

Mask mandates continue to fall in US

The Washington Post

Mask mandates continued to fall in traditionally cautious blue states Wednesday as the number of U.S. coronavirus cases plunged, COVID-19 hospitalizations dropped below 100,000 and the government's chief medical adviser, Anthony Fauci, said the country is "on the road to approaching normality."

In New York, Illinois and Rhode Island, governors said they would soon end requirements that adults wear face coverings in public indoor places and some, including Massachusetts, promised children would no longer have to wear them in school.

"This is what we're waiting for — tremendous progress after two long years," said Gov. Kathy Hochul, D, of New York, where the mask mandate will expire Thursday, but the school requirement will remain until at least early March. "And we're not done. But this is trending in a very, very good direction, and that is why we are now approaching a new phase in this pandemic."

But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and some independent experts

remained more wary. They tried to slow the gathering momentum to move on from a crisis that has killed more than 900,000 people in the United States and disrupted life around the globe for more than two years.

"We continue to recommend masking in areas of high and substantial transmission," CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said at a White House briefing on the pandemic, where she noted the seven-day average of new infections, while plummeting, is still more than 247,000 each day. "That's much of the country right now, in public indoor settings."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Americans living in states that have pulled back their mask mandates should still follow CDC guidelines.

Taken together, Wednesday's events were another unusual moment in the once-in-a-century public health crisis: A weary public and eager elected officials largely ignoring the advice of the health professionals who had guided them to this point.

California, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Delaware also

have dropped mask mandates in recent days. In some cases, officials said local authorities would be making future decisions on when to mask.

Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said that while responsibility for the data rests with the CDC, decisions about mitigation methods involve other considerations.

"The risks and benefits of a mask mandate is not a science," she said. "There is a data and strategy element, and a political element."

A poll released by the Pew Research Center on Wednesday showed that 60% of the public has been confused by changes in public health recommendations about how to slow the coronavirus, seven points more than last summer.

"It's hard because there is definitely uncertainty," said Joshua Sharfstein, vice dean for public health practice at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "People are responding to uncertainty in different ways."

UK's Johnson: Ukraine crisis is 'dangerous moment'

Associated Press

MOSCOW — British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Thursday that the Ukraine crisis has grown into "the most dangerous moment" for Europe in decades, while his top diplomat held icy talks with her Moscow counterpart who said the Kremlin won't accept lectures from the West.

Amid the deadlock, Russian forces held sweeping maneuvers north of Ukraine in Belarus, part of a buildup of over 100,000 troops that has stoked Western fears of an invasion.

NATO has also stepped up military deployments to bolster its eastern flank, with the United States sending troops to Poland and Romania. A British Royal Air Force jet carrying 350 troops landed Thursday in Poland in a move that followed London sending anti-tank missiles to Ukraine to help boost its defenses.

"This is probably the most dangerous moment, I would say in the course of the next

few days, in what is the biggest security crisis that Europe has faced for decades, and we've got to get it right," Johnson said at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

Johnson, who later flew to Warsaw to meet with Poland's prime minister, said he believes President Vladimir Putin has not yet decided what he might do with Ukraine, adding that the West must use "sanctions and military resolve plus diplomacy."

"Poland and the U.K. won't accept a world in which a powerful neighbor can bully or attack their neighbors," he said before meeting the British soldiers in Poland.

Johnson told British broadcaster that if the Russians "want less NATO on their western borders, as it were, this is exactly the wrong way to go about it."

"We stand on the edge of a precipice and things are as dangerous as I have seen them in Europe for a very, very long time," adding that it's up to Putin "to disengage and de-es-

calate."

Speaking in Moscow, Putin said Russia was continuing a series of talks with the U.S. and its allies and is working on a reply to Western security proposals.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said he sent a letter to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeating an invitation to a series of talks on improving European security.

Lavrov set a stern tone for his talks in Moscow with U.K. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, who again warned Russia that attacking its neighbor would "have massive consequences and carry severe costs." She urged the Kremlin to abide by international agreements that commit it to respecting Ukraine's independence and sovereignty.

Lavrov rejected Western worries about the Russian troop buildup as "sheer propaganda" and noted that Moscow won't stand for lectures.

US military jets head to Europe amid situation

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Air Force is sending eight F-15 Eagle fighter jets to Poland to bolster NATO defenses amid ongoing fears of a new Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The deployment coincides with the arrival of four B-52 Stratofortress aircraft at Britain's RAF Fairford on Thursday, which U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa said is part of a long-planned and unrelated bomber rotation.

The fighter jets, which are assigned to the 48th Fighter Wing at RAF Lakenheath, England, were to arrive Thursday at Lask Air Base, Air Force officials said.

They're slated to work alongside Polish and Danish F-16 jets already flying NATO air policing missions out of Siauliai Air Base in Lithuania, USAFE-AFAFRICA said.

"The extra fighters will bolster readiness and allied deterrence and defense as Russia continues military buildup in and around Ukraine," the command said in a statement.

NATO air policing in the Baltics is a routine peacetime duty shared by NATO allies. They protect the airspace of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which don't have their own fighter jets.

The deployment of more jets to the air policing rotation comes as the United States bolsters allies in Europe, in response to the placement of more than 130,000 Russian troops near Ukraine's borders.

The fighter deployment demonstrates the solidarity of the NATO alliance, Gen. Jeff Harrigan, head of USAFE-AFAFRICA and the Allied Air Command, said in a statement.

The aircraft will work closely with a multinational air operations center based in Germany that coordinates missions across Northern Europe, USAFE-AFAFRICA said.

The B-52s from Minot Air Force Base, N.D., also are working with allies. While flying to Fairford, the aircraft met up with British Typhoon jets and Portuguese F-16s assigned to NATO's Icelandic air policing mission.

The B-52s trained with British joint terminal attack controllers, the troops responsible for coordinating airstrikes to support ground forces, USAFE-AFAFRICA said.

US troops might help in evacuation from Ukraine

By CAITLIN DOORBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. troops could be used to help evacuate American citizens from Ukraine should Russia invade the country, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday.

Kirby's comments came as roughly 850 troops with the 82nd Airborne Division from Fort Bragg, N.C., arrived in Poland in response to more than 100,000 Russian troops amassed on Ukraine's northern and eastern borders. Another 850 troops with 82nd Airborne are expected to join them in the coming days.

"[The 82nd Airborne troops] will be establishing themselves to be able to respond to multiple contingencies and to conduct whatever missions [they] are called on to do," Kirby told reporters at the Pentagon. "One of them could very well be preparing for some sort of evacuation assistance on the Polish side of that [Ukrainian] border."

He did not specify what that assistance would be. The Wall Street Journal on Wednesday, however, reported that some of the 82nd Airborne troops will set up checkpoints, tent camps and other facilities at the Polish border in preparation to receive Americans fleeing Ukraine, citing unnamed officials.

Kirby declined to confirm the report, but noted the 82nd Airborne is capable of such activities.

"They are multimission capable and they are going to be ready to do a number of contingencies, including [evacuation] ... if that's what we're called to do," he said.

The 1,700 U.S. soldiers directed to Poland are among 3,000 troops that the Pentagon announced last week it would deploy to support NATO countries near Ukraine. Also included are about 1,000 troops from an infantry Stryker squadron in Germany now on its way to Romania and 300 from the 18th Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg who are setting up a joint task force headquarters in Germany.

Camp Pendleton-based Marine charged in 'sextortion' scheme

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — A Camp Pendleton-based Marine has been charged with cyberstalking several young women, accused of demanding sexually explicit photos and videos online and then repeatedly harassing and threatening them when they refused to comply, according to a complaint filed in Los Angeles federal court Wednesday.

Johao Miguel Chavarri, 25, is accused of targeting at least 11 women who currently or previously lived in his hometown of Torrance. Investigators believe he met many of them — or their friends, family members or boyfriends — while he attended various high schools and El Camino College there.

Chavarri used the alias "Michael Frito" in his alleged online interactions with the women, posing as a married welder from New York from 2019 to 2021, according to

the complaint.

The interactions usually began with Chavarri messaging a woman through Instagram and complimenting her appearance, the complaint states. That would be followed up with a request for the woman to send him photos of her feet, and later nudes, according to investigators.

Chavarri offered to pay for the photos and asked that they be sent through Snapchat, where the women believed the photos could not be saved, the complaint says.

Many women sent photos at first but refused repeated requests to send more. That's when Chavarri grew aggressive, threatening to post the nude images online or send them to the victims' family, coworkers and friends, according to the complaint. In several cases, Chavarri said that the only way to make him stop was for the women to send more, investigators said.

US inflation in past year highest since 1982

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Inflation soared over the past year at its highest rate in four decades, hammering America's consumers, wiping out pay raises and reinforcing the Federal Reserve's decision to begin raising borrowing rates across the economy.

The Labor Department said Thursday that consumer prices jumped 7.5% last month compared with 12 months earlier, the steepest year-over-year increase since February 1982. The acceleration of prices ranged across the economy, from food and energy to apartment

rents and electricity.

When measured from December to January, inflation was 0.6%, the same as the previous month and more than economists had expected. Prices had risen 0.7% from October to November and 0.9% from September to October.

Shortages of supplies and workers, heavy doses of federal aid, ultra-low interest rates and robust consumer spending combined to send inflation leaping in the past year. And there are few signs it will slow significantly anytime soon.

Wages are rising at the fastest pace in at least 20 years. Ports

and warehouses are overwhelmed, with hundreds of workers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the nation's busiest, out sick last month. Many products and parts remain in short supply as a result.

Even when measured month to month, prices for a broad range of goods and services accelerated from December to January — and not just for items directly affected by the pandemic. Apartment rental costs rose 0.5% in January, the fastest pace in 20 years. Electricity prices surged 4.2% in January alone, the sharpest rise in 15

years, and are up 10.7% from a year earlier. Last month, household furniture and supplies rose 1.6%, the largest one-month increase on records dating to 1967.

Food costs, driven by pricier eggs, cereal and dairy products, increased 0.9% in January. New car prices, which have jumped during the pandemic because of a shortage of computer chips, were unchanged last month but are up 12.2% from a year ago. The surge in new-car prices has, in turn, accelerated used-car prices; they rose 1.5% in January and are up a dizzying 41% from a year ago.

Jobless claims decline for 3rd straight week

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits declined for the third straight week.

Jobless claims fell by 16,000 to 223,000 last week, from 239,000 the previous week, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

The four-week average for claims, which compensates for weekly volatility, declined by 2,000 to 253,250 after rising for five straight weeks as the omicron variant of the coronavirus spread, disrupting business in many parts of the U.S.

Last week, the Labor Department reported a surprising burst of hiring in January, with employers adding 467,000 jobs. It also revised its estimate for job gains in November and December upward by a combined 709,000. The unemployment rate edged up to a still-low 4% from 3.9%, as more people began looking for work, but not all of them securing jobs right away.

In total, 1.6 million Americans were collecting jobless aid the week that ended Jan. 29, essen-

tially flat from the previous week.

Even as the omicron variant spread quickly earlier this winter, employers have been eager to hire, a sign of a resilient economy. That winter spike in infections briefly tripped up the country's strong recovery from 2020's virus-caused recession, but employers appear confident in long-term growth.

Massive government spending and the vaccine rollout jump-started the economy as employers added a record 6.4 million jobs last year. The U.S. economy expanded 5.7% in 2021, growing last year at the fastest annual pace since a 7.2% surge in 1984, also coming after a recession.

An overheated U.S. economy has spawned inflation not seen in four decades, leading the Federal Reserve to ease its support for the economy. The Fed has signaled that it would begin a series of interest-rate hikes in March, reversing pandemic-era policies that have fueled hiring and growth but also stubborn inflation.

CDC proposes softer guidance regarding opioid prescriptions

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The nation's top public health agency on Thursday proposed changing — and in some instances, softening — guidelines for U.S. doctors prescribing oxycodone and other opioid painkillers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's previous guidance, issued six years ago, helped slow the kind of prescribing that ignited the worst overdose epidemic in U.S. history. But it also caused some doctors to become too quick to cut off patients taking prescription painkillers and too strict in keeping the drugs from patients who might benefit, CDC officials said.

"We began to hear how the guidelines were being misused and misapplied" said the CDC's Christopher Jones, a co-author of the draft guidance.

The proposed changes, contained in a 229-page draft update in the Federal Register, would roll back some suggested limits on the drugs. Their publication opens a 60-day public comment period. The CDC will consider comments

before finalizing the updated guidance.

The general intent is to foster individualized patient care, Jones said. It also offers more options for treating the kind of short-term, acute pain that follows surgeries or injuries.

Changes include:

- The CDC would no longer suggest trying to limit opioid treatment for acute pain to three days.

- The agency would drop the specific recommendation that doctors avoid increasing dosage to a level equivalent to 90 milligrams of morphine per day.

- The CDC would say doctors should consider having patients undergo urine tests to see if they are using other controlled and illicit drugs, but would no longer call on having such testing done annually.

- For patients receiving higher doses of opioids, the CDC would urge doctors to not abruptly halt treatment unless there are indications of a life-threatening danger. The agency would offer suggestions about how to taper patients off the drugs.

Lawmakers launch probe into Greene death

Associated Press

Declaring “no cover-up will be tolerated,” Louisiana’s top GOP lawmaker announced a bipartisan legislative investigation Thursday into the deadly 2019 arrest of Black motorist Ronald Greene, an inquiry that will examine the state’s response at “all levels,” from troopers to the governor.

House Speaker Rep. Clay Schexnayder said he launched the probe in response to an Associated Press report last month that showed Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards was informed within hours that troopers arresting Greene engaged in a “violent, lengthy struggle,” yet he kept quiet for two years as state police told a much different story to the victim’s family

and in official reports: that Greene died from a crash after a high-speed chase.

“These events have raised serious questions regarding who knew what and when,” Schexnayder said in a statement. “The actions taken that night and the cryptic decisions and statements made every step of the way since then have eroded public trust.”

Edwards, who was in the midst of a tight reelection campaign at the time of Greene’s May 2019 death near Monroe, did not speak out in detail about the case until last May, after the AP obtained and published long-withheld body-camera video showing white troopers jolting Greene with stun guns, punching him in the face and

dragging him by his ankle shackles as he wailed, “I’m your brother! I’m scared! I’m scared!”

Edwards did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday. But at a news conference last week, he said he was unaware Greene had been mistreated until September 2020 and did not speak out about the troopers’ actions — even after privately watching the footage — because of an ongoing federal civil rights investigation.

Edwards’ news conference marked the first time he characterized the actions of the troopers involved in Greene’s arrest as “racist.” And he denied doing anything to impede or delay justice.

“The implication that I knew

more and tried to cover it up is simply and categorically false,” he said.

Asked at the news conference about the prospect of a legislative probe, Edwards said: “I can’t tell you that I welcome an investigation that is an absolute witch hunt with no basis in fact. Where would that stop?”

Schexnayder said a new investigative committee made up of four Democrats and four Republicans will begin public hearings in the coming weeks, with Edwards himself among the witnesses likely to be called. Lawmakers are also expected to request a range of documents, including text messages from Edwards that he has yet to release in response to a public records request by AP.

States get go-ahead to build EV charging stations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — States are being given the go-ahead to build a nationwide network of electric vehicle charging stations that would place new or upgraded stations every 50 miles along interstate highways, part of the Biden administration’s plan to spur widespread adoption of the zero-emission cars.

The administration on Thursday announced the availability of \$5 billion in federal funds to states over five years under President Joe Biden’s infrastructure law, sketching out a vision of seamless climate-friendly car travel from coast to coast.

Under new requirements issued by the

Transportation Department, states must submit plans to the federal government and can begin construction by this fall if they focus first on highway routes, rather than neighborhoods and shopping centers, that can allow people to take their electric vehicles long distances. Each station would need to have at least four fast-charger ports, which enable drivers to fully recharge their vehicles in about an hour.

A joint office between the Transportation and Energy departments will help provide guidance to states on how to build out the network, with attention as well to serving rural and disadvantaged communities. If states

don’t fully meet requirements, they risk delays in getting approval from the Federal Highway Administration or not getting federal money at all.

“A century ago, America ushered in the modern automotive era; now America must lead the electric vehicle revolution,” said Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who will have final signoff over most aspects of the funding. “The president’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will help us win the EV race by working with states, labor, and the private sector to deploy a historic nationwide charging network that will make EV charging accessible for more Americans.”

SpaceX satellites falling out of orbit after solar storm

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — SpaceX’s newest fleet of satellites is tumbling out of orbit after being struck by a solar storm.

Up to 40 of the 49 small satellites launched last week have either reentered the atmosphere and burned up, or are on the verge of doing so, the company said in an online up-

date Tuesday night.

SpaceX said a geomagnetic storm last Friday made the atmosphere denser, which increased the drag on the Starlink satellites, effectively dooming them.

Ground controllers tried to save the compact, flat-panel satellites by putting them into a type of hibernation and flying them in a way to minimize

drag. But the atmospheric pull was too great, and the satellites failed to awaken and climb to a higher, more stable orbit, according to the company.

SpaceX still has close to 2,000 Starlink satellites orbiting Earth and providing internet service to remote corners of the world. They circle the globe more than 340 miles up.

The satellites hit by the solar

storm were in a temporary position. SpaceX deliberately launches them into this unusually low orbit so that any duds can quickly reenter the atmosphere and pose no threat to other spacecraft.

There is no danger from these newly falling satellites, either in orbit or on the ground, according to the company.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Deputy is jailed on sex charges, fired

GA DECATUR — A DeKalb County sheriff's deputy was arrested on felony charges including sex trafficking and cruelty to children, authorities said Monday.

News outlets reported that Derrick Gardner, 34, of Stone Mountain, was being held without bond in the DeKalb jail following his arrest on Sunday, Sheriff Melody Maddox said.

Gardner was charged with trafficking for sexual servitude; rape; child molestation; cruelty to children; enticing a child for indecent purposes and aggravated sexual battery.

Waste oil ignited fire at school; roof is unstable

SD MILLER — The cause of an explosion and fire at a school campus in Miller has been determined, fire officials said.

Fire Chief Steve Resel said equipment being used in the high school's agriculture shop ignited a barrel of waste oil on Feb. 2. The explosion ignited a fire in the ceiling and while the roof is still intact, fire officials say it's unstable.

Students and staff have not been allowed to return to the school building, which also houses the elementary and junior high schools. Sometime within the next two weeks, students in the schools will resume classes at nearby churches.

Police: Missing teen found in home, arrested

SC COLUMBIA — Authorities say a South

Carolina teenager who was the subject of a search after being reported missing more than a week ago has been found in Columbia after what they described as a crime spree.

A statement from the Richland County Sheriff's Department said the 15-year-old was discovered Sunday inside a home in Columbia that had been burglarized. Police encountered the teen after a homeowner home to discover the residence had been broken into.

The teen was last seen at her high school on Jan. 25, and the sheriff's department publicly reported the teenager missing days later, The State reported. She told officers she was a runaway, authorities said.

Deputies arrested the teen, who The Associated Press is not identifying because of her age, and were looking for another person believed to have stayed with her for a few days.

Habitat to reopen after 12 rays found dead

FL TAMPA — A Florida zoo is reopening a stingray habitat that was closed last spring after 12 of the rays were found dead.

ZooTampa at Lowry Park announced Monday that a reimagined state-of-the-art version of Stingray Bay will open at the end of 2022, allowing guests to once again touch and feed them, WTSP-TV reported.

Last May, Zookeepers arrived one morning to find that seven cownose rays, four southern rays and one Atlantic ray had died mysteriously in the habitat, officials said. No other animals were in the exhibit.

Tests later determined that a

supersaturation event had caused gas bubbles inside the rays, similar to the bends in human scuba divers. Officials have said the remodeled Stingray Bay will include safeguards and new procedures.

Study: Prison officers shortchanged on OT pay

MD BALTIMORE — The state of Maryland shortchanged correctional officers and other staff at the Jessup Correctional Institution by nearly a half-million dollars in wages over a two-year period, according to a U.S. Department of Labor investigation.

The report said the state paid staff members only through the end of their scheduled shifts instead of when workers actually clocked out. That effectively rounded off overtime for employees who were regularly required to stay late to deal with issues or wait for other staffers to relieve them, The Baltimore Sun reported.

The investigation covered the period between November 2018 and November 2020.

Joanna Hawkins, a spokeswoman for the Labor Department's Philadelphia regional office, said the investigation determined that Maryland owes past and present Jessup Correctional Institution correctional officers \$468,238.87.

Police unit disposes of 'degraded' explosives

VT GEORGIA — The Vermont State Police Bomb Squad on Tuesday disposed of 30 sticks of aging dynamite that were creating a potentially hazardous condition in the

town of Georgia.

The bomb squad had been notified by members of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives that a licensed individual was in possession of the degraded explosives. The explosives were possessed legally and no criminal charges were expected.

Following an operation of just over three hours, squad members used a controlled burn to safely consume 30 sticks of nitroglycerin-based dynamite that had started to display crystals of nitroglycerin on the surface, creating a potentially hazardous condition, police said.

No Moxie? Beloved soda in short supply

ME PORTLAND — Depending on whom you ask, Maine is in the midst of either a tragedy or a blessing — that's right, there's a shortage of Moxie.

Moxie, a polarizing beverage that is the state's official soft drink, is in short supply because of supply chain woes. The soda is beloved by thousands of Mainers, but it also has detractors who often say it tastes like medicine, or worse.

Coca-Cola Beverages Northeast, the local bottler of Moxie, told WGME-TV that supply chain issues have delayed its delivery of Moxie concentrate for months. The bottler said it looks forward to "being able to stock the shelves with Moxie as soon as possible."

Moxie originated in the 19th century, when it was indeed sold as a kind of medicine, replete with dubious claims of health benefits.

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Chen wins gold with near-flawless program

Associated Press

Nathan Chen remembers making the long drive with his mother from his home in Utah to Rafael Arutyunyan's training base in Southern California. He had started out in figure skating just a few years earlier, using his sister's skates and sleeping in the car to follow his Olympic dreams.

Ten years later, Chen sat alongside Arutyunyan as his scores were read and that dream realized.

With a nearly perfect free skate on the heels of a record-setting short program, the 22-year-old Yale student walked away with the gold medal at the Beijing Games on Thursday. He became the first American figure skating champion since Evan Lysacek in 2010 and capped one of the most dominant four-year runs in the history of the sport.

"My mom and I grew up quite poor. We really didn't have much money," Chen said. "She would just scrape together some dollars to try to pay Raf, and Raf obviously knew about the situation and thanks to the kindness of his heart, was able to just continue taking me in, and taking as much money as we could provide him."

Arutyunyan would try to give the money back sometimes, Chen said, "but I would always try to stick it in his pocket."

On Thursday, Chen was able to give his old coach something priceless.

"I'm happy. Just emotional," Arutyunyan said. "He made it."

Inside historic Capital Indoor Stadium in China, the nation both his parents immigrated from, Chen landed all five of his quads during his "Rocketman" program set to the soaring film score by Elton John. The statistics and data science major finished with an insurmountable total of 332.60 points, just three off his own world record and 22 points

ahead of his closest competition. Yuma Kagiyama and Shoma Uno of Japan took silver and bronze.

Chen also firmly put in the past any lingering memories of his brutal disappointment four years ago in Pyeongchang, when not even a monumental free skate could rescue his medal hopes after a disastrous short program.

"It means the world," he said. "I'm just so happy."

This gold medal might not be the last Chen takes home, either.

The Americans, who earned silver behind the Russians in the team event Monday, were awaiting confirmation from the IOC and International Skating Union that "legal issues" holding up the medal ceremony were related to reports of doping linked to their biggest star, Kamila Valieva. That could ultimately elevate the U.S. to the gold medal, a second for Chen.

"I mean, I don't really feel like I'm the most qualified person to talk about it," Chen said. "Whatever ends up being the case will be the case, but I'm still wrapped up in what I was able to do today."

The Salt Lake City native did his part for the American team with a winning short program last Friday. Vincent Zhou, who was forced to withdraw from the individual event due to a positive COVID-19 test, would also earn a gold medal for the U.S. because he performed his free skate on Sunday.

The suave, down-to-earth Chen and his Japanese rivals separated themselves from the field during their short programs, when Chen shattered the world record with a flawless performance to "La Boheme." When they took to the ice for the free skate, Kagiyama and Uno made just enough mistakes to clear the way for Chen's coronation.

Performing to "Bolero," one of the most

popular musical selections of the Beijing Games, Uno under-rotated a quad salchow and quad toe loop, then was dinged for his combination spin late in the program to finish with 293 points.

Then it was the 18-year-old Kagiyama, performing to music from the film "Gladiator," who popped his triple toe loop and triple salchow. It was still enough to score 310.05 points and earn a fist pump in the kiss-and-cry area, but not enough to add any pressure on Chen, who was calmly skating across the placid ice as Kagiyama's score was read.

With a socially distanced crowd watching Thursday afternoon in Beijing, and millions back home on late-night TV, Chen soared through his opening quad salchow. He landed four more effortless quads, his only slight bobble coming on a late combination sequence, and couldn't wipe the grin from his face as he seemingly reached for the sky.

Chen basked in the spotlight in the middle of the ice, then headed off to hear his scores, which by that point were a mere formality. Once they were read, Chen's longtime coach raised his arm like a triumphant boxer.

"He deserves it," said American Jason Brown, who finished in sixth place. "There is no one more deserving. He worked so hard. He's so unbelievably talented. I'm so proud to be a teammate."

While the spotlight shined bright as ever on Chen, it seemed to fade away for his long-time hero and Japanese rival.

Yuzuru Hanyu arrived in Beijing aiming to become the first men's skater since Gillis Grafstrom in 1928 to win a third straight Olympic gold medal. But after missing most of the past year to an ankle injury, the 27-year-old struggled through his short program on Tuesday, essentially taking him out of contention for a medal.

American Kim wraps up halfpipe gold with 94-point run

Associated Press

ZHANGJIAKOU, China — There were doubts, and falls, and fear for Chloe Kim.

Ultimately, there was a gold medal, too.

The 21-year-old American's second straight trip to the top of the Olympic podium — a trip taken Thursday after a terrible pre-contest training session that made her wonder if she really could make it — came with a timely reminder not only for her, but for everyone else paying attention to her latest domination of the halfpipe.

"It's unfair to be expected to be perfect,

and I'm not perfect in every way," Kim said.

Kim put her stamp on this one early, knocking down a — perfect? — run on her first trip down the halfpipe. She accomplished precisely what she sought on this Olympic trip.

"Spinning all four ways and mastering the sport has been a goal," said her coach, Rick Bower.

Kim came to China ready to show the world she could do it. But time after time in practice before the contest started, she struggled and fell. It explains her reaction at

the bottom of her first run, when she nailed all five jumps she tried, three of which involved jumping while riding backward.

She fell down onto the snow and put her head to the ground. She placed her hands over her mouth. Some 10 minutes later, NBC showed her at the top, still crying tears of joy. She scored a 94, and anyone who's been following this game over the eight years since she came to the halfpipe knew nobody would catch her. Queralt Castellet of Spain finished second and Sena Tomita of Japan finished third.

Valieva practices despite drug test report

Associated Press

BEIJING — Kamila Valieva, the 15-year-old Russian superstar who was expected to deliver her nation its third straight Olympic gold medal in women's figure skating, practiced as usual on Thursday, hours after reports surfaced that she had tested positive for a banned substance.

Valieva tested positive for the heart medication before the Beijing Games, the Russian newspaper RBC reported.

The sample was reportedly obtained before Valieva won the European championship last month in Estonia, a performance that solidified her status as the leader of Russia's "quad squad" of elite women's figure skaters.

It's unclear if Russia is appealing or fighting the result, though her light-hearted appearance at her regularly scheduled practice implies that the federation isn't accepting any finding that would eliminate her.

"She is not suspended," Russian figure skating federation spokeswoman Olga Ermolina said, offering no further details.

The International Skating Union, the sport's governing body, said in a statement it "cannot disclose any information about any possible anti-doping rule violation."

Valieva ran through her program and skated with teammate Alexandra Trusova while getting pointers from coach Eteri Tutberidze at the practice rink. Valieva flashed a smile to one of her coaches near the end of the roughly 30-minute session, and none of the skaters took questions from reporters.

When Valieva left the media area, she gave a gesture with a fist in the air. It appeared that she responded to something inaudible that was asked by a journalist speaking to her in Russian.

A positive test could not only cost Russia the gold medal from the team competition but threaten Valieva's chance to win the individual competition. It starts Tuesday and she is the overwhelming favorite to win gold.

The drug detected, trimetazidine, is a metabolic agent that helps prevent angina attacks and treats vertigo, according to the European Union's medicines agency. It is banned by the World Anti-Doping Agency because it can help endurance and increase blood flow efficiency, both of which could help a figure skater.

It is unclear whether Valieva applied for a therapeutic use exemption or has a history of heart problems.

Russian athletes are in Beijing competing as ROC, short for Russian Olympic Committee, after the country was banned because of a massive state-sponsored doping scheme at the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov referred reporters to the International Olympic Committee.

The IOC and Switzerland-based International Testing Agency, which oversees the Olympic drug testing program, have declined to comment on the case.

On Thursday, IOC spokesman Mark Adams said it would not be appropriate to talk of an ongoing legal case or "all sorts of speculation that I have also seen overnight."

The case is more complicated because minors have protection within the World Anti-Doping Code from being identified.

The International Skating Union can also take out athletes with interim bans if they test positive at its events, or in samples it gets before Jan. 27, when the ITA took over the Olympic anti-doping program. The ISU also has not commented.

If any athlete and team is disqualified or had results nullified, an appeal is likely, which could further delay the medals presentation.

Robertson's two tip-ins lead Stars past Predators

Associated Press

DALLAS — Jason Robertson tipped in shots from John Klingberg twice on the power play, Luke Glendening scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period and the Dallas Stars beat the Nashville Predators 4-3 on Wednesday night.

Roope Hintz had his team-leading 21st goal in the opener of a crucial stretch of eight consecutive games against Central Division opponents for the playoff-chasing Stars. Jake Oettinger stopped 20 shots.

The division rivals were playing for the first time since the All-Star break, which came with both on a roll. Dallas has now won six of eight, while Nashville lost for the second time in six games.

Matt Duchene scored his 22nd for the Predators, who erased one-goal deficits with

each of their goals. Eeli Tolvanen and Yakov Trenin also scored for Nashville. All-Star Roman Josi had two assists. Juuse Saros had 23 saves.

Blackhawks 4, Oilers 1: Alex DeBrincat had a goal and two assists as visiting Chicago scored on its first two shots of the game and beat Edmonton.

Brandon Hagel, Dylan Strome and Kirby Dach also scored for the Blackhawks, who snapped a three-game losing streak. Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 40 shots — the fourth time this season he's had at least that many.

Leon Draisaitl scored for the Oilers, who have lost two in a row and have just three wins in their last 11 at home. Mike Smith had 26 saves.

Red Wings 6, Flyers 3: Pius Suter and Robby Fabbri scored goals and defenseman Marc

Staal made the save of the game to help visiting Detroit beat Philadelphia.

Dylan Larkin, Lucas Raymond, Givani Smith and Vladislav Namestnikov also scored for the Red Wings, and Morris Seider had two assists. Alex Nedeljkovic had 21 saves.

Flames 6, Golden Knights 0: Mikael Backlund had a goal and three assists and Jacob Markstrom stopped 28 shots for his league-leading eighth shutout for host Calgary.

Andrew Mangiapane had two goals, Matthew Tkachuk added a goal and an assist, and Johnny Gaudreau and Elias Lindholm also scored to help the Flames win for the sixth time in seven games. Calgary moved one point behind Los Angeles and Anaheim for second place in the Pacific Division with the Flames holding four games in

hand on the Kings and five on the Ducks.

Coyotes 5, Kraken 2: Karel Vejmelka made 34 saves and Nick Schmaltz scored twice for visiting Arizona.

Phil Kessel and Anton Stralman both scored as Arizona built a 3-1 lead, and Alex Galchenyuk added an empty-net goal with 1:37 left after Seattle pulled to 3-2. The Coyotes rebounded from a lopsided loss in Vancouver a night earlier to knock off Seattle for the second time this season.

Islanders 6, Canucks 3: Anders Lee and Casey Cizikas each had a goal and an assist and visiting New York beat Vancouver.

Matt Martin, Matthew Barzal, Brock Nelson and Zach Parise also scored for the Islanders, and Cal Clutterbuck had two assists. Ilya Sorokin had 34 saves.

Bulls hand Hornets 6th straight loss

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — DeMar DeRozan scored 36 points, Nikola Vucevic added 18 points, 15 rebounds and eight assists, and the Chicago Bulls handed the Charlotte Hornets their sixth consecutive loss, 121-109 on Wednesday night.

Zach LaVine chipped in with 27 points for the Bulls (34-21), who pulled within one game of the Eastern Conference-leading Miami Heat.

It was DeRozan's fourth straight 30-point game and he has averaged 37.5 points over that span.

DeRozan even heard "MVP! MVP!" chants in the second half from a small but vocal contingent of Chicago fans at the Spectrum Center in Charlotte.

"I'm just trying to finish this thing off going into the (All-Star) break," DeRozan said. "I understand how critical these games are. It's a big opportunity for us to take advantage of these last few games. That's been my mindset."

LaMelo Ball had 33 points and nine rebounds for Charlotte, which continued to struggle with its three-point shooting and made just 13 of 43. During their six-game losing streak, the Hornets are shooting 27.9% (66-for-236) from beyond the arc.

Charlotte (28-28) has lost its last six games by an average of 11.8 points and wrapped up a homestand with an 0-4 record to fall to ninth place in the conference.

Jazz 111, Warriors 85: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 23 points and Donovan Mitchell had 14 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists as host Utah snapped Golden State's nine-game winning streak.

Hassan Whiteside added nine points, 17 rebounds and seven blocks for the Jazz, who nearly held the Warriors to their lowest shooting percentage this season until a garbage-time hot streak helped them finish at 36%.

Mitchell fell just short of Utah's first triple-double since Carlos Boozer did it 14 years ago.

Utah is still without Rudy Gobert, who has missed eight games with a calf strain. But the Jazz dominated the paint on both ends of the court.

Jordan Poole led Golden State with 18 points and Stephen Curry had 16 in the Warriors' most lopsided loss this season.

Golden State was also shorthanded. Klay Thompson, Andre Iguodala and James Wiseman were sidelined with injuries.

Trail Blazers 107, Lakers 105: Arnerne Simons scored 29 points and host Portland snapped a six-game losing streak with a victory over Los Angeles.

Jusuf Nurkic added 19 points and 12 rebounds for the Trail Blazers, who kept it close through the first three quarters before rallying in the fourth — despite a roster depleted by a flurry of recent trades.

LeBron James had 30 points for the Lak-

ers, who didn't have Russell Westbrook because of lower back tightness. It was the first game the former NBA MVP had missed this season.

Kings 132, Timberwolves 119: Harrison Barnes scored 30 points, Domantas Sabonis had 22 points and 14 rebounds in his Sacramento debut in a win over visiting Minnesota.

De'Aaron Fox added 27 points and eight rebounds to help the Kings win in their first game since making a six-player trade with Indiana.

Cavaliers 105, Spurs 92: Darius Garland scored 27 points in his return from a back injury and Caris LeVert added 11 in his debut with his new team, leading Cleveland over San Antonio in its last home game before hosting the All-Star Game.

Garland, who missed the past four games with a sore lower back, showed why he was selected as an All-Star for the first time. He made 12 of 15 shots, added six assists, five rebounds and got Cleveland's offense back on track.

Raptors 117, Thunder 98: Pascal Siakam had 27 points and 16 rebounds, Fred VanVleet made six three-pointers and added 21 points, and Toronto rolled at Oklahoma City for its seventh straight victory.

Siakam started quickly en route to a 13-for-17 shooting performance. He had 15 points on 7-for-8 shooting in the first nine minutes of play.

Mustangs rally to stun No. 6 Cougars

Associated Press

DALLAS — Kendrick Davis scored 22 points and Marcus Weathers added 20 as SMU rallied from a 15-point deficit in the second half to stun No. 6 Houston 85-83 on Wednesday night.

Davis sank two free throws with 40.6 seconds remaining to break an 81-all tie. Michael Weathers hit the second of two free throws with 24.1 seconds left for a three-point lead. The Cougars had a chance to tie it at the end when Kyler Edwards heaved the ball toward the basket from near midcourt with two seconds left and was fouled by Emmanuel Bandoumel.

Edwards hit the first free throw but missed the second. He hit his third shot off the rim and Houston was called for a lane violation.

Michael Weathers added 17 points, including 14 in the second half, for the Mustangs (17-7, 8-2 American Athletic Conference), who moved within a game of the first-place Cougars (20-3, 9-1). SMU is 12-0 at home this season.

Oklahoma 70, No. 9 Texas Tech 55: Umoja Gibson scored a season-high 30 points and the host Sooners beat the Red Raiders.

Gibson shot 8-for-11 on three-

pointers to help Oklahoma (14-10, 4-7 Big 12) stop a three-game skid and halt Texas Tech's three-game winning streak.

No. 10 Baylor 75, Kansas State 60: Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua scored 21 points on 8-for-9 shooting as the visiting Bears beat the Wildcats.

James Akinjo added 15 points for Baylor (20-4, 8-3 Big 12).

Rutgers 66, No. 16 Ohio State 64: Geo Baker had 25 points, including the go-ahead free throws with 18.8 seconds left, and the host Scarlet Knights scored the final 10 points to win.

No. 19 Tennessee 72, Mis-

issippi State 63: Josiah-Jordan James and Kennedy Chandler each had 18 points and the visiting Vols outscored the Bulldogs 11-2 in the final three minutes.

Seton Hall 73, No. 25 Xavier 71: Jared Rhoden scored 25 points to lead the host Pirates.

Boston University 75, Army 74: Sukhmail Mathon's layup and free throw with one second on the clock lifted the host Terriers.

The Black Knights (13-12, 7-6 Patriot), who trailed by nine points in the second half, led 74-69 with 2:20 remaining after a three-pointer by Jalen Rucker.