

US evacuates citizens from Sudan war

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hundreds of Americans fleeing two weeks of deadly fighting in Sudan reached the east African nation's port Saturday in the first U.S.-run evacuation, completing a dangerous land journey under escort of armed drones.

American unmanned aircraft, which have been keeping an eye on overland evacuation routes for days, provided armed overwatch for a bus convoy carrying 200 to 300 Americans over 500 miles to Port Sudan, a place of relative safety, U.S. officials said.

The Pentagon "deployed U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets to support air and land evacuation routes," Pentagon press secretary Sabrina Singh said in a statement Saturday, as reported in *The Washington Post*. "Our focus has been and remains to help as many U.S. citizens depart as safely as possible."

The U.S., which had none of its officials on the ground for the evacuation, has been criticized by families of trapped Americans in

Sudan for initially ruling out any U.S.-run evacuation for Americans who wanted out, calling it too dangerous.

The passengers who evacuated Saturday were told to gather at a golf course in the capital, a U.S. official said in the *Washington Post* story, for a 24-hour journey through rough terrain and armed checkpoints.

"It's not like jumping on the Autobahn," the U.S. official said, referring to the German highway system known for its lack of speed limits. "It's slow going, with the potential for bad guys all over the place."

The convoy was tracked overhead throughout the trip by armed drones, with the knowledge that any decision to use the weapons risked civilian casualties.

"That's why operational security was so important on this," the official said, explaining why the departure, and tense tracking while the vehicles were en route, remained unannounced until arrival.

U.S. special operations troops briefly flew to the capital, Khartoum, on April 22 to air-

lift out American staffers at the embassy and other American government personnel. Several thousand U.S. citizens were left behind, many of them dual-nationals.

More than a dozen other nations had already been carrying out evacuations for their citizens, using a mix of military planes, navy vessels and on the ground personnel.

A wide-ranging group of international mediators has only managed to achieve a series of fragile temporary cease-fires that failed to stop clashes but created enough of a lull for tens of thousands of Sudanese to flee to safer areas and for foreign nations to evacuate thousands of their citizens by land, air and sea.

State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said the convoy carried U.S. citizens, local people employed by the U.S. and citizens of allied countries.

On Sunday, a U.S. warship also arrived to Port Sudan to evacuate more American citizens, according to footage from the Saudi-owned al-Arabiya TV channel.

Official: Tanker capture may have been retaliation

**BY ALISON BATH
AND J.P. LAWRENCE**

Stars and Stripes

The United States recently redirected a tanker attempting to ship Iranian crude oil to China, an action that likely triggered Tehran's seizure last week of an oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman, U.S. officials say.

Iran may have retaliated as part of a well-established pattern of behavior when the U.S. or other countries enforce economic sanctions leveled against them, a U.S. official familiar with the matter, who was not authorized to speak on the record, told *Stars and Stripes* on Friday.

A tanker carrying oil to China was redirected toward the

United States, the British newspaper *Financial Times* reported Friday, citing three unnamed U.S. officials.

Iran's seizure on Thursday of the Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker *Advantage Sweet* followed the DOJ action.

The DOJ did not respond Friday to a *Stars and Stripes* request for comment.

Advantage Sweet was traveling in international waters Thursday when it issued a distress call, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet said in a statement the same day.

The Navy called for the ship to be released, saying the action was unjustified and a further example of Iran's destabilizing activity at sea.

Advantage Tankers, which lists the MT *Advantage Sweet* as one of its 18 oil tankers, said in an email Friday night that their ship is being held at the Port of Bandar Abbas on the southern coast of Iran.

The fully laden oil tanker was sailing from Kuwait to Houston, Texas, with 24 crew on board with 23 from India and one from Russia, the statement said.

Iran said its navy intercepted the tanker as it fled after colliding with a fishing vessel, the Iranian state news agency IRNA reported.

The ship was directed toward Iran's coastal waters, according to the IRNA report, which cited the Iranian army.

But the company operating

the ship had no knowledge of any collision, Mark Clark, director at a crisis response company representing *Advantage Tankers*, said Friday.

The Iranian government has not yet contacted the company, Clark said, adding the Indian and Russian embassies have been contacted regarding their citizens.

Over the past two years, Iran has unlawfully seized at least five commercial ships in the Middle East, the Navy said in a statement.

"Iran's continued harassment of vessels and interference with navigational rights in regional waters are a threat to maritime security and the global economy," U.S. 5th Fleet said in the statement.

USS George Washington to return to Japan

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The aircraft carrier USS George Washington will return next year to this naval base south of Tokyo, where it will replace the USS Ronald Reagan as the centerpiece of the U.S. 7th Fleet's carrier strike group, the Navy announced Friday. The move was first reported March 1 by Nikkei Asia, citing U.S. Pacific Fleet spokesman Lt. Brian Cunningham.

The George Washington is undergoing its mid-life nuclear refueling and maintenance at Newport News shipyard in Virginia. The Navy did not disclose the date the George Washington will arrive, but further details

will be announced "closer to the actual movement of the carriers," according to a news release Friday from Naval Forces Japan.

"The United States values Japan's contributions to the peace, security and stability of the Indo-Asia-Pacific and its long-term the release said. "These forces, along with their counterparts in the Japan Self-Defense Forces, make up the core capabilities needed by the alliance to meet our common strategic objectives."

The carrier strike group now centered on the Ronald Reagan was previously led by the George Washington from 2008 to 2015. The carrier's scheduled four-year refit began in 2017 but

was significantly delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other setbacks.

The refit includes refueling two nuclear reactors and "significant repairs, upgrades and modernization," the Navy said.

"The Navy positions many of its most advanced capabilities in Japan in recognition of the importance of our alliance," Naval Forces Japan spokeswoman Cmdr. Katie Cerezo told Stars and Stripes by email Friday. "This turnover will ensure continued carrier presence in the region."

Following the George Washington's arrival, the Ronald Reagan will relocate for maintenance to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, Wash.,

according to the release.

The Ronald Reagan has spent eight years in Yokosuka, approaching the 10-year limit for Navy ships deployed overseas.

Congress set the limit in the fiscal year 2019 Defense Department budget following the back-to-back collisions in 2017 of the destroyers USS John S. McCain and USS Fitzgerald. Both had been based at Yokosuka more than a decade when they separately collided with commercial vessels.

One upgrade to the George Washington is the ability to embark the MQ-25A Stingray, a 50-foot drone that can refuel other aircraft in flight and extend the carrier air wing's range, Nikkei Asia reported March 1.

Lawmakers: Address Marines', sailors' quality-of-life concerns

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — House lawmakers pressed Navy and Marine Corps officials on Friday to make quality-of-life improvements for sailors and Marines, from mental health care to gender parity to child care.

Members of the House Armed Services Committee said they continue to hear from service members who complain of long waitlists for child care, poor living conditions, sexism and insufficient access to suicide prevention services.

Rep. Sara Jacobs, D-Calif., said troops in her district are contending with a military child care waitlist that has ballooned to 4,000 children. Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., a Marine Corps veteran, said the services are also failing to properly advertise a new 988 suicide prevention hotline. Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., said he constantly hears about junior sailors struggling with subpar housing.

Navy and Marine Corps officials did acknowledge persistent problems with providing troops and their families with access to child care and mental health services, describing them as among the top quality-of-life issues plaguing the services. Gen. David Berger, commandant of the Marine Corps, said the average wait time for child care is an "unacceptable" 100 days. Much of the delay is due to the slow pace of hiring child care providers and competition with private child care centers that might offer more competitive wages, he said.

Adm. Michael Gilday, chief of naval operations, said child care provider staffing is at about 80% and the waitlist for child care across the Navy has decreased from 8,000 last year to 5,500 this year. Still, the service is sometimes offering providers wages that are \$5 above the market median and recruiting from colleges to help alleviate a summer surge of demand, he said.

Bill seeks more mental health care for troops and families

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

A bill introduced in the Senate on Thursday aims to cut costs and expand mental health care access for families of active-duty service members, a senator sponsoring the legislation said.

The Military Families Mental Health Services Act would provide active-duty military family members covered by Tricare — the military's health insurance provider — three free outpatient mental health visits per year, said Sen. Jon Ossoff, D-Ga. Ossoff announced the new bill co-sponsored by Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., on Thursday.

"Our bipartisan bill will expand free access to counseling and mental health services for military families, who make great sacrifices for our nation, endure great stress in so doing, and deserve nothing less than the care they need when they need it," Ossoff said.

The bill would allow the de-

fense secretary to waive co-pays for military dependents seeking mental health care for those three visits each year. Co-pays vary for families using Tricare. For service members using Tricare Select who joined the military after 2018, the co-pay for an in-network outpatient mental health visit would be \$30, according to Tricare.

The Pentagon has aimed in recent years to improve mental health care access for troops and their family members, amid increases in suicide rates.

A 2019 study published in the Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research found the children of service members who have deployed since the 2001 Afghanistan invasion were "more likely to have behavioral health problems than their same-aged peers." The study found conditions prevalent among military children included sleep issues, depression, anxiety, substance abuse and suicidal ideation.

Suspect in deaths of Texas neighbors on the run

The Washington Post

The search for a Texas man who allegedly gunned down five neighbors Friday after they asked him to stop shooting in his yard continued Sunday as residents expressed alarm that he remained on the run.

Law enforcement officers initially searched for the suspect, Francisco Oropeza, 38, in a wooded area near the Cleveland, Texas, neighborhood where the shooting occurred, but they eventually lost his trail.

The FBI's Houston office on Sunday warned anyone who might see Oropeza not to con-

front him because he is considered "armed and dangerous."

"He is out there, and he's a threat to the community," James Smith, special agent in charge of that office, told reporters Saturday.

President Joe Biden was briefed Sunday morning on the search for the gunman, according to a White House official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly.

Oropeza "could be anywhere" within 10 to 20 square miles, Smith said Saturday after the search area expanded. Offi-

cials said they found the AR-15-style weapon allegedly used in the killings, as well as articles of clothing and a cellphone, but they were unsure whether the suspect had another gun with him.

Oropeza faces five counts of murder for the killings of four adults and an 8-year-old child, San Jacinto County Sheriff Greg Capers said.

Authorities said all five victims were shot in the head. Five other people survived the shooting in the small city about 45 miles northeast of downtown Houston.

Oropeza was firing his weapon in his yard Friday about 11 p.m. when his neighbors asked him to stop, noting that their baby was trying to sleep, officials said. Rather than ceasing, Oropeza allegedly became angry, took the gun inside the neighbors' home and killed half the people there.

The victims were identified Saturday as Sonia Argentina Guzman, 25; Diana Velazquez Alvarado, 21; Julisa Molina Rivera, 31; Jose Jonathan Casarez, 18; and Daniel Enrique Laso, 8. All were from Honduras, authorities said.

Known for laughs, DC dinner spotlights risks to journalism

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House Correspondents' Association dinner — known for its fun albeit ferocious jabs at Washington — took a more solemn tone this year as President Joe Biden acknowledged the several American journalists under siege in authoritarian countries around the world.

"We are here to send a message to the country and, quite frankly, to the world: The free press is a pillar, maybe the pillar, of a free society, not the enemy," Biden said in his speech.

The president and first lady Jill Biden, upon arriving at the Washington Hilton on Satur-

day, met privately with the parents of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who has been imprisoned in Russia since March. He was charged with spying, despite strong denials from his employer and the U.S. government. Some guests wore buttons with "Free Evan" printed on them.

Also among the 2,600 people attending the gala was Debra Tice, the mother of Austin Tice, who has not been heard from since disappearing at a checkpoint in Syria in 2012. U.S. officials have said they are operating under the assumption he is alive and are working to try to bring him home.

"Journalism is not a crime," Biden said. "Evan and Austin should be released immediately along with every other American detained abroad." He said: "I promise you, I am working like hell to get them home."

The Bidens also made a beeline for Brittney Griner, the WNBA star and Olympic gold medalist who was detained in Russia for nearly 10 months last year before her release in a prisoner swap. Griner attended with her wife, Cherelle, as guests of CBS News.

"This time last year we were praying for you, Brittney," Biden said to the basketball star.

Fort Lee renamed Fort Gregg-Adams to honor Black officers

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

FORT GREGG-ADAMS, Va. — After more than a century as Fort Lee, the Army officially renamed the post Fort Gregg-Adams on Thursday, honoring two Black officers who helped pave the way for an integrated military.

"The inspirational quality of the two leaders that we now honor is something that should echo in the mind and heart of every soldier and every American," Maj. Gen. Mark Simerly, commander of the Combined Arms Support Command, said at a ceremony honoring Lt. Gen.

Arthur Gregg and Lt. Col. Charity Adams.

Fort Gregg-Adams, which is outside Richmond, Va., is the third of nine Army posts scheduled to be renamed as the military works to redesignate bases that honor Confederate leaders from the Civil War. Fort Pickett, Va., and Fort Rucker, Ala., have already been renamed Fort Barfoot and Fort Novosel, respectively. The next three scheduled to be renamed are Fort Hood, Texas, on May 9, Fort Benning, Ga., on May 11 and Fort Bragg, N.C., on June 2. Fort Gordon, Ga., Fort A.P. Hill, Va., and Fort Polk, La., are also

to be renamed but dates have not been scheduled.

"I was very honored that they felt I was worthy but, you know, you don't take it too seriously," Gregg said Thursday at the renaming ceremony. "I was aware that there were a number of really outstanding people up for consideration. When the decision was made that the post would be redesignated Gregg-Adams, I was just overwhelmed."

Lt. Gen. Arthur Gregg served in the Army from 1946 to 1981, rising from private to a three-star general in logistics. At 94, he is the only living person in

modern Army history to have an installation named after him, according to the Army.

In 1942, Lt. Col. Charity Adams served in the newly created Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and eventually led the first African-American women's unit to serve overseas, the 6888th Postal Battalion. Stationed in Birmingham, England, they sorted and organized mail for soldiers in the European Theater during World War II. Her unit was given six months to clear out the backlog of 3 million letters and packages. The 6888th completed the job in half the time.

Coronation to highlight diversity in UK

Associated Press

LONDON — It will be a coronation of many faiths and many languages.

King Charles III, keen to show that he can be a unifying figure for everyone in the United Kingdom, will be crowned in a ceremony that will for the first time include the active participation of faiths other than the Church of England.

Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh leaders will take part in various aspects of the coronation, the Archbishop of Canterbury's office said Saturday, as it revealed details of a service it described as an act of Christian worship that will reflect contemporary society.

The ceremony also will include female bishops for the first time, as well as hymns and prayers sung in Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and Irish Gaelic, as well as English.

"The service contains new elements that reflect the diversity of our contemporary society," Archbishop Justin Welby, spiritual leader of the Church of England, said in a statement. "It is my prayer that all who

share in this service, whether they are of faith or no faith, will find ancient wisdom and new hope that brings inspiration and joy."

The coronation ceremony reflects Charles' efforts to show that the 1,000-year-old monarchy is still relevant in a country that is much more diverse than it was when his mother was crowned 70 years ago.

While the king is the supreme governor of the Church of England, the latest census showed that less than half of the population now describe themselves as Christian.

Built around the theme "Called to Serve," the coronation service will begin with one of the youngest members of the congregation — a Chapel Royal chorister — greeting the king.

Charles will respond by saying, "In His name and after His example, I come not to be served but to serve."

The moment is meant to underscore the importance of young people in the world today, according to Lambeth Palace, the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The service will also include many historic elements underscoring the ancient traditions through which power has been passed on to new kings and queens throughout the centuries.

In the most sacred part of the service, the Archbishop of Canterbury will anoint the king with oil, consecrating him and setting him apart from his subjects.

A screen will cover Charles at this moment, and the anointing won't be visible on television or to most people in the abbey, except for a few senior members of the clergy.

"When the screen which will surround the coronation chair is removed, the king is revealed to us all as someone who has taken on the responsibility of serving God and serving the people," a Lambeth Palace spokesperson said while speaking on customary condition of anonymity.

This will be followed by the presentation of the coronation regalia, sacred objects like the orb and scepter that symbolize the monarch's power and responsibilities.

Ukrainian drones strike Crimea

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A massive fire erupted at an oil depot in Crimea after it was hit by two of Ukraine's drones, a Russia-appointed official there reported Saturday, the latest in a series of attacks on the annexed peninsula as Russia braces for an expected Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Mikhail Razvozhayev, the Moscow-installed governor of Sevastopol, a port city in Crimea, posted videos and photos of the blaze on his Telegram channel.

Razvozhayev said the fire at the city's harbor was assigned the highest ranking in terms of how complicated it will be to extinguish. However, he reported that the open blaze had been contained.

Razvozhayev said the oil depot was attacked by "two enemy drones," and four oil tanks burned down. A third drone was shot down from the sky, and one more was deactivated through radio-electronic means, according to Crimea's Moscow-appointed governor, Sergei Aksyonov.

Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, a move that most of the world considered illegal.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in an interview last week that his

country will seek to reclaim the peninsula in the upcoming counteroffensive.

Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to Crimea last month to mark the ninth anniversary of the Black Sea peninsula's annexation from Ukraine.

Putin's visit took place the day after the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for the Russian leader accusing him of war crimes.

The attack reported in Sevastopol comes a day after Russia fired more than 20 cruise missiles and two drones at Ukraine, killing at least 23 people.

Almost all of the victims died when two missiles slammed into an apartment building in the city of Uman, located in central Ukraine.

Six children were among the dead, Ukrainian Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko said Saturday, adding that 22 of the 23 bodies recovered have been identified. Two women remained missing, Klymenko said.

Russian forces launched more drones at Ukraine overnight. Ukraine's Air Force Command said two Iranian-made self-exploding Shahed drones were intercepted, and a reconnaissance drone was shot down on Saturday morning.

Japan lifts some inbound traveler test restrictions

BY HANA KUSUMOTO

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — The Japanese government lifted most of its coronavirus-related border control measures on Saturday, a week earlier than the date it announced in April.

Travelers and returnees no longer need to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test taken within 72 hours of departure or a valid COVID-19 vaccination certificate of three doses, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said at a news conference Friday.

However, travelers entering Japan with COVID-19 symptoms are still subject to on-arrival tests and treatment for positive test results until May 8, Matsuno said.

Travelers entering from mainland China by direct flights will be subject to the same measures.

"The border control measures will be changed from the viewpoint of facilitating travelers returning from overseas during the holidays," Matsuno said. Japan until May 7 celebrates an annual series of holidays known as Golden Week.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Student stops school bus after driver passes out

M WARREN — A boy grabbed the steering wheel on a school bus and hit the brakes, bringing the vehicle to a safe stop on a busy Detroit-area road after the driver had passed out, authorities said.

"Someone call 911. Now!" seventh-grader Dillon Reeves shouted to dozens of other middle-school kids on the bus.

Dillon was hailed as a hero: He stopped the bus as it was veering toward oncoming traffic.

The incident was recorded on a video camera just above the driver. The video shows the driver fanning herself with a baseball cap and informing the transportation office that she needs to pull over.

Seconds later, Dillon jumped into action, hitting the brake pedal and clutching the steering wheel.

Man continued date after fatal shooting, police say

TX HOUSTON — A man on a date paid \$40 to park, only to learn inside a burger joint that he was scammed. He then went back and fatally shot the man posing as an attendant and then returned for dinner, according to court records.

Erick Aguirre appeared in court on murder charges in the April 11 death of Elliot Nix, 46. His bond was set at \$200,000.

Aguirre, 29, allegedly told his date "everything was fine" and that he just scared the man after returning to the Rodeo Goat restaurant from the parking lot.

They then started walking to a table but left to eat someplace

else after Aguirre looked uncomfortable, according to court records.

Aguirre's date contacted police two days later after police had released photos of the couple, who had been identified by tips to Crime Stoppers.

An employee at a nearby smoke shop later told police he saw Aguirre run back to his car, grab a pistol and go after Nix. The employee said both men went out of his view but he heard a gunshot before 8 p.m., then saw Aguirre "nonchalantly walking back to his car with the gun in his hand" before putting the gun back in his car. Aguirre then walked back to the restaurant and went inside with his date, according to the affidavit.

Railroad workers rescue 3-year-old from tracks

NY TARRYTOWN — A railroad conductor in New York sprinted to scoop up a 3-year-old boy who had wandered dangerously close to the electrified third rail, officials said this week.

Engineer William Kennedy, who was operating a southbound train April 6, was the first to spot the boy on Metro-North Railroad tracks near Tarrytown, north of New York City, and sent out an emergency radio message, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority said in a news release.

The video shows the northbound train proceeding slowly until the crew can spot the child. Assistant conductor Marcus Higgins jumps down from the train, grabs the boy from a cover on top of the third rail and carries him to safety.

Meanwhile, the MTA said,

two additional railroad employees on their way to help spotted the child's sobbing mother and sister on a street corner. The family was reunited at the Tarrytown station.

Metro-North President Catherine Rinaldi said the boy's grateful mother told the railroad workers that her son is autistic and non-verbal.

Coretta Scott King monument dedicated

GA ATLANTA — A new monument and garden honoring the legacy of civil rights activist Coretta Scott King was dedicated April 27, which would have been her 96th birthday.

The Coretta Scott King Peace and Meditation Garden and monument sits on the grounds of The King Center in Atlanta, which she founded in 1968 to memorialize the life, work, legacy and commitment to nonviolence of her husband, slain civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Bernice King and her niece Yolanda Renee King — the 14-year-old daughter of Martin Luther King III — untied a ribbon on the garden's gate and cut another ribbon on the monument.

Teens accused in killing took 'memento' photo

CO DENVER — Three teens accused of driving around and throwing large rocks at passing cars, one of which investigators say killed a 20-year-old woman, circled back to take a photo of her crashed car as a "memento," according to court documents.

Nicholas "Mitch" Karol-Chik

told investigators that Joseph Koenig slowed down so Zachary Kwak could get a photo of the car where authorities say Alexa Bartell died after being hit in the head with a rock on April 19, according to arrest affidavits for the 18-year-olds. In a hint at a possible motive, Karol-Chik said all three got excited every time they hit a car with a rock that night but acknowledged he felt "a hint of guilt" passing by Bartell's car, according to the documents.

Kwak said he took the photo because he thought that Karol-Chik or Koenig would want to have a "memento" of what had happened, according to the affidavits.

Machine gun range could harm drinking water

MA BOSTON — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a draft determination that a proposed machine gun training range at a National Guard base could pose a threat to Cape Cod's drinking water, potentially creating a public health hazard for more than 220,000 year-round residents.

There are no reasonably available alternative drinking water sources for residents should the Cape Cod aquifer become contaminated, the agency said. The agency said it will accept public comment through June 26.

The Massachusetts Army National Guard has proposed building the new 138-acre gun range at Joint Base Cape Cod. The EPA launched a review of the project in August 2021.

— From wire reports

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Knicks fans as bold, brash as ever

Associated Press

NEW YORK — LeBron James for years professed his love for Madison Square Garden, then declined the chance to make it his home.

Kevin Durant not only passed on the New York Knicks, but he chose the other team in their city, allowing him to torment them from a few miles across the river.

The 2000s have been a mostly miserable time for the franchise and its fans. Losses piled up like rush-hour traffic on the bridges and tunnels, and the most painful defeats sometimes followed the seasons. Lottery luck would elude the Knicks and so would the marquee free agents, ensuring that the Knicks could never win for losing.

The ineptitude would occasionally quiet their fans — even Spike Lee briefly gave up going to watch them — but never completely drive them away. Not when they always held the belief that New York was the epicenter of the basketball world, where Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Julius Erving honed their games at Rucker Park, was home of the most special arena, and that someday everything would come together — even though it's now 50 years since it last did.

"The most amazing thing about Knick fans, to me, is they come and support and treat every game like it's a Game 7, and there's a fanaticism with Knick fans and also incredible optimism," former Knicks coach Jeff Van Gundy said. "They may get down in the season, but come the offseason, they pump themselves back up to see a pathway toward success."

Maybe it will finally come again now.

With the Knicks into the second round of the playoffs for the first time in 10 years, their fans are back and as brash as ever. Forget just winning a series. They see top-seeded Milwaukee gone, regular-season success against all the other teams left in the East, and are thinking about the NBA Finals — even if their odds on Fanduel Sportsbook are behind both teams in the Boston-Philadelphia series.

Just as cocky as ever.

"That's just New York for you and I'm just happy to be a part of it," Knicks guard Jalen Brunson said.

Fans poured out of MSG onto Seventh Avenue, halting traffic, on Sunday after beating Cleveland in Game 4 of the first round. The Knicks wrapped up the series on the road Wednesday, and later that night learned their op-

ponent would be the Miami Heat, their fierce rival from the 1990s, when the Knicks always felt they would have a shot at the title. They were a game away from winning it in 1994 and got back to the NBA Finals again in 1999.

Those Knicks fought for everything and were willing to fight anybody — especially someone wearing a Miami uniform — and the fans watching courtside on celebrity row all the way up to the cheapest seats dreamed of seeing Patrick Ewing and his teammates march up the Canyon of Heroes in a championship parade.

Then the 2000s arrived and it turned into a nightmare.

After reaching the Eastern Conference finals in 2000, the Knicks made the playoffs just twice more in the next 10 years. They became a league laughing-stock, the East Coast Clippers, with 50- and eventually 60-loss seasons becoming the norm.

Hall of Famers such as Isiah Thomas and Phil Jackson were given the keys to the franchise, only to wreck it. (A train wreck, specifically, tennis champion and longtime Knicks fan John McEnroe called Jackson's last season as team president in 2017).

The Knicks never got a break

in the lottery when a difference-making college player was available. They started aiming for free agency, only to have James pass in 2010 — picking the hated Heat to make it worse — and Durant opt for Brooklyn along with Kyrie Irving in 2019.

To Knicks fans, those players who were supposed to be saviors became cowards. Too scared of the challenge of being the leading man on Broadway, too weak to lift a franchise onto their shoulders.

Durant never lost to the Knicks when he was in Brooklyn, but that didn't stop Knicks fans — polite in public — from talking trash on social media.

"Imagine the tweets I've been getting since I decided to come to the Nets from Knicks fans," he said after one Nets victory at MSG. "I mean, they're still [ticked] off about stuff I say and little jabs here and there."

The summer of the Durant disappointment began the Knicks' turnaround. They hoped to get the No. 1 pick and draft Zion Williamson but ended up third and took RJ Barrett, who had fans chanting his name during a strong finish to the Cleveland series. Julius Randle became their top get in free agency, and he has been an All-Star two of the last three seasons.

Murray leads Nuggets past Suns in 2nd round opener

Associated Press

DENVER — Jamal Murray kept imploring the crowd to get louder and louder with each trip down the floor.

As if the Nuggets point guard even needed to. His play was already rocking the arena.

Murray scored 34 points, hitting six of Denver's 16 three-pointers, and the Nuggets sprinted past the Phoenix Suns 125-107 on Saturday night in Game 1 of their second-round series.

"He's a bad man," Nuggets

coach Michael Malone said.

Any response to that adulation?

"Thanks?" Murray said. "Appreciate it. ... I'm just playing my game. ... I'm doing whatever it takes to win."

And maybe show a nation that doesn't always get to watch the Nuggets — you know, because they're usually on so late — what the players have known all season: They're talented and worthy of their top seed in the Western Conference. They don't

mind if the Suns, as the fourth seed, are the trendy pick to beat them, either.

"We're going to keep doing what we're doing, keep proving everybody wrong," Murray said.

Reigning back-to-back NBA MVP Nikola Jokic had 24 points and 19 rebounds, while Aaron Gordon finished with 23 points. But this was the Murray Show, where he went 6-for-10 from three-point range and frequently exhorted for more noise from

the already raucous crowd.

"Let's be honest, some of the shots he hit tonight I don't think anybody could have stopped him," Suns coach Monty Williams said.

Kevin Durant scored 29 points and grabbed 14 boards for the Suns, with Devin Booker adding 27 points and Chris Paul 11. Booker averaged 37.2 points in a first-round series win over the Los Angeles Clippers.

Game 2 is Monday night in Denver.

Maple Leafs get over hump, advance

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — The Toronto Maple Leafs are eager to leave nearly two decades of playoff futility behind them.

Seizing an opportunity to prove they're no longer a team that falls short at the most important time of the year, the Leafs ended an 11-game losing streak in elimination games and beat the Tampa Bay Lightning 2-1 in overtime Saturday night.

Auston Matthews scored his fifth goal of the series for Toronto, beating Andrei Vasilevski from the top of the right circle at 13:47 of the second period. John Tavares added the winner, which trickled past the Lightning goalie after deflecting off a defender's skate.

The victory gave Toronto its first postseason series win since

2004 and sends the Maple Leafs into the Eastern Conference semifinals against Boston or Florida.

The Bruins and Panthers are tied 3-3 in their first-round series. Game 7 was Sunday in Boston.

"It's felt different all season," coach Sheldon Keefe said. "It's nice to sit up here and say it is different."

The Maple Leafs were 0-for-7 in playoff appearances from 2013 to 2022, including first-round exits each of the past six seasons.

To get past Tampa Bay, Toronto won three times in overtime on the road and ended the Lightning's run of three straight appearances in the Stanley Cup Final. The visiting team won five of six games,

with the Maple Leafs taking Games 3, 4 and 6 in Tampa despite being outplayed for long stretches.

Defenseman Morgan Rielly said he and teammates were both happy and relieved to finally get over the hump. He also said it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what's different about this season's team.

"It's a tough question," said Rielly, who scored the winning goal in Game 3. "I don't think there's any right answer."

Tavares had his first career playoff hat trick in a home victory in Game 2 and delivered the series winner at 4:35 of overtime Saturday night.

A year ago, the Lightning rallied from 2-1 and 3-2 series deficits to eliminate the Maple Leafs from the opening round

in seven games. This time, Toronto twice trailed in the third period before coming from behind to win in OT.

"Even when they were being leaned on by us, they were opportunistic," said Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper, who felt the Lightning played better against Toronto this year than they did in eliminating the Maple Leafs in 2022.

Now that they've finally managed to escape the first round, Keefe and his players say there's no room for complacency.

"It's been a long time coming for a lot of players in our locker room, a long time coming for me, and Leafs nation," Keefe said.

"At the same time," Tavares added, "it's just one step."

Oilers advance to second round with win over Kings

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The shortest player on the Edmonton Oilers roster had their biggest goal Saturday night.

Kailer Yamamoto scored with 3:02 remaining for his first point of the series as the Oilers beat the Los Angeles Kings 5-4 in Game 6 to advance to the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs.

In a series dominated by superstars Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, it was the Oilers' fourth line that played a pivotal role. Besides Yamamoto, Klim Kostin had two goals and an assist.

"It didn't go in the net early in the series, but he stuck with it. He stuck with it and eventually ended up scoring the series winner," Oilers coach Jay Woodcroft said.

Yamamoto — who lived in Los Angeles for three years and played youth hockey for the Jr. Kings — got possession of the puck deep in the offensive zone,

skated around and then sent a wrist shot through traffic and past the right shoulder and stick of Kings goaltender Joonas Korpinen.

"Being in this position, it's pretty crazy. Playing against them last year you get your hopes up," Yamamoto said about scoring a pivotal goal against the Kings. "To be able to beat them is an amazing feeling."

McDavid and Draisaitl also scored while Stuart Skinner stopped 40 shots as the Oilers knocked the Kings out of the postseason for the second straight season.

Next up for Edmonton is the Vegas Golden Knights in the second round. The Oilers won three of the four regular-season meetings, but Vegas won the Pacific Division by two points on the way to the top seed in the Western Conference.

The series will start in Las Vegas, but the NHL had not announced when Game 1 will be

played as of Sunday morning.

Yamamoto got the game-winner after the Kings tied it 7:46 into the third period on a fluke goal. Phillip Danault took advantage of Skinner breaking his stick and scored short-handed.

"It's good that we've been in that situation before where you feel like you're doing a lot of good things and the game is tied. You didn't really do anything wrong, but a couple tough breaks," McDavid said. "Coming down the stretch, Skinner gave us a chance to win and obviously, the little guy (Yamamoto) steps up over here."

Kevin Fiala had a goal and two assists for Los Angeles, and Adrian Kempe and Sean Durzi also scored. The Kings have been eliminated in their last four first-round series.

Los Angeles hasn't won a playoff series since it defeated the New York Rangers in six games in 2014 to capture its second Stanley Cup title in three seasons.

"When you get two power-play goals and a short-handed goal against a team like that you should probably come away with a win. And we didn't," coach Todd McLellan said.

Rangers 5, Devils 2: Chris Kreider had a power-play goal and two assists as host New York beat New Jersey to force a Game 7 in their first-round series.

Mika Zibanejad and Vladimir Tarasenko each had a goal and an assist for the Rangers, which had totaled just two goals while losing the previous three games. Barclay Goodrow and Braden Schneider also scored, and Adam Fox added two assists. Igor Shesterkin stopped 34 shots.

Curtis Lazar and Dawson Mercer scored for the Devils. Akira Schmid, who had stopped 80 of 82 shots over the previous three games, was pulled after giving up five goals on 29 shots.

Game 7 is Monday night at New Jersey.

Texans build for future in NFL Draft

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The day after C.J. Stroud was taken with the second overall pick in the NFL Draft, the quarterback raved about the job Houston Texans general manager Nick Caserio did to not only get him but to trade up to nab outside linebacker Will Anderson Jr. at No. 3.

"Shout-out to Nick," Stroud said. "You're doing a great job."

Caserio looked sheepish amid the praise and had a simple message for Stroud.

"Just play well," Caserio said. "That's all."

Many pundits believe the Texans won the 2023 draft with the addition of Stroud and Anderson. But Caserio won't pat himself on the back until those two help Houston turn things around after the team won just 11 games combined in the last three seasons.

"We're not going to solve anything in one draft, one player,

one night," Caserio said. "It's going to take a series of actions over time with the right people, with the right mindset that believe in the things that we're doing, that believe in what we're trying to build, and then hopefully that will manifest itself on the field when we actually do play."

Stroud is poised to become the franchise quarterback Houston has lacked since Deshaun Watson requested a trade before being dealt to the Cleveland Browns. Davis Mills has started most of the last two seasons, going 5-22-1 in 28 games with 26 starts as the Texans were among the NFL's worst teams.

"His toughness, his competitiveness, his leadership, his accuracy, those are all strengths of his," Caserio said of Stroud. "But there's certainly things that he's going to have to work on."

Stroud, who was a two-year

starter at Ohio State, isn't daunted by the pressure of being the face of the team and the player expected to lead Houston back to respectability.

"I know that it's special," he said. "I know I'm going to treat it like my baby. The city of Houston hasn't seen a franchise quarterback in a long time and that's something that I hope I become ... but right now I've got to put in the work."

First-year coach DeMeco Ryans beamed as he discussed not only getting a talented quarterback, but also a linebacker from Alabama, his alma mater.

"First emotion, to get C.J., I was elated," Ryans said. "Once we were able to seal that deal and get Will, I was over the moon. I couldn't have been happier, smiling, just being able to get both of these guys was outstanding."

Stroud threw for 8,123 yards with 85 touchdowns and 12 interceptions as the Buckeyes

went 21-4 in games he started. His 85 touchdowns over two seasons broke a Big Ten record held by Drew Brees.

Anderson was a three-year starter with the Crimson Tide, where he piled up 204 tackles, including 58½ for a loss, and 34½ sacks, which ranked second on Alabama's all-time list. He was the second player in history to win the Bronko Nagurski Award as the nation's top defensive player twice.

He's thrilled to be playing for Ryans, who was a linebacker in the NFL for 10 seasons, including his first six with the Texans.

"I've always had a head coach that I shared the same mentality with," Anderson said. "So when I came here and I talked to coach Ryans, I was like: 'I've got to be here.' The same exact mindset, the same mentality, what he's trying to preach, everything. That's what I'm all about, and that's what I want to do."

Padres outslug Giants in Mexico City's thin air

Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — By the time Manny Machado put San Diego ahead for good, hitting home runs in Mexico City's thin air was old hat.

Machado overcame a seventh-inning deficit with his second homer, the 11th of the night, and the Padres outslugged the San Francisco Giants 16-11 Saturday in Major League Baseball's first regular-season game in the Mexican capital.

Nelson Cruz, Juan Soto, Fernando Tatis and Xander Bogaerts also went deep for the Padres, who outhomered the Giants 6-5 and outhit them 17-13 in the thin air of Estadio Alfredo Harp Helú.

Pirates 6-16, Nationals 3-1: Drew Maggi got his first two major league hits, three days after making his big league debut following 13 years in the minor

leagues, and visiting Pittsburgh completed a day-night doubleheader sweep.

Tigers 7-4, Orioles 4-6: Grayson Rodriguez struck out nine in five shutout innings for his first major league win, and visiting Baltimore earned a split in its doubleheader against Detroit.

Brewers 7, Angels 5: Corbin Burnes pitched six sparkling innings, and host Milwaukee earned its third straight win.

Dodgers 1, Cardinals 0: Ace Clayton Kershaw continued his dominant start to the season with seven sharp innings for host Los Angeles.

Rays 12, White Sox 3: Wander Franco hit a leadoff homer in the seventh for his team's first hit off Lance Lynn, sparking a 10-run inning for visiting Tampa Bay.

Diamondbacks 11, Rockies

4: Geraldo Perdomo and Christian Walker homered, and Arizona handed Colorado its seventh consecutive home loss.

Rangers 2, Yankees 0: Nathan Eovaldi pitched a three-hitter for his first big league nine-inning shutout, and host Texas handed listless New York its fifth loss in seven games.

Phillies 6, Astros 1: Zack Wheeler threw six shutout innings and Kody Clemens hit a two-run homer, leading visiting Philadelphia to its fourth straight win.

Reds 3, Athletics 2: Jeury Familia gave up a one-run lead in the ninth, Jake Fraley hit a broken-bat double and host Oakland set a major-league record of 28 games to begin a season without a win by the starting pitcher in a loss to Cincinnati.

Red Sox 8, Guardians 7 (10):

Alex Verdugo drove in the winning run to cap a two-run 10th inning for host Boston, which rallied for a win over Cleveland despite blowing the lead an inning earlier.

Blue Jays 1, Mariners 0 (10): Daulton Varsho singled with the bases loaded in the 10th and host Toronto won its sixth straight victory after Seattle pitcher Easton McGee took a no-hitter into the seventh inning of his first major league start.

Royals 3, Twins 2: Joao Duran's wild pitch allowed Edward Olivares to score the tie-breaking run in the ninth inning, and visiting Kansas City ended a nine-game losing streak at Target Field.

Marlins 7, Cubs 6: Jesús Sánchez hit a two-run double in host Miami's five-run first inning, and the team held on to beat Chicago.