

Russia's attack in east gains momentum

Associated Press

IRPIN, Ukraine — Moscow's offensive in eastern Ukraine gathered momentum as several areas came under heavy shelling Thursday, amid suspicions Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to score a major battlefield success in time for Victory Day, one of Russia's proudest holidays, on May 9.

Ukrainian authorities reported intense Russian fire in the Donbas — the eastern industrial heartland that the Kremlin is bent on capturing — and near Kharkiv, a northeastern city outside the Donbas that is seen as key to the offensive.

In the ruined southern port city of Mariupol, Ukrainian fighters holed up in the steel plant that represents the last pocket of resistance said concentrated bombing overnight killed and wounded more people. And authorities warned that a lack of safe drinking water inside the city could lead to outbreaks of deadly diseases.

The fresh attacks came as the United Nations chief met in Kyiv with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and surveyed the destruction in small towns outside the capital that saw some of the worst horrors of the first onslaught of the war.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres condemned the atrocities committed

in towns like Bucha, where evidence of mass killings of civilians was found after Russia retreated in the face of unexpectedly stiff resistance. He called such towns “the epicenter of unbearable heartbreak and pain.”

“Wherever there is a war, the highest price is paid by civilians,” Guterres lamented, reiterating the importance of investigating alleged war crimes.

Separately, Ukraine's prosecutor accused 10 Russian soldiers, including a general, of being “involved in the torture of peaceful people” in Bucha. Prosecutor General Iryna Venediktova did not say her office had filed criminal charges, and she appealed to the public to help assemble evidence. Russia has denied it targets civilians.

“During the occupation of Bucha, they took unarmed civilians hostage, killed them with hunger and thirst, kept them on their knees with hands tied and eyes taped, mocked and beat them,” Venediktova said.

Getting a full picture of the unfolding battle in the east has been difficult because airstrikes and artillery barrages have made it extremely dangerous for reporters to move around. Several journalists have been killed in the war, now in its third month. Also, both Ukraine and the Moscow-backed rebels

fighting in the east have introduced tight restrictions on reporting from the combat zone.

Western officials have said the Kremlin's apparent goal is to take the Donbas by encircling and crushing Ukrainian forces from the north, south and east.

But so far, Russia's troops and their allied separatist forces appear to have made only minor gains, taking several small towns as they try to advance in relatively small groups against staunch Ukrainian resistance.

Russian military units were mauled in the abortive bid to storm Kyiv and had to regroup and refit. Some analysts have said the delay in launching a full-fledged offensive may reflect Putin's decision to wait until his forces are ready for a decisive battle — rather than rushing in and risking another failure that could shake his rule amid worsening economic conditions at home because of Western sanctions.

Many observers expect Putin will try to claim a big victory in the east by Victory Day, which marks the defeat of Nazi Germany during World War II.

Putin, like many of his predecessors, often uses patriotic Russian holidays and anniversaries to make announcements.

More than half of US howitzers for Ukraine delivered

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Ukrainian troops now have more than half of the 90 howitzers the United States pledged them to help beat back a Russian attack in the country's eastern region, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday.

The 155 mm M777 howitzers were included in President Joe Biden's two \$800 million aid packages approved April 13 and April 21, respectively, and represented the first time the U.S. sent such artillery to Ukraine since Russian forces invaded Feb. 24.

While they are a different caliber than Ukraine's Soviet-era 152 mm Msta-B howitzers, they share the same “basic outlines,” a senior U.S. defense official said last week.

Still, Ukrainian troops require some training

to use the weapons, which the U.S. is providing at an undisclosed location outside Ukraine, Kirby said. Ukrainian troops who complete the training are expected to train other troops when they return to the fight.

“We finished up earlier this week the first tranche of more than 50 trainers that are going to go in and train their teammates,” Kirby said. “We're working on a second tranche of ... more than 50 that [are] going to go through training in the same location outside Ukraine.”

The training has gone well so far, according to Ukraine Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov, who said in a translated statement Wednesday that Ukrainian gunners working with a 155mm howitzer “hit the target with the first shot.”

The switch to the U.S. cannon has effects that spread past the battlefield as it better aligns Ukrainian forces with partners in the West, Reznikov said. He added that learning

these systems is a step toward his goal to “integrate Ukraine into NATO de facto.”

“Gradually, this will ensure full compatibility of the Ukrainian army with the armies of NATO countries, which will become a significant reinforcement of the eastern flank of the alliance,” he said in the statement. “Three months ago, this task was considered almost impossible, but thanks to the courage and professionalism of Ukrainian soldiers ... everything has changed.”

One of the reasons that Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to invade Ukraine was to stop the country from seeking NATO membership, for which it applied in 2008. While NATO has not accepted Ukraine, it refused to close the door on future membership for Ukraine earlier this year despite Putin's demands.

NATO chief: Finland and Sweden could join quickly

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Thursday that Finland and Sweden would be embraced with open arms should they decide to join the 30-nation military organization and could become members quite quickly.

Stoltenberg's remarks came as public support in Finland and Sweden for NATO membership mounts in response to Russia's war in Ukraine. Media speculation in the two countries suggest the two might apply in mid-May.

"It's their decision," Stoltenberg said. "But if they decide to apply, Finland and Sweden will be warmly welcomed, and I expect that process to go quickly."

He gave no precise time frame, but did say that the two could expect some protection should Russia try to intimidate them

from the time their membership applications are made until they formally join.

Stoltenberg said he's "confident that there are ways to bridge that interim period in a way which is good enough and works for both Finland and Sweden."

NATO's collective security guarantee ensures that all member countries must come to the aid of any ally under attack. Stoltenberg added that many NATO allies have now pledged and provided a total of at least \$8 billion in military support to Ukraine.

Before launching the war in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded that NATO stop expanding and pull its troops back from Russia's borders. So the prospect of neighboring Finland, and Sweden, joining the trans-Atlantic alliance is unlikely to be welcomed in Moscow.

Marine Corps IDs combat engineer who drowned Sunday in Hawaii

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Isaac Romero had completed his first year as a Marine the day before he drowned Sunday just off a beach on the Hawaii base where he was stationed, the Marine Corps said Wednesday.

Romero, 22, a Minnesota native, was assigned to Marine Wing Support Squadron 174 at Marine Corps Base Hawaii on Oahu in December after completing training as a combat engineer, according to a Marine Corps news release.

His death prompted the base commander to temporarily close several of the base's beaches beginning Wednesday to conduct a review of beach safety procedures and risk management practices, the Marine Corps said.

They will remain closed until Wednesday.

Romero was swimming in the afternoon from North Beach on the base, leaving a friend behind on land.

He had swum out about 60 yards before

the friend lost sight of him, the Marine Corps said. The friend called the base Provost Marshal's Office at 2 p.m., and first responders from the base and Honolulu Fire Department soon arrived.

They found his body in shallow water about 45 minutes later. He was pronounced dead at 3:42 p.m. at Castle Medical Center, the Marine Corps said.

The Naval Criminal Investigative Service and local authorities are still looking into Romero's death.

"Our heartfelt sympathies and deepest condolences go out to Isaac's family and friends, and we join them in remembering and mourning this Marine," Lt. Col. Gideon Grissett, commander of Marine Wing Support Squadron 174, said in the news release.

"His enthusiasm and devotion to duty inspired others with his positive, upbeat attitude. We are grateful to have had the opportunity to know him and be a part of our Marine Corps family."

A memorial service is planned for May 6 at the base chapel.

Russia may be using dolphins to protect base

The Washington Post

Satellite photos show Russia has placed trained dolphins at the entrance to a key Black Sea port, in a move that may be designed to help protect a significant Kremlin naval base there, according to a naval analyst.

The images, provided to The Washington Post by Maxar Technologies, show two dolphin pens at the entrance to Sevastopol harbor in Crimea — which Russian forces annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

H I Sutton, a submarine analyst who first reported on the dolphins for the U.S. Naval Institute on Wednesday, said the pens were moved there in February, around the time of the invasion of Ukraine.

He said the dolphins could be used to counter specialist Ukrainian divers attempting to enter the port to sabotage Russian warships — a role he said the United States and Russia have previously trained marine mammals for.

In an email to The Post, a spokesman for Maxar Technologies agreed with Sutton's analysis and explanation of the dolphin pens captured by their satellites recently.

Some Russian warships are based at the Sevastopol port, out of range of Ukrainian missiles. The warship Moskva — the flagship of the Russian Black Sea fleet — sank this month after being hit by two Ukrainian missiles, delivering a significant blow to Russian naval capacity, U.S. and Ukrainian officials said.

Russia reportedly used the Sevastopol base during the Soviet era to train dolphins for military purposes such as planting explosives on ships or searching for mines. Whether they were ever deployed for military operations is disputed. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Sevastopol facility was used by Ukraine to train dolphins for therapy sessions. Russia resumed the training of military sea mammals after taking control of the port city in 2014, the Moscow Times reported at the time.

In 2019, a white whale surfaced in Norway wearing a harness — prompting local marine experts to speculate that they'd come across a mammal that was part of a Russian naval training program, according to reports.

US economy down in Q1; spending still steady

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. economy shrank last quarter for the first time since the pandemic recession struck two years ago, contracting at a 1.4% annual rate, but consumers and businesses kept spending in a sign of underlying resilience.

The steady spending suggested that the economy could keep expanding this year even though the Federal Reserve plans to raise rates aggressively to fight the inflation surge. The first quarter's growth was hampered mainly by a slower restocking of goods in stores and warehouses and by a sharp drop in exports.

The Commerce Department's estimate Thursday of the first quarter's gross domestic product — the nation's total output of goods and services — fell far below the 6.9% annual growth in the fourth quarter of 2021. And for 2021 as a whole, the economy grew 5.7%, the highest calendar-year expansion since 1984.

Additionally, the U.S. job market — the most important pillar of the economy — remains robust. And in the January-March quarter, businesses and consumers increased their spending at a 3.7% annual rate after adjusting for inflation.

Imports also surged in the Ja-

nuary-March quarter as businesses and consumers bought more goods from abroad while U.S. exports rose more slowly. That disparity widened the trade deficit and subtracted from the quarter's growth.

The weakness of the economy's overall growth rate contrasts with the vitality of the job market. At 3.6%, the unemployment rate is nearly back to the half-century low it reached just before the pandemic. Layoffs have reached historically low levels as employers, plagued by labor shortages, have held onto their workers tightly.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that jobless

claims in the United States declined by 5,000 to 180,000 for the week ending April 23. First-time applications generally reflect the number of layoffs. The four-week average for claims, which evens out the weekly ups and downs, rose slightly to 179,750 from 177,500 the previous week.

Wages are rising steadily as companies compete to attract and retain workers, a trend that has helped maintain consumers' ability to spend. At the same time, though, that spending has helped fuel inflation, which reached 8.5% in March compared with 12 months earlier.

Big progress on wildfires, but dangerous winds on the way

Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Firefighters have been making significant progress Wednesday on the biggest wildfires burning unusually hot and fast for this time of year in the western United States.

But forecasters from the Southwest to the southern High Plains warned of the return the next two days of the same gusty winds and critical fire conditions that sent wildland blazes racing across the landscape last week.

Some of the nearly 1,000 firefighters battling the biggest fire in drought-stricken New Mexico cut away brush and burned out any extra fuel Wednesday ahead of increased danger forecast Thursday into the weekend.

That allowed crews to dig fire lines around about a third of what has become the largest wildfire burning in the U.S. — now 94 square miles — and keep flames from reaching mostly rural homes and ranches that are still in its path northeast of Santa Fe.

"Another great day on the fire line," federal fire incident commander Carl Schwope said Wednesday night.

"Fire personnel are making great progress," he told residents at a community meeting in Las Vegas, N.M., where numerous rural communities in the nearby mountains remain under evacuation orders.

But he quickly emphasized the success could be short-lived because hotter, drier, windier weather should return Thursday and Friday.

"This fire still has tremendous potential to move and still has a lot of danger," he said. "We have a couple of critical fire days still ahead."

The most critical fire danger remains the next two days across practically the entire state of New Mexico, according to the National Weather Service. The elevated-risk area stretches all the way from Arizona's border with California and Nevada into the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, the service said late Wednesday.

Congressional maps drawn by NY Dems rejected in court

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York's highest court on Wednesday rejected new congressional maps that had widely been seen as favoring Democrats, largely agreeing with Republican voters who argued the district boundaries were unconstitutionally gerrymandered.

The decision may delay New York's primary elections by as much as two months and is likely a hammer-blow to Democrats' national redistricting hopes, which leaned heavily on their ability to gerrymander New York state to maximize the number of seats they could win in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The state's Court of Appeals said the Democratic-led Legislature lacked the authority to redraw congressional and state Senate maps after an independent redistricting commission charged with crafting new maps failed to reach a consensus.

The judges also said lawmakers gerrymandered the congressional maps to Democrats' favor, in violation of a 2014 con-

stitutional amendment designed to rout out political gamesmanship in redistricting.

The Appeals Court handed authority to draw new district maps to an expert, known as a special court master, instead of the Legislature.

"Prompt judicial intervention is both necessary and appropriate to guarantee the People's right to a free and fair election," said the court's opinion, written by Chief Judge Janet DiFiore.

The ruling didn't specify a deadline for the adoption of new maps. But the judges said they were sending the matter to a lower state court, which "shall adopt constitutional maps with all due haste."

It will "likely be necessary," DiFiore wrote, to move the congressional and state Senate primary elections from June 28 to August, to give time for the maps to be redrawn and for candidates and elections officials to adapt their plans.

The state elections board said it didn't anticipate that the primary date would change for other races, including governor and assembly.

Judge halts prep for end of US asylum limit

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — A federal judge ordered a two-week halt Wednesday on the phasing out of pandemic-related restrictions on seeking asylum — and raised doubts about the Biden administration's plan to fully lift those restrictions on May 23.

For now, the decision is only a temporary setback for the administration. But the judge staked out a position that is highly sympathetic with Louisiana, Arizona and 19 other states that sued to preserve so-called Title 42 authority, which denies migrants a chance at asylum on grounds of preventing the spread of COVID-19.

“(The states) have established a substantial threat of immediate and irreparable injury resulting from the early implementation of Title 42, including unrecoverable costs on healthcare, law enforce-

ment, detention, education, and other services for migrants,” wrote U.S. District Judge Robert Summerhays in Lafayette, La.

Summerhays, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump, said states were likely to succeed with their argument that the administration failed to adhere to federal procedures when it announced April 1 that it was ending Title 42 authority.

The judge has scheduled a critical hearing on May 13 in Lafayette to hear arguments on whether to block Title 42 from ending as planned 10 days later.

Texas filed a similar lawsuit Friday in federal court.

The decision to end Title 42 authority was made by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It has come under growing criticism from elected officials in Biden's Democratic Party who contend the adminis-

tration is unprepared for an anticipated increase in asylum-seekers. The Justice Department declined to comment on the order but the administration has said it will comply, while contending it will hamper preparations for Title 42 to end on May 23.

About 14% of single adults from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were processed under immigration laws during a seven-day period ending last Thursday. That's up from only 5% in March, according to government figures.

Summerhays' order requires the Homeland Security Department to “return to policies and practices in place” before it announced plans to end Title 42 and to submit weekly reports that demonstrate it is acting “in good faith.”

Migrants have been expelled more than 1.8 million times under the rule invoked in March 2020 by

the Trump administration. Migrants were stopped more than 221,000 times at the Mexico border in March, a 22-year-high that has raised concerns about the government's ability to handle larger numbers when Title 42 is lifted.

Advocates for asylum-seekers say the restrictions endanger people fleeing persecution back home and violates rights to seek protection under U.S. law and international treaty. As the CDC acknowledged, the public health justification for the order has weakened as the threat of COVID-19 has waned.

At two hearings Wednesday, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas sought to defend the administration's handling of an increase of migrants at the Southwest border and its plans to deal with the prospect of more with the potential end of Title 42.

Dem: Biden suggests he will ease student loan burden

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden has signaled he might forgive some student loan debt and further extend the federal moratorium on repayments, a lawmaker who discussed the issue with him said Wednesday.

The White House was notably more measured about Biden's stance, but such moves would be a boon to many of the 43 million Americans carrying student loans worth \$1.6 trillion, according to federal figures. It would also be a win for Democratic and progressive leaders who have long pressed Biden to carry through on a 2020 campaign promise that as president he would “immediately” cancel up to \$10,000 in debt per student.

Biden's remarks came during a wide-ranging Monday meeting at the White House with seven members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, according

to Rep. Tony Cardenas, D-Calif., who was among them. He said in an interview Wednesday that he asked Biden to extend the moratorium on debt payments through this year, instead of letting it expire Aug. 31.

“He immediately smiled and said, ‘I’ve extended in the past, and you’re going to like what I do next,’” Cardenas said. “So I said, ‘OK, wonderful. Next question.’”

Cardenas said he then asked about forgiving at least \$10,000 in debt for each student, which he said the caucus believes Biden can do using executive powers. That would preclude the need for legislation from Congress, where there is Republican opposition.

“He said, ‘Yes, I’m exploring doing something on that front,’” said Cardenas. “And he also smiled and said, ‘You’re going to like what I do on that as well.’”

S. Korean activist resumes flying anti-North leaflets

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — A South Korean activist said Thursday he launched a million propaganda leaflets by balloon into North Korea this week, in his first such campaign while standing trial for past leafletting under a contentious new law that criminalizes such actions.

The law that took effect in March 2021 and punishes anti-Pyongyang leafletters with up to three years in prison has been hotly debated in South Korea, with critics saying Seoul's liberal government was sacrificing freedom of speech to improve ties with rival North Korea.

Park Sang-hak, a North Korean defector-turned-activist, said he resumed his leafletting campaign after halting such activities for a year during a police investigation and court trial for sending balloons across the border in April last year. The trial is continuing.

On Monday and Tuesday, his group floated 20 balloons carrying leaflets critical of North Korea's nuclear program and the Kim family's hereditary rule across the border, Park said.

Park said the balloons also contained pictures of South Korea's incoming conservative president, Yoon Suk-yeol, to show North Koreans the difference between the South's election system and the North's father-to-son successions. He said small books and USB sticks, which carry information about South Korea's economic and cultural development, were also put in the balloons.

“North Korea has deceived us. It once said it would scrap its nukes but its leader Kim Jong Un and (his sister) Kim Yo Jong are now threatening to launch preemptive nuclear strikes on South Korea and the international community. I want to condemn such acts,” Park said by phone.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Plane crashes in stunt; pilot parachutes to safety

AZ ELOY — Authorities are investigating the crash of one of two planes that were part of a Red Bull stunt in which two pilots attempted to swap planes in midair over the Arizona desert.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the pilot of the plane that spun out of control and crashed ended up landing safely by parachute. The other pilot regained control of the second plane and landed safely. Eloy is about 65 miles southeast of downtown Phoenix.

Man gets 7 months, fine for trafficking turtles

FL MIAMI — A Florida man was sentenced to seven months in federal prison followed by a year of home confinement for his part in a scheme to smuggle illegally harvested Florida turtles to China, Japan and other places.

Michael Van Nostrand, 55, of Davie, pleaded guilty in November to conspiring to illegally traffic wildlife. Van Nostrand also must pay \$100,000 to a congressionally authorized fund that pays for the care, treatment and rehabilitation of wildlife. Van Nostrand's company, Strictly Reptiles Inc., must pay \$150,000 to the same fund.

According to court documents, Van Nostrand and others established a network of "collectors" who searched the Florida wilds for certain freshwater turtle specimens, including the three-stripe mud turtle, from April 2017 through April 2019. The collectors and Van Nostrand then falsely labeled the turtles as having been bred in

captivity, rather than caught in the wild, prosecutors said.

Worker arrested after hot grease thrown on patron

AL BIRMINGHAM — An Alabama fast-food worker who allegedly threw hot grease on a customer during a dispute over service in the drive-thru line, causing severe burns, was charged with assault, police said.

The 50-year-old woman was charged following a confrontation at an Arby's restaurant in suburban Birmingham, according to a statement from the Hueytown Police Department.

The victim, who suffered second-degree burns over a large part of her body, filed a civil lawsuit seeking an unspecified amount of money from the worker, Arby's and Alabama-based companies that operate the restaurant, court documents show.

Arby's said it fired the employee.

Person wounded during police training drill

MI TAYLOR — A person taking part in a suburban Detroit police training program suffered a gunshot wound and was hospitalized, Michigan State Police said.

The shooting happened during the exercise at a Taylor city park for the city's volunteer auxiliary police program.

The civilian was a "role player" in a training scenario when an auxiliary officer in the training fired a shot from his service revolver, hitting the person in the abdomen, state police said. The person was taken to a hospital in stable condition.

Tourists need reservation to visit iconic site

HI HONOLULU — Out-of-state visitors will soon need reservations to visit one of Hawaii's most recognizable natural sites.

State land officials announced the new policy for Diamond Head State Monument will take effect May 12. The iconic ancient volcanic crater stands at the end of Waikiki Beach on Oahu.

Non-residents must also make reservations for Haena State Park on Kauai and Waianapanapa State Park on Maui. Reservations are required at certain times to visit Haleakala National Park on Maui. State officials said the new rules are needed to control damage to the environment and infrastructure, congestion on hiking trails, heavy vehicle traffic and illegal parking.

Trooper uninjured when car hit by drunken driver

ND MANDAN — Authorities said a North Dakota Highway Patrol trooper manning road closure gates for Interstate 94 in Mandan avoided injury when his squad car was struck by a drunken driver.

The patrol said the incident happened after the interstate was shut down because of a blizzard. The trooper was facing eastbound in the westbound lane with his emergency lights activated when a vehicle approached at high speed.

The trooper was able to move his car to avoid a head-on collision and was side-swiped by the vehicle, which continued on to strike the road-closure gates. The vehicle's driver, who was

not injured, was arrested for driving under the influence.

Fire destroys synagogue on last day of Passover

KY LOUISVILLE — A Kentucky arson unit is investigating after a fire destroyed a synagogue and worship center on the final day of Passover.

Rabbi Avrohom Litvin is regional director of Chabad of Kentucky. He said the blaze started as a grease fire in a building adjoining Louisville's Chabad House, WDRB-TV reported. Firefighters brought it under control, but it apparently rekindled around noon and the Chabad House caught fire.

Litvin said the Chabad House was quickly engulfed in flames and the roof collapsed. No one was injured, but the sanctuary and nearly everything in it were destroyed, Litvin said.

Ground broken on largest urban wildlife crossing

CA AGOURA HILLS — Construction has begun on what is billed as the world's largest wildlife crossing for mountain lions and other animals caught in Southern California's urban sprawl.

Officials held a ceremony to mark the start of construction of a \$90 million bridge over a freeway and feeder road that is about 35 miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles. The bridge will stretch 200 feet over U.S. 101 to give big cats, coyotes, deer and other wildlife a safe path to the nearby Santa Monica Mountains. It is expected to be completed by early 2025.

— From wire reports

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Bucks advance with Game 5 win over Bulls

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — The defending NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks continue to produce in the postseason even without key performers.

The Chicago Bulls simply don't have that kind of depth or playoff savvy.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 33 points and nine rebounds and the Bucks routed the Bulls 116-100 on Wednesday night to finish off their first-round series in five games.

Milwaukee won the last three games by an average of 23.3 points despite playing without Khris Middleton, the All-Star who sprained the medial collateral ligament in his left knee during the fourth quarter of Game 2.

The third-seeded Bucks advanced to face second-seeded

Boston in the Eastern Conference semifinals, with Game 1 on Sunday in Boston. The Celtics swept Brooklyn.

"After Game 2, we kind of talked about how we know what the deal was," Antetokounmpo said. "The team knew what the deal was. We knew what we had to do. We had to be desperate. We had to go out there and compete at a high level, pay attention to detail as much as possible, help one another defensively. We've got to do it as a team."

The Bucks have been through this before. They won their first title since 1971 last season despite losing Antetokounmpo for the last two games of the Eastern Conference finals due to a hyperextended knee.

"We've been talking about the depth of the roster, the quality of the roster a lot this season," Mil-

waukee coach Mike Budenholzer said. "Other guys have gotten opportunities and played well. Our defense has tightened up, and we've leaned hard on that these three games. We've got depth. We've got a good group."

Antetokounmpo appeared to get his left wrist treated during the first half, but it clearly didn't limit his effectiveness. Antetokounmpo said afterward he felt "great," and Budenholzer added that "we think he's fine."

While the Bucks thrived without Middleton, Chicago didn't handle the loss of key players quite as well.

The Bulls played without the starting backcourt they used for the first four games because two-time All-Star Zach LaVine was in health and safety protocols and Alex Caruso was in

concussion protocol. Without them on the floor, Chicago fell behind by as many as 29 points in the first half.

"This was a lot of our guys' first rodeo, just understanding what it's like to compete in a playoff series," DeMar DeRozan said. "There's so much you can learn from that experience, especially going against the defending champs."

Milwaukee focused on containing DeRozan, who had scored 41 points in the Bulls' Game 2 victory. DeRozan was held to 11 points Wednesday while shooting 5 of 10, though he also had seven assists.

"That was the game plan — make him see a lot of bodies and force everybody else to beat us," Bucks guard Wesley Matthews said.

Curry, Warriors hold off Jokic, eliminate Nuggets

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Back in the starting lineup at last, Stephen Curry took over late and brought his team back just as he has so many times during Golden State's deep postseason runs.

Curry scored 30 points in his return to the starting five and the Warriors beat Nikola Jokic and the Denver Nuggets 102-98 on Wednesday night to win their first-round series in five games.

It has been three years since Curry carried Golden State on a big playoff stage — like those five straight trips to the NBA Finals — but he's certainly still got it.

"Tonight was just a weird feeling because we hadn't been there in a while," said Curry, last season's NBA scoring champion. "We wanted it so bad, kind of made it a lot more difficult on ourselves. But we still remember how to do it, which is a good feeling."

Curry scored 11 points during

the fourth quarter after the Warriors began the final 12 minutes down by eight. The two-time MVP converted a three-point play with 1:33 left and scored again with 29 seconds remaining to help send Golden State on to the second round in the Western Conference.

"I was a witness, letting him cook, create plays for him. Try to get him open looks and after that, you know what he does," Warriors guard Gary Payton II said.

Jokic scored 12 of his 30 points in the final 3:46 and finished with 19 rebounds and eight assists.

Golden State — thriving with the support from a raucous home crowd in its first close-out playoff game at Chase Center — advanced to play the winner of the Memphis-Minnesota series led 3-2 by the Grizzlies heading into Game 6 on Friday in Minneapolis. The Grizzlies eliminated the Warriors in the play-

in round last year.

Jokic tied it at 90 on an 18-footer with 2:26 remaining before Payton made a layup moments later. Payton also hit a go-ahead three-pointer from the corner in front of Denver's bench with 6:57 left to put Golden State up 86-84. He finished with 15 points.

"He was incredible, both ends of the floor, big shots, big plays," teammate Draymond Green said.

Payton found his dad, former NBA star Gary Payton, after the final buzzer just for a quick hello.

Jokic converted two free throws with 3:46 left after Green fouled the Nuggets' 7-footer. Jokic wound up 12-for-18 from the floor. DeMarcus Cousins contributed 19 points off the bench against his former Warriors team, and Aaron Gordon added 15 points and nine rebounds.

Jokic had an answer, time and

again.

"That guy is a warrior. I just don't understand the people that find a way to criticize Nikola Jokic. Is he perfect? No, I'm not saying he is," Denver coach Michael Malone said. "But the guy is the definition of a warrior — competitive, consistent. He impacts the game in so many ways. Hell of a season. Hopefully he'll win the MVP again. I think rightfully he deserves it."

The Nuggets made seven of their first 10 shots after halftime to turn a 48-all tie into a 66-56 lead. Curry's three with 4:06 left pulled the Warriors to 68-67.

Curry shot 10-for-22 with five three-pointers. He came off the bench in the first four games, with the series beginning one month from when he sprained a ligament in his left foot March 16 against Boston.

"Thankfully I got through pretty much unscathed," Curry said, happy to have a few days off to rest the foot.

Frustrated Mets brawl with Cardinals

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — The New York Mets' hit-by-pitch frustrations boiled over Wednesday when reliever Yoan López threw a pitch near Nolan Arenado's head, sparking a benches-clearing brawl that led to Arenado's ejection in the St. Louis Cardinals' 10-5 victory.

Mets hitter J.D. Davis left in the top of the eighth inning after being hit in the left foot by a pitch from Génesis Cabrera, the major league-leading 19th hit-by-pitch for New York this season — including three Tuesday night against the Cardinals.

The Mets appeared to retaliate a half-inning later against Arenado, who reached four times and drove in three runs. López zipped a 94 mph fastball near his head, and Arenado began yelling for López to "do it again." The benches and bullpens cleared, and the teams pushed and shoved near home plate.

"I went a little bit inside, that's part of the

game," López said via an interpreter. "That one kind of got away from me."

First-year St. Louis manager Oliver Marmol said Arenado's reaction was justified.

"When you come up top like that and jeopardize someone's career and life, yeah, I take exception to that," Marmol said. "And I don't think anyone in the big leagues appreciates getting thrown up top."

Cardinals first base coach Stubby Clapp seemed to tackle New York star Pete Alonso near the center of the melee. St. Louis veteran Adam Wainwright later walked over to Alonso to ask if he was all right.

"Actually, Génesis Cabrera grabbed me by the back of the collar and then then he just ripped down and then the coach just kind of jumped on me and I thought that was kind of cheap going from behind," Alonso said. "I mean, if you want to hold me back, if you want to restrain me, go at me like a man."

Clapp was ejected along with Arenado, but López remained in the game.

Crew Chief Mark Wegner told a pool reporter that Arenado was ejected for charging the mound and Clapp was ejected for "his overaggressive actions" during the fracas.

"I did not believe the pitch was intentional, and both of them, I didn't see any actions that would result in ejection," Wegner said, referring to why he did not eject López or Alonso. "But we're going to watch the videos and write up a report and Major League Baseball will look at it all and see if they see something that we didn't see."

López was high-fived by several teammates when he returned to the dugout after the inning, including Alonso, who was hit by a pitch in the head Tuesday.

"I knew he was uncomfortable from that pitch and he got upset," López said of Arenado. "At that point, I was happy with that because I knew I got him out of his comfort zone. They took him out of the game because of it."

Bogaerts has 4 hits as Red Sox beat Blue Jays

Associated Press

TORONTO — Xander Bogaerts had four hits and the Boston Red Sox celebrated the return of manager Alex Cora by snapping a four-game losing streak with a 7-1 defeat of the Toronto Blue Jays on Wednesday.

Cora rejoined the Red Sox after missing the past six games because of COVID-19. Boston went 1-5 under bench coach Will Venable while Cora was away.

Bogaerts went 4-for-4 with four singles and a walk. Michael Wacha (2-0) earned his second straight win, allowing one run and four hits in six innings.

Angels 9, Guardians 5: Taylor Ward hit a grand slam and finished a single shy of the cycle, Shohei Ohtani showed off his two-way prowess and host Los Angeles romped past Cleveland for its fourth consecutive victory.

Mike Trout added two RBI doubles and extended his hitting streak to 10 games for the

Angels.

White Sox 7, Royals 3: Andrew Vaughn hit a tiebreaking three-run homer in the seventh inning, and host Chicago stopped an eight-game slide.

The winning rally for the White Sox started when Danny Mendick and Tim Anderson hit consecutive two-out singles off Collin Snider (2-1). Scott Barlow then came in, and Vaughn drove his first pitch into the home bullpen in left.

Cubs 6, Braves 3 (10): Willson Contreras hit a run-scoring double in the 10th inning, Patrick Wisdom followed with a two-run homer and Chicago won at Atlanta.

Contreras lined his double to the left field wall off Tyler Matzek (0-1) to drive in automatic runner Ian Happ. After Frank Schwindel struck out, Wisdom launched a drive into the left-center seats for his third homer of the season.

Diamondbacks 3, Dodgers 1: Zac Gallen pitched six scoreless innings, and host Arizona

won as it scored two runs after Max Muncy's throwing error in the eighth inning.

Gallen allowed two hits and left with a 1-0 lead, but Ian Kennedy (2-1) gave up Trea Turner's run-scoring single in the eighth inning.

Yankees 5, Orioles 2: Slugger Giancarlo Stanton hit his 350th career homer and lifted a go-ahead sacrifice fly in the sixth inning to lead host New York.

Joey Gallo also homered for the Yankees for the second straight night, his third straight game with an RBI after going his first 14 games without one.

Athletics 1, Giants 0: Paul Blackburn and five relievers combined on a three-hitter, making Chad Pinder's leadoff homer stand up as visiting Oakland snapped San Francisco's five-game winning streak.

Phillies 7, Rockies 3: Bryce Harper had three hits and Odbel Herrera homered, leading host Philadelphia to its third straight win over Colorado.

Marlins 2, Nationals 1: Miami's Pablo López lowered his majors-best ERA to 0.39 by throwing six shutout innings in a win at Washington.

Rays 3, Mariners 2: Drew Rasmussen struck out nine in six shutout innings, and host Tampa Bay stopped Seattle's four-game winning streak.

Brewers 3, Pirates 1: Tyrone Taylor hit a tiebreaking RBI single in the seventh, leading Milwaukee to a win at Pittsburgh.

Padres 8, Reds 5: Jurickson Profar hit a three-run homer for San Diego, and MacKenzie Gore struck out 10 over five innings in a win at Cincinnati.

Twins 5, Tigers 0: Joe Ryan threw seven innings of one-hit ball and Max Kepler stayed hot with a pair of home runs as host Minnesota won its sixth game in a row.

Astros 4, Rangers 3: Kyle Tucker hit a three-run double in the fifth inning and Cristian Javier won his first start of the season as Houston won at Texas.

Canadiens halt nine-game losing streak

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jeff Petry scored his second goal of the game in the final minute of the third period and Sam Montembeault made 24 saves as the Montreal Canadiens beat the playoff-bound New York Rangers 4-3 Wednesday night to snap a nine-game losing streak.

Petry scored his sixth of the season with 31 seconds remaining to put Montreal ahead for the fourth time and forge a victory for Martin St. Louis, the former Ranger who took over behind the Canadiens' bench in early February coaching for the first time at Madison Square Garden.

Ryan Poehling and Mike Hoffman also scored for Montreal, which had lost nine straight in regulation since a 7-4 win at New Jersey on April 7.

Ryan Reaves, Frank Vatrano and Ryan Strome scored for the Rangers, and Barclay Goodrow had two assists. Alexandar Georgiev finished with 20 saves.

Jets 4, Flyers 0: Eric Comrie

made 35 saves for his first NHL shutout and host Winnipeg beat Philadelphia.

Kyle Connor had an empty-net goal and two assists to push his season points total to 92, the most since the franchise moved from Atlanta to Winnipeg in 2011. Captain Blake Wheeler had 91 points in 2017-18 and 2018-19.

Nikolaj Ehlers and Wheeler each had a goal and an assist, and Pierre-Luc Dubois scored his career-high 28th goal.

Playing his fifth NHL game and second straight, Philadelphia's Felix Sandstrom stopped 23 shots. The Flyers have been shut out six times this season.

Blackhawks 4, Golden Knights 3 (SO): Tyler Johnson scored in the seventh round of the shootout, and host Chicago eliminated Vegas from the playoff race.

Johnson scored on a wrist shot seconds before Dallas, which needed a point to eliminate the Golden Knights regardless, went into overtime at home against Arizona. John-

son's goal was the only one in 14 attempts in the tiebreaker. Taylor Raddysh had two goals and Caleb Jones also scored for the Blackhawks, who won their second straight. Kevin Lankinen stopped 37 shots.

Michael Amadio, Alec Martinez and Max Pacioretty scored for Vegas, and Chandler Stephenson had three assists. Logan Thompson also had 37 saves.

Coyotes 4, Stars 3 (OT): Travis Boyd scored 1:43 into overtime and visiting Arizona beat playoff-bound Dallas.

Anton Stralman, Shayne Gostisbehere and Barrett Hayton scored in regulation for the Coyotes, and Harri Sateri had 26 saves.

Jani Hakanpaa, Tyler Seguin and Miro Heiskanen scored to give Dallas a 3-0 lead 3 minutes into the second period. Joe Pavelski had two assists to reach a career high in points at age 37. Scott Wedgewood finished with 33 saves.

The Stars wrapped up the Western Conference's final

playoff spot when Vegas lost in a shootout to Chicago just before this game went to overtime. After a seven-round shootout victory at home over Vegas on Tuesday night, the Stars were only one point away from earning a wild card.

Kings 5, Kraken 3: Lias Andersson's first goal of the season for visiting Los Angeles snapped a tie early in the third period.

Gabriel Vilardi, Phillip Daulton, Trevor Moore and Andreas Athanasiou also scored for the playoff-bound Kings. Jonathan Quick made 36 saves to get his fifth straight win.

Jared McCann, Ryan Donato, and Jordan Eberle scored for Seattle, which lost its third in a row. Philipp Grubauer finished with 21 saves.

On the go-ahead goal, Brendan Lemieux picked up a loose puck behind the Seattle net, and sent it out in front of Andersson, who was rushing toward the net and sent it past Grubauer to give the Kings a 4-3 lead at 2:39 of the third.

Sanders shines light on HBCU's 'draftable guys'

Associated Press

Deion Sanders did his part to make sure NFL teams don't overlook players from historically Black colleges in this weekend's draft.

The Jackson State coach and Pro Football Hall of Famer released his "Prime Prospects" on Monday, featuring 16 players from 12 HBCUs. Last year, not one HBCU player was drafted.

"My prediction is five to seven, maybe 10 guys that should be drafted," Sanders told The Associated Press. "We have at least 15, 16 truly draftable guys, more that I feel like probably are going to get drafted. Exposure helps. What's going on and what's translating today in HBCU football is helping tremendously. We're getting a lot of

shine."

Neon Deion has helped provide a spotlight on HBCU players since leaving his analyst duties at NFL Network and taking over at Jackson State in 2020. Sanders was the Southwestern Athletic Conference Coach of the Year in 2021 after leading the Tigers to an 11-2 record.

"I'm not thinking about legacy. I don't care about that. I care about winning games and changing lives and provoking change in whatever I touch," Sanders said. "Eddie George has done a wonderful job at Tennessee State. Hue Jackson coming into Grambling, raising the bar there is going to be tremendous. Willie Simmons at (Florida A&M) and some of the other notable persons, Coach (Fred

McNair at Alcorn, are some guys that can really coach the game and they're able to take this thing to another level.

"We're doing a better job of the exposure," Sanders said. "We're often overlooked and underexposed, which is something that we're trying to tackle right now. ... We're trying our best to bring light to all those. It's just absurd to me. I know pro football. I worked at the NFL Network for almost two decades and played for 14 years. I know what a professional looks like, and there are a multitude of these young men that can play the game at the next level, if given the opportunity.

"When you don't see a player visually, it's hard to understand that he's equipped and he could

participate. If you didn't see the players from Alabama on television every darn week, I'm pretty sure the number that they're circulating into the NFL would cease a bit. You never see these kids and you don't understand what they're capable of, and I'm telling you they can play this game."

The inaugural Legacy Bowl held in February in New Orleans gave top football players from HBCU schools a new level of exposure to pro scouts and executives. But Sanders has another idea for a Bowl game.

"I would love to namesake an All-Star Game that HBCUs play against all the other schools," Sanders said. "I don't like when you just have an HBCU game we play against each other."