

Bitter cold strains power grid in US

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Nearly 3.4 million utility customers around the United States were still without power Wednesday in the aftermath of a winter storm that overwhelmed power grids unprepared for climate change, and another blast of snow and ice threatened to impede the efforts to restore service.

The latest storm front was expected to bring more hardship to parts of Texas, Arkansas and the Lower Mississippi Valley before moving to the Northeast on Thursday.

“There’s really no letup to some of the misery people are feeling across that area,” said Bob Oravec, lead forecaster with the National Weather Service, referring to Texas.

More than 100 million people live in areas covered by some type of winter weather warning, watch or advisory, the weather service said.

At least two dozen people have died in the extreme weather this week, some while struggling to find warmth inside their homes. In the Houston area, one family succumbed to carbon monoxide from car exhaust in their garage. Another perished as they used a fireplace to keep warm.

Record low temperatures were reported in city after city. Blame the polar vortex, a weather pattern that usually keeps to the

Arctic but is increasingly spilling into lower latitudes. Scientists say global warming caused by humans is partly responsible for making the polar vortex’s southward escapes longer and more frequent.

Utilities from Minnesota to Texas and Mississippi have implemented rolling blackouts to ease the burden on power grids straining to meet extreme demand for heat and electricity.

More than 3 million customers remained without power in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi, more than 200,000 more in four Appalachian states and nearly that many in the Pacific Northwest, according to poweroutage.us, which tracks utility outage reports.

The weather has threatened the nation’s COVID-19 vaccination effort. President Joe Biden’s administration said delays in vaccine shipments and deliveries were likely.

The worst power outages by far have been in Texas, where officials requested 60 generators from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and planned to prioritize hospitals and nursing homes. The state opened 35 shelters to more than 1,000 occupants, the agency said.

Texas’ power grid manager, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, said that electricity had been restored to 600,000 homes and businesses by Tuesday night, but that 2.7 million households were still without

any power.

Blackouts lasting more than an hour began before dawn Tuesday in and around Oklahoma City, stopping electric-powered space heaters, furnaces and lights just as temperatures hovered around minus 8 degrees Fahrenheit. Oklahoma Gas & Electric urged users to set thermostats at 68 degrees, avoid using major electric appliances and turn off lights or appliances not in use.

Entergy imposed rolling blackouts Tuesday night in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Southeast Texas at the direction of its grid manager, the Midcontinent Independent System Operator, “as a last resort and in order to prevent more extensive, prolonged power outages that could severely affect the reliability of the power grid,” according to a statement from the New Orleans-based utility.

The Southwest Power Pool, a group of utilities covering 14 states, said the blackouts were “a last resort to preserve the reliability of the electric system as a whole.”

The weather also caused major disruptions to water systems in the Texas cities of Houston, Fort Worth, Galveston, Corpus Christi and in Memphis, Tenn. In Houston, residents were told to boil their water — if they had power to do so — because of a major drop in water pressure linked to the weather.

Vaccinated sailors have some virus restrictions lifted

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Ships with fully vaccinated crews will soon be able to relax some of the health protection measures put in place due to the coronavirus pandemic, according to a Navy announcement issued Tuesday.

The Navy’s updated coronavirus guidance factors in immunized crews, new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance on the virus, as well as lessons learned by the fleet during the pandemic.

“In short, fully immunized sailors will allow our Navy to begin to unwind the limita-

tions that have been placed on our sailors at sea... The higher the percentage of the crew immunized, the less risk there is to a widespread outbreak,” according to the administrative message.

The Navy has been encouraging sailors through social media about the importance of receiving the vaccine as a means to protect themselves and stop the spread of the virus.

Sailors will continue to abide by health measures such as wearing masks, according to the Navy.

Immunized sailors — people who have received two doses of the vaccine — are no

longer required to undergo a 14-day restriction of movement prior to their deployment.

Sailors who have come into close contact with an infected person but have received their final vaccine dose more than two weeks prior will not have their movement restricted, but must still follow health protection measures, according to the Navy message, which is based on CDC guidelines.

Commands that have a crew with 100% immunization can immediately eliminate the 14-day restriction of movement and relax health protection measures because the threat of an outbreak is reduced, according to the Navy.

Black admiral: Military lags on diversity

By DAN LAMOTHE
The Washington Post

The young midshipman heard the question but kept walking as he neared a group of white students at the Naval Academy.

"You know, the only reason you're here is the quota system, right?" one of them said.

Cecil Haney, a Black student from a Black neighborhood in the District of Columbia, did not respond. His family had warned him that he could face racism at the academy, and more than 40 years later, he remembers the remark clearly.

"It's bad enough having one individual ask that question," Haney said. "But what hurt the most was that tribe he was with said nothing to the contrary of that kind of thing."

Haney, 65, went on to become one of the first Black four-star admirals in Navy history, serving as the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and the U.S. Strategic Command, where he oversaw nuclear weapons before retiring in 2017.

Haney recalled working with a number of white colleagues who were professional and kind during his military career. But he was a rarity: a Black leader at an institution that was mostly white, with a disproportionate number of white leaders going up through the ranks.

The U.S. military is still struggling with a lack of diversity, as well as racism and extremism in the ranks, which senior defense officials say is hard to track and expose.

After recent racist incidents in the Navy, Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, said in a statement to sailors last week that "we cannot be under any illusions that extremist behaviors do not exist in our Navy."

In one of the incidents, a sailor was removed from his warship,

the USS Lake Champlain, after leaving a noose on an African American colleague's bunk last month. He later admitted to it under questioning, said a Navy official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. An investigation is ongoing, said Cmdr. Nicole Schwegman, a Navy spokeswoman.

Graffiti that included the phrase "Nazi life" also was found on the USS Carl Vinson, an aircraft carrier, according to an official familiar with the situation.

A new Navy task force on diversity said in a report this month that although the service's inclusion efforts are "admirable in many respects," they "clearly fell short of adequately addressing the societal challenges of today."

At the highest ranks, the Navy has slid, according to the report. Several minorities and a woman have held the service's highest rank in the past, but all 10 of its current four-star admirals are white men.

Haney said he cannot understand why it has taken so many years for the military to confront issues such as the Confederate battle flag, which was banned last summer. He has issued a call to action to alumni from the academy to fight racism and bigotry.

"I'm a big believer that you have to look at best-case, but you also have to look at worst-case," he said. Although it can be easy to get wrapped up in the "rah-rah of institution," he said, "any organization has things to work on."

Haney remembers the race riots that erupted in Washington during his childhood after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. He saw neighborhood stores destroyed and U.S. troops deployed on city

streets, but he did not quite understand it at the time.

A couple of years later, Haney was a student at Eastern High School, a short walk from the D.C. Armory. He washed cars and cut grass for money, and then took a summer job at Naval Sea Systems Command, which needed operators for its massive computers that tracked shipyard data.

Haney said his bosses — a Black woman and a white man — taught him computer languages and encouraged him to apply to military service academies. They invited a Navy captain to walk him through options. Until then, he thought he might enlist in the Army to pay for college.

Haney said his father, an Army veteran who worked at a bus terminal, warned him that he could face racism in the military. But Haney bonded with his white roommates and brought friends home to visit his parents.

Haney graduated from the academy in 1978 and became a submarine officer. His initial assignment on the USS John C. Calhoun, named for a former vice president who was a devout defender of slavery, triggered questions from his father.

Haney said his goal was to command a ship as he rose through the ranks. He took charge of the USS Honolulu, a fast-attack submarine, in 1996.

As Haney was considering retiring, he was selected to become an admiral. His wife, Bonny, who died in 2017, played a key role in his decision to stay.

"We had a heart-to-heart, and frankly she was more excited about me becoming a flag officer and the opportunity for an African American to do so than I initially was," he said.

As protests erupted last summer, Haney recalled his childhood in Washington and the tur-

moil of 1968. In some ways, he said, "we haven't gotten very far" from the days after the assassinations of King and President John F. Kennedy.

The admiral took on racism in the newsletter for the Naval Academy Alumni Association and Foundation, warning colleagues that the Navy's process for interviewing prospective members "cannot accurately assess" all of their beliefs about biases and racial prejudice.

Haney wrote the essay, titled "A Call to Action for USNA Alumni," after a member of the class of 1980 accidentally broadcast himself making racist comments in a Facebook live stream. That person, retired Navy Capt. Scott Bethmann, apologized and resigned from the academy's alumni association board of trustees at the request of senior association officials.

The incident served as a reminder that some people "dislike me and disrespect anything I accomplished simply because of the color of my skin," Haney wrote.

The Navy's new focus on diversity, including the task force's work, is a positive sign, Haney said. The report's recommendations include adding "respect" as one of the Navy's core values, which have included "honor," "courage" and "commitment" since the 1990s.

"It's a big deal for a service to change its core values," Haney said.

The report also called for a review of the names that ships and buildings in the service.

Unlike the Army, the Navy does not have bases named for Confederate officers who fought to preserve slavery. But it does have aircraft carriers named for men who advocated for segregation: former senator John Stennis, D-Miss., and former congressman Carl Vinson, D-Ga.

Austin vows new US tone at NATO meeting

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — On the eve of a major NATO meeting, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said he would bring a new level of respect to the way Washington works with allies, but also called on members to meet their defense spending obligations.

“We are not withdrawing from Europe,” Austin said in an op-ed published in *The Washington Post* on Wednesday, the first day of a 2-day meeting of NATO defense ministers.

He is now reviewing the merits of the Trump administration’s plan to withdraw nearly 12,000 troops from Germany, a proposal that drew skepticism from current administration officials during

last year’s election campaign.

“Our alliances and partnerships are strategic advantages none of our competitors can match. They lend to the mission-unique capabilities and credibility that sometimes each of us alone might lack,” Austin said. “But teams succeed only when every player is trusted and respected. And our alliance teammates haven’t always felt that respect.”

The tone was likely to be welcomed by NATO members who faced frequent criticism from former President Donald Trump. He regularly criticized allies for underinvestment in defense and at times questioned the value of the alliance.

Although defense spending was the hallmark issue for Trump, it’s still likely to feature prominently in Austin’s

talks with allies.

NATO members are expected to increase overall spending for the seventh straight year, even though only nine of 30 members will hit the alliance benchmark of dedicating 2% of gross domestic product to their respective militaries.

“It is heartening to see many of them meeting or exceeding their obligations, even as further increases are essential for some to get there,” Austin said.

At NATO headquarters in Brussels, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg this week reaffirmed the importance of meeting the 2% spending target, but also said other reforms are needed.

Stoltenberg wants defense ministers to consider increasing NATO’s shared budget. Such a change would mean

that countries sending troops on NATO missions wouldn’t be stuck paying the whole cost of the deployment.

The move is likely to be welcomed by the Pentagon, which pays the bill for various high-profile U.S. missions, such as leading a multinational battle group in Poland focused on deterring potential Russian aggression.

Stoltenberg, after an initial round of talks Wednesday, said the Biden administration represents a chance “to open a new chapter in relations between Europe and North America.”

Later this year, allies will hold a heads of state summit, during which Stoltenberg said he hopes allies will agree to a new “strategic concept” to deal with new threats.

Navy sends destroyer to exercise free passage in South China Sea

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

The USS Russell conducted a freedom-of-navigation operation in the South China Sea on Wednesday, challenging the “unlawful restrictions on innocent passage” imposed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan, the Navy’s 7th Fleet said.

The guided-missile destroyer steamed past the Spratlys, a chain of more than 100 small islands and reefs, according to a statement from 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley on Wednesday.

Six surrounding nations, including China, Vietnam and the Philippines, claim all or part of the Spratlys, a commercial fishing zone with potential oil and natural gas deposits. The islands are west of the Philippine island of Palawan.

China has improved seven of the Spratly features with airstrips, helipads, barracks and other facilities, including anti-ship cruise missiles, according to the CIA World Factbook online.

The Spratlys are near commercial shipping lanes that carry 80% of world trade by volume, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

China, Vietnam and Taiwan require either permission or advance notice before a foreign military vessel engages in innocent passage through the area, a practice the United States holds is contrary to international law.

“The United States challenges excessive maritime claims around the world regardless of the identity of the claimant,” Keiley wrote. “Unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea pose a serious threat to the freedom of the sea, including freedoms of navigation and overflight, free trade and unimpeded commerce, and freedom of economic opportunity for South China Sea littoral nations.”

The 1982 United Nations Law of the Sea Convention stipulates that ships of any state, including warships, have the right to innocent passage through territorial seas, Keiley said.

The Russell’s trip past the Spratlys is the Navy’s second freedom-of-navigation exercise in the South China Sea this month. A day after steaming through the Taiwan Strait on Feb. 4, the guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain sailed near the Parcel Islands, south of the Chinese island of Hainan. Possession of that small chain is also in dispute.

Murkowski: I can’t fear fallout from impeachment vote

Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska — Alaska Republican U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski said Tuesday that she knows her vote to convict former President Donald Trump during his recent Senate impeachment trial could have political consequences, “but I can’t be afraid of that.”

If the people of Alaska decide that “because I did not support my party that I can no longer serve them in the United States Senate, then so be it,” Murkowski told reporters during a visit to the state Capitol.

She also said that if the state Republican Party decides to censure her due to her vote, “they can make that statement. But I will make the statement, again, that my obligation is to support the Constitution that I have pledged to uphold, and I will do that, even if it means that I have to oppose the direction of my state party.”

The Alaska Republican Party State Central Committee earlier this month passed a resolution opposing the Senate impeachment trial as “moot” and opposing a conviction. Glenn Clary, the party chairman, did not respond to messages Tuesday, including whether the party is considering a censure of Murkowski.

Biden reframes goal for reopening schools

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — President Joe Biden is promising that a majority of elementary schools will be open five days a week by the end of his first 100 days in office, restating his goal after his administration came under fire when aides said schools would be considered open if they held in-person learning just one day a week.

Biden's comments, during a CNN town hall in Milwaukee, marked his clearest statement yet on school reopenings. Biden had pledged in December to reopen "the majority of our schools" in his first 100 days, but has since faced increasing questions about how he would define and achieve that goal, with school districts operating under a patchwork of different virtual and in-person learning arrangements nationwide.

He said comments by White House press secretary Jen Psaki earlier this month that one day a week of in-person learning would meet his goal were "a mistake in the communication."

Asked when the nation would see kindergarten through eighth grades back to in-person learning five days a week, Biden said, "We'll be close to that at the end of the first 100 days." He said he expected many schools would push to stay open through the summer, but suggested reopening would take longer for high schools due to a higher risk of contagion among older students.

California

LOS ANGELES — California is moving toward easing restrictions on businesses now that the nation's most populous state has emerged from the deadliest surge of the pandemic and is seeing rapid declines in new coronavirus cases and hospitalizations.

The governor spoke at the site of a new federally supported mass vaccination site in Los

Angeles, which opened Tuesday along with a similar facility in Oakland. The two locations are expected to get about 6,000 doses of vaccine a day, and are intended to vaccinate people in communities hit hard by the pandemic.

The openings of the mass vaccination sites, heralded by a number of state and federal officials, came as California's virus numbers continue to improve even as demand for the vaccine far exceeds capacity.

North Carolina

CHEROKEE — While minority communities across the United States have struggled to trust the COVID-19 vaccine, the opposite is true for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, a Native American tribe of 16,000 in western North Carolina, and other tribes across the country, which were also quick to adopt coronavirus prevention measures.

The federal Indian Health Service said Tuesday that it has administered nearly 385,300 doses of COVID-19 vaccines. At a rate of about 18,490 per 100,000, that's higher than all but five U.S. states, according to an AP analysis of federal data.

The trend owes itself both to a harsh reality — Native Americans and Alaskan Natives are four times more likely to be hospitalized from COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — and tradition. Community before self has long been a core principle in Native American culture.

Washington

SEATTLE — Washington state is expanding COVID-19 testing options for many public schools and Gov. Jay Inslee said Tuesday that more students should have access to in-person learning.

"This is the best way to educate our children," Inslee said

at a news conference. "This can be done safely."

Decisions about how and when to reopen schools to students are largely left to individual districts. Many districts — including Seattle, the state's largest — have been closed for in-person instruction for almost a year during the pandemic.

Inslee said the state was encouraging local authorities to increase the number of days in which children can be back in the classroom. The Democratic governor said moving toward more in-person instruction is in line with the scientific consensus and the latest guidance from federal officials.

New York

ALBANY — Some New Yorkers are driving hours to get the COVID-19 vaccine because they are unable to find appointments closer to home through a state website.

Residents of the Albany and Buffalo areas in particular have complained on social media and to their local lawmakers that they have had to resort to signing up for appointments in Utica, Rochester, Binghamton or Syracuse.

Jessica Muentert, 48, said she lives a short drive away from the SUNY Buffalo site, but instead resorted to booking an appointment in Rochester, which is over an hour away. She was one of several millions of New Yorkers with eligible health conditions that leave them particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 who could start signing up for vaccines Sunday.

Muentert and other newly eligible individuals have grown frustrated in recent days with the state's Am I Eligible sign-up portal for state-run mass vaccination sites, which has continued to greet them with messages saying "No Appointments Available" at SUNY Albany and SUNY Buffalo. Meanwhile, appointments have been at times available at sites from

Javits Center in New York City to Plattsburgh International Airport.

Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson lifted some restrictions Tuesday on smaller indoor events and school sports as the state's coronavirus cases continued trending downward and vaccine distribution ramps up.

Arkansas reported 177 new cases of the virus Tuesday, but testing was greatly decreased because of winter weather that hit the entire state a day earlier, Hutchinson said.

But beyond the weather-related decreases, Arkansas' rolling average of daily new cases over the past two weeks has dropped by nearly 50%, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins University.

On Tuesday, the Republican governor lifted a temporary restriction that required any indoor event of 10 people or more to obtain state approval in advance. Indoor events with 100 people or more still require approval under restrictions put in place last fall.

Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY — A winter storm that brought heavy snowfall and record-breaking freezing temperatures slowed Oklahoma's distribution of the coronavirus vaccine on Tuesday.

Health officials in many cities and counties across the state worked to reschedule vaccination appointments. The Tulsa County Health Department kept delivering vaccines Tuesday at the city's Expo Square Pavilion. Still, it cautioned people with appointments to dress warmly and wait in their vehicle until their scheduled appointment time.

Tulsa reported more than 6,000 appointments were rescheduled by the department due to inclement weather.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Valentine's Day balloon cuts power for thousands

CA FRESNO — A Valentine's Day balloon filled with helium drifted into a power line Sunday, sparking an outage that temporarily plunged more than 2,300 Fresno households into the dark.

Pacific Gas & Electric spokeswoman Karly Hernandez said that the outage began about 8 p.m. in an area east of Valentine Avenue. The Fresno Bee reported Monday. Most lights were back on an hour later but some residents were without power until midnight.

Last year, metallic balloons caused about 450 outages in PG&E's service area in Northern and central California, the utility reported. The utility routinely warns residents of the dangers of balloons before major holidays.

Men file lawsuits alleging attacks by prison dogs

VA RICHMOND — Two men who say they were viciously attacked by prison security dogs have filed federal civil rights lawsuits against the Virginia Department of Corrections, alleging the agency violated protections against cruel and unusual punishment.

Curtis J. Garrett, 29, a former inmate at the Sussex II State Prison, and Corey E. Johnson, 51, a current inmate at Red Onion State Prison, filed lawsuits this month in U.S. District Court in Richmond and Roanoke. The two alleged that they were obeying orders from corrections officers when the canines were let loose on them. The Richmond Times-Dispatch reported Mon-

day.

Garrett argued that a 2018 attack caused him to suffer permanent injuries, including nerve damage and the inability to use his left hand, in addition to mental health effects. His suit alleged that the dogs were unleashed after he returned to his cell following an altercation with another inmate.

A dog's attack in May 2020 left Johnson requiring more than 20 stitches on his right hand and arm, according to his lawsuit. Johnson said he was lying facedown with his arms extended outward after a fight with another inmate when a handler released a dog onto him. The handler alleged he let the dog loose after Johnson approached another officer in a threatening manner.

1 dead, 1 jailed after fight over a political sign

WA BIG LAKE — One woman is dead and another is being held in jail for investigation of murder after a fight over the alleged theft of a political sign.

Skagit County Sheriff's Office deputies were called to a residence on Big Lake Road about 5:30 p.m. Saturday to a report of a fight, according to the sheriff's office. Upon arriving at the scene, deputies found a 32-year-old Arlington woman dead in the driveway, the release states. The two residents of the house, a 58-year-old man and a 55-year-old woman, came out of the house to speak to deputies, the report states. Initial investigation has determined that the fight began over the theft of a political sign, the release states.

The woman was booked for

investigation of second-degree murder, while her husband was arrested for investigation of fourth-degree assault, the release states.

Explosion destroys 5 garbage trucks

FL PENSACOLA — An explosion and fire destroyed five garbage trucks and damaged two others at a sanitation complex in the Florida Panhandle.

The flames erupted Sunday afternoon at the station in Escambia County, Emerald Coast Utilities Authority said in a statement. The complex is located north of Pensacola. No injuries were reported but five trucks were destroyed.

News outlets reported the fire happened at a fueling station. The authority said the cause of the explosion is under investigation.

Bison largely remaining within boundaries of park

MT BOZEMAN — Bison have largely stayed in Yellowstone National Park and avoided being captured by park officials or killed by hunters this winter, officials said.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks spokesperson Morgan Jacobsen said most of the animals have remained within the park's borders on the slopes above Gardiner. The Bozeman Daily Chronicle reported. Bison migrate to lower elevations outside of the park annually in search of food, which is when they are trapped at the park's Stephens Creek Capture Facility and killed by hunters after

crossing over the border.

Snow leopard known for her 7 healthy cubs dies

NJ CAPE MAY COUNTY — A snow leopard that gained national attention for giving birth to seven cubs has died at 17 years old, a New Jersey zoo said Sunday.

Himani, who reared four litters of cubs at a time when snow leopard breeding success was at a low point, was "peacefully euthanized following a battle with cancer" on Friday, according to a press release from Cape May County.

Himani was born in June 2003 and came to the Cape May County Zoo in 2009 from the Knoxville Zoo in Tennessee, the Press of Atlantic City reported.

Pizza Ranch expanded in 2020 despite pandemic

IA ORANGE CITY — Iowa-based Pizza Ranch, known for its buffet of pizza, chicken and other offerings, expanded last year, even as the coronavirus pandemic hit the restaurant industry harder than most.

Pizza Ranch, based in Orange City, has over 200 locations in 14 states. The chain added five new locations last year and has six or seven more openings slated for this year, Chief Administrative Officer Ryan Achterhoff told the Sioux City Journal.

The National Restaurant Association reported in September that almost 100,000 restaurants — nearly one in every six — closed permanently or long-term due to the pandemic.

— From wire reports

STARS  STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Serena returns to form for semifinals

Associated Press

Serena Williams agrees with everyone else that her footwork and movement are better these days than they've been for a bit — and that's a big reason she's closing in on what would be a record-tying 24th Grand Slam singles title.

Here's what she wants to make clear, though, as a blockbuster Australian Open semifinal against Naomi Osaka approaches on Thursday: This is nothing new.

As much as Williams thrives with her best-in-the-game serves, superb returns and booming groundstrokes, her ability to cover the court has long been a staple of her success. Yes, it's been below par — “the last two, three years,” in her coach's estimation — but is once again an asset, thanks in part to finally getting past a problematic left Achilles.

Two key points during a 6-3, 6-3 quarterfinal victory over No. 2 seed Simona Halep on Tuesday illustrated this element of Williams' game. Coming at deuce while Halep served at 3-all in the second set, the first lasted 21 strokes, the second 13. Both were extended by

Williams' defense. Both ended with forehand misses by Halep. Both helped Williams break serve as part of a five-game, match-closing run.

Asked how long it's been since she felt she owned those sorts of lengthy, pivotal points, Williams crossed her legs, folded her hands and cracked herself up with a joke.

“It's definitely been a minute. It's been a long minute. I think 1926 — the summer of 1926, I think — was the last time I felt that,” Williams said, before turning more serious.

“I'm good at rallying and I have to embrace the things I'm good at. I'm good at playing power. I'm good at hitting 100 balls,” said the 39-year-old American, whose most recent major championship came at the Australian Open in 2017. “And that's one thing that's unique about me, that I just need to kind of accept and embrace and just be good at both.”

Halep, a two-time major champion who beat Williams in the 2019 Wimbledon final, certainly noticed a change.

She said Williams is “running more,” and described two aspects that matter about a renew-

ed ability to get where she wants to go as quickly as she wants to get there.

One is that it makes it “tougher for the opponents to finish the point,” Halep explained, and the other is that it's “much easier” for Williams to properly calibrate offensive shots when she is in the right spot at the right time.

That patience within points is helpful, even if not always second nature for players with the sort of quick-strike power that Williams possesses. But by bidding her time, tracking down opponents' shots and letting it all develop, Williams can let the other players' mistakes help her as much as her own winners do.

“When you're not (having) a good day, you need a Plan B. ... If you can't move well, there is no Plan B; the only plan is attack,” said Williams' coach, Patrick Mouratoglou. “I think it cost her a few important matches. So we have decided to find a way to bring back the footwork that she used to have in the past.”

That could come in handy Thursday in the semifinals, when Williams takes on three-time major champion Naomi Osaka, who won their memora-

ble 2018 U.S. Open final.

The semifinalists on the other half of the draw will be No. 25 Karolina Muchova vs. No. 22 Jennifer Brady. Muchova knocked off No. 1 seed Ash Barty 1-6, 6-3, 6-2, while Brady ended the surprising run of unseeded Jessica Pegula, 4-6, 6-2, 6-1.

In each of her previous two rounds at Melbourne Park, there were drawn-out points in which Williams sprinted this way and that, somehow getting the ball back over the net, before eventually producing a desperation defensive lob.

And each time, Williams was rewarded when her opponent put an overhead into the net.

“Movement has always been one of my strengths, and so it's actually more natural for me to move, than for me not (to). So it was just kind of, like, ‘Oh, that's how I used to move!’ So it's pretty good,” Williams said. “I'm happy that I'm doing that again and that I put it back into my game. I think I was more focused on other things and not focused on something that is actually a strength of mine — has always been a strength of mine.”

Czech Republic's Muchova knocks off No. 1 seed Barty

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Top-ranked Ash Barty built a big lead in the Australian Open quarterfinals before her opponent took a medical timeout and left the court.

More than an hour later, it was Barty heading abruptly for the exit, upset 1-6, 6-3, 6-2 Wednesday by 25th-seeded Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic.

Muchova earned her first semifinal berth at a Grand Slam tournament and ended Barty's bid to become the first Australian woman to win the title at

home since Chris O'Neil in 1978.

“It's heartbreaking, of course,” said Barty, who took nearly all of 2020 off because of the coronavirus pandemic, including opting not to try to defend her 2019 French Open title. “But the sun will come up tomorrow. You're either winning or you're learning, and today is a massive learning curve for me.”

No. 2-ranked Rafael Nadal built a big lead in a night-time quarterfinal, but his bid for a men's-record 21st Grand Slam title ended with an upset five-set loss to Stefanos Tsitsipas of

Greece.

The women's semifinals Thursday will be the first matches at Melbourne Park with crowds in nearly a week after the easing of restrictions imposed by the Victoria state government during a five-day lockdown in Australia's second-largest city to contain the spread of a COVID-19 cluster.

Tournament director Craig Tiley said Wednesday that attendance will be capped at 7,477 — about half the capacity of Rod Laver Arena — for each of the last four days of the tournament.

Muchova's opponent will be

22nd-seeded Jennifer Brady, who beat fellow American and good friend Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-2, 6-1. Brady reached her second Grand Slam semifinal, following a run that far at the U.S. Open in September.

“I hope I make it a habit,” Brady said. “Hopefully I have a new habit of making finals.”

She struggled at times and gave her racket an angry toss midway through the second set. But the unseeded Pegula, who advanced beyond the third round at a major for the first time, appeared to tire down the stretch.

Nadal blows 2-set lead in quarters loss

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Rafael Nadal entered his Australian Open quarterfinal with a 223-1 record when grabbing the first two sets of a Grand Slam match.

Thanks to his own mistakes — and some spirited play by Stefanos Tsitsipas — that mark is now 223-2.

A couple of uncharacteristically sloppy overheads and a framed backhand in a third-set tiebreaker began Nadal's undoing, and his bid for a men's-record 21st major championship eventually ended Wednesday with 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (4), 6-4, 7-5 loss to the younger, sharper Tsitsipas.

"Was little bit of everything, no? I missed a couple of balls in the tiebreak that I shouldn't — that I could not — miss if I want to win. And that's it," said Nadal, who briefly left the Spanish portion of his post-match news conference after clutching at his cramping right hamstring.

"I have to go back home," Nadal said, "and practice to be bet-

ter."

At his put-the-ball-where-he-wants-it best in the early going, Nadal went ahead rather easily, winning 27 consecutive points on his serve in one stretch and running his streak of consecutive sets won at major tournaments to 35, one shy of Roger Federer's record for the professional era.

Nadal and Federer are currently tied at 20 Grand Slam singles titles, more than any other man in the history of a sport that dates to the late 1800s.

But Tsitsipas never wavered and that surprisingly poor tiebreaker by Nadal — thinking too far ahead, perhaps? — helped hand over the third set and begin the epic comeback.

"I started very nervous, I won't lie," the fifth-seeded Tsitsipas said. "But I don't know what happened after the third set. I just flew like a little bird. Everything was working for me. The emotions at the very end are indescribable."

As Tsitsipas played, in Nadal's estimation, a "very, very

high level of tennis" over the last two sets, the 34-year-old Spaniard's play dipped considerably.

Nadal made a total of only 10 unforced errors in the first two sets combined, then 32 the rest of the way — 11 in the third, 14 in the fourth, seven in the fifth.

The only other occasion in which Nadal went from a two-set advantage to a defeat in a Slam came at the 2015 U.S. Open against Fabio Fognini (who just so happened to have lost to Nadal in the fourth round at Melbourne Park this year).

So now, instead of Nadal attempting to surpass Federer, it will be Tsitsipas — a 22-year-old from Greece with a flashy game — who will meet 2019 U.S. Open runner-up Daniil Medvedev in the semifinals Friday.

Neither Tsitsipas nor Medvedev has won a Grand Slam tournament.

In the other men's semifinal, 17-time major champion and No. 1-ranked Novak Djokovic will face 114th-ranked qualifier Aslan Karatsev, who is making

his Grand Slam debut.

The women's semifinals Thursday are Serena Williams vs. Naomi Osaka, and Jennifer Brady vs. Karolina Muchova.

Nadal won the 2009 Australian Open, but it is the only major he hasn't won at least twice, with 13 titles at Roland Garros, four at the U.S. Open and two at Wimbledon.

"Sometimes the things go well," Nadal said, "and sometimes the things go worse."

He came into this year's first major with doubts about his back, citing that as his reason for pulling out of the ATP Cup team competition that preceded the Australian Open and saying the problem prevented him from practicing properly for about three weeks.

But Nadal said after the loss to Tsitsipas that his back was not an issue.

Nadal hadn't ceded a set at Melbourne Park through four matches; he also won all 21 sets he played at last year's French Open, where he picked up his 20th Slam trophy.

Islanders complete two-game sweep of Sabres

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — New York Islanders goalie Ilya Sorokin's eyes lit up and he broke into a big smile in not needing an interpretation when asked his favorite memory of his first NHL win — and a shutout, no less.

"Video review," the Russian-born goalie said. "Canceled it."

There was more to Sorokin's 20-save performance in the Islanders' 3-0 victory over the Buffalo Sabres than an overturned goal on Tuesday night. But the 25-year-old rookie understood how big of a save he got from coach Barry Trotz in having Victor Olofsson's power-play goal negated with 6:59 remaining.

Rather than have the Sabres cut New York's lead to 2-1, the

review of the offside challenge clearly showed Buffalo captain Jack Eichel entering the zone before the puck 22 seconds earlier. The Sabres never managed another shot after that, as New York completed a two-game sweep of Buffalo.

Sorokin improved to 1-2-1, and began showing the potential he displayed in establishing himself as one of the Russian-based Kontinental Hockey League's top young netminders. The Islanders' 2014 third-round pick won 25 or more games in each of his past four seasons and had a league-leading nine shutouts last year.

His teammates were most happy to contribute by building a 2-0 first-period lead.

Capitals 3, Penguins 1: Conor

Sheary and Jakub Vrana scored in the second period, and Washington stopped a four-game slide by winning at Pittsburgh.

Lars Eller also scored for the Capitals, and Vitek Vanecek stopped 26 shots in his 11th straight start.

Devils 5, Rangers 2: Yegor Sharangovich and Nicholas Merkley scored in the third period and visiting New Jersey sent New York to its fourth straight loss.

Pavel Zacha, Will Butcher and Mikhail Maltsev also scored for the Devils, who returned to action for the first time since Jan. 31 after a pause due to a COVID-19 outbreak. Mackenzie Blackwood made 37 saves and Janne Kuokkanen added three assists in the win.

Avalanche 3, Golden Knights

2: Nazem Kadri scored with 41 seconds remaining in the third period, lifting Colorado to a win at Vegas.

Moments after Marc-Andre Fleury stopped Mikko Rantanen's backhand with 45.3 seconds left, the Avalanche got the better end of a faceoff from the right circle, eventually setting up Kadri, who was able to lift a loose puck into the net for his second game-winner of the season.

Kings 4, Wild 0: Jaret Anderson-Dolan had a goal and an assist, Jonathan Quick made 28 saves and Los Angeles defeated visiting Minnesota.

It was the Wild's first game since Feb. 2 due to a COVID-19 outbreak.

Ingram, Williamson power Pelicans past Grizzlies

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Brandon Ingram had 27 points, 12 rebounds and a career-high four blocks, Zion Williamson capped a 29-point night with a game-sealing dunk in the final minute, and the New Orleans Pelicans beat the Memphis Grizzlies 118-109 on Saturday for their third straight victory.

Eric Bledsoe scored 11 of his 21 points in the fourth quarter, when New Orleans fell behind by seven before storming ahead by outscoring Memphis 23-7 over the final seven minutes. Lonzo Ball added 16 points for the Pelicans, who broke open a close game despite playing one night after pulling out a tight road game in Indiana.

"Everybody just got super aggressive. The momentum shifted a little bit," Ingram said of the final stretch. "We stayed in and we knocked down shots and we got stops on the defensive end. So it all came down to the fourth quarter where we had to bring a little extra energy off of a back-to-back. We just couldn't make (being) tired an excuse, and just kept going."

Jonas Valanciunas returned from a five-

game absence because of COVID-19 protocols and scored 23 points in 24 minutes for the Grizzlies.

"He really attacked it well tonight and defensively did some good things," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said. "Obviously, his minutes will continue to go up and up as he gets back and reconditions. He was really good for us tonight."

Kyle Anderson scored 21 for the Grizzlies, and Ja Morant had 16 points and nine assists. But it wasn't enough to prevent the team from losing its third straight.

"We kind of lost our pace there in the fourth quarter. They forced us into some tough possessions and some tough shots," Jenkins said. "We still had some good looks but didn't make it, and credit to them. ... They made some big-time shots. That was kind of the difference there late in the fourth quarter."

After the teams were separated by a single point at halftime and the end of the third quarter, Memphis appeared to be taking control when Tyus Jones scored six of his eight points during an 11-2 run that put the Grizzlies up 102-95.

James leads Lakers past Timberwolves

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — LeBron James had 30 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists and Dennis Schröder scored 24 points, helping the Los Angeles Lakers pull away from the Minnesota Timberwolves for a 112-104 victory on Tuesday night.

Montrezl Harrell pitched in 17 points for the Lakers, who stopped a seven-game losing streak at Minnesota with their first win at Target Center since March 25, 2015.

Nets 128, Suns 124: James Harden scored 38 points, Joe Harris added 22 and Brooklyn overcame a 24-point deficit to win at Phoenix.

Raptors 123, Bucks 113: Fred VanVleet scored 33 points, Pascal Siakam added 23 and Toronto withstood the loss of Kyle Lowry to win at slumping Milwaukee.

Celtics 112, Nuggets 99: Jaylen Brown had 27 points and eight assists to help Boston withstand a 43-point night from Nikola Jokic and beat visiting Denver.

Trail Blazers 115, Thunder 104: Damian Lillard scored 12 of his 31 points in the final 4:11 to help Portland win at Oklahoma City.

Camara leads Georgia's rally over Missouri

Associated Press

ATHENS, Ga. — Losing a big second-half lead made Missouri's third consecutive loss even more painful.

Toumani Camara scored 15 points, including a big three-point play, and Georgia rallied to beat the No. 20 Tigers 80-70 on Tuesday night.

Missouri (13-6, 6-6 Southeastern Conference) blew a 48-35 lead following a dominant start to the second half.

"You put yourself in a position to win it on the road, you've got to find a way to win it," coach Cuonzo Martin said.

Camara said it was important that the Bulldogs, faced with their own streak of two consecutive loss-

es, played with even more hunger than the Tigers.

"I believed ... the most desperate team will probably win the game," Camara said.

Missouri dropped 10 spots in this week's Top 25.

Kobe Brown led the Tigers with a career-high 21 points. Mark Smith and Xavier Pinson had 11 apiece.

Missouri forward Parker Braun said the Tigers "stopped being aggressive" after building the big second-half lead.

"We've just got to stay locked in for a full 40 minutes and be ready to play down the stretch," Braun said.

Missouri center Jeremiah Tilmon missed his second consecutive game while away from the team following a death in his family.

Justin Kier led Georgia (13-8,

6-8) with 16 points.

Camara's three-point play with 4:55 left broke a 62-all tie, launching an 18-8 run to end the game.

No. 5 Illinois 73, Northwestern 66: Kofi Cockburn had 17 points and 10 rebounds, Ayo Dosunmu added 13 points and the host Illini beat the Wildcats.

Cockburn got his 14th double-double of the season for Illinois (20-5, 11-3 Big Ten), which took control early in its sixth straight win.

Chase Audige scored 22 points for Northwestern (6-13, 3-12).

Pete Nance added 14 points for the Wildcats, who lost their 12th straight.

The Illini led 25-7 but saw their lead cut to two points with 1:30 left.

No. 24 Arkansas 75, Florida

64: Davonte Davis led four Razorbacks in double figures with 18 points in a victory over the visiting Gators.

Arkansas (17-5, 9-4 Southeastern Conference) entered the Top 25 on Monday for the first time since 2018 and has won seven straight league games.

Florida (10-6, 6-5) turned a 15-point, second-half deficit into a lead with 4:40 left after Tyree Appleby's layup. Davis and Jalen Tate made back-to-back buckets, Justin Smith blocked Anthony Duruji at the rim and Moses Moody made a pair of free throws to push Arkansas back ahead by two possessions with less than 1:30 left.