

US starts denying Afghans' entry requests

Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration has issued dozens of denials to Afghans seeking safety in the United States through a fast-track for legal entry called humanitarian parole.

The numbers are still relatively small, but advocates fear they represent a larger trend.

Under humanitarian parole, which is not a pathway to citizenship, the federal government can cut through the red tape of the typical visa process to temporarily allow people to enter the U.S. for emergency or public interest reasons. Advocates say the government belatedly set unnecessarily steep barriers that many Afghans can't surmount.

Parole is issued on a case-by-case basis and typically reserved for dire circumstances, such as giving someone a few days to visit a dying loved one, but it has also been used to quickly bring in thousands of people in the aftermath of wars or environmental disasters.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigra-

tion Services, which typically processes 2,000 parole applications annually, has been flooded with more than 20,000 from Afghans alone since August. With a filing fee of \$575 per person, that translates to an infusion of more than \$11 million for the agency.

So far, Citizenship and Immigration Services has approved 135 cases.

Spokeswoman Victoria Palmer said the agency has increased the number of staffers working on parole cases fivefold to 44 officers. She added that parole is not intended to replace established processing channels under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for people who have fled their country of origin and are seeking protection.

In some limited circumstances, protection needs are so urgent that obtaining protection via that process is not realistic, she wrote in a statement, adding: "This, along with other, multiple factors are taken into consideration when USCIS assesses whether urgent humanitarian or significant pub-

lic benefit parole warrants a favorable exercise of discretion."

With no way to quickly leave Afghanistan, even those with family ties to the U.S. could wait more than a decade because of massive visa backlogs.

In denial letters, the agency has requested third-party evidence of "risk of severe targeted or individualized harm." A 2017 Citizenship and Immigration Services training manual says officers can grant humanitarian parole to people facing "generalized violence." But the website states that parole is generally not intended to protect people "at generalized risk of harm."

Applicants must also complete in-person vetting and biometrics screenings before they can be approved for parole. Because the U.S. Embassy in Kabul is closed, applicants must travel to a third country to do so, Palmer said.

That's assuming they can sneak past the Taliban to leave.

Massachusetts Democratic Sen. Edward Markey and Rep. Seth Moulton, along with 53 other

lawmakers, sent a letter to the federal agency on Monday expressing alarm about the "restrictive and inconsistent" humanitarian parole processing. They asked agency officials to justify what they consider changes to the requirements for Afghans to prove they need parole despite the agency's discretionary authority. The lawmakers also urged the agency to create a special parole program for Afghans that would go beyond the program established for those evacuated by U.S. forces.

Some 75,000 Afghans evacuated during the chaotic U.S. withdrawal and were brought in under humanitarian parole, which lasts two years and qualifies beneficiaries for work permits and temporary refugee assistance. More than half are ineligible for the special immigrant visas given to those who worked directly with the federal government and will have to seek asylum or other protections before their parole expires or possibly face eventual deportation.

Navy pilot program will provide free maternity uniforms

By JUAN KING

Stars and Stripes

The Navy is looking for hundreds of pregnant sailors to help find the right fit for maternity uniforms.

The sea service is conducting a pilot program between Jan. 2 and Sept. 30, 2026, that will provide "a full array of authorized Navy maternity uniforms" to expectant sailors at no cost to them, according to an administrative message, NAVADMIN 284/21, which lays out the details.

The Navy is opening the program to 400 volunteers from en-

listed and officer ranks in active and reserve units worldwide. The maternity attire will include the working uniform Type III, service khaki for E-7 and above and the service uniform for E-6 and below.

Robert Carroll, the head of Navy Uniform Matters, said pregnant sailors will be accepted into the program on a first-come, first-served basis, according to a Navy news release from Dec. 15.

"Uniforms will be provided to participants fully hemmed and with all required sewn-on ac-

coutrements attached," it stated.

Uniforms will also be shipped at no cost. If the pilot program succeeds, the number of eligible sailors will be increased.

Eligible sailors must be approved for the program by their commands and meet five criteria, including being pregnant when they apply, having 12 months of service remaining at the time of their request and not planning to receive a maternity clothing allowance during their pregnancy.

Sailors accepted into the pilot

program will be measured for uniforms by their local Navy Exchange uniform section, which in turn will contact them regarding their uniform issue.

Also, those sailors must return their maternity uniforms when their pregnancy is over. Feedback from individuals on the program process and wear testing will also be required.

The Navy announced the program about six months after unveiling a prototype for an adjustable maternity flight suit. A similar uniform was announced by the Marine Corps in April.

Russia security talks to start next month

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian and U.S. negotiators will sit down for talks early next year to discuss Moscow's demand for Western guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine, Russia's top diplomat said Wednesday.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia in January will also start separate talks with NATO to discuss the issue, adding that separate negotiations under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will also be held.

Last week, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries

and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. Washington and its allies have refused to provide such pledges, but said they are ready for the talks.

Moscow presented the demands amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion.

President Joe Biden warned Russian President Vladimir Putin in a conference call earlier this month that Russia will face "severe consequences" if it attacks Ukraine.

Putin has denied having plans to launch an attack but has described NATO's expansion to Ukraine and weapons deployment of the alliance weapons there as a "red line."

"We don't want a war," Lavrov said Wednesday. "We don't want to take the path of confrontation. But we will firmly ensure our security using the means we consider necessary."

Speaking in a live interview with Russian RT television, Lavrov hailed Washington's "business-like" approach that helped quickly agree on parameters of the future talks.

He added that Moscow would be ready to consider Washington's demands, but warned that the talks can't drag out indefinitely.

"I hope that they will take us seriously given the moves we take to ensure our defense capability," he said.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Tuesday that

Washington is working with its European allies to address what he called "Russian aggression" with diplomacy, but said Biden opposes the kind of guarantees sought by Putin.

"The president has been extremely clear for many, many years about some basic principles that no one is moving back on: the principle that one country does not have the right to change by force the borders of another, that one country does not have the right to dictate the policies of another or to tell that country with whom they may associate," Blinken told reporters in Washington. "One country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history."

Discharged sailor planned to sell US supplies to China

The Union-Tribune

Ye San Wang was deployed to Iraq in 2018 when a package she had ordered online arrived at Naval Special Warfare Command base in Coronado, Calif., home to the Navy SEALs.

She told her command, where she worked in supply and logistics, that it was something she had ordered for her husband for a camping trip. Instead, the package contained military equipment for her husband to sell to China for profit.

The item — a device used to identify U.S. military personnel in the field — was among several that Wang, who goes by the nickname Ivy, obtained for her husband's resale business through her Navy credentials, according to prosecutors.

On Tuesday, Wang, 37, was sentenced in San Diego federal court to 2½ years in prison and

ordered to pay a \$20,000 fine.

The hearing comes almost a year after her husband, Shao-hua "Eric" Wang, was sentenced to nearly four years prison in the scheme.

Ivy Wang, a Chinese national, moved to the United States in 2002, attended high school in Los Angeles and attended UC San Diego before enlisting in the Navy at the age of 21 and becoming a U.S. citizen shortly after.

In her plea agreement, Ivy Wang admitted to using her credentials and position in logistics to purchase export-controlled military equipment for his business from 2015 to 2019. Her husband — a former officer in the People's Liberation Army of China — would then illegally export and store the equipment at a warehouse in China, where he connected with buyers, prosecutors said.

Marine's quick actions likely saved drive-by shooting victim

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

A Marine corporal's visit to a San Diego-area coffee shop turned out to be a godsend for a wounded man, who is still alive thanks to first aid given by the Marine, authorities said.

Cpl. Giovanni Brunacini and a friend were leaving the Starbucks in the Lemon Grove Plaza shopping center on Nov. 17 when gunfire was unleashed some 200 yards away, leaving a homeless man badly injured.

The Camp Pendleton-based infantryman hurriedly administered medical care, which authorities said kept the man from dying in the apparent drive-by shooting.

"The victim is stable and is expected to survive his injuries, thanks to the help of the Marine," Sgt. Pat Fox of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department said in an email Monday.

A marksmanship instructor, Brunacini was visiting a friend at

the coffee shop. Their goodbye was interrupted by the shots.

"It was relaxed; it was very chill. We were laughing, and all the sudden, boom, it just, combat mindset happened," Brunacini said in a Marine Corps video released Friday.

He grabbed his medical bag and ran through the parking lot toward the gunfire, ducking behind cars along the way, he said. When the shooting was over, he saw a man on the ground and no one was helping him.

After sprinting over, Brunacini found him lying in a pool of blood with two shots to his lower abdomen, an exit wound in his belly button and a shattered forearm, he said in the video.

"What was going through my head was what my corpsman had taught me," he said, crediting combat-lifesaver training with giving him the skills to treat the man until police and paramedics arrived.

About \$100B in virus relief stolen, misused

Associated Press

Nearly \$100 billion at minimum has been stolen from COVID-19 relief programs set up to help businesses and people who lost their jobs due to the pandemic, the U.S. Secret Service said Tuesday.

The estimate is based on Secret Service cases and data from the Labor Department and the Small Business Administration, said Roy Dotson, the agency's national pandemic fraud recovery coordinator, in an interview. The Secret Service didn't include COVID-19 fraud cases

prosecuted by the Justice Department.

While it makes up roughly 3% of the \$3.4 trillion dispersed, the amount stolen from pandemic benefits programs shows "the sheer size of the pot is enticing to the criminals," Dotson said.

Most of that figure comes from unemployment fraud. The Labor Department reported about \$87 billion in unemployment benefits could have been paid improperly, with a significant portion attributable to fraud.

The Secret Service said it has seized more than \$1.2 billion

while investigating unemployment insurance, and loan fraud and has returned more than \$2.3 billion of fraudulently obtained funds by working with financial partners and states to reverse transactions. The Secret Service said it has more than 900 active criminal investigations into pandemic fraud, with cases in every state, and 100 people have been arrested so far.

The Justice Department said last week that its fraud section had prosecuted over 150 defendants in more than 95 criminal cases and had seized over \$75

million in cash proceeds derived from fraudulently obtained Paycheck Protection Program funds, as well as numerous real estate properties and luxury items purchased with the proceeds.

"Can we stop fraud? Will we? No, but I think we can definitely prosecute those that need to be prosecuted and we can do our best to recover as much fraudulent pandemic funds that we can," said Dotson, who is the Secret Service's assistant special agent in charge of the agency's field office in Jacksonville, Fla.

Navy Reserve officer dies of coronavirus at 35

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

A 35-year-old Navy Reserve nurse who died over the weekend of complications related to COVID-19 in a Los Angeles hospital is the 81st military fatality from the disease.

Lt. Ivey Quintana-Martinez, of Lake Elsinore, Calif., had been hospitalized since Nov. 10, the Navy said Tuesday. Quintana-Martinez was assigned to Navy Reserve Center San Diego.

Quintana-Martinez was a naturalized U.S. citizen and served 10 years in the Air Force before joining the Navy Reserve Nurse Corps through a direct commissioning program in 2019. Lt. Cmdr. Amber Lewis, a Navy Reserve Forces spokeswoman, said Wednesday in an

email. In January, she was assigned to Navy Reserve, Navy Medicine Readiness and Training Command at Camp Pendleton.

Navy data released days before her death showed only one sailor hospitalized with COVID-related illness out of 661 cases.

Quintana-Martinez's death brings the number of fatalities among sailors from COVID-related causes to 17.

Throughout the Navy, a total of 180 sailors, civilian employees, family members and contractors have died from the disease, according to data released last week.

Active-duty sailors were required to be fully vaccinated by Nov. 28, though nearly 5,500 were not, the service said. Reservists have until Dec. 28 to be fully vaccinated, and the Navy

data did not say how many were yet to have gotten the jab.

Some 2,750 active-duty sailors had sought religious accommodations, but the Navy has so far granted none. The service had approved seven permanent medical exemptions and nearly 300 that were temporary.

More than 215 exemptions have been granted for administrative reasons, such as operational deployment, emergency leave or change of duty station.

Sailors who do not get vaccinated or do not receive an exemption face administrative penalties, such as loss of education benefits, promotions and bonuses. Those who reject the vaccine altogether will face separation from the service.

De Blasio: 'No more shutdowns' as NYC faces spike

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said he's committed to keeping the city open as it grapples with a huge spike in coronavirus cases.

The Democrat said Tuesday that New York can't see schools and businesses close again like they did when COVID-19 first hit the city in 2020.

De Blasio has faced questions over the past week about whether he would reinstate closures as the omicron variant surges in the city.

"Adamantly I feel this: No more

shutdowns. We've been through them," de Blasio said at a virtual news conference Tuesday. "They were devastating. We can't go through it again."

De Blasio, in the waning days of his term as mayor, will decide by Christmas whether the annual New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square will continue as planned. The event was small and socially distanced last year but de Blasio had hoped to hold it this year at "full strength." That was before reports of COVID-19 cases ramped up again.

While the fate of the outdoor New Year's Eve event remained up in the air, de Blasio's successor Eric Adams postponed his inauguration ceremony, scheduled for Jan. 1 indoors at Brooklyn's Kings Theatre.

The mayor-elect issued a statement Tuesday saying the ceremony would be rescheduled for a later date "to prioritize" the health of attendees, staff and reporters.

"It is clear that our city is facing a formidable opponent in the omicron variant of COVID-19, and

that the spike in cases presents a serious risk to public health," Adams said.

Adams will still take over as mayor on Jan. 1. His spokesperson, Evan Thies, said it would take a lot for the mayor-elect to shut down New York City again.

"He believes that we can balance the priorities of public health and keeping New York open in a safe and responsible way as we aggressively address the omicron threat with more vaccinations, boosters and testing," Thies said.

Dems 'not giving up' on \$2T funding bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden appears determined to return to the negotiating table with Sen. Joe Manchin, the hold-out Democrat who effectively tanked the party's signature \$2 trillion domestic policy initiative with his own jarring year-end announcement.

Biden, responding to reporters' questions Tuesday at the White House, joked that he holds no grudges against the conservative West Virginia senator whose rejection of the social services and climate change bill stunned Washington just days ago.

Instead, the president spoke passionately about the families that would benefit from the Democrats' ambitious, if now highly uncertain, plan to pour billions of dollars into child care,

health care and other services.

"Sen. Manchin and I are going to get something done," Biden said.

The president's off-the-cuff remarks constitute his first public statement as Democrats struggle to pick up the pieces from Manchin's announcement over the weekend that he would not support the bill, as is. Manchin essentially crushed Biden's sweeping policy measure in the 50-50 Senate, siding with all Republicans who oppose the bill.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer also struck a determined tone later Tuesday, telling Senate Democrats on a 90-minute video call to expect a vote in January on the package as they push toward a deal.

Schumer acknowledged the frustration among Democrats

but he told senators the party was "not giving up" on the proposal, according to a Democrat on the private call who provided details on the condition of anonymity.

But the Democrats face serious questions over whether the \$2 trillion initiative can be re-fashioned to win Manchin's crucial vote or the party will be saddled with a devastating defeat.

Manchin and his party are so far apart, his relationships so bruised after months of failed talks, it's unclear how they even get back to the negotiating table, let alone revive the sprawling more than 2,100-page social services and climate change bill.

Biden spoke forcefully of the economic pressures that strip away the "dignity of a parent" trying to pay the bills, and the assistance millions could receive

from the federal government with the legislation. He also said his package would help ease inflationary pressures and pointed to analyses suggesting it would boost the economy.

"I want to get things done," Biden said. "I still think there's a possibility of getting Build Back Better done."

The setback has thrown Biden's signature legislative effort into deep doubt at a critical time, closing out the end of the president's first year and ahead of congressional midterm elections when the Democrats' slim hold on Congress is at risk.

Coupled with solid Republican opposition, Manchin's vote is vital on this and other initiatives, including the Democrats' priority voting rights legislation that Schumer also said would come to an early vote.

Professor guilty of hiding ties to China recruitment

Associated Press

BOSTON — A Harvard University professor charged with hiding his ties to a Chinese-run recruitment program was found guilty on all counts Tuesday.

Charles Lieber, 62, the former chair of Harvard's department of chemistry and chemical biology, had pleaded not guilty to two federal counts of filing false tax returns, two counts of making false statements, and two counts of failing to file reports for a foreign bank account in China.

The jury deliberated for about two hours and 45 minutes before announcing the verdict following five days of testimony in Boston.

Lieber's defense attorney Marc Mukasey had argued that prosecutors would be unable to prove that Lieber acted "knowingly, intentionally, or willfully, or that he made any material false statement." Mukasey also stressed Lieber wasn't charged with illegally transferring any

technology or proprietary information to China.

Prosecutors argued that Lieber, who was arrested in January, knowingly hid his involvement in China's Thousand Talents Plan—a program designed to recruit people with knowledge of foreign technology and intellectual property to China—to protect his career and reputation.

Lieber denied his involvement during inquiries from U.S. authorities, including the National Institutes of Health, which had provided him with millions of dollars in research funding, prosecutors said. Lieber also concealed his income from the Chinese program, including \$50,000 a month from Wuhan University of Technology, up to \$158,000 in living expenses and more than \$1.5 million in grants, according to prosecutors. In exchange, they say, he agreed to publish articles and apply for patents on behalf of the university.

Wreck of last US slave ship mostly intact on Ala. coast

Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Researchers studying the wreck of the last U.S. slave ship, buried in mud on the Alabama coast since it was scuttled in 1860, have made the surprising discovery that most of the wooden schooner remains intact, including the pen that was used to imprison African captives during the brutal journey across the Atlantic Ocean.

While the upper portion of the two-masted Clotilda is gone, the section below deck where the captured Africans and stockpiles were held is still largely in one piece after being buried for decades in a section of river that hasn't been dredged, said maritime archaeologist James Delgado of the Florida-based SEARCH Inc.

At least two-thirds of the ship remains, and the existence of the unlit and unventilated slave pen, built during the voyage by the

addition of a bulkhead where people were held as cargo below the main deck for weeks, raises further questions about whether food and water containers, chains and even human DNA could remain in the hull, said Delgado.

The finding was confirmed in a report that was provided to The Associated Press and led to the site becoming part of the National Register of Historic Places in November.

The Clotilda was the last ship known to transport African captives to the American South for enslavement. Nearly 90 feet in length, it departed Mobile, Ala., for an illegal trip to purchase people decades after Congress outlawed such trade in 1808.

The Clotilda's captain transferred its human cargo off the ship once it arrived in Alabama and set fire to the vessel to hide evidence of the journey. But most of the ship didn't catch fire.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man faces charge after stolen bridge is found

OH AKRON — A 58-foot-long pedestrian bridge stolen from an Ohio city last month has been found and a man is facing charges, police said.

Akron police said investigators acting on tips and other information found the missing span partially disassembled on property in Sharon Township in neighboring Medina County.

The Akron bridge once crossed a river in Akron's Middlebury Run Park near Goodyear's world headquarters. It was taken down in 2003-04 as part of a wetland restoration project and was stored on park property.

A 63-year-old man was charged with felony theft, according to Akron police and court records. Authorities allege that he paid a trucking company for crane service and the firm picked up the bridge and took it to Medina County.

Pirate 'invasion' returns after a virus break

FL TAMPA — Avast! The century-old pirate "invasion" of Tampa is coming back after a virus-related year off and officials have a message: Don't throw plastic parade beads into the bay.

The Gasparilla parade and other events are set to return in January, celebrating the pirate lore of Florida's Gulf Coast. It's like a miniature Mardi Gras but with eye patches, cannon fire and many cries of "Arrrrgh!"

Tampa officials at a news conference stressed that protecting the environment during the event is paramount.

The issue is plastic beads. Mounds of them get thrown to crowds and many wind up in the waters where they can have detrimental long-term effects on marine life.

Home explodes when butane used to get THC

ME AUBURN — A house in Maine exploded and a man was seriously injured when someone used butane to try to extract a psychoactive compound from marijuana, state police said.

Police said the investigation determined the explosion occurred because of the use of the gas to extract THC from the marijuana.

A 35-year-old man sustained serious burns and other injuries and was transported to a hospital where he was expected to survive, police said.

Four other people were in the home at the time and were unhurt, they said.

Mural at university defaced by vandals

MO ST. LOUIS — Washington University officials said a mural on campus that depicts prominent Black people was vandalized recently with racist symbols.

University officials said there are cameras in the area near the mural that is painted on the wall of a pedestrian tunnel that connects several dorms to the rest of campus.

They said they hope investigators will be able to identify the people who defaced the mural.

Local artists painted the mural before the start of fall classes in 2020.

Chile drop back to help spice up New Year's Eve

NM LAS CRUCES — Organizers said the annual Chile Drop will return to Plaza de Las Cruces this year for an in-person celebration to ring in 2022.

The celebratory event was held virtually last year. It was prerecorded and aired Dec. 31 for viewers.

This year, live music, food and entertainment will be offered starting at 9 p.m. New Year's Eve in downtown Las Cruces. Main Street will be blocked off around the plaza so the event will be pedestrian friendly.

One change this year will be how the color of the chile is determined when the clock strikes midnight. This year, coordinators decided to let residents vote on their preferred color online by scanning a QR code.

Man pleads guilty in illegal gun sales plot

VA NORFOLK — A Virginia man pleaded guilty to conspiring to make false statements in connection with 45 firearms transactions, federal prosecutors said.

From June 2019 through June 2020, Kevin Staton Jr., 23, of Chesapeake, engaged in the business of buying and selling firearms without a license, according to court documents.

Staton claimed he was the actual buyer of the firearms when he was actually purchasing the guns for other individuals or with the intent to resell them, prosecutors said in a news release.

Staton faces a maximum of 15

years in prison.

Man rejects plea offer, heads off to 5th trial

MD BALTIMORE — A man who has been tried four times in the shooting death of a Baltimore security guard is headed to a fifth trial in May after rejecting a plea offer.

Keith Davis Jr. rejected the offer at a hearing, The Baltimore Sun reported. Prosecutors offered a term of 50 years in prison with all but 15 suspended in exchange for his plea for the 2015 killing of Kevin Jones and a jailhouse fight last year.

Davis was given a chance to submit Alford pleas, which allow a defendant to maintain innocence while acknowledging there is enough evidence to convict, according to Davis' public defender, Deborah Katz Levi.

Two of Davis' trials ended in mistrials. He was convicted in two other trials, but both convictions were overturned.

Firefighter killed after fire truck tire explodes

LA HAUGHTON — A northwest Louisiana firefighter died after a tire he was maintaining on a fire truck exploded.

The South Bossier Parish Fire District No. 2 said Jessie Henry, 28, died at one of the district's stations while working on the tire.

Family members told KSLA-TV that a tire sensor hit Henry in the head.

Henry had been a firefighter in the district for four years, relatives said. He served in the U.S. Army before that.

— From wire reports



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NHL players won't go to Olympics

Associated Press

NHL players will not be allowed to participate in the Beijing Olympics after the league pulled the plug Wednesday amid a rash of postponements caused by positive COVID-19 test results.

Commissioner Gary Bettman made the announcement, making official what seemed inevitable in recent days when the list of postponed games quickly grew to 50. The league will use the previously scheduled Feb. 6-22 Olympic break to make up those games and others that need to be rescheduled.

Bettman said, "Given the profound disruption to the NHL's regular-season schedule caused by recent COVID-related events ... Olympic participation is no longer feasible." In a separate statement, Players' Association executive director Don Fehr said that while there was a clear path to Beijing before COVID-19 intervened, the Olympic break is now needed to

make up games.

International officials and national federations must now pivot to Plan B for a second consecutive Olympic men's hockey tournament without NHL players. USA Hockey said it will soon announce new management and coaching staffs, and Hockey Canada is expected to draw from the executives, coaches and players who took part in an international tournament in Moscow this month.

"Although we are disappointed to receive this decision by the NHL and NHLPA, we nevertheless fully understand the circumstances that forced this action to be taken," International Ice Hockey Federation president Luc Tardif said in a statement. "It was a shock to see how COVID-19 affected the NHL schedule almost overnight, and we understand the NHL's decision is in the best interest of the health and safety of its players."

The NHL's focus is on completing an 82-game regular season for the first time since 2018-

19. The schedule already was extended through April, with the playoffs going to the end of June, with more than two weeks off in between for the Olympics.

When Olympic participation was confirmed in September, teams were sent two versions of the NHL schedule. The sheer volume of postponements forces the league to use that break for makeup dates, rather than folding later games into February and move up the start of the playoffs.

Despite the NHL not being part of the Olympics for just the second time since 1998, Bettman, Fehr and Tardif expressed optimism about a return for 2026. The league and NHLPA have a deal for Olympic participation as part of their collective bargaining agreement extension through that year.

The decision is an abrupt turnaround from September, when the NHL, union, International Olympic Committee and International Ice Hockey Fed-

eration struck a deal to put the best players in the world back on sports' biggest stage after they skipped the 2018 Pyeongchang Games. The fast-spreading omicron coronavirus variant forced the scrapping of those plans.

A week ago, the NHL attempted to halt the spread of the omicron variant by reintroducing more restrictive COVID-19 protocols, which included daily testing and limiting player gatherings, especially on the road.

Then a sudden rash of postponements brought the total to 50 this season, a daunting number to reschedule and complete an 82-game season while taking an Olympic break for more than two weeks in February. The NHL's bottom line is at stake, with the league and players drawing no direct money from competing at the Winter Games.

The decision comes long before the league faced a Jan. 10 deadline to pull out without financial penalty.

Lightning score 3 unanswered goals, rally past Knights

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Steven Stamkos scored the tiebreaking goal on a third-period power play and the Tampa Bay Lightning rallied past the Vegas Golden Knights 4-3 on Tuesday night in the final NHL game before an extended holiday break.

Gabriel Fortier, Pierre-Edouard Bellemare and Anthony Cirelli also scored for the Lightning, who played without coach Jon Cooper and trailed 3-1 late in the second. Andrei Vasilevskiy made 36 saves as the Lightning won their third straight and ended Vegas' five-game winning streak.

Mark Stone scored twice and Nicolas Roy also had a goal for

the Golden Knights. Laurent Brossoit stopped 15 shots.

It was the only NHL game played Tuesday night after nine others were postponed because of coronavirus concerns. The league will begin its annual Christmas break Wednesday, two days earlier than originally planned, due to a startling rise in COVID-19 cases that shut down 10 of the 32 teams.

Games are scheduled to resume Monday.

Vegas was missing defenseman Alex Pietrangelo and forward Evgenii Dadonov, who both entered the COVID-19 protocol earlier in the day.

Tampa Bay was without Cooper, who entered the protocol roughly two hours before

warmups. Lightning assistant Derek Lalonde filled in for Cooper.

Lalonde said Cooper texted the staff around 4:30 p.m. that he had entered the protocol.

"We got to the rink, nothing really changed, obviously let the guys know and things would be seamless," Lalonde said. "Just kind of went about our business. I don't think anything is surprising."

Lalonde said Stamkos handed him the game puck afterward and said, "Not how you envisioned your first win."

"It was probably coming at any moment with what's been going on around the league," Stamkos said of Cooper's announcement. "Vegas got hit today. We got hit with our coach.

I think you have to expect some more here in the next coming days just with how it's gone around the league."

With the Flyers and Capitals called off earlier in the day, Tampa Bay and Vegas didn't disappoint in the spotlight.

The score was tied midway through the third when the Lightning were able to work the puck around the perimeter before Stamkos fired a one-timer past Brossoit, capping three unanswered goals for the two-time defending Stanley Cup champions.

Stamkos set a franchise record for most game-winning goals (65).

Tampa Bay enters the break with the most points in the NHL (44).

Hurts' 3 TDs lead Eagles past Washington

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Nick Sirianni yelled at Jalen Hurts on the sideline for being careless with the ball and losing a fumble. Then the Philadelphia Eagles coach saw his starting quarterback hold on tight to carry the team on his shoulders.

Hurts ran for two touchdowns and threw for another, helping the Eagles come back from an early deficit to beat virus-ravaged Washington 27-17 Tuesday night in a critical showdown with NFC playoff implications.

In his first game back from an ankle injury, Hurts scored on a pair of 1-yard QB sneaks to set the single-season franchise record for rushing touchdowns by a quarterback with 10 and connected with Greg Ward on a 19-yard TD pass.

"He played a great football game — one of the best I've seen him play," Sirianni said of Hurts. "Jalen is able to take tough coaching. He responded great and played a great game."

Hurts was 20-for-26 for 296 yards passing with the TD and a bad-luck interception when Dallas Goedert dropped a catchable pass and the ball bounced off his right foot and into the hands of Washington's Landon Collins.

That was a bad bounce for Philadelphia

that helped stake Washington (6-8) to a 10-point lead after the first quarter. Behind a dominant effort from their offensive line, it was all Eagles (7-7) from there: They out-gained Washington 435-136 the rest of the way and shut down an opponent missing a handful of starters because of COVID-19 protocols.

"I told the guys we had to go in with the mentality of not being denied," Hurts said. "We had so many things go wrong early in the game, but we overcame it."

Miles Sanders exploited the holes in Washington's defense left by those absences and additional injuries, carrying the ball 18 times for a career-high 131 yards.

"Credit to the offensive line," said Sanders, who became the first Eagles player with back-to-back 100-yard rushing games since LeSean McCoy in 2014. "They're making it very easy on the running backs to run behind them."

Well-rested coming off its bye week, Philadelphia finished with 238 yards rushing, becoming the first team with 175-plus yards on the ground in seven consecutive games since the 1985 Chicago Bears. That's also a first in Eagles franchise history.

"It was unacceptable how they were running around," Washington defensive end Montez Sweat said.

Goedert made up for his early blunder and a later drop by catching seven passes for 135 yards, including a 45-yard completion.

Despite the game getting pushed back 54 hours because of Washington's coronavirus outbreak, the delay did not allow starting quarterback Taylor Heinicke or backup Kyle Allen to clear protocol in time to play. Garrett Gilbert, who signed Friday, completed nine of his first 13 passes and finished 20-for-31 for 194 yards.

Second-year running back Antonio Gibson ran for Washington's first touchdown and had 20 of his 26 rushing yards on that drive, when he got the ball on all seven plays. He was slowed by a toe injury, the same thing that derailed his rookie season, and Jaret Patterson had the team's other rushing TD.

COVID-19 absences

Washington played without five starters who remained in NFL COVID-19 protocol: Heinicke, 2020 All-Pro right guard Brandon Scherff, center Tyler Larsen, cornerback Kendall Fuller and safety Kamren Curl. Reserve defensive tackle Tim Settle and third-string tight end Sammis Reyes were cleared but inactive.

Philadelphia's only virus-related absence was starting left guard Landon Dickerson.

Kupp's 2 TD catches carry Rams past Seahawks

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — After a week of COVID-19 chaos, the Los Angeles Rams went into their rescheduled showdown against Seattle with no full practices and major questions about who would be in uniform until a few hours before kickoff.

The Rams still came out of a tremendously uncertain week with another win because Cooper Kupp and Matthew Stafford have a rock-solid connection.

Kupp caught two touchdown passes from Stafford in the second half, and Los Angeles held off the Seahawks 20-10 Tuesday night in a game between two COVID-depleted teams.

Kupp broke Isaac Bruce's single-season Rams receptions record in the third quarter with a 6-

yard TD catch that was also the 120th of his spectacular year. The NFL's receiving leader then scored a tiebreaking 29-yard touchdown with 10:48 to play on a picture-perfect throw over the middle from Stafford to cap an 88-yard drive.

Stafford passed for 244 yards and Sony Michel rushed for 92 for Los Angeles (10-4) in a game postponed from Sunday, while Kupp had nine catches for 136 yards in the team's third straight victory following a winless November. The Rams hadn't had a normal day since they beat NFC West-leading Arizona last Monday, but their postgame celebration felt joyously familiar.

"Coming off a very big game against the Cardinals and then having all the stuff go on ... it's

just being able to navigate the changes in your routine and still put together a game plan and execute when you don't even know who's going to play," said Kupp, a Washington native. "I just thought we did a good job handling that and walking out with a 'W.'"

With its third victory over Seattle in 2021, Los Angeles pulled even with Arizona atop the NFC West with three games to play, although the Cards hold the tiebreaker on division record.

The Rams were without starting right tackle Rob Havenstein, leading tackler Jordan Fuller, tight end Tyler Higbee and a host of backups after 10 days of roster turmoil, while the Seahawks were without leading re-

ceiver Tyler Lockett, starting cornerback D.J. Reed and leading rusher Alex Collins.

"Up until this morning, you really don't know if you're getting some key players (back)," said Sean McVay, who became the third coach in team history to post four 10-win seasons. "(Recently) I didn't even know if we had enough guys to be able to field a team."

DeeJay Dallas rushed for a touchdown for Seattle (5-9), whose streak of nine consecutive winning seasons under coach Pete Carroll ended. The Seahawks are still mathematically alive for their ninth playoff appearance in those 10 seasons, but will regret losing an eminently winnable game at SoFi Stadium.

Herro, Robinson lift Heat past Pacers

Associated Press

MIAMI — Tyler Herro had 26 points in his return from a three-game absence with a bruised thigh, Duncan Robinson also scored 26 to match a season high and the Miami Heat rolled past the Indiana Pacers 125-96 on Tuesday night.

Miami tied a franchise record with 22 made three-pointers, the fourth time the Heat have hit that many.

Max Strus scored 18 points, and Kyle Lowry finished with eight points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists for Miami. Omer Yurtseven added 13 rebounds for the Heat.

Chris Duarte and Caris LeVert each scored 17 for the Pacers, who lost Malcolm Brogdon in the first half with more soreness in his right Achilles.

It was the first game back for Indiana coach Rick Carlisle, who entered the league's health and safety protocols on Dec. 9 after testing positive for COVID-19.

Suns 108, Lakers 90: Devin Booker continued to distance himself from a hamstring injury that cost him seven games, scoring 24 points with nine rebounds and seven assists as Phoenix pulled away to win at Los Angeles.

Booker played 32 minutes and went 8-for-16 from the field one game after he was on the court for 26 minutes in his return Sunday during a blowout victory over Charlotte.

Deandre Ayton had 19 points and 11 re-

bounds, and Mikal Bridges scored 14 as the Suns won their fourth consecutive game.

LeBron James scored 34 points for the Lakers, who lost their third game in a row as coach Frank Vogel remained in health and safety protocols for the second straight. Four Los Angeles players are also in protocols, including starting guard Avery Bradley.

Russell Westbrook had 22 points and 10 rebounds for the Lakers, who were without star Anthony Davis for the second consecutive game. Davis is expected to miss at least four weeks with an MCL sprain in his left knee.

Pelicans 111, Trail Blazers 97: Brandon Ingram had 28 points, Nickeil Alexander-Walker scored 22 of his 27 in the second half and host New Orleans beat Portland for its first three-game winning streak of the season.

Josh Hart added 20 points for the Pelicans, who shot 52.5% while winning for the eighth time in 13 games following a 3-16 start — all while awaiting the return of All-Star forward Zion Williamson from an off-season foot injury.

Damian Lillard scored 39 for the Trail Blazers, who won their previous two games. Jusuf Nurkic added 17 points and Norman Powell had 16.

Mavericks 114, Timberwolves 102: Jalen Brunson had 26 points, Dorian Finney-Smith scored 15 of his 19 in the second half

and host Dallas defeated Minnesota.

A total of nine players, including three starters, missed the game because they are in the NBA's health and safety protocol.

Brunson scored 16 points in the first half. Finney-Smith hit two three-pointers during a 10-0 run in the fourth quarter that wiped out the Timberwolves' last lead.

Sterling Brown added 12 points and 11 rebounds in his first start this season.

Karl-Anthony Towns led Minnesota with 26 points and 14 rebounds.

D'Angelo Russell had 14 points and 12 assists.

Knicks 105, Pistons 91: Evan Fournier scored 22 points, Julius Randle and Kemba Walker each had 21 and New York won at home for the first time in almost a month, beating Detroit.

Mitchell Robinson had 17 points and 14 rebounds for the Knicks, who had dropped five straight at Madison Square Garden since beating the Los Angeles Lakers on Nov. 23. They are just 6-10 at home.

Walker was out of the rotation entirely but started a second straight game with six players in health and safety protocols and Derrick Rose out again with ankle soreness. Walker had eight rebounds and five assists.

Saben Lee scored 16 points for the Pistons, who had lost 14 in a row before beating Miami on Sunday.

New York won for only the third time in 11 games overall.

Brajkovic leads Davidson's upset of No. 10 Alabama

Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Luka Brajkovic scored 22 points and made a late three-pointer and Michael Jones scored 21 points to help lift Davidson to a 79-78 victory over No. 10 Alabama on Tuesday night.

The Wildcats (9-2) rolled to a 13-point lead in the second half and held on for their eighth straight win in a game scheduled to fill sudden voids in their respective schedules because of COVID-19. The Crimson Tide (9-3) have dropped two of three games but stayed in this one until Jahvon Quinerly missed a potential tying free throw with four seconds left.

Alabama scored the final nine points after Brajkovic's three-pointer with 2:01 left pushed it back to 79-69. But Davidson was able to run out the final seconds and ended up getting a huge win in the unexpected matchup.

Jones made 8 of 11 shots, including all three three-point attempts, for the Wildcats. Hyun-jung Lee scored 17 points and made four threes. Foster Loyer scored 11 points after totaling 59 the previous two games.

No. 9 Iowa State 79, Chicago State 48: Izaiah Brockington had 20 points and 13 rebounds, Tristan Enaruna added 19 points and 10 rebounds, and the host Cyclones rolled past the Cougars.

Iowa State (12-0) came into the game limiting opponents to 56.8 points per game, 12th in the nation. The Cyclones have now held nine teams to 60 or fewer points.

No. 11 Michigan State 90, Oakland 78: At Detroit, Marcus Bingham had 17 points, 12 rebounds and four blocks and was one of five double-digit scorers for the Spartans in a win over the Golden Grizzlies.

Michigan State (10-2) has won five straight for a second time this season. Oakland (7-4) lost consecutive games for the first time this season.

No. 23 Villanova 71, No. 18 Xavier 58: Justin Moore scored

12 of his 17 points after halftime and Caleb Daniels added 16 points to lead the host Wildcats past the Musketeers.

Collin Gillespie and Eric Dixon each had 15 points for Villanova (8-4, 1-1 Big East), which bounced back from consecutive blowout losses.

Tarleton State 67, Air Force 45: Tahj Small posted 14 points as the host Texans routed the Falcons.

Montre Gipson had 12 points for Tarleton State (5-8), which earned its fourth consecutive home victory. Freddy Hicks added 11 points and nine rebounds. Shamir Bogues also had 11 points.