

Hormuz traffic still slow amid ceasefire US, Iran prepare for talks while Lebanon conflict remains unresolved

From staff and wire reports

Tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz remained effectively frozen Thursday as the fragile two-week ceasefire between Iran and U.S.-Israeli forces entered its second day.

The waterway, which accounts for a fifth of the globe's oil, is supposed to be free and open under the temporary agreement, according to U.S. officials.

But the ceasefire deal has so far done little to restore maritime traffic as Iran attempts to control the flow of ships, according to experts and ship-tracking data.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said Wednesday on X that any movement through the strait must occur in coordination with the Iranian

Armed Forces.

The same day, tankers in the Gulf received a radio broadcast warning them that they would be targeted with military strikes unless they first gained approval from Iranian authorities, according to *The Wall Street Journal*.

"If any vessel tries to transit without permission, [they] will be destroyed," the recording said.

As part of negotiations, Iran has requested control over the strait, including the ability to charge fees.

The *Financial Times*, citing a spokesperson for Iran's Oil, Gas and Petrochemical Products Exporters' Union, reported that Iran will demand shipping companies pay tolls in cryptocurrency during the two-week

ceasefire.

Meanwhile, the United States and Iran prepared for peace talks in Pakistan with issues such as Israel's offensive in Lebanon remaining unresolved.

Vice President JD Vance is expected to lead the American delegation in discussions scheduled for Islamabad on Saturday, while Iranian officials were due to arrive in the Pakistani capital on Thursday.

Both sides appear to have paused strikes across the region after President Donald Trump's announcement of a truce after nearly six weeks of fighting.

The exception is in Lebanon, where Israel's ongoing campaign against Tehran-aligned Hezbollah risks undermining the negotiations. Israel's mili-

tary on Thursday told residents in eight Beirut neighborhoods to leave ahead of strikes, after a major operation that killed more than 200 people the previous day.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he agreed to hold direct talks with Lebanon about the conflict, with the focus on disarming Hezbollah. Trump called the Israeli leader on Wednesday and asked him to scale back strikes to ensure the success of negotiations with Iran, NBC reported, citing an unidentified senior administration official.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said Israel's strikes in Lebanon are a "clear violation" of the ceasefire and "will render negotiations meaningless."

CNO: No aircraft carrier needed in SOUTHCOM

BY GARY WARNER

Stars and Stripes

The chief of naval operations wants to come up with an "enabling naval package" capable of responding in the U.S. Southern Command area without an aircraft carrier.

"I want to reserve the carrier ... for power projection and deterrence in the theaters that really need that kind of capability," Adm. Daryl Caudle said March 31 at the Maritime Security Dialogue in Washington, D.C. The event was co-hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the U.S. Naval Institute.

Since President Donald Trump took office in January

2025, the Navy has at times strained under a shift in strategic priorities and military activity around the world.

Caudle said commanders in all theaters want carriers as the paramount response to outside threats. But with China and Russia operating in the Indo-Pacific, the war in Ukraine, and the Middle East conflict that stretches from the Arabian Sea north to the Mediterranean Sea, the demand for carriers outstrips the supply when maintenance periods are factored into plans.

Congress requires that the Navy maintain a minimum of 11 aircraft carriers, but at any given time about a third are in

maintenance ranging from months to years. Others are training for a deployment or have just returned from months at sea.

Southern Command — which includes the Atlantic and Pacific on either side of Central and South America, along with the Caribbean — is a possible place to look at a different kind of response, Caudle said.

The key to the Southern Command region is "maritime domain awareness," Caudle said, essentially knowing what is going on at sea in the region in real time. Southern Command's "main problem set" is drug interdiction, traditionally handled by the U.S. Coast Guard, Caudle

said.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy promises to "provide President Trump with credible military options to use against narco-terrorists wherever they may be."

Last summer and fall, the Pentagon surged naval assets to the western Atlantic, Caribbean and eastern Pacific, major hubs for drug trafficking.

The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford and its strike group were part of the buildup. Instead of an invasion, U.S. special forces captured Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro, who was flown to the United States to face indictment on drug and other charges.

Trump eyes base moves amid NATO rift

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — President Donald Trump again took aim at NATO after a Wednesday meeting with its top official, calling the alliance unreliable as Washington weighs a plan to relocate bases in Europe to countries deemed more cooperative.

“NATO wasn’t there when we needed them, and they won’t be there if we need them again,” Trump posted on his Truth Social platform shortly after his White House meeting with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte.

The talks with Rutte occurred at a pivotal time for NATO, which Trump has blasted repeatedly during both of his terms as president.

The situation has raised ques-

tions about whether the large U.S. troop presence and network of bases in Europe could be used as leverage for reprisals.

Trump is considering punishing some NATO members for not supporting U.S. efforts in Iran, *The Wall Street Journal* reported Wednesday.

One option involves moving some U.S. bases to countries deemed more helpful during the conflict. Poland, Romania, Lithuania and Greece are countries that could stand to gain U.S. troops, U.S. officials told the newspaper.

Besides relocations, the plan also could target a U.S. base in at least one European country, possibly Spain or Germany, for closure, officials said.

The plan is in its early stages but is supported by some top

Trump officials, with the administration also considering a range of other options to punish allies, according to the newspaper report.

Trump has considered closing bases and relocating forces in Europe before. Toward the end of his first term, a plan emerged calling for the withdrawal of 12,000 troops from Germany, sending some elsewhere in Europe and others back to the U.S.

The proposal, ostensibly meant to punish Germany for not spending enough on defense, never came to fruition and was later canceled by President Joe Biden.

U.S. bases in Europe have been developed over decades and serve an array of functions, including projecting power far beyond the Continent. Making

significant changes to the current arrangement would be complex.

Ramstein Air Base in Germany, for example, is the U.S. military’s most significant base in Europe, and any effort to shift comparable operations elsewhere would require massive investments in infrastructure to replicate its capabilities.

Likewise, the elaborate training areas in Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels, referred to as the “crown jewel” of the Army’s presence in Europe, would be hard to duplicate elsewhere.

Even though Poland has gone to great lengths to build up facilities for U.S. forces, they remain austere compared with those in Germany and are not designed for large numbers of permanently stationed troops and families.

Trump’s threats resonate even after Iran war ceasefire

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump may have backed down on his Tuesday threat to eliminate the “whole” Iranian civilization, but Democrats hope his social media posts triggered enough outcry to buoy them to a congressional majority and, possibly, lead to a push to impeach Trump for the first time this term and the third time since he was first elected president in 2016.

Trump made the threat to eliminate the country with a population of more than 90 million amid ongoing negotiations to end the conflict between Iran and the U.S. On Tuesday night, Trump announced a two-week ceasefire, which would lead to Iran’s reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, but by Wednesday afternoon, it wasn’t clear if the ceasefire would hold.

Still, the harsh flavor of his rhetoric has galvanized Demo-

crats and even spurred concern from Republicans who are traditionally simpatico with the 47th president.

In the House, a growing group of Democrats are doubling down on calls to bring impeachment articles against Trump or invoke the 25th Amendment to remove him from the presidency, which would require support from the majority of Trump’s Cabinet.

“I’m relieved Trump did not destroy an entire civilization last night, but his unhinged threat and illegal war make it clear he is unfit to serve as president,” Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., wrote in a post Wednesday. “Trump needs to be removed from office.”

Two Democratic members — Reps. Shri Thanedar of Michigan and Jasmine Crockett of Texas — have sent letters to Trump’s Cabinet urging them to remove him, while other Democrats have issued statements supporting the

25th on social media. Rep. John Larson, D-Conn., introduced impeachment articles against Trump this week.

“Temporary ceasefire or not, Trump already committed an impeachable offense,” Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., wrote in a post. “Congress needs to get back to work and remove him from office before he does more damage to our country and the world.”

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., however, has yet to publicly call for Trump’s impeachment or removal. Since Trump’s threat, he has called on Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., to reconvene Congress early to pass a resolution to end the war with Iran.

By contrast, fewer Senate Democrats have called for impeachment or use of the 25th Amendment.

Both options are seen as unrealistic among most of the Senate

Democratic Conference: To convict Trump during an impeachment trial in the Senate requires a two-thirds vote, or 67 senators voting to remove him. That threshold was not met during the two impeachment hearings in Trump’s first term.

Deal with Iran or not, it appears Democrats’ calls for Johnson and Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., to reconvene Congress early and address Iran have fallen on deaf ears. Neither chamber is scheduled to return to D.C. until next week.

No Republicans serving in Congress have so far publicly called for invoking the 25th Amendment or for impeachment in this case. But the support for Trump outside the halls of the Capitol is shrinking as former members and prominent conservative influencers splinter with the president over the conflict and his rhetoric.

UK, Norway deter Russian subs in High North

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

Britain and Norway spent more than a month tracking three Russian submarines in waters north of Europe during an operation to deter the vessels, which ultimately returned to Russia, the U.K. Defense Ministry said Thursday.

The successful deterrence of the submarines should put Russian President Vladimir Putin on notice that the U.K. and its allies won't tolerate covert operations against critical undersea pipelines and cables, the ministry said in a statement.

"We see you, we see your activity over our underwater infrastructure," U.K. Defense Secretary John Healey said in the statement, speaking directly

to Putin. "You should know that any attempt to damage it will not be tolerated and would have serious consequences."

Healey's words follow repeated warnings by U.S. military officials in recent years that Russian submarine activity in the High North is increasing and that cooperation between Moscow and China is expanding, particularly in the Arctic.

In addition, the Baltic Sea has seen suspected sabotage events in recent years, such as the destruction of undersea communication cables.

NATO countries accuse Russia of carrying out such gray-zone warfare in Europe because of Western military support for Ukraine.

In the most recent example of

Russia's presence in the region, U.K. military personnel identified a Russian attack submarine that had entered international waters in the High North several weeks ago, the defense ministry said. The ministry did not say exactly when the submarine was discovered.

Working alongside Norway and other unidentified allies, U.K. ships and aircraft subsequently tracked the submarine's activity and determined that it was acting as a decoy to divert attention from two other Russian submarines, according to the statement.

Those vessels, part of Russian reconnaissance operations, were loitering near critical undersea infrastructure in another location, the U.K. said.

After the U.K. and its allies made it apparent that they were monitoring the submarines, the vessels retreated and returned home, the defense ministry said. The ministry did not specify exactly when the submarines left the area.

There is no evidence any damage was done to U.K. cables and pipelines, the BBC reported.

Healey also pointed out that the Russian undersea activity occurred while attention was focused on conflict in the Persian Gulf.

"As we act to defend our interests and allies in the Middle East, we are tackling increasing threats to NATO in the High North, maintaining strong support for Ukraine and protecting our UK homeland," he said.

Pentagon seeks to increase military spouse employment

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon wants leaders in the armed services to do more to combat persistently high military spouse unemployment, which sits at 20% — five times the national average.

To address the disparity, the armed forces are directing senior leaders to maximize the use of hiring flexibilities for military spouses, Anthony Tata, defense undersecretary for personnel and readiness, said in a statement Wednesday on X.

That includes waiving rules that may create challenges for those seeking work overseas.

"Hiring military spouses is smart business and the right thing to do for our warriors & their families," Tata said in the statement. "This immediate change will make it easier for talented military spouses to secure opportunities in the Department."

Among the obstacles, he said, was that the Department of De-

fense Education Activity could not extend job offers to military spouses with teaching licenses until 30 days before their permanent change of station move.

That creates "economic insecurity for our military families and unnecessary vacancies in our schools," Tata said.

Under changes introduced this week, military spouses now can apply and be hired upon receiving official change of station orders, he said.

In a memorandum accompanying the social media post, Tata said DOD must eliminate unnecessary barriers to military spouses joining the civilian workforce.

Tata's post urged the use of alternative work sites for spouses accompanying military members on orders outside a job's primary duty location.

In addition, he called on DOD hiring managers to consider military spouses before all other candidates who are ineligible for hiring preferences.

UK destroyer pulls into port amid Iran tensions

By PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

A British warship deployed to help defend U.K. bases and allied interests in the eastern Mediterranean Sea amid tensions with Iran has pulled into port for maintenance.

The destroyer HMS Dragon, built for air and missile defense, experienced a "minor technical issue" with its onboard water system, the U.K. Defence Ministry said in a statement Tuesday, the BBC reported.

The setback comes two days after the United States and Iran announced a two-week ceasefire and follows criticism from the White House that the U.K. did not respond quickly enough to the crisis.

President Donald Trump has called on the U.K. and other European allies to help reopen the Strait of Hormuz, a key shipping route between Iran, the UAE and Oman where about 20% of the world's daily oil supply tra-

ditionally passes.

As a result of the U.S.-Israeli strikes, Iran has restricted ship traffic through the waterway, which has led to higher global oil prices.

A YouGov poll showed that 70% of U.K. voters opposed joining U.S. military action, with 57% saying Trump was wrong to strike Iran.

Dragon was deployed to the region on March 10 along with "drone-busting" Wildcat helicopters after an Iranian-made drone struck RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus.

The deployment is part of Britain's response to wider hostilities that escalated after U.S. and Israeli strikes against Iran began on Feb. 28. The ship's crew of about 200 remains on standby and can sail on short notice if required, the ministry said.

The ministry has not specified how long the ship will remain in port, but described the stop as a short maintenance period.

Artemis II reentry will test heat shield

Los Angeles Times

EDWARDS, Calif. — The Artemis II astronauts are scheduled to return Friday from their trip to the moon. When they do, they will slam into Earth's atmosphere at over 32 times the speed of sound — and will do so using a reentry technique that has yet to be tested in real-world scenarios.

In 2022, NASA sent the uncrewed Artemis I test mission to the moon.

As it pierced through the Earth's atmosphere on return, the capsule suffered unexpected damage to its heat shield, prompting NASA scientists to rethink what's needed to keep the Artemis II astronauts safe.

There's been a ton of work done to prepare for this moment

— but the reality is, scientists won't know exactly how the heat shield will behave until they test it in a bona fide reentry.

That's why a team of NASA and Department of Defense scientists and test pilots stand at the ready to collect detailed data on how the heat shield performs as the capsule streaks through the sky, turning the atmosphere around it into a fireball about half as hot as the surface of the sun before splashing down off of San Diego.

Test pilots stationed at Southern California military bases will take turns chasing the capsule in a complex, high-speed relay: first a NASA business jet, then a Navy surveillance aircraft, followed by another NASA jet and finally a NASA

weather research aircraft. Crews on the ground will monitor the Artemis II capsule and send those test pilots precise speeds and coordinates to hit as they follow the fireball in the sky.

Meanwhile, researchers in the back of the planes will track the capsule with telescopes and sensors.

"It's an exciting job threading the needle multiple times," said Robert Navarro, project manager at NASA's Armstrong Flight Research Center in Edwards, Calif., which is in charge of conducting the third segment of the relay.

"It has to be precise, simply because of the short window of time that they need to collect that data. They have to be exact-

ly right on the mark."

After splashdown, a separate Armstrong Flight Research Center team will collect a fortified sensor affixed to the exterior of the capsule that is designed to study the heat shield up close.

"I'm really excited that my team is a part of such an important mission," said Patty Ortiz, deputy project manager for the capsule sensor project at the center. "Having worked on it since 2019, it's definitely a full-circle moment for me."

The center has been preparing to study the Artemis II reentry for years, but the work became even more important after NASA discovered issues with the heat shield after the Artemis I test mission.

Pam Bondi will not appear at House deposition being held over Epstein files

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — Pam Bondi will not appear for her scheduled deposition next week as part of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee's investigation of deceased sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, a panel spokesperson said Wednesday.

The panel stipulated the April 14 deposition date in a letter to the then-attorney general last month, after a bipartisan coalition voted to subpoena her to come before the panel to answer lawmaker questions about the Justice Department's compliance with a law Congress passed last year that ordered the release of records related to the late financier.

A panel spokeswoman, in a statement Wednesday, said the Justice Department has said that Bondi would not appear for the April 14 deposition because

she is no longer attorney general and was subpoenaed in that capacity.

"The Committee will contact Pam Bondi's personal counsel to discuss next steps regarding scheduling her deposition," the spokeswoman said.

News that Bondi would not show for the April 14 deposition was criticized by lawmakers who backed the subpoena.

Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., in a social media post, said Bondi "cannot escape accountability simply because she no longer holds the office." The subpoena motion was related to Bondi by name, not by title, Mace said in a post on social media.

Rep. Robert Garcia of California, the top Democrat on the House oversight panel, noted the subpoena was bipartisan and said it applied to Bondi whether or not she was the attorney general.

Ruling upholds Anthropic's label as a supply-chain risk

Bloomberg News

A federal appeals court declined for now Anthropic's request to pause a declaration by the Pentagon that the artificial intelligence company poses a risk to the U.S. supply chain, even as plans for a broader government ban on its technology remain blocked by a California judge.

In its decision Wednesday, the three-judge panel in Washington, D.C., said it would work quickly to review the case because Anthropic is likely to "suffer some irreparable harm" as the legal action plays out. The court set oral arguments in the case for May 19.

The ruling leaves in place a Defense Department declaration that was the legal basis for the Trump administration's plan to sever all ties to the company, which claims it could face billions of dollars in lost revenue. The government announced the ban after a dispute

with Anthropic over how its AI technology would be used by the military.

"On one side is a relatively contained risk of financial harm to a single private company," the court wrote in explaining why it rejected the request for an immediate pause. "On the other side is judicial management of how, and through whom, the Department of War secures vital AI technology during an active military conflict."

The Claude chatbot maker has been fighting back on two fronts. It asked the appeals court on March 9 to review the Pentagon's declaration, calling it "arbitrary, capricious and an abuse of discretion."

The same day, Anthropic sued in San Francisco federal court to challenge the ban, which could mean billions in lost revenue. On March 27, a judge in that case blocked the government following through while the lawsuit proceeds.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

RNC reaches deal with election board on rolls

NC RALEIGH — National Republicans agreed to settle a lawsuit with the North Carolina State Board of Elections on Tuesday regarding the removal of noncitizens from the state’s voter rolls.

The agreement, if approved by a judge in Wake County Superior Court, would require election officials to use jury questionnaire responses to identify noncitizens who may be registered to vote and remove them from the rolls, if warranted.

“It is straightforward: if someone admits they are not a citizen when they are considered for jury duty, that same information should be used to ensure they are not registered to vote,” RNC Chair Joe Gruters said in a statement.

The State Board of Elections, which has argued in the past that it already complied with the policy in question, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Insurers could pay \$100M to sexual abuse survivors

MD BALTIMORE — A potential \$100 million insurance payout will go to local survivors of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, marking what survivors’ attorney Jonathan Schochor called “a very significant step forward” as negotiations in the Archdiocese of Baltimore’s bankruptcy case continue.

“We are hoping that this momentum shift will get things moving with the Archdiocese of Baltimore, which, let’s be frank,

they’re the enablers,” Schochor said.

Last week’s settlement between The Hartford insurance company and the Official Committee of Unsecured Creditors, which represents more than 900 survivors, comes more than two-and-a-half years into this chapter of the archdiocese’s legal front.

The agreement with Hartford Insurance depends on approval of a broader plan by the court.

Days before the Maryland Judiciary was set to cut its filing deadline on child sex abuse claims, the Archdiocese of Baltimore declared bankruptcy in late 2023, effectively rushing ahead of the docket to protect its assets. Since then, piles of lawsuits have stalled in state court as the bankruptcy case continues.

Church spokesperson Christian Kendzierski said Tuesday that the archdiocese “continues to be committed to the process and working with the Survivors Committee and others to achieve an agreed-upon resolution of these reorganization proceedings.”

Swalwell campaign denies online claims on behavior

CA LOS ANGELES — A spokesman for Rep. Eric Swalwell, a leading Democratic candidate for California governor, on Tuesday denounced online claims that the congressman had inappropriate relationships with young congressional staff members.

“This false, outrageous rumor is being spread 27 days before an election begins by flailing opponents who have sadly teamed up with MAGA conspi-

racious theorists because they know Eric Swalwell is the front-runner in this race,” said spokesman Micah Beasley in a statement that was first reported by Politico.

“In 13 years, no one in Eric Swalwell’s Congressional office has ever been asked to sign [a nondisclosure agreement]. Ever,” Beasley said. “In 13 years, not a single ethics complaint by any staff in his office or any other office has ever been lodged. Ever.”

The Los Angeles Times has not independently corroborated reports of inappropriate behavior.

Swalwell, 45, did not respond to requests for comment.

Governor vetoes bill revoking in-state tuition

KS TOPEKA — Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly has vetoed a bill that would revoke in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants who earned a high school diploma in the Sunflower State.

In a veto message issued on Monday, she characterized the legislation as cruel and shortsighted.

“America’s immigration system is broken, but this is not the way to fix it,” said Kelly, a Democrat who is serving out her last year of eight in office.

“This bill targets Kansans who were brought to the United States as children. To punish these kids for decisions their parents made years ago is not only cruel, but also not in the best interest of the state,” Kelly continued. “Kansas needs these young people to be educated and trained so they can enter our workforce and contribute to

our state’s economy.”

The legislation, Senate Bill 254, would also require anyone applying for state or local benefits to prove their status as either a citizen or an immigrant who came to the country legally.

“Laura Kelly has prioritized illegal aliens over Kansans. She chose to send your hard-earned tax dollars to benefit illegal immigrants, not Kansas families,” said Senate President Ty Masterson, an Andover Republican who’s running for governor, in a Tuesday statement.

Sensitive LAPD records leaked in suspected hack

CA LOS ANGELES — A trove of sensitive LAPD records, including officer personnel files and documents from Internal Affairs investigations, are among the materials believed to have been seized by hackers in a breach last month involving the Los Angeles city attorney’s office.

Some of the records have started surfacing on social media platforms like X. Among the first to post a file from the suspected hack was the account @WhosTheCop, which regularly posts about information related to police accountability.

The account’s administrator said a security researcher first disclosed the breach in a post that had been taken down by Tuesday afternoon.

It wasn’t immediately clear whether the hackers requested a ransom not to release the information and whether the city paid one.

There has been no public acknowledgment of the hack from city or LAPD officials.

— From wire reports



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Nuggets win 10th straight, top Grizzlies

Associated Press

DENVER — Nikola Jokic had 14 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists for his 34th triple-double of the season, and Denver beat the Memphis Grizzlies 136-119 on Wednesday night for the Nuggets' 10th straight win.

Denver increased its hold on the No. 3 seed in the Western Conference with its first double-digit winning streak since getting 15 in a row Feb. 23-March 23, 2013. The Nuggets lead the reeling Los Angeles Lakers by 1 1/2 games and finish the regular season with games against the top two teams in the conference.

Jamal Murray scored 26 points and Jonas Valanciunas had 14 points in his 1,000th career game.

The wins during the streak haven't been easy. Memphis needed to rally from double-digit deficits in the fourth quarter twice, winning both in overtime.

Jokic, who leads the NBA in rebounding and assists, already clinched a triple-double average for the second straight season. His assist on Cameron Johnson's layup midway through the third gave him the 198th triple-double of his career. He didn't play in the fourth quarter.

Cedric Coward had 27 points, for the Grizzlies, who have lost six in a row and 18 of 20. Memphis was 19 of 50 from deep two nights after tying an NBA record with 29 made 3-pointers.

Magic 132, Timberwolves 120: Paolo Banchero had 20 points and eight rebounds, Desmond Bane added 18 points and six assists and host Orlando beat Minnesota.

Franz Wagner scored 17 points and Goga Bitadze came off the bench with 14 points and 15 rebounds for the Magic, who have won four straight.

The win pulled the Magic (44-36) up to seventh place in the tight race for playoff/play-in positions. With two road

games remaining (Chicago on Friday and Boston on Sunday), they could finish anywhere between six and ninth in the Eastern Conference.

Terrence Shannon Jr. led the Timberwolves with a career-high 33 points. Jaden McDaniels, back in the lineup after missing six games with a left knee injury, added 18 points in 19 minutes.

The Timberwolves, who have lost five of seven, played without Anthony Edwards (right knee injury) and four players who started Tuesday night's win at Indiana that clinched their Western Conference playoff spot.

Julius Randle missed his first game of the season and Rudy Gobert missed his fifth.

Spurs 112, Trail Blazers 101: De'Aaron Fox had 25 points and host San Antonio kept rolling even with Victor Wembanyama and Stephon Castle sidelined by injuries, defeating Portland.

San Antonio (61-19) is 28-3 since Feb. 1 and has its best record since 2017, its last appearance in the Western Conference finals during a 22-year postseason run that included five NBA championships.

Deni Avdija scored 27 points and Scoot Henderson added 20 for the Trail Blazers, who have lost two straight after a three-game winning streak.

Portland (40-40) remains ninth in the West, just 2 1/2 games ahead of Golden State (37-42) heading into the final weekend of the regular season.

San Antonio had six players in double figures to offset the absence of the NBA's past two Rookie of the Year winners.

Thunder 128, Clippers 110: Chet Holmgren had 30 points and 14 rebounds, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 20 points and 11 assists, and Oklahoma City clinched the NBA's best regular-season record with a road victory over Los Angeles.

Jalen Williams scored 18

points for the NBA champion Thunder (64-16), who will have homecourt advantage throughout the postseason in their title defense after holding off San Antonio (61-19), which is on an 18-2 run since February. Oklahoma City has won seven straight and 19 of 20 to earn the West's No. 1 seed for the third straight season.

Kawhi Leonard scored 20 points and Brook Lopez added 16 for the eighth-place Clippers, who had won seven of nine. Los Angeles is 35-18 since shortly before Christmas, but still must win one of its final two games to extend this once-moribund franchise's streak to 15 consecutive winning seasons.

The Clippers head to Portland on Friday for a crucial game. The winner almost certainly will finish eighth in the Western Conference, while the losers will slip to ninth, where they'll need two wins in the play-in tournament to make the playoffs.

Pistons 137, Bucks 111: Cade Cunningham had 13 points and 10 assists in his return from injury as host Detroit beat Milwaukee in its home finale.

Cunningham hadn't played since sustaining a collapsed lung in a win against the Washington Wizards on March 17, but appeared comfortable while playing 26 minutes in short stints. He hit six of 11 field goal attempts, including one 3-pointer, and pulled down five rebounds.

Jalen Duren added 21 points and nine rebounds as the Pistons won for the sixth time in eight games. Duncan Robinson scored 20 points on a night where J.B. Bickerstaff kept all five starters under 30 minutes.

Jericho Sims had a triple-double — 11 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists — while Ryan Rollins scored 23 points for Milwaukee, which has lost 10 of its last 13 games.

Cavaliers 122, Hawks 116: Donovan Mitchell scored 31 points, Evan Mobley had 22 points and tied a career high with 19 rebounds, and Cleveland defeated Atlanta.

It was Mitchell's 200th regular-season game with at least 20 points in four years with the Cavaliers. He is the fifth player in franchise history to reach that milestone.

James Harden added 21 points for the Cavaliers, who have won four straight and seven of eight. Cleveland (51-29) can finish no lower than fourth place in the Eastern Conference and is 1/2 game behind New York for the third seed.

Nickeil Alexander-Walker scored 25 points and Jonathan Kuminga had 24 off the bench as Atlanta was unable to clinch a playoff berth with the loss. The Hawks (45-35) have dropped their last two after winning four straight. They are one game ahead of Toronto for the fifth seed but only 1 1/2 in front of Orlando to avoid being in the play-in tournament.

Sun 112, Mavericks 107: Devin Booker scored 37 points, Dillon Brooks added 28 and host Phoenix edged short-handed Dallas.

The Mavericks pulled within 110-107 on John Poulakidas' 3-pointer with 1:08 left and had a chance to get even closer on their next possession but Oso Ighodaro blocked Moussa Cisse at the rim to stop the rally.

Brooks made a driving layup with 13.7 seconds to finally put the game away. The Suns clinched the No. 7 spot in the Western Conference playoff race, meaning they get two chances at home to win one game in the play-in tournament.

Poulakidas — a 6-foot-5 undrafted rookie who played at Yale — scored a season-high 23 points. Rookie of the Year front-runner Cooper Flagg had a tough game, scoring 11 points on 4 of 19 shooting.

McDavid, Oilers top Sharks for Pacific lead

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — The best way for the Edmonton Oilers to shake off a tough loss was to let Connor McDavid take over the game.

One night after his team squandered three separate leads in an overtime defeat at Utah, McDavid delivered the kind of performance Edmonton needed.

He scored three goals for his 15th career hat trick and added two assists in a 5-2 victory over San Jose on Wednesday that moved the Oilers into sole possession of first place in the Pacific Division.

“He knows our team needed a win,” coach Kris Knoblauch said. “We’re playing a little short-handed and he’s going to be the guy. Tonight every shift he was really dialed in and played extremely well. I’ve seen him play a lot of good games and that was one of his best.”

McDavid was sharp right from the start, scoring a power-play

goal on his third shift. He assisted on a power-play goal by Vasily Podkolzin late in the first period and then added two more goals and an assist on his first seven shifts of the second to put away the game.

When McDavid is playing the way he did against the Sharks, the strategy for his teammates is simple.

“Get him the puck,” Edmonton defenseman Evan Bouchard said. “When you see him playing the way he was tonight, and honestly, most of the season, you want to get him the puck. He makes things happen when not many other people can.”

McDavid got the best of his matchup against his Canadian Olympic teammate and fellow Hart Trophy contender Macklin Celebrini, who scored on the power play to give San Jose a 1-0 lead.

McDavid answered that goal less than two minutes later, and the Sharks couldn’t slow him down the rest of the night.

The Oilers are two points ahead of Vegas in the division race, but the Golden Knights have a game in hand.

Sabres 5, Rangers 3: Jason Zucker scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third period, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 17 saves and visiting Buffalo rallied to beat New York.

Zucker slid his 24th goal past Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin at 7:14 after teammate Alex Tuch had tied the contest with his 31st at 5:50 of the third.

Zach Benson scored twice and Ryan McLeod added a goal for the Sabres, who will participate in the postseason for the first time since 2010-11.

Buffalo won its 48th game in a dramatic turnaround from last year when it had 79 points and missed the playoffs for a 14th straight season. The Sabres are 22-6-3 in their last 31 games, including a league-best 16 wins and 34 points since the Olympic break.

Alexis Lafreniere scored twice and Adam Fox also scored for New York in its home finale. Shesterkin had 22 saves.

Capitals 4, Maple Leafs 0: Logan Thompson made 21 saves to register his third shutout of the season as visiting Washington breathed life into its fading playoff hopes with a victory over Toronto.

Dylan Strome and Martin Ferhervary, with a goal and an assist each, Ryan Leonard and Cole Hutson scored for the Capitals, who sit three points back of the Eastern Conference’s final wild-card spot with three games left on the schedule.

Anthony Stolarz suffered a lower-body injury early in the first period after stopping the second of two shots he faced for the Maple Leafs.

Joseph Woll finished with 14 saves in just over 57 minutes of work for Toronto, which is set to miss the postseason for the first time since 2016.

Honorary starters Nicklaus, Player, Watson open Masters

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — The Masters got started beneath wispy white clouds and a bright blue spring sky Thursday when Gary Player, Jack Nicklaus and Tom Watson once again struck the ceremonial tee shots down the first fairway at Augusta National.

Well, mostly down the first fairway.

After the 90-year-old Player hit his shot down the middle, and celebrated with a big leg kick, the 86-year-old Nicklaus stepped up. His son, Jackie, placed his ball on the tee, and the Golden Bear offered a tongue-in-cheek warning to the patrons lining the tee box — “Oh, boy, watch out,” Nicklaus said, “and I don’t mean that facetiously” — and proceeded to hit a low hook right at them.

“I said, ‘Spread out on both sides because I don’t want to kill anybody,’” he relayed afterward. “If it’d been a little closer I might have.”

The ball cleared the heads of the patrons down the left side by a couple of feet.

Last up was the 76-year-old Watson, who used the tee Nicklaus had left stuck in the

ground. “May I use your tee?” Watson asked. “It’s why I left it,” the six-time Masters champion replied, and he proceeded to strike his drive right down the middle.

With that, the 90th edition of the Masters was underway.

The honorary starter has been a tradition at Augusta National since 1963, when Jock Hutchinson and Fred McLeod hit their opening shots of the tournament. The idea had come to club founder Bobby Jones years earlier, and over time, it has become a treasured part of the Masters mystique, with 11 dignitaries and past champions having served in the role.

Byron Nelson, Gene Sarazen and Sam Snead were the longest-serving, performing the duty throughout most of the 1980s and ‘90s, while Arnold Palmer was joined by Nicklaus and Player for many years. When the King died in 2016, it left just Nicklaus and Player in a twosome, so Watson was asked to join them, and the trio continues to this day.

“When I first played the Masters as an amateur in 1970, I teed off early in the morn-

ing, playing with Doug Ford. I went to the honorary starters, and it was very special,” Watson said. “I remember seeing Gene Sarazen tee off. Sam Snead, Arnold Palmer, Jack and Gary. It’s something very special. I thought it was just part of the aura of the tournament, and I wanted to witness it.”

How much longer Player, Nicklaus and Watson take part is a big question surrounding the Masters these days.

So is who might take on the role next.

“I was a little worried. I had carpal tunnel surgery about five, six weeks ago, and I was worried about being able to hold onto the golf club and hurt somebody,” Nicklaus said. “I’m fortunate that I got it over somebody’s head. I didn’t hit it very well, but I got it over their heads and didn’t hurt anybody. As long as I can still hit the golf ball.”

Nicklaus said he doesn’t really play anymore. He did once all of last year and once more this past February.

“But it’s such a nice ceremony, and it’s a real honor to be invited,” he said. “I hope to be able to do it as long as I can not kill anybody.”

Rangers top Mariners for 3-game sweep

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — MacKenzie Gore allowed one hit in five innings, Brandon Nimmo and Josh Smith had two hits each and the Texas Rangers shut out the Seattle Mariners 3-0 on Wednesday.

Texas scored all three runs in the fifth inning to complete a three-game series sweep.

Gore (2-0) fanned nine and walked two. Bryan Woo (0-1) took the loss after allowing three runs — one earned — on five hits in five innings.

Danny Jansen and Smith opened the fifth inning with consecutive singles for the Rangers before Ezequiel Duran followed with another single to load the bases.

Nimmo then reached on a fielder's choice that scored Jansen and Smith as Seattle committed a throwing error trying to turn a double play. Duran advanced to third, and Nimmo moved to second on the misplay to give Texas a 2-0 lead.

Corey Seager added a sacrifice fly later in the inning to score Duran and extend the advantage to 3-0.

The Mariners managed just two hits — singles by Mitch Garver and Cole Young — and struck out 13 times.

Guardians 10, Royals 2: Angel Martinez belted a grand slam and had a career-high four hits, and rookie Chase DeLauter delivered a two-run double to lift host Cleveland over Kansas City.

Martinez launched a 374-foot shot to right off Steven Cruz in the eighth inning, when the Guardians scored five times to blow open what was a 5-2 game. Rhys Hoskins had a career-best three doubles as Cleveland tied its season high with 16 hits.

Guardians starter Joey Cantillo (1-0) struck out nine over 5½ innings, allowing one earned run and one unearned run on three hits. Matt Festa worked 1½ scoreless innings for his first save since July 7, 2022, with Seattle.

Orioles 5, White Sox 3: Taylor Ward drove in two runs and scored another, and visiting Baltimore beat Chicago for its ninth straight win against the White Sox.

Pete Alonso scored on a passed ball by catcher Reese McGuire in the sixth inning after the Orioles loaded the bases against Chicago reliever Lucas Sims (0-1). Dylan Beavers then put Baltimore on top 4-3 with a sacrifice fly against Bryan Hudson.

Ward had four hits, helping the Orioles complete a three-game sweep after losing all three at Pittsburgh. He doubled and scored in a two-run third against White Sox starter Sean Burke and lined an RBI double in the ninth against Tyler Schweitzer to make it 5-3.

Rockies 9, Astros 1: Hunter Goodman homered, Michael Lorenzen bounced back from a rough home opener by throwing efficiently into the sixth and host Colorado beat Houston to complete a three-game sweep.

The Rockies won their fourth straight game to move to 6-6.

Lorenzen (1-1) surrendered one run and seven hits over 5½ innings. The right-hander gave up career-highs in hits (12) and runs (nine) Friday in the home opener.

Padres 8, Pirates 2: Nick Castellanos hit a two-run double, Jake Cronenworth added a two-run homer and visiting San Diego beat Pittsburgh.

Castellanos' double began a four-run seventh inning that broke open a scoreless game and helped San Diego clinch the three-game series.

Red Sox 5, Brewers 0: Sonny Gray pitched 6⅓ shutout innings, and host Boston took advantage of three walks and two infield hits to score three times in the third inning and beat Milwaukee for its first back-to-back wins of the season.

Gray (2-0) allowed three hits and two walks, striking out two. Shane Drohan took the loss in

his major league debut, giving up three runs on three hits and four walks — most of it in the third, when he walked both Andruw Monasterio and Caleb Durbin, two of the players he was traded for in February.

Blue Jays 4, Dodgers 3: Davis Schneider scored the tie-breaking run on a throwing error by catcher Will Smith in the bottom of the eighth inning and host Toronto beat Los Angeles, stopping a six-game losing streak and avoiding a three-game sweep.

Schneider scored from third when shortstop Miguel Rojas couldn't handle Smith's throw on Andrés Giménez's stolen base attempt.

Cardinals 6, Nationals 1: Jordan Walker homered for the third consecutive game, Michael McGreevy earned his first victory of the season and visiting St. Louis defeated Washington.

Alec Burleson had three hits and drove in three runs for the Cardinals, who won two of three against the Nationals and finished 3-3 on a road trip that began in Detroit.

Giants 5, Phillies 0: Rafael Devers homered and drove in four runs as host San Francisco beat Philadelphia for its second consecutive shutout.

Tyler Mahle and four relievers combined on a four-hitter for the Giants, who blanked the Phillies 6-0 on four hits Tuesday night behind Robbie Ray and two relievers to halt a four-game losing streak.

Braves 8, Angels 2: Matt Olson homered, Grant Holmes pitched into the seventh inning and visiting Atlanta beat Los Angeles.

The Braves broke a 2-2 tie in the third inning on Olson's third homer of the season — a two-out, two-run shot to center field. Austin Riley followed with a double and scored on Zach Neto's throwing error to make it 5-2.

Diamondbacks 7, Mets 2:

Corbin Carroll had three extra-base hits in his 500th career game Wednesday, including a two-run double during a four-run second inning that lifted visiting Arizona over New York.

Carroll also doubled in the first and tripled in the seventh — his major league-leading 44th triple since 2023. Right fielder Brett Baty robbed Carroll of another potential hit with a sliding catch in the fifth before snaring his 100.3 mph liner to end the eighth.

Cubs 6, Rays 2: Nico Hoerner hit a leadoff homer and then delivered an RBI double during a five-run fifth inning as visiting Chicago beat sloppy Tampa Bay at Tropicana Field.

Michael Conforto had a two-run double for the Cubs, who took advantage of three Rays throwing errors in the fifth to win the rubber game of the series before an announced crowd of 20,483.

Marlins 7, Reds 4: Griffin Conine and Connor Norby homered to lead host Miami past Cincinnati.

Xavier Edwards and Jakob Marsee each had two hits and an RBI for the Marlins, who snapped Cincinnati's five-game winning streak.

Athletics 3, Yankees 2: Brent Rooker hit a go-ahead sacrifice fly off David Bednar in the ninth inning, and the visiting Athletics rallied to beat New York.

Nick Kurtz singled leading off the ninth against Bednar (0-1), and Shea Langeliers doubled.

Twins 8, Tigers 6: Byron Buxton had three hits and host Minnesota batted around in a six-run first inning against Framber Valdez before holding off Detroit.

Bailey Ober (1-0) allowed two runs in 5½ innings for the Twins, who went for a four-game sweep of their AL Central rivals Thursday afternoon. Cody Laweryson struck out two in 1½ innings before Kody Funderburk got two outs for his third career save and first this season.