

Admiral warns of Chinese aggression

Bloomberg News

China is rapidly becoming more aggressive in its rhetoric and actions across Asia, the outgoing head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said, as Beijing turned up the heat on Washington just before Secretary of State Antony Blinken heads to the country for a high-stakes visit.

“We all need to understand that it’s moving very fast,” Adm. John Aquilino told reporters in Tokyo on Tuesday. “The buildup of military power despite a bad economy, the increased narrative of all things inside the 10-dash line are Chinese sovereign territory, then the actions that are going toward enforcement.”

His comments came as the U.S. seeks to build up a network of relationships with partners across the region to counter China — a move that has been condemned by Beijing. At the same time, Blinken is set to use his first trip to China since mid-2023 to convey U.S. concerns about Chinese companies providing support to Russia’s war machine and seek to avoid derailing Washington’s ties with Beijing.

In a Foreign Ministry statement released Tuesday, China launched its harshest attack to date on U.S. complaints about industrial overcapacity, signaling Blinken may be in for some difficult conversations during his visit that runs from

Wednesday to Friday.

Aquilino, who is preparing to step down after serving three years in the regional role overseeing 380,000 personnel, said China’s actions in the South China Sea were dangerous and destabilizing.

Tensions have grown around the Second Thomas Shoal, where the Philippines maintains a grounded World War II-era ship and Chinese vessels have used water cannons to block Philippine military missions that rotate and resupply troops on the vessel.

He also criticized China for “an increasingly aggressive campaign plan of coercion and pressure,” around Taiwan, including increased maritime

patrols and continued crossing of a central line meant to prevent miscalculations.

Blinken is also likely to reiterate U.S. support for Taiwan before Lai Ching-te’s inauguration as president in May, which could prompt a response from Beijing.

China lashed out at Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida after his recent visit to Washington, where he bolstered ties with the U.S. and took part in the first trilateral summit with the Philippines. Beijing’s military also criticized “a certain non-regional country” for building “small cliques,” which it said were “irresponsible and extremely dangerous.”

North Korea: Tests were to practice counterattacks

BY DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea’s launch of several short-range ballistic missiles Monday was an exercise in counterattacking the United States and South Korea with nuclear warheads, according to the North’s state media.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un presided over the drill that involved at least four mobile transporter-erector launchers, said a report and photos released Tuesday by the Korean Central News Agency.

The missiles flew approximately 190 miles before falling into the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, according to South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the launches posed no im-

mediate threat to U.S. personnel, territory or its allies, according to a statement Monday.

The North has yet to prove its missiles could be tipped with a nuclear warhead, South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Lee Seong-joon said Tuesday. Monday’s exercise may have served as cover for a delayed spy satellite launch, he added.

“If North Korea attempts to use nuclear weapons, it will be faced with an immediate ... response from the South Korea-U.S. alliance,” Lee said during a news conference in Seoul.

KCNA’s report described the projectiles as 600 mm rockets that flew from an undisclosed site before hitting a simulated maritime target roughly 220 miles away, or within range of Seoul.

North Korea frequently describes its missiles as rockets. KCNA previously reported 600 mm rockets were fired from multiple launchers during a drill March 18; South Korea and Japan called the weapons short-range ballistic missiles.

North Korea has been prohibited by the U.N. Security Council from firing ballistic missiles since 2006.

Monday’s launches were part of North Korea’s nuclear counterattack system and served as a “clear warning” against the U.S. and South Korea’s war-mongering, KCNA said.

The report referred to the U.S. and South Korea’s largest annual air drill ending Friday and criticized the allies’ description of it being defensive in nature.

The two-week Korea Flying

Training exercise includes 25 types of aircraft from both countries, according to 7th Air Force. On Friday, around 200 U.S. and South Korean special operations soldiers jumped out of U.S. C-17 Globemaster IIIs and U.S. and South Korean C-130 Hercules as part of the exercise.

KCNA’s report called the allies’ parachute drill a provocative “joint airborne infiltration drill” ... to “remove a target.”

The U.S. condemned North Korea’s launches, which will be on Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s agenda when he travels to China, a North Korean ally since 1961, for talks with senior officials starting Wednesday, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said during a news conference in Washington, D.C., on Monday.

DOD seeks new turf for Africa operations

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military is doubling down on its counterterrorism mission in western Africa, even as it faces eviction from strategic bases in Niger, a dwindling number of able partners and a terrorism threat that poses little danger to the American homeland.

U.S. Africa Command has been left scrambling for alternatives to carry out surveillance operations across an expanse of territory where terrorist attacks have been on the rise.

The Defense Department is coordinating with Niger on the departure of more than 1,000 troops from the country, which for years was the centerpiece of U.S. security strategy in the Sahel region before a July coup upended everything.

"We'll continue to explore options to ensure that we can continue to conduct the kinds of coun-

terterrorism, advising, assisting and operations that we need to," Pentagon spokesman Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said Monday.

The turn of events in Niger comes only five years after the opening of a \$110 million drone base in the city of Agadez, an Air Force project that was touted as the largest airmen-led construction effort in history.

"There is no avoiding that the loss of access to the two air bases in Niger is a setback not only for the United States, but also its allies and partners, both African and beyond," said J. Peter Pham, who served as a special U.S. envoy to the Sahel during the Trump administration.

The U.S. campaign in Niger included a second drone base in the capital, Niamey. In the wake of the withdrawal from the country, a broader review of the American approach across the Sahel is needed, some analysts say.

But with the Pentagon already scouting basing alternatives in the region, which stretches across North Africa along the Sahara Desert, there has been no signal of any major strategy shift.

"That suggests to me that there is no pause," said Cameron Hudson, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "There probably isn't a whole lot of time for what I would consider to be a thoughtful reflection on what just happened. And that's a little scary, quite frankly."

Operations have been going on there for decades, picking up momentum after 9/11, when the idea of nipping in the bud terrorism threats in far-flung places became a focal point. But while terrorism concerns brought U.S. forces to the region, the threats posed across the Sahel are largely localized, analysts argue.

"There's a real possibility that we have overinflated and over-

stated the direct threat to vital U.S. interests in the region and beyond," Hudson said.

A mix of militant groups operates across the Sahel, some of which advertise themselves as affiliates of Islamic State or al-Qaida. But the groups bear little resemblance to the parent terrorist organizations that made their names carrying out attacks such as those on Sept. 11, 2001, or the ISIS march across Iraq and Syria several years ago.

In the Sahel, a string of coups has complicated U.S. efforts to coordinate with governments, not only in Niger but also in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Last week, another U.S. partner in Africa, Chad, made threats about denying access to a base where a small number of U.S. troops operate. While it's not yet clear how that situation will play out, the broader picture shows the United States losing sway.

Publisher testifies he vowed to suppress anti-Trump info

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A veteran tabloid publisher testified Tuesday that he pledged to be Donald Trump's "eyes and ears" during his 2016 presidential campaign, recounting how he promised the then-candidate that he would help suppress stories that had the potential to harm the Republican's election bid.

The testimony from David Pecker was designed to bolster prosecutors' assertions of a decadeslong friendship between Trump and the former publisher of the National Enquirer that culminated in an agreement to give the candidate a heads-up on negative tips and stories so they could be quashed.

Pecker is the first witness in Trump's historic hush money

trial in Manhattan, where he faces 34 felony counts of falsifying business records in connection with payments meant to prevent harmful stories from surfacing during the final days of the 2016 campaign. The stories included a porn actor's claims of an extramarital sexual encounter a decade earlier.

The effort to suppress unflattering information was designed to influence the election, prosecutors have alleged in seeking to elevate the gravity of the first trial of a former American president.

Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee in 2024, has thrust his legal jeopardy into the center of his presidential campaign as he lambastes this case and the three others he faces as examples of political persecution.

Abu Ghraib jury deliberates

Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — A lawyer for the military contractor being sued by three survivors of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq told jurors Monday that the plaintiffs are suing the wrong people.

"If you believe they were abused ... tell them to make their claim against the U.S. government," said John O'Connor, defense attorney for Reston, Va.-based military contractor CACI, during closing arguments at the civil trial in federal court. "Why didn't they sue the people who actively abused them?"

The lawsuit brought by the three former Abu Ghraib detainees marks the first time a U.S. jury has weighed claims of abuse at the prison, which was the site of a worldwide scandal 20 years ago when photos became public

showing U.S. soldiers smiling as they inflicted abusive and humiliating treatment on detainees in the months after the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The suit alleges that civilian interrogators supplied by CACI contributed to the torture the plaintiffs experienced by conspiring with military police to "soften up" detainees for interrogations.

CACI, in its closing arguments, relied in part on a legal theory known as the "borrowed servant doctrine," which states an employer can't be liable for its employees' conduct if another entity is controlling and directing those employees' work. In this case, CACI says the Army was directing and controlling its employees in their work as interrogators.

Jurors deliberated about three hours Monday. Deliberations are to resume Wednesday.

Aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan heads to Senate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate returned to Washington on Tuesday to vote on \$95 billion in war aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, the final congressional steps to send the legislation to President Joe Biden's desk after months of delays and contentious internal debate over how involved the United States should be abroad.

The \$61 billion for Ukraine comes as the war-torn country desperately needs new firepower and as Russian President Vladimir Putin has stepped up his attacks. Ukrainian soldiers have struggled to hold the front lines as Russia has seized the momentum on the battlefield and gained significant territory.

Biden told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Monday the U.S. will send badly needed air defense weaponry as soon as the legislation is passed. The House approved the package Saturday in a series of four votes, sending it back to the Senate for final approval.

"The President has assured me that the package will be approved quickly and that it will be powerful, strengthening our air defense as well as long-range and artillery capabilities," Zelenskyy said on X.

The Pentagon is poised to send an initial \$1 billion package of military aid to Ukraine, U.S. officials said Tuesday as the Senate began debate on long-awaited legislation to fund the weapons Kyiv desperately needs to stall gains being made by Russian forces in the war.

The legislation also would send \$26 billion in wartime assistance to Israel and humanitarian relief to citizens of Gaza,

and \$8 billion to counter China in Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific. In an effort to gain more votes, Republicans in the House majority also added a bill to the package that could ban the social media app TikTok in the U.S. if its Chinese owners do not sell their stake within a year.

The foreign aid portion of the bill is similar to what the Senate passed in February with some minor changes and additions, including the TikTok bill and a stipulation that \$9 billion of the economic assistance to Ukraine is in the form of "forgivable loans."

Opening the Senate on Tuesday morning, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the coming vote was "six months in the making."

"Let us not keep our friends around the world waiting for a moment longer," Schumer said.

The package has had broad congressional support since Biden first requested the money last summer. But congressional leaders had to navigate strong opposition from a growing number of conservatives who question U.S. involvement in foreign wars and argue that Congress should be focused instead on the surge of migration at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The growing fault line in the GOP between those conservatives who are skeptical of the aid and the more traditional, "Reagan Republicans" who strongly support it may prove to be career-defining for the two top Republican leaders.

The Senate could pass the aid package, now combined back into one bill, as soon as Tuesday if senators are able to agree on the timing for a vote.

Pro-Palestinian protests sweep campuses in US

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Columbia University's main campus will switch to hybrid learning — giving students the option to attend classes online rather than in person — for the rest of the semester amid protests over Israel's war with Hamas that have roiled colleges across the U.S.

Tensions have risen since more than 100 pro-Palestinian demonstrators who had camped out on Columbia's upper Manhattan campus were arrested last week.

The arrests sparked renewed anti-war protests and encampments, including at New York University a few miles south of Columbia, where an encampment swelled to hundreds of protesters and police made arrests Monday night.

Across the country, Califor-

nia State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, announced that its campus will be closed through Wednesday after demonstrators occupied a building Monday night. Classes were to be conducted remotely, the school said on its website.

At the University of Michigan, protesters had set up more than 30 tents on the central part of the Ann Arbor campus called the Diag.

In Connecticut, police on Monday arrested 60 protesters at Yale University, including 47 Yale students, after they refused to leave an encampment on Beinecke Plaza.

At the University of Minnesota, nine anti-war protesters were arrested Tuesday after police took down an encampment a couple of hours after it was set up in front of the library.

Google fires more workers who protested Israel deal

Associated Press

Google fired at least 20 more workers in the aftermath of protests over technology the company is supplying the Israeli government amid the Gaza war, bringing the total number of terminated staff to more than 50, a group representing the workers said.

It's the latest sign of internal turmoil at the tech giant centered on "Project Nimbus," a \$1.2 billion contract signed in 2021 for Google and Amazon to provide the Israeli government with cloud computing and artificial intelligence services.

Workers held sit-in protests last week at Google offices in New York and Sunnyvale, Calif. The company responded by calling the police, who made arrests.

The group organizing the protests, No Tech For Apartheid, said the company fired 30 work-

ers last week.

Then, on Monday night, Google fired "over 20" more staffers, "including non-participating bystanders during last week's protests," said Jane Chung, a spokeswoman for No Tech For Apartheid, without providing a more specific number.

"Google's aims are clear: the corporation is attempting to quash dissent, silence its workers, and reassert its power over them," Chung said in a news release. "In its attempts to do so, Google has decided to unceremoniously, and without due process, upend the livelihoods of over 50 of its own workers."

The company disputed the group's claims, saying that it carefully confirmed that "every single one of those whose employment was terminated was personally and definitively involved in disruptive activity inside our buildings."

Missile strike destroys Ukrainian TV tower

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said a Russian missile strike that smashed a television tower in Kharkiv was part of the Kremlin's ongoing effort to intimidate Ukraine's second-largest city, which in recent weeks has come under increasingly frequent attack.

The strike sought to "make the terror visible to the whole city and to try to limit Kharkiv's connection and access to information," Zelenskyy said in a Monday evening address.

The northeastern Kharkiv region straddles the approximately 600-mile front line where Ukrainian and Russian forces have been locked in battle for more than two years since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The front line has changed little during a war of attrition, focused mostly on artillery, drones and trenches.

Since late March, Russia has stepped up the pressure on Kharkiv, apparently aiming to exploit Ukraine's shortage of air defense systems. It has pounded the local power grid

and hit apartment blocks.

On Monday, a Russian Kh-59 missile struck Kharkiv's 820-foot-high TV tower, breaking it roughly in half and halting transmissions.

A Washington think tank said Russia may be eyeing a ground assault on Kharkiv.

"The Kremlin is conducting a concerted air and information operation to destroy Kharkiv City, convince Ukrainians to flee and internally displace millions of Ukrainians ahead of a possible future Russian offensive operation against the

city or elsewhere in Ukraine," the Institute for the Study of War said in an assessment. The expected arrival in Ukraine in weeks of new military aid from its Western partners possibly has prompted Russia to escalate its attacks before the help arrives, the ISW said, adding that trying to capture Kharkiv would be "a significant challenge" for the Kremlin's forces.

The U.S. Senate returned to Washington on Tuesday to vote on \$61 billion in war aid to Ukraine after months of delays.

Iran air defense radar hit in likely Israel attack

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Satellite photos taken Monday suggested an apparent Israeli retaliatory strike targeting Iran's central city of Isfahan hit a radar system for a Russian-made air defense battery, contradicting repeated denials by officials in Tehran of any damage in the assault.

The strike on an S-300 radar in what appears to have been a very limited strike by the Israelis would represent far more damage done than in the massive drone-and-missile attack Iran unleashed against Israel on April 13. That may be why Iranian officials up to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have been trying to dismiss discussing what the attack actually did on Iranian soil.

Analysts believe both Iran and Israel, regional archrivals locked in a shadow war for years, are now trying to dial back tensions following a series of escalatory attacks between them as the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip still rages and inflames the wider region. But a strike on the most advanced air defense system Iran possesses and uses to protect its nuclear sites sends a message, experts said.

"This strike shows Israel has the ability to penetrate Iran's air defense systems," said Nicole Grajewski, a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment's nuclear policy program. "The precision of it was quite remarkable."

The satellite images by Planet Labs PBC taken Monday morning near Isfahan's dual-use airport and air base, some 200 miles south of Tehran, showed an area nearby that served as a deployment point for the air defense system. Burn marks sit around what analysts including Chris Biggers, a consultant former government imagery analyst, had previously identified as a "flap-lid" radar system used for the S-300.

Less-detailed satellite images taken after Friday showed similar burn marks around the area, though it wasn't clear what was at the site.

Biggers said other components of the missile system appeared to have been removed from the site — even though they provide defensive cover for Iran's underground Natanz nuclear enrichment facility.

"That's a powerful statement, given the system, the location, and how they use it," Biggers wrote.

Ship owner, manager accused of negligence in bridge crash

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — The owner and manager of the massive container ship that took down the Francis Scott Key Bridge last month should be held fully liable for the deadly collapse, according to court papers filed Monday on behalf of Baltimore's mayor and city council.

The two companies filed a petition soon after the March 26 collapse asking a court to cap their liability under a pre-Civil War provision of an 1851 maritime law — a routine but important procedure for such cases. A federal court in Maryland will ultimately decide who's responsible and how much they owe in what could become one of the most expensive maritime disasters in history.

Singapore-based Grace Ocean Private Ltd. owns the Dali, the vessel that veered off course and slammed into the bridge. Synergy Marine Pte Ltd., also based in Singapore, is the ship's manager.

In their filing Monday, attorneys for the city accused them of negligence, arguing the companies should have realized the Dali was unfit for its voyage and manned the ship with a competent crew, among other issues.

A spokesperson for the companies said Monday that it would be inappropriate to comment on the pending litigation.

The ship was headed to Sri Lanka when it lost power shortly after leaving Baltimore and struck one of the bridge's support columns, collapsing the span and sending six members of a roadwork crew plunging to their deaths.

"For more than four decades, cargo ships made thousands of trips every year under the Key Bridge without incident," the city's complaint reads. "There was nothing about March 26, 2024 that should have changed that."

FBI agents boarded the stalled ship last week amid a criminal investigation. A separate federal probe by the National Transportation Safety Board will include an inquiry into whether the ship experienced power issues before starting its voyage, officials have said. That investigation will focus generally on the Dali's electrical system.

Lawyers representing victims of the collapse and their families have also pledged to hold the companies accountable and oppose their request for limited liability.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Pot-themed license plates up for bidding

CO DENVER — Coloradans had until 4:20 p.m. on Saturday to bid for the rights to cannabis-themed license plates in a state auction.

The annual auction featured 10 phrases, including 420, CO-HEMP, HASHISH, HILIFE, REEFER, among others. Proceeds from the auction will go toward grants and state programs to support people with disabilities.

Since the auction launched in 2021, the state has raised more than \$96,000, according to a news release from the governor's office.

Bidders can win the right to own the use of the marijuana phrases on their state license plates or they can buy a novelty plate and keep the right to use that phrase in the future. Winners could also choose to resell the license plate phrase through the state's Disability Funding Committee.

USC cancels graduation keynote by filmmaker

CA LOS ANGELES — The University of Southern California further shook up its commencement plans Friday, announcing the cancellation of a keynote speech by filmmaker Jon M. Chu just days after making the controversial choice to disallow the student valedictorian from speaking.

The private university in Los Angeles on Monday said it was canceling valedictorian Asna Tabassum's speech at the May 10 ceremony because of safety concerns. Tabassum, who is

Muslim, has expressed support for Palestinians in the ongoing Israel-Hamas war, and university officials said the response to her selection as valedictorian had "taken on an alarming tenor." They did not cite any specific threats.

The university's decision was met with praise from pro-Israel organizations but condemnation from free speech groups and the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Students and faculty marched across campus Thursday in silent protest of the university's decision.

Diver escapes alligator attack by risking arm

SC GOOSE CREEK — Out of air and pinned by an alligator to the bottom of the Cooper River in South Carolina, Will Georgitis decided his only chance to survive might be to lose his arm.

The alligator had fixed his jaws around Georgitis' arm and after he tried to escape by stabbing it with the screwdriver he uses to pry fossilized shark teeth off the riverbed, the gator shook the diver and dragged him 50 feet down, Georgitis told The Post and Courier.

The alligator attacked Georgitis on April 15 as he surfaced from his dive, nearly out of air. His tank emptied with the gator's jaws crushing the arm he put up in defense. Georgitis figured he had one last chance and managed to rip his arm out without ripping it off.

Georgitis frantically swam to a friend's waiting boat and was taken to shore and the hospital. His arm was broken and he needed "a ton" of staples to close up the wounds from the

alligator's teeth, he said.

Designer who smuggled crocodile bags gets jail

FL MIAMI — A leading fashion designer whose accessories were used by celebrities from Britney Spears to the cast of the "Sex and the City" TV series was sentenced Monday to 18 months in prison after pleading guilty in Miami federal court on charges of smuggling crocodile handbags from her native Colombia.

Nancy Gonzalez was arrested in 2022 in Cali, Colombia, and later extradited to the United States for running a sprawling multiyear conspiracy that involved recruiting couriers to transport her high-end handbags on commercial flights to high-end showrooms and New York fashion events — all in violation of U.S. wildlife laws.

Lawyers for Gonzalez have sought leniency for the celebrity designer, describing her journey as a divorced single mother of two children in Cali who designed belts on a home sewing machine for friends into a fashion icon who could compete with the likes of Dior, Prada and Gucci.

The government countered that she had acquired great wealth and an opulent lifestyle, however, which contrasted with the couriers she recruited to smuggle her merchandise into the United States.

Work starts on rail line connecting Vegas, LA

NV LAS VEGAS — Work began Monday on a \$12 billion high-speed pas-

senger rail line between Las Vegas and the Los Angeles area, with officials projecting millions of ticket-buyers will be boarding trains by 2028.

Brightline West, whose sister company operates a fast train between Miami and Orlando in Florida, aims to lay 218 miles of new track between a terminal to be built just south of the Las Vegas Strip and another new facility in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif. Almost the full distance is to be built in the median of Interstate 15, with a station stop in San Bernardino County's Victorville area.

Brightline aims to link other U.S. cities that are too near to each other for flying between them to make sense and too far for people to drive the distance, Brightline Holdings founder and Chairperson Wes Edens said.

CEO Mike Reininger has said the goal is to have trains operating in time for the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles in 2028.

LA mayor safe after break-in at residence

CA LOS ANGELES — Police in Los Angeles arrested a suspect following a break-in at the home of Mayor Karen Bass on Sunday morning, officials said.

Bass and her family were not harmed when a suspect gained access to Getty House, the LA mayor's official residence on Irving Boulevard.

The LAPD identified the suspect as Ephraim Matthew Hunter, 29, a city resident. He was being held on \$100,000 bail.

— From wire reports

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Murray, Nuggets overcome 20-point deficit

Associated Press

DENVER — Jamal Murray didn't even see the biggest basket of his career. At least not live, he didn't.

Murray swished a step-back 15-footer over Anthony Davis at the buzzer Monday night, giving the Denver Nuggets a stunning 101-99 win over the Los Angeles Lakers and capping a comeback from a 20-point second-half deficit.

Murray tumbled into the Nuggets' bench along with Davis just as his shot fluttered through the net and the roar from the crowd shook Ball Arena.

"I just lost my balance and fell. I think A.D. was in my way or somebody was in my way and I just heard everybody scream and that's how I knew it went in," said Murray, who was mobbed by his teammates after his bucket gave the reigning

NBA champions their 10th consecutive win over the Lakers.

More importantly, it gave Denver a 2-0 lead in their Western Conference series that shifts to Los Angeles for Game 3 Thursday night.

Murray missed 13 of his first 16 shots and was easily the most flustered, frazzled and frustrated of all his teammates when it appeared the Nuggets would lose to the Lakers for the first time in 494 days.

"I told my teammates when I was struggling, 'I'm gonna look for y'all,' and every single one of them told me to keep shooting," recounted Murray, who did just that in going 6-for-8 for 14 points in the fourth quarter to finish with 20 points.

Davis led the Lakers with 32 points, James had 26 and D'Angelo Russell added 23.

Cavaliers 96, Magic 86: Donovan Mitchell scored 23

points, Jarrett Allen had 20 rebounds and the Cleveland Cavaliers outlasted the Orlando Magic 96-86 on Monday night to take a 2-0 lead in their first-round Eastern Conference series.

Mitchell set the tone as the Cavs led from start to finish, just as they did in Game 1.

Evan Mobley added 17 points and Allen scored 16 — with nine offensive rebounds — for the Cavs.

Paolo Banchero scored 21 points and Franz Wagner 18 for the Magic, who have only come back to win one playoff series in 13 tries when losing the series opener. They're now in an even deeper hole.

Knicks 104, 76ers 101: Donte DiVincenzo made a go-ahead 3-pointer with 13 seconds remaining after a desperate scramble, and host New York beat Philadelphia to take a 2-0

lead in their first-round playoff series.

The Knicks trailed by five points within the final 30 seconds, on the verge of losing home-court advantage before a stunning rally, starting when Jalen Brunson finally got a shot to fall during an otherwise miserable night.

Brunson's 3-pointer from the corner bounced on the rim and fell in, cutting it to 101-99 with 27 seconds remaining. Josh Hart stole the ball from Tyrese Maxey to get the ball back for the Knicks, but DiVincenzo missed a 3-pointer. Isaiah Hartenstein grabbed the rebound and passed it to OG Anunoby, who got it back to DiVincenzo, who hit that one to make it 102-101.

Hartenstein then blocked Maxey's drive, Anunoby made two free throws, and the Knicks held on when Joel Embiid missed a 3-pointer at the buzzer.

Hurricanes rally late, stun Islanders to take 2-0 lead

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Carolina Hurricanes were down big at home in the NHL playoffs, playing desperate hockey full of withering long shifts in the offensive zone as they tried to rally.

They fought back long enough to give themselves a chance — then Sebastian Aho and Jordan Martinook pounced to complete an improbable comeback that will linger in franchise lore.

Aho scored the tying goal late in the third period, followed by Martinook with the winner 9 seconds later as the Hurricanes beat the New York Islanders 5-3 on Monday night, turning a three-goal deficit into a 2-0 lead in their first-round playoff series in unlikely fashion.

"It was a special night for sure," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "It's one of those games that we'll probably look back on for a long time."

Aho struck first by redirecting Andrei Svechnikov's shot at the right post behind Semjon Varlamov with 2:15 remaining to tie the game at 3. After an Islanders giveaway on the ensuing faceoff, Martinook raced down to beat Noah Dobson to the puck along the

boards and then pushed it toward the same post with a wraparound attempt from behind the net.

The puck banged off Varlamov's left skate and slipped into the net for the 4-3 lead with 2:06 to go, sending the Hurricanes players mobbing a jumping Martinook amid a roof-blowing roar from a shocked home crowd.

Maple Leafs 3, Bruins 2: Auston Matthews scored on a breakaway to snap a third-period tie with eight minutes left, and visiting Toronto beat Boston to knot its first-round playoff series at one game apiece.

Ilya Samsonov stopped 27 shots for the Maple Leafs, who snapped an eight-game losing streak against the Bruins over 534 days dating to November 2022. Max Domi and John Tavares also scored for Toronto, which hasn't beaten Boston in a playoff series since 1959.

Morgan Geekie and David Pastrnak scored for the Bruins. Linus Ullmark, starting as part of a goalie rotation even though Jeremy Swayman won Game 1 on Saturday, made 30 saves.

Golden Knights 4, Stars 3: Vegas captain Mark Stone scored quickly after missing two months, Tomas Hertl had a nifty goal in his playoff debut and the reigning Stanley Cup champions opened the defense of their title

with a win over top-seeded Dallas.

Jonathan Marchessault got his franchise-record 36th postseason goal for Vegas, while Brayden McNabb scored on a 50-foot sniper shot from against the boards in the second period. Jack Eichel and Noah Hanifin, a trade-deadline acquisition like Hertl, both had two assists.

The host Stars got goals from captain Jamie Benn, Jason Robertson and Marchment, who scored with 8:14 left.

Oilers 7, Kings 4: Zach Hyman had three goals and an assist for his first postseason hat trick, Connor McDavid had five assists and host Edmonton beat Los Angeles in Game 1 of their first-round playoff series.

Adam Henrique, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Leon Draisaitl and Warren Foegele also scored and Evan Bouchard chipped in with four assists for the Oilers, who had lost the first game of their last seven playoff series and had not won Game 1 of a series on home ice since 1990.

Mikey Anderson, Adrian Kempe, Pierre-Luc Dubois and Trevor Moore scored for the Kings, who were eliminated in the opening round by the Oilers in each of the previous two seasons. Cam Talbot had 38 saves.

A's top Yankees on ninth-inning homer

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Zack Gelof hit a two-run homer off Victor González in the ninth inning, and the Oakland Athletics stopped an eight-game losing streak in the Bronx by beating the Yankees 2-0 Monday following the ejection of New York manager Aaron Boone just five pitches in.

After New York's Carlos Rodón and Oakland's JP Sears matched each other with shutout ball, Abraham Toro reached off González (1-1) leading off the ninth when the pitcher slipped while trying to pick up his dribbler between the mound and the third-base line.

Gelof hit an opposite-field drive into the right-field seats on a flat sinker for his third home run this season.

Gelof had entered 3-for-19 against left-handers after hitting .167 (12-for-72) with one homer against them last year.

Tigers 7, Rays 1: Tarik Skubal struck out nine over six scoreless innings, Mark Canha and Parker Meadows homered, and visiting Detroit beat Tampa Bay.

The Tigers improved to 9-3 on the road this season.

Phillies 7, Reds 0: Ranger Suárez allowed two hits in seven innings and Kody Clemens hit a three-run homer as visiting Philadelphia extended its winning

streak to seven games with a victory over Cincinnati.

Suárez (4-0) ran his scoreless streak to 25 innings. He's won his last four starts, including a 112-pitch shutout against Colorado last Tuesday. This time, he yielded two singles, struck out five and walked one.

Pirates 4, Brewers 2: Oneil Cruz broke out of a slump with three hits, Jared Jones allowed one run in six innings and host Pittsburgh ended its skid at six games and halted the Brewers' four-game winning streak.

Cruz capped a three-run sixth with a two-out, two-run single. He also singled in the second and dropped a double into right-center in the fourth. The 6-foot-7 shortstop was 4-for-44 in his previous 12 games.

Braves 3, Marlins 0: Travis d'Arnaud hit his fifth home run in four games and Bryce Elder pitched 6⅔ spotless innings in his return from the minors as host Atlanta beat Miami.

David Fletcher capped a three-run fourth with an RBI single to help the Braves win for the seventh time in eight games.

Twins 7, White Sox 0: Max Kepler had two hits and three RBIs in his return from the injured list and host Minnesota beat Chicago.

Chris Paddack struck out 10 in seven innings to win as a

starter for the first time in nearly two years. Edouard Julien homered among his three hits for Minnesota.

Blue Jays 5, Royals 3: Bo Bichette had a bases-clearing triple, Daulton Varsho hit a two-run homer and visiting Toronto beat Kansas City.

Yusei Kikuchi (2-1) was efficient early, allowing one baserunner on 48 pitches in the first five innings.

Padres 3, Rockies 1: Dylan Cease permitted one hit in seven dominant innings and pinch-hitter Tyler Wade singled home the tiebreaking run in the eighth, sending visiting San Diego to a victory over struggling Colorado.

Cease (3-1) struck out eight and walked none, allowing only one baserunner in a 90-pitch outing. Acquired from the Chicago White Sox in a March 13 trade, the right-hander lowered his ERA to 1.82 — his best mark through five outings in six major league seasons.

Cardinals 5, Diamondbacks 3: Nolan Gorman snapped an 0-for-19 slump with a two-run homer in the bottom of the ninth inning that gave host St. Louis a walk-off victory over Arizona.

It was the fourth home run this season for Gorman, who entered as a defensive replacement in the eighth. Paul

Goldschmidt, who homered earlier, reached on an infield single before Gorman hit left-hander Kyle Nelson's only pitch into the right-field seats.

Giants 5, Mets 2: Michael Conforto homered against the team that drafted him in the first round a decade ago, helping to back rookie Keaton Winn's latest stellar outing as host San Francisco beat New York.

Nick Ahmed hit a two-run single in the second and Matt Chapman added a two-run double the next inning to support Winn (2-3). He struck out six while allowing four hits in six-plus innings, receiving a standing ovation when Ryan Walker relieved in the seventh after a leadoff walk to Francisco Lindor that was Winn's lone free pass.

Orioles 4, Angels 2: Craig Kimbrel struck out Mike Trout looking with the bases loaded for the final out, and visiting Baltimore beat Los Angeles for its seventh win in eight games.

James McCann and Colton Cowser homered and Adley Rutschman drove in two runs for the Orioles, who moved into first place in the AL East. They improved to 3-1 on their road trip while winning the 10,000th regular-season game in Angels history.

New York manager Boone ejected five pitches into game

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Aaron Boone didn't tie the record for fastest ejection. The New York Yankees manager did think it was among the most unjust dismissals.

Boone was thrown out of Monday's 2-0 loss to Oakland five pitches in by Hunter Wendelstedt over a remark the Yankees maintained was yelled by a fan behind the dugout, while the plate umpire said it was something shouted from the far end of New York's bench.

"It's embarrassing," Boone said. "I couldn't believe it."

Esteury Ruiz was hit on the back foot by Carlos Rodón's slider leading off the game.

Standing on the dugout steps, Boone raised his hands, questioning whether Ruiz swung at the pitch. First base umpire John Tumpane determined Ruiz did not swing and should go to first base.

After a called strike to Tyler Nevin, Wendelstedt removed his mask, took a few steps toward the Yankees' dugout and could be heard by a YES Network microphone yelling at Boone: "Hey, guess what? You're not yelling at me. I did what I'm supposed to do and checked! I'm looking for him to get hit

by the pitch! You got anything else to say, you're gone! OK?"

Wendelstedt pointed at Boone as he finished. Boone, leaning on the dugout rail with his left arm, held up his left hand as if to signal OK, then gave the umpire a thumbs-up.

As the umpire put his mask back on and walked behind catcher Shea Langeliers, a fan behind the dugout in a blue shirt appeared to yell at Wendelstedt. The umpire pulled off his mask and demonstratively waved his right arm in an arc, thumb extended, screaming: "Aaron, you're done!"

First-round QBs a coin-flip proposition

Associated Press

The Minnesota Vikings need a quarterback in this draft. That much is easy to see. The hard part is picking the right one — and determining what it's worth to them to get him.

With this top-flight class — featuring Caleb Williams, Jayden Daniels, Drake Maye and J.J. McCarthy — the Vikings are poised to set up their future with the 11th and 23rd overall picks that could be packaged together for a move into the top five.

But they realize no matter how well set up they are for a rookie with a quarterback-friendly coach in Kevin O'Connell and a superstar wide receiver in Justin Jefferson, there is no guarantee in this highly calculated yet no-better-than-a-coin-flip exercise of finding that franchise player in the NFL.

"I think our odds will be better than the margins. How good are those odds? Obviously, it's still a pretty risky thing," third-year general manager Kwesi Adofo-Mensah said. "But just because something's risky doesn't mean you're scared of it."

Teams are using premium draft picks on quarterbacks at an increasingly high rate. This draft is slated to be the eighth in the past nine years with at least three QBs taken in the first round, which matches the number of times that happened in the first 38 years of the common

draft era.

Quarterbacks could go with the top three picks for the fourth time ever with Chicago, Washington and New England all sorely in need of a passer who can turn the fortunes of a franchise. This draft could break a record with four quarterbacks possibly going in the top nine picks. Michael Penix and Bo Nix also under consideration for other QB-needy teams outside the top 10 like Denver and Las Vegas.

But for every Patrick Mahomes, there is a Josh Rosen.

"I think it would be hard to point to the results and say we've made progress, as sad as that is," NFL Network draft analyst Daniel Jeremiah said. "The more you look at it, I think there's more attention being paid now to maybe more so the environment than the actual quarterback, and knowing how to set the table for when you do take the quarterback, that he can be successful."

Never mind whether the player is a rhythm pocket passer, adept at ad-libbing, or somewhere in between.

"Different styles, that's not something to get carried away with. To me, it's more a focus of, 'Do we have the right play caller, the right offensive line to protect him, and do we have some guys he can get the ball to?'" Jeremiah said. "I think that seems to be what's going to

lead to these guys being a success or not."

The Vikings are banking on that.

"When we talk about these players, it's not just how good are they? It's how do we get the best version of themselves if they come to the Minnesota Vikings? We set up plans before they walk in the building," Adofo-Mensah said.

Still, the league-wide hit rate remains largely a tossup.

From the start of the rookie wage scale era in the 2011 draft through 2022, 38 quarterbacks have been drafted in the first round. Those QBs have essentially played at slightly below league-average rates early in their careers with a passer rating 1.5 points below league average over their first three seasons.

Twenty of those QBs were allowed to leave their original teams without even reaching the relatively low bar of receiving a second contract.

Getting a quarterback worthy of a second contract is no sign of success with many of those being no better than a mid-level performer like Daniel Jones, Ryan Tannehill, Blake Bortles and Carson Wentz.

Only five earned first- or second-team All-Pro honors. Only eight have led their teams to multiple playoff wins so far.

"I feel like it's really hard to evaluate quarterbacks, but you

just try to get better and try to understand what you did the last time that was really good and what you did last time that was really bad," said Commanders first-year general manager Adam Peters, who is aiming for better success picking a QB at No. 2 this year than he had as assistant GM in San Francisco when the 49ers took Trey Lance third overall in 2021.

The majority of those busts provided two seasons or fewer as regular starters as teams quickly moved on from failures like Jake Locker, Johnny Manziel, Paxton Lynch and of course Rosen, who spent time with a whopping seven teams over five years after Arizona traded up five spots to take him 10th overall in 2018.

Several teams were quickly forced back on the quarterback draft carousel. There were eight instances of a team using another first-round pick on a quarterback in the ensuing four drafts, including the Cardinals, who traded away Rosen after one year and took Kyler Murray first overall in 2019.

Chicago and New England could add to that count at the top of this draft with the Bears widely expected to draft Williams at No. 1 overall after trading away 2021 first-round QB Justin Fields and New England possibly using the third pick on a replacement for 2021 first-round Mac Jones.

Jets trade former No. 2 overall pick Wilson to Broncos

Associated Press

Zach Wilson was expected to be the face of the franchise for the New York Jets. Instead, he became a symbol of disappointment.

And now, the 2021 second overall draft pick will get the chance to rejuvenate his career with the Denver Broncos.

The Jets traded Wilson to the

Broncos on Monday, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press. The Jets are sending Wilson and a seventh-round pick in this week's NFL Draft to the Broncos for a sixth-round pick, the person said.

The person spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the teams haven't announced the deal. NFL Network

first reported the trade.

The Jets are parting ways with Wilson after three disappointing seasons. He came to the Jets with massive expectations after he was selected out of BYU because of his exceptional athletic ability and knack for making throws on the run. But he struggled mightily in his first two seasons in New York before

the Jets acquired Aaron Rodgers last offseason.

Wilson took over as the starter when Rodgers was injured, but he showed few signs of improvement from his first two years.

He had perhaps the best performance of his career, going 27-for-36 for 301 yards and two touchdowns, but suffered a concussion the following week.