes too far, it could also alienate advertisers.

The deal was cemented roughly two weeks after the billionaire first revealed a 9% stake in the platform. Musk said last week that he had lined up \$46.5 billion in financing to buy Twitter, putting pressure on the company's board to negotiate a deal.

Twitter said the transaction was unanimously approved by its board of directors and is expected to close in 2022, pending regulatory sign-off and the approval of shareholders.

Supreme Court tackles case about praying coach

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A coach who crosses himself before a game. A teacher who reads the Bible aloud before the bell rings. A coach who hosts an after-school Christian youth group in his home.

Supreme Court justices discussed all those hypothetical scenarios Monday while hearing arguments about a former public high school football coach from Washington state who wanted to kneel and pray on the field after games. The justices were wrestling with how to balance the religious and free speech rights of teachers and coaches with the rights of students not to feel pressured into participating in religious practices.

The court's conservative majority seemed sympathetic to the coach while its three liberals seemed more skeptical. The outcome could strengthen the acceptability of some religious practices in the public school setting.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh suggested that there's a difference between a coach praying in a huddle with students or in the locker room and "when players are dispersing after the game." "This wasn't, you know, 'Huddle up, team,'" Kavanaugh said at one point, suggesting the coach's practice was acceptable.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett asked what if the coach had instead run an after-school religious youth group at his home, with students free to join or not. Would the school have been able to object to that, she asked.

Arguments at the high court lasted nearly two hours, despite being scheduled for just one. The justices and the lawyers arguing the case at various points discussed teachers and coaches who might wear ashes on their foreheads on Ash Wednesday, oppose racism by kneeling during the national anthem or express a political opinion by putting signs in their home's yard. Former NFL player Tim Tebow, who was known for kneeling in prayer on the field, and Egyptian

soccer star Mohamed Salah, a Muslim who kneels and touches his forehead to the ground after a goal, also came up.

Justice Samuel Alito, borrowing from the news, asked about protesting the Russian invasion of Ukraine and what if the coach had, instead of praying, gone out to the center of the field and "all he did was to wave a Ukrainian flag." Would he have been disciplined? Yes, a lawyer for the school district said, because the district "doesn't want its event taken over for political speech."

The Supreme Court previously declined to get involved in the case at an earlier stage in 2019. At that time Alito wrote for himself and three other conservatives — Kavanaugh and Justices Neil Gorsuch and Clarence Thomas — that a lower court decision in favor of the school district was "troubling" for its "understanding of the free speech rights of public school teachers." But they agreed with the decision not to take the case up at the time.

China plans system to take out dangerous asteroids

Bloomberg News

China plans to develop a system for monitoring asteroids that pose a threat to Earth, highlighting the nation's growing ambitions for its space program.

The country will also explore ways for taking out asteroids that endanger the planet, Wu Yanhua, deputy director of the China National Space Administration, said in a TV interview, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

To test the system, China intends to send a spacecraft toward an asteroid in 2025 or 2026

to study it and then change its course, Wu added, without providing details on how that would work.

The Asian nation has pushed forward with plans for its space program in recent years. In January, Wu said Beijing signed an agreement with Russia to build a base on the moon, and last year a Chinese moon mission returned to Earth with lunar samples.

China's aspirations for its space program have ramped up tensions with the U.S. The two sides have sparred over SpaceX satellites that Beijing said came dangerously close to its

space station, prompting the government of the Asian nation to criticize SpaceX in a memo to a United Nations committee that oversees operations in space. Earlier this month the Pentagon said China and Russia continue to deploy weapons that can attack U.S. satellites.

NASA already watches space for asteroids that could be on a collision course with Earth. The Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System, which uses telescopes in Hawaii, Chile and South Africa, was upgraded this year so that it completes a scan of the skies once every 24 hours.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Mom sent bomb threat to hungry son's school

FL COCOA — A woman has been arrested months after threatening to blow up her son's high school unless cafeteria workers started giving him more food, officials said.

The threat was left in a voice-mail to Cocoa High School on Florida's Atlantic Coast, according to police and court records. The 41-year-old woman was arrested and charged with making a false bomb threat and disruption of a school. She did not leave her name on the voicemail, but the school's caller ID recorded the number, an arrest report said.

A resource officer confirmed that her child had gotten into an argument with a cafeteria worker because he wanted more food.

3 ordered to pay \$5.5M in insurance scheme

LA NEW ORLEANS — Three Louisiana women have been ordered to repay a total of \$5.5 million to companies defrauded in a scheme to stage wrecks.

Keishira Richardson, 27; Chandrika Brown, 31; and Aisha Thompson, 44, are among 36 people convicted so far in what authorities have called "Operation Sideswipe," news releases said. Each was sentenced on one count each of conspiracy to commit mail fraud.

Richardson was sentenced to five years probation and ordered to pay \$4.7 million in restitution. That's the total paid to settle claims made by her and others for one crash staged on Oct 13, 2015.

U.S. District Judge Sarah S. Vance sentenced Thompson to 18 months in prison and restitution

of \$677,500 — the total paid in claims to people involved in a crash with a tour bus on Oct. 15, 2015.

Vance ordered Brown to serve 100 hours community service and pay \$121,000 restitution. Although Brown wasn't in a RAV4 that hit a tractor-trailer on Sept. 6, 2017, she received medical treatment, a news release said.

15 migrants, driver hurt after chase with police

TX SAN ANTONIO — Fifteen migrants and another individual were injured after the truck they were in rolled over following a high-speed chase with Texas deputies, according to authorities.

A deputy pulled over the truck in Medina County, and one person fled the vehicle before it sped off, according to the Medina County Sheriff's Office.

The chase continued into nearby Bexar County, where the driver lost control and the truck rolled over several times.

Fifteen migrants were found in the truck as well as the driver, who is from Austin.

Party participants pelt police with bottles, cans

OR EUGENE — Officers had glass bottles and canned food thrown at them when they attempted to break up a party that drew as many as 1,000 people to a neighborhood near the University of Oregon, police said.

Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner said the party included underage drinkers, college-age individuals and their parents. Skinner called the party an embarrassment for those involved and said the attempted assault on

officers was inexcusable.

The party occurred as the university was hosting "Duck Day," a fan festival named after the school's mascot that includes an intra-squad football game and other events. Following the football game, the city called in 10 officers on overtime to patrol the area. The officers intervened in numerous house parties and issued more than two dozen citations for alcohol possession by minors and open container violations, police said.

Man allegedly set fire to hide Home Depot theft

CA SAN JOSE — A man charged with setting a fire that gutted a Northern California Home Depot, prompted hundreds to flee and filled the sky with smoke was trying to cover up a theft of tools, authorities said.

Dyllin Jaycruz Gogue, 27, of San Jose, was arrested. Gogue is accused of setting a fire that began in the lumber section of the Home Depot in South San Jose. He was trying to create a distraction while making off with a cart full of tools but drove off without taking them, prosecutors said.

The five-alarm fire destroyed the store, causing an estimated \$17 million in damage to the store contents. The fire took about 100 firefighters six hours to control.

Players suspended after pitcher tackles batter

TX WEATHERFORD — A Texas junior college baseball conference has suspended a pitcher for four games after he tackled an opposing batter after a home run, and the batter was also suspended for two games.

The North Texas Junior College Athletic Conference announced it suspended both players and many more from both teams due to the resulting brawl.

Online video of the play showed North Central Texas College's Josh Phillips rounding third after his sixth-inning home run, only to have Weatherford College pitcher Owen Woodward charge off the mound and level him with a violent blow to the midsection. Several players then charged onto the field.

Vets want museum to honor Doolittle Raiders

SC COLUMBIA — A veterans group is trying to raise millions of dollars to build a museum in South Carolina honoring a group of 80 men who went on a daring bombing raid over Tokyo just months after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II.

The Doolittle Raiders started their training in Columbia, and the city hosted reunions before the final members of the group died in the past decade. The American Heritage Foundation wants to build a museum to honor the raiders near the Columbia Metropolitan Airport, said Larry Russell, 75, an Army veteran and member of the planning group.

The Doolittle Raiders were led by Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, who rounded up 80 men to fly what they thought could be suicidal missions from aircraft carriers in the Pacific Ocean to drop bombs on Japan just four months after the December 1941 Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.

— From wire reports

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Celtics sweep Nets out of NBA playoffs

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Even as they rolled through the second half of their schedule, the Boston Celtics knew there was a notion they should lose.

Tanking a game down the stretch and falling out of the No. 2 seed would have meant avoiding a playoff series with Kevin Durant and the Brooklyn Nets, who were considered a team to be feared.

Not to these Celtics. They aren't afraid of anything.

"We feel confident, we feel strong against anybody and we're going to come to play every single game," Jaylen Brown said.

Their defense made life miserable for Durant. Now they might get a chance to turn it loose on Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Boston swept its way into the Eastern Conference semifinals with a 116-112 victory on Monday night in Game 4, becoming the first team into the second

round. Jayson Tatum scored 29 points and Brown had 22.

Next up could be the NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks, who hold a 3-1 lead in their series against Chicago. And the Celtics will have home-court advantage, in part because they refused to consider trying to lose their way out of the No. 2 seed to avoid the Nets.

"We said it quite openly, we're not running from anybody and we'll let the chips fall where they may," coach Ime Udoka said.

Boston got off to a rocky start to Udoka's first season and was just 18-21 on Jan. 6 after blowing a 25-point lead and losing 108-105 to the New York Knicks on RJ Barrett's three-pointer at the buzzer. Udoka said his team needed leadership at the game, which Tatum called one of the lowest points of the season.

There weren't many more of them.

"I think that was right

around the time we started jelling and clicked and figured it out," Tatum said. "But there was just so many variables in the beginning of the season — new team, health. And honestly, we just started playing better as a team and individually."

The team went 33-10 from there. Tatum's all-around game grew on the offensive end and the Celtics became a defensive force, led by Defensive Player of the Year Marcus Smart. They left an impression on Durant, who hadn't lost in the first round since his first playoff appearance in 2010 and had never been swept in any series.

"They're an incredible team," Durant said. "They've got a chance to do some big things the rest of the playoffs and they played amazing."

Brown was injured last season when Boston was beaten by Brooklyn in five games in the first round. Once the rematch was secured, it appeared the Celtics would indeed get the

tough test that was predicted when it needed Tatum's basket at the buzzer to win Game 1.

From there it was mostly all Boston, which found itself getting sharper because it knew what Durant and Kyrie Irving could do.

"I think that was good for us," Tatum said. "I think just knowing that, who they got on their team and what they are capable of had us that much more locked in from the first game."

The Celtics, who got center Robert Williams back from a knee injury midway through the series, were too big and strong for the Nets. It would be a much fairer fight against the Bucks, whose frontline features the NBA Finals MVP in Antetokounmpo.

Fear the Deer?

Nope. Boston won't worry about that matchup, either.

"We're not scared of anybody. We're not going to run from anybody," Udoka said.

Raptors stay alive, force Game 6 back in Toronto

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Pascal Siakam gave a pregame pep talk to keep the Toronto Raptors calm in a hostile Philly environment where they already lost twice and fell into a playoff hole.

The message was simple: "Listen to our voices."

How do they like the sound of this? The resilient Raptors are headed home, still with a chance to pull off a series comeback that's never happened in the NBA.

Siakam had 23 points and 10 rebounds, Precious scored 17 and Toronto forced a return home for Game 6 in their Eastern Conference first-round series against Philadelphia, beating the 76ers 103-88 on Monday night.

"We always kind of figure it out," Siakam said.

Once holding a 3-0 series lead, the 76ers are headed back north. No team has ever blown a 3-0 advantage and lost a playoff series.

The Raptors have won two straight in the series and jumped all over injured Philadelphia center Joel Embiid and ineffective James Harden to make Thursday night's game a necessity.

FanDuel Sportsbook has the Sixers favored by 1½ points for Game 6.

Embiid had 20 points and 11 rebounds playing with a thumb injury. Harden scored 15 points on 4-for-11 shooting.

"I was terrible defensively," Embiid said. "There's really no explanation. I've just got to play with more energy, move my feet better. I've just got to be better."

Rapper and famous 76ers fan Meek Mill pulled his hood over

his head and walked away from his courtside seat late in the game and the home team down 14.

Philadelphia coach Doc Rivers is dragging the weight of ignominious NBA history with him through customs. Rivers, who led Boston to the 2008 championship, is the only coach in NBA history to blow three 3-1 series leads.

His Orlando Magic lost to Detroit in the 2003 Eastern Conference first round, the 2015 Los Angeles Clippers blew the series to Houston in the Western Conference semifinals and in 2020, the Clippers lost to Denver in the West semifinals.

The next season, Rivers was in Philly — and the Sixers lost three games at home as the No. 1 seed and were eliminated in the second round.

The nerves in Philly are suddenly as tight as the rims.

"We never brought the fight to them at the beginning of the game, really," 76ers forward Tobias Harris said.

Philadelphia had a miserable first half. It finished with 10 turnovers and shot 35% from the floor. The 76ers' last bucket in the first quarter was one for the blooper reel: Matisse Thybulle's missed shot bounced off the rim and was accidentally tipped in by the Raptors' Precious Achiuwa.

Maybe it sparked something for the Raptors. They opened the second quarter on a 12-0 run to take control while the Sixers missed their first nine shots. The Sixers didn't score until 6:51 was left in the half. Scottie Barnes scored eight points in the quarter and the Raptors took a 54-41 lead at the break.

Doncic scores 33 as Mavs rout Jazz

Associated Press

DALLAS — Luka Doncic delighted the crowd in his first home playoff game coming off a calf injury.

Frustrated the Utah Jazz as well.

The young Dallas superstar had 33 points and 13 rebounds while also being thrown to the court on a hard foul that led to Hassan Whiteside's ejection as the Mavericks routed the Jazz 102-77 on Monday night for a 3-2 lead in their first-round series.

Doncic made his series debut in Game 4 at Utah, when the Jazz scored the last five points in the final 31 seconds for a one-point win that evened the series. He never let Game 5 get close.

"For his second game, it looks like he's been playing this whole series," coach Jason Kidd said. "His conditioning, his effort on

the defensive end. As we talk about rebounding, he's one of the best for us and he did that tonight."

After the first four games were decided by eight points or less, Utah never had a chance after a nearly six-minute scoreless drought in the second quarter that fueled a 22-4 Dallas run on the way to a 52-36 halftime lead.

Game 6 is Thursday night in Salt Lake City, with the Jazz regaining their formidable home-court edge, but facing the long odds of just 18% of teams winning a series after dropping the fifth game when the teams split the first four.

The Mavericks haven't advanced in the postseason since winning the 2011 championship. Utah is in the playoffs for the sixth consecutive year, but has yet to get past the second round

in that stretch.

Jordan Clarkson scored 20 points and Rudy Gobert added 17 points and 11 rebounds in the lowest-scoring game for the Jazz since they lost by 50 at Dallas (118-68) on Nov. 14, 2018. They were 3-for-30 from three-point range (10%) and shot 38% overall.

Donovan Mitchell, who averaged 30 points in the first four games, scored just nine and missed all seven of his three-pointers before leaving with a left hamstring injury in the fourth quarter. He will get an MRI on Tuesday.

"They've scrambled extremely hard," said Mitchell, who is shooting 20% from three-point range after being well over 40% the past two playoff years. "It's a lot to continuously run teams off the line, and they've done a good job of it.

They've made us uncomfortable."

Doncic had already matched Utah's entire output in the third quarter with 19 points when he returned midway through the fourth. Whiteside challenged an attempted dunk and flung Doncic to the court after they got tangled up.

Whiteside was assessed two technical fouls after shoving Dorian Finney-Smith and going nose-to-nose with Reggie Bullock as coaches from both sides frantically tried to keep players separated. Finney-Smith and Bullock also got technicals, and Bullock was ejected because it was his second of the game.

"It was nothing," Doncic said. "It's playoffs, man. There's going to be always attention, but it was nothing. I tried to dunk it. Wasn't successful. These things happen in the playoffs."

Mets rally past Cards with five runs in ninth inning

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Pinch-hitter Dominic Smith hustled for an infield single that drove in two pivotal runs, and the New York Mets capitalized on an uncharacteristic error by Gold Glove third baseman Nolan Arenado to rally for five runs with two outs in the ninth inning of a 5-2 victory over the St. Louis Cardinals on Monday night.

After the hit by Smith gave New York the lead, Brandon Nimmo capped the outburst with a two-run homer.

Max Scherzer struck out 10 over seven innings of two-hit ball in a scoreless duel with St. Louis starter Miles Mikolas. A two-run single by Tyler O'Neill off Trevor May (1-0) put the Cardinals ahead in the eighth.

The Mets were down to their final strike when Mark Canha hit a grounder to third against Giovanni Gallegos (0-1). Arenado

threw high for an error that allowed Eduardo Escobar to score from second, making it 2-1.

Edwin Diaz worked the ninth for his second save.

Rangers 6, Astros 2: Marcus Semien and Corey Seager had RBI singles in the decisive seventh inning, Adolis Garcia added a bases-clearing double in the eighth, and host Texas beat Houston in the opener of a four-game series.

Pinch-hitter Willie Calhoun opened the Rangers seventh with a double off just-in reliever Phil Maton (0-1), who after getting his only out allowed Semien's single that tied the game at 2-2.

Giants 4, Brewers 2: Luis González hit his first major league homer, a two-run drive with two outs in the ninth inning that sent San Francisco to a win at Milwaukee.

The Giants went 8-3 on their

four-city trip. Their one-game visit to Milwaukee was part of a makeup for a series postponed because of the lockout, and San Francisco will return for a doubleheader in September.

Blue Jays 6, Red Sox 2: Bo Bichette broke an eighth-inning tie with his first career grand slam and host Toronto beat slumping Boston.

Lourdes Gurriel Jr. and Matt Chapman also homered for the Blue Jays. José Berríos allowed two runs in a season-high seven-plus innings and Adam Cimber (4-0) got three outs for his major league-leading fourth win as Toronto won for the fifth time in six games.

Dodgers 4, Diamondbacks 0: Walker Buehler tossed a three-hitter for his first career shutout, Will Smith launched a solo homer and Los Angeles won at Arizona.

Buehler (2-1) retired 15

straight batters during a brilliant stretch from the fourth inning to the ninth. He walked none, hit one batter with a pitch and struck out 10.

Angels 3, Guardians 0: Taylor Ward homered twice and drove in all three runs, Michael Lorenzen pitched six innings of three-hit ball, and host Los Angeles beat Cleveland.

Ward delivered a solo homer in the fifth and a two-run shot in the seventh, both off Guardians ace Shane Bieber (1-1).

Phillies 8, Rockies 2: Bryce Harper homered and drove in two runs, Rhys Hoskins had three hits and host Philadelphia took advantage of several defensive miscues by Colorado.

Kyle Schwarber added two RBIs for the Phillies. Kyle Gibson (2-1) lasted 5½ innings, allowing two runs on three hits with four strikeouts and two walks.

Djokovic cleared to defend at Wimbledon

Associated Press

Novak Djokovic will be allowed to defend his title at Wimbledon, despite not being vaccinated against COVID-19, because the shots are not required to enter Britain, All England Club chief executive Sally Bolton said Tuesday.

Djokovic, a 34-year-old Serb who is ranked No. 1, missed the Australian Open in January after being deported from that country because he was not vaccinated against the illness caused by the coronavirus that has led to the deaths of millions during the pandemic that began in 2020.

During the annual spring briefing ahead of Wimbledon, which starts on June 27, Bolton said that “whilst, of course, it is encouraged” that all players get vaccinated, “it will not be a condition of entry to compete” at the grass-court Grand Slam tournament this year.

Djokovic — who has said he got COVID-19 twice, once each in 2020 and 2021 — owns 20 Grand Slam singles titles, tied with Roger Federer for the second-most for a man. They trail Rafael Nadal, who won his 21st at the Australian Open.

Six of Djokovic’s trophies came at Wimbledon, including victories each of the past three times the tournament was held

— in 2018, 2019 and 2021. It was not held in 2020 because of the pandemic.

In other tennis news:

■ Federer intends to return to tournament tennis after what will have been more than a year away from the tour by playing at the Swiss Indoors in October.

The event in Basel announced in a statement posted on its website on Tuesday that the 20-time Grand Slam champion “has officially entered the tournament and will appear on the entry list with the protected ATP ranking” of No. 9.

Ovechkin injury clouds Capitals’ outlook

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin did not skate with his Washington Capitals teammates Tuesday morning and his status moving forward is unclear with the start of the playoffs less than a week away.

Ovechkin was listed as day to day with an upper-body injury, and coach Peter Laviolette called his captain a game-time decision to face the New York Islanders in the third to last game of the regular season. But the team is being extra cautious with the 36-year-old star, and Laviolette made that clear when asked if he was optimistic about Ovechkin being ready for the start of the first round.

“I want to say I hope so, but I don’t know,” Laviolette said after Washington’s morning skate. “It depends on how things progress with him, so it’s day to day right now.”

Ovechkin tripped over Toronto goaltender Erik Kallgren’s stick and slammed into the boards left shoulder first early in the third period Sunday night in a shootout loss to the Maple Leafs. He lay on the ice in pain, skated off and did not return.

The Russian winger has only missed 24 games because of injury during his 17-year NHL career. He has never missed a playoff game.

Morant named NBA’s Most Improved Player

Ja Morant was rookie of the year in 2020, vowing he would get better from there.

And he’s done exactly that.

The Memphis Grizzlies guard picked up his second major award in three seasons Monday, getting announced as the NBA’s Most Improved Player. He is the first Grizzlies player to receive the award — and the first player in league history to have won both rookie of the year and most improved.

Morant set career bests in scoring (27.4 points per game), rebounds (5.7), steals (1.2) and field-goal shooting (49.3%). His

scoring average last season was 19.1 per game, and he made the big jump while playing basically the same amount of minutes.

Virginia AG investigating Commanders

RICHMOND, Va. — Virginia’s attorney general has launched an inquiry into the Washington Commanders following allegations of financial improprieties raised by a congressional committee.

Attorney General Jason Miyares, a Republican, disclosed his office’s investigation in a letter to a team lawyer on Monday, saying he viewed it as his “responsibility to carefully examine the material facts regarding this matter.”

“To be clear, I have not prejudged the issues raised regarding the Commanders,” he wrote.

The announcement from Miyares comes about two weeks after the House Committee on Oversight and Reform wrote to the Federal Trade Commission saying it found evidence of deceptive business practices over the span of more than a decade, including withholding ticket revenue from visiting teams and refundable deposits from fans.

DeBrincat, Lankinen help Blackhawks stop Flyers

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Chicago Blackhawks wanted to give their fans something to cheer about at the end of a long season.

Alex DeBrincat delivered.

DeBrincat scored his 41st goal in the third period and Kevin Lankinen made 33 saves, helping the Blackhawks beat the Philadelphia Flyers 3-1 on Monday night in a matchup of disappointing teams.

“The guys, they battled, they worked,” interim coach Derek King said. “Lanks played well. We did some good things.”

Jonathan Toews had a goal and an assist as Chicago (27-42-11) won for just the

fifth time in its last 20 games. Erik Gustafsson also scored against one of his former teams, and Dominik Kubalik picked up an assist in his 200th NHL game.

King talked to his team at the morning skate about making the most of its last three games, including two at home. The Blackhawks improved to 13-21-6 at the United Center this season.

“Finish right at home. Get the fans out of their seats,” King said.

Philadelphia lost for the 12th time in its last 16 games. Kevin Hayes scored for the Flyers (25-44-11), and Felix Sandstrom made 30 stops in his fourth NHL start.

“We weren’t good enough with the puck tonight versus a team that transitions really well,” interim Philadelphia coach Mike Yeo said. “They came in off the rush and it gave them a lot of opportunities.”

Chicago was clinging to a 2-1 lead when DeBrincat converted a one-timer off a cross-ice pass from Patrick Kane at 7:45.

DeBrincat matched his career high for goals, set during the 2018-19 season. It was Kane’s 66th assist, equaling his career best from 2018-19.

The Flyers had won six in a row against the Blackhawks.