

Austin: No decision on troop withdrawal

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The United States has yet to decide the future of its military posture in Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Friday, urging an end to violence in the nation where American troops have been fighting for nearly 20 years.

“The United States will not undertake a hasty or disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan that puts [Afghan military] forces, or [NATO’s] reputation at risk,” Austin told reporters during his first news briefing as the Pentagon’s leader. “In the meantime, current missions will continue, and of course commanders have the right and the responsibility to defend themselves and our Afghan [military] partners against threats.”

Austin spoke to reporters one day after the completion of a virtual NATO conference. He said he had assured NATO allies, who have contributed troops to the Afghan war effort since its launch in 2001, they would not be surprised by President Joe Biden’s decision on Afghanistan, whatever his verdict might be.

“We will consult each other and consult

together, decide together, and act together,” Austin said he told NATO allies, who were at times blindsided by decisions made during former President Donald Trump’s administration.

Austin is now leading a federal government-wide review of the U.S. military posture and other roles in Afghanistan, as the United States faces a May 1 deadline to remove all of its forces from the country under an accord struck last year between the Taliban and Trump’s administration. But U.S. military and civilian leaders — including members of Trump’s former administration — have long said the Taliban has failed to keep its commitments to the agreement struck Feb. 29, 2020, in Doha.

The Taliban has not cut ties to terrorist groups, namely al-Qaida, or reduced violence in the country, U.S. officials have said. Austin on Friday called for the Taliban to commit to upholding its commitments, continue peace negotiations with the U.S.-backed Afghan government and cut back violence in the country.

“Clearly the violence is too high right now and more progress needs to be made in the Afghan-led negotiations,” Austin said. “I urge all parties to choose the path towards peace. The violence must decrease now.”

Under Trump, the United States withdrew about half of its remaining troops in Afghanistan during the final weeks of his administration, leaving Biden with about 2,500 service members in the country.

Some worry the Taliban, which has largely lived up to a commitment in the agreement to avoid attacks on U.S. troops, will return to targeting American and NATO forces after May 1.

Retired Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, who served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2015 to 2019, told lawmakers on Friday that the United States might not have enough troops to defend itself from renewed Taliban attacks.

Dunford, who once led the Afghanistan war effort, served on a Congress-mandated panel to study the deal with the Taliban. On Friday, he told members of the House Oversight and Reform Committee’s subpanel on national security that the U.S. should try to negotiate with the Taliban to extend the May 1 withdrawal deadline.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid warned last week that the insurgents “will definitely return to war” if the U.S. “rejects this deal,” but he did not indicate whether the group would consider extending the May 1 deadline.

Biden declares major disaster in Texas after storm

The Washington Post

President Joe Biden on Saturday approved a major disaster declaration for Texas, making available a wider range of federal assistance to help those affected by the severe winter storm.

Biden had already approved states of emergency in Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas, following severe winter storms that have pummeled the south this week, killing dozens of people and initially rendering millions without power, heat or potable water.

Biden’s declaration allows individuals and business owners in Texas to apply for federal emergency aid, including grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property loss-

es and other recovery programs.

Around 80,000 electric utility customers in Texas remained in the dark and without heat Saturday morning as the state awoke to temperatures in the 20s. More than 14 million people in 160 counties were still experiencing water-service disruptions as of Friday night, and the impacts of the week’s Arctic cold blast stretched to Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee and beyond.

Temperatures are rising but the week’s icy weather is still taking its toll on Texas infrastructure. Houston, the nation’s fourth-largest city, was under a boil-water advisory Friday evening. Much of Austin, Texas’s capital, lacked running water, and officials could not say when it might return.

“This has just been one thing after another,”

Austin Democratic Mayor Steve Adler told CNN on Friday. “This is a community of people that are scared, and upset, and angry. We’re eventually going to need some better answers to why we’re here.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has so far provided generators, drinking water, food and other supplies to Texas.

As Texas begins its recovery from the failure of its electric grid, attention is shifting to whether a disaster of this magnitude could have been avoided and who is to blame for the emergency. Congress is likely to open an investigation next week into what went wrong in Texas, and the state’s legislature is expected to conduct its own hearings.

USAF watchdog to expand inspection into disparities

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Air Force inspector general will do a second investigation into racial and ethnic disparities across the force, service leaders said Friday, expanding the review to include gender and additional racial categories such as Asian and American Indian.

The latest review comes just two months after the IG released a report concluding that Black service members in the Air Force are far more likely to be investigated, arrested, face disciplinary actions and be discharged for misconduct. The December report found that “racial disparity exists” for Black service members but that the data did not explain why it happens.

The new study also reflects broader campaigns within the Defense Department and the Biden administration to root out extremism and racism. President Joe Biden declared domestic extremism an urgent national security threat in the wake of the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. The crowd that breached the building as lawmakers were preparing to certify the election was overwhelmingly white and included members of far-right groups.

Acting Air Force Secretary John Roth, who ordered the latest review, said the IG will go directly to Air Force and Space Force service members for input. A survey that will go out to the force soon will look at several different categories: Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino and gender.

“The IG team has already begun to gather information contained in a wide array of previous reports, studies and various databases across the Department of the Air Force,” Roth said. “Although the data is helpful, the most important information will come directly from our Airmen and Guardians.” Guardians are members of the Space Force.

The Pentagon is also grappling with a wider effort to expand diversity within the ranks, and a campaign to tackle racism and extremism. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, earlier this month, ordered military leaders to spend time talking to their troops about extremism in the ranks, after a number of former and current military members took part in the U.S. Capitol assault.

IG reviews Space Command move

Associated Press

DENVER — The Department of Defense’s inspector general announced Friday that it was reviewing the Trump administration’s last-minute decision to relocate U.S. Space Command from Colorado to Alabama.

The decision on Jan. 13, one week before Trump left office, blindsided Colorado officials and raised questions of political retaliation. Trump had hinted at a Colorado Springs rally in 2020 that the command would stay at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs.

But the man with whom Trump held that rally, Republican Sen. Cory Gardner, lost his reelection bid in November, and Colorado, unlike Alabama, voted decisively against Trump. The Air Force’s last-minute

relocation of command headquarters to Huntsville, Ala. — home of the U.S. Army’s Redstone Arsenal — blindsided Colorado officials of both parties, who have urged the Biden administration to reconsider the decision.

On Friday, the inspector general’s office announced it was investigating whether the relocation complied with Air Force and Pentagon policy and was based on proper evaluations of competing locations.

Colorado officials of both parties were thrilled. “It is imperative that we thoroughly review what I believe will prove to be a fundamentally flawed process that focused on bean-counting rather than American space dominance,” said Rep. Doug Lamborn, a Republican whose district includes Space Command.

Marine attacks handling of her assault case

By Caitlin M. Kenney

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A female Marine posted a video online Thursday lashing out at a general who intervened to stop the ouster of another Marine she accused of sexual assault and bringing renewed attention to military oversight and decision-making in these cases.

“And this is exactly why...females in the military...kill themselves,” she said through tears in the video. “This is exactly why nobody...takes this seriously.”

The Marine posted the video on her TikTok page under the username “gwothot” and it was reposted on Twitter by #NotInMyMarineCorps, an advocacy group for ending sexual assault and harassment in the military.

“This is what happens when you report your assault in the @USMC,” the group wrote with the video.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Friday at the Pentagon that he found the video “deeply disturbing” and that he had asked his staff for additional information.

In a Twitter post Friday, the Marine Corps said they are aware of the video and the service “takes all allegations of misconduct seriously.” The service added her command, II Marine Expeditionary Force based at Camp Lejeune, N.C., is working to ensure she is safe.

“This video specifically refers to an allegation of misconduct regarding the wrongful appropriation and distribution of personal information,” II MEF said in a statement Friday. “The current administrative separation process for the accused perpetrator mentioned in the video is ongoing. The Marine in the video is safe and has been afforded the opportunity to meet with senior representatives in her command.

According to previous social media posts and her website that was shared on her Twitter profile before it was deleted Friday, the Marine’s first name is Dalina and she states she was raped in 2016 in her own bed by a fellow Marine. She had allowed him to stay at her home because he had been drinking and “I didn’t want him to get hurt driving home,” she said on the website.

Opposition threatens Biden budget pick

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nomination of Neera Tanden to lead the White House Office of Management and Budget was thrown in doubt Friday as Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia became the first Democratic lawmaker to oppose her confirmation.

During her confirmation hearings, Tanden apologized for spending years attacking top Republicans on social media. She is a former adviser to Hillary Clinton and served as president of the liberal-leaning Center for American Progress. With the Senate evenly divided between 50 Republicans and 50 Democrats, she'll likely need support from at least one Republican to win

confirmation.

"I believe her overtly partisan statements will have a toxic and detrimental impact on the important working relationship between members of Congress and the next director of the Office of Management and Budget," Manchin said in a statement. He went on to say that, at a time of grave crisis, "it is more important than ever that we chart a new bipartisan course that helps address the many serious challenges facing our nation."

It's the first real test that Biden has faced on a nomination, with most of his picks for Cabinet positions sailing through the chamber with bipartisan support. Tanden had al-

so disparaged some Democrats on social media, most notably Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont.

Biden, asked Friday whether he would pull Tanden's nomination, said he wouldn't.

"I think we are going to find the votes and get her confirmed," Biden said.

Moments earlier, the White House had issued a statement defending her.

"Neera Tanden is an accomplished policy expert who would be an excellent Budget Director and we look forward to the committee votes next week and to continuing to work toward her confirmation through engagement with both parties," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

6 tied to Oath Keepers charged in attack on Capitol

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Six more people linked to the far-right Oath Keepers militia group have been indicted on charges that they planned and coordinated with one another in the attack on the U.S. Capitol, authorities said Friday.

The case against those affiliated with the Oath Keepers is the largest conspiracy case brought by the U.S. Justice Department so far in the Jan. 6 insurrection. The six new people arrested this week are indicted alongside three others who were charged last month with plotting to undo President Joe Biden's victory.

Authorities say the defendants prepared for weeks ahead of the attack, attended training sessions and recruited others. They

donned tactical vests and helmets, moved in an organized fashion as they advanced on the Capitol and communicated with one another during the siege, prosecutors say. Several defendants formed a "stack" formation used by military infantrymen, marching the Capitol steps with their hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them, authorities said.

The new arrests include an Ohio couple, Sandra and Bennie Parker. The others facing charges are: Graydon Young of Englewood, Fla.; his sister, Laura Steele of Thomasville, N.C.; Kelly Meggs and his wife Connie Meggs, of Dunnellon, Fla.

Kelly Meggs, who authorities say is the leader of the Florida chapter of the Oath Keepers, wrote in a Facebook message in

December: "Trump said It's gonna be wild!!!!!! It's gonna be wild!!!!!! He wants us to make it WILD that's what he's saying. He called us all to the Capitol and wants us to make it wild!!!" according to court documents.

Later that month, authorities say Young reached out to a company that does firearms and combat training about a rifle class for four people, according to the indictment.

Authorities say Bennie Parker was in contact with an Oath Keepers member who was arrested last month, Jessica Watkins, leading up to the trip to Washington, discussing things like the uniforms and gear they would bring on Jan. 6. Authorities say Sandra Parker entered the Capitol while her husband stayed in contact outside.

Kenosha rally participant charged in threat to cop

Associated Press

KENOSHA, Wis. — An activist who participated in protests following the August police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha was charged Friday with a felony for allegedly kicking in a door at the Kenosha Public Safety Building and saying he wanted to break an officer's fingers.

Clyde McLemore, 62, of Zion, Ill., was charged Friday with a felony count of attempted battery to a law enforcement officer and a misdemeanor count of disorderly conduct. A warrant was issued for his arrest.

McLemore founded the Black Lives Matter chapter in Lake County, Ill., and was ac-

tive in many protests after Blake's shooting. He told the Kenosha News on Friday that he had just learned of the charges.

"Kenosha County is refusing to charge the officer that shot Jacob Blake, but now they want to charge Clyde McLemore," he said.

Officers were trying to arrest Blake on an outstanding warrant on Aug. 23 when a pocketknife fell from his pocket.

Blake picked it up and was going to a vehicle with two of his children inside when Kenosha Officer Rusten Sheskey shot him seven times. Blake has said he was prepared to surrender after putting the knife in the vehicle, but Sheskey said he feared Blake was

going to stab him. Sheskey was not charged.

Letetra Wideman, Blake's sister and chair of the Black Lives Matter chapter McLemore founded, said she was "disgusted" and called the charge absurd.

The charges stem from an Aug. 24 incident after local officials moved a news conference inside the Public Safety Building due to a crowd of people outdoors. According to the complaint, people in the crowd outside were trying to force their way inside. The complaint says McLemore can be seen on video kicking the door. He allegedly posted that video on Facebook along with a comment about trying to break an officer's fingers. The officer was not hurt.

Vaccine progress touted amid delays

Associated Press

PORTAGE, Mich. — President Joe Biden toured a state-of-the-art coronavirus vaccine plant Friday, intent on showcasing progress even as extreme winter weather across the U.S. handed his vaccination campaign its first major setback, delaying shipment of about 6 million doses and causing temporary closures of inoculation sites in many communities.

While acknowledging the weather is “slowing up the distribution,” Biden said at the Pfizer plant in Michigan that he believes “we’ll be approaching normalcy by the end of this year.” His speech melded a recitation of his administration’s accomplishments in its first month confronting the pandemic, a vigorous pitch for his \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill and criticism of his predecessor.

The disruptions caused by frigid temperatures, snow and ice have left the White House and states scrambling to make up lost ground as three days’ worth of vaccine shipments were temporarily delayed. Even the president’s trip to see Pfizer’s largest plant was pushed back a day due to a storm affecting the nation’s capital.

Before the trip, White House coronavirus response adviser Andy Slavitt said the federal government, states and local vaccinators are going to have to redouble efforts to catch up after the interruptions. The setback comes just as the vaccination campaign seemed to be on the verge of hitting its stride. All the backlogged doses should be delivered in the next several days, Slavitt said, still confident that the pace of vaccinations will recover.

Biden has set a goal of administering 100 million shots in his administration’s first 100 days, and he said Friday that’s still on track and it’s only a beginning.

He went on to say that by the end of July his administration can deliver 600 million doses for

Americans. Still, Biden cautioned that timetable could change, citing the current weather delays and concerns about new strains of the virus as well as the possibility that production rates could fluctuate.

“I believe we’ll be approaching normalcy by the end of this year,” he said. “God willing, this Christmas will be different than last, but I can’t make that commitment to you.”

New York

ALBANY — New York City restaurants will be allowed to serve more customers indoors starting Feb. 26.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced Friday that New York City indoor dining will be able to expand from 25% capacity to 35% capacity — in line with New Jersey’s current limit.

His announcement came as the state sees an overall drop in hospitalizations to 6,155 as of Thursday, which is down from a winter peak of 9,273 on Jan. 19. Nearly 52,000 people tested positive statewide for COVID-19 in the previous seven days, down from 63,000 over the previous week.

Alabama

MONTGOMERY — Alabama’s state health officer said Friday that he is cautiously optimistic about improving COVID-19 numbers but urged people to maintain precautions such as wearing masks and avoiding crowds.

Three major barometers of the pandemic’s severity — hospitalizations, daily new cases and the percent of tests coming back positive — have fallen to levels the state last saw in fall or summer. Although, state health officials expressed alarm when the state hit those numbers last year.

“We are not out of the woods, but we see how to get out of the woods. Please don’t stop doing the things that you are doing. This is not the time to ease up wearing your mask. It’s not the time to go

be in large groups of people,” Dr. Scott Harris told reporters in his weekly briefing.

California

LOS ANGELES — The University of Southern California expects to reopen campuses this fall, joining the state’s major public universities in planning to resume on-campus life that was curtailed by the coronavirus outbreak.

“With conditions improving and vaccine distribution now being ramped up, many of us are feeling a sense of hope about this pandemic that we haven’t felt for a long time,” USC President Carol L. Folt wrote in an online letter to students and their families Friday. “We are cautiously optimistic and are doing everything to make sure our plans for a return are fully realized.”

Folt noted that the number of new COVID-19 cases locally has dropped sharply.

Florida

MIAMI — Four federal mass vaccination sites are coming to Florida, officials said Friday.

Miami, Tampa, Orlando and Jacksonville will be the locations of the new Community Vaccine Centers, according to a White House news release. The cities and locations were selected based on their proximity to vulnerable populations and officials estimate that the four centers will give up to 12,000 shots a day in total.

The locations are Miami-Dade Community College, TGT Poker & Racebook in Tampa, Valencia Community College in Orlando, and Gateway Town Center in Jacksonville.

Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY — The rolling average of new coronavirus cases in Oklahoma has been more than cut in half, according to data from Johns Hopkins University on Friday.

The seven-day rolling average of new cases in the state during

the past two weeks declined from 2,233 per day to 1,010.71 while the rolling average of daily deaths fell from 36.86 to 23.43, according to the Johns Hopkins data.

There have been a reported 417,345 total virus cases and 4,132 deaths since the pandemic began, according to the Oklahoma State Department of Health, increases from Thursday of 869 cases and 20 deaths due to COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus.

Texas

AUSTIN — Texas reported 172 more deaths Friday, and state health officials said the number of hospitalizations with the illness the virus causes has resumed its downward trend.

The deaths raised the death toll for the coronavirus pandemic to more than 41,600, but hospitalizations fell by 117 patients to 7,757 Thursday, the most recent number available from the Texas Department of State Health Services.

The confirmed and probable coronavirus cases reported to the state rose by 2,791 to 2,577,131, of which an estimated 227,726 are active.

Wisconsin

MADISON — The University of Wisconsin-Madison warned of a recent spike in COVID-19 cases Friday, a day after a more contagious variant of the virus was detected in the county and the university system’s president said he wanted students to attend nearly all classes in person this fall.

The warning emailed to students, faculty and staff told of a “significant increase” in COVID-19 cases among students on and off campus. There were 112 new confirmed cases reported Wednesday and 99 more on Thursday, according to the email from Jake Baggott, the head of University Health Services.

The seven-day average of new cases both on and off campus was up 13.2%, according to the UW dashboard.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Aargh! City delays pirate festival until 2022

FL TAMPA — For more than 100 years, Tampa has held a celebration of pirate lore known as Gasparilla. Avast, mateys, it's not to be this time.

This year's event was postponed and then canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla, which represented Tampa's old guard when it began the event in 1904 and is still at the helm today, said the next one won't be held until January 2022.

The Gasparilla parade annually draws hundreds of thousands of people.

Employee charged after falsifying complaint

NY WEST LEYDEN— An employee for a New York state agency is accused of filing an anonymous abuse complaint against herself in order to collect paid leave.

Heather Race, of West Leyden in central New York, was charged with third-degree grand larceny and two other charges related to falsification, the state police said.

She allegedly received eight weeks of pay, or around \$6,900, on leave while the abuse complaints she filed against herself were investigated.

Race, 40, worked for the state's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities.

'Jeepers Bandits' accused of robberies arrested

AZ PHOENIX — Three men nicknamed the "Jeepers Bandits" are in custo-

dy in a string of armed robberies around metro Phoenix, according to the FBI.

Authorities said the suspects got their nickname due to their appearance and attire, which is similar to a cartoon character from the "Scooby Doo" TV show who frequently said "jeepers."

The FBI said Dakotah Jones, 20, Noel Aragon, 22, and Justin Krause, 20, face multiple charges including armed robbery, burglary, kidnapping and aggravated assault. FBI officials said the suspects are accused of stealing from five smoke shops and one ice cream store between Nov. 27 and Dec. 4.

Woman hurt, rescued after fall into old well

OR SILVERTON — A woman was rescued after she fell through the wooden top of an old well northeast of Salem, authorities said.

Authorities responding to a property outside Scotts Mills found a woman conscious, injured and hypothermic about 60 feet down into the stone-lined well, according to the Silverton Fire District.

A Salem Fire Department rope rescue team was called and they lowered a rescuer down, stabilized the woman and hoisted her to the top of the well, Silverton fire officials said. The woman was taken to a hospital in serious condition.

Library worker accused of burning book fired

TN CHATTANOOGA — A Tennessee public library employee who helped organize protests against police brutality was fired after being

accused of burning library books by conservative authors.

Cameron Williams had been on leave from the Chattanooga Public Library since December after someone complained to the library about an Instagram video in which he burned copies of conservative commentator Ann Coulter's "How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must)" and former President Donald Trump's "Crippled America" while Trump protest song "FDT" played in the background, the Chattanooga Times Free Press reported.

Man denies shooting arrows at police officers

IA SIOUX CITY — A Sioux City man pleaded not guilty to shooting arrows at police during a standoff.

Mitchell Smith, 47, entered his written plea to attempted murder, intimidation with a dangerous weapon and two counts of assault on a peace officer, The Sioux City Journal reported.

Police said officers responded to a home Dec. 1 on a report that Smith had threatened a neighbor's wife.

After a brief encounter, the officers were leaving when Smith fired an arrow over the head of an officer, police said. The officers drove about a block, when Smith reportedly fired a second arrow. During a standoff, Smith allegedly fired two more arrows. No one was hit by the arrows.

Woman drives car into man she says robbed her

NY ROCHESTER — A woman who author-

ities said fatally hit a man with a car she was driving at high speeds is facing a murder charge.

Angelina Griffin, 24, told witnesses that she had just been robbed at gun point by Omar Coker. She then drove her car onto the shoulder of the road and fatally struck Coker, 34, Brighton Police Chief David Catholdi said.

Griffin turned herself into police and was charged with second-degree murder, The Democrat and Chronicle reported.

Court documents said Griffin stayed briefly at the scene where she told witnesses Coker had just robbed her with a gun and tried to pick up cash that was strewn around, the newspaper reported.

Police found Coker dead when they arrived and said that they found a gun with him and several thousand dollars in cash at the scene.

Same coyote responsible for 4 attacks since July

CA MORAGA — The coyote that bit a girl, 3, is the same animal that bit three other people last year in the San Francisco Bay Area and officials are searching for the animal to euthanize it, a wildlife official said.

"The coyote's DNA profile is a match to the coyote responsible for the three other attacks that occurred all in the same vicinity between July and December 2020," California Fish and Wildlife Capt. Patrick Foy told the San Francisco Chronicle.

Last year, the animal bit a grocery store worker and a man in December and a boy, 2, in July.

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Rockies written off since trading star

Associated Press

DENVER — Kyle Freeland sees the prevailing theory out there: All-Star third baseman Nolan Arenado traded away, the Colorado Rockies instantly written off.

That sort of narrative just provides even more incentive for the left-hander and his teammates.

“We haven’t even played a spring training game ... and people are already counting us out,” Freeland said Thursday as Colorado’s pitchers and catchers cranked up spring-training workouts in Scottsdale, Ariz. “It’s a great opportunity for us to shock the world.”

Very few are betting too heavily on Colorado after the recent blockbuster deal that sent eight-time Gold Glove winner Arenado to St. Louis. The Baseball Prospectus’ PECOTA projections have the Rockies finishing last in the NL West with a forecasted record of 60.3-101.7. Colorado’s worst record in franchise history was

64-98 in 2012 — the year before Arenado arrived in Denver.

“Anytime you lose a player like Nolan, it’s going to hurt,” said Rockies reliever Scott Oberg, who’s returning this season after missing 2020 while dealing with blood clots in his pitching arm. “There’s going to be a lot of question marks from a lot of different people.”

That’s why Oberg, outfielder Ian Desmond and shortstop Trevor Story were among the leaders to reach out to teammates following the Arenado deal.

Their message: Stick together.

“You never want to see a clubhouse go 25, 26 different directions,” Oberg said. “We just wanted to make sure that (we) reiterated some of the team goals, some of the team values. You know, ‘Hey look, we lost one of our brothers. We lost one of our guys. But we still have jobs to do.’”

Arenado grew frustrated with a front office that didn’t

make any major moves to contend with the perennial NL West champion Los Angeles Dodgers. The Rockies made the postseason in 2017 and ’18, but trended backward in ’19 with a 91-loss campaign and missed the postseason again in ’20. Arenado, who signed a \$260 million, eight-year contract in February 2019, wanted out.

In the deal with St. Louis, the Rockies received left-hander Austin Gomber along with four minor leaguers. They also sent cash to the Cardinals to offset part of the money Arenado is due in his contract.

It’s a trade that’s soured the Rockies’ fan base.

Freeland’s request: Give the squad a chance.

“We have some incredible players on this team,” said Freeland, a Denver native who grew up a Rockies fan. “This active roster that will be put on the field this year is going to go out there looking to win ball games consistently.”

As for his inclusion in the deal, Gomber took it as a compliment: “A compliment the Rockies would look at me as part of proper compensation for Nolan Arenado. Now it’s just about going out and proving them right.”

Gomber’s only experience pitching at Coors Field was in 2018, when he went six innings, allowed one earned run and struck out six while with the Cardinals.

The 27-year-old Gomber plans to rely on his four-seam fastball along with a curve, which historically doesn’t have as much break for pitchers inside Coors.

“I could be pitching on the moon and I’m still going to throw a curveball,” said Gomber, who’s competing for the fifth spot in the rotation. “When guys maybe try to change the game plan and be somebody they’re not is when they get in trouble.”

For advice, he’s been leaning on fellow lefty Freeland.

Osaka defeats Brady in Australian Open final

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — As Naomi Osaka strode through the Champion’s Walk leading to the court for the Australian Open final — headphones on her ears, racket bag strapped to her back — she reached out her left hand to tap a panel marked with her name and the year of her previous title there.

Not a big deal, she explained. Just a bit of superstition. Less than 10 minutes later, she began the match against Jennifer Brady. And less than 1 ½ hours later, Osaka won the last point, because that’s what she does when the stakes are the greatest on her sport’s biggest stages.

Osaka improved to 4-0 in Grand Slam finals by grabbing six consecutive games to pull

away in what initially was a tight contest, beating Brady 6-4, 6-3 at Melbourne Park on Saturday.

“You don’t go into a final wanting to be the runner-up. For me, I feel like every opportunity that I play a Slam is an opportunity to win a Slam,” said the 23-year-old Osaka, who will move up to No. 2 in the WTA rankings. “So I think maybe I put that pressure on myself too much, but honestly, it’s working out in my favor right now.”

Sure is.

With serves that reached 122 mph and produced six aces, and returns that helped create six breaks, Osaka became the first woman to win her first four major finals since Monica Seles did it 30 years ago.

That is part of Osaka’s 12-0 re-

cord in quarterfinals, semifinals and finals at the majors.

“She plays so aggressive that she puts so much pressure on you to perform well,” said Brady, a 25-year-old from Pennsylvania who played college tennis at UCLA and was participating in a Slam final for the first time. “And that’s something that not every tennis player has that ability to do.”

Osaka, the 2020 AP Female Athlete of the Year, is also on a 21-match winning streak that dates to last season and includes her championship at last year’s U.S. Open. She also won the U.S. Open in 2018, and the Australian Open in 2019.

“What I have learned on and off the court is it’s OK to not be sure about yourself. For me, I feel like

I’ve always forced myself to, like, be ‘strong’ or whatever. I think if you’re not feeling OK, it’s OK to not feel OK,” Osaka said. “But you have to sort of go within yourself and figure things out in a way.”

Osaka was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father, and moved to the United States with her family when she was 3. She has been a vocal advocate for Black victims of racism and police violence, saying she would refuse to play a match at one tournament last year to spotlight the issue.

“She’s such an inspiration to us all, and what she’s doing for the game is amazing in getting the sport out there,” said Brady, who was seeded 22nd. “I hope young girls at home are watching and inspired by what she’s doing.”

Embiid paces Sixers with career-high 50

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — All-Star Joel Embiid scored a career-high 50 points in the Philadelphia 76ers' 112-105 victory over the Chicago Bulls on Friday night.

Embiid added 17 rebounds, five assists, four blocks and two steals in a dominating performance at both ends.

Tobias Harris had 22 points and 12 rebounds for the Eastern Conference-leading 76ers.

Zach LaVine scored 30 points for the Bulls.

With the 76ers clinging to a 107-103 lead, Embiid blocked LaVine's driving attempt with 1:02 remaining, then hit a 17-foot baseline jumper with 41 seconds left. When the Bulls called timeout, Embiid jogged to center court and put both hands up as if requesting cheers from the empty seats while the speakers played artificial "M-V-P!" "M-V-P!" chants.

Nuggets 120, Cavaliers 103: Jamal Murray scored a career-high 50 points, All-Star starter Nikola Jokic had a triple-double and visiting Denver adjusted to a schedule change by handing Cleveland its ninth straight loss in a matchup hastily arranged by the NBA due to COVID-19.

Jokic, on his 26th birthday, had 16 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for his seventh triple-double of the season. Collin Sexton scored 23 points, and Jarrett Allen had 20 for Cleveland.

Clippers 116, Jazz 112: Kawhi Leonard scored 29 points, Lou Williams had 19 and host Los Angeles ended Utah's winning streak at nine games.

Donovan Mitchell scored 29 of his 35 points in the second half for the NBA-leading Jazz. They lost for the second time in 22 games.

Suns 132, Pelicans 114: Chris Paul had 15 points and a season-high 19 assists, spear-

heading an 11-point, fourth-quarter comeback in visiting Phoenix's victory over New Orleans.

Brandon Ingram scored 25 points for the Pelicans, and Zion Williamson added 23. They've lost five of six.

Magic 124, Warriors 120: Nikola Vucevic had 30 points, 16 rebounds and 10 assists for his third career triple-double and host Orlando overcame a 13-point, fourth-quarter deficit to beat Golden State.

Vucevic made two free throws with 16 seconds left to put Orlando ahead 123-120 after Warriors star Stephen Curry hit back-to-back three-pointers in the final minute.

Bucks 98, Thunder 85: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 29 points, a season-high 19 rebounds and eight assists, and Milwaukee beat visiting Oklahoma City to snap a five-game skid.

The Bucks avoided their first six-game losing streak since March 12-22, 2015.

Celtics 121, Hawks 109: Kemba Walker scored a season-high 28 points and host Boston held off Atlanta.

Trae Young led the Hawks with 31 points. Atlanta has lost five of six.

Grizzlies 109, Pistons 95: Ja Morant scored 21 of his 29 points in the second half, Jonas Valanciunas added 17 points and 15 rebounds and Memphis rallied to beat visiting Detroit.

Jerami Grant and Delon Wright led the Pistons with 16 points each.

Raptors 86, Timberwolves 81: Norman Powell scored a season-high 31 points and Toronto closed with an 11-0 run to beat host Minnesota for its third straight win.

Karl-Anthony Towns led Minnesota with 19 points and 13 rebounds.

Logano wants peace at Penske following Daytona 500 crash

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — A truce has yet to be called in the Team Penske camp amid friction following the last-lap Daytona 500 crash between teammates Joey Logano and Brad Keselowski.

Logano was leading Keselowski when Keselowski pulled out to attempt a race-winning pass, a move that caused contact that triggered a fiery eight-car wreck. Three of the cars involved were Fords fielded by Penske.

Logano had yet to speak to Keselowski by Friday — he said "it's probably best to cool your jets a little bit before the conversation happens" — but planned to talk before the two raced again for the sake of the Penske organization. The two race Sunday on the road course at Daytona.

"The goal is to move on and not say, 'You raced me hard, so I'm going to race you hard' and now we're beating the doors off of each other every week and it grows and grows," Logano said. "You can't seek revenge or just, 'Well, you made my life hard, so I'm going to make your life hard.' That's childish. We're adults.

"If you do that, it's the most selfish thing you can do because you're not just hurting yourself or hurting him, you're hurting all the people that work on that car and what did they do to you?"

Keselowski was visibly frustrated following the crash and heaved his helmet at his wrecked car. He was adamant after the race that he was not at fault for the collision.

"I don't feel like I made a mistake, but I can't drive everybody else's car, so frustrating," he said.

Logano did not accept culpability.

"I don't think anyone did anything wrong," he said. "Everyone

is going to have different perspectives and I think that's probably where we're going to be. To me, the biggest heartbreak of this whole thing is that there are 400 people at Team Penske asking where their Daytona 500 bonus is and it's up in a ball of flames up in turn three."

Three-time Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin bristled at Logano's deflection. He noted Logano could have guaranteed the organization a Daytona 500 victory if he'd allowed Keselowski to pull alongside him and the two Penske cars together would have blocked the track to other competitors as the teammates raced each other to the finish line.

"Say huh?" Hamlin posted to Twitter. "Ya k now best way to guarantee a Penske win? If the 2 got beside him then they race to the line to see which one wins."

Hamlin and Logano were teammates for five years at Joe Gibbs Racing and have previously feuded.

It remains to be seen how Keselowski chooses to work with Logano going forward. He did not comment Friday on Logano's push for the teammates to move on, but Keselowski did post a photo on social media that showed damage to equipment in his car from the fire started in the crash.

Keselowski, the 2012 Cup champion but winless in 12 Daytona 500s, is in a contract year with Penske and probably can't afford to feud with his teammate. Logano, also a Cup champion and the 2015 Daytona 500 winner, doesn't have the same job security concerns.

"It's kind of the situation here, where I will be forced and he will be forced to work with me," Logano said. "We're still teammates. We will have to figure this out."

Tahoe is 'mic drop' moment for NHL games

Associated Press

STATELINE, Nev. — Some players snapped pictures of Lake Tahoe and the majestic Sierra Nevada mountains as they came out for their first look at the picturesque outdoor rink that will host a pair of NHL games this weekend.

Others just soaked in the environment before taking the ice for a practice that took them back to their childhood, when many got started playing hockey on frozen ponds and lakes.

It's fair to say none of those makeshift rinks was quite like the one that will be used for the games this weekend between Vegas and Colorado and Philadelphia and Boston in one of the most scenic settings imaginable.

"Anywhere where they can build outdoor rinks, there's always a competition on the street whose dad can build a better rink," Vegas coach Peter DeBoer said Friday after his team practiced in preparation for Saturday's game against the Avalanche.

"Every year you come back and someone adds lights or a scoreboard. This is a drop-the-mic-type outdoor rink. It's the nicest I've ever seen. The guys really, really enjoyed it today. It's awe-inspiring when you walk out there and see the mountains and the lake in the background. The only thing we're missing is fans."

With the COVID-19 pandemic limiting attendance at games, the NHL took the opportunity to hold a pair of outdoor games at

a unique setting unlike the 30 previous outdoor games at stadiums.

They built a rink on the 18th fairway of the golf course of the Edgewood Tahoe Resort, which is located on the shores of Lake Tahoe and surrounded by trees with the snow-covered Sierra Nevada mountain range towering in the background.

"It's a really cool feeling," Avalanche captain Gabriel Landeskog said. "The surroundings speak for themselves. You can see that in pictures. But it still doesn't really do it justice. It's probably the purest form of hockey, being outdoors and obviously the elements and the wind and the sun comes into play. It's going to be a lot of fun."

The Golden Knights practiced first, with DeBoer holding a traditional session before giving his players some 3-on-3 time to mimic what it was like playing outdoors as kids with their friends.

The players spent the practice day getting used to the elements. The ice was in good shape for an outdoor rink but is "stickier" and will play slower than a traditional indoor setting, especially if the sun is shining like it was Friday.

The bigger issues could be the glare from the sun, wind and an elevation of more than 6,000 feet above sea level.

Before the Avalanche and Golden Knights took the ice for the first game at Tahoe on Saturday, the Philadelphia Flyers and Boston Bruins got a chance to

practice on the rink before their game Sunday that wraps up the weekend here.

Bruins forward Brad Marchand said the outdoor setting reminds him of growing up in Nova Scotia, where there was a pond behind his house that became his winter skating rink.

"It'd be pretty special when it would rain and the entire lake could be frozen, but there'd be no snow on it," he said. "You could skate the entire thing. You did have the scenery, the trees in the background. Obviously we didn't have the mountains in that kind of view. But we had a great little spot that we could go out and it got cold early on there."

Flyers forward James Van Riemsdyk is a veteran of the outdoor games, having played in six of the 30 the NHL has held to date. He said playing his first one at Fenway Park with the Flyers in 2010 and then at the Big House at the University of Michigan four years later with Toronto stand out.

But this version will be completely different.

"I think the scenery should be pretty cool," he said. "Usually these events are at stadiums and stuff like that. Even though it was outdoor, it was a little bit more of a common thing that we're all generally used to. I know for this one, being on the golf course there will be way different and a totally different vibe in that sense. That'll make this one special and definitely memorable."

Niederreiter, Hurricanes put Blackhawks on ice

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Nino Niederreiter had two goals and an assist and the Carolina Hurricanes cooled off a 5-3 victory Friday night.

Niederreiter capped his big night by scoring on the power play with 4:56 left, pushing the puck past Kevin Lankinen from the top of the crease for his ninth of the season. That made it 4-2, putting the Hurricanes in control after quickly blowing a two-goal lead late in the second.

Martin Necas scored the go-ahead goal early in the third on the power play. Vincent Trocheck and Jacob Slavin also found the net, with Slavin scor-

ing on a long empty-netter with 3:14 left.

Patrick Kane had a spectacular goal and two assists for the Blackhawks, and Ian Mitchell scored in the final seconds before the second intermission to tie it at 2.

The Blackhawks had won three in a row and six of seven.

James Reimer made 26 saves for the victory.

Panthers 7, Red Wings 2: Patric Hornqvist scored in the first and third periods to help visiting Florida rout Detroit.

Juho Lammikko and MacKenzie Weegar had goals on consecutive shots in the opening period, and Hornqvist made it 3-0

in a four-shot stretch that doomed a Detroit team averaging an NHL-low 1.9 goals a game.

Aleksander Barkov, Anthony Duclair and Aaron Ekblad also scored, and Chris Driedger made 30 saves. The Central Division-leading Panthers matched a season high with three straight victories, giving them 11 wins in 15 games.

Valtteri Filppula and Bobby Ryan scored for Detroit. Thomas Greiss gave up four goals and stopped nine shots in the first period. Jonathan Bernier replaced Greiss and had 23 saves over the last two periods.

Oilers 2, Flames 1: Jesse Pul-

jujarvi and Gaetan Haas scored, Mike Smith made 20 saves and visiting Edmonton beat Calgary to open a home-and-home series.

Defenseman Rasmus Andersson scored for Calgary, and David Rittich made 23 saves.

Jets 2, Canucks 0: Laurent Brossoit made 29 saves for his second career shutout, Mark Scheifele scored on a first-period breakaway and visiting Winnipeg beat Vancouver.

Mason Appleton added an empty-netter. Thatcher Demko made 29 saves for the Canucks.

The teams will complete the two-game series Sunday night in Vancouver.