

NATO chief: Door open for Ukraine

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

NATO's membership door remains open to Ukraine, the alliance's top official said Friday, adding that Moscow will have no say over which countries have a right to join the Western military alliance.

"It is for Ukraine to decide its own path," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said following talks with top French military and diplomatic officials in Paris.

Ukraine's quest to eventually join NATO has been a major point of contention with Russia, which has used Kyiv's increasingly closer ties with the West as a justification for its military buildup on Ukraine's borders.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is seeking guarantees from Washington that it will preclude future Ukrainian membership in NATO. Putin has also complained about allied military assistance to the country.

Meanwhile Ukraine has called on allies to

fast-track its path to membership.

In a Foreign Affairs article published in August, Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign affairs minister, wrote that for the United States and its allies, "recognizing the new reality means institutionalizing the country's place within the West."

"It is time for the United States and Europe to set out a clear road map for Ukraine to finally join NATO and the European Union," Kuleba wrote.

NATO has given no indication it is willing to do that. Still, Stoltenberg said the decision on whether to admit Ukraine into NATO rests with the 30 countries that make up the alliance.

He also said NATO rejects Russia's notion that it has a right to a "sphere of influence" in Ukraine.

In 2008, NATO countries' heads of state decided that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually become members once they met a range of standards on military capabilities and democratic reforms.

But in the years since, NATO hasn't taken the next step of offering a Membership Action Plan, which is a precursor to full-fledged membership.

Shortly after the 2008 decision, Russia fought a brief war with Georgia, and it exerts control over two Georgian breakaway regions.

Ongoing territorial disputes, first in Georgia and later in Ukraine, where Russia annexed land in 2014, have complicated both countries' NATO ambitions.

Within NATO, there also is a lack of consensus on whether Ukraine and Georgia should be welcomed in. Germany and France have long been skeptical about the idea.

Meanwhile, U.S. President Joe Biden's administration appears to have reservations of its own.

Senior State Department officials have told Ukraine that NATO membership is unlikely to be approved in the next decade, The Associated Press reported Thursday.

General warns of rise in attacks on US troops in Iraq

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The top U.S. commander for the Middle East said Thursday that the United States will keep the current 2,500 troops in Iraq for the foreseeable future, and he warned that he expects increasing attacks on U.S. and Iraqi personnel by Iranian-backed militias determined to get American forces out.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie said in an interview with The Associated Press at the Pentagon that despite the shift by U.S. forces to a non-combat role in Iraq, they will still provide air support and other military aid for Iraq's fight against the Islamic State.

Noting that Iranian-backed militias want all Western forces out of Iraq, he said an ongoing uptick in violence may continue through December.

"They actually want all U.S. forces to leave, and all U.S. forces are not going to leave," he said, adding that as a result, "that

may provoke a response as we get later into the end of the month."

The Iraqi government earlier Thursday announced the conclusion of talks on ending the U.S. combat mission against ISIS. U.S. forces have been largely in an advisory role for some time, so the announced transition changes little. The announcement reflects a July decision by the Biden administration to end the U.S. combat mission in Iraq by Dec. 31.

"We've drawn down from bases we didn't need, we've made it harder to get at us. But the Iraqis still want us to be there. They still want the presence, they still want the engagement," said McKenzie. "So as long as they want it, and we can mutually agree that's the case — we're going to be there."

He said he believes ISIS militants will continue to be a threat in Iraq and that the group will "keep recreating itself, perhaps under a different name." The key, he said,

will be to ensure that ISIS is not able to coalesce with other elements around the globe and become increasingly strong and dangerous.

America invaded Iraq in 2003, and at the peak point had more than 170,000 troops battling insurgents in the country and later working to train and advise Iraqi forces. All U.S. forces were withdrawn at the end of 2011, but just three years later, American troops were back to help Iraq beat back ISIS, which had swept across the border from Syria to gain control of a large swath of the country.

The U.S. presence in Iraq has long been a flash point for Tehran, but tensions spiked after a January 2020 U.S. drone strike near the Baghdad airport killed a top Iranian general. In retaliation, Iran launched a barrage of missiles at al-Asad airbase, where U.S. troops were stationed. More than 100 service members suffered traumatic brain injuries in the blasts.

US general: Al-Qaida growing in Afghanistan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—The al-Qaida extremist group has grown slightly inside Afghanistan since U.S. forces left in late August, and the country's new Taliban leaders are divided over whether to fulfill their 2020 pledge to break ties with the group, the top U.S. commander in the region said Thursday.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, said in an interview with The Associated Press that the departure of U.S. military and intelligence assets from Afghanistan has made it much harder to track al-Qaida and other extremist groups inside Afghanistan.

"We're probably at about 1 or 2% of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan," he said, adding that this makes it "very hard, not impossible" to ensure that neither al-Qaida nor the Islamic State's Afghanistan affiliate can pose a threat to the United States.

Speaking at the Pentagon, McKenzie said it's clear that al-Qaida is attempting to rebuild its presence inside Afghanistan, which

was the base from which it planned the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks against the United States. He said some militants are coming into the country through its porous borders, but it is hard for the U.S. to track numbers.

The U.S. invasion that followed the Sept. 11 attacks led to a 20-year war that succeeded initially by removing the Taliban from power but ultimately failed. After President Joe Biden announced in April that he was withdrawing completely from Afghanistan, the Taliban systematically overpowered Afghan government defenses and seized Kabul, the capital, in August.

McKenzie and other senior U.S. military and national security officials had said before the U.S. withdrawal that it would complicate efforts to keep a lid on the al-Qaida threat, in part because of the loss of on-the-ground intelligence information and the absence of a U.S.-friendly government in Kabul. The U.S. says it will rely on airstrikes from drones and other aircraft based beyond Afghanistan's borders to respond to any extremist threats against the U.S. homeland.

McKenzie said no such strikes have been conducted since the U.S. completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan on Aug. 30. He added that America's ability to conduct such strikes is based on the availability of intelligence, overhead imagery and other information and communications, "and that architecture is still being developed right now."

Al-Qaida is among numerous extremist groups inside Afghanistan. After 2001, it lost most of its numbers and its ability to directly threaten U.S. territory, but McKenzie said it retains "an aspirational desire" to attack the United States. During their first period of rule in Kabul, from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban gave a haven to al-Qaida and refused Washington's demand after 9/11 to expel the group and turn over its leader, Osama bin Laden. The Taliban and al-Qaida have maintained ties ever since.

"So we're still trying to sort out exactly how the Taliban is going to proceed against them, and I think over the month or two it'll become a little more apparent to us," he said.

Army awards Purple Hearts for those hurt in Iran attack

The Washington Post

The Army on Wednesday said it has approved Purple Heart awards for an additional 39 soldiers wounded in an Iranian ballistic missile strike nearly two years ago in western Iraq, a significant victory for troops whose brain injuries were downplayed by their commander in chief at the time, President Donald Trump.

The announcement is an official acknowledgment that the attack, a dramatic escalation by Tehran after a U.S. drone strike that killed Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, was far more serious than Washington was willing to concede initially even though no fatalities occurred.

More than 30 Purple Hearts were awarded previously to U.S.

soldiers forced to take cover when 11 missiles — each about 40 feet long and carrying a 1,600-pound warhead — slammed into Ain al-Asad air base on Jan. 8, 2020, an incident that brought the United States and Iran to the brink of war. Commanders pressured the Army to consider others who were hurt, saying approval guidelines were unevenly and unfairly applied.

One of the newly approved awards will be given posthumously to Sgt. Jason Quitugua, who took his life in October, said Lt. Col. Gabe Ramirez, an Army spokesman. The others will be presented to a mix of active-duty soldiers, National Guard members and five people who have since left the service.

The Army is evaluating 11 other requests, Ramirez said.

US again expands COVID vaccine booster campaign

Associated Press

U.S. health authorities again expanded the nation's booster campaign Thursday, opening extra doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine to several million 16- and 17-year-olds.

The U.S. and many other nations already were urging adults to get booster shots to pump up immunity that can wane months after vaccination, calls that intensified with the discovery of the worrisome new omicron variant.

On Thursday, the Food and Drug Administration gave emergency authorization for 16- and 17-year-olds to get a third dose of the vaccine made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech — once they're six months past their last dose. And hours later, the Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention lifted the last barrier as Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the agency's director, issued a statement strongly encouraging those teens to get their booster as soon as it's time.

Boosters are important considering that protection against infection wanes over time and "we're facing a variant that has the potential to require more immunity to be protected," Walensky told The Associated Press.

About 200 million Americans are fully vaccinated, including about 4.7 million 16- and 17-year-olds.

"The booster vaccination increases the level of immunity and dramatically improves protection against COVID-19 in all age groups studied so far," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin said in a statement.

Court won't stop abortion ban but OKs clinics' suit

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court has ruled that Texas abortion providers can sue over the state's ban on most abortions, but the justices are allowing the law to remain in effect.

The court acted Friday, more than a month after hearing arguments over the law that makes abortion illegal after cardiac activity is detected in an embryo. That's around six weeks, before some women even know they are pregnant. There are no exceptions for rape or incest.

The law has been in place since Sept. 1.

The outcome is at best only a partial victory for abortion providers. The same federal judge who already has once blocked the law almost certainly will be asked to do so again. But then his decision will be reviewed by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which has twice voted to allow enforcement of the abortion ban.

The case could return to the justices and so far there have not been five votes on the nine-member court to put the law on hold while the legal fight plays out.

The high court ruling came a day after a state court judge in Texas ruled that the law's enforcement, which rewards lawsuits against violators by awarding judgments of \$10,000, is unconstitutional yet left the law in place.

The vote was 8 to 1 in favor of allowing the lawsuit to proceed, with only Justice Clarence Thomas voting the other way.

The law authorizes lawsuits against clinics, doctors and anyone who "aids or abets" an abortion performed after cardiac activity is detected.

Biden to focus on tech and elections at summit

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden was looking to close his two-day virtual Summit for Democracy on Friday by shining a spotlight on the importance of election integrity, countering authoritarian regimes' misuse of technology and bolstering independent media.

The United States, along with Australia, Denmark and Norway, announced the launch of a joint effort that aims to stem the misuse of technology by authoritarian powers to stifle dissent and seeks to help develop new tech innovations that support human rights.

The initiative, in part, calls for establishing a voluntary written code of conduct that's meant to guide government and tech companies on human rights criteria for export and licensing policy. Under the global charter for digital public goods, governments, civil society groups, software engineers and tech companies would declare principles for open source tech products.

"The United States will take greater responsibility for the digital tools we export," U.S. Agency for International Development administrator Samantha Power said. "All too often, technology originates in a hub of innovation like the United States and is exported to countries that use that technology to enable human rights abuses."

Biden on Thursday pledged that the U.S. would spend up to \$424 million around the world to support independent media, anti-corruption work and more.

The administration has sought to frame the virtual summit — a gathering that Biden had made a priority during his first year in

office — as a launching point for the 110 nations invited to take part in it to collaborate at a difficult moment for democracies. Biden wants to reconvene a follow-up gathering next year to take stock.

Biden in his own assessment said democracies are in a difficult place and called on world leaders to work with him to reverse what he called an alarming "backward slide" of democracy around the globe.

He didn't mention China or Russia by name as he opened the summit. But he has repeatedly made a case that the U.S. and like-minded allies need to show the world that democracies are a far better vehicle for societies than autocracies are.

Biden underscored that even long-established democracies, like the United States, haven't been immune to the strains.

"Here in the United States we know as well as anyone that renewing our democracy and strengthening our democratic institutions requires constant effort," Biden said.

Other leaders at the summit delivered their own remarks, many prerecorded, on the state of democracy, often reflecting on the stress that rapidly evolving technology is having on their nations. They also bemoaned the increase of disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining institutions and elections.

"The democratic conversation is changing," Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said. "New technologies and large tech companies are increasingly setting the stage for the democratic dialogue, sometimes with more emphasis on reach than on freedom of speech."

Reality TV's Josh Duggar guilty of having child porn

Associated Press

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — Former reality TV star Josh Duggar was immediately taken into custody Thursday after a federal jury convicted him of downloading and possessing child pornography.

The jury in Fayetteville, about 140 miles northwest of Little Rock, found Duggar, 33, guilty on one count each of receiving and possessing child pornography. He faces up to 20 years in prison and fines of up to

\$250,000 for each count when he's sentenced.

"Regardless of wealth, social status, or fame, our office will continue to seek out all individuals who seek to abuse children and victimize them through the downloading, possession and sharing of child pornography," said U.S. Attorney Clay Fowlkes of the western district of Arkansas, which prosecuted the case.

U.S. District Judge Timothy Brooks said

sentencing will happen in about four months, Fayetteville TV station KNWA reported.

"We respect the jury's verdict and we look forward to continuing this fight on appeal," said Justin Gelfand, one of Duggar's defense attorneys.

Duggar and his large Arkansas family starred on TLC's "19 Kids and Counting" until the network canceled the show in 2015 following revelations that he had molested four of his sisters and a babysitter.

Smollett guilty of staging attack, lying

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Former “Empire” actor Jussie Smollett was convicted Thursday on charges he staged an anti-gay, racist attack on himself nearly three years ago and then lied to Chicago police about it.

In the courtroom as the verdict was read, Smollett stood and faced the jury, showing no visible reaction. He and his family later left the courthouse without comment.

The jury found the 39-year-old guilty on five counts of disorderly conduct — for each separate time he was charged with

lying to police in the days immediately after the alleged attack. He was acquitted on a sixth count, of lying to a detective in mid-February, weeks after Smollett said he was attacked.

Outside court, special prosecutor Dan Webb called the verdict “a resounding message by the jury that Mr. Smollett did exactly what we said he did.”

Smollett “wreaked havoc here in the city for weeks on end for no reason whatsoever,” then compounded the problem by lying under oath to the jury, Webb said.

Defense attorney Nenyé Uche said

Smollett would appeal the conviction. He said Smollett was disappointed but “holding up very strong,” and is “committed to clearing his name.” He expressed confidence the actor would be cleared by an appellate court.

Judge James Linn set a post-trial hearing for Jan. 27, and said he would schedule Smollett’s sentencing at a later date. Disorderly conduct is a class 4 felony that carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if convicted, Smollett would likely be placed on probation and ordered to perform community service.

UK court permits Assange extradition to US

Associated Press

LONDON — A British appellate court opened the door Friday for Julian Assange to be extradited to the United States by overturning a lower court ruling that found the WikiLeaks founder’s mental health was too fragile to withstand the American criminal justice system.

The High Court in London ruled that U.S. assurances were enough to guarantee Assange would be treated humanely and directed a lower court judge to send the extradition request to the home secretary for review. The home secretary, who oversees law enforcement in the U.K., will make the final decision on whether to extradite As-

sange.

“There is no reason why this court should not accept the assurances as meaning what they say,” the High Court ruling stated. “There is no basis for assuming that the USA has not given the assurances in good faith.”

Assange’s fiancé, Stella Moris, called the decision a “grave miscarriage of justice” and said lawyers would file an appeal “at the earliest possible moment.”

Assange, 50, is currently being held at London’s high-security Belmarsh Prison. His supporters gathered outside the High Court on Friday, waving banners demanding his release.

A lower court judge earlier this year re-

fused the U.S. request to extradite Assange to face spying charges over WikiLeaks’ publication of secret military documents a decade ago. District Judge Vanessa Baraitser denied extradition on health grounds, saying Assange was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions.

The United States appealed, challenging the notion that Assange’s mental health made him too vulnerable to withstand the U.S. judicial system. James Lewis, a lawyer for the U.S. government, said Assange “has no history of serious and enduring mental illness” and does not meet the threshold of being so ill that he cannot resist harming himself.

New Zealand to ban youth under 15 from tobacco for life

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — New Zealand’s government believes it has come up with a unique plan to end tobacco smoking — a lifetime ban for those aged 14 or younger.

Under a new law the government announced Thursday and plans to pass next year, the minimum age to buy cigarettes would keep rising year after year.

That means, in theory at least, 65 years after the law takes effect, shoppers could still buy cigarettes — but only if they could prove they were at least 80 years old.

In practice, officials hope smoking will fade away decades before then. Indeed, the plan sets a goal of having fewer than 5% of New Zealanders smoking by 2025.

Other parts of the plan include allowing

only the sale of tobacco products with very low nicotine levels and slashing the number of stores that can sell them. The changes would be brought in over time to help retailers adjust.

Because the current minimum age to buy cigarettes in New Zealand is 18, the lifetime smoking ban for youth wouldn’t have an impact for a few years.

In an interview with The Associated Press, New Zealand’s Associate Health Minister Dr. Ayesha Verrall, who is spearheading the plan, said her work at a public hospital in Wellington involved telling several smokers they had developed cancer.

“You meet, every day, someone facing the misery caused by tobacco,” Verrall said. “The most horrible ways people die. Being short of breath, caused by tobacco.”

Smoking rates have steadily fallen in New Zealand for years, with only about 11% of adults now smoking and 9% smoking every day. The daily rate among Indigenous Maori remains much higher at 22%. Under the government’s plan, a taskforce would be created to help reduce smoking among Maori.

Big tax increases have already been imposed on cigarettes in recent years and some question why they aren’t hiked even higher.

“We don’t think tax increases will have any further impact,” Verrall said. “It’s really hard to quit and we feel if we did that, we’d be punishing those people who are addicted to cigarettes even more.”

And she said the tax measures tend to place a higher burden on lower-income people, who are more likely to smoke.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Arrest made in Fox Christmas tree fire

NY NEW YORK — A man was charged with arson and other crimes Wednesday for setting fire to a 50-foot Christmas tree in front of Fox News headquarters in midtown Manhattan, police said.

The tree outside of the News Corp. building that houses Fox News, The Wall Street Journal and the New York Post caught fire shortly after midnight, police said.

Firefighters extinguished the flames, and no injuries were reported. A 49-year-old man who police said was homeless was arrested on charges including criminal mischief, arson and trespassing.

Prison disturbance results in fires, injuries

NV LAS VEGAS — A disturbance among inmates resulted in fires and minor injuries Wednesday at a medium-security prison in southern Nevada, but no one was hospitalized and no significant damage resulted, a state corrections official said.

Police and firefighters were summoned about 1 p.m. from Las Vegas to Southern Desert Correctional Center near Indian Springs, but calls were canceled before responders completed the 20-minute drive, police and Clark County spokesmen said.

A group of inmates refused to comply with guards “and a couple of fires were started,” state prisons spokeswoman Teri Vance said.

Vance said no one was hurt

seriously enough to require transport to a hospital, and she denied initial media reports characterizing the incident as a “riot” at the much larger High Desert State Prison. Vance said damage was “not significant.”

Small alligator found a long way from home

MA WEST SPRINGFIELD — A long way from its home, a small alligator was rescued by a Massachusetts fisherman Tuesday after it was spotted in the Westfield River for months.

Jeremy White, a worker for the state’s department of conservation and recreation, said he saw a video of the alligator on the news and decided he was going to see it for himself, The Boston Globe reported Tuesday.

White drove his boat to the area in the river where the alligator was spotted but couldn’t see it and decided to throw in a fishing line. The alligator appeared and White pushed closer to it.

He said the reptile was “trying to warm up in the sun because its eyes were closed. I was able to get up right next to it, so I just reached out and grabbed it.”

According to West Springfield Animal Control, the reptile is in good condition and is in the care of the state’s environmental police.

Reward is offered after two albino deer killed

VA STUART — An albino deer and her fawn were shot and killed illegally in a Virginia county, and the sheriff is offering a reward for information leading to whomever is

responsible.

Game warden Dale Owens told the Martinsville Bulletin. Owens said whoever shot the deer didn’t have permission to hunt on the property and were shooting from the roadway.

Albino deer are not protected in Virginia, although in some states they are.

Patrick County Sheriff Dan Smith’s office is offering a \$250 reward to anyone who can provide information about the illegal killing of the two albino deer.

Driver has medical event, fatally strikes 2

IL MIDLOTHIAN — Two people died Wednesday after they were run over suburban Chicago strip mall parking lot by a motorist suffering a medical emergency, police said.

An unidentified driver was moving his vehicle through a parking lot when he suffered a “medical event,” Midlothian police said.

The vehicle then accelerated and struck several parked vehicles and two elderly pedestrians before striking a Secretary of State’s office and coming to a rest, police said.

The driver and both pedestrians were taken to a hospital in critical condition. The two pedestrians — Kathleen Coyne, 75, of Hometown, and Thomas Coyne, 80, of Oak Lawn — were later pronounced dead, the Cook County Medical Examiner’s office said.

Officer accused of using patrol car in illegal hunt

LA COUSHATTA — A police officer in Louisiana is accused of using a pa-

trol car while off duty to illegally hunt deer at night without a hunting license, authorities said Wednesday.

Javarrea Pouncy’s three companions included a convicted felon who was illegally carrying a firearm and also didn’t have a hunting license, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries said in a news release.

It said wildlife agents heard gunfire while patrolling Sunday night and came upon a vehicle spotlighting for deer in an open field on private property. When the agents got closer, they identified the vehicle as a Coushatta Police Department patrol unit, according to the release.

Mill asks for cardboard because of shortage

ME OLD TOWN — A Maine paper mill is asking local residents for cardboard to turn into packaging because of the rising cost of the raw materials it typically uses.

ND Paper in Old Town uses cardboard and corrugated containers to create pulp that is later used to make packaging. However, it’s becoming more difficult and expensive to obtain those materials, a representative for the company told the Bangor Daily News.

The company is asking residents of Old Town and surrounding communities to drop off cardboard, cereal boxes and pizza boxes, the Daily News reported. The company, which also has locations elsewhere in Maine and out of state, said it’s the first time it has tried to source materials from residents.

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Navy had tough path to Army matchup

Associated Press

At the beginning of the season, Navy coach Ken Niumatalolo declared this would be the toughest schedule in all his years with the Midshipmen.

It's largely lived up to that expectation — and that's taken a toll on Navy's record.

"If Georgia would have won, we would have played two teams that would be in the final four. Or if Iowa would have won," Niumatalolo said. "I've been encouraged. I've been seeing us improve a lot. ... But sometimes your schedule doesn't allow that."

Navy's schedule this season included matchups against Cincinnati and Notre Dame — a playoff team and another that barely missed the cut. The challenges don't end there. When the Midshipmen play their annual showdown with Army this weekend in New Jersey, that will be the 11th bowl-bound opponent for Navy. Nobody in the country will have faced more.

"We've been improving," Niumatalolo said. "But like if you're a boxer, and you're fighting Floyd Mayweather, you're like, 'I

think I got better.' But then you got six black eyes. But who else has beaten him? I thought we played well against Notre Dame and Cincinnati, who got one loss in between them."

Navy plays outside the Power Five, but the presence of two playoff contenders made its schedule tough. In AAC play, the Midshipmen (3-8) also took on a Houston team that is currently in the Top 25 and an SMU team that was ranked when it faced Navy.

At the bottom of the league, Navy beat Temple (3-9) in its most recent game, but Tulane (2-10) and South Florida (2-10) were not on the schedule. When the Midshipmen did play their toughest opponents, they were often competitive, losing to Houston by eight, SMU by seven and Cincinnati by seven. Against Cincinnati, Navy recovered a late onside kick, but an interception ended its chance of spoiling the Bearcats' unbeaten record.

The question now is whether Navy's schedule has sharpened the Midshipmen

enough to help them beat Army (8-3) this weekend. The Black Knights obviously have a better record than the Midshipmen, but Army has victories over Bucknell of the FCS, plus Connecticut (1-11) and Massachusetts (1-11).

The Black Knights have also played good teams tough, however, losing to Wisconsin by six and to Wake Forest in a wild 70-56 affair.

"We'll be ready for those guys. I'll just tell you that," Niumatalolo said.

No matter how the rest of the season has gone, a win this weekend would give Navy cause to celebrate. That's just the nature of the rivalry with Army — and this year in particular, Niumatalolo believes the Midshipmen have made strides that haven't shown in their record.

"The season's not what they wanted, but I've been impressed with them working the whole year, the whole season," Niumatalolo said. "They recognize for the seniors, winning this game would change everything for them, and catapult us into the offseason."

Alabama QB Young voted AP Player of Year

Associated Press

Alabama quarterback Bryce Young is The Associated Press college football player of the year, giving the Crimson Tide their second consecutive winner.

Young received 42 of 53 first-place votes from AP Top 25 voters and 137 points to easily finish ahead of Michigan defensive end Aidan Hutchinson (four first-place votes, 67 points) for the AP Player of the Year honor presented by Regions Bank.

Pittsburgh quarterback Kenny Pickett was third; Alabama linebacker Will Anderson Jr. was fourth; and Ohio State quarterback C.J. Stroud was fifth.

Young, Hutchinson, Pickett and Stroud are the finalists for the Heisman Trophy, which will be presented Saturday in New York.

Later Thursday, during the ESPN College Football Awards show, Young also won the Davey O'Brien Award as the nation's top quarterback, and the Maxwell Award as the most outstanding player in college football.

Other winners included Georgia defensive tackle Jordan Davis, who won the Bednarik Award as the nation's top defensive player and the Outland Trophy as the most outstanding interior lineman, and Kenneth Walker III of Michigan State, who became

the first Spartans player to win the Doak Walker Award as the nation's best running back.

Walker, who finished sixth in AP Player of the Year voting, was also named Walter Camp player of the year.

A sophomore and first-year starter, Young passed for 4,322 yards and a school record-tying 43 touchdowns, leading the top-ranked Tide to the Southeastern Conference championship and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff. The Tide will face No. 4 Cincinnati on Dec. 31 in the Cotton Bowl.

Young said he felt well prepared for the challenge of leading a program that has set the standard in college football for more than a decade, but nothing speaks louder than performance.

"Settling in and getting to play in different environments, getting to be put in situations, naturally, makes you more comfortable as leaders," Young told AP. "It's always about what you do in the offseason, how you carry yourself, but any time you're able to produce in big moments and you're able to demonstrate a lot, that's always a big part, as well. Because leadership is a lot about action."

Young capped his season with an SEC

championship game-record 421 yards passing against Georgia last week.

Alabama receiver DeVonta Smith became the first Alabama player to win AP Player of the Year in 2020. Young is the 18th quarterback to win the award since it was established in 1998.

Young, a Southern California native and former five-star recruit, said the high expectations are what drew him to Alabama and help motivate him.

"You want to live up to the pressure and to the hype of it all," he said.

Other awards handed out Thursday night:

■ Pitt receiver Tre Tipton won the Disney Spirit Award.

■ Stanford quarterback Isaiah Sanders was the winner of the Wuerffel Trophy for community service.

■ Pitt's Jordan Addison won the Biletnikoff Award as the nation's top receiver.

■ Michigan's Jake Moody won the Lou Groza Award as the nation's best kicker.

■ San Diego State's Matt Araiza took the Ray Guy Award as the best punter.

■ Cincinnati cornerback Coby Bryant won the Thorpe Award as the best defensive back.

Rutgers knocks off new No. 1 Purdue

Associated Press

PISCATAWAY, N.J. — Ron Harper Jr. hit a buzzer-beater from just inside half court, and Rutgers shocked Purdue in its first-ever game as the nation's No. 1 team, winning 70-68 on Thursday night.

Harper finished with 30 points on 10-for-15 shooting and 10 rebounds for the Scarlet Knights, a do-it-all performance that concluded with the most stunning shot of the young college hoops season. Rutgers (5-4, 1-1 Big Ten) beat the top-ranked team for the first time in program history.

Purdue had gone ahead 68-67 on a layup by Trevion Williams with 4 seconds left. With no timeouts, Rutgers inbounded the ball to Harper, who dribbled across the half-court line and let it fly from the big "R" logo. The ball went through as time expired and Rutgers fans stormed the

court.

Williams scored 21 points off the bench for Purdue (8-1, 1-1 Big Ten), which was a unanimous No. 1 in this week's AP Top 25, the program's first time atop the poll. Its stay will be brief.

The lead changed hands three times in the final 13.1 seconds. Harper hit a turnaround jumper to put Rutgers ahead 67-66, its first lead since early in the second half.

No. 23 Seton Hall 64, No. 7 Texas 60: Jared Rhoden scored 18 points and made the go-ahead basket as the Pirates beat the visiting Longhorns for their second win this season over a top-10 team.

Cold-shooting Bryce Aiken scored five of his 10 points in the final minute, including a clutch three-pointer, as Seton Hall (8-1) won its fifth straight game. The Pirates also have an impressive road win at then-

No. 4 Michigan on Nov. 16.

Alexis Yetna added 12 points and 11 rebounds for Seton Hall in a game that was part of the annual Big East-Big 12 Battle. Myles Cale had 10 points and Tyrese Samuel came off the bench to grab 11 rebounds.

The Pirates held Texas (6-2) scoreless for 7:20 down the stretch and are off to their best start since opening 9-1 in 2017-18.

Tre Mitchell had season highs of 19 points and 11 rebounds for Texas, which had won five in a row. Foul-plagued Timmy Allen added 17 points and a season-best 12 rebounds.

No. 5 Gonzaga 80, Merrimack 50: At Spokane, Wash., Drew Timme scored 22 points, making all eight of his shots, and the Bulldogs beat the cold-shooting Warriors.

Freshman center Chet Holmgren had 15 points and 15

rebounds, and Julian Strawther added 15 points for Gonzaga (8-2), which has won 57 consecutive home games — the longest streak in the nation and a program record.

Jordan Minor scored 17 points and Ziggy Reid had 16 for Merrimack (4-7), which is in the third season of its transition to Division I and was playing a ranked opponent for the first time.

No. 17 Iowa State 73, Iowa 53: At Ames, Iowa, Izaiah Brockington had 29 points and 10 rebounds as the Cyclones dominated the rival Hawkeyes.

Brockington made his first nine shots and finished 11-for-14 from the field to help surprising Iowa State (9-0) remain undefeated after going 2-22 last season.

Jordan Bohannon scored 17 for Iowa (7-3), which shot 27% and has lost three in a row.

James' triple-double not enough against hot Grizzlies

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 25 points, Desmond Bane added 23 and the Memphis Grizzlies pulled away in the fourth quarter for a 108-95 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Thursday night.

Tyus Jones and De'Anthony Melton added 12 points apiece for Memphis, which won for the sixth time in seven games.

"I thought our activity was fantastic defensively," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said. "I thought the Lakers came out and kind of imposed their will in the first quarter, but we just kept making those winning plays throughout."

LeBron James had a triple-double with 20 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds, and Anthony Davis led the Lakers with 22 points. Talen Horton-Tucker and Avery Bradley each added

10 points.

Memphis opened the fourth quarter on a 9-2 run, pushing the lead to double digits for the first time for either team. With that spurt, Memphis extended its lead to 94-80. Los Angeles never got its deficit to single digits.

The Grizzlies were without leading scorer Ja Morant and their top defender, Dillon Brooks, who are in health and protocol protection. That put Memphis at a personnel disadvantage.

"I didn't know what we were going to look like," Bane said of learning about an hour before the game that Brooks was out. He said the Grizzlies have had games in which they didn't have the players individually, but not both missing.

"One thing I did know was that we were going to fight, re-

gardless," Bane said. "Before the game started, I told everybody to have fun. Just do what we do and have fun playing the game."

Memphis, which leads the league in points in the paint, was forced into long-range shots early by the Lakers defense, and the shooting percentage reflected the situation.

But in the second quarter, Memphis was able to run more. The transition baskets and more Los Angeles turnovers contributed to the Grizzlies building a 59-53 lead at the half.

Jazz 118, 76ers 96: Donovan Mitchell scored 22 points, Rudy Gobert had 17 points and 21 rebounds, and visiting Utah extended its winning streak to six games.

Hassan Whiteside added 14 points and 10 rebounds for Utah.

Joel Embiid had 19 points and nine rebounds for the 76ers. Seth Curry scored 18 points and Tobias Harris 17 for Philadelphia, which had won four of five.

Both teams were playing the second night of a back-to-back, and it was the 76ers who looked tired after halftime.

Spurs 123, Nuggets 111: Derrick White had 23 points, Lonnie Walker IV added 21 and host San Antonio never trailed in beating Denver, snapping a two-game skid.

Dejounte Murray added 20 points, nine assists and eight rebounds for San Antonio, which is in the middle of a five-game homestand.

Nikola Jokic had 22 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists for his fifth triple-double of the season for Denver. Aaron Gordon added 25 points and Will Barton had 19.

Fleury posts shutout for 500th victory

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Marc-Andre Fleury made 27 saves and earned his 500th career win as the Chicago Blackhawks beat the Montreal Canadiens 2-0 Thursday night.

With a shutout, Fleury joined Martin Brodeur and Patrick Roy as the only NHL goaltenders to reach 500 career victories.

As the clock reached zero, Blackhawks teammates rushed over to Fleury in celebration.

Jonathan Toews and Henrik Borgstrom scored for Chicago. Patrick Kane and Seth Jones picked up assists.

Jake Allen had 23 saves for Montreal.

Wild 5, Sharks 2: Jordan Greenway scored twice and visiting Minnesota beat San Jose for its eighth straight win.

Kevin Fiala, Joel Eriksson Ek and Kirill Kaprizov also scored for the Wild, who took over the NHL lead with 39 points, their most through 26

games in franchise history.

Predators 4, Islanders 3: Eeli Tolvanen scored with 11.5 seconds left to cap visiting Nashville's third-period rally for a victory over the Islanders.

The Islanders led 3-2 after Noah Dobson's goal early in the third, but Nashville rallied to keep New York winless in seven games at its new arena.

Lightning 5, Maple Leafs 3: Steven Stamkos scored early and set up visiting Tampa Bay's final three goals in a win over Toronto.

The short-handed Lightning were without four significant players and still managed to win their fifth straight game.

Ducks 2, Blue Jackets 1 (SO): Trevor Zegras and Rickard Rakell scored in the shootout and visiting Anaheim rallied past Columbus for its second straight win.

Isac Lundestrom scored for Anaheim and John Gibson stopped 33 shots for his fourth straight win against Columbus.

Blues 6, Red Wings 2: Nathan Walker scored his first career hat trick and fourth-string goaltender Charlie Lindgren made 29 saves, leading host St. Louis over Detroit.

The Blues recalled Walker from their AHL affiliate, the Springfield Thunderbirds, under emergency conditions Wednesday. The 27-year-old Walker, from Wales, had previously dressed in 25 NHL games, recording three goals and two assists.

Bruins 3, Oilers 2: Matt Grzelcyk scored his first goal of the season in the final minutes of the third period, and visiting Boston snapped a two-game skid with a victory over Edmonton.

Grzelcyk scored with 2:33 left in the third.

Brad Marchand and Jake DeBrusk also scored for the Bruins. Linus Ullmark finished with 41 saves.

Hurricanes 2, Flames 1 (OT): Sebastian Aho scored his second goal of the game 4:07

into overtime to give visiting Carolina a victory over Calgary.

Aho also scored in the first period for the Hurricanes (18-6-1) to extend his point streak to four games. Frederik Andersen stopped 26 shots.

Kings 4, Stars 0: Adrian Kempe and Arthur Kaliyev scored as host Los Angeles shut out Dallas.

Jonathan Quick made 27 saves for his second shutout of the season and 56th of his career. Viktor Arvidsson and Andreas Athanasiou added empty-net goals.

Jets 3, Kraken 0: Kyle Connor scored two goals and Connor Hellebuyck stopped 25 shots to lead visiting Winnipeg past Seattle.

It was Winnipeg's first shutout of the season. Dominic Toninato also scored for the Jets, winners in four of their last six games. Paul Stastny, Mark Scheifele and Logan Stanley had assists as the Kraken again faltered early.

Vikings nearly blow 29-point lead, survive Steelers' rally

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Minnesota Vikings safety Harrison Smith ripped off his helmet once the victory was finally secured, after a 29-point lead on the Pittsburgh Steelers late in the third quarter evaporated into yet another teeth-clenching finish.

Smith looked exhausted and exasperated, hardly excited at all. These Vikings don't make anything easy on themselves.

Dalvin Cook rushed for 205 yards and two touchdowns in his faster-than-expected return from a shoulder injury, and the Vikings held on to beat the Steelers 36-28 by forcing an incomplete pass in the end zone on the final play Thursday night.

Ben Roethlisberger's throw to Pat Freiermuth was on target,

but Smith smashed into the rookie tight end at just the right moment to dislodge the ball as Xavier Woods and Anthony Barr converged. That gave the Vikings (6-7) a critical victory after they flirted with an unforgivable loss.

"It is frustrating having to come down to the last second. It's taken a few years of my life this season, but it's good to be on this side of a close one," Barr said.

All but one of Minnesota's games this year have been decided by eight points or less, including four losses by three points or fewer.

"Never say 'over' with this team," said coach Mike Zimmer, who watched the Vikings lose 29-27 last week at previous-

ly winless Detroit on a last-play touchdown pass.

The Steelers had fared much better in these close finishes this season, but they weren't trying to erase 29-point deficits in those other situations, either.

Just as vital as all the turf he tore up on the ground was the 17-yard catch Cook made on a seam route on third-and-9 from the Minnesota 26 with 2:38 left. That forced the Steelers to use all their timeouts, leaving Roethlisberger 96 yards and 2:16 to go after Jordan Berry pinned a punt deep against his former team.

Roethlisberger hit Chase Claypool for 48 yards while Bashaud Breeland was committing pass interference to reach midfield. Claypool pulled in a

fourth-and-1 slant to reach the Minnesota 34 but cost the Steelers a handful of seconds by celebrating the first down rather than immediately tossing the ball to the referee.

Diontae Johnson set up the last play from the 12 by taking a crossing route 12 yards out of bounds, but the Steelers (6-6-1), who failed on a two-point conversion try earlier in the fourth quarter, wound up just short this time. Last week, they hung on to beat Baltimore 20-19 by denying a two-point try with 12 seconds remaining.

Coach Mike Tomlin wasn't all that impressed by the comeback.

"We were JV again tonight, and I'm talking up front on both sides," Tomlin said.