

Officials: ISIS leader wanted taken alive

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The pre-dawn raid Thursday by U.S. special operations forces in northeastern Syria was designed to capture the leader of the Islamic State, who instead blew himself up along with members of his family rather than be taken alive, top Pentagon officials said.

Elite American troops spent months planning and coordinating the operation, conducting tabletop exercises and dry-runs intent on avoiding civilian casualties and capturing ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, the officials said in separate briefings Thursday. But as the U.S. troops surrounded al-Qurayshi's home and called through a megaphone for the occupants to surrender, the ISIS leader detonated a bomb that destroyed the building's third floor, killing him and several others, including his own wife and children, officials said.

"The objective was to finish his leadership of ISIS and that was achieved," chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters. "This is a man who we should all be happy is no longer walking on the face of the Earth."

The explosion was larger than a typical

suicide vest blast — such as the one that al-Qurayshi's predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, used to kill himself as American forces cornered him in a similar raid in Syria in 2019, said Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the leader of U.S. Central Command who was the senior commander for both attacks.

"Let me be clear, [al-Qurayshi] did not fight," McKenzie said during a virtual appearance with the Middle East Institute. "He killed himself and his immediate family without fighting, even as we attempted to call for his surrender and offered him a path to survive."

The general said 10 noncombatants at the house — an adult male, an adult female and eight children — were saved from harm and, ultimately, left at the site after U.S. forces departed.

Though using ground forces elevates the risk of troop casualties, the decision to raid the compound rather than conduct an airstrike was a deliberate attempt to prevent unintentional civilian deaths, President Joe Biden said Thursday.

"Knowing that this terrorist had chosen to surround himself with families, including children, we made a choice to pursue a spe-

cial forces raid at a much greater risk to our people rather than targeting him with an airstrike," Biden said in a public address.

U.S. forces, however, did kill at least four people during the raid. Two people — an ISIS militant and his wife — were killed after firing on troops as they arrived at the building's second floor, said Kirby, who described the militant as one of al-Qurayshi's top lieutenants. Kirby did not name the fighter.

A child was also killed on the second floor, Kirby and McKenzie said. The general indicated ISIS fighters were believed to be responsible for the child's death.

Two others killed in the event were from a group of armed men "linked to al-Qaida" who entered the scene as American troops cleared the building after the explosion, McKenzie said. They were struck by helicopter gunfire, while others in their group fled the scene.

McKenzie and Kirby said it was possible more people died during the raid — particularly in the blast set off by al-Qurayshi. McKenzie said he did not believe American troops had accidentally killed any civilians during the operation.

Troops from Fort Bragg arrive in Poland, Germany

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Hundreds of Fort Bragg-based soldiers deployed to U.S. Army Europe and Africa headquarters in Germany on Friday, while another contingent arrived in Poland to set the stage for 1,700 82nd Airborne Division soldiers, U.S. European Command said.

About 300 soldiers from the XVIII Airborne Corps are in Wiesbaden, where they will provide a "Joint Task Force-capable headquarters" to support efforts aimed at reinforcing NATO's eastern flank, EUCOM said Friday.

Meanwhile, service members from the 435th Air Ground Operations Wing arrived in Poland on Thursday night to prepare an airfield for the U.S. Army soldiers arriving there.

"This is a strong signal of allied solidarity

in response to the situation in Ukraine," Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said in a statement Friday announcing the arrivals.

EUCOM said the U.S. forces that landed in Poland are operating out of an airport in Rzeszow, a southeastern town not far from the Ukrainian border.

The U.S. military already has about 4,000 service members operating in various parts of Poland on a rotational basis, including hundreds of soldiers supporting a NATO mission just 50 miles from Russia's military exclave of Kaliningrad.

The joint headquarters in Wiesbaden will augment the Army's recently established V Corps, which became fully operational last year.

"An XIII Airborne Corps task force adds scale and capabilities to our operations here in Europe," U.S. Army Europe and Africa

said in a statement.

In the coming days, 1,000 soldiers from the 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Vilseck, Germany, will depart for Romania in connection with President Joe Biden's decision to boost troop levels along NATO's eastern flank.

U.S. European Command and USA-EUR-AF have declined to provide details thus far about troop arrivals in Poland and Romania.

In Romania, the U.S. already has 900 troops carrying out a wide range of missions, with much of the activity centered around Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base, which hosts elements of the 1st Air Cavalry Brigade and the 1st Infantry Division's 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team.

The Navy also has an Aegis Ashore Missile Defense System site at Deveselu, Romania and the U.S. Air Force operates a drone facility at Campia Turzii, a Romanian air base.

France, Germany to visit Russia, Ukraine

Associated Press

PARIS — The French president and the German chancellor will head to Moscow and Kyiv in the coming weeks, adding to diplomatic efforts to try to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin from launching an invasion of Ukraine and find a way out of the growing tensions.

France's Emmanuel Macron is scheduled to visit Moscow on Monday and Kyiv on Tuesday, while Germany's Olaf Scholz will travel to Kyiv on Feb. 14 and Moscow on Feb. 15.

The high-level visits come as China has backed Russia's demand that NATO be precluded from expanding to Ukraine, and after the U.S. accused the Kremlin on Thursday of an elaborate plot to fabricate an attack by Ukrainian forces that Russia could use as a pretext to take military action. The U.S. has not provided detailed information

backing up the claims, which Moscow has vehemently denied.

While France is a major player in NATO and is moving troops to Romania as part of the alliance's preparation for possible Russian action, Macron has also been actively pushing for dialogue with Putin and has spoken to him several times in recent weeks. The two will hold a one-on-one meeting Monday, Macron's office said Friday.

Macron is following a French tradition of striking a separate path from the United States in geopolitics, as well as trying to make his own mark on this crisis and defend Europe's interests.

Germany has emphasized the importance of various diplomatic formats in tackling the tensions and has refused to send weapons to Ukraine, irking some allies. Scholz also has faced criticism at home lately for keeping a low public profile in the cri-

sis.

After weeks of talks in various diplomatic formats have led to no major concessions by Russia and the U.S., it's unclear how much impact the trips will have. But Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Friday that "top-level visits seriously reduce challenges in the sphere of security and upset the Kremlin's plans."

In a call Wednesday with U.S. President Joe Biden, Macron filled him in on his diplomatic efforts. In talks with the Russian and Ukrainian leaders Thursday night, Macron's office said they discussed ways to "identify elements that could lead to de-escalation," and "conditions for strategic balance in Europe, which should allow for the reduction of risks on the ground and guarantee security on the continent."

Scholz has a previously planned meeting with Biden in Washington on Monday.

US: Russia planning false attack video before invasion

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Russia is considering filming a fake attack against Russian territory or Russian-speaking people by Ukrainian forces as a pretext to invade its neighbor, the Biden administration said Thursday, warning that the resulting propaganda footage could include "graphic scenes of a staged false explosion with corpses."

Russia has already recruited the people who would be involved in the fabricated attack video, and Russian intelligence is intimately involved in the effort, a senior Biden administration official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity under rules set by the administration.

"We believe that Russia would produce a very graphic propaganda video, which would include corpses and actors that would be depicting mourners and images of destroyed locations, as well as military equipment at the hands of Ukraine or

the West, even to the point where some of this equipment would be made to look like it was Western-supplied," Defense Department press secretary John Kirby said Thursday during a briefing at the Pentagon.

Such a Russian disinformation effort would be "right out of their playbook," Kirby said, noting that most activity of that nature is approved at the highest levels of the Russian government. Kirby said the Biden administration felt it was important, when possible, "to call it out."

The accusation is the latest in a string of announcements by the U.S. and British governments aimed at preemptively disrupting Russian plots to destabilize Ukraine. Last month, the Biden administration accused Russia of sending a group of operatives trained in sabotage and urban warfare into eastern Ukraine possibly to launch a "false flag" attack

against Russian separatist proxy forces and pin it on Kyiv. The British government later alleged Russia was organizing a scheme to destabilize Ukraine and install a Russia-friendly government in Kyiv. None of the allegations has been accompanied by a release of the underlying evidence.

The Kremlin dismissed the U.S. allegation. This is not the first time that materials about Russia's "invasion" of Ukraine have been published in the United States, but nothing has come of them, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told the Russian state news agency Tass.

Russia has massed more than 100,000 troops around the borders of Ukraine, prompting the Biden administration to warn that Russian President Vladimir Putin could send his forces into Ukrainian territory at any moment. The White House has said the United States does not have information that Putin has

made a decision to invade but has cited evidence of advance planning by the Russian government.

The propaganda video that the Biden administration accused Russia of planning would also accuse Ukrainians of committing grave crimes against Russian-speaking people, officials said.

"The video will be released to underscore a threat to Russia's security and to underpin military operations," the senior administration official said. "This video, if released, could provide Putin the spark he needs to initiate and justify military operations against Ukraine."

The Russian government has expressed outrage over Ukraine's recent use of Bayraktar drones supplied by Turkey, a member of NATO. The senior administration official said it is possible such drones "could be included in this video as a means to implicate NATO in the attack."

US employers add 467K jobs amid omicron surge

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. employers added a burst of 467,000 jobs in January despite a wave of omicron infections that sickened millions of workers, kept many consumers at home and left businesses from restaurants to manufacturers short-staffed.

The government's report Friday also drastically revised up its estimate of job gains for November and December by a combined 709,000. It also said the unemployment rate ticked up last month from 3.9% to a still-low 4%.

The strong hiring gain for January, which was unexpected, demonstrates the eagerness of many employers to hire even as the pandemic maintains its grip on the economy. Businesses appear to have seen the omicron wave as having, at most, a temporary impact on the economy and remain confident about longer-term growth.

"Employers have assumed that omicron would be painful but short term, so they haven't changed their hiring plans," said Mathieu Stevenson, the CEO of Snagajob, a job listings site focused on hourly workers. "Demand from employers is as strong as ever."

The surprisingly healthy hiring figures will likely give the Federal Reserve leeway

to raise interest rates more quickly to cool inflation. The Fed has already indicated that it will begin raising rates in March, and it could do so again at its next meeting in May.

Dow Jones futures dipped immediately on the expectation that the Fed could accelerate its efforts to tighten credit, which would slow borrowing and spending and potentially weaken the economy.

The overall outlook for the job market remains bright, with openings near a record high, the pace of layoffs down and the unemployment rate having already reached a healthy level. The nation gained more jobs last year, adjusted for the size of the workforce, than in any year since 1978. The unemployment rate fell by nearly 3 percentage points — from 6.7% to 3.9% — the sharpest yearly decline on records. Much of that improvement represented a rebound from record job losses in 2020 that were driven by the pandemic recession.

Yet the economy's strong growth and hiring gains were accompanied by the highest inflation in four decades, magnified by brisk consumer spending on furniture, electronics, appliances and other goods and vast infusions of federal aid that has now largely expired.

Spending talks likely headed to 3rd stopgap bill

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — Congress is on course to pass a third government funding stopgap for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1, as negotiations on a 12-bill omnibus package continue at a snail's pace barely two weeks before the Feb. 18 deadline appropriators set in the last continuing resolution.

"I think we're probably headed that direction anyway, whether it's going to be a longer one or a shorter one," Senate Appropriations ranking member Richard C. Shelby said Thursday about the likelihood of another continuing resolution. "And that would depend on the leadership ... on where we are, if we are anywhere in our negotiations."

They are not anywhere at the moment.

"We haven't resolved anything yet," Shelby said.

The Alabama Republican said Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell will make the call on how long the next continuing resolution should last. House leaders would likely be involved as well, but Speaker Nancy Pelosi offered no indications of needing another stopgap Thursday.

"Right now, we are going back and forth with offers between the Democrats and Republicans and ... we're hoping to reach a deal on a topline very soon on that," the California Democrat said at her weekly news conference.

Pelosi was referring to topline spending levels for defense and nondefense. Democrats want to enact a bigger increase for nondefense, arguing funding for domestic programs has not kept up with Pentagon spending. Republicans are pushing for "parity," or equal percentage increases for both sides of the ledger.

Republicans provided Democrats with an offer Wednesday that proposed a larger increase for defense than the \$778 billion that Congress approved on a bipartisan basis in the fiscal 2022 defense authorization law. That figure, a 5% increase over fiscal 2021 funding levels, includes spending on the Pentagon and other security-related programs that fall outside the Defense Department.

Senate Appropriations Chairman Patrick J. Leahy declined to comment Thursday on Republicans' offer.

"I'll be happy to talk to them about it. I never negotiate through the press," the Vermont Democrat said.

GOP now looks to censure Cheney and Kinzinger, but not oust them

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Republican officials meeting in Utah advanced a watered-down resolution Thursday that would formally censure GOP Reps. Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for their perceived disloyalty to former President Donald Trump but not seek to expel them from the party.

The resolution's passage through a subcommittee followed hours of hand-wringing over language that initially would have called on the House Republican Conference to oust Cheney and Kinzinger, the only Republicans on the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol. The censure resolution was expected to be voted on Friday by all 168 Republican National Committee members at their winter

meeting in Salt Lake City.

"We want to send a message that we're disapproving of their conduct. It's a middle ground," RNC member Harmeet Dhillon said, noting that the vote was unanimous.

"This is not about being anti-Trump. There are many anti-Trump Republicans that are not included in this resolution. These two took a specific action to defy party leadership," she added.

The censure resolution accuses Kinzinger and Cheney of "participating in a Democrat-led persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse" and of "utilizing their past professed political affiliation to mask Democrat abuse of prosecutorial power for partisan purposes."

Northeast hit by same storm as South

Associated Press

A major winter storm spread misery from the Deep South where a tornado claimed a life and tree limbs snapped under the weight of heavy ice all the way to the nation's northeastern tip where snow and ice caused havoc for travelers on Friday. Hundreds of thousands were without electricity.

In Oklahoma, police were investigating the hit-and-run death of a 12-year-old boy who was sledding when he was hit by a vehicle.

More than a foot of snow fell in parts Pennsylvania, New York and New England on Friday but it was freezing rain and ice, accompanied by plummeting temperatures, that threatened to

cause the biggest problems for travel and electric service before the storm was expected to blow out to sea late Friday and Saturday.

"Snow is a lot easier to plow than ice," said Rick Otto, meteorologist for the National Weather Service in College Park, Md.

About 350,000 homes and businesses lost power in an area stretching from Texas to Ohio on Thursday as freezing rain and snow brought down branches and encased power lines. On Friday morning, the power outages were concentrated in Tennessee, Ohio, New York, West Virginia and Pennsylvania, according to poweroutage.us, which tracks utility reports.

Many schools and businesses

remained closed Friday in areas hit by the frigid weather because roads remained icy and temperatures hadn't risen above freezing. Flights were disrupted at major hubs in the U.S. on Friday, including airports in New York City, Boston and Dallas.

The storm represented a "highly energized system" with waves of low pressure riding along like a train from Texas, where there was snowfall and subfreezing temperatures, to Maine and the Canadian Maritimes, said Hunter Tubbs, meteorologist from the National Weather Service in Maine.

In western Alabama, a tornado on Thursday killed one person, critically injured three others and heavily damaged a home,

Hale County Emergency Management Director Russell Weedon told WBRC-TV. sTornadoes in the winter are unusual, but the atmospheric conditions needed to cause them have intensified as the planet warms, scientists say.

In Texas, the return of subfreezing weather brought heightened anxiety nearly a year after February 2021's catastrophic freeze that buckled the state's power grid for days, leading to hundreds of deaths in one of the worst blackouts in U.S. history. But Gov. Greg Abbott said Thursday's power outages were due to high winds or downed power lines, not grid failures. About 18,000 homes and businesses in Texas remained without power Friday morning.

Arbery killer's father retracts his guilty plea

Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. — One of the three men convicted of murder in the killing of Ahmaud Arbery has taken back his guilty plea ahead of their federal hate crime trial.

Greg McMichael reversed course late Thursday after the trial judge rejected the terms of an agreement federal prosecutors had reached with him and his son, Travis McMichael. That deal was met with passionate objections by Arbery's parents.

Travis McMichael was scheduled to appear in court Friday morning to announce his decision after being warned by the judge that she would not guarantee their sentence if they chose to plead guilty.

The McMichaels and a neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, were convicted of murder in a Georgia state court last fall and sentenced to life in prison. Georgia lacked a hate crimes law at the time of the killing. The U.S. Department of Justice had them indicted on charges that the three white men violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he was Black.

The McMichaels armed themselves and chased Arbery in a pickup truck after spotting the 25-year-old man running past their home just outside the port city of Brunswick on Feb. 23, 2020. Bryan joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael blasting Arbery with a

shotgun.

The father and son had planned to plead guilty to a hate crime charge after prosecutors and defense attorneys agreed to propose a 30-year sentence that would include a request to transfer the McMichaels from Georgia's state prison system to federal custody. The deal would have required the McMichaels to admit to racist motives and forfeit the right to appeal their federal sentence.

U.S. District Judge Lisa Godbey Wood rejected the deal Monday after Arbery's parents argued that conditions in federal prison wouldn't be as harsh. Wood said she ultimately denied the deal because it would have locked her into a specific sentence.

Naked man arrested after allegedly shooting on bus

Associated Press

OROVILLE, Calif. — A 21-year-old man who was acting erratically opened fire inside a Greyhound bus in Northern California, killing a 43-year-old woman and wounding four others before he was arrested, naked, inside a Walmart after getting into a fight, authorities said.

Asaahdi Coleman started shooting at passengers as they exited the Los Angeles-bound bus after it stopped at a convenience store in the city of Oroville on Wednesday

night, Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said Thursday.

"This is a horrific tragedy that was visited upon our community," he said.

Police received 911 calls shortly after 7:30 p.m. that someone was shooting inside a bus outside a convenience store in the small city of Oroville, about 65 miles north of Sacramento. Officials said they recovered a dozen 9 mm bullet casings on the bus, which had a bullet hole through the windshield. Detectives later recovered the weapon in a

nearby construction site, Honea said.

It was not immediately clear if Coleman has an attorney who can speak on his behalf. He is expected to appear in court Friday.

The wounded include a 32-year-old man who was shot multiple times and is in a critical condition, a 25-year-old pregnant woman who is in critical condition and an 11-year-old girl in stable condition. A 38-year-old man was treated for a minor injury and is expected to be released from the hospital soon, Honea said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cause of explosion, fire investigated at school

SD MILLER — Classes are canceled for the rest of the week at Miller High School where an explosion and fire caused heavy damage to the agriculture workshop.

All students and staff evacuated to nearby churches Wednesday morning. Authorities say six students and a staff member were in the shop at the time, but were not hurt.

“Something ignited, or something exploded in the ag shop,” Charlene Crosswait, Miller School District Superintendent, said. “... They’re not sure why or what really happened.”

Officials said there is smoke damage throughout the school.

Retailer to pay \$5M in gender bias case

AL BIRMINGHAM — An Ohio-based retailer sued in Alabama for sexual discrimination will pay \$5 million and provide job opportunities to women to settle the lawsuit, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission said.

The federal agency announced the agreement in a statement Wednesday about American Freight Management Co. The company’s website shows it has more than 300 closeout stores nationwide in 40 states operating as American Freight Furniture and Mattress.

The commission claimed in a lawsuit filed in 2019 that American Freight had a nationwide pattern of discriminating against women to work in its warehouse-style stores. Managers refused to hire women claiming they “can’t lift” or

would be a “distraction” to men, a statement said, or that females don’t sell furniture as well as males. The money will go to compensate women who were wrongly denied work.

Firefighter shot while responding to blaze

CA STOCKTON — A veteran firefighter was fatally shot while responding to a report of a dumpster fire and authorities arrested a suspect, officials said.

Fire Capt. Vidal “Max” Fortuna was shot before dawn in the city of Stockton and died at a hospital, Stockton Fire Chief Rick Edwards told reporters.

A 67-year-old man was detained at the scene and officers recovered a firearm, said interim Police Chief Jim Chraska. Homicide detectives are trying to determine what led up to the shooting, he said.

6 indicted in theft ring involving delivery drivers

NC EDEN, — Six people have been arrested in North Carolina for their roles in a theft ring in which package delivery drivers traded packages for drugs, police said.

WGHP-TV reported that Eden police launched an investigation after they received a tip about a delivery driver trading packages. That same tip led them to five locations throughout the city.

According to police, the driver would stop in a particular neighborhood about 10 times a day and stay for an average of 10 minutes at a time, which is longer than a typical package delivery.

Police said they identified two FedEx employees and found multiple packages at five different addresses.

In all, investigators said they recovered more than \$10,000 worth of stolen merchandise.

All six suspects are facing felonies, ranging from drug possession and receiving stolen property accessing computers to defraud and animal cruelty, police said.

Grand trees’ fate concerns residents

SC CHARLESTON — Several people on James Island in Charleston are expressing concerns over a request to remove several large trees from the island.

Eric Schultz, a city planner with the city of Charleston, says he received more than two-dozen emails from people concerned about the request.

The trees are designated as grand trees, which get certain protections from the city, WCSC-TV reported.

A multi-building self-storage facility is being planned, which prompted the request to remove the trees.

The trees are a part of the island’s infrastructure and should be protected, said James Island resident Franny Henty.

Parents of student sue fraternity over hazing

MO COLUMBIA — The parents of a Minnesota man allege in a lawsuit that he has been unresponsive and requires constant medical care since being forced to drink a bottle of vodka at a fraternity at the University of Mis-

souri.

Daniel Santulli, 19, of Eden Prairie, Minn., was found in cardiac arrest inside a car at University Hospital on Oct. 20, according to the lawsuit. His blood alcohol content was 0.486%, more than six times the legal limit for driving, the Columbia Missourian reported.

The lawsuit contends Santulli and the rest of his pledge class at Phi Gamma Delta were each forced to drink a bottle of hard liquor, given to them by their “pledge fathers.”

The lawsuit names the national Phi Gamma Delta organization and individual members of the Missouri chapter.

Ram trucks recalled to tighten wiper nuts

MI DETROIT — Stellantis is recalling nearly 202,000 Ram heavy-duty pickups and chassis cabs to tighten a loose nut that can stop the windshield wipers from working properly.

The recall covers certain Ram 2500 and 3500 pickups and some 3500, 4500 and 5500 chassis cabs, all from the 2019 and 2020 model years. Most are in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, but some are in other global markets.

The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says in documents posted Thursday that the wiper arms may loosen, possibly causing a malfunction that can reduce visibility.

That can increase the risk of a crash, although Stellantis says it knows of no crashes or injuries.

Dealers will tighten the nuts on the trucks.

— From Associated Press

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and Military News

Beijing's pandemic Olympics begin

Associated Press

The country where the coronavirus outbreak emerged two years ago launched a locked-down Winter Olympics on Friday, proudly projecting its might on the most global of stages.

The opening ceremony began just after the arrival of Chinese President Xi Jinping and International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach at the same lattice-encased National Stadium that hosted the inaugural event at the 2008 Olympics.

With the dimming of the lights, Beijing became the first city to host both winter and summer Games. And while some are staying away from the second pandemic Olympics in six months, many other world leaders planned to attend the opening ceremony. Most notable: Russian President Vladimir Putin, who met privately with Xi earlier in the day as a dangerous standoff unfolds at Russia's border with Ukraine.

The Olympics — and the opening ceremony — are always an exercise in performance for the host nation, a chance to showcase its culture, define its place in the world, flaunt its best side. That's something China in particular has been consumed with for decades.

Fourteen years ago, a Beijing opening ceremony that featured massive pyrotechnic displays and thousands of card-flipping performers set a new standard of extravagance to start an Olympics that no host since has matched. It was a fitting start to an event

often billed as China's "coming out."

Now, no matter how you view it, China has arrived — and is putting on another show at the stadium known as the Bird's Nest, built in consultation with Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei.

For Beijing, these Olympics are a confirmation of its status as world player and power. But for many outside China, particularly in the West, they have become a confirmation of what they view as the country's increasingly authoritarian turn.

The pandemic also weighs heavily on this year's Games, just as it did last summer in Tokyo. More than two years after the first COVID-19 cases were identified in China's Hubei province, nearly 6 million human beings have died and hundreds of millions more around the world have been sickened.

The host country itself claims some of the lowest rates of death and illness from the virus, in part because of sweeping lockdowns imposed by the government that were instantly apparent to anyone arriving to compete in or attend the Winter Games.

In the shadow of those issues, China puts on its show. Ahead of the official ceremony, dancers, in a variety of colorful white snowsuits, entertained the crowd, including some who boogied with Bing Dwen Dwen, the chubby panda mascot for the Games. The stadium was relatively full — though by no means at capacity — after authorities decided to allow a select group to attend events. Many got into the groove, holding up

their phones with the light shining.

Once the cauldron is lit, as with any Olympics, attention will shift Saturday — at least partially — from the geopolitical issues of the day to the athletes themselves.

All eyes turn now to whether Alpine skiing superstar Mikaela Shiffrin, who already owns three Olympic medals, can exceed sky-high expectations. How snowboard sensation Shaun White will cap off his Olympic career — and if the sport's current standard-bearer, Chloe Kim, will wow us again. And whether Russia's women will sweep the medals in figure skating.

And China is pinning its hopes on Eileen Gu, the 18-year-old, American-born freestyle skier who has chosen to compete for her mother's native country and could win three gold medals.

As they compete, the conditions imposed by Chinese authorities offer a stark contrast to the party atmosphere of the 2008 Games. Some flight attendants, immigration officials and hotel staff have been covered head-to-toe in hazmat gear, masks and goggles. There is a daily testing regimen for all attendees, followed by lengthy quarantines for all those testing positive.

Even so, there is no passing from the Olympic venues through the ever-present cordons of chain-link fence — covered in cheery messages of a "shared future together" — into the city itself, another point of divergence with the 2008 Games.

Chen, US leading way in team figure skating

Associated Press

BEIJING — It was supposed to be a foregone conclusion that Russia's powerful stable of figure skaters, including world champions in three of the four disciplines, would run away with the team gold medal at the Beijing Olympics.

Nathan Chen and the rest of the Americans must have taken exception.

The three-time world champ's winning short program set the tone for Team USA on Friday, and everyone else followed suit. Madison Hubbell and Zachary Donohue won the rhythm dance with a season-best score, and Alexa Knierim and Brandon Frazier capped the first of three days of team competition with a personal-best short program.

That left the Americans with 28 points,

two ahead of Russia and seven ahead of third-place China.

Moguls

Before her qualifying round, mogul skier Jaelin Kauf put on a pair of necklaces — one silver, the other gold — custom-made by her mom.

Then, she went out and put herself in the mix for more hardware this weekend.

The 25-year-old American got a great start on her Olympic journey, speeding through the bumps to finish third in a qualifying round Thursday, the night before the cauldron was lit in Beijing to mark the official start of these Olympics. She'll be back at it Sunday with the medals on the line.

Jakara Anthony of Australia led the way in qualifying, followed by defending

Olympic champion Perrine Laffont of France. Kauf's American teammates, Olivia Giaccio and Hannah Soar, each finished in the top 10 to guarantee their spots in the final. Nobody was completely eliminated.

Curling

American mixed doubles curlers Vicky Persinger and Chris Plys survived an extra end against Sweden for a much-needed victory in the Olympics on Friday, quickly hugged and then found two friendly faces to wave to in a far corner of the eerily quiet and mostly empty Ice Cube.

The victory moved the Americans into a tie for fifth with China and the Czech Republic in the 10-team field. After the round robin, the top four teams move into the semifinals.

Hawks end Suns' winning streak at 11

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Trae Young scored 43 points and led Atlanta's flurry of three-pointers as the surging Hawks beat Phoenix 124-115 on Thursday night to end the Suns' 11-game winning streak.

The Hawks made 20 of 41 three-pointers, including six by Young. Young's final three made it 122-113 with 37 seconds remaining. Kevin Huerter made five threes and had 19 points.

The Hawks have won eight of their last nine games, with their only loss to Toronto coming when Young was held out with a right shoulder contusion. Young will start as Atlanta's only representative in the Feb. 20 All-Star Game.

NBA-leading Phoenix dropped to 41-10, losing for the first time since Jan. 8 at home

against Miami. Devin Booker and Chris Paul were named All-Stars before the game.

Booker led the Suns with 32 points. Mikal Bridges had 24, and Paul 18.

The Suns' second winning streak of more than 10 games this season included eight games on the road. They set a franchise record with 18 consecutive wins from Oct. 30 to Dec. 2, including a 121-117 home victory over the Hawks on Nov. 6.

Clippers 111, Lakers 110: Reggie Jackson gave the Clippers the lead with a driving layup with four seconds remaining and finished with 25 points in a victory over the Lakers.

There were five lead changes in the final 1:03, including Jackson's winner. Anthony Davis, who led the Lakers with 30

points and 17 rebounds, had a chance to win it, but missed a running floater as time expired.

Marcus Morris Sr. led the Clippers with 29 points, and Serge Ibaka added 20 points and nine rebounds.

Warriors 126, Kings 114: Klay Thompson hit his first seven shots overall and initial six three-pointers and finished with 23 points and seven assists to help Golden State beat visiting Sacramento for its eighth straight victory.

Thompson finished 8-for-11 from the floor with seven threes and continues to make strides following his 2½-year comeback from surgeries on his left knee and right Achilles tendon.

Raptors 127, Bulls 120 (OT): Pascal Siakam had 25 points and 13 rebounds, Chris

Boucher added 16 points and 10 rebounds and Toronto outlasted visiting Chicago in overtime.

Fred VanVleet and OG Anunoby each scored 21 points as Toronto won its fourth straight overall and snapped a five-game losing streak against the Bulls.

Heat 112, Spurs 95: Tyler Herro scored 24 points, Bam Adebayo added 18 points and 11 rebounds and Miami beat host San Antonio to snap a three-game losing streak.

Derrick White had 22 points for San Antonio.

Timberwolves 128, Pistons 117: Anthony Edwards scored 25 points, and Karl-Anthony Towns added 21 points and 14 rebounds and visiting Minnesota beat Detroit.

Saddiq Bey had 21 points and 13 rebounds for Detroit.

Phoenix's Booker, Paul picked as All-Star reserves

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Devin Booker and Chris Paul were chosen Thursday as reserves for the NBA All-Star Game, giving the league-leading Phoenix Suns two selections.

The Utah Jazz also got a pair with Rudy Gobert and Donovan Mitchell, but the Cleveland Cavaliers had to settle for one player in the game they will host Feb. 20.

Guard Darius Garland will represent the Cavaliers but center Jarrett Allen was not among the seven players from the Eastern Conference.

The other reserves from the Western Conference were Luka Doncic of Dallas, Karl-Anthony Towns of Minnesota and Draymond Green of Golden State.

The remainder of the players from the East were Boston's Jayson Tatum, Brooklyn's James Harden, Chicago's Zach LaVine, Toronto's Fred VanVleet, Miami's Jimmy Butler and Milwau-

kee's Khris Middleton.

Reserves were voted on by the head coaches from each conference, who could not vote for players from their own teams.

The starter pool in the Eastern Conference announced last week included Brooklyn's Kevin Durant, Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo and Philadelphia's Joel Embiid in the frontcourt, along with Atlanta's Trae Young and Chicago's DeMar DeRozan.

In the West, it's LeBron James, Golden State's Stephen Curry and Andrew Wiggins, NBA MVP Nikola Jokic of Denver and Memphis guard Ja Morant.

James and Durant, as the leading vote-getters in each conference, will be captains who draft rosters for the game, though their own status for playing in it is unknown. Durant remains out with a sprained left knee ligament, while James is sidelined with a less severe knee injury.

The draft is Feb. 10. James will choose first from the pool of starters as the player who received the most total votes, while Durant has the first choice among reserves.

Green is also injured. Commissioner Adam Silver makes the selections to replace players who are unable to play.

That could open the door for yet another player from the Suns, who entered Friday play with a 41-10 record. Mikal Bridges or Deandre Ayton could be one of the players that would be considered.

As it is, the Suns will send coach Monty Williams, who will lead Team LeBron, and now Paul and Booker. It's the 12th selection for Paul, the career leader in assists in the All-Star Game, and the third in a row for Booker.

It's also the third straight appearance for both Mitchell and Gobert, the reigning Defensive Player of the Year.

Garland is the first Cavaliers All-Star since both James and Kevin Love were selected in 2018. He is the only player besides Jokic averaging at least 19 points and 7.0 assists on at least 46% shooting.

Allen was among the group of East hopefuls who fell short that included Charlotte teammates LaMelo Ball and Miles Bridges, and Miami's Tyler Herro.

Harden made it for the 10th straight time and VanVleet the first, while LaVine joins DeRozan in giving Chicago two All-Star guards.

The NBA champs also have two All-Stars, with Middleton joining Antetokounmpo for the third time.

Team Durant's coach is still to be determined. It will be the coach of the team with the best winning percentage among East teams through Sunday's games. Chicago currently tops the conference.

Arizona avenges earlier loss to UCLA

Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. — Arizona's offense, after flowing so well in the first half, hit a Bruins wall in the second. Good looks were hard to come by, every pass contested, the stretch without a field goal exceeding five minutes.

In stepped Kerr Kriisa. The Estonian guard who missed all 12 of his shots in the first go-round against UCLA, calmly sank a three-pointer with two minutes left, allowing the Wildcats space enough to pull out a hard-fought win.

Kriisa scored 16 points and hit that big three-pointer, Dalen Terry flirted with a triple-double and No. 7 Arizona grinded out a 76-66 win over No. 3 UCLA on Thursday night.

"Playing at UCLA was good, gave him some battle scars, so to speak," Arizona coach Tommy Lloyd said of Kriisa. "Now he's a

little more grizzled, a little tougher, and that's super important."

Shut down by UCLA nine days earlier, the Wildcats (18-2, 8-1 Pac-12) had a good offensive flow in the first half, building a 12-point lead that stretched to 17 in the second.

The Bruins (16-3, 8-2) turned up the defensive pressure and slowed the game in the second half to chip the lead down to three. Kriisa soon answered with a three — Arizona's only field goal in the final 7:04 — to make it 70-61 and the Wildcats made six straight free throws in the final 1:25 to win the rematch.

Jules Barnard scored 15 points for UCLA and Johnny Juzang had 12 after missing two games in COVID-19 protocols.

UCLA won the first meeting 75-59 at Pauley Pavilion on Jan. 23 by slowing the pace and shutting down one of the nation's top

offenses.

No. 2 Gonzaga 92, San Diego 62: Chet Holmgren had 23 points and 12 rebounds to lead the visiting Bulldogs past the Toreros for their 11th straight victory.

Drew Timme added 13 points and eight rebounds as six Gonzaga players scored in double figures. Andrew Nembhard had 14 points and seven assists.

Gonzaga (18-2, 7-0 West Coast Conference) has won its last 25 league games by double digits — and by an average of more than 24 points.

Jace Townsend scored 13 points off the bench for San Diego (13-10, 6-4).

No. 19 USC 58, Arizona State 53: Boogie Ellis scored 21 points, including five free throws in the final minute, to lift the visiting Trojans over the Sun Devils.

Southern California (19-3, 9-3

Pac-12) has won two in a row and five of its last six. Arizona State has lost four straight. Both teams struggled shooting until the final minutes, when they traded baskets in a white-knuckle finish.

Isaiah Mobley made a three-pointer with 1:57 left to put USC up 49-48 but Arizona State (6-13, 2-7) responded with Jalen Graham's layup while getting fouled. He made the free throw to put the Sun Devils up 51-49.

Mobley's tough basket in the post tied it 51-all with a minute left and Ellis made a pair of free throws to give USC a 53-51 lead with 46 seconds left. Ellis added three more free throws over the next few possessions and then added an exclamation point with a breakout dunk just before the buzzer.

Mobley finished with 12 points. Drew Peterson had six points and 13 rebounds.

Goodell pressured to release report about Washington

Associated Press

Former Washington Commanders employees and members of Congress pressured the NFL and Commissioner Roger Goodell on Thursday to release a report about the team's history of sexual harassment and its sexist, hostile workplace culture. They said the team and owner Dan Snyder have not been held accountable for their misdeeds.

One of the six former employees who spoke before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform also came forward with a new allegation that she was sexually harassed by Snyder himself, which Snyder denied.

Complaints about the team's treatment of female employees first surfaced in 2020. Snyder commissioned an investigation into the team's workplace environment that was taken over by

the NFL. The probe by attorney Beth Wilkinson's firm led the league to fine Washington \$10 million, and Snyder temporarily ceded day-to-day operations of the team to his wife, Tanya.

But the league did not release any details of the Wilkinson investigation's findings, and former employees who spoke Thursday noted the contrast to the way the NFL handled an investigation into allegations that quarterback Tom Brady deflated footballs.

"When the investigation of the air pressure of Tom Brady's football concludes with a 200-plus-page report, but the investigation into two decades of sexual harassment concludes with nothing, it shows the NFL's complete lack of respect towards women, their employees and for the culture of our country," said Emily Applegate, who worked in the

team's marketing department and said she was sexually harassed daily by her direct superior.

In 2020, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and widespread protests about systemic racism, the team dropped its longtime name "Redskins" amid pressure from sponsors to get rid of a moniker that was criticized for decades for being offensive to Native Americans. The franchise was known as the Washington Football Team until Wednesday, when Snyder announced its new name, the Commanders.

Tiffani Johnston, who worked for the team for eight years starting in 2002 as a cheerleader and marketing manager, told the committee on Thursday that Snyder placed his hand on her thigh without her consent at a team dinner, and that he pushed her

toward his limousine with his hand on her lower back. She had not previously disclosed those allegations to the media or investigators.

"He left his hand on the middle of my thigh until I physically removed it," Johnston said.

Describing the incident outside Snyder's limousine, she said: "The only reason Dan Snyder removed his hand from my back and stopped pushing me towards his limo was because his attorney intervened and said, 'Dan, Dan, this is a bad idea.' ... I learned that I should remove myself from Dan's grip while his attorney was distracting him."

Maloney read from a letter by another former team employee, Jason Friedman, corroborating Johnston's account. In a statement released by the Commanders, Snyder denied Johnston's allegations.