

Omicron variant keeps world on edge

Associated Press

TOKYO — The omicron variant kept a jittery world off-kilter Wednesday as Japan further tightened travel restrictions, infections linked to the new version of the coronavirus popped up in more places and new evidence made clear the mutant strain was circulating weeks earlier than thought.

Much is still unknown about the new variant, including how contagious it is and whether it can evade vaccines, and the European Union chief acknowledged that waiting for scientists to tell the world more felt like “an eternity.” Meanwhile, many nations in Europe are still dealing with a surge in infections and hospitalizations from their old foe, the delta variant.

Japan continued its aggressive stance, asking international airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in the country until the end of December. The move by the world’s third-largest economy, coupled with its recent return to a ban on foreign visitors, is among the most severe anywhere, and more in line with cloistered neighbor China than with some other democracies in the region.

In the United States, the White House announced that a person in California became the first in the nation to have an identified

case of the omicron variant.

Many countries around the world have barred travelers from southern Africa, and the U.S. is moving to toughen testing requirements for international arrivals.

South African researchers alerted the World Health Organization to omicron last week, but it is not known where or when the variant first emerged, and it’s already clear it was circulating in Europe before that alert.

But Nigeria stretched the timeline back even further Wednesday, when its national public health institute said it detected the variant in a sample it collected in October — also its first known case of the mutation.

The worry and uncertainty about the new variant and the sometimes haphazard imposition of restrictions recalled the early days of the pandemic, as did the familiar realization that the virus had once again outpaced efforts to contain it.

In a sign of how difficult the virus is to control in an age of jet travel and economic globalization, Japan confirmed its second case of the variant — in a person who arrived from Peru via Qatar.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, said Wednesday that it had detected its first case of the omicron variant, a day after Brazil reported cases of the variant, the first known cases in

Latin America.

“I listen to my scientists, they all say we do not know enough now. Therefore, it is good that they take their two to three weeks,” said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

“This is, in normal times, a short period. In pandemic times, it’s an eternity.”

While the world waited impatiently for more information, some countries were already struggling to beat back surges that predated the announcement of omicron.

Germany’s intensive care association warned Wednesday that the number of COVID-19 patients requiring intensive care will hit a new high before Christmas — and that it expected the all-time high from last year to be exceeded.

The DIVI association called for national restrictions to slow the spread immediately.

German federal and state leaders are expected to decide Thursday on new measures.

Chancellor-designate Olaf Scholz said he would back a proposal to mandate vaccinations for everybody next year.

Austria, meanwhile, extended its lockdown until Dec. 11 as planned amid signs that the restrictions are helping to bring down sky-high coronavirus infections.

Navy active-duty coronavirus vaccination rates drop

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — About 97.2% of active-duty sailors are at least partially vaccinated against the coronavirus, the Navy said Tuesday, two days after the service’s deadline for the entire force to get the shots.

That percentage is lower than the Navy reported last week. On Nov. 24, the Navy said 99.8% of active-duty sailors had received at least one dose of the vaccine. A week prior, the service reported 99.7% of its active-duty force were partially vaccinated.

“Previous releases reflected a snapshot of data available at that time,” the service said in the statement. “Information released today reflects validated and the most up-to-date information.”

The Navy said the discrepancy could also be attributed to a change in the force structure.

“Changes to military personnel numbers resulted in that slight percent decrease, which account for personnel who were separated, retired or are no longer active duty,” the service said.

About 96.3% of the active-duty force was fully vaccinated as of Monday, according to the service. All active-duty sailors were required to be fully vaccinated by Sunday or possibly face separation from the service.

The deadline was established after Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in August ordered all service members to be vaccinated. The Pentagon considers troops fully vaccinated two weeks after their final coronavi-

rus shot.

About 88% of sailors in the Navy Reserve have received at least one shot of the vaccine and 85.6% are fully vaccinated, according to the statement. Those sailors have until Dec. 28 to become fully vaccinated.

The Pentagon allows troops to submit exemption requests from the mandate for religious, medical or other administrative reasons. To date, none of the 2,531 religious exemption requests have been approved, according to the Navy.

The Navy has, however, granted seven permanent medical exemptions, 400 temporary medical exemptions and 134 administrative exemptions, according to the service. Six medical exemption requests are pending review.

Blinken warns Russia over Ukraine moves

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The United States is prepared to impose “severe costs” on Russia, and NATO is ready to send more troops to its eastern flank if Moscow invades Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday.

Blinken, speaking in Latvia after high-level talks with NATO leaders, said Russia has sent tens of thousands of combat troops to the border and has stepped up an anti-Ukraine disinformation campaign that aims to destabilize the country from within.

“We must prepare for all contingencies,” Blinken said after the ministerial meeting in Riga. He is set to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Thursday in Sweden.

Blinken said Washington will impose sanctions it has “refrained from in the past”

with “high impact economic measures” if Russia invades. He declined to spell out what those sanctions could be, but said the U.S. position was shared with NATO member states.

“We will be in lock step with our allies with this ... the purpose is to dissuade Mr. Putin for making the wrong decision on Ukraine,” he said.

Meanwhile, Blinken indicated that if Russia launched an invasion in Ukraine, the alliance would shore up its own defenses as a precaution.

“NATO is prepared to reinforce its defenses on the eastern flank,” he said.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that allies were ready to take actions similar to ones launched in 2014, after Russia’s first intervention in Ukraine. Moscow’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula was a transformative event for NATO,

Stoltenberg said.

“That actually triggered the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense since the end of the Cold War,” Stoltenberg said at the end of Wednesday’s talks.

Before 2014, NATO had virtually no significant troop formations on its eastern borders with Russia. But now the alliance has multinational battle groups in the Baltics and Poland, has increased troop rotations in the region and intensified air policing operations, Stoltenberg said.

“We need to remain vigilant and avoid escalation,” Stoltenberg said.

“Ministers made clear any future Russian aggression would come at a high price and have serious political and economic consequences for Russia.”

It’s not clear whether the threat of sanctions will be enough to dissuade Moscow

from deciding to intervene.

Numerous economic sanctions were imposed on Russia in connection with its 2014 intervention in Ukraine but haven’t appeared to alter the Kremlin’s approach.

Moscow has also intensified its rhetoric in recent months about U.S. and NATO activities in and around Ukraine, complaining that beefing up western forces in the area amounts to a new “red line” for Russia.

While Ukraine has ambitions of eventually joining NATO — allies agreed in 2008 that the country would eventually become a member should it meet various NATO standards — there is little sign that the alliance is ready to grant membership anytime soon.

With NATO membership comes an alliance security guarantee that an attack on one member demands a collective response from all.

Navy base enacts curfew, booze limit for younger sailors

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. naval base in Greece is raising the drinking age for military members to 21, despite local laws that allow anyone 18 and older to buy and consume alcohol.

Naval Support Activity Souda Bay in Crete announced the change Tuesday on Facebook. It applies to on-base alcohol sales at the exchange and other retail outlets.

They are now required to check ID for all alcohol purchases, the post said. ID checks may not have been necessary before because service members are at least 18 years old.

Base officials declined to say whether the change was in response to specific incidents.

Local media outlets have reported several cases of alcohol intoxication in

minors as young as 13, some of whom required hospitalization. In one case, a cafe owner was arrested, the news site In.gr reported. The reports didn’t indicate if the minors had any affiliation with the military.

The base also instituted a graduated curfew requiring all active-duty personnel E-4 and under to leave places that serve alcohol no later than midnight and be back to their home, hotel or the base no later than 1 a.m.

Service members E-5 and above are to leave bars by 1 a.m. and return to their home, hotel or the base by 2 a.m.

In addition, sailors E-4 and lower are required to have at least one other service member with them when they leave base.

Groups cannot number more than four, Navy officials said. Group members must leave and return to the base

together and check in with officials on both legs of the trip.

People who disobey the order face discipline or administrative action. U.S. and Greek authorities will do spot checks, according to the post.

“Communication with your chain of command is key,” the post stated. “If you find yourself in a situation where you may violate curfew, please let them know and it will be looked at as a mitigating action on your part.”

U.S. military bases overseas typically abide by the host country’s laws, including those regarding the purchase and consumption of alcohol.

Commanding officers, however, have the discretion to institute additional policies that they deem necessary for the safety and well-being of service members and the promotion of good relations with the host country.

Justices seem open to abortion limits

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court's conservative majority on Wednesday signaled it would uphold Mississippi's 15-week ban on abortion and may go much further to overturn the nationwide right to abortion that has existed for nearly 50 years.

The fate of the court's historic 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion throughout the United States and its 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which reaffirmed *Roe*, probably won't be known until next June.

But after nearly two hours of arguments, all six conservative justices, including three appointed by former President Donald Trump, indicated they would uphold the Mississippi law.

At the very least, such a decision would undermine *Roe* and *Casey*, which allow states to regulate but not ban abortion up until the point of viability, at roughly 24 weeks.

And there was also substantial support among the conservative justices for getting rid of *Roe* and *Casey* altogether.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a Trump appointee, asked a series of questions about whether the court would be better off withdrawing from the abortion debate and letting states decide.

"Why should the court be the arbiter?" Kavanaugh asked. "There'll be different ac-

cess in Mississippi and New York, Alabama and California."

Abortion would soon become illegal or severely restricted in roughly half the states if *Roe* and *Casey* are overturned, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion rights. Legislatures in many Republican-led states are poised for action depending on the Supreme Court's next decision.

The court's three liberal justices said that reversing *Roe* and *Casey* would significantly damage the court's legitimacy.

"Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts?" Justice Sonia Sotomayor asked.

Justice Elena Kagan said the abortion decisions are "part of the fabric of women's place in this country."

Among the conservatives, Chief Justice John Roberts appeared most interested in a less sweeping ruling that would uphold the Mississippi law, but not explicitly overrule *Roe* and *Casey*.

"That may be what they're asking for, but the thing at issue before us today is 15 weeks," Roberts said, alluding to Mississippi's call to overturn the broader cases.

Even upholding the 15-week ban would mean rejecting the decades-old viability

line. Abortion rights supporters have said that would still effectively overturn *Roe* and leave no principled line for when abortions might be banned.

Justice Neil Gorsuch, another Trump appointee, suggested the lack of a rigorous alternative might be a reason to overrule *Roe* and *Casey* entirely.

Supporters of both sides in the abortion debate filled the sidewalk and street in front of the court, their dueling rallies audible even from inside the building. Opposing signs read such sentiments as "Her Body Her Choice" and "God Hates the Shedding of Innocent Blood." The court stepped up security measures, including closing off some streets around the building.

The court had never agreed to hear a case over an abortion ban so early in pregnancy until all three Trump appointees — Justice Amy Coney Barrett, Gorsuch and Kavanaugh — were on board.

The Mississippi case poses questions central to the abortion right. Mississippi argues that viability of the fetus is an arbitrary standard that doesn't take sufficient account of the state's interest in regulating abortion. It also contends that scientific advances have allowed some babies who were born earlier than 24 weeks to survive, though it does not argue that the line is anywhere near 15 weeks.

Student kills 4, wounds 7 at Michigan high school

Associated Press

OXFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. — A 15-year-old sophomore opened fire at his Michigan high school Tuesday, killing four students, authorities said.

One of the victims, a 17-year-old boy, died Wednesday from his wounds. The other dead included a 16-year-old boy who died in a deputy's patrol car on the way to a hospital. Seven people were wounded, some critically, including a 14-year-old girl who was placed on a ventilator after surgery.

Investigators were still trying to determine a motive for the shooting Tuesday at Oxford High School, located in a community of about 22,000 people roughly 30 miles north of Detroit, Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said.

"The person that's got the most insight and the motive is not talking," he said at a news conference late Tuesday.

Deputies rushed to the school around

lunch time as more than 100 calls flooded 911 dispatchers with reports of a shooter. They arrested the student in a hallway within minutes of their arrival. He put his hands in the air as deputies approached, Bouchard said.

The boy's father on Friday bought the 9 mm Sig Sauer used in the shooting, Bouchard said. He didn't know why the man bought the semiautomatic handgun, which his son had been posting pictures of and practicing shooting, Bouchard said.

Authorities did not immediately release the boy's name.

The four students who were killed were Tate Myre, 16; Hana St. Juliana, 14; Madison Baldwin, 17; and Justin Shilling, who died Wednesday.

Bouchard said Myre died in a patrol car as a deputy tried to get him to an emergency room.

A teacher who received a graze wound to

the shoulder left the hospital, but seven students ranging in age from 14 to 17 remained hospitalized through the night with gunshot wounds, he said.

The gun the boy was carrying had seven more rounds of ammo in it when he surrendered, Bouchard said.

Undersheriff Mike McCabe said the student's parents advised their son not to talk to investigators. Police must seek permission from a juvenile's parents or guardian to speak with them, he added.

Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald said in a statement that her office expects to issue charges quickly and that an update would be given Wednesday.

Authorities were made aware of posts on social media that said there had been threats of a shooting at the roughly 1,700-student school, but Bouchard said they didn't know about the rumors until after the attack.

Streamlining of military moves gets delayed

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department's effort to streamline the global system of transferring household goods for service members and federal employees is delayed again by protests from firms competing for the \$6.2 billion contract.

U.S. Transportation Command announced in early November that the Houston-based HomeSafe Alliance LLC had been awarded the contract to provide "complete door-to-door" transportation of household goods for the military and Coast Guard.

HomeSafe won the contract after disputing the original April 2020 award to American Roll-

On Roll-Off Carrier Group.

HomeSafe and another bidder, Connected Global Solutions LLC, appealed to the Government Accountability Office, which sustained their protest in October 2020.

Last week, American Roll-On and Connected Global Solutions filed protests with the GAO against HomeSafe's selection.

"The government's decision to choose a new company formed for the bid with a very limited staff and no household goods related moving assets is difficult to understand," American Roll-On said in a statement emailed Tuesday to Stars and Stripes.

The contract with HomeSafe was slated to begin Wednesday

and run to Aug. 31, 2025.

Movement of household goods was to continue under the current system during a transition period that would have been completed in late 2022. The new protest voids that timetable.

"Start of the transition phase of the contract will be delayed until the GAO protest decisions are issued," U.S. Transportation Command said in a statement emailed to Stars and Stripes on Monday.

The GAO has until March 3 to issue a decision.

HomeSafe CEO Al Thompson expressed frustration with the protests in a Friday news release.

"After a comprehensive review process during which the

prior awardee's significant problems came to light, we are disappointed that protests may delay getting to the work of supporting our servicemembers and their families," Thompson said.

The selection of a single company to handle movement of all goods is intended to streamline a system that uses more than 900 commercial entities for the roughly 325,000 annual shipments of household goods, according to U.S. Transportation Command.

The change is driven by long-time complaints from military families about delays in pickups and deliveries of goods and damage to items during transportation.

US panel backs distinctive COVID-19 pill from Merck

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A panel of U.S. health advisers on Tuesday narrowly backed a closely watched COVID-19 pill from Merck, setting the stage for a likely authorization of the first drug that Americans could take at home to treat the coronavirus.

The Food and Drug Administration panel voted 13-10 that the antiviral drug's benefits outweigh its risks, including potential birth defects if used during pregnancy.

"I see this as an incredibly difficult decision with many more questions than answers," said panel chair Dr. Lindsey Baden of Harvard Medical School, who voted in favor of the drug. He said the FDA would have to carefully tailor the drug's use for patients who stand to benefit most.

The recommendation came after hours of debate about the drug's modest benefits and potential safety issues. Most experts backing the treatment

stressed that it should not be used by anyone who is pregnant and called on the FDA to recommend extra precautions before the drug is prescribed, such as pregnancy tests for women of child-bearing age.

The vote specifically backed the drug for adults with mild-to-moderate COVID-19 who face the greatest risks, including older people and those with conditions like obesity and asthma. Most experts also said the drug shouldn't be used in vaccinated people, who weren't part of Merck's research and haven't been shown to benefit.

The FDA isn't bound by the panel's recommendation and is expected to make its own decision before year's end. The antiviral is already authorized in the United Kingdom.

Merck hasn't specifically tested its drug against the new omicron variant, but said it should have some potency based on its effectiveness against other strains of the coronavirus.

Jan. 6 panel to hold contempt vote against ex-DOJ official

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection will vote on pursuing contempt charges against a former Justice Department official Wednesday as the committee aggressively seeks to gain answers about the violent attack by former President Donald Trump's supporters.

The vote to pursue contempt charges against Jeffrey Clark, a former Justice Department lawyer who aligned with Trump as he tried to overturn his election defeat, comes as Trump's top aide at the time, chief of staff Mark Meadows, has agreed to cooperate with the panel on a limited basis. Clark appeared for a deposition last month but refused to answer any questions based on Trump's legal efforts to block the committee's investigation.

If approved, the recommendation of criminal contempt charges against Clark would go to the full House for a vote as soon as Thursday. If the House votes to hold Clark in contempt, the Justice Department would then decide

whether to prosecute.

The panel has vowed to aggressively seek charges against any witness who doesn't comply as they investigate the worst attack on the Capitol in two centuries. The Justice Department has signaled it is willing to pursue those charges, indicting longtime Trump ally Steve Bannon last month on two federal counts of criminal contempt.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said then that Bannon's indictment reflects the department's "steadfast commitment" to the rule of law after Bannon outright defied the committee and refused to cooperate.

Clark's case could be more complicated since he did appear for his deposition and, unlike Bannon, was a Trump administration official on Jan. 6. But members of the committee argued that Clark had no basis to refuse questioning, especially since they intended to ask about matters that didn't involve direct interactions with Trump and wouldn't fall under the former president's claims of executive privilege.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cardboard holiday display is talk of a town

NJ ASBURY PARK — A fresh-cut natural Christmas tree usually graces the Grand Arcade at Convention Hall on Asbury Park's historic boardwalk.

But this year, in its place is art made of cardboard in the shape of a tree that also incorporates elements of the seashore, the city's architecture and its rich musical heritage. It is designed to be recycled after it is dismantled.

"I like that it's different," said Chris Trifari of neighboring Neptune as he strolled by the tree. "It's pretty interesting."

Others were not as appreciative.

"It looks like an Amazon package," said Anthony Solimando, a former resident of nearby Neptune City who recently moved to Hoboken.

Michael Lavalley, a local artist who goes by the name Porkchop and whose work has been displayed throughout the U.S. and Europe, created the 17-foot-tall piece with Brad Hoffer. They call it "The Giving Tree."

Sea turtle at aquarium inspires musical

MS GULFPORT — A sea turtle at the Mississippi Aquarium has inspired a musical.

The green sea turtle Banner was the inspiration behind, "Banner: A Sea Turtle Saga," an original children's musical put on by theater students from Mississippi State University.

The show was written by Mississippi State Associate Professor of Communications Tonya Hays and marine scientist and

Northern Gulf Institute Education and Outreach Director Jonathan Harris. The story teaches about the dangers marine animals face due to plastic pollution, oil spills and climate change.

Banner was rescued in Florida after being severely injured by a boat propeller.

The green sea turtle is a threatened species in U.S. Atlantic waters, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

More state firefighters to get bulletproof vests

ME CARIBOU — Caribou Fire and Ambulance is the latest in the state to equip ambulance workers with bulletproof vests.

The worsening opioid crisis has added to the danger for first responders, necessitating the vests, Caribou Fire and Ambulance Chief Scott Susi said.

"When you revive someone, they're unpredictable," Susi said. "They might flail their arms or grab an object on the floor. You never really know what they're going to do."

A donation from a local bank funded the purchase of 16 vests for the entire crew of Caribou Fire and Ambulance.

Nonprofit is new owner of Hawaiian fishpond

HI HONOLULU — A Kauai nonprofit now owns the island's last remaining Hawaiian fishpond thanks to a private donation and the Trust for Public Land.

The 102-acre Alakoko Fishpond dates back 600 years. Its owners put the property on the market for \$3 million, Hawaii

Public Radio reported.

The new owner is Malama Hule'ia, a nonprofit that has been restoring the fishpond for the last four years.

The Trust for Public Land fundraised and secured a donation from Chan Zuckerberg Kauai Community Fund of the Hawaii Community Foundation.

The trust then bought the property and conveyed it to Malama Hule'ia. The deed ensures the fishpond will be used for conservation and Native Hawaiian education, aquaculture, and stewardship.

Volunteers plant fruit trees for primates

IN WINAMAC — Staff at a primate sanctuary in northern Indiana will be feeding the center's menagerie with freshly picked fruit in the coming years thanks to a newly planted orchard.

A team of volunteers helped plant 60 fruit trees in October on the property of the Peaceable Primate Sanctuary, which is home to baboons and macaque monkeys retired from research facilities and pharmaceutical companies.

The new orchard at the primate center is outfitted with an irrigation system and within a few years it will supply the sanctuary with fresh apples, persimmons and other fruits, WSBT-TV reported.

Oral history of deadly wildfire goes online

TN GATLINBURG — An oral history of a deadly wildfire that began in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and devastated Gatlinburg in 2016 became accessible

to the public this week.

Rising from the Ashes: The Chimney Tops 2 Wildfires Oral History Project is available on the University of Tennessee Libraries website.

Working with the city of Gatlinburg and the Anna Porter Public Library in Gatlinburg, the UT Libraries collected around 140 audio and video interviews, according to a news release.

The interviews are with people who lost homes and businesses, first responders, fire and forestry experts, artists, journalists, clergy, health care professionals, educators and others.

School fined for spectators' comments

SD SIOUX FALLS — The Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference fined South Dakota Mines for racist comments made by spectators at a recent football game.

The school said it removed the spectators from the Nov. 13 game against Colorado Mesa University and has banned them from athletic events. Conference commissioner Chis Graham called the slurs directed at the Colorado Mesa team "abhorrent."

The school released few other details about the incident, including how much it was fined, the Rapid City Journal reported. The school's athletic communications coordinator Josh Van Valkenburg-Gernert declined to comment on the incident because an investigation is ongoing.

— From wire reports

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No. 3 Cincinnati focusing on AAC title

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Cincinnati coach Luke Fickell won't get drawn into the debate over whether the Bearcats deserve inclusion in the College Football Playoff if they win the AAC title Saturday.

"I haven't answered those questions. Don't know that I would, regardless of how things went," Fickell said Monday during a media gathering previewing the conference championship game.

Fickell typically pivots to the one-game-at-a-time message he emphasizes amid the constant outside noise vying to distract his players.

The No. 3 Bearcats (12-0, 8-0 AAC, No. 4 CFP) face No. 16 Houston (11-1, 8-0, No. 24 CFP) in the most significant AAC championship in the eight-season history of the game.

If Cincinnati wins, it will stay

on track to become the first team from outside the Power 5 to make the playoff.

In that regard, Cincinnati also is playing for respect, for the AAC and other second-tier teams in the so-called Group of Five.

Fickell, who is 47-14 in five seasons at Cincinnati, has the senior-laden Bearcats in the conference title game for the third consecutive season, and on the cusp of history.

He wishes he could sequester his players in the football building, remove the TVs and shut off the internet. Keep them away from all the outside noise.

"We're not ignorant to think that they're going to be like me and bury their head in the sand and not listen or talk to or communicate with anybody outside of where it is you spend 90% of your time," Fickell said. "Hey, we want to enjoy what these se-

niors in particular have created, this buzz on our campus, in our stadium, but we can't allow it to change us. And I'm not saying it's easy."

This is also the time of year the 48-year-old Fickell has to sweep aside questions about coaching vacancies, particularly the big one at Oklahoma that just came open when Lincoln Riley took the USC job.

"We don't talk about individual things," is his standard line.

Dana Holgorsen came to Houston as coach in 2019 after eight seasons at West Virginia, which had transitioned to the Big 12 during his tenure.

Cincinnati, he said, is the real deal.

"They're deserving of where they're ranked in the CFP," Holgorsen said "They should be ranked higher in my opinion, based on what they've done here over the last couple of

years and the quality of football they have played."

Amid all the discussion of whether a G5 team is deserving lies some irony. Cincinnati and Houston are among the teams slated to move to a Power 5 conference — the Big 12 — within the next few seasons.

AAC commissioner Mike Aresco is philosophical about schools using the conference as a stepping stone and continues to work against the notion that it is inferior. Cincinnati's success surely has helped.

"We just embrace the fact that they're doing all this in our conference," Aresco said. "We're very proud of Cincinnati, we're very proud of Houston. The one thing I will say is we hate to lose them down the road and we're not sure (when) that will be, but this is a celebration of what this conference has achieved over nine years."

Michigan moves up to second in latest CFP rankings

Associated Press

DALLAS — Michigan moved up to No. 2 Tuesday night in the second-to-last College Football Playoff rankings, joining Georgia, Alabama and Cincinnati in the top four heading into conference championship weekend.

Oklahoma State is fifth going into the Big 12 championship game Saturday against No. 9 Baylor, and Notre Dame is sixth with no games left and no head coach.

Brian Kelly left the Fighting Irish and was introduced as the new coach at LSU on Tuesday, three days after independent Notre Dame finished its season 11-1.

Selection committee chairman Gary Barta, who is Iowa's athletic director, noted selection protocol requires the committee to consider the unavailability of players and coaches and how that could affect a team's performance in the postseason.

Losing Kelly had no impact on this week's ranking for Notre Dame because the committee does not project ahead into the postseason until all games are finished.

"And each of the 13 members can weigh that the way they want to weigh it, compared to head-to-head competition and common opponents and all the other things we evaluate," Barta said.

Georgia was first, as it has been for every selection committee ranking so far, and Michigan climbed to No. 2 after it beat last week's No. 2, Ohio State. The Wolverines play 13th-ranked Iowa in the Big Ten title game.

Alabama will be third going into the Southeastern Conference championship game with Georgia, and Cincinnati is fourth heading into its American Athletic Conference championship against Houston, which is 21st in the committee's rankings.

The playoff field will be set Sunday. The top four teams will play in the Orange and Cotton bowls on Dec. 31. The College Football Playoff national championship game is scheduled for Jan. 10 in Indianapolis.

Here are their most direct paths to the playoff:

■ Georgia (12-0). The Bulldogs look like a lock no matter what happens in the SEC championship game

■ Michigan (11-1). Win and in.

■ Alabama (11-1). Win and in, but could a close loss to the Bulldogs make the Tide the first team with two losses to make the field of four? Just how close would Alabama have to keep it?

■ Cincinnati (12-0) is trying to become the first team from outside the Power Five conferences to make the playoff. Will staying undefeated be enough to keep the Bearcats from being passed by the team right behind them?

There is no precedent here. No so-called Group of Five conference team has ever been close to playoff position entering championship weekend.

■ Oklahoma State (11-1). The Cowboys are well positioned to benefit from any slip-ups in front of them.

The only time a 12-1 Power Five conference champion was left out of the CFP was in 2018, when Ohio State finished sixth in the committee's final ranking behind two unbeaten P5 champs, unbeaten Notre Dame, 12-1 Big 12 champ Oklahoma and Georgia, which was 11-2 after losing by a touchdown to Alabama in the SEC title game.

Can Oklahoma State pass Cincinnati if both win Saturday?

■ Notre Dame. The Fighting Irish need help and now have to also consider if the committee would dock them for not having a head coach.

Europe halts basketball, wrestling

By KENT HARRIS
Stars and Stripes

AVIANO AIR BASE, Italy — Less than four days before schools were set to roll out wrestling mats and light up basketball scoreboards again, DODEA Europe has canceled all interschool activities.

“In coordination with our military and public health partners, the decision has been made to cancel all DODEA Europe athletic competitions through the month of December,” Acting DODEA Europe Director Charles Kelker said in a statement Tuesday. “This decision is based on the recent sharp rise in COVID-19 numbers across the Region.”

One sport will continue: marksmanship. That sport can

be conducted remotely at each location. That was the case during the 2020-2021 winter sports season, where marksmanship was the only traditional sport in DODEA Europe.

Eleven schools are set to compete in the first meet on Dec. 11, then resume competition after the winter break. The finals are set for Feb. 5.

Whether there will be any finals for basketball or wrestling — or any competition at all — remains to be determined. An addendum to the statement, which referred to the move as “pausing,” said DODEA leadership will decide that in the first week of January. Events scheduled for the first two weekends of December will not be made up.

In the meantime, teams can

continue to practice.

DODEA Europe Athletic Director Kathy Clemmons said Wednesday that she is optimistic that at least some basketball and wrestling will go on. The sports were scheduled to conclude in late February.

“Once we are able to compete again, we hope we can resume our schedule,” Clemmons said.

Clemmons said she is not aware of any student-athletes contracting the coronavirus from fall sports competition, when football and volleyball were introduced after a year’s absence.

She said that unlike volleyball, basketball players and wrestlers were not set to wear masks while they were competing. She also said she’s not aware

of any discussion to require vaccinations to compete.

The decision is for DODEA Europe only. DODEA Pacific activities are currently going ahead, according to DODEA Pacific Athletic Director Tom McKinney.

Teams started to play last week in DODEA Japan, where DODEA teams are also competing against international schools. Competition began Wednesday on Okinawa, though DODEA’s two schools there and the three in Korea are only currently scheduled to compete against each other.

Wrestling was not held at all during the 2020-2021 season at DODEA schools overseas and basketball was limited to only DODEA Korea.

Panthers’ big rally in third period stuns Capitals

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Sam Reinhart scored the winning power-play goal with 14.4 seconds left, capping a furious comeback for the Florida Panthers to beat the Washington Capitals 5-4 on Tuesday night.

Trailing 4-1, the Panthers scored four goals on a season-high 26 shots in the third period to snap a two-game skid.

Eetu Luostarinen and Ryan Lomberg each had a goal and an assist. Sam Bennett and Joe Thornton also scored goals for Florida, and Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 23 shots.

Nick Jensen had a goal and an assist for the Capitals. Lars Eller, Beck Malenstyn and Connor McMichael also scored goals. Ilya Samsonov made 45 saves.

NHL teams had lost 303 consecutive games when trailing by three or more goals entering the third. The last team to pull off such a comeback was, ironically, Washington — which on Jan. 18, 2020, trailed the New

York Islanders 4-1 entering the third and went on to win 6-4.

Ducks 5, Kings 4 (SO): Kevin Shattenkirk and Trevor Zegras scored in the shootout, and visiting Anaheim blew a three-goal lead in the third period before rallying to beat Los Angeles in the first Freeway Face-off of the season.

Troy Terry and Shattenkirk scored unassisted goals in the second period and John Gibson made 30 saves before stopping two of the Kings’ three tries in the shootout.

The Ducks got their 10th win in 14 games despite wasting a 4-1 lead with 13 minutes left in regulation after Cam Fowler and Isac Lundeström scored 29 seconds apart early in the third period.

Blues 4, Lightning 3 (SO): Ryan O’Reilly scored the lone goal in a shootout and goalie Jordan Binnington rebounded from a rough start to lift host St. Louis over Tampa Bay.

The Blues erased an early three-goal deficit and have won

their last five against the Lightning, the two-time defending Stanley Cup champions.

Stars 4, Hurricanes 1: Roope Hintz scored his first career hat trick on an empty netter in the closing minutes, and host Dallas beat Carolina for its fifth straight win.

Joe Pavelski had a goal and two assists for the Stars, who were outshot 40-17 and have won six straight home games — the longest current winning streak in the NHL. Braden Holtby made 39 saves in his 500th regular season game.

Red Wings 2, Bruins 1: Marc Staal’s first goal of the season was the tiebreaker with just over eight minutes remaining in the third period, and Alex Nedeljkovic made 41 saves, leading visiting Detroit over Boston.

It was the Red Wings’ 3,000th victory. Filip Zadina also scored for Detroit, which won its third straight.

Wild 5, Coyotes 2: Jordan Greenway had a goal and two

assists, Kirill Kaprizov scored and Kaapo Kahkonen made 29 saves as host Minnesota beat Arizona.

Joel Eriksson Ek, Jonas Brodin and Marcus Foligno also scored for the Wild, who lead the NHL with 59 goals scored since Nov. 2. They have won four games in a row and scored 19 goals in that span.

Sharks 5, Devils 2: Leading scorer Timo Meier scored twice, James Reimer made 32 saves and visiting San Jose defeated New Jersey.

Noah Gregor, Jacob Middleton and Erik Karlsson also scored for the Sharks, who have started their five-game road trip at 2-0.

Predators 6, Blue Jackets 0: Filip Forsberg scored four goals and Juuse Saros made 27 saves for his first shutout of the season, leading host Nashville over Columbus.

Yakov Trenin and Nick Cousins also scored, and Mikael Granlund assisted on all four of Forsberg’s goals.

Suns top Warriors for 17th straight win

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Deandre Ayton scored 24 points, Chris Paul added 15 points and 11 assists, and the Phoenix Suns tied a franchise record of 17 straight wins by beating the Golden State Warriors 104-96 on Tuesday night in an early showdown between the NBA's top teams.

The Suns won despite losing star guard Devin Booker to a left hamstring injury in the second quarter. He had 10 points and two rebounds in 15 minutes.

Even without Booker, the Suns led 56-54 at halftime and 80-78 going into the fourth quarter. The game stayed tight, and neither team led by double digits until Landry Shamet knocked down a three-pointer — on an assist by Paul — with 54.4 seconds left.

The game mostly lived up to the hype — at least until the Warriors, who had their seven-game winning streak snapped, went cold in the fourth quarter.

Jordan Poole led Golden State with 28 points. Stephen Curry — who came into the game averaging 28.6 points per game — had 12 points on 4-for-21 shooting, including 3 of 14 from three-point range.

The Suns and Warriors are now both 18-3. The only other time Phoenix has won 17 straight games was during the 2006-07 season. They'll go for their franchise record 18th win against the Pistons on Thursday.

Nets 112, Knicks 110: James Harden and Kevin Durant led the way until James

Johnson made two free throws with 2.2 seconds left to give Brooklyn a win over New York.

Harden had 34 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists, and Durant heated up after a slow start to finish with 27 points and nine assists. He had 11 points in the final 5:45, but the Knicks sent a second defender to force him to give the ball up on the last possession.

The ball went to Johnson, who was fouled in the lane and made the free throws for the final points.

Alec Burks scored a season-high 25 points in his new role as the Knicks' starting point guard. Julius Randle added 24 points, nine rebounds and eight assists.

Grizzlies 98, Raptors 91: Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 25 points, Desmond Bane had 23 and Dillon Brooks 17 as visiting Memphis won back-to-back games, beating struggling Toronto.

The Grizzlies won again without leading scorer Ja Morant, who sat for the second game because of a sprained left knee. Morant is expected to miss at least two weeks. Memphis was coming off a win over Sacramento on Sunday.

Bane made five three-pointers and Jackson had four for the Grizzlies, who never trailed and led by as many as 17 points. Pascal Siakam scored 20 points, Scottie Barnes had 19 and Fred VanVleet 15 as the Raptors lost their third straight. Toronto has lost five straight home games.

Lakers 117, Kings 92: Anthony Davis scored 25 points, Russell Westbrook added 23 and Los Angeles overcame the absence of LeBron James to win at Sacramento.

The Lakers sent James home earlier in the day after he was placed in the NBA's health and safety protocol.

But they got more than enough from their other two big stars and took over with a dominant third quarter to win back-to-back games for the first time since Nov. 8-10.

The Kings missed 17 of 18 shots from the field during a stretch that lasted into the fourth quarter. They fell to 2-3 under interim coach Alvin Gentry. Richaun Holmes scored 27 points on 12-for-13 shooting in his first game back after missing three with an illness. De'Aaron Fox added 17.

Trail Blazers 110, Pistons 92: CJ McCollum scored 28 points and host Portland handed Detroit its seventh straight loss.

Ben McLemore, who had played in just six previous games for the Blazers this season, had 17 points off the bench. Portland, with Damian Lillard looking on from the bench in street clothes, snapped a three-game losing streak.

The Blazers have won 10 straight at home for the first time since 2009. Detroit rookie Cade Cunningham finished with a season-high 26 points, including five three-pointers. The Pistons have won just four games this season and fell to 2-9 on the road.

Buckeyes use strong defense to top No. 1 Blue Devils

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Zed Key scored a career-high 20 points and Ohio State held top-ranked Duke scoreless for the final 4½ minutes, completing a rally from a 15-point second-half deficit to beat the Blue Devils 71-66 on Tuesday night.

E.J. Liddell hit two free throws with 1:06 remaining to give the Buckeyes (5-2) their first lead since early in the first half, and his jumper made it 69-66 with 16 seconds left. Duke freshman star Paolo Banchero missed a tying three-pointer, and Cedric Russell got the rebound and closed it out at the free-throw line.

The Blue Devils (7-1) claimed the top spot in this week's AP Top 25 poll after beating then-No. 1 Gonzaga in Las Vegas. Ohio State improved to 2-1 against ranked foes this year with its fourth straight game decided in the final minutes.

Wendell Moore Jr. led the Blue Devils with 17 points and Banchero finished with 14.

No. 2 Purdue 93, Florida State 65: Jaden Ivey scored 18 points and matched his career high with four three-pointers, Brandon Newman added 13 points, and the host Boilermakers pulled away from the Seminoles.

Florida State (5-2) was led by

Caleb Mills with 22 points.

No. 13 Tennessee 86, Presbyterian 44: Kennedy Chandler and Justin Powell scored 15 points apiece to lead the host Vols past the Blue Hose.

Chandler, a freshman guard, had seven assists and seven steals. Victor Bailey added 14 points and Santiago Vescovi had 13 for Tennessee (5-1).

No. 15 Houston 99, Northwestern State 58: Marcus Sasser made seven three-pointers in the first half and finished with 26 points, and the host Cougars beat the Demons.

Sasser had 23 points by halftime on 7-for-12 shooting from beyond the arc as Houston (6-1)

built a 60-25 lead at the break. He finished 9-for-17 from the field for the game.

No. 17 UConn 72, UMES 63: R.J. Cole scored 25 points and the Huskies survived a challenge from the visiting Hawks.

Tyler Polley added 14 points for UConn (7-1), which was sluggish for much of the night. UMES cut the lead to one point in the second half before the Huskies pulled away.

Siena 83, Army 67: Colby Rogers had 18 points as the visiting Saints topped the Black Knights.

Josh Caldwell had 19 points and seven rebounds for Army (4-3).