

SIGAR: US aid likely in Taliban hands

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The leader of the U.S. government's watchdog for the war in Afghanistan warned Congress on Wednesday that he cannot guarantee the U.S. is not funding the Taliban through billions of dollars in humanitarian aid.

John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, made the stark assessment at the first of a series of Republican-led House Oversight Committee hearings on the U.S. mission in the country.

"As I sit here today, I cannot assure this committee or the American taxpayer we are not currently funding the Taliban," he said. "Nor can I assure you that the Taliban are not diverting the money we are sending from the intended recipients, which are the poor Afghan people."

American troops withdrew from the country in August 2021 after 20 years of war there, but the U.S. earmarked \$2 billion to continue support for women's rights, health care, food assistance, agriculture, education, and other humanitarian and economic needs. Another \$3.5 billion is in a Switzer-

land-based Afghan Fund created by the U.S. last year to hold frozen Afghan central bank assets.

The hearing called Wednesday featured inspectors general from the Defense Department, State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development and the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, and is part of a campaign by Republicans newly in control of the House to scrutinize the rapid fall of the Afghan government to the Taliban and the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops.

"Since the Afghan government's collapse, the Oversight Committee has wanted answers from the Biden administration, and we will get them," said Rep. James Comer, R-Ky, the chairman of the committee.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee focused its first hearing on the Afghanistan War in March on the deadly evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul that led to the deaths of 13 U.S. service members in a suicide bombing on Aug. 26, 2021. Members of the House Oversight Committee on Wednesday largely fixated on accountability for the estimated \$8 bil-

lion in taxpayer funds sent to Afghanistan and spent on Afghan refugees since October 2021.

"These are billions and billions out of the U.S. Treasury that if they're not going to do what they ought to do, could be better spent at home," said Rep. Kweisi Mfume, D-Md. "They should be getting into Afghanistan to protect what we see going on with girls and women there, the tremendous suppression of human rights and if that's not occurring then we really do, ladies and gentlemen, have a big task before us in making sure that that takes place."

Sopko said his office has gathered information indicating the Taliban already are diverting funds and criticized international institutions such as the United Nations and World Bank for weak oversight and little transparency.

The World Bank reported last year that 70% of households in Afghanistan cannot meet their basic needs, including food. Women and girls are particularly affected because strict Taliban rules prohibit them from traveling without a male companion and accessing Western aid offices without female staff.

Investigators say ships' near crash was preventable

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — The near-collision of two Navy warships in San Diego Bay in November was a preventable incident caused by numerous failures, including poor communication on and between the vessels, according to an investigation by the Navy.

The partially redacted report also says that evasive action taken by junior officers enabled the guided-missile destroyer USS Momsen and the dock landing ship USS Harpers Ferry to avoid crashing into one another in the narrowest part of the harbor.

The bay is home to more than 50 Navy ships, including two aircraft carriers, making it the largest naval installation on the West Coast and one of the largest in the world.

If Momsen and Harpers Ferry had collided, it might have tied up the main channel of

the harbor. But the ships made sharp, last-minute turns, slipping past each other, leading the Navy to decide against taking punitive action.

"This preliminary inquiry is an opportunity to critically assess processes and implement lessons learned to ensure this type of incident does not occur again," Vice Adm. Roy Kitchener, commander of Naval Surface Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet, said in the report.

The investigation was completed months ago. But it only became public last week when it was published by the U.S. Naval Institute, an independent interest group based in Annapolis, Md.

The report focuses on two of the most valuable types of ships operated by the Navy.

The Momsen is a 510-foot Arleigh Burke-class destroyer that's used to help protect

aircraft carrier groups and is capable of launching long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles.

Harpers Ferry is a 610-foot, first-of-her-class dock landing ship that supports amphibious operations and is capable of carrying upward of 500 Marines as well as landing craft. At the time of the incident, Momsen was entering the harbor and Harpers Ferry was leaving. They started to enter a collision course as Harpers Ferry was rounding Naval Air Station North Island near Shelter Island.

The ships were "projected to meet in the most dangerous portion of the San Diego harbor narrow channel, an area San Diego pilots call the Triangle, where pilots attempt to avoid meeting situations," says the report, whose redactions make it impossible to know precisely what happened.

US Army conducts artillery strategy summit with allies

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army held an “artillery summit” this week with allies in Poland, where commanders strategized how to better incorporate a much-lauded rocket system into their fighting formations.

V Corps, at a Polish base in the north-central city of Torun, brought senior leaders together for the European High Mobility Artillery Rocket System Initiative.

The Corps’ headquarters described it as a “pathbreaking” effort to enhance how allies fight together with long-range firepower.

“We see this as the underpinning of an expanded ability to fight with joint fires in support of large-scale combat operations,” V Corps commander Lt. Gen. John S. Kolasheski said in a statement Wednesday.

The HIMARS system has received added attention ever since Ukraine put the weaponry to effective use against Russian units, a factor that helped Ukraine’s smaller military push back a larger Russian force.

The three-day summit in Poland, which concluded Wednesday, marked a milestone for V Corps’ new HIMARS initiative, which

will eventually bring allied troops together with American units for an apprenticeship program.

The effort focuses on countries that either have HIMARS or are in the pipeline to acquire the system.

“We take their officers and noncommissioned officers and embed them into our HIMARS or [Multiple Launch Rocket System] battalions, where they get an opportunity to learn what it takes to effectively man, train, maintain and sustain the system,” Kolasheski said.

The U.S. military over the past year has also made the HIMARS system a focal point during training events across Europe, showcasing how the rockets can be boarded on military aircraft for quick reaction operations.

Col. Wil Hsu, commander of the 41st Field Artillery Brigade, based out of Grafenwoehr, said the system enables commanders to reach targets “that are really far out.”

“The HIMARS can go on C-130 and C-17 (cargo planes) and be transported around the European theater and make a big impact,” he said in the statement.

Commanders: US can handle China, Russia

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Commanders of U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific region said Thursday that their work has not been diminished by U.S. support for Ukraine, rebuking Republican factions who have insisted the United States cannot simultaneously handle threats from Russia and China.

Adm. John Aquilino, who leads U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and Army Gen. Paul LaCamera, commander of American troops in South Korea, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that they have not been affected by more than a year of U.S. armament shipments to Ukraine as it battles Russia’s invasion and said they remain equipped to address Chinese aggression.

“The U.S. is the only global force capable of managing multiple threats,” Aquilino said. “I haven’t been impacted at this point as it applies to my deterrence mission, so I do believe we can do both. I believe we have to do both to maintain the peace.”

Aquilino’s appraisal of readiness came at the prompting of Sen. Roger Wicker, of Mississippi, the top Republican on the committee, who noted the opposition of some lawmakers to continued aid for Ukraine.

Most Republicans in Congress have said they stand firm in their support for the war-battered country, though some hard-liners in the party are questioning the prudence of spending resources on Ukraine while China grows stronger and eyes a possible invasion of the neighboring island of Taiwan.

Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., a leader of Senate Republicans’ isolationist wing, has called for a “nationalist” foreign policy that scraps aid to Ukraine in favor of total focus on China.

Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, reiterated her support for Ukraine on Thursday while acknowledging there are ongoing discussions in the Senate and House about the tradeoffs of maintaining military assistance to the country.

“There are those who say we cannot complete both missions, that we shouldn’t be helping in Ukraine. I agree with you, Admiral Aquilino, I agree with you, General LaCamera, that we must maintain our assistance to Ukraine,” she said.

Official says DOD has found ‘no credible evidence’ of UFO activity

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The official charged by the Pentagon to track the mystery surrounding UFOs told lawmakers Wednesday that there is nothing unusual to see at this time.

“I state clearly for the record that in our research, AARO has found no credible evidence thus far of extraterrestrial activity, off-world technology or objects that defy the known law of physics,” Sean Kirkpatrick, the director of the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office, told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee’s subpanel on emerging threats and capabilities.

The hearing was only the second one

held in Congress on the phenomenon in more than 50 years.

The Defense Department refers to the idea of UFOs as unidentified anomalous phenomena, or UAP. Kirkpatrick said 650 UAP cases are being reviewed at this time. He provided examples during his testimony showing two cases, one resolved and one unresolved, of how the department goes through data to try and explain reports.

In the examples, both images were captured from an MQ-9 Reaper drone of what looked like aircraft.

“Time and time again, UAPs are resolved into something already explainable,” Kirkpatrick said.

Yellen calls for better US-China ties

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Thursday that the United States and China “can and need to find a way to live together” in spite of their strained relations, which have worsened in recent months.

In a speech at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, Yellen called for “cooperation on the urgent global challenges of our day” between the countries for the sake of maintaining global stability, while supporting economic restrictions on China to advance U.S. national security interests.

She called out China’s business and human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet while striking a conciliatory tone about

how there is “a future in which both countries share in and drive global economic progress.”

“We seek a healthy economic relationship with China: one that fosters growth and innovation in both countries,” Yellen said.

Relations between the two countries have become increasingly strained after the discovery of a Chinese surveillance balloon in U.S. airspace and since the Communist nation has grown its ties with Russia despite its continued invasion into Ukraine.

“A growing China that plays by international rules is good for the United States and the world,” Yellen said. “Both countries can benefit from healthy competition in the economic sphere. But healthy economic competition — where both sides benefit — is only

sustainable if that competition is fair.”

Though China has maintained that it is neutral in the conflict, stating that it won’t sell weapons to either side in the war, it recently held joint military drills with Russia.

“China’s no limits partnership and support for Russia is a worrisome indication that it is not serious about ending the war,” she said. “It is essential that China and other countries do not provide Russia with material support or assistance with sanctions evasion.”

Yellen, in her speech, said U.S. national security “is of paramount importance” in the relationship with the People’s Republic of China. She said the U.S. is “considering a program to restrict certain U.S. outbound investments in specific sensitive technologies with significant national security implications.”

SpaceX’s giant rocket explodes minutes after launch

Associated Press

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, Texas — SpaceX’s giant new rocket exploded minutes after blasting off on its first test flight Thursday and crashed into the Gulf of Mexico.

Elon Musk’s company was aiming to send the nearly 400-foot Starship rocket on a round-the-world trip from the southern tip of Texas, near the Mexican border. It carried no people or satellites.

Images showed several of the 33 main engines were not firing as the rocket climbed from the launch pad, reaching as high as 24 miles. There was no immediate word from

SpaceX on how many engines failed to ignite or shut down prematurely.

The booster was supposed to peel away from the spacecraft minutes after liftoff, but that didn’t happen. The rocket began to tumble and then exploded four minutes into the flight, plummeting into the gulf.

After separating, the spacecraft was supposed to attempt to circle the world before crashing into the Pacific near Hawaii.

Throng of spectators watched from South Padre Island, several miles away from the Boca Chica Beach launch site, which was off limits. As it lifted off, the

crowd screamed: “Go, baby, go!”

Musk, in a tweet, called it “an exciting test launch of Starship! Learned a lot for next test launch in a few months.”

In the weeks leading up to the flight, Musk gave 50-50 odds that the spacecraft would reach orbit.

“You never know exactly what’s going to happen,” said SpaceX livestream commentator and engineer John Insprucker. “But as we promised, excitement is guaranteed and Starship gave us a rather spectacular end.”

The company plans to use Starship to send people and cargo to the moon.

McCarthy unveils \$1.5T debt bill, pushes toward vote

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy unveiled a sweeping package Wednesday that would raise the nation’s debt limit by \$1.5 trillion into next year while imposing a long list of Republican priorities, including new spending caps, work requirements for recipients of government aid and others that are sure to be nonstarters for the White House.

McCarthy announced that House Republicans were introducing their legislation just as President Joe Biden was taking the stage at a union hall in Maryland to warn of a looming fiscal crisis if Congress fails to take action to raise the debt ceiling, now at \$31 trillion, to keep paying the nation’s bills.

The 320-page “Limit, Save, Grow Act” unleashed by House Republicans has almost no chance of becoming law, but McCarthy is using the legislation as a strategic move, a starting point to draw Biden into negotiations that the White House has, so far, been unwilling to have over the debt crisis.

“President Biden is skipping town to deliver a speech in Maryland rather than sitting down to address the debt ceiling,” McCarthy, R-Calif., said in a speech on the House floor.

The package was swiftly embraced by leading Republicans as McCarthy has worked intently to unite his often fractious majority. A vote in the House is expected next week, in hopes of pressuring Biden to

respond. Democrats in the House and Senate are almost certain to be opposed.

Among the bill’s highlights:

■ It would raise the debt ceiling by \$1.5 trillion into next year, putting the issue squarely into the middle of the next presidential election.

■ It would roll back spending to 2022 levels, and impose a 1% cap on future federal spending for the next decade, with likely exceptions for some defense accounts. It claws back unspent COVID-19 funds.

■ Republicans want to rescind some of Biden’s top policy achievements, including his executive action that provided student loan payment relief for millions of college students, a Democratic party priority.

NATO head: Ukraine belongs in alliance one day

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg defiantly declared Thursday that Ukraine deserves to join the military alliance and pledged continuing support for the country on his first visit to Kyiv since Russia's invasion just over a year ago.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged Stoltenberg, who has been instrumental in marshaling support from NATO's members, to push for even more from them, including warplanes, artillery and armored equipment.

The Kremlin has given various justifications for going to war, but repeated Thursday that preventing Ukraine from joining NATO was a key goal behind its invasion, arguing that Kyiv's membership in the alliance would pose an existential threat to Russia.

NATO leaders said in 2008 that Ukraine would join the alliance one day, and Stoltenberg has re-

peated that promise throughout the course of the war — though the organization has established no pathway or timetable for membership.

"Let me be clear, Ukraine's rightful place is in the Euro-Atlantic family," Stoltenberg told a press conference. "Ukraine's rightful place is in NATO."

He said he and Zelenskyy discussed a NATO support program.

"This will help you transition from Soviet-era equipment and doctrines to NATO standards and ensure full interoperability with the alliance," Stoltenberg said. "NATO stands with you today, tomorrow and for as long as it takes."

He noted Thursday's announcement by Denmark and the Netherlands that they plan to provide Ukraine with at least another 14 refurbished Leopard 2 battle tanks from early 2024. He added that he expected countries to "make new announcements of

concrete military support to Ukraine" at a meeting Germany on Friday.

The fighting in recent months has become a war of attrition, with neither side able to gain momentum. But Ukraine is expected to launch a counteroffensive in coming weeks, and it has recently received sophisticated weapons from its Western allies.

NATO has no official presence in Ukraine and provides only non-lethal support to Kyiv, but Stoltenberg has been the strong voice of the alliance throughout the war.

A procession of international leaders has made the journey to Kyiv over the last year, and the former Norwegian prime minister is one of the last major Western figures to do so.

NATO, formed to counter the Soviet Union, has long feared being dragged into a wide war with nuclear-armed Russia, but as the West has moved from hesitantly

providing helmets and uniforms to tanks, warplanes and advanced missile systems, high-level visits have become routine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that preventing Ukraine from joining NATO remains one of the goals of what Moscow calls its "special military operation."

Speaking in a conference call with reporters, Peskov said that Ukraine's accession would pose a "serious, significant threat to our country, to our country's security."

Earlier this month, Finland joined the alliance, setting aside decades of neutrality in a historic realignment of Europe's post-Cold War security landscape. While NATO says it poses no threat to Russia, the Nordic country's accession dealt a major political blow to Putin.

Finland's membership doubles Russia's border with the world's biggest security alliance.

Panicked crowd leads to a deadly stampede in Yemen

Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen — A crowd apparently panicked by gunfire and an electrical explosion stampeded at an event to distribute financial aid during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in Yemen's capital late Wednesday, killing at least 78 people and injuring at least 73 others, according to witnesses and Houthi rebel officials.

The tragedy was Yemen's deadliest in years that was not related to the country's long-running war, and came ahead of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan later this week.

Armed Houthis fired into the air in an attempt at crowd control, apparently striking an electrical wire and causing it to explode, according to two witnesses, Abdel-Rahman Ahmed and Yahia Mohsen. That sparked a panic, and

people, including many women and children, began stampeding, they said.

Video posted on social media showed dozens of bodies, some motionless, and others screaming as people tried to help. Separate footage of the aftermath released by Houthi officials showed bloodstains, shoes and victims' clothing on the ground. Investigators were seen examining the area.

The crush took place in the Old City in the center of Sanaa, where hundreds of poor people had gathered for a charity event organized by merchants, according to the Houthi-run Interior Ministry.

People had gathered to receive about \$10 each from a charity funded by local businessmen, witnesses said. Wealthy people and businessmen often hand out cash and food, especially to the poor, during Ramadan.

Solar eclipse wows trekkers, locals in Australia, Indonesia

Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Under a cloudless sky, 20,000 eclipse chasers crowded a tiny outpost to watch a rare solar eclipse plunge part of Australia's northwest coast into brief midday darkness Thursday while temporarily cooling the tropical heat.

The remote town of Exmouth was promoted as one of the best vantage points in Australia to see the eclipse that also crossed remote parts of Indonesia and East Timor. An international crowd had been gathering for days, camping in tents and trailers on a dusty plain on the edge of town with cameras and other viewing equipment pointed skyward.

NASA astronomer Henry Throop was among those at Exmouth cheering in the darkness.

"Isn't it incredible? This is so fantastic. It was mind-blowing. It was so sharp and it was so bright.

You could see the corona around the sun there," the visibly excited Washington resident said.

"It's only a minute long, but it really felt like a long time. There's nothing else you can see which looks like that. It was just awesome. Spectacular. And then you could see Jupiter and Mercury and to be able to see those at the same time during the day — even seeing Mercury at all is pretty rare. So that was just awesome," Throop added.

In Indonesia's capital, hundreds came to the Jakarta Planetarium to see the partial eclipse that was obscured by clouds. Azka Azzahra, 21, came with her sister and friends to get a closer look by using the telescopes with hundreds of other visitors.

"It is happy to see how people with high enthusiasm come here to see the eclipse, because it is rare," Azzahra said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

4 shot, 1 fatally, while painting over graffiti

CA LOS ANGELES — Four men were shot — one fatally — after two of them volunteered to paint over graffiti on the wall of a neighborhood ice cream shop in Los Angeles, authorities said.

The gunfire erupted Saturday afternoon in the Northridge area of the San Fernando Valley, according to the Los Angeles Police Department.

Shortly before the shooting, two of the men walked into Northridge Ice Cream, the shop's owner, Victor Santoyo, told ABC 7.

"They said, 'There is graffiti on the wall. Do you want me to paint the graffiti for you, for free,'" Santoyo said. "I found them a little bit of paint and gave it to them, and then a few minutes later, we hear the gunshots."

A few minutes later, the four men are seen on surveillance video ducking from gunshots, the news station reported.

State chooses to require usage-based water billing

MS JACKSON — Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves signed legislation Friday requiring localities to base water bills on personal consumption, blocking a proposed reform by the federally appointed manager of the troubled water system in the state's capital city.

The Republican governor signed House Bill 698 months after Ted Henifin, who was appointed in November by a federal court to help improve Jackson's water infrastructure, released a proposal calling for billing water based on property

values rather than personal use.

Henifin said the new billing model would be a more equitable method of pricing water in a city where roughly 25% of residents live in poverty.

It would be unfair to charge people for water based on factors unrelated to how much they consume, Reeves said in a statement on Friday. The new law takes effect July 1.

\$1 billion Lego factory expected to open in 2025

VA CHESTERFIELD — A cluster of just six Lego bricks can be combined in over 915 million different ways. Lego Group's Chesterfield County factory, which is expected to be running by the end of 2025, will be pumping out billions of those small, colored bricks for customers worldwide.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin announced 10 months ago that the Danish toymaker had chosen Meadowville Technology Park as the site for U.S. manufacturing. That \$1 billion investment includes a 1.7 million-square-foot manufacturing facility with a pledge of 1,761 jobs for the area.

Lego last week held a groundbreaking ceremony for the plant with Youngkin; national, state and local officials; and economic development groups.

Health data breach blamed on human error

DC WASHINGTON — The recent data breach of personal information for thousands of users of Washington, D.C.'s health insurance exchange, including members of Congress, was caused by basic human error, according to a top administrator.

The revelation comes from

prepared statements submitted in advance of Wednesday's congressional hearing to investigate the issue. In her statement, Mila Kofman, executive director of the District of Columbia Health Benefit Exchange Authority, states that the data breach was first discovered in early March and includes basic personal information — including date of birth, Social Security numbers and contact information — for "56,415 current and past customers including members of Congress, their families, and staff."

Kofman states the security flaw was quickly tracked down to a particular computer server that was "misconfigured to allow access to the reports on the server without proper authentication. Based on our investigation to-date, we believe the misconfiguration was not intentional but human mistake."

This security flaw enabled an unidentified hacker to steal two reports that contained the client information — some of which was later offered up for sale in an online forum. The issue first came to public attention when members of the House of Representatives and the Senate were informed that they and their staffers may have been affected.

Wreckage of submarine found by divers in sound

CT HARTFORD — Connecticut divers have discovered the wreckage of an experimental submarine that was built in 1907 and later scuttled in Long Island Sound.

The Defender, a 92-foot-long boat, was found Sunday by a team led by Richard Simon, a commercial diver from Coventry, Conn.

Simon said he had been inter-

ested in the story of the Defender for years. He spent months going over known sonar and underwater mapping surveys of the bottom of the sound, as well as government documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, to identify any anomaly that fit the size of the sub.

"A submarine has a very distinct shape," he said. "It needs to be 100 feet long and 13 feet in diameter. So I made a list of everything that was that long and there was one target on that list."

Simon then assembled a group of top wreck divers to determine if the Defender was in the location he had identified. They discovered the Defender lying on the bottom, more than 150 feet beneath the water's surface, off the coast of Old Saybrook.

Man arrested after church windows smashed

CA NEWPORT BEACH — A 27-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of using a baseball bat to smash stained glass windows at a Southern California church, police said.

Rev. Paul Capetz, the senior pastor at Christ Church by the Sea in Newport Beach, said police called him before dawn Saturday to report the vandalism. Capetz said the suspect smashed stained glass windows and doors that were donated by a church member years ago in honor of their loved ones. He estimated the damage could cost up to \$100,000 to repair.

The suspect, a resident of San Dimas, was arrested later Saturday morning, according to Newport Beach Police Department Sgt. Sabrina Fabbri.

— From wire reports

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Kings' Fox named clutch player of year

Associated Press

It was a tie game in Orlando on Nov. 5. De'Aaron Fox got the ball with about five seconds left, took four dribbles and let a shot fly from just inside of midcourt as time expired.

Swish, for the win.

A clutch moment — one of many for the Sacramento guard this season. Fox was announced Tuesday night as the inaugural winner of the NBA's clutch player of the year award, as selected by a panel of 100 writers and broadcasters who cover the league.

Miami's Jimmy Butler was second, and Chicago's DeMar DeRozan was third.

"You can't be afraid to fail," Fox said on the TNT broadcast of the announcement. "Obviously, you're not going to make every shot, but my teammates, my coaches, they put me in position to succeed. So the least I can do is have confidence in myself to take good shots."

Fox became Sacramento's first individual winner of a major award since Tyreke Evans held

off Stephen Curry for rookie of the year in 2010. The Kings didn't have to wait 13 years for their next award — Mike Brown was unanimously named Coach of the Year on Wednesday.

"These honors don't come around often, so you're very appreciative of them," Brown said on the TNT broadcast of the announcement. "I'm really appreciative of being in Sacramento. The fans, the city has been fantastic."

Brown won the award for the second time, adding this trophy to the one he got after he and LeBron James led Cleveland to a 66-16 record in the 2008-09 season. The other finalists this season were Oklahoma City's Mark Daigneault and Boston's Joe Mazzulla.

The clutch player voting was a runaway; Fox, who led the league with 194 clutch points, got 91 of the possible 100 first-place votes and 460 of a possible 500 points. Butler got one first-place vote and 104 points, while DeRozan finished with 80 points — just three ahead of fourth-place

finisher Jalen Brunson of New York.

DeRozan was second in the NBA with 159 clutch points scored this season, and Butler was third with 151.

Fox led the league in clutch-game scoring this season with 194 points in 39 such games; clutch games are defined as those where the margin between teams is five points or less at any point in the final 5:00. He actually shot better from the field in those moments (53%) than he did at all other times (51%).

He becomes the first recipient of the Jerry West Trophy; it was named for the player who earned the moniker of "Mr. Clutch" during his career. The NBA announced in December that it was adding the clutch award. Like most other awards, it is voted on by the media panel, but unlike other awards, the field of candidates is first narrowed down by polling of NBA coaches.

Fox was one of many major contributors to a resurgence in Sacramento this season.

The Kings — who currently

lead defending champion Golden State 2-0 in a Western Conference first-round series — reached the postseason for the first time in 17 years. Fox is averaging a team-best 31 points in those two playoff games so far. And at 48-34, this was Sacramento's best regular season since going 50-32 in 2004-05.

"My teammates and my team put me in position to succeed," Fox said.

The award was the second major individual one to be announced by the league this season, followed by Coach of the Year.

Memphis' Jaren Jackson Jr. was announced Monday as the defensive player of the year. Sixth Man of the Year (Boston's Malcolm Brogdon, Milwaukee's Bobby Portis Jr. or New York's Immanuel Quickley) was to be revealed Thursday.

The rest of the schedule for announcing other league awards, including MVP, most improved player and rookie of the year, has not yet been disclosed.

Bucks, without Antetokounmpo, even series with Heat

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — For at least one night, the Milwaukee Bucks didn't miss Giannis Antetokounmpo at all.

Brook Lopez scored 25 points, Jrue Holiday added 24 and the hot-shooting Bucks withstood Antetokounmpo's absence while trouncing the Miami Heat 138-122 on Wednesday, tying their Eastern Conference first-round playoff series at a game apiece.

Milwaukee shot 25-for-49 from three-point range to match an NBA record for three-pointers in a game as the Bucks showcased their depth by thriving without their two-time MVP. Pat Connaughton, who didn't even play in Game 1, scored a playoff career-high 22

points and shot 6-for-10 from beyond the arc.

"Everyone's ready," Lopez said. "Everyone has the right mentality coming into the game — the mentality it takes to be a Milwaukee Buck. There's no one above anyone else. We're just out there trying to win."

Antetokounmpo remained out for Milwaukee after leaving the Bucks' 130-117 Game 1 loss early in the second quarter with a bruised lower back. He suffered the injury on a hard fall after getting fouled late in the first period during a drive to the basket.

"We'll continue to monitor him and expect for him to improve and still continue to be optimistic that soon he'll be ready to play," Bucks coach Mike Bu-

denholzer said before the game.

Jimmy Butler scored 25 points for the Heat.

Game 3 is Saturday in Miami. **Grizzlies 103, Lakers 93:**

Xavier Tillman scored a career-high 22 points and had 13 rebounds, and host Memphis overcame Ja Morant's absence to beat Los Angeles in Game 2 and tie the Western Conference series.

No. 2 seed Memphis sat Morant after he tested the right hand he originally hurt April 7 in a win at Milwaukee and aggravated driving to the basket in the opening loss to the Lakers. He had more exams on the hand before being declared inactive and watched from the bench with his hand bandaged.

LeBron James led the Lakers

with 28 points and 12 rebounds.

Game 3 is Saturday night in Los Angeles.

Nuggets 122, Timberwolves 113: Jamal Murray scored 40 points and Michael Porter Jr. had 13 of his 16 in the fourth quarter, powering host Denver past Minnesota for a 2-0 lead in the Western Conference series.

Nikola Jokic added 27 points, nine assists and nine rebounds for the Nuggets, who blew an early 21-point lead and trailed 89-87 heading into the fourth quarter.

Anthony Edwards had 41 points for the Wolves, who shot a sizzling 81% in the third quarter to erase a 64-59 halftime deficit.

Game 3 is Friday night in Minneapolis.

Young's size doesn't concern Panthers

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Carolina Panthers general manager Scott Fitterer said the team has no reservations about Bryce Young's size as it begins to finalize a decision on who'll be the No. 1 overall pick in next week's NFL Draft.

The Panthers are also considering three other quarterbacks — Ohio State's C.J. Stroud, Florida's Anthony Richardson and Kentucky's Will Levis — but Young has emerged as the strong favorite despite his 5-foot-10 stature.

Fitterer compared Young to the 5-foot-11 Russell Wilson, whom he helped draft in 2012 while a member of the Seattle Seahawks front office. Wilson has won a Super Bowl and is a nine-time Pro Bowl selection.

"When Russell Wilson came out he had three balls batted down his senior year; Bryce had two," Fitterer said Tuesday during a pre-draft news conference. "It doesn't seem to be an

issue. When you grow up a short quarterback you learn how to evolve your game and adapt and see the field. And he's done that."

Young played at Alabama at 194 pounds, although he weighed in at 204 pounds at the NFL combine.

Fitterer doesn't see that being an issue, either.

"Nutritionally we can do some things to educate him, get him in the weight room," Fitterer said. "When you look at his lower body it has gotten bigger. He's put on a lot of mass down there. A lot of times quarterbacks don't want to lift on the upper body because you get a little bound up (up top). But he's going to naturally put on size as he ages as well."

Panthers assistant general manager Dan Morgan said it's important to take much more than size into account when making a decision at quarterback.

"You have to have those pock-

et instincts, the ability to slide, find passing lanes," Morgan said. "So you have to look at other things like that and then obviously how smart and how well a quarterback sees the field is also important."

The NFL Network reported Monday that Young canceled all of his remaining visits with teams after meeting with only the Panthers and Houston Texans, who have the No. 2 pick.

That has led to rampant speculation the Panthers have informed Young he'll be their pick.

Fitterer denied that, saying that was a decision Young made on his own.

"We're going through the whole process," Fitterer said.

But the Panthers did little to dissuade the notion that Young is the favorite to be the first quarterback taken No. 1 overall by the franchise since Cam Newton in 2011. Most of the 30-minute news conference focused on Fitterer, Morgan and

director of college scouting Cole Spencer answering questions about Young, the 2021 Heisman Trophy winner.

Fitterer said he and head coach Frank Reich will have final say over the No. 1 pick.

He said he still hasn't asked Reich who he prefers, largely because he wants both to keep an open mind.

"I think we do see things the same way," Fitterer said. "We value the same things in quarterbacks, the same traits and the same characteristics. There are certain things that we really want and that is where the clarity comes from."

At least one thing appears for certain: the Panthers have no intentions of trading down from the top spot after sending four draft picks and wide receiver D.J. Moore to the Chicago Bears to move up eight spots.

"We will always pick up the phone but I think we are in a position where we like where we are at," Fitterer said.

Rest of majors in doubt for Woods after ankle surgery

Associated Press

Tiger Woods had fusion surgery on his right ankle Wednesday morning to alleviate arthritis from a broken bone, putting in doubt whether he plays any more majors this year.

Woods disclosed the surgery on Twitter and said it was a subtalar fusion procedure to address post-traumatic arthritis from when he broke his talus bone in February 2021.

"He's resting now and will start the recovery process," Mark Steinberg, his agent at Excel Sports, said in a telephone interview.

The surgery took place in New York, and Steinberg said Woods has returned to his home near Jupiter, Fla., to begin rehabilitating.

As for when Woods could return to playing golf, Steinberg

said there was "no timetable on this."

"The first goal is to recover and lead a much more enjoyable day-to-day life," he said.

Woods shattered multiple bones in his right leg and ankle in February 2021 when the SUV he was driving crashed off a suburban coastal Los Angeles road at about 85 mph and tumbled down the side of a hill. The injuries were so severe, Woods said, that doctors contemplated amputation.

Woods has had multiple surgeries on his leg as a result of the car crash. The ankle has been causing most of the problems of late, including a noticeable limp when he played four of the last five majors, most recently the Masters two weeks ago.

The talus is the second-largest

of a group of bones known as the tarsus, which forms the lower part of the ankle joint and transmits the weight of the body from the lower leg to the foot. The subtalar joint allows for side-to-side movement needed for walking, especially on uneven surfaces.

Most estimates put recovery from subtalar fusion at eight to 12 weeks. That would all but rule out the PGA Championship next month — Woods was doubtful, anyway, given it will be in Rochester, N.Y., with likely cold temperatures.

The U.S. Open is June 15-18 at Los Angeles Country Club, and the British Open is in three months (July 20-23) at Royal Liverpool in England.

Woods made an improbable return 14 months after the car crash to play in the Masters and walked

72 holes. Remarkably, he has missed only one cut — the British Open at St. Andrews last summer — although he withdrew after three rounds of the PGA Championship last year and he withdrew this year in the middle of the third round of the rain-delayed Masters.

Woods cited plantar fasciitis for his withdrawal from the Masters, where he tied the record by making his 23rd cut. Plantar fasciitis also was cited when he had to withdraw from his Hero World Challenge in the Bahamas in December, which he said was caused by working too much to get ready to play.

Jason Day said at the Masters that Woods told him the reason for his withdrawal from the PGA Championship last year "was a screw went through the skin."

Panthers beat Bruins to tie opening series

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Panthers managed a split in Boston, and they did it with a performance few teams have mustered on the Bruins' home ice this season.

Florida scored four straight third-period goals — two of them by Brandon Montour — and beat the Presidents' Trophy-winning Bruins 6-3 on Wednesday night to send Boston to its first loss in 10 games and tie the first-round playoff series.

"In a perfect world, it would have been great to steal two, but after Game 1 this was all that was on our mind," said Panthers forward Matthew Tkachuk, who had two assists. "We're going back to Florida even. We'll take the split and

run."

The league's top regular-season team last year, Florida didn't qualify for the playoffs until the final days of this season. Their reward: a first-round matchup with the team that set records for the most wins and points in NHL history.

After losing 3-1 in the opener, the Panthers twice took a lead but found themselves tied 2-2 heading into the third period. Montour scored 22 seconds in and later added an insurance goal as Florida opened a 6-2 lead before Taylor Hall cut the deficit to three in the final minute.

Boston had only lost one other game by more than one goal at home all year. It also won its last eight regular-season games and

15 of its last 16.

"The No. 1 lesson you learn is how hard it is to win in the playoffs," Bruins coach Jim Montgomery said. "For a team that's been really good in the third period for a long time, it's an opportunity for us to learn from that."

Hurricanes 4, Islanders 3 (OT): Jesper Fast took a cross-ice pass from Jordan Staal and beat Ilya Sorokin at 5:03 of overtime to lift host Carolina past New York for a 2-0 lead in the Eastern Conference series.

Staal's pass came from the left side near the boards and found Fast loose on the right for the finish over Sorokin's pad, ending a game that saw Carolina blow a two-goal lead before rallying to force overtime.

Oilers 4, Kings 2: Klim Kostin broke a tie at 2:20 of the third period and host Edmonton beat Los Angeles to tie the Western Conference series.

NHL scoring champion Connor McDavid had an assist and Stuart Skinner made 23 saves in his first NHL playoff victory.

Stars 7, Wild 3: Roope Hintz scored a short-hander on Dallas' first shot and added two more goals, Evgenii Dadonov scored twice and host Dallas beat Minnesota to even the Western Conference series.

Captain Jamie Benn and Tyler Seguin also scored, Miro Heiskanen had four assists and Jake Oettinger made 23 saves. Oskar Sundqvist, Marcus Johansson and Frederick Gaudreau scored for Minnesota.

Athletics buy land for new stadium in Las Vegas

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — The Oakland Athletics have signed a binding agreement to purchase land for a new retractable roof ballpark in Las Vegas after being unable to build a new venue in the Bay Area.

Team president Dave Kaval said Wednesday night that the team finalized a deal last week to buy the 49-acre site where the A's plan to build the stadium close to the Las Vegas Strip with a seating capacity of 30,000 to 35,000.

The A's will work with Nevada and Clark County on a public-private partnership to fund the stadium. Kaval said the A's hope to break ground by next year and would hope to be moved to their new home by 2027.

"It's obviously a very big milestone for us," Kaval said. "We spent almost two years working in Las Vegas to try to determine a location that works for a long-term home. To identify a site and have a purchase agreement is a big step."

The A's had been looking for a new home for years to replace the outdated and run-down Oakland Coliseum, where the team has played since arriving from Kansas City for the 1968 season. They had sought to build a stadium in Fremont and San Jose before shifting their attention to the Oakland waterfront.

Las Vegas would be the fourth home for a

franchise that started as the Philadelphia Athletics from 1901-54.

"We're turning our full attention to Las Vegas," Kaval said. "We were on parallel paths before. But we're focused really on Las Vegas as our path to find a future home for the A's."

Commissioner Rob Manfred said in December the A's would not have to pay a relocation fee if the team moved to Las Vegas.

"We're past any reasonable timeline for the situation in Oakland to be resolved," Manfred said then.

Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao said in a statement that she was disappointed the A's didn't negotiate with the city as a "true partner."

"The city has gone above and beyond in our attempts to arrive at mutually beneficial terms to keep the A's in Oakland," she said. "In the last three months, we've made significant strides to close the deal. Yet it is clear to me that the A's have no intention of staying in Oakland, and have simply been using this process to try to extract a better deal out of Las Vegas. I am not interested in continuing to play that game — the fans and our residents deserve better."

"I am incredibly proud of what we have accomplished as a City, including securing a fully entitled site and over \$375 million in new infrastructure investment that will

benefit Oakland and its Port for generations to come. In a time of budget deficits, I refuse to compromise the safety and well-being of our residents. Given these realities, we are ceasing negotiations and moving forward on alternatives for the redevelopment of Howard Terminal."

The A's would be only the second MLB team to change cities in more than a half-century. Since the Washington Senators became the Texas Rangers in 1972, the only team to relocate was the Montreal Expos, who became the Washington Nationals in 2005.

The A's lease at the Coliseum expires after the 2024 season. The A's have struggled to draw fans to the Coliseum in recent years as owner John Fisher has slashed payroll and many of the team's most recognizable stars have been traded away.

If the A's leave Oakland, the city with a rich sports tradition would have no major pro sports teams with the NFL's Raiders having moved to Las Vegas in 2020 and the NBA's Warriors moving across the bay to San Francisco in 2019.

"We know it's a difficult message for our folks in Oakland," Kaval said. "Obviously we're grateful for all the hard work that went into the waterfront. But we have been unable to achieve success or make enough progress."