

## Gaza protests intensify on US campuses

*Associated Press*

NEW YORK — Columbia University averted another confrontation between students and police early Wednesday, but the situation remained tense with campus officials saying it would continue talks with pro-Palestinian protesters for another 48 hours.

University President Minouche Shafik had set a midnight deadline to reach an agreement on clearing an encampment of protesters on campus but the school extended negotiations, saying it was making “important progress.” Student protesters had committed to dismantling and removing a significant number of tents, the New York Ivy League university said in a statement.

On Wednesday morning, the encampment appeared calm and a little smaller than the previous day.

Standoffs also persisted at other universities across the country, including California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, where protesters this week used furniture, tents, chains and zip ties to block a building’s entrance and barricade themselves inside. And new student encampments continued to pop up, including at Brown University in Rhode Island.

Police first tried to clear the encampment at Columbia last week, when they arrested more than 100 protesters. But the move backfired, acting as an inspiration for other students across the country to set up similar encampments and motivating protesters at Columbia to regroup.

Students protesting Israel’s war with Hamas are demanding schools cut financial ties to Israel and divest from companies

enabling its monthslong conflict. Dozens have been arrested on charges of trespassing or disorderly conduct. Some Jewish students say the protests have veered into antisemitism and made them afraid to set foot on campus.

The reprieve at Columbia came hours before Republican U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson planned to visit and meet with Jewish students to address antisemitism on college campuses.

Columbia said it had agreed with protest representatives that only students would remain at the encampment and they would make it welcoming, banning discriminatory or harassing language.

Elsewhere, at the University of Minnesota, Democratic U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar attended a protest late Tuesday, hours after nine protesters were arrest-

ed on the campus when police took down an encampment in front of the library. Hundreds had rallied in the afternoon to demand their release.

Omar’s daughter was among the demonstrators arrested at Columbia last week.

Also Tuesday night, police arrested over 200 protesters blocking traffic in Brooklyn, near the home of Sen. Chuck Schumer, during a non-college demonstration demanding a permanent cease-fire in Gaza. The protest was organized by Jewish Voice for Peace on the second night of Passover.

Students at some protests were hiding their identities. At an encampment of about 40 tents at the heart of the University of Michigan’s campus in Ann Arbor, almost every student wore a mask, which was handed to them when they entered.

## DOD says US pier for Gaza not started, but ‘on track’

**By COREY DICKSTEIN**

*Stars and Stripes*

Construction has yet to start on a temporary floating pier off Gaza’s coast, but the Pentagon expects it will be ready to flow new aid into the war-torn Palestinian enclave in the coming weeks, the Defense Department’s top spokesman said Tuesday.

All the Army and Navy troops needed to build the temporary dock and an 1,800-foot floating causeway from the Mediterranean Sea into northern Gaza have arrived in the region, Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder told reporters at the Pentagon. Even with construction of the makeshift port — known as a Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore, or

JLOTS — not started, Ryder said the Pentagon was confident it would be operating “by the end of this month or early May.”

The operation is meant to provide a new way to deliver badly needed aid into Gaza. The World Health Organization has warned some 2.3 million inhabitants face extreme hunger that could become a full-blown famine by next month amid the war launched by Israel in response to Hamas militants’ surprise Oct. 7 assault on Israelis.

Ryder has said the JLOTS operation could deliver some 2 million meals per day to Gaza.

“All the necessary vessels are within the Mediterranean region and standing by ... to begin construction when we’re given

the order to do that,” he said. “There is a process and procedure that will have to be followed ... and our planners have worked through the details of all the things one would expect [but] we’re on track at this point to implement that operational capability” in the coming weeks.

Ryder did not say Tuesday precisely how long it would take troops to build the port once construction begins.

President Joe Biden first announced the JLOTS operation would begin to bolster U.S. efforts to deliver aid to Gazans on March 7 during his State of the Union speech. One day later, Ryder said the JLOTS would be operational within about 60

days.

The Army last month sent four ships from the 7th Transportation Brigade at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Va., toward the Mediterranean to spearhead the operation.

The Navy also deployed two ships to help in the construction of the pier. One of those ships, the USNS 2nd Lt. John P. Bobo was forced to return to the United States last week after suffering an engine room fire. That incident does not appear to have altered the Pentagon’s planned timeline for the pier’s construction, according to Ryder on Tuesday.

The operation is expected to include about 1,000 American troops.

# Japan's pilots flying fewer intercept missions

BY HANA KUSUMOTO  
AND SETH ROBSON

*Stars and Stripes*

TOKYO — The number of flights Japanese fighter pilots made to intercept Chinese and Russian aircraft approaching Japan were down by 14% the past fiscal year, their lowest response in a decade, according to Japan's Ministry of Defense.

Data released Friday shows Japanese jets scrambled 669 times during Japanese fiscal year 2023, which ended March 31.

That's 109 fewer than the 778 scrambles Japanese pilots made the previous fiscal year and the lowest total since fiscal 2013.

Fighters are still intercepting foreign military aircraft at a high rate, Japan's Joint Staff said in a

statement released with the data.

There was only one violation of the country's airspace involving a Russian aircraft, according to the data, which did not offer further details.

"Since fiscal 2013, the number of scrambles continues to be at a high level, with over about 700 scrambles conducted every fiscal year, and military aircraft continue to be active around Japan," the release said.

Chinese aircraft were the most likely to approach Japan, provoking 479 scrambles during the past fiscal year. That's down from 575 scrambles against Chinese aircraft the previous year.

Japanese pilots scrambled 174 times against approaching Russian planes in fiscal 2023, accord-

ing to the Defense Ministry release. The lowest response in a decade, 150 flights, occurred the previous year.

In June, Chinese aircraft passed between the Japanese islands of Miyako and Okinawa, according to the release. In June and December, Chinese and Russian bombers carried out a joint patrol over the East China Sea and Sea of Japan.

In August, a Chinese drone flew for the first time flew between Japan's Yonaguni Island and Taiwan and over Sea of Japan, the release said.

Defense Minister Minoru Kihara mentioned the flights at a news conference Friday.

"The Ministry of Defense and the Self-Defense Forces will con-

tinue to take all possible precautions to ensure vigilance and surveillance and take strict measures against airspace violations," he said.

Russian aircraft have noticeably reduced their activity near Japan since 2021, said James Brown, an international affairs expert at Temple University's Japan campus.

"Russia is trying to maintain the pretense that its military capabilities in the Pacific are unaffected by the war in Ukraine," he said Tuesday.

"In reality, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has limited its ability to show force in east Asia since so much of its equipment and men have been chewed up in the Ukrainian meat grinder."

## New chopper demoted after scorching White House lawn

*Bloomberg News*

WASHINGTON — The new presidential helicopter has been demoted to backup duty because Lockheed Martin still can't figure out how to keep it from scorching the White House's South Lawn.

The VH-92 Patriot is landing only on paved runways for now, flying missions with White House officials or Secret Service staff instead of carrying President Joe Biden. The problem is due to an issue first identified in 2018 — the helicopter's spinning rotors and engine exhaust sometimes scorch the grass where it lands.

With its "white top" paint job, Marine One — its designation when the president is on board — is as much a symbol of the presidency as Air Force One. Reporters and White House guests often gather to watch the president depart from its traditional takeoff spot on the South Lawn.

For the time being, the helicopter doing that job will remain the VH-3D Sea King, which like the

VH-92 is built by Lockheed's Sikorsky unit.

Lockheed has so far delivered 20 VH-92 helicopters to the Marine Corps under the \$5 billion program, Lockheed spokeswoman Melissa Chadwick said.

She said the company believes it's found a fix and will start testing soon.

"We have been working in close collaboration with our customer and have an agreed upon landing zone solution with testing planned to validate and ensure the aircraft meets that specific operational requirement," Chadwick said.

According to a White House official, who asked not to be identified discussing private conversations, engineering and design work is underway to see if fixes can be made to prevent grass damage under hot environmental conditions when rotors are turning. The White House declined to say when the helicopter will be ready to carry Biden.

## US Navy P-8 Poseidon to join hunt for Japanese helo crews

BY HANA KUSUMOTO  
AND ALEX WILSON

*Stars and Stripes*

TOKYO — The U.S. Navy is sending an aircraft to help scour the Pacific for seven Japanese aviators missing since two helicopters crashed on Saturday, Defense Minister Minoru Kihara said this week.

A P-8 Poseidon patrol and surveillance plane will join the search for two SH-60 Seahawk crews with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, he said at a press conference Tuesday. The helicopters went down during nighttime training about 370 miles south of Tokyo.

Kihara did not indicate when the Poseidon would begin its search. U.S. 7th Fleet spokeswoman Lt. Jamie Moroney acknowledged a request for comment Wednesday but was unable to provide an immediate response.

The Poseidon will join about 10 ships and five other aircraft from the Self-Defense Force and Japan

Coast Guard to comb the area where contact was lost with the helicopters, Kihara said. The search area, however, is steadily expanding over time due to the tides.

"In any case, we will carry out search and rescue operations with all our efforts to safely rescue all seven mission personnel as soon as possible," he added.

The Self-Defense Force's oceanographic research ship JS Shonan is also joining the mission, bringing with it the capability to search underwater and identify exactly where the helicopters sank.

The helicopters, both assigned to Japan's Fleet Air Wing 22, went missing at 10:38 p.m. Saturday during an anti-submarine warfare drill alongside a third helicopter about 170 miles east of Torishima in the Izu island chain.

Eight crewmembers were aboard the helicopters; one was found and confirmed dead Sunday.

# Biden signs \$95B foreign aid package

BY SVETLANA  
SHKOLNIKOVA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Wednesday signed the \$95 billion in foreign aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, ending months of political deadlock that saw the bill stall due to Republican opposition to arming Ukraine while Russia gained momentum on the battlefield.

“We rose to the moment. we came together and we got it done,” Biden said at a White House event to announce the signing. “Now we need to move fast, and we are.”

Senators approved the assistance package Tuesday in a 79-18 vote after the House this weekend passed a version of the legislation that allowed members to cast votes on aid to each country individually. The majority of House Republicans voted against continuing to help the Ukrainian military.

Most Senate Republicans rejected the isolationist stance of their colleagues in the House and stood in support of Kyiv.

“Take it from this senator, elected to this body alongside President [Ronald] Reagan: the conservative position is to believe in America, to invest in our military and to support freedom,” said Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa.

The legislation contains \$60 billion for Ukraine, \$26 billion for Israel’s military as well as humanitarian aid for civilians in the Gaza Strip and other conflict zones and \$8 billion for Taiwan and other partners in the Indo-Pacific region to counter China.

Several members of the Democratic caucus objected to the package due to its aid for Israel, condemning the destruction and suffering caused by the Israeli campaign against Hamas militants in Gaza.

Much of the funds for Ukraine

will go to the Pentagon to replenish American stockpiles of weapons and equipment sent to Ukraine, finance new purchases of weapons for Kyiv and pay for an intensified U.S. troop presence in Europe.

The bill also seeks the repayment of \$10 billion in economic assistance to the Ukrainian government, though it would also allow the forgiveness of the loans beginning in 2026.

Another measure would allow the selling of frozen Russian assets in the United States to finance Ukraine’s reconstruction.

Congress last approved a major tranche of funding for Ukraine in December 2022. The foreign aid package approved Tuesday was first requested by the White House in October and faced a tortuous path through Congress as Republicans resisted additional assistance for the Ukrainian war effort.

The Senate passed its own \$95 billion emergency aid legislation for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan in February after a deal pushed by Republicans to pair the bill with stricter immigration provisions unraveled amid criticism from former President Donald Trump.

A number of Senate Republicans flipped to support the aid package after voting against it in February.

The aid package approved Tuesday will reauthorize the Pentagon to pull up to \$7.8 billion worth of supplies for Ukraine from its inventories.

Minutes after senators cast their votes, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine thanked lawmakers for finally marshaling the aid package across the finish line.

“This vote reinforces America’s role as a beacon of democracy and the leader of the free world,” he wrote on social media.

## Court weighs state abortion ban even in an emergency

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Conservative Supreme Court justices appeared skeptical Wednesday that state abortion bans that took effect after the sweeping ruling overturning *Roe v. Wade* violate federal health care law, even during some medical emergencies.

The case marks the first time the Supreme Court has considered the implications of a state ban since the nationwide right to abortion was overturned. It comes from Idaho, which is among 14 states that now ban abortion at all stages of pregnancy with very limited exceptions.

While members of the high court’s conservative majority expressed concern about pregnant patients’ ability to get emergency care in the state, it was unclear whether any were swayed by the Biden administration’s argument.

The Justice Department has said abortions must be allowed in emergencies that seriously threaten a woman’s health un-

der a federal health care law that requires hospitals accepting Medicare to provide emergency care regardless of patients’ ability to pay.

“How can you impose restrictions on what Idaho can criminalize, simply because hospitals in Idaho have chosen to participate in Medicare?” said Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote the decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

Justices on the high court’s liberal minority, meanwhile, raised sharp questions about whether Idaho’s law was putting women’s health at risk.

“Within these rare cases, there’s a significant number where the woman’s life is not in peril, but she’s going to lose her reproductive organs. She’s going to lose the ability to have children in the future unless an abortion takes place,” Justice Elena Kagan said.

Idaho has contended its ban has exceptions for life-saving abortion, but allowing it in more medical emergencies would turn hospitals into “abortion enclaves.”

## Updates rules place limit on added sugars in school meals

*Associated Press*

The nation’s school meals will get a makeover under new nutrition standards that limit added sugars for the first time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced Wednesday.

The final rule also trims sodium in kids’ meals, although not by the 30% first proposed in 2023. And it continues to allow flavored milks — such as chocolate milk — with less sugar, rather than adopting an option that would have offered only unflavored milk to the youngest kids.

The aim is to improve nutrition and align with U.S. dietary guidelines in the program that provides breakfasts to more

than 15 million students and lunches to nearly 30 million students every day at a cost of about \$22.6 billion per year.

“All of this is designed to ensure that students have quality meals and that we meet parents’ expectations,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters.

The limits on added sugars would be required in the 2025-26 school year, starting with high-sugar foods such as cereal, yogurt and flavored milk. By the fall of 2027, added sugars in school meals would be limited to no more than 10% of the total calories per week for breakfasts and lunches, in addition to limits on sugar in specific products.



# Sigonella priest accuses chaplain of reprisal

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — A priest who worked at Naval Air Station Sigonella for over a decade contends in a recent complaint filed with the Defense Department Inspector General that his impending dismissal is an act of reprisal by a military chaplain.

The Rev. Frank Watts submitted the complaint April 17, saying he was singled out for punishment and other unfair treatment over the last year. Those actions in turn led to the Sicily base's refusal to renew his contract, which expires May 31, he said.

Watts said he was never informed of the decision by NAS Sigonella's chaplaincy, but learned about it through an email sent earlier this month by a base office responsible for contracts.

The chaplain whom Watts accuses of retaliating against him is on leave and wasn't immediately available to comment Wednesday. NAS Sigonella did not respond to a request to interview the chaplain.

A new contract for a priest "will be up for bid to those who are interested in serving the NAS Sigonella Catholic community," Lt. j.g. Andrea Perez, a base spokeswoman, said Wednesday. "Our goal is to avoid any lapse in support to our

Catholic community."

The reprisal allegation stems from an April 2023 disagreement between Watts and the chaplain about control over, and spending, of Sunday offerings from parishioners, according to Watts.

The chaplain wanted to use some of those funds for a project that was incompatible with the Sigonella Catholic community's traditional charitable outreach, said Watts, who has served at Sigonella since 2013.

Watts said he challenged the chaplain's effort to control how contributions were spent. Not long after, he found himself being called into the chaplain's office on allegations of rule violations, such as failing to meet office hour requirements, he said.

Watts said he signed a couple of disciplinary write-ups, including one for allowing his wife to use his computer with his DOD identification card, or CAC, inserted while she did ministry volunteer work.

He did not sign others, however, because they were false, Watts said.

Watts married while he was an Anglican clergyman, prior to his conversion in 2011. He served as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force from 2002 to 2011, according to a June 2013 story in Sigonella's *The Signature*.

The failure to renew his con-

tract may also be related to questions he asked about falsification of financial records and abuse of authority, Watts said.

He made a separate complaint to the Navy Region Europe, Africa, Central Inspector General in Naples about those issues April 12.

On Wednesday, the office said it would not investigate the matter and would refer it to base commander Capt. Aaron Shoemaker, according to an excerpt of an email from the Naples IG's office that Watts shared with *Stars and Stripes*.

Subsequent emails from the contracting office to Watts said work performance issues were why his contract wasn't renewed, and that his contract no longer met the needs of the department.

Watts countered the work performance contention by citing his many years of service at the base. He celebrated 287 Masses in 2023, according to data he provided to *Stars and Stripes*. That same year, he also performed three baptisms, 12 first Communions and 10 confirmations, according to the data.

"I can prove I've been doing my contract," Watts said. "I have a 10-year-long record of performance."

NAS Sigonella confirmed that Watts' contract will end next month, adding that an option to

renew it for a year won't be exercised.

Shoemaker will meet Thursday with Catholics in the base community to address concerns and questions, Perez said.

The contract for Sigonella's Catholic religious education program director also was allowed to lapse without renewal. Base officials didn't answer questions about that decision.

Alicia Fabbri, a civilian worker at the base, said she is concerned about the lack of transparency in the decision not to renew Watts' contract. Base officials have not explained to her and other parishioners the reasoning behind the decision, she said.

In addition, the possibility that Mass services may be reduced from five weekly to just one is troubling, as is the potential for youth programs to be disrupted, she said.

The congregation has 30 to 40 children, some of whom are preparing for their first Communion or looking forward to attending summer camp.

"To me, that plainly communicates you are not familiar with the needs of the Catholic community," said Fabbri, who also filed an IG complaint alleging that Watts was subjected to discrimination and retaliation. "We are not just a Sunday-only congregation."

## 20th anniversary tribute honors USS Firebolt service members

By SHANNON RENFROE  
*Stars and Stripes*

MANAMA, Bahrain — Hundreds of service members and senior military officials gathered at Naval Support Activity Bahrain on Wednesday to mark 20 years since a Persian Gulf suicide bombing killed three people aboard the patrol ship USS Firebolt.

Seven crew members set out from the Firebolt in an inflatable boat on April 24, 2004, to inspect fishing dhows lurking around protected Iraqi oil terminals in the Persian Gulf.

Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Nathan Bruckenthal, Navy Petty Officer 1st

Class Michael Pernaselli and Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Christopher Watts were killed when an explosive on one of the fishing boats detonated.

Four crew members risked their lives by swimming toward the victims and trying to save them.

Vice Adm. George Wikoff, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, delivered remarks that linked the tragedy 20 years ago to current events in the Middle East.

"Even as we speak, sailors, not unlike these three brave men, are facing down anti-ship ballistic missiles in the Red Sea

and the Gulf of Aden or boarding suspect vessels trafficking illegal narcotics or arms in the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Gulf," Wikoff said. "Like the heroes of the Firebolt, they sail unflinchingly into harm's way, knowing there's no such thing as a routine mission."

Former Firebolt crew members from over the years came to pay their respects Wednesday and talked about the impact of that day.

"Ceremonies are always humbling, especially if you have done some of the operations that caused this tragedy," said Master Chief Petty Officer Raul Valladares.

# UN seeks probe of mass graves in Gaza

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — The United Nations called Tuesday for “a clear, transparent and credible investigation” of mass graves uncovered at two major hospitals in war-torn Gaza that were raided by Israeli troops.

Credible investigators must have access to the sites, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters, and added that more journalists need to be able to work safely in Gaza to report on the facts.

Earlier Tuesday, U.N. human rights chief Volker Türk said he was “horrificed” by the destruction of the Shifa medical center in Gaza City and Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis as well as the reported discovery of mass graves in and around the facilities after the Israelis left. He called for independent and transparent investigations into the deaths, saying that “given the prevailing climate of impunity, this should include international investigators.”

“Hospitals are entitled to very

special protection under international humanitarian law,” Türk said. “And the intentional killing of civilians, detainees and others who are ‘hors de combat’ (incapable of engaging in combat) is a war crime.”

U.S. State Department spokesman Vedant Patel on Tuesday called the reports of mass graves at the hospitals “incredibly troubling” and said U.S. officials have asked the Israeli government for information.

The Israeli military said its forces exhumed bodies that Palestinians had buried earlier as part of its search for the remains of hostages captured by Hamas during its Oct. 7 attack that triggered the war. The military said bodies were examined in a respectful manner and those not belonging to Israeli hostages were returned to their place.

The Israeli military says it killed or detained hundreds of militants who had taken shelter inside the two hospital complexes, claims that could not be independently verified.

The Palestinian civil defense in the Gaza Strip said Monday that it had uncovered 283 bodies from a temporary burial ground inside the main hospital in Khan Younis that was built when Israeli forces were besieging the facility last month. At the time, people were not able to bury the dead in a cemetery and dug graves in the hospital yard, the group said.

The civil defense said some of the bodies were of people killed during the hospital siege. Others were killed when Israeli forces raided the hospital.

Palestinian health officials say the hospital raids have destroyed Gaza’s health sector as it tries to cope with the mounting toll from over six months of war.

The issue of who could or should conduct an investigation remains in question. For the United Nations to conduct an investigation, one of its major bodies would have to authorize it, Dujarric said.

“I think it’s not for anyone to prejudge the results or who would do it,” he said. “I think it

needs to be an investigation where there is access and there is credibility.”

The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, said after visiting Israel and the West Bank in December that a probe by the court into possible crimes by Hamas militants and Israeli forces “is a priority for my office.”

The discovery of the graves “is another reason why we need a cease-fire, why we need to see an end to this conflict, why we need to see greater access for humanitarians, for humanitarian goods, greater protection for hospitals” and for the release of Israeli hostages, Dujarric said Monday.

In the Hamas attack that launched the war, militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250 hostages.

In response, Israel’s air and ground offensive in Gaza, aimed at eliminating Hamas, has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials.

## Blast near ship may mark a new attack by Houthis

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — A ship near the strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait saw an explosion in the distance Wednesday, marking what may be a new attack by Yemen’s Houthi rebels through the crucial waterway for international trade.

The explosion, reported by the British military’s United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center, comes after a relative lull from the Houthis after they launched dozens of attacks on shipping in the region over Israel’s ongoing war on Hamas in

the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis did not immediately claim responsibility for the blast, but suspicion fell on the group as they’ve repeatedly targeted ships in the same area. It typically takes the Houthis several hours before acknowledging their assaults.

The explosion happened some 80 miles southeast of Djibouti in the Gulf of Aden.

“The master of a merchant vessel reports an explosion in the water a distance from the vessel,” the UKMTO said. “Vessel and

crew reported safe. Authorities are investigating.”

The private maritime security firm Ambrey separately reported the apparent attack.

The Houthis have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, seized one vessel and sank another since November, according to the U.S. Maritime Administration.

Houthi attacks have dropped in recent weeks as the rebels have been targeted by a U.S.-led airstrike campaign in Yemen and shipping through the Red Sea and

Gulf of Aden has declined because of the threat. American officials have speculated that the rebels may be running out of weapons as a result of the U.S.-led campaign against them and firing off drones and missiles steadily in the last months.

The Houthis have said they would continue their attacks until Israel ends its war in Gaza, which has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians. The war began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people and taking some 250 others hostage.

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# McDaniels, Timberwolves take 2-0 lead

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Jaden McDaniels scored 25 points for a career best in the playoffs and spearheaded another stifling defensive performance by the Minnesota Timberwolves in a 105-93 victory over the Phoenix Suns to take a 2-0 lead in their first-round series on Tuesday night.

Mike Conley and Rudy Gobert each had 18 points for the Wolves to offset a smothering of Anthony Edwards by the Suns, who held him to 15 points on 3-for-12 shooting after allowing him 33 in the opener.

The teams head to Phoenix for Game 3 on Friday night. Minnesota has held a 2-0 series lead only one other time in franchise history, against Denver in the first round in 2004 en route to a 4-1 series victory.

"Everyone down the list has shown they'll be willing to do whatever it takes to sacrifice whatever it is for betterment of the team," said Karl-Anthony Towns, who had 12 points.

Devin Booker scored 20 points, and Kevin Durant added 18 for the Suns, who failed to get their high-octane offense in gear.

"When they're scoring on us and we're not getting the right stops, we can't not be organized offensively," Suns coach Frank Vogel said. "We had too many possessions like that."

The big three of Booker, Durant and Bradley Beal combined to shoot 18 for 45, with McDaniels leading the list of reasons for the slump.

"We can see it. I can feel it. I can see them. It's tough," Gobert said. "No one likes going against the type of defense that we're playing right now."

After building an eight-point lead in the second quarter and taking a 51-50 edge into halftime, the Suns wore down while Towns got going after early foul trouble.

Phoenix lost guard Grayson Allen to an aggravated ankle sprain in the third quarter. Minnesota's momentum carried into the fourth quarter, and the crowd noise came with it. Conley found Gobert with a bounce pass off the pick-and-roll for an easy slam and an 84-76 lead the Wolves later extended to 19 points, before the 17-year veteran point guard swished a corner 3-pointer that electrified the arena.

The "Wolves in 4!" chant popped up in the final minutes.

"The building's been amazing. The fans have been unreal," coach Chris Finch said. "Our guys have risen to their energy, and we were locked in from the start."

The Wolves used a heavy dose of Edwards on the attack to deliver a 25-point win in Game 1 on Saturday, and the Suns never hesitated to send multiple defenders swarming into his space.

The Timberwolves had trouble making them pay, shooting 9 for 32 from 3-point range. The bench production that helped them dominate the opener waned a bit. The whistles were tighter this time, leading to a costly three-foul first quarter for Towns that kept him out until halftime.

But McDaniels, Gobert and anyone else wisely attacked the basket with abandon, making sure the Wolves could use their size advantage inside.

**Pacers 125, Bucks 108:** Pascal Siakam scored 37 points and visiting Indiana overcame another fantastic first-half performance from Damian Lillard to beat Milwaukee and tie their

Eastern Conference first-round playoff series at a game apiece.

Indiana snapped a 10-game playoff losing streak that began with a Game 7 loss to Cleveland in a first-round series in 2018.

Two nights after scoring all 35 of his points in the first half of the Bucks' 109-94 Game 1 victory, Lillard had 26 by halftime Tuesday and finished with 34.

Lillard didn't get enough help with two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo out due to a strained left calf.

**Mavericks 96, Clippers 93:** Luka Doncic scored 32 points and visiting Dallas overcame the return of superstar Kawhi Leonard to beat Los Angeles and tie their Western Conference first-round playoff series at a game apiece.

Leonard had 15 points and seven rebounds in 35 minutes of his first game since March 31. He hadn't played or had any contact practices during that stretch because of inflammation in his surgically repaired right knee.

Kyrie Irving added 23 points for the Mavs, who led most of the game two days after they trailed by 29 points in a 109-97 loss.

## 76ers' Maxey tops White for Most Improved Player

Associated Press

Tyrese Maxey was sixth in the Most Improved Player voting two years ago, a tribute to the jump he made between his first and second seasons in the NBA.

Voters thought the jump he made from his third year to his fourth was even more impressive.

Philadelphia's All-Star guard on Tuesday night was named the league's most improved this season. Maxey's scoring rose for the third consecutive year, and he finished the regular season averaging 25.9 points, 6.2

assists, 3.7 rebounds and 1.0 steals per game — all career bests.

It's not uncommon for players to see their numbers soar when given a new role, but that wasn't the case with Maxey. Consider: two years ago, he averaged 17.5 points, 4.3 assists, 3.2 rebounds and 0.7 steals in 35.3 minutes per game. This year, he topped all those numbers and averaged only 2.2 more minutes per contest.

"It feels great," Maxey said on the TNT broadcast where the award was announced. "Somebody like myself, who prides

myself on putting in a lot of work and outworking people and finding ways to get 1% better every single time I step in the gym, it feels good for that to come to light, honestly."

Maxey edged Chicago's Coby White in the voting. Houston's Alperen Sengun was third. White averaged 19.1 points, 4.5 rebounds and 5.1 assists per game — all career highs. Sengun averaged 21.1 points, 9.3 rebounds, 5.0 assists and 1.2 steals in 32.5 minutes per game — also all career highs.

Maxey got just over half of the first-place votes and that

pushed him just past White. Players got five points for a first-place vote, three for second and one for third. Maxey finished with 319 points to White's 305, but White appeared on 91 ballots compared with 79 appearances for Maxey.

Sengun finished with 92 points for third.

The awards were selected by a panel of 99 reporters and broadcasters who cover the league. Their ballots were due last week before the start of the play-in tournament. NBA awards take only the regular season into consideration.



# Braves top Marlins as Fried throws shutout

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Max Fried pitched a three-hitter for Atlanta's first nine-inning complete game since 2022, Adam Duvall had a two-run homer and the Atlanta Braves blanked the Miami Marlins for the second night in a row, 5-0 on Tuesday.

After a rough start to the season, Fried (2-0) looks like himself again. It took just 1 hour, 54 minutes for the left-hander to mow down the hapless Marlins, who have gone 20 innings without a run.

"I was just trying to get back to being who I am," Fried said. "Get ground balls, be on the attack."

Fried retired only two hitters in his first start of the season, giving up three runs at Philadelphia before he was lifted, and surrendered 10 hits and seven earned runs in 4½ innings in his next appearance vs. Arizona.

Since then, the left-hander has beaten the Marlins twice, giving up just one earned run in 15½ innings, and lowered his ERA to 4.97 after it stood at 40.50 after his first outing.

"I was looking in the seventh inning and his pitch count was where it should be in the fifth," Braves manager Brian Snitker said. "I had a good feeling he could go nine."

The left-hander used his slider more than he had all season, conceding that "it's a really good pitch that I had forgotten about a little bit." The strategy worked to near-perfection as he needed only 92 pitches — 69 of them strikes — to dispatch the free-swinging Marlins.

Fried fanned six and didn't walk anyone in the major leagues' fourth complete game this season.

**Pirates 2, Brewers 1:** Andrew McCutchen led off the bottom of the first with a home run for the second straight game, Bailey Falter took a shutout into the eighth inning and host Pittsburgh beat Milwaukee.

McCutchen hit the first pitch

of Tobias Myers' major league career down the left-field line for his 12th career leadoff homer and his 100th long ball at PNC Park. McCutchen is 5-for-8 in two games since manager Derek Shelton moved him to the top of the batting order, boosting his average from .173 to .233.

**Tigers 4, Rays 2:** Riley Greene went deep twice for his first multi-homer game, Mark Canha added a homer and visiting Detroit beat Tampa Bay.

The Tigers have won the first two of the three-game set and have won four of their last five games.

**Guardians 4, Red Sox 1:** Tyler Freeman and Bryan Rocchio had RBIs in the seventh inning when his team finally scored against Tanner Houck, and José Ramírez homered as host Cleveland kept up its scorching start with a win over Boston.

Houck (3-2) threw a three-hit shutout against the Guardians last week. He held them scoreless for six more innings before Freeman hit a run-scoring single and Rocchio added a sacrifice fly off reliever Brennan Bernardino.

**Reds 8, Phillies 1:** Elly De La Cruz hit a two-run home run, Christian Encarnacion-Strand went 3-for-4 with two RBIs and host Cincinnati ended Philadelphia's seven-game winning streak.

Cincinnati's Santiago Espinal also had three hits, including a solo homer in the eighth inning, his first since July 29. Fernando Cruz (1-1) pitched ⅔ of an inning in relief.

**Yankees 4, Athletics 3:** Anthony Rizzo snapped a lengthy power drought with a two-run homer that capped a four-run first inning, and host New York held on for a win over Oakland.

Giancarlo Stanton had a go-ahead double against Paul Blackburn (2-1) in the bottom half of the first and Rizzo hit his second home run of the season and his first since April 7. He had just one extra base hit in 54

at-bats between homers.

**Dodgers 4, Nationals 1:** Shohei Ohtani hit a 450-foot homer to the second deck in right field in his first trip to Nationals Park, and visiting Los Angeles beat Washington.

Ohtani's sixth homer of the season was the hardest-hit of his career at 118.7 mph. It was also the hardest-hit home run for a Dodgers player in the Statcast era, which began in 2015. The solo shot in the ninth inning off Matt Barnes made it 4-1 after pinch-hitter James Outman and Miguel Rojas drove in runs an inning earlier to put Los Angeles ahead.

**Royals 3, Blue Jays 2:** Bobby Witt Jr. delivered the go-ahead double in the fifth inning after a costly error by first baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr., and Kansas City's bullpen shut down visiting Toronto the rest of the way for the victory.

Chris Stratton (2-1) minimized the damage when he inherited a bases-loaded jam from Michael Wacha in the fifth. He also took care of the sixth before John Schreiber handled the seventh, and James McArthur breezed through the eighth and finished the ninth for his fifth save of the season.

**Mariners 4, Rangers 0:** Logan Gilbert allowed only two hits pitching into the seventh inning, Julio Rodríguez hit his first homer and visiting Seattle beat Texas, knocking the World Series champion out of first place for the first time this season.

Gilbert (2-0) struck out six and walked four while throwing 100 pitches over 6½ innings. It was the franchise-record 11th game in a row for the Mariners to have their starter pitch at least five innings and allow two earned runs or less.

**Twins 6, White Sox 5:** Alex Kirilloff hit a two-out, game-ending single after Byron Buxton led off the ninth inning with a tying homer, and host Minnesota beat major league-worst Chicago.

Chicago joined Cincinnati in 2022, Detroit in 2003, the St. Louis Browns in 1936 and the Cleveland Spiders in 1899 as the only teams to start 3-20. The 1988 Baltimore Orioles began 1-22.

**Diamondbacks 14, Cardinals 1:** Pavin Smith hit a grand slam and drove in a career-high six runs to help visiting Arizona to a win over St. Louis.

Christian Walker and Kevin Newman also homered for Arizona, which leads the majors with 148 runs.

**Cubs 7, Astros 2:** Mike Tauchman hit his first two homers of the season, and host Chicago took a five-run first-inning lead in a win that dropped Houston 10 games under .500 for the first time since 2016.

Cody Bellinger hit a two-run homer in the first off J.P. France (0-3) and Tauchman hit a three-run drive. He added a solo homer in the eighth against Seth Martinez and tied his career high of four RBIs.

**Rockies 7, Padres 4:** Brendan Rodgers hit a go-ahead grand slam in a five-run fourth inning, and host Colorado beat San Diego for just its second win in 10 games.

Colorado trailed 4-1 before Rodgers' first career slam, a drive into the left-field bleachers on an up-and-in fastball from Michael King (2-2) with an 0-2 count. Rodgers had not homered since Sept. 29 — he hit all four of his homers last year in a 10-day span.

**Giants 5, Mets 1:** Logan Webb pitched eight strong innings and extended his scoreless streak to 19 as host San Francisco beat New York.

Webb (3-1) won his third straight start, striking out four and scattering six hits with a walk. The 27-year-old right-hander recorded 15 ground ball outs.

**Angels 7, Orioles 4:** Mike Trout hit his first leadoff home run since 2012, and host Los Angeles defeated Baltimore to snap a five-game losing streak.

# Rangers take 2-0 series lead over Caps

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The New York Rangers withstood the strong bounce-back effort they anticipated from the Washington Capitals and held on to take a 2-0 lead in their first-round playoff series.

Vincent Trocheck and Mika Zibanejad each had a goal and an assist and the Presidents' Trophy-winning Rangers beat the scrappy Capitals 4-3 Tuesday night.

"I expected that tonight, the way it played out, physical and same attitude and directness inside of the game," New York coach Peter Laviolette said. "I thought our guys responded well. It was a hard-fought game."

Jack Roslovic and K'Andre Miller also scored for the Rangers, and Erik Gustafsson and Alexis Lafreniere each had two assists. Igor Shesterkin stopped 22 shots.

New York has had goals from eight players in the first two games of this series.

"It's been there all year," Zibanejad said. "Obviously when you come to these type of games we talk about needing everyone and everyone has been stepping up, playing

their roles and contributing."

New York, seeking its first Stanley Cup championship in 30 years, has won four straight and 12 of its last 15 games.

Tom Wilson had a goal and an assist, and Connor McMichael and Dylan Strome also scored for the Capitals. Charlie Lindgren finished with 23 saves.

**Panthers 3, Lightning 2 (OT):** Carter Verhaeghe lifted a backhand just under the crossbar 2:59 into overtime, and host Florida beat Tampa Bay for a 2-0 lead in their first-round playoff series.

It was the fifth OT winner in Verhaeghe's career, coming on a play where Matthew Tkachuk got the puck to Anton Lundell — who found Verhaeghe. He waited for Tampa Bay goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy to commit, then put the puck over him to end it.

Sam Bennett, who left with an injury in the second period when he appeared to get hit by teammate Brandon Montour's slap shot, and Vladimir Tarasenko scored for Florida. Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 21 shots, including some highlight-reel saves.

**Avalanche 5, Jets 2:** Artturi Lehkonen

had a goal and an assist and visiting Colorado scored four goals in the second period in a win over Winnipeg to tie the first-round playoff series at a game apiece.

Miles Wood, Zach Parise, Josh Manson and Valeri Nichushkin also scored for the Avalanche. Alexandar Georgiev made 28 saves for Colorado, a bounce-back effort after allowing seven goals on 23 shots in the series opener.

David Gustafsson and Mark Scheifele scored for the Jets. Connor Hellebuyck stopped 27 of 31 shots.

Game 3 of the best-of-seven series is scheduled for Friday night in Denver.

**Predators 4, Canucks 1:** Filip Forsberg scored a goal and had an assist, and visiting Nashville beat Vancouver to level the best-of-seven playoff series at 1-1.

Anthony Beauvillier — a former Canuck — also had a goal and an assist for the Predators, Colton Sissons and Kiefer Sherwood had goals and Juuse Saros made 17 saves.

Nikita Zadorov scored for a Vancouver team that struggled to get shots on net and experienced a series of unlucky bounces.

# Heisman Trophy returned to 2005 winner Bush

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Reggie Bush has been reinstated as the 2005 Heisman Trophy winner more than a decade after Southern California returned the award following an NCAA investigation that found he received what were impermissible benefits during his time with the Trojans, the Heisman Trust announced Wednesday.

"We are thrilled to welcome Reggie Bush back to the Heisman family in recognition of his collegiate accomplishments," said Michael Comerford, president of The Heisman Trophy Trust. "We considered the enormous changes in college athletics over the last several years in deciding that now is the right time to reinstate the Trophy for Reggie. We are so happy to welcome him back."

Bush had won the trophy awarded to the top player in college football after amassing more than 2,000 yards from

scrimmage and scoring 18 touchdowns in 2005. His 784 first-place votes were the fifth most in Heisman history.

The Heisman Trust has returned the trophy to Bush and the replica to USC. Bush will be invited to all future Heisman Trophy ceremonies.

## NFL investigation won't impact Falcons' draft

FLOWERY BRANCH, Ga. — The NFL's investigation of the Atlanta Falcons' possible violation of tampering policies before signing quarterback Kirk Cousins won't conclude before this week's NFL Draft.

For Falcons general manager Terry Fontenot, that means the team won't lose any draft picks this year as he looks to build around Cousins.

"The league has been very communicative with us and throughout the whole process," Fontenot said Tuesday.

"I really appreciate them.

We've obviously cooperated and provided them all the information. Again, not really any update from our end. We'll just continue to cooperate and control what you can control as we get ready for this draft. We're excited moving forward."

The Falcons have the No. 8 overall pick in the first round on Thursday night.

## Newgarden disqualified as IndyCar race winner

Team Penske suffered a humiliating disqualification Wednesday when reigning Indianapolis 500 winner Josef Newgarden was stripped of his victory in the season-opening race for manipulating his push-to-pass system.

Penske teammate Scott McLaughlin, who finished third in the opener on the downtown streets of St. Petersburg, Fla., was also disqualified. Will Power, who finished fourth at St.

Pete, was not penalized but docked 10 points.

Additionally, all three Penske entries were fined \$25,000 and forfeited all prize money associated with the race. Power has not been accused of any wrongdoing.

Roger Penske owns the race team, the IndyCar Series and Indianapolis Motor Speedway, host of the Indy 500.

"Very disappointing," Penske said in a text message to The Associated Press. "I am embarrassed."

The reverberations were immediate throughout the paddock.

The disqualifications gave the victory to Pato O'Ward, who finished second. It is the first win for McLaren's IndyCar team since 2022.

Although Newgarden is accused of cheating in the March 10 opener, IndyCar said the manipulation wasn't discovered until Sunday.