

NATO eyes security in Black Sea region

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and other NATO defense ministers are slated to review plans for increasing allied troop numbers in southeastern Europe, the alliance's top official said Friday.

Among the moves on the table is the creation of a multinational battlegroup to be stationed in the Black Sea region, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said during a stop in Romania, which would be one of the host countries under the proposal.

NATO defense leaders will meet in Brussels for two days of talks beginning Wednesday. They will review various plans for reinforcing the alliance's eastern flank, Stoltenberg said.

The meeting comes amid growing con-

cerns about Russia's military buildup around Ukraine and the potential for a new large-scale war there.

"The number of Russian troops is going up, and the warning time (for an attack) is going down," Stoltenberg said.

On Friday, Stoltenberg said he had visited with U.S. troops from the Vilseck, Germany-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment who deployed earlier this week to Romania's Mihail Kogalniceanu military base, which serves as a hub for U.S. forces rotating through the country.

About 1,000 U.S. soldiers have shifted from Germany to Romania as part of an effort to shore up defenses closer to Russia. In all, the U.S. now has close to 2,000 troops in Romania on a rotational basis.

Adding a NATO battlegroup could supplement force strength in southeastern Europe

in a way that would be similar to postures in the Baltic states and Poland, Stoltenberg said.

Stoltenberg said France has already volunteered to lead a battlegroup in Romania. He didn't spell out what other countries could see similar battlegroups, but Bulgaria is one possibility.

A final decision on the size, scope and locations of the new battlegroups is expected to be made in the spring, he said.

Stoltenberg also met with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis. During a news conference, Iohannis reiterated Romania's long-standing view that NATO needs to shore up defenses in southeastern Europe.

"A more consistent presence of U.S. and other allies in the Black Sea region is needed," Iohannis said.

UK official in Moscow addresses Ukraine tensions

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Britain's defense secretary visited Moscow on Friday in another effort to ease tensions over a possible invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which held massive war games near its neighbor and insisted that the highly strained relations were "not at our fault."

Ben Wallace's trip came a day after British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss also held talks in Moscow, urging Russia to pull back over 100,000 troops near Ukraine and warning that attacking its neighbor would "have massive consequences and carry severe costs."

Russia says it has no plans to invade but wants the West to keep Ukraine and other former Soviet countries out of NATO. It also wants NATO to refrain from deploying weapons there and to roll back alliance forces from Eastern Europe — demands flatly rejected by the West.

Speaking at the start of his talks with Wallace, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu noted that "the military-political situation in Europe is growing increasingly tense, and not at our fault."

He noted that shipments of weapons to Ukraine by the U.S., Britain and other allies have contributed to the tensions. He also

pointed to the recent deployment of British soldiers to Ukraine and inquired why they were sent and how long they will stay.

Speaking to reporters after the talks, Wallace noted that the anti-tank missiles that Britain sent to Ukraine were defensive tactical weapons that do not pose a threat to any neighbor unless it invades.

He said a number of British troops were deployed to Ukraine to help train its military to use the British weapons and will leave fairly soon after they accomplish that mission.

Wallace described the talks as "constructive and frank," noting his Russian counterpart's assurances that Moscow has no intention to attack Ukraine. But he also emphasized that the concentration of Russian troops near Ukrainian territory is clearly "beyond normal exercising."

He warned again that a Russian invasion would have "tragic consequences" and emphasized the need to maintain contacts between military forces to prevent incidents.

In an interview Thursday with NBC News, President Joe Biden repeated his warning that any Americans still in Ukraine should leave as soon as possible.

"It's not like we're dealing with a terrorist organization. We're dealing with one of the

largest armies in the world. It's a very different situation, and things could go crazy quickly," he said.

Biden planned to hold a call with trans-Atlantic leaders later in the day.

Asked whether there were any scenarios that would prompt him to send U.S. troops to Ukraine to rescue Americans, the president said: "There's not. That's a world war when Americans and Russia start shooting at one another."

Speaking Friday on a visit to Australia, Secretary of State Antony Blinken did not detail the reasons behind the latest State Department's security alert urging all American citizens to leave Ukraine.

"We're in a window when an invasion could begin at any time and, to be clear, that includes during the Olympics," Blinken added. The Olympic Games are scheduled to end Feb. 20.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba played down the U.S. advice to Americans to leave, saying that Washington has made similar calls before. He noted that the situation remains volatile.

Continuing its military buildup near Ukraine, Russia has moved six amphibious assault vessels into the Black Sea, augmenting its capability to land marines on the coast.

Biden splitting \$7B frozen Afghan funds

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden signed an executive order on Friday to create a pathway to split \$7 billion in Afghan assets frozen in the U.S. to fund humanitarian relief in Afghanistan and to create a trust fund to compensate Sept. 11 victims.

The order calls for U.S. financial institutions to facilitate access to \$3.5 billion for Afghan relief and basic needs. The other \$3.5 billion would remain in the United States and be used to fund payments from ongoing litigation by U.S. victims of terrorism.

International funding to Afghanistan was suspended and billions of dollars of the country's assets abroad, mostly in the United States, were frozen after the Taliban took control in August as the U.S. military withdrew.

The White House said in a statement that the order "is designed to provide a path for the funds to reach the people of Afghanistan, while keeping them out of the hands of the Taliban and malicious actors."

Afghanistan's economy has been in a tailspin since the Taliban takeover. Nearly 80% of the previous Afghan government's budget came from the international communi-

ty. That money, now cut off, financed hospitals, schools, factories and government ministries. Desperation for such basic necessities has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as health care shortages, drought and malnutrition.

The lack of funding has led to increased poverty, and aid groups have warned of a looming humanitarian catastrophe. State employees, from doctors to teachers and administrative civil servants, haven't been paid in months. Banks, meanwhile, have restricted how much money account holders can withdraw.

The official noted that U.S. courts where 9/11 victims have filed claims against the Taliban will also have to take action for the victims to be compensated. It will ultimately be up to the courts to decide if the victims have a claim to the \$3.5 billion the administration is allotting for them through the trust fund, according to two senior administration officials who briefed reporters ahead of the signing.

The Biden administration is still working through details of setting up the trust fund, an effort the White House says will likely take months to sort out.

Because victims have ongoing legal

claims on the \$7 billion in the U.S. banking system, the courts would have to sign off before the money for humanitarian assistance could be released to Afghanistan, the officials said.

The U.S. launched the war in Afghanistan more than 20 years ago after then-Taliban leader Mullah Omar refused to hand over al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden following the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Bin Laden, who was born in Saudi Arabia but had his citizenship revoked, relocated to Afghanistan after being expelled from Sudan in 1996.

Taliban political spokesman Mohammad Naeem criticized the U.S. for not releasing all the funds to Afghanistan.

"Stealing the blocked funds of Afghan nation by the United States of America and its seizure shows the lowest level of humanity ... of a country and a nation," Naeem tweeted.

The Biden administration pushed back against criticism that all \$7 billion — largely derived from donations by the U.S. and other nations to Afghanistan — should be released to Afghanistan, noting that the 9/11 claimants under the U.S. legal system have a right to have their day in court.

US forces won't fetch Americans stuck in Ukraine

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Americans in Ukraine shouldn't count on 82nd Airborne paratroopers in nearby Poland to come to the rescue if a Russian invasion occurs.

That was the message Thursday from President Joe Biden, who ruled out evacuation missions should the Kremlin's threatening military buildup near Ukraine turn into a new incursion.

"That's a world war. When Americans and Russians start shooting one another, we're in a very different world," Biden said during an NBC News interview.

He added that American citizens should leave immedi-

ately.

"We're dealing with one of the largest armies in the world," he said. "This is a very different situation, and things could go crazy quickly."

On Friday, hours after Biden's comments, the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine issued a statement saying that Russian military action "may commence at any time and without warning."

"The U.S. government will not be able to evacuate U.S. citizens in the event of Russian military action anywhere in Ukraine," the statement said.

The travel alert comes as paratroopers with the 82nd Airborne continue to arrive in eastern Poland and take up po-

sitions near the Ukrainian border.

On Wednesday, Pentagon chief spokesman John Kirby said the troops could be called on to help evacuate American citizens from Ukraine.

Given Biden's directive, the option of sending U.S. forces into Ukraine for evacuations is off the table, at least for now.

One of their missions "could very well be preparing for some sort of evacuation assistance on the Polish side of that border," Kirby said.

Kirby did not detail what form that assistance could take, but The Wall Street Journal, citing unnamed officials, reported Wednesday that the plan could involve checkpoints

and tent camps at the border to receive fleeing Americans.

For weeks, the U.S. government has been urging Americans to leave Ukraine, which is now surrounded by an estimated 130,000 Russian troops on its northern, eastern and southern borders.

In response to Russia's buildup, the Pentagon has sent 1,700 extra soldiers to Poland and 300 to Germany, and also repositioned 1,000 soldiers from the Germany-based 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Romania.

The moves are aimed at reassuring and demonstrating resolve to NATO allies worried about Russian aggression in Eastern Europe.

Biden narrowing candidates for court

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden appears to be narrowing his list of candidates for the Supreme Court, saying he's looking at "about four people" as Democrats who met with him Thursday say he wants a "persuasive" nominee in the mold of retiring Justice Stephen Breyer.

In an interview Thursday, Biden told NBC the White House is doing a "deep dive" on the candidates to see if there's anything in their background that would disqualify them. Biden has said his nominee will be a Black woman and he will decide by the end of February.

The comments came just before a meeting with 10 Democratic members of the Senate Judiciary Committee in which he told the senators, many of them his

former colleagues, that he wants to nominate a woman in the mold of Breyer who will not only be able to persuade her colleagues but will write "stirring, compelling, lasting arguments," according to Delaware Sen. Chris Coons, one of the committee members who attended the meeting.

The senators said Biden would meet soon with candidates. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said the meeting was half "friendly and light" and half serious as the president prepares to make history by nominating the first Black woman for the court.

The weeklong vetting process, and a gradual narrowing of candidates, is routine for Supreme Court nominations. In

his NBC interview, Biden did not mention the names of any of the candidates but said he believes his eventual pick will get Republican votes.

"I'm not looking to make an ideological choice here," he said, adding that he wants someone like Breyer, "with an open mind, who understands the Constitution, interprets it in a way that is consistent with the mainstream interpretation of the Constitution."

Biden and Senate Democrats have said they want his nominee to have significant Republican support. But despite the Democrats' lofty bipartisan goals, it's unclear if Biden's nominee will be able to win any GOP votes. Most Senate Republicans have consistently voted against his lower court nominees.

Trump using endorsements to influence GOP

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump spent months persuading a longtime ally to challenge Georgia's sitting Republican governor. This week, he gave David Perdue another boost, orchestrating a deal for a rival to drop his campaign and instead run for Congress with the former president's coveted endorsement.

"He said, 'Listen, you have an opportunity. (What you could) do in the state level, you can do for this country,'" the candidate, Vernon Jones, said in an interview recalling his conversation with Trump. "And obvi-

ously he said I would have his support, because we share the same agenda."

Trump is attempting a similar strategy in other states. In North Carolina, for instance, he has pressed another Senate candidate to drop out and run for the House. He is shopping for a Senate hopeful to back in New Hampshire. In Ohio's Republican Senate race, one contender withdrew last week after Trump made clear he would not offer his endorsement.

The moves are a reminder of the power Trump wields over the GOP on the eve of what could be a tumultuous primary

season. The former president remains the most popular figure with the GOP base as he considers another bid for the White House. He isn't hesitating to leverage that pull to exact revenge on his enemies and further bend the party to his will.

In the process, some Republicans say, Trump is injecting chaos into an election year that should otherwise be favorable to the GOP.

"It's a mess. It's just a mess," said Chip Lake, a GOP strategist in Georgia who warned that Trump endorsing so many candidates meant some were likely

to lose.

"Everyone in Georgia wants to have Trump's endorsement, but Trump's endorsement is certainly being stretched thin," he said, "We all know that when you throw stuff on the wall only some of it sticks."

A Trump spokesman did not respond to questions, but Trump has continued to tout his endorsement record as a measure of his political strength.

"We're endorsing some fantastic people," he said in a call-in interview to Fox Business Network on Tuesday morning. "We want people that are going to put America first."

Abortions fell in 1st month of Texas limits

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Abortions in Texas fell by 60% in the first month under the most restrictive abortion law in the U.S. in decades, according to new figures that for the first time reveal a full accounting of the immediate impact.

The nearly 2,200 abortions reported by Texas providers in September came after a new law took effect that bans the procedure once cardiac activity is detected,

usually around six weeks of pregnancy and without exceptions in cases of rape or incest. The figures were released this month by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission.

In August, there had been more than 5,400 abortions statewide. State health officials said more data will be released on a monthly basis.

The numbers offer a fuller picture of the sharp drop in patients that Texas doc-

tors have described in their clinics over the past five months, during which time courts have repeatedly allowed the restrictions to stay in place. It has left some Texas patients traveling hundreds of miles to clinics in neighboring states or farther, causing a backlog of appointments in those places.

Planned Parenthood issued a statement calling the numbers "the very beginning of the devastating impact" of the law.

Congress approves sex harassment bill

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Congress on Thursday gave final approval to legislation guaranteeing that people who experience sexual harassment at work can seek recourse in the courts, a milestone for the #MeToo movement that prompted a national reckoning on the way sexual misconduct claims are handled.

The measure, which is expected to be signed by President Joe Biden, bars employment contracts from forcing people to settle sexual assault or harassment cases through arbitration rather than in court, a process that often benefits

employers and keeps misconduct allegations from becoming public.

Significantly, the bill is retroactive, nullifying that language in contracts nationwide and opening the door for people who had been bound by it to take legal action.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, who has spearheaded the effort, called it “one of the most significant workplace reforms in American history.”

Gillibrand, D-N.Y., said the arbitration process is secretive and biased and denies people a basic constitutional right: a day in court.

“No longer will survivors of sexual assault or harassment in the workplace come forward and be told that they are legally forbidden to sue their employer because somewhere buried in their employment contracts was this forced arbitration clause,” she said.

Gillibrand, who has focused on combating sexual harassment and sexual misconduct in the military, originally introduced the legislation in 2017 with Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

The legislation had uncommonly broad, bipartisan support in a divided Congress.

That allowed the bill to be passed in the Senate by unanimous consent — a procedure almost never used for significant legislation, especially one affecting tens of millions of Americans. The House passed the bill this week on a robust bipartisan basis in a 335-97 vote.

“If you could ever say any legislation was long overdue, this is it,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. He called it “almost medieval” to force victims of harassment and assault “to shut up, not tell anyone about it and not seek justice.”

Cage-free chicken campaign surprising success

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — Without much fuss and even less public attention, the nation’s egg producers are in the midst of a multibillion-dollar shift to cage-free eggs that is dramatically changing the lives of millions of hens in response to new laws and demands from restaurant chains.

In a decade, the percentage of hens in cage-free housing has soared from 4% in 2010 to 28% in 2020, and that figure is expected to more than double to about 70% in the next four years.

The change marks one of the animal welfare movement’s biggest successes after years of battles with the food industry. The transition has cost billions of dollars for producers who initially resisted calls for more humane treatment of chickens but have since fully embraced the new reality. Pushed by voter initiatives in California and other states as well as pressure from fast food restaurant chains and major grocers, egg producers are freeing chickens from cages and letting them move throughout hen houses.

“What we producers failed to realize early on was that the people funding all the animal rights activist groups, they were our customers. And at the end of the day, we have to listen to our customers,” said Marcus Rust, the CEO of Indiana-based Rose Acre Farms, the nation’s second-largest egg producer.

Josh Balk, vice president for farm animal protection at the Humane Society of the United States, noted the abruptness of the about face. This is “an entire industry that at one point fought tooth and nail not to make any changes,” he said.

Australia declares koalas an endangered species

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — Koalas were declared officially endangered Friday in eastern Australia as they fall prey to disease, lost habitat and other threats.

Federal Environment Minister Sussan Ley downgraded their conservation status across the country’s east coast, in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, on a recommendation by the government’s Threatened Species Scientific Committee. Earlier they had been listed as a vulnerable species.

Many koalas in Australia suffer from chlamydia. Koala populations in New South Wales have fallen by 33-61% since 2001. In 2020, a parliamentary inquiry

warned the species might become extinct before 2050 without urgent intervention.

The number of koalas in Queensland has fallen by half since 2001 due to drought, fires and deforestation. Some are killed in attacks by dogs, or run over on roads.

“Koalas have gone from no-listing to vulnerable to endangered within a decade. That is a shockingly fast decline,” said Stuart Blanch, a conservation scientist with the World Wildlife Fund-Australia.

“Today’s decision is welcome, but it won’t stop koalas from sliding toward extinction unless it’s accompanied by stronger laws and landholder incentives to protect their forest homes,” he said.

The Australian Koala Foundation estimates that there are less than 100,000 koalas left in the wild, possibly as few as 43,000. Summer brush fires in 2019-20 killed at least 6,400 of the animals, as rescuers worked desperately to save them and treat their injuries.

“There have been many pressures on the koala. The Black Summer fires, of course, was a tipping point. But we know the koala is vulnerable to climate change and to disease,” Ley told reporters at the Blue Mountains on Friday.

Ley said vaccines to prevent and treat chlamydia among koalas, the use of drones to study them and restoration of habitats are ways to the government is helping protect the vulnerable marsupial.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Firefighters training on lake rescue teens

MO MARYLAND HEIGHTS — A training session on water rescues turned real for firefighters in suburban St. Louis this week when the crews sprang into action to save two teenagers.

Maryland Heights Fire Protection District crews were wrapping up training Tuesday on Creve Coeur Lake when they spotted two people running across it, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. As they watched, the ice covering the lake broke and the pair fell through.

The training firefighters, along with Pattonville and Creve Coeur firefighters, quickly scrambled to pull the two teens from the icy lake within minutes.

Roofer falls through a skylight to his death

IN COLUMBUS — A roofer fell through a skylight to his death at a southern Indiana Sam's Club, authorities said Wednesday.

Pedro Gonzalez, 42, of West Chester, Ohio, was working for an Ohio-based industrial roofing company when he fell through the skylight at the store in Columbus about 2:20 p.m. Tuesday, authorities told The Republic.

Bartholomew County Coroner Clayton Nolting released Gonzalez's identity Wednesday. Nolting estimated the fall from the skylight was 40 to 50 feet.

Investigators believe the worker was standing up near the skylight and slipped, falling through the skylight. An investi-

gation is continuing.

X-rays indicated the worker suffered multiple fractures to the skull and cervical spine in the incident, Nolting's office said. Gonzalez was pronounced dead at the scene.

Beach house falls into ocean, prompts warning

NC MANTEO — A beach house on the North Carolina coast collapsed into the Atlantic Ocean, prompting the National Park Service to issue a warning to visitors on Wednesday for debris.

The warning for the Cape Hatteras National Seashore targeted the beach and the ocean between the villages of Rodanthe and Salvo, a news release said. The bulk of the debris is at the site of the collapsed house in Rodanthe. But the news release said smaller amounts of debris have been spotted as far south as off-road vehicle ramp 23, more than 7 miles away.

The park service is communicating with Dare County to coordinate removal of the house and all related debris on the beach, according to the news release.

WAVY reports it was a five-bedroom cottage just south of the Hatteras Island Fishing Pier that was built in 1980. The station reports another oceanfront home disappeared overnight from the beach at Rodanthe in 2020.

Universities split \$11 million scholarship gift

KS WICHITA — Wichita State University and the University of Kansas

will split an \$11 million gift to provide full-ride scholarships to undergraduates, according to a news release issued Wednesday.

Both schools will get \$5.5 million from the estate of Richard "Dick" Smith, who founded the Range Oil Company in Wichita in 1964.

At Wichita State, undergraduates in any field of study will be eligible for the new scholarships.

At Kansas, the money will be divided between students studying geology and general scholarships.

9 taken into custody after school fight

DE NEWARK — Police took nine students into custody after a large fight at a Delaware high school Tuesday and discovered one student had a stun gun, officials said.

The school resource officer at Glasgow High School in Newark learned of a fight in a stairwell involving eight students around 11:30 a.m., Delaware State Police said in a news release.

The officer and staffers broke up the initial fight but the group broke into four groups and continued fighting throughout the hallways, police said. Officers responded to the school and helped take nine students into custody. One student had lacerations to the face after the fight, police said. One 17-year-old girl from Bear had a stun gun, police said.

Seven students were issued criminal summons for disorderly conduct. One 17-year-old girl was charged with rioting, disorderly conduct, carrying a con-

cealed dangerous instrument and menacing. Another 17-year-old girl was charged with rioting, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. They were released on \$2,200 unsecured bond.

Police: Man caused his own arm wound

ME LEWISTON — A man discovered stumbling downtown with a severed arm is believed to have inflicted the injury himself, police said.

The victim was injured with a band saw used to cut meat, but didn't work at the market where the saw was located, police said.

"At this point, after speaking with numerous witnesses and reviewing hours of both store and neighboring footage, it appears the incident was self-inflicted," police said in a statement this week.

Public works crews who were in the area saved the man's life by applying a tourniquet while waiting for first responders to arrive, police said.

City votes to ban flavored tobacco

ME PORTLAND — Maine's largest city is banning the sale of flavored tobacco products.

The Portland City Council voted unanimously to approve the ban, which takes effect on June 1. That's the day a similar new law takes effect in Bangor.

More than 300 communities around the country have restricted sale of the products, the Portland Press Herald reported.

— From Associated Press

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White 'not sad' about 4th place finish

Associated Press

ZHANGJIAKOU, China — Shaun White bent down to one knee, set his snowboard on its edge and raised his left hand toward the sky.

The crowd, never huge to begin with in this pandemic era, had thinned to four or five dozen — most of them knew him, or loved him, or had been around over the past 20 years to watch him take snowboarding on a wild ride to the Olympics and beyond.

They all cheered. Moments later, after working his way through a few more people who only wanted to touch him, Friday's fourth-place finisher, his Olympic crown now worn by Ayumu Hirano of Japan, rode away from the halfpipe for the very last time.

"I'm not sad," he had insisted about 30 minutes earlier, even though the tears, the stifled sobs and the stories he told spoke of the melancholy of knowing this party really is over.

On a bittersweet day of riding that ultimately ended in a fall, White came one spot shy of a medal. It was nothing to be ashamed of considering the massive tricks going down in what surpassed the previous Olympics as the most progressive halfpipe contest ever.

It also was not exactly what he had hoped for. It certainly was not the fourth

gold medal that, frankly, had felt like a dream given what he's been through over the past few months.

It would be easy to say that was beside the point. But White was the man who, almost singlehandedly, made it cool to ride for big bucks and big trophies and Olympic medals in a sport that took decades to come to terms with that worldview.

"I'm proud of what I put down," White said. "And I can't help but think if I would have hit the podium in third, I would have wanted second. And if I'd have gotten second, I would've wanted first. It's just the fighter in me, and I'm always hoping for more."

In his final run, he was trying to pull off the same five tricks that won him his third gold medal, four years ago in Pyeongchang.

He's 35 now, not 31.

"My leg, in my run, was just giving out on me, and I'm thinking, 'Wow, of all the days to have this happen,' " he said.

On his third and final run of the day, the final run of his career, he fell on the second of two straight double-cork, 1440-degree jumps he was trying to execute.

Four years ago in South Korea, he pulled it off for the first time ever and finished first. This fourth-place finish, thanks to an earlier run that was a tad less difficult, matched the other just-off-the-podium re-

sult he got during his frenzied trip to the Sochi Games in 2014.

"Three out of five. Not bad," White said of his Olympic record.

In so many ways, watching what went down on a cold, crisp, practically perfect day for riding — with two-thirds of the halfpipe enveloped in shade and the sun beaming down on the rest — felt more like a victory than a loss for the world's most famous rider, and for snowboarding overall.

"I hoped I could send a message to him by showing my ride to him," said Hirano, the 23-year-old whose triple-cork jump set the standard and earned the narrow win over Scotty James of Australia.

White didn't have the triple, and without it, even had this winter gone smoothly — which it did not — he knew he'd be fighting uphill if anyone put it down as part of a complete run here.

But this was hardly a day to talk about what White couldn't do.

"The overall riding was incredible," Donna Burton Carpenter, whose late husband, Jake, invented the modern-day snowboard and helped bring the sport to the mountain and into the mainstream, told The Associated Press in a phone interview. "I think, on some level, we were all rooting for Shaun today. He gave it his best shot and went out like a champion."

US women's hockey survives scare from Czechs

Associated Press

BEIJING — Once the sense of relief subsided following an all-too-tense quarterfinal victory for the defending Olympic women's hockey champions, United States coach Joel Johnson's focus turned to just how far other countries have come.

In a tournament that appeared destined for a gold-medal showdown between the global powers of U.S. and Canada, the upstart Czech Republic nearly crashed the party. So much for the lack of parity in the sport that some have been griping about after the U.S. and Canada rolled through their first three preliminary round games out-

scoring opponents by a combined margin of 47-5.

"When I read some articles from people who have no clue what they should be talking about, this game is a good reminder for them," Johnson said following the Americans' 4-1 victory against the Czechs. "There might be some scores that look a little lopsided, but this is exactly what everybody knows, that people are making strides."

The Americans overcame a 1-0 deficit and avoided what would have been a stunning upset by scoring three times in the third period.

Lee Stecklein scored the go-ahead goal 6:49 into the third period when her shot

from the right point deflected in off the stick of Czech forward Michaela Pejzlova. Hilary Knight had a goal and assist, Savannah Harmon also scored and Kendall Coyne Schofield added an empty-netter. Alex Cavallini stopped five shots, while getting plenty of help from her shot-blocking defenders.

The second-seeded Americans, who have never failed to reach the semifinal stage since women's hockey was introduced at the 1998 Nagano Olympics, next play on Monday against an opponent that won't be determined until the quarterfinal results Saturday.

Canada, the tournament's

top seed, beat Sweden 11-0 in another quarterfinal.

The Czech Republic's women's hockey program took 23 years to qualify for its first Olympics, but it took only five games in Beijing to show why the country could be a fixture for years to come after finishing second in Group B.

While being outshot 59-6, credit the Czechs for a rope-a-dope style of defense, which kept most of the Americans' chances to the perimeter. Goalie Klara Peslarova then covered up most of the mistakes by stopping 55 shots, including the first 22 she faced.

Suns beat Bucks in NBA Finals rematch

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Deandre Ayton scored 27 points, Mikal Bridges added 18 and the Phoenix Suns beat Milwaukee 131-107 on Thursday night in a rematch of last year's NBA Finals won by the Bucks.

The game was tight throughout most of the first half but the Suns slowly pulled away in the third quarter, building a 97-77 advantage going into the fourth. Ayton had an efficient night, shooting 12-for-14 from the field on a variety of post moves and jumpers.

Chris Paul added 17 points and 19 assists for his 500th career double-double. He's just the fourth guard in NBA history to accomplish that feat.

The Bucks had a four-game winning streak snapped. Jrue Holiday and Khris Middleton led the Bucks with 21 points apiece. Giannis Antetokounmpo had 18 points, eight assists and seven rebounds.

Mavericks 112, Clippers 105: Luka Doncic scored 28 of

his career-high 51 points in the first quarter, and Dallas beat visiting Los Angeles.

The 22-year-old star's three-point frenzy, part of the highest-scoring quarter in the NBA this season, came a few hours after the Mavericks traded Kristaps Porzingis to Washington. The pairing of Doncic and Porzingis never developed quite like the club wanted in two-plus seasons.

Despite Doncic hitting seven of his first nine threes in the highest-scoring quarter of his career, regular season or playoffs, the Clippers were within two points in the fourth quarter. But that just set up Doncic for his first 50-point game.

Wizards 113, Nets 112: Kyle Kuzma had 15 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists for his first career triple-double, leading injury- and trade-depleted host Washington over Kyrie Irving and equally in-flux Brooklyn.

Irving scored 31 points as the only star on the Nets' makeshift

roster as Brooklyn's season-worst skid extended to 10 games.

Earlier Thursday, the Nets broke up their Big Three, sending James Harden and Paul Millsap to the Philadelphia 76ers for disgruntled point guard Ben Simmons, Seth Curry, Andre Drummond and draft picks. Brooklyn had hoped Harden, Irving and Kevin Durant could win a championship, but the trio played only 16 games together.

Knicks 116, Warriors 114: Julius Randle scored 28 points and matched his season high of 16 rebounds, and New York earned its first win in four tries during its West Coast trip, holding off host Golden State.

Stephen Curry scored 19 of his 35 points in the first half and dished out 10 assists in Golden State's second straight loss, just the third time all season the Warriors have dropped consecutive contests.

Heat 112, Pelicans 97: Bam Adebayo had 29 points and 10

rebounds, Jimmy Butler also scored 29, and Miami beat New Orleans to tarnish CJ McCollum's debut with his new team.

Kyle Lowry added 14 points, 11 assists and 11 rebounds to help Miami win its fourth straight while snapping New Orleans' four-game winning streak.

Grizzlies 132, Pistons 107: Ja Morant scored 23 points, Steven Adams added 17 points and Memphis routed host Detroit.

Desmond Bane added 22 points for the Grizzlies, who have won four straight and seven of eight.

The Pistons have gone 2-12 since winning five of their first eight games of 2022.

Raptors 139, Rockets 120: Gary Trent Jr. scored a season-high 42 points, and visiting Toronto pushed its season-high winning streak to eight games with a victory over Houston.

Toronto's winning streak is the longest active one in the NBA and the loss extended Houston's skid to four games.

Michigan ends No. 3 Purdue's 6-game winning streak

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Hunter Dickinson had 22 points to lead Michigan in a lopsided 82-58 win over No. 3 Purdue on Thursday night.

Eli Brooks had 16 points, Moussa Diabate had 15 points — all but two in the first half — and Caleb Houstan added 14 for the Wolverines (13-9, 7-5 Big Ten).

Jaden Ivey had 18 points, Trevion Williams had 12 and Zach Eden scored 10 for Purdue (21-4, 10-4), which saw its six-game winning streak snapped.

Purdue, which went into the game shooting 50.8% from the floor, shot only 44%. Michigan made 53% of its shots from the floor. The Boilermakers had been making 41% of their three-pointers but made only four as a team in 17 attempts. Dickinson

had four three-pointers for Michigan.

No. 2 Gonzaga 89, Pacific 51: Rasir Bolton scored 20 points, Drew Timme added 13 points and 10 rebounds, and the host Bulldogs beat the Tigers for their 13th consecutive victory.

Julian Strawther had 15 points and Chet Holmgren scored 14 for Gonzaga (20-2, 9-0 West Coast Conference), which has won 65 consecutive home games — the longest streak in the nation.

No. 4 Arizona 72, Washington State 60: Benedict Mathurin scored 20 points, Azuolas Tubelis added 15, and the visiting Wildcats pulled away in the second half for a win over the Cougars.

Arizona (21-2, 11-1 Pac-12) won its fifth straight and is off to

its best start since the 2016-17 season. The Wildcats have won 16 of the last 17 against Washington State and used a big surge midway through the second half after the Cougars threatened.

No. 7 Duke 82, Clemson 64: Trevor Keels tied his career high with 25 points and added a career-best 11 rebounds as the visiting Blue Devils bounced back from their loss to Virginia with a victory over the Tigers.

Duke (20-4, 10-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) reached 20 wins for the first time since 2020 and the 36th time in coach Mike Krzyzewski's 42 seasons.

No. 22 Saint Mary's 86, San Diego 57: Logan Johnson had 16 points, a career-high nine rebounds and five steals, and the host Gaels bounced back from

their first loss in a month to beat the Toreros.

Tommy Kuhse scored 13 points and Alex Ducas added 12 for Saint Mary's (20-5, 8-2 West Coast Conference). Augustus Marciulionis, son of Hall of Famer Sarunas Marciulionis, scored nine.

No. 23 Murray State 73, Tennessee State 62: KJ Williams led his team with a career-high 39 points and the visiting Racers extended their winning streak to 13 by rallying past the Tigers.

Murray State (23-2, 13-0 Ohio Valley Conference) trailed for most of the first 30 minutes before mounting a comeback. Williams, a 6-foot-10 junior forward, made 15 of 22 from the floor and 7 of 9 from the foul line.

Hurricanes shut out depleted Bruins

Associated Press

BOSTON — Sebastian Aho scored twice, Frederik Andersen made 34 saves and the Carolina Hurricanes shut out the short-handed Boston Bruins 6-0 on Thursday night.

Andrei Svechnikov had a goal and two assists, Vincent Trocheck, Brett Pesce and Jordan Staal also scored, and Teuvo Teravainen added three assists to help Carolina complete a season sweep of Boston with another rout. The Hurricanes outscored the Bruins 10-1 in the first two games before capping the sweep with their second shutout in the three meetings.

The Bruins lost for the third time in four games and were already reeling from the loss of three top players — their leading scorer, team captain and winningest goalie in franchise history — over the previous 48 hours.

Brad Marchand served the first of a six-game suspension for going after Pittsburgh goalie

Tristan Jarry late in a 4-2 loss Tuesday night. Bruins captain Patrice Bergeron missed the game with a head injury sustained against the Penguins. And on Wednesday, goalie Tuukka Rask announced he was ending his bid to return from off-season hip surgery and retiring.

Linus Ullmark started in net and allowed six goals on 43 shots.

Avalanche 3, Lightning 2: Gabriel Landeskog, Devon Toews and Valeri Nichushkin scored for host Colorado, which withstood a last-minute blitz by Tampa Bay in a matchup between two of the NHL's top teams.

Returning from the All-Star break, the Avalanche won for the 11th time in 12 games overall and extended their franchise-record home points streak to 22 games (20-0-2).

Capitals 5, Canadiens 2: Joe Snively had his first career two-goal game and visiting Wash-

ington spoiled the debut of Montreal interim coach Martin St. Louis.

Connor McMichael and Carl Hagelin also scored and Tom Wilson added an empty-netter to help the Capitals (26-14-9) snap a two-game skid. Ilya Samsonov made 42 saves.

Penguins 2, Senators 0: Casey DeSmith made 26 saves in outdueling former teammate Matt Murray as visiting Pittsburgh blanked Ottawa for its fifth straight road win.

Jeff Carter scored in the second period. Sidney Crosby blocked a late shot in close before assisting on Bryan Rust's empty-net goal in the waning seconds. The Penguins are 8-1-3 in their last 12 games.

Devils 7, Blues 4: Nico Hischier and Yegor Sharangovich triggered a five-goal flurry in the third period and Jon Gillies made 27 saves as visiting New Jersey rallied to beat St. Louis.

The Devils, playing their third game in four nights, won

back-to-back road games for the first time this season after defeating Montreal on Tuesday.

Blue Jackets 4, Sabres 3 (OT): Jakub Voracek scored 16 seconds into overtime to give visiting Columbus a comeback win over Buffalo.

Oliver Bjorkstrand, Jack Roslovic and Brendan Gaunce also had goals for the Blue Jackets, who won for the fourth time in five games and second straight on a five-game road trip. Elvis Merzlikins made 24 saves.

Flames 5, Maple Leafs 2: Led by Noah Hanifin's goal and assist, host Calgary scored four times in the second period to beat Toronto for its fifth victory in a row.

Andrew Mangiapane, Oliver Kyllington, Elias Lindholm and Rasmus Andersson also scored for the Flames (25-13-6), who are heating up on home ice as well. They've won five consecutive games at the Scotiabank Saddledome, outscoring the opposition 24-4.

Packers QB Rodgers earns fourth MVP award

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A four-time MVP, three Super Bowl players and the beginning of a brother act.

The Associated Press 2021 NFL awards had a bit of everything, starting with Aaron Rodgers becoming the fifth player to repeat as Most Valuable Player.

"It is kind of surreal sitting here," Rodgers said. "Being a four-time MVP is crazy.

"They're all different. They're all unique in their own ways and this one feels the sweetest."

Despite the turmoil of training camp and the headlines created by the Green Bay quarterback when he misled the public on his COVID-19 vaccination, Rodgers' play on the field was superb. So much so that he earned 39 votes from a nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the NFL. Not even one of Tom Brady's best performances — in his final season — came close in the MVP race, with the Buccaneers quarterback getting 10

votes.

Only Peyton Manning with five MVP awards is ahead of Rodgers, who said no announcement on his future in the NFL is imminent.

Rams wide receiver Cooper Kupp got one vote for MVP, but he easily took top offensive player honors. Kupp and Cincinnati quarterback Joe Burrow (Comeback Player) and wideout Ja'Marr Chase (Offensive Rookie) will face off in Sunday's Super Bowl.

Kupp led the NFL with 138 receptions, 1,829 yards receiving and 15 touchdown catches while leading Los Angeles to the NFC West title. A unanimous All-Pro, he received 35 votes, far in front of Colts running back Jonathan Taylor (10).

Kupp was so productive while working with a new passer, Matthew Stafford, that he had 14 games with at least 10 catches, no games with fewer than seven. Though he isn't the fastest nor strongest wideout, he had 100 yards receiving in 11 contests.

Steelers edge rusher T.J. Watt, a unanimous All-Pro like Kupp, led the NFL in sacks with a record-tying 22½. He joined brother J.J., a three-time winner of Defensive Player of the Year.

Dallas linebacker Micah Parsons, who came in second to Watt for top defensive player — but 37 votes behind — was a unanimous choice for Defensive Rookie of the Year. Parsons not only helped the Cowboys turn around their defensive performance this season, but he was so dynamic he helped coordinator Dan Quinn win the assistant coach award.

In the Bengals' worst-to-first AFC North rise, and then deep into the playoffs, Chase was a major contributor. The fifth overall pick in last April's draft despite skipping the 2020 season at LSU due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chase had 81 receptions for 1,455 yards with 13 touchdowns.

Mike Vrabel's work with the Titans earned him Coach of the Year.