

Uncertainty clouds US-Iran negotiations

Hormuz dispute lingers as sticking point for delegations meeting in Pakistan

BY LARA KORTE

Stars and Stripes

Disagreements over control of a major sea lane and questions about the U.S.-Iran ceasefire were still looming Friday as the two countries prepared for high-stakes talks on ending a war that has claimed 13 American service members' lives.

Vice President JD Vance will lead a delegation to Islamabad, Pakistan, where meetings with Iranian officials are scheduled to begin on Saturday, according to White House officials.

The key issue hanging over the talks is the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, an oil transit corridor that Iran closed off in retaliation for combined strikes by the U.S. and Israel.

The strait has remained at a virtual standstill despite Tuesday's ceasefire agreement. Maritime trackers showed few vessels in the waterway Friday morning, and analysts said only ships carrying Iranian cargoes

were allowed to pass through it.

As part of the two-week ceasefire, the strait is supposed to be free and open, U.S. officials said. But Iran appears unwilling to give up control of the waterway, which usually carries about a fifth of the world's oil.

Tehran has demanded sovereignty over the strait as part of any permanent deal, and some reports say vessels that attempt to pass through without coordinating with Iranian authorities are being threatened with further attacks.

President Donald Trump said on his Truth Social platform Thursday that Iran cannot levy tolls on tankers passing through the strait.

"There are reports that Iran is charging fees to tankers going through the Hormuz Strait — They better not be and, if they are, they better stop now!" he wrote.

A few hours later he wrote: "Iran is doing a very poor job,

dishonorable some would say, of allowing Oil to go through the Strait of Hormuz. That is not the agreement we have!"

The blockade has roiled global markets and sent fuel prices soaring, though markets calmed slightly after announcement of the ceasefire.

Brent crude, a global benchmark for oil prices, has dropped to about \$94 per barrel after hitting a high of \$112 last month.

But the decline has done little to assuage fears about long-term impacts to oil supply chains, especially as disagreements between the U.S. and Iran persist. U.S. officials have insisted they may resume strikes if a permanent deal does not materialize.

The U.S. will help with ship congestion in the strait, loading supplies and making sure everything goes well, Trump said this week without providing further details.

In the past, he has suggested

that U.S. Navy vessels could escort tankers, though officials have not outlined a plan for such operations and the proposal could carry risks of escalation.

Any potential security effort in the strait will likely depend on whether the ceasefire between the U.S. and Iran holds and whether the talks in Pakistan produce a broader agreement.

The first days of the ceasefire have been some of the bloodiest in the war, with Israel launching fresh attacks against Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militant group in Lebanon.

Israel's strikes have put the fragile negotiations on even shakier ground, with Iran threatening to pull out of Saturday's talks if the ceasefire is not extended to Lebanon. The campaign against Hezbollah resumed Friday morning.

As of Friday afternoon, there was no confirmation of Iranian negotiators' arrival in Pakistan.

NATO allies begin outlining effort to secure Hormuz

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Some NATO allies have begun making concrete pledges of support for a future mission aimed at ensuring the safe passage of commercial ships through the Strait of Hormuz, the alliance's top official said this week.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte's remarks Thursday came against a backdrop of increased pressure on Europe from President Donald Trump

to deliver military support in missions stemming from the war against Iran.

Trump has reportedly issued an ultimatum that countries need to make specific offers of what they can provide.

Rutte touted a recent announcement by the Netherlands of readiness to offer capabilities such as minehunters to the initiative. Frigates and radar technology also were under consideration, he said.

"We have to see what happens with the shipping lanes as

we now go forward day by day," he said during an appearance at the Reagan Institute's Center for Peace Through Strength in Washington.

Rutte knows that Trump is "very keen on making sure that the sea lanes are open as soon as possible," he added.

Trump told Rutte during a Wednesday meeting at the White House that pledges would be expected in a matter of days, German news magazine *Der Spiegel* reported.

It's unclear whether NATO

could play a formal role in providing security in the Strait of Hormuz, a vital chokepoint where a fifth of the world's oil supply usually transits.

The United Kingdom has been leading a coalition of more than 40 countries that are mobilizing an effort related to clearing the strait, a senior NATO military official said Friday.

"In terms of NATO's role at this time, the Secretary General is in contact with Allies about his recent discussions in Washington," the official said.

Vance under pressure to forge Iran deal

New York Daily News

Vice President JD Vance is under intense pressure to forge a durable Iran ceasefire deal when he leads high-stakes talks Saturday in Pakistan with top leaders of the Islamic regime.

The eyes of the world will be on Vance as he seeks to keep the guns quiet and get the oil flowing through the crucial Strait of Hormuz while squeezing enough concrete concessions from Tehran to please President Donald Trump and his MAGA allies.

It might be a tall order. If the talks falter or, even worse, if fighting resumes, Vance could quickly find himself in the crosshairs of critics within and outside of his mercurial boss' inner circle.

Early signs are not encouraging. The veep, who generally op-

poses U.S. entanglements overseas, was exposed this week as a key voice opposing Trump's decision to launch the war alongside Israel, according to an account in *The New York Times*.

He apparently wasn't involved in negotiating the murky eleventh-hour deal that averted Trump's threat to bomb Iran "back to the Stone Ages where they belong."

"The war with Iran is deeply unpopular, and has been from Day One. Apparently, Vance opposed it internally, so that's a plus for him," said Larry Sabato, a University of Virginia political analyst. "But in the end, as vice president, he owns Trump's record."

With the deal looking shaky in its first hours, Vance seemed to side with Iran when he said it was "understandable" that the

Tehran regime believed the ceasefire was supposed to include Lebanon, even though Israel and the U.S. say that was never the case.

He added that he "found it fascinating" that Iran's leaders say they still have the right to enrich uranium, a claim that White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said is an unbreakable "red line" for Trump.

The vice president then made a bizarre analogy between Iran's nuclear program and his relationship with his pregnant wife, second lady Usha Vance.

"I thought to myself, you know what? My wife has the right to skydive, but she doesn't jump out of an airplane," Vance told reporters. "Because she and I have an agreement that she's not going to do that because I don't want my wife

jumping out of an airplane."

The political fallout could be especially harsh because Vance is widely seen as the front-runner to succeed Trump as the Republican presidential standard bearer on the 2028 GOP White House ticket.

Vance's top dog status could spur rivals in both parties to portray him as the face of an unpopular war that voters blame for rising inflation and the all-important price of gas at the pump.

Underlining the potential political peril, some right-wing supporters of Israel and Iran hawks have already suggested the ceasefire could be a mistake if it allows the Islamic regime to survive and regroup while effectively controlling the flow of oil through the Straits of Hormuz.

Pentagon, Vatican deny rift despite criticism from Pope

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon and the Vatican denied allegations of a rift following Pope Leo XIV's criticism of the Trump administration and a news report of a contentious meeting between a papal envoy and a top U.S. defense official.

In separate statements, the two sides professed an eagerness to get along, saying the meeting that occurred in January was frank but polite. The Defense Department issued a statement that said "we have nothing but the highest regard and welcome continued dialogue with the Holy See."

"The Apostolic Nunciature is grateful for the opportunities to meet and dialogue with government officials and others in Washington to discuss areas of mutual concern," the Vatican's

diplomatic mission in Washington said in a statement.

The episode comes at a moment of friction between the Trump administration and the new pope.

In a January address, Pope Leo made a plea for a more peaceful world order and offered oblique criticism of the U.S. days after a U.S. operation to capture Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. "A diplomacy that promotes dialogue and seeks consensus among all parties is being replaced by a diplomacy based on force," he said.

He was even more pointed after President Donald Trump issued a social media threat against Iran that "a whole civilization will die tonight." The pope called that threat "truly unacceptable."

White House staff warned of insider trading, war bets

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The White House sent an internal staff-wide email that warned employees against using confidential information to place trades on financial markets and fast-growing event betting platforms.

The warning comes after a series of recent well-timed and profitable bets raised questions about potential insider trading around President Donald Trump's decision-making on military maneuvers in Iran and Venezuela.

The email was sent from the White House Management Office on March 24, according to a White House official who asked not to be identified discussing a confidential matter.

President Donald Trump, the previous day, had cited "pro-

ductive conversations" with Tehran and announced a five-day pause on his threat to attack Iranian power plants in a social media post.

Futures for oil and stocks worth billions of dollars changed hands just 15 minutes before Trump's post sent crude prices tumbling and equities soaring.

Contracts corresponding to at least 6 million barrels of Brent and West Texas Intermediate were sold in the two minutes from 6:49 a.m. in New York on March 23, according to exchange data compiled by Bloomberg. The average for the same time period over the previous five trading days was about 700 lots — or 700,000 barrels. Trump's Truth Social post was published at around 7:05 a.m. that day.

Zelenskyy aide sees Ukraine nearing peace deal with Putin

Bloomberg News

Ukraine's top negotiator with Russia said he sees progress toward a potential peace deal with the Kremlin, adding that a resolution to the war may not take long to achieve.

While negotiations to end Europe's bloodiest conflict since World War II have publicly yielded few results, Kyrylo Budanov expressed optimism that the talks are evolving toward a settlement. Ukraine's former top military spy said he believes Russia also wants to stop the war.

"They all understand the war needs to end. That's why they are negotiating," Budanov said in an April 4 interview with Bloomberg. "I don't think it will be long."

Budanov earned a reputation for plotting and sometimes leading daring raids on Russian forces as head of Ukraine's mil-

itary intelligence from 2020 until January this year, when President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appointed him as chief of his presidential office.

He's a key figure in Ukraine's negotiating team in three-way talks with the U.S. and Russia aimed at bringing an end to the war that's now in its fifth year.

He also plays a leading role in overseeing prisoner exchanges with Russia that have brought hundreds of Ukrainians home from captivity. While he has moved to civilian administration, Budanov retains his army rank as a lieutenant general, giving him a rare perspective on the political and military challenges facing Ukraine.

Budanov acknowledged that both sides have maintained "maximalist" positions in the U.S.-mediated negotiations so far, but said he believes they'll

move closer together in the search for a compromise.

Russia has a clear incentive to reach a deal, he said. "Unlike us, they are spending their own money," Budanov said. "These are enormous sums — already in the trillions."

Still, he declined to say how a possible compromise would look like on territory, the thorniest issue at the talks.

"No final decision has been made yet," he said. "But, in principle, everyone now clearly understands the limits of what is acceptable. That's enormous progress."

Budanov stood out with Ukrainians in the early years of the invasion for his notably optimistic forecasts about the course of the war.

His upbeat assessment now about the state of negotiations doesn't appear to be shared by some Russian officials at least.

Orban warns of 'danger' if he's defeated in election

Bloomberg News

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban addressed the nation two days before pivotal elections, telling voters that he was the safe bet and that ousting him after 16 years in office, as independent polls suggest may happen, would imperil the nation.

"We are now facing the danger of losing everything we have built together," Orban said on Friday morning on his social media channel. He said "foreign intelligence services" were interfering in elections to sow "chaos," without providing evidence.

Hungarians will hold parliamentary elections on Sunday with stakes that extend far beyond the European Union's nation of 10 million. Orban has built the campaign around his hostility toward Ukraine and vetoed a key \$105 billion E.U. loan for the nation at war.

The Hungarian leader won repeated endorsements from the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump and emerged as the closest ally of Vladimir Putin in Europe as he sought to stymie sanctions against Russia.

Recent polls point to a late shift in momentum toward the opposition. Independent surveys show Peter Magyar's Tisza party opening up a lead, with a recent Publicus poll putting it ahead 52%-39% among decided voters, and showing gains across all categories as the campaign nears the end.

The survey confirms a trend seen by other pollsters, and suggests rising expectations of an opposition victory, though the outcome remains uncertain given Hungary's electoral system and the entrenched advantages of Fidesz, Orban's political party.

Armored vehicle runs over detective's suspected killer to bring standoff to end

Los Angeles Times

A Tulare County sheriff's deputy was fatally shot Thursday while assisting officers serving an eviction notice in Porterville, Calif. The incident turned into an hourslong standoff with the suspected gunman that ended when he was run over and killed by a police armored vehicle.

The bizarre ending to the tragic sequence of events occurred around 6 p.m. just as Tulare County Sheriff Mike Boudreaux was providing an update to reporters at a news conference. After stepping away for a few minutes, Boudreaux returned to say the situation had been resolved.

"The suspect is now dead," he

said. "He was not shot. One of our (armored vehicles) ran over him and killed him.

"This story is not about him; this story is about our officer. ... We have a ... baby who will never know his or her father," the sheriff said; the detective is survived by his wife, who is 4 months pregnant.

When asked by a reporter if the officers had intentionally run over the suspect, Boudreaux said they had.

"We intentionally ran him over," he said. "Don't shoot at cops. You shoot at cops, we're going to run you over. He got run over. He got what he deserved."

Boudreaux said the suspect was wearing camouflage cloth-

ing and had been shooting at officers as he moved among three homes. He said officers in the armored vehicle were searching an area where they believed he was hiding when they ran him over. The suspect had initially barricaded himself inside his home.

The slain detective was Randy Hoppert, 35.

Hoppert had been serving as a detective and had been with the department for six years. Hoppert also served as a Navy corpsman from 2010 to 2015.

Boudreaux identified the suspect as David Morales, 59. The incident began around 10:20 a.m. after the suspect fired on two officers who were there to serve an eviction notice.

Acting attorney general might stay for months

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump will have wide latitude to keep his preferred pick leading the Justice Department after his firing of ally Pamela Bondi, including scenarios that could entirely avoid a Senate confirmation process well into the future.

Any permanent attorney general nominee could face a tough path to confirmation in the Senate, where controversies and attacks against the department's independence have outraged Democrats and at times spurred concern from some Republicans.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., who sits on the Senate Judiciary Committee, already indicated in a CNN interview that he would not back an attorney general nominee who has excused the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. He previously has criticized a Justice Department

probe into Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell as a threat to the independence of the central bank.

Several names have been floated in news reports as potential replacements for Bondi, but the president has not announced a nominee. Meanwhile, the president's former personal attorney, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche, is leading the department as acting attorney general.

Blanche, experts say, could remain as acting attorney general for many months, if not longer, depending on the consent of Senate Republican leadership and the interpretation of federal statute.

Under one scenario, Blanche could have been appointed under the Federal Vacancies Reform Act of 1998.

The statute allows an individual to serve in an acting capacity for 210 days, during which time

the president could announce a nominee for Senate confirmation.

Once a nomination has been made, the person serving in the acting capacity can stay in the role while the nomination is pending in the Senate, according to the statute.

Under that scenario, Trump could nominate a permanent attorney general and Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., could refuse to bring that nomination up for a vote, leaving it pending and allowing Blanche to lead the department without a deadline, legal experts say.

But with that plan, Thune could face pressure from within his own caucus from lawmakers who want to see the Senate play a role in the confirmation process, said David Super, a professor at Georgetown Law.

"Senator Thune has his own political constituencies and vul-

nerabilities," Super said. "And whether he's willing to cooperate with a plan that structurally eliminates the Senate's role, I think is questionable."

"There's certainly potential for abuse here, but it's not an unobstructed path for the president," Super said.

Thomas Berry, director of constitutional studies at the Cato Institute, said Blanche could be leading the department under a separate statute, known as Section 508, that allows the deputy attorney general to "exercise all the duties" of the attorney general's office, in the case of a vacancy.

That statute has been interpreted to simply allow for the deputy attorney general to serve as the acting attorney general "indefinitely," Berry said.

The Justice Department did not respond to questions regarding Blanche's designation as acting attorney general.

First lady denies ties to Epstein, knowledge of crimes

Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — First lady Melania Trump made a rare public appearance at the White House on Thursday to tell reporters that she did not know about Jeffrey Epstein's crimes and that the convicted sex offender did not introduce her to her husband, President Donald Trump.

"The lies linking me to the disgraceful Jeffrey Epstein need to end today," the first lady said. She added that she was "not Epstein's victim" and emphasized: "Epstein did not introduce me to Donald Trump."

The first lady spoke for less than six minutes and walked out of the room without taking questions from reporters.

Melania Trump instead decided to read a statement that distanced her from any connection to Epstein and his convicted accomplice, Ghislaine Max-

well. She said she had never been on Epstein's plane or visited his private island and noted that her name has never appeared in court documents, depositions, victim statements or FBI interviews related to the Epstein files.

"The false smears about me from mean-spirited and politically motivated individuals and entities looking to cause damage to my good name to gain financially and climb politically must stop," she said.

Melania Trump told reporters she met her husband "by chance" at a party in New York City in 1998. The Trumps and Epstein overlapped in New York social circles and have been pictured together.

Melania Trump has previously pushed back against claims that Epstein was involved in introducing her and Donald Trump.

Author Michael Wolff said last year that Epstein played a role in introducing the couple in a Daily Beast article that was later retracted. Melania Trump later sent a letter to Wolff demanding that he retract his statements, apologize and offer her a financial settlement. Wolff filed a lawsuit in response, alleging that Melania Trump's letter was designed to "create a climate of fear" and "shut down legitimate inquiry into the Epstein matter with the Trumps." The case is ongoing.

HarperCollins UK last year also recalled a biography of the former British Prince Andrew that claimed Epstein had introduced Melania and Donald Trump.

Epstein himself had suggested in a 2016 email that he was with Donald Trump and Melania Knauss, as she was then known, when they met.

Epstein was a known fabulist and there is no indication of where the alleged meeting would have taken place.

The email, whose recipient's name is redacted, was released by the Department of Justice in response to last year's Epstein Files Transparency Act, which required the agency to release all documents related to its investigations into the deceased financier who has been accused of sexually abusing more than 1,000 victims.

The first lady's appearance Thursday itself was striking for its rarity.

She has largely stayed out of the public eye during her husband's second term, making it all more notable that she decided to address allegations tied to one of the most high-profile scandals that has dogged the Trump administration.

Knicks stay alive in race for No. 2

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Josh Hart scored 15 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter, Jalen Brunson had 25 points and 10 assists, and the New York Knicks stayed alive in the race for the No. 2 seed in the Eastern Conference with a 112-106 victory over Jayson Tatum and the Boston Celtics on Thursday night.

Tatum had 24 points, 13 rebounds and eight assists in his first game back on the Madison Square Garden court where he ruptured his Achilles tendon in last season's playoffs.

The Knicks (52-28) pulled two games behind the Celtics (54-26) for second place with two games to play for both teams. New York owns the tiebreaker after winning the season series 3-1 and would take the No. 2 seed with two wins and two Boston losses.

Raptors 128, Heat 114: Brandon Ingram scored a season-high 38 points, RJ Barrett had 22 and host Toronto moved closer to clinching its first playoff berth since 2022 by beating slumping Miami.

Collin Murray-Boyles scored 17 points, Scottie Barnes had 13 and Immanuel Quickley 11 as Toronto moved past Atlanta into fifth place in the Eastern Conference. The Raptors and Hawks are both 45-35, but Toronto swept the season series.

Bam Adebayo had 24 points and 11 rebounds as the Heat, destined for the play-in tournament, lost for the 10th time in 13 games.

Bulls 119, Wizards 108: Leonard Miller scored a career-high 26 points and matched his career best with 11 rebounds as Chicago won at Washington to

Embiid's postseason status in doubt after former MVP has appendectomy

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Joel Embiid had an appendectomy in Houston on Thursday after Philadelphia's star big man was stricken with appendicitis overnight.

The team announced that the surgery had been completed as the 76ers were playing the Houston Rockets on Thursday night. Coach Nick Nurse said Embiid felt fine in practice on Wednesday before he learned of the situation Thursday morning.

"They had said that he had in the middle of the night, like 3, 3:30 (a.m.) or something, contacted them to say he was not feeling well," Nurse said. "And so I think that's kind of when this particular incident started."

Nurse said the team learned of Embiid's diagnosis while preparing for the game.

"They finally got him to the doctor and they had the scan and then decided they needed to do the surgery here in Houston," Nurse said.

The coach did not give a timetable for Embiid's return, but it seems unlikely that the former MVP would be able to return for the play-

in tournament or the first round of the playoffs.

"It is a tough blow," Nurse said.

Embiid has been limited to 38 games this season, sitting out primarily to manage injuries to his knees.

"They've played different stretches of the year without him," Nurse said. "As far as what we do personnel-wise, we've got (Adem) Bona, we got (Andre) Drummond and we'll use them both. And then hopefully we can use (Thursday) and (Friday) and Sunday get back to getting used to that scenario again."

Embiid was held out against the Detroit Pistons on Saturday. He has not played in both games of a back-to-back all season.

After missing Saturday's game, Embiid had 34 points and 12 rebounds in Philadelphia's 115-102 loss at San Antonio on Monday night.

Embiid, 32, is averaging 26.9 points and 7.7 rebounds this season after playing in only 19 games in 2024-25. He hasn't appeared in as many as 40 games in a regular season since 2022-23, when he averaged a career-best 33.1 points and earned MVP honors.

sweep a two-game set.

Tre Jones scored 31 points and Collin Sexton added 27 for the Bulls, who won 129-98 at Washington on Tuesday night to snap a seven-game skid.

Will Riley scored 23 points to lead Washington, which had 10 players sidelined by injuries.

Pacers 123, Nets 94: Obi Toppin had 26 points and nine rebounds and seven Indiana players scored in double digits as it snapped a three-game skid with a win at Brooklyn.

The Pacers won for the fifth time in 27 games. Indiana was without head coach Rick Carlisle, who missed the first of two

games to attend his daughter's spring formal. Lloyd Pierce handled the coaching duties.

E.J. Liddell led the Nets with 26 points and 10 rebounds.

Rockets 113, 76ers 102: Kevin Durant scored 29 points and host Houston extended its winning streak to eight games.

Jabari Smith Jr. and Amen Thompson added 19 points each for the Rockets, who are contending with Denver and the Los Angeles Lakers for playoff seeding in the West.

Tyrese Maxey scored 23 points for Philadelphia and VJ Edgecombe added 21. The Sixers lost their third straight and

dropped into a tie with Charlotte for eighth place in the Eastern Conference.

Lakers 119, Warriors 103: LeBron James had 26 points, 11 assists and eight rebounds but didn't get to play against rival and pal Stephen Curry as Los Angeles won at Golden State.

Curry, who sat out the front end of a home-road back-to-back, had played the previous two contests in his return from a 27-game absence because of a right knee injury.

Brandin Podziemski and Nate Williams each scored 17 as Golden State used its 41st starting lineup of the season.

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McIlroy grabs share of Masters lead

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Rory McIlroy began his title defense in the Masters with a tee shot that rolled next to a spectator's seat. Another one was in the trees. His tee shot on the seventh hole went into the 17th fairway. The prevailing thought was not concern, not a bit of panic.

He's the Masters champion. That brought a measure of patience and a load of freedom.

"I just trusted that eventually I'll start to make some good swings. So that was a little different," McIlroy said after opening with a 5-under 67, his best start at Augusta National in 15 years, to share the lead with Sam Burns.

It seems as though McIlroy has been wearing his Masters green jacket all week — to the weekend activities, to his news conference on Tuesday (Tiger Woods never did that), to the Masters Club dinner that night. And after his opening round?

"It's easier for me to make those swings and not worry about where it goes when I know that I can go to the Champions Locker Room and put my green jacket on at the end of the day," he said.

It wasn't his best golf, but he

got everything out of his round in his bid to become only the fourth player to win back-to-back at Augusta National.

Only one other player in the past 10 years — Hideki Matsuyama when he won in 2021 — shot 67 while hitting only five fairways. McIlroy was the sixth defending champion to have at least a share of the 18-hole lead, though only Jack Nicklaus (1966) went on to win.

There's a long way to go, and a course that already has everyone's attention because of how fast and firm it already was on Thursday.

Burns was among the early starters. He played the par 5s with three birdies and an eagle and wound up with his lowest score in his fifth Masters appearance.

"Historically, people who have success here play the par 5s really well, and we were able to do that today. So it's a good recipe around this golf course," Burns said.

Scottie Scheffler, the No. 1 player in the world chasing a third green jacket in five years, was 3 under through three holes in the tougher afternoon, when the light gusts began playing tricks and the greens got crispy.

He had one bogey and 14 pars the rest of the way for a 70.

The whole day was tough, and the forecast — this could be the first Masters in 25 years without any rain — has everyone on edge thinking what the next three days could hold. Yes, the weather was gorgeous. But dry and firm conditions are scary, even in this marvelous garden.

Patrick Reed, the 2018 Masters champion and a two-time winner on the European tour this year, was at 69 along with Jason Day and Kurt Kitayama. Reed was atop the leaderboard for so much of the day due to two eagles on the front nine that sent him out in 31.

Justin Rose, twice a playoff loser in the Masters, was in range of the lead until he dropped three shots over the last five holes and had to settle for a 70, tied with Scheffler, Xander Schauffele and Shane Lowry.

The greens are already so firm that Rose quipped, "You might get a yellow jacket if you win." That was a reference to the shade of the greens — a yellow sheen means firm and fast, and that color on Thursday can make players nervous.

Augusta National can still

take a bite out of anyone with enough swirling gusts to bring indecision, or bad shots that wind up in the wrong spot.

Bryson DeChambeau found that out on the 11th when he put his approach in the right bunker and it took him three to get out on his way to a 76. Jon Rahm turned potential birdie or better into a double bogey with a shot into the azaleas on the par-5 13th. He shot 78.

Only five players broke 70, and only 16 broke par, the lowest in five years at the Masters for the opening round.

Ten players failed to break 80. One of them was Robert MacIntyre of Scotland. The No. 8 player in the world was among three players to take quadruple-bogey 9 on the par-5 15th.

McIlroy wasn't sure what to expect in his 18th appearance, his first as the Masters champion. Only twice had he started with rounds in the 60s, his best a 65 in 2011. That year, he went on to shoot 80 on the final day.

There were still nerves. It's still Augusta National.

"My hope was to get off to a solid start," he said. "I feel like the way I played, 5 under, exceeded where I thought I would be or what I wanted to do."

MacIntyre gives middle-finger salute to firm, fast Augusta

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Robert MacIntyre summed up the difficulty posed by firm, breezy and fast Augusta National with a single gesture on Thursday.

His middle finger, aimed toward the green at the par-5 15th, after his approach shot found the water.

MacIntyre wasn't alone in expressing his displeasure during the first round of the Masters; Tyrrell Hatton flashed a different gesture with a similar meaning after his approach at the seventh hit the flagstick and spun

into a bunker. Nor was MacIntyre alone in dealing with a course that started tough, got tougher, and might not have reached peak toughness yet.

"Stuff can happen quick around this place," said his playing partner, Scottie Scheffler, "and it's really hard."

Defending champion Rory McIlroy and Sam Burns led at 5 under after the opening round. Both played earlier in the day, when the course was softer and more receptive. That Scheffler managed his 2-under 70 while playing in the second-to-last

group only made the two-time champion's round look better.

"I think when the greens get that firm," McIlroy said, "you really have to think about where the best miss is. And distance control is very important. ... It makes it a much more tactical test, and you really have to think about things."

It's been dry across northern Georgia this spring, with abundant sunshine and warm temperatures. Those are ideal golfing conditions if you're a weekend hacker at the local muni. But for the those playing in the

Masters, that's more like a recipe for carnage.

There were tee shots and lay-ups Thursday that bounded through crispy fairways and right into the water. Approach shots ricocheted off rock-hard greens as if they had landed on a concrete parking lot. And those same greens picked up so much speed by the time they were baked to well-done late in the day that some players putted right off of them.

MacIntyre did that, two holes before angrily flashing the bird at the 15th. He shot 80.

Athletics one-hit Yankees, clinch series

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jeffrey Springs took a no-hit bid into the seventh inning and combined with two relievers on a one-hitter, and the Athletics beat the New York Yankees 1-0 Thursday afternoon to clinch their first series at Yankee Stadium since 2016.

Springs (2-0) lost his no-hitter on his 84th pitch when Ben Rice hit a single to right field following a walk to Giancarlo Stanton. Springs kept the Yankees scoreless by retiring Austin Wells and Randal Grichuk.

The Yankees have only two hits in their last 17 innings and have not scored since getting two runs in the first inning of Wednesday's 3-2 loss off Luis Severino.

After Springs exited Thursday, Justin Sterner retired Aaron Judge on a groundout with a runner on first to end the eighth. Hogan Harris pitched a 1-2-3 ninth for his fifth career save and first this season.

The A's allowed one hit for the first time since April 15, 2024, at Texas. The Yankees were held to one hit for the first time since Aug. 15, 2023, at Atlanta.

Marlins 8, Reds 1: Owen Caissie had three hits and three RBIs to help Miami beat visiting Cincinnati.

Javier Sanoja also had three hits with two RBIs, Xavier Edwards tripled and Otto Lopez added a double for the Marlins, who had 12 hits total and moved to 7-3 at home this season.

Marlins right-hander Max Meyer picked up his first win since May 16, 2025, allowing four hits and one run with four strikeouts. Meyer last won a start last year against the

Tampa Bay Rays before undergoing season-ending left hip surgery in June.

Caissie drove in two runs with an opposite-field double off Rhett Lowder (1-1) in the third, making it 3-0 after Agustín Ramírez's fielder's choice allowed Edwards to score in the first.

Twins 3, Tigers 1: Brooks Lee hit a tie-breaking two-run single in the eighth inning as Minnesota completed a four-game sweep of visiting Detroit.

Mick Abel pitched six scoreless innings and Josh Bell went 3 for 4 with a home run for the Twins, who posted the first four-game sweep in the majors this season. The last team the Twins swept in four games was the Athletics in June 2024.

The Tigers lost center fielder Parker Meadows in the eighth after a head-to-head collision as left fielder Riley Greene caught Bell's fly ball. Meadows was sent to a hospital for overnight observation.

Eric Orze pitched a perfect ninth to become the fifth different Twins pitcher to record a save in 13 games this season, after Garrett Acton went two innings for his first career win.

Diamondbacks 7, Mets 1: Eduardo Rodríguez outdueled Nolan McLean in a rematch of the World Baseball Classic final, leading Arizona to a win at New York.

Rodríguez threw his final pitch down 1-0 before the Diamondbacks scored four runs in the seventh off McLean (0-1) and Luke Weaver. Gabriel Moreno greeted Weaver with a pinch-hit RBI double before Jose Fernandez beat Mark Vientos' throw home

on Alek Thomas' grounder to first.

Tim Tawa hit a sacrifice fly and Jorge Barrosa followed with a run-scoring triple.

Moreno and Adrian Del Castillo added RBI doubles in the eighth.

Rodríguez (1-0) gave up five hits — including Luis Robert Jr.'s first-inning homer, the first earned run allowed this season by the left-hander — and struck out three in six innings.

McLean was charged with two runs on three hits and struck out eight in 6⅓ innings.

Rodríguez tossed four scoreless innings and McLean surrendered two runs in 4⅓ innings on March 17, when Venezuela won the WBC by edging Team USA, 3-2.

White Sox 2, Royals 0: Anthony Kay allowed three hits in 5⅓ innings to pick up his first major league victory since July 2021 as Chicago won at Kansas City.

Kay (1-0), who pitched the last two seasons in Japan, walked three but struck out six, getting Vinnie Pasquantino, Jac Caglianone and Kyle Isbel twice each.

Seranthony Domínguez picked up his second save as the White Sox snapped a 14-game losing streak at Kauffman Stadium.

Padres 7, Rockies 3 (12): Xander Bogaerts hit a walk-off grand slam in the bottom of the 12th inning as San Diego snapped Colorado's four-game winning streak.

Bogaerts sent a 1-0 pitch from Valente Bellozo (0-1) out to left field for his ninth career slam and his second with the Padres.

David Morgan (1-0) retired all five batters he faced to get the win after coming in with two on and one out in the 11th.

Reports: Justice Dept. investigating NFL over TV deals

Associated Press

The Justice Department is investigating the NFL for potential anticompetitive practices, according to a government official.

The official, who was not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation by name and spoke on condition of anonymity Thursday, said the investigation is "about affordability for consumers and creating an even playing field for providers."

The investigation was first reported by The Wall Street Journal.

The NFL has not received a notification that it is being investigated, according to two people with knowledge of the situation who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The investigation comes amid increasing federal scrutiny of the amount of money

fans are paying to watch sports on television. The Federal Communications Commission is seeking public comments on the ongoing shift of live sports from broadcast channels to streaming services.

The NFL said in a statement Thursday that over 87% of its games are available on broadcast television, including all that are played in a team's local market.

"The NFL's media distribution model is the most fan and broadcaster-friendly in the entire sports and entertainment industry. The 2025 season was our most viewed since 1989 and reflects the strength of the NFL distribution model and its wide availability to all fans," the league said in its statement.

Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah), chair of the Senate judiciary subcommittee on antitrust,

competition policy and consumer rights, wrote a letter to the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission on March 3 urging them to review whether the NFL's distribution methods are in line with the Sports Broadcasting Act, which grants limited antitrust immunity to allow teams to collectively license game broadcasts to national networks.

Lee said in his letter that football fans spent almost \$1,000 on cable and streaming subscriptions. Forbes estimated the cost of watching every NFL game via streaming last season at \$765.

The NFL aired games last season on CBS, NBC, ABC/ESPN/ESPN+, Fox, NFL Network, Amazon Prime Video, Netflix and YouTube TV.

Pens end three-year playoff drought

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Evgeni Malkin scored as part of his two-point game, Sidney Crosby set up two goals and Kris Letang had an assist as the Pittsburgh Penguins clinched a playoff spot by defeating the New Jersey Devils 5-2 on Thursday night.

The Penguins are playoff-bound for the first time since 2022, ending a three-year drought that followed a streak of qualifying 16 seasons in a row. Crosby, Malkin and Letang have been around for all of it, including Stanley Cup runs in 2009, '16 and '17.

Bryan Rust, who was part of the back-to-back championships, scored his 29th goal of the season on Pittsburgh's first shot.

Newcomers helped make the latest bid possible, including winger Egor Chinakov, who had a goal and two assists, and netminder Stuart Skinner, who made 19 saves and was serenaded by "STUUUU" chants from visiting fans in attendance. Each player was acquired by trade in December.

Mammoth 4, Predators 1: Dylan Guenther scored his 39th goal of the season, Clayton Keller had three assists to reach 56 and Utah beat visiting Nashville for its fifth straight victory.

Less than an hour after the game, Utah clinched a playoff berth in its second season when Anaheim beat San Jose. The Mammoth sit in the first Western Conference wild card spot with 90 points and have a six-point lead over Nashville.

Kailer Yamamoto, Nick Schmaltz and captain Lawson Crouse also scored for Utah, and Karel Vejmelka stopped 29 shots.

Erik Hauula had Carolina's goal and Juuse Saros made 23 saves.

Stars 5, Wild 4: Jason Robertson scored his 42nd goal with 9:25 left and Dallas held on for a win over visiting Minnesota in a physical and entertaining preview of the upcoming playoff series between the Central Division foes.

Wyatt Johnston, Mikko Rantanen and Colin Blackwell each had a goal and an assist for the Stars, who now at 106 points are four ahead of Minnesota. They were already locked in as first-round opponents, but both still have three regular-season games left to determine home-ice advantage.

Ducks 6, Sharks 1: John Carlson scored three goals for the first hat trick of his 17-year NHL career, and Anaheim snapped its six-game losing streak with an emphatic victory over visiting San Jose.

Leo Carlsson, Alex Killorn and Frank Vatrano also scored and Beckett Sennecke had

two assists for the Ducks, who jumped to a 4-0 lead and dominated their Pacific Division rivals for their first win since March 26.

Carlson scored two power-play goals in the third period, connecting with 5:57 left to secure the first hat trick of his 1,156-game career. The veteran defenseman has been exactly what the Ducks needed when they acquired him at the trade deadline, scoring 12 points in 13 games while steadying the back end for one of the NHL's worst defensive teams.

Avalanche 3, Flames 1: Nathan MacKinnon scored his career-high 52nd goal of the season into an empty net and had two assists to help host Colorado clinch the NHL's top seed for the postseason with a victory over Calgary.

It's the fourth time Colorado has won the Presidents' Trophy for the best record in hockey. With 114 points and four games left, the Avalanche have a shot to earn 120 in a season for the first time in franchise history. There have only been 12 NHL teams to reach at least 120 points, the most recent being the Boston Bruins in 2022-23 with 135.

Islanders 5, Maple Leafs 3: Matthew Schaefer tied the NHL record for goals by a rookie defenseman, and New York defeated Toronto in Peter DeBoer's first game as Islanders coach.

Schaefer scored his 23rd goal of the season, matching the record held by Hall of Fame defenseman Brian Leetch.

DeBoer was hired Sunday after the Islanders fired Patrick Roy amid a late-season slide that saw the team lose seven of 10 games.

New York remains in contention for a wild-card playoff spot, trailing Ottawa by three points with three games left.

Senators 5, Panthers 1: Fabian Zetterlund scored two goals and Ottawa moved closer to securing a playoff berth with a win over visiting Florida.

The Senators hold the second and final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, leading the New York Islanders by three points with three games remaining. Ottawa plays at New York on Saturday. The Senators are two points back of Boston for the first East wild card.

The Senators wrapped up their five-game homestand with a 4-1-0 record, with the lone loss coming against Minnesota.

Red Wings 6, Flyers 2: Dylan Larkin had three goals and an assist as Detroit kept its playoff chances alive with a win over visiting Philadelphia.

Moritz Seider had a career-high five points with a goal and four assists while Patrick Kane had a goal and two assists.

The win gives the Red Wings 91 points with three games left. They trail the Ottawa Senators by three points for the second Eastern Conference wildcard, and the Senators hold the regulation-wins tiebreaker.

The Flyers, who had won three straight, are still on 92 points, one ahead of the New York Islanders for third place in the Metro.

Canadiens 2, Lightning 1: Cole Caufield became the first Montreal player to score 50 goals in a season in more than three decades and Juraj Slafkovsky scored a tiebreaker with just over a minute remaining as it beat visiting Tampa Bay in a fight-filled game.

Slafkovsky scored his 30th at 18:56 of the third period and Nick Suzuki had two assists to raise his season total to 70 for Montreal (47-22-10). Jakub Dobes made 17 saves for his seventh consecutive win.

Caufield became the seventh Canadiens player to hit the 50-goal mark, and the first since Stéphane Richer in 1989-90.

Sabres 5, Blue Jackets 0: Rookie Colten Ellis stopped 37 shots for his first NHL career shutout, and Buffalo beat visiting Columbus to dent its playoff chances.

Josh Doan broke the game open with two third-period goals, while Peyton Krebs, Jack Quinn and Rasmus Dahlin also scored.

Buffalo reached the 49-win mark for just the fourth time in team history, and maintained the Atlantic Division lead with a week left in the regular season.

Jets 3, Blues 2: Alex Iafallo, Josh Morrissey and Jonathan Toews scored as Winnipeg won at St. Louis to keep its playoff hopes alive.

Mark Scheifele had two assists and Connor Hellebuyck made 20 saves for Winnipeg, which has 82 points. The Jets went into the game four points behind Nashville for the second Western Conference wild card.

Dylan Holloway and Colton Parayko scored for St. Louis and Jordan Binnington had 31 saves. The Blues, who have 78 points, took a hit to their playoff hopes with four games remaining in the regular season.

Hurricanes 7, Blackhawks 2: Logan Stankoven had two goals and an assist, helping depleted Carolina win at Chicago.

Playing without several regulars in their first game since clinching the Metropolitan Division title, the Hurricanes (51-22-6) stayed two points ahead of Buffalo for the top spot in the Eastern Conference.