

Ukraine asks separatists for cease-fire

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia extended military drills near Ukraine's northern borders Sunday amid increased fears that two days of sustained shelling along the contact line between soldiers and Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine could spark an invasion. Ukraine's president appealed for a cease-fire.

The exercises were originally set to end Sunday and brought a sizable contingent of Russian forces to Belarus. The presence of the Russian troops raised concern that they could be used to sweep down on the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, a city of about 3 million people less than a three-hour drive away.

Western leaders warned that Russia was poised to attack its neighbor, which is surrounded on three sides by about 150,000 Russian soldiers, warplanes and equipment. Russia held nuclear drills Saturday

as well as the conventional exercises in Belarus, and has ongoing naval drills off the coast in the Black Sea.

The United States and many European countries have charged for months that Russia is trying to create pretexts to invade. They have threatened massive, immediate sanctions if it does.

A top European Union official, Charles Michel, said: "The big question remains: Does the Kremlin want dialogue?"

"We cannot forever offer an olive branch while Russia conducts missile tests and continues to amass troops," said Michel, the president of the European Council.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called Saturday on Russian President Vladimir Putin to choose a place where the two leaders could meet to try to resolve the crisis and on Sunday appealed for a cease-fire on Twitter. Russia has denied plans to

invade, but the Kremlin had not responded to Zelenskyy's offer to meet by Sunday. It was Belarus — not Russia — that announced the extension of the drills.

NATO has estimated there are 30,000 Russian troops in Belarus.

After a call with French President Emmanuel Macron, Putin blamed Ukraine for the escalation at the contact line and NATO for "pumping modern weapons and ammunition" into Ukraine. The Kremlin statement mentioned a cease-fire only in passing and made no mention of Zelenskyy's call for a meeting.

Officials in the separatist territories claimed Ukrainian forces launched several artillery attacks and that two civilians were killed during an unsuccessful assault on a village near the Russian border. Ukraine's military said two soldiers died in firing from the separatist side on Saturday.

Families of troops killed at Kabul airport question probe

The Washington Post

As the sun faded on another anxious, adrenalized day, Kareem Nikoui, a 20-year-old U.S. Marine from Southern California, balanced on top of a concrete traffic barrier and scanned the crowd. Thousands of Afghans had packed into the fetid, open-air corridor outside Kabul's airport, desperate to flee Taliban rule and undeterred by warnings of a suicide bomber in the area.

Nearly 8,000 miles away, Nikoui's mother, Shana Chappell, had a sinking feeling. She was aware the hastily orchestrated evacuation was growing increasingly perilous and worried about how her son would process the reality that thousands would be left behind.

It was Aug. 26. At 5:36 p.m. local time, the bomber struck, detonating a vest packed with explosives and ball bearings.

Nikoui, standing barely 30 feet away, was killed, along with 12 other U.S. service members and an estimated 170 Afghans.

The attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport's Abbey Gate was not preventable, the Pentagon determined, though critics of commanders' decision-making have said the entry point was especially vulnerable and questioned why it was left open. The Americans were due to close the gate for the final time within a matter of minutes.

For Chappell and some of the other families of those killed that day, the release this month of a U.S. military investigation examining the attack has caused them to question whether Defense Department officials distorted its findings. In interviews, they castigated the Biden administration for placing their loved ones — most,

like Nikoui, barely 20 years old — into such a dangerous situation and said that the Marines who survived the explosion told them they endured a firefight afterward — claims the Pentagon has dismissed.

The release of a 2,000-page investigative report — first obtained by The Washington Post through a Freedom of Information Act request — has revealed stark new detail about the operation.

On Feb. 4, U.S. military officials announced at the Pentagon that, after an extensive investigation, they had determined that a single suicide bomb with "disturbing lethality" caused the staggering loss of life.

But according to their full report, survivors of the attack described a more complex situation. In witness statements, Marines recalled coming under

and returning gunfire, sprinting to the blast site to treat survivors with tourniquets and clotting agents, and struggling to find enough refrigerated storage for all of the remains.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in a statement that "we grieve alongside these Gold Star families," while backing the inquiry's principal conclusions.

"We do not pretend to understand the depths of their grief, but we respect their concerns and their unique perspectives about the loss of their loved ones," he said. "To that end, we stand by the investigation's finding that the attack on Abbey Gate could not have been prevented and that the decision made by commanders on the ground to keep the gate open was consistent with their mission of trying to evacuate as many people as possible."

Thrift Savings Plan to offer more services

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

The federal government's Thrift Savings Plan is catching up with services already provided by similar firms in the civilian sector: a mobile app, online chat assistance and electronic funds transfer.

Starting this summer, the savings plan — the equivalent of a 401(k) retirement account for military members and civilian workers — will also offer mutual funds for the first time in addition to its stable of index funds.

The changes, announced by the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board on Jan. 26, come in response to requests for these services by plan members seeking greater investment flexibility, board spokeswoman Kim Weaver told Stars and Stripes by email on Thursday.

Mutual funds invest in a chang-

ing list of securities chosen by an investment manager and will try to outperform the stock market. By contrast, index funds track specific securities in stock market indexes, such as the Standard & Poor's 500, Dow Jones and Nasdaq, that are seeking market-average returns, according to NerdWallet.com.

"The mobile app will allow participants to do all the transactions they can do on the website," Weaver said. "Including having access to a chat feature that can then connect the participant to a live contact center representative."

To invest in mutual funds through the thrift plan, account holders must hold a \$40,000 minimum balance and make a minimum investment of \$10,000 into mutual funds.

The Thrift Savings Plan became available to uniformed ser-

vice members in 2001, and since December the average account balance is around \$40,000.

Participants in the Thrift Savings Plan will pay a \$55 annual access fee and a \$95 service fee to participate in mutual funds. A baseline, per-trade fee of \$28.75 will vary depending on the fund.

"The number of mutual funds offered in the mutual fund window will be in the thousands," Weaver said. "The TSP is requiring that the mutual fund window offer the lowest cost share class of each mutual fund to its participants. The number of funds will fluctuate as mutual funds join or leave the mutual fund window platform."

The current administration fees for the index and Lifecycle funds average at 0.043 cents per \$1,000 invested, according to Weaver.

"The mutual funds offered

through the mutual fund window will have their own costs associated with them," she said. "They are not controlled by the TSP, but rather by the mutual fund owner."

Thrift Savings Plan members should do research before moving money over to the mutual funds, or at least wait until a year has passed to review fund performances, says financial counselor Felix De Jesus at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

"As of now with the current way the indexes are and the Lifecycle funds, they really answer to most people's desires in building wealth, because they are moderate plans," De Jesus told Stars and Stripes by phone Thursday. "Now mutual funds, depending what mutual fund it's focused on, in what industry in the stock market, it can fluctuate in volatility and earnings."

Okinawa-based Marine gets 2 years for cannabis delivery

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — An Okinawa-based Marine was sentenced to two years in a Japanese prison Friday for attempting to smuggle cannabis products into the country and two others pleaded guilty to similar charges in an unrelated case.

Cpl. Nicholas Garner received two years in prison with hard labor and a \$4,344 fine in Naha District Court, a court spokeswoman told Stars and Stripes by phone Friday. It's customary in Japan for officials to speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

Garner pleaded guilty Jan. 28 to two counts of violating Japan's Cannabis Control and Customs Act, the Okinawa Times reported at the time. He was indicted on Nov. 25 after 2 liters, or a half-gallon, of cannabis liquid and nearly

a quarter-pound of cannabis arrived at Camp Foster on June 7.

That package was sent from Nevada on May 26 by unidentified individuals, the court spokeswoman said. Garner reportedly had a small amount of cannabis flower and liquid on him when security forces arrested him June 3 at his Foster residence.

In a separate case, Cpl. Deshane Fox and Lance Cpl. Alfred Johnson pleaded guilty Thursday in district court to violating one count of the control act. Prosecutors are seeking three years imprisonment and about \$4,000 in fines for both men. Fox and Johnson were charged Nov. 9 after customs officials intercepted a package April 21 at the Camp Kinser post office with just over a quarter-pound of marijuana and about 4½ grams of cannabis liquid inside, the spokeswoman said.

Emanuel welcomes new US citizens aboard USS Reagan

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Rahm Emanuel's first trip to the U.S. Navy's largest installation in Japan left little time for catching his breath.

The new U.S. ambassador to Japan arrived by train Thursday at Yokosuka-chuo Station after the morning commuter rush and met immediately with the city's mayor, Katsuaki Kamiji. The two spoke briefly and exchanged gifts: Chicago-distilled whiskey and a book on Yokosuka's history.

Then Emanuel met with high-ranking officers and presided over a naturalization ceremony aboard the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

"When our two countries stay strong together and work together like our armed forces do, it's an

example of what our ideals can bring in the sense of collaboration and cooperation," Emanuel, a former Chicago mayor, told Kamiji.

The Yokosuka mayor was welcoming. "Once again, I would like to express that I'm very honored by your visit to Yokosuka, and I'm deeply grateful to have this opportunity to meet you for the first time ever," he said.

Emanuel next stopped for a headquarters reception at Naval Forces Japan, then toured the Ronald Reagan prior to the ceremony where 17 sailors and military spouses from 11 countries were sworn in as U.S. citizens. Previous ceremonies took place elsewhere on base, but Emanuel's visit presented a unique opportunity, a spokeswoman for the carrier, Lt. Cmdr. Dawn Stankus, told Stars and Stripes on Thursday.

Fed members back interest rate hikes

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Federal Reserve should start raising interest rates next month to help rein in too-high inflation, Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said Friday. But he added that the rate hikes may not have to begin with as big a bang as some have suggested.

With inflation at its hottest level in two generations, the Fed is widely expected to seek to cool the economy by raising its benchmark short-term interest rate from its record low of nearly zero, where it's been throughout the pandemic. The only question has been how big and how quickly it will move, because an overly aggressive approach could choke the economy while too much caution could let inflation spiral further.

"Personally, I don't see any compelling argument to take a big step at the beginning," Williams said following an event at New Jersey City University to discuss the economy and interest rates.

Williams, who is vice chair of the committee that sets the Fed's interest-rate policy, said

he sees a March increase as the beginning of a "steadily moving" process to get interest rates closer to a level where they are no longer stimulating the economy. He also said he expects inflation to fall from its current level due to a confluence of factors, including the Fed's moves and hoped-for improvements in supply-chain bottlenecks. Last month, inflation hit 7.5% in January compared with a year ago.

Williams' comments were echoed by other Fed officials, who spoke at a policy conference in New York. This support for a steady approach to rate hikes contrasted with previous statements by Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard, who said the Fed should consider a half-point rate hike in one of its upcoming meetings, twice its normal increase. His comments shook Wall Street, which had been expecting a slower liftoff of rates.

Lael Brainard, a member of the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors, said that she expected the Fed would, at its next meeting in March, "initiate a series of rate increases."

Brainard is close to Fed Chair Jerome Po-

well and has been nominated for vice chair, the Fed's No. 2 position.

Krishna Guha, an analyst at investment bank Evercore ISI, said that Brainard "broadly endorsed" Wall Street's expectations that the Fed will hike rates six times this year.

She also said the Fed would soon turn to reducing its huge, \$9 trillion balance sheet, which has more than doubled during the pandemic because of the Fed's bond purchases.

Charles Evans, president of the Chicago Fed, said Friday that the Fed needed to adjust its low-interest rate policies, which he called "wrong-footed." But he also suggested that the central bank may not have to sharply raise rates this year.

Evans also said that high prices have mostly been caused by disruptions to supply chains and other factors stemming from the pandemic, and will likely fade partly on their own.

And given the economy's current strength, the Fed's moves shouldn't slow hiring as much as interest rate hikes have in the past, Evans added.

Calif. bill would have citizens enforce weapons ban like Texas on abortion

Associated Press

DEL MAR, Calif. — California Gov. Gavin Newsom proposed Friday letting private citizens in his state sue gun makers to stop them from selling assault weapons just as Texas lets its residents sue abortion providers to stop the procedures, then essentially dared the U.S. Supreme Court to treat both issues the same.

At a news conference in the coastal town of Del Mar, north of San Diego, Newsom said he thought the Texas law was wrong and the Supreme Court's decision in December to let it stay in effect while it's appealed was "absurd" and "outrageous."

"But they opened up the door. They set the tone, tenor, the rules. And either we can be on the defense complaining about it or we can play by those rules. We are going to play by those rules," Newsom said. He later added: "We'll see how principled the U.S. Supreme Court is."

The unique Texas law, approved last year, bans all abortions once a fetal heartbeat is detected, usually around the sixth week of pregnancy. The law does not let the government enforce it. Instead, private citizens can sue

abortion providers or anyone who "aids and abets" the procedure.

The theory is that because the government can't enforce the law, then abortion advocates can't sue the state to block it. That makes it much harder to challenge in court.

A bill in the California Legislature unveiled Friday would do the same thing. But instead of abortion providers, it would let people sue gun makers and others who sell, make or distribute assault-style guns in the state.

California has banned the sale and manufacture of many assault-style guns for decades. But last year, U.S. District Judge Roger Benitez overturned that law, ruling it was unconstitutional while comparing an AR-15 rifle to a Swiss Army knife as "good for both home and battle." The ruling incensed Newsom and he vowed to fight back.

California's proposed legislation is exactly what gun rights groups feared would happen if the Supreme Court allowed the Texas law to stay in effect. That's why the Firearms Policy Coalition opposed that law at the high court. The group said Friday it would go to court if necessary to block the California proposal.

Iran wants vow US won't leave new nuke deal

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iranian lawmakers have urged President Ebrahim Raisi to obtain guarantees from the U.S. and three European countries that they won't withdraw from the nuclear agreement being renegotiated in Vienna, an Iranian news agency reported Sunday.

Negotiators from Iran and the remaining parties to the agreement — Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China — are working to restore life to the 2015 accord, which granted Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. The U.S. has participated indirectly in the talks because it withdrew from the deal in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump. President Joe Biden has signaled that he wants to rejoin the deal.

The Iranian parliament's news agency, ICANA, reported that 250 lawmakers in a statement urged Raisi and his negotiating team to obtain guarantees from the U.S., Britain, France and Germany that they won't withdraw after the deal is renegotiated.

Estimated 73% of US immune to omicron variant

Associated Press

The omicron wave that assaulted the United States this winter also bolstered its defenses, leaving enough protection against the coronavirus that future spikes will likely require much less — if any — dramatic disruption to society.

Millions of individual Americans' immune systems now recognize the virus and are primed to fight it off if they encounter omicron, or even another variant.

About half of eligible Americans have received booster shots, there have been nearly 80 million confirmed infections overall and many more infections have never been reported. One influential model uses those factors and others to estimate that 73% of Americans are, for now, immune to omicron, the dominant variant, and that could rise to 80% by mid-March.

This will prevent or shorten new illnesses in protected people and reduce the amount of virus circulating overall, likely tamping down new waves. Hospitals will get a break from overwhelmed ICUs, experts agree.

"We have changed," said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. "We have been exposed to this virus and we know how to deal with it."

The coronavirus — the current variant or future ones that are sure to pop up — remains a dangerous germ. It is still infecting more than 130,000 Americans and killing more than 2,000 every day. Tens of millions of people remain vulnerable.

And there will be future out-

breaks. The notion of a "herd immunity" that could stop the virus has slipped away under the harsh reality of new variants, waning immunity, and the rejection of vaccines by some Americans.

But the coronavirus is no longer new. Two years ago it arrived in a nation where nobody's immune system had seen it before. The entire population — 330 million people — were immunologically naive, that is, susceptible to infection.

"I am optimistic even if we have a surge in summer, cases will go up, but hospitalizations and deaths will not," said Mokdad, who works on the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation model, which calculated the 73% figure for The Associated Press.

As mask mandates ease, workers return to offices and flights fill up, experts are trying to understand whether this return to normal can last, or if another setback is looming.

Scientists at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health estimate that about three out of four people in the United States will have been infected by omicron by the end of the surge.

"We know it's a huge proportion of the population," said Shaun Truelove, an epidemiologist and disease modeler at Johns Hopkins. "This varies a lot by location, and in some areas we expect the number infected to be closer to one in two."

That means different regions or groups of people have different level of protection — and risk.

Brits with COVID-19 soon won't need to self-isolate

Associated Press

LONDON — People with COVID-19 won't be legally required to self-isolate in England starting in the coming week, the U.K. government has announced, as part of a plan for "living with COVID" that is also likely to see testing for the coronavirus scaled back.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said ending all of the legal restrictions brought in to curb the spread of the virus will let people in the U.K. "protect ourselves without restricting our freedoms." He is expected to lay out details of the plan in Parliament on Monday.

But some of the government's scientific advisers said it was a risky move that could bring a surge in infections and weaken the country's defenses against more virulent future strains.

Wes Streeting, health spokesman for the main opposition Labour Party, accused Johnson of "declaring victory before the war is over."

Johnson's Conservative government lifted most virus restrictions in January, scrapping vaccine passports for venues and ending mask mandates in most settings apart from hospitals in England.

A combination of high vaccination rates in the U.K. and the milder omicron variant means easing restrictions didn't lead to a surge in hospitalizations and deaths. Both are falling, though the U.K. still has Europe's highest coronavirus toll after Russia, with more than 160,000 recorded deaths.

In Britain, 85% of people age 12 and up have had two vaccine doses and almost two-thirds have had a third booster shot.

Canada's rallies settle, but may echo in politics

Associated Press

TORONTO — The streets around the Canadian Parliament are quiet now. The Ottawa protesters who vowed never to give up are largely gone, chased away by policemen in riot gear. The relentless blare of truckers' horns has gone silent.

But the trucker protest, which grew until it closed a handful of Canada-U.S. border posts and shut down key parts of the capital city for weeks, could echo for years in Canadian politics and perhaps south of the border.

The protest, which was first aimed at a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers but also encompassed fury over the range of COVID-19 restrictions and hatred of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, reflected the spread of disinformation in Canada and simmering populist and right-wing anger.

While most analysts doubt the protests will mark a historic watershed in Canadian politics, it has shaken both of Canada's two major parties.

"The protest has given both the Liberals and the Conservatives a black eye," said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto.

Trudeau's Liberals look bad for allowing protesters to foment weeks of chaos in the capital city, he said, while the Conservatives look bad for championing protesters, many of them from the farthest fringes of the right.

The conservatives "have to be careful not to alienate more moderate voters, who are generally not sympathetic to the protesters or right-wing populism more generally," said Daniel Béland, a political science professor at McGill University in Montreal.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman turning 100 adds another milestone tattoo

MI ST. JOSEPH — A Michigan woman soon will celebrate a milestone birthday. How old? Look at her decorative upper arm.

Gloria Weberg has “NY NY 1922” tattooed on her left arm, the year and place of her birth.

Weberg is turning 100 on March 2, not a typical age to visit a tattoo artist. But that’s what she has done every 10 years since turning 80, The Herald-Palladium reported.

Her birth year and New York is under a goddess representing Mother Earth — added at age 80 — and among seven stars representing her children, which she added at age 90.

Reward offered in \$100K heist from gold mine

GA DAHLONEGA — A reward is being offered in hopes of finding a man who stormed into a north Georgia gold mine and made off with about \$100,000 worth of gold, cellphones, money and jewelry from the mine’s retail shop.

The man — dressed in black and armed with a gun — forced employees to turn over the loot at the Crisson Gold Mine in Dahlonega, WSB-TV reported.

People donated money for the \$10,000 reward, he said.

Police: Teenager killed during gunplay with friend

AL BESSEMER — A 15-year-old girl was fatally shot in Alabama while she and a friend were playing with a gun, authorities said.

The Jefferson County Coroner’s Office identified the vic-

tim as Janiya Simmons, AL.com reported. Lt. Christian Clemons from the Bessemer Police Department told the news outlet that the shooting happened inside the home of the suspect’s family member.

Simmons and the suspect, an 18-year-old man, were friends, Clemons said. It appeared they were playing with the gun when it discharged and hit Simmons in the chest. The high school freshman from Birmingham was pronounced dead at a hospital less than an hour later.

Police said Raukeem Cunningham has been charged with manslaughter.

Man accused of trying to open door during flight

OR PORTLAND — A Portland, Ore., man who authorities said tried to open an emergency exit door during a commercial flight from Salt Lake City to Portland made his first appearance in court.

The 31-year-old man has been charged with interfering with a flight crew and attendants for his actions on the Delta Airlines flight, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported.

FBI agent Adam T. Hoover wrote in an affidavit in support of a criminal complaint that the man was seen removing the plastic covering on an emergency exit handle and pulled on the handle with his full body weight before a flight attendant intervened.

Once the plane landed in Portland, Port of Portland police arrested him.

According to the affidavit, the man told police he tried to push the emergency exit handle so passengers would videotape

him and he’d have “the opportunity to share his thoughts on COVID-19 vaccines.”

Young girl missing since 2019 found under stairs

NY SAUGERTIES — A young girl reported missing in 2019 was found hidden under a staircase by officers searching a home in New York’s Hudson Valley, police said.

The child was found in good health in a Saugerties home about 130 miles east of Cayuga Heights, where she was reported missing in July 2019, when she was 4 years old, according to Saugerties police.

Police said they initially suspected she had been abducted by her noncustodial parents.

Officers executing a search warrant found the girl hidden with her noncustodial mother in a cold, wet, makeshift enclosure under a basement staircase.

She was turned over to her legal guardian and reunited with her older sister.

The noncustodial parents and a third person were arraigned on charges of custodial interference and endangering the welfare of a child.

Restaurant subject of probe after patrons fall ill

NV LAS VEGAS — More than 30 people who ate at a Thai restaurant in Las Vegas this year have reported getting sick, the Southern Nevada Health District said.

Health officials are investigating what led up to what they called “unusual” illnesses. Patrons of the Secret of Siam restaurant located on Centennial Center Boulevard reported in-

creased heart rates, blurred vision, disorientation, loss of consciousness, and numbness or tingling within hours of being at the restaurant.

The restaurant opened in 2019 and consistently passed inspection reports, KTNV-TV in Las Vegas has reported.

Some customers have told local news outlets they suspect their food was tainted with THC — the compound in cannabis that produces the high sensation — after seeking medical attention and testing positive for it.

Lawmakers designate mastodon as state fossil

IN INDIANAPOLIS — Indiana lawmakers have designated the American mastodon as the state’s first official fossil, advancing the proposal to the governor’s desk for final approval.

The Indiana Senate voted 39-6 to name the mastodon Indiana’s state fossil. The bill, authored by Republican Rep. Randy Frye, of Greensburg, previously passed unanimously out of the House.

The Ice Age mammal is related to modern day elephants and is already the state fossil of Michigan.

Mastodons roamed Indiana starting about 2.5 million years ago, and they became extinct about 10,500 years ago, retired Hanover College geology professor Stanley Totten told the House Natural Resources Committee earlier this month. They’re now the most common Ice Age fossil found in Indiana.

— From wire reports



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As Games end, IOC comes under scrutiny

Associated Press

Before he got out of town, the great Canadian snowboarder Mark McMorris called the Beijing Games a version of “sports prison.” He was joking — sort of — but his vision wasn’t that far off.

The cordoned-off Olympic bubble that folded up when the closing ceremony ended Sunday produced its usual collage of amazing athletes doing great things. This 17-day journey, however, has been witnessed through a sealed-off looking glass — a lens warped and sterilized by Beijing’s organizing committee with underwriting from the Chinese government.

The ultimate sponsor: the International Olympic Committee, which has been under fire for producing Games that, to many, have felt soulless while also being tainted by scandal and political posturing.

“I think that sometimes it doesn’t seem like their heart is in the right place,” the outspoken freestyle skier Gus Kenworthy said. “It feels like it’s a greed game. I mean, the Olympics are so incredible. But it’s a TV show.”

As the IOC pulls up stakes from Beijing, it has 29 months to hit the reset button and hope for a different, COVID-free and much better vibe when the Summer Games go to Paris.

The lingering question is whether, even in a more-welcoming, democratic locale, the Olympic overseers can repair their reputations to the point that people — most notably, the dwindling TV audience and the increasingly alienated throng of athletes — start to enjoy this enterprise again.

Some images they’ll have to work to forget:

■ The thousands of testers, cloaked head to toe in personal protective gear, shoving swabs down athletes’ throats day after day for their mandatory COVID-19 screenings.

■ A sobbing Belgian skeleton racer, Kim Meylemans, going to social media to beg for release from quarantine.

■ And, of course, the Russian doping scandal, all perturbingly encapsulated by the image of 15-year-old figure skater Kamila Valieva crying after her disastrous long program while her coach asked: “Why did you stop fighting?”

Syracuse pop culture professor Robert Thompson, said Valieva’s performance last Thursday was riveting television “for all the wrong reasons.”

“Surprising, weird and hyper-dramatic,” Thompson said. “Yet today, I searched the hallways in vain to find anyone who had seen it, or even heard tell of it. I’ve been paying close attention to the Olympics for 40 years, and never have I seen one surrounded by so much silence, so little buzz.”

Through last Tuesday, the Nielsen Company said prime-time viewership on NBC (which pays the lion’s share of the bills for these Games) and its streaming service, Peacock, was down 42% from a 2018 Games that didn’t do all that well, either.

The simplest explanation is to point toward the ever-increasing menu of viewing options and the time difference; this was the third straight Winter Games held in Asia.

That the IOC had to turn to authoritarian Russia, then China, for two of its last three Winter Olympics speaks to a larger problem that underscores how much less people care. Cities willing to foot the bill for the Games, then share the heat with the IOC over a years-long buildup, are harder to find these days.

With only one other choice for 2022 — Kazakhstan — the IOC decision to hand over one of its crown jewels to China came with compromises.

Beijing’s organizing committee, and, in conjunction, the Chinese government, took extreme measures to keep the COVID-19 virus, which originated inside its borders two years ago, from spreading. Because of that, these Games brought with them the looming threat of a positive test, maybe from out of the blue, that could end an athlete’s

chance for glory before it even began.

There were some beautiful moments, too, along with some others that brought out the raw emotion in a way that only the Olympics can.

Shaun White’s farewell to snowboarding after five Olympics touched hearts. Mikaela Shiffrin’s willingness to unflinchingly face her setbacks was a reminder that there’s more to be gained from these games than trips to the medals stand.

China’s favorite story might have come from Gu. The 18-year-old freeskiier made history by becoming the first winter action-sports athlete to win three medals in the same Olympics — two golds and a silver.

The fact that Gu is American and chose to compete for her mother’s homeland of China, however, made it clear that, her good intentions aside, there is no taking politics out of these Games.

In the end, no athlete’s plight told the story of the Beijing Games more viscerally than that of skater Valieva.

When the litany of Russian doping scandals started unfurling, shortly after the end of the 2014 Sochi Games, the IOC had the advantage of the knowing that the reports, the meetings, the terrible headlines and the chaos would largely take place outside of the Games themselves and out of the general public’s view.

The Valieva case can be fairly viewed as a byproduct of all the half-measures taken to sanction the Russians. But her drama clouded virtually every aspect of a Games that already had issues.

“We are dissatisfied because what we love about sport is the authentic pioneering struggle to redefine the possible, or to compete head to head, pouring every measure of devotion into the effort,” Max Cobb, an outspoken leader in U.S. Olympic circles, wrote in an essay this weekend.

“It’s a great mix of awe and honest effort that inspires,” Cobb wrote, “except when it isn’t.”

Big win for Timberwolves’ Towns in 3-point contest

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Karl-Anthony Towns gave big men everywhere something to shoot for.

Minnesota’s 7-footer became the first center to win the three-point shooting contest, defeating seven guards during the

NBA’s All-Star Saturday and providing a memorable moment on a night the dunk contest barely got off the ground.

Towns, who has spent his entire career proving doubters wrong about his range, posted a 29 — the highest total in the

competition — during the final round to defeat Atlanta’s Trae Young and Luke Kennard of the Los Angeles Clippers, who tied for second with 26 each.

New York’s Obi Toppin won the four-person dunk contest, scoring a 47 out of 50 in the final

round by putting the ball between his legs in the air, touching it off the backboard and re-directing it through the rim.

A trio of Cleveland Cavaliers, Darius Garland, Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen, won the Skills Challenge.

Rantanen powers Avs past Sabres

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Mikko Rantanen scored a goal and assisted on Alex Newhook's tiebreaking score in the third period, and the NHL-leading Colorado Avalanche beat the Buffalo Sabres 5-3 on Saturday.

Nathan MacKinnon also had a goal and an assist, J.T. Compher and Nazem Kadri scored the other goals, and Colorado extended its season-best road win streak to seven. The Avalanche improved to 8-0-1 in their past nine road games and 24-2-2 overall since Dec. 6.

Darcy Kuemper made 29 saves to earn a point in his 18th consecutive decision (16-0-2), prolonging a franchise record.

Tage Thompson had his first hat trick for Buffalo, which has lost two in a row and fell to 8-14-4 at home. Jeff Skinner had two assists and Dustin Tokarski stopped 31 shots.

Flames 2, Kraken 1: Elias Lindholm scored for the seventh straight game and host Calgary got its ninth consecutive win.

Matthew Tkachuk had a goal and an assist, and Jacob Markstrom stopped 22 shots while starting for the 14th time in 15 games. Lindholm, who also had an assist, extended his point streak to nine games with eight goals and seven assists during the stretch.

Calle Jarnkrok scored for Seattle, which has lost three straight. Philipp Grubauer finished with 35 saves.

Oilers 4, Jets 2: Connor McDavid scored a goal and added two assists to lead visiting Edmonton to its fifth straight victory under interim coach Jay Woodcroft.

McDavid now has 71 points, two ahead of Oilers teammate Leon Draisaitl, who had an assist against Winnipeg, for the NHL lead.

Zach Hyman, Kailer Yamamoto and Darrell Nurse also had goals for Edmonton, and Tyson Barrie had two assists. Mikko Koskinen stopped 22 shots.

The Jets scored a pair of third-period goals, with one coming short-handed from Adam Lowry and Kyle Connor adding another on a power play. Connor Hellebuyck made 36 saves.

Bruins 3, Senators 2 (OT): David Pastrnak scored on a one-timer off a cross-ice feed from from Taylor Hall at 2:42 of overtime to lift Boston to a win at Ottawa.

Jake DeBrusk and Brandon Carlo also scored to help the Bruins snap a two-game losing streak. Jeremy Swayman made 29 saves.

Tim Stutzle and Nick Holden had goals for the Senators, and Anton Forsberg finished with 30 saves.

Blues 6, Maple Leafs 3: Brandon Saad, Ryan O'Reilly and Pavel Buchnevich each scored in St. Louis' three-goal third period that broke open a tie game in a win at Toronto.

Buchnevich finished with two goals, and Klim Kostin and Brayden Schenn also scored for the Blues. Ville Husso made 34 saves to improve to 9-1-1 since Jan. 1.

St. Louis rebounded from a 3-2 overtime loss Thursday night that ended the Montreal Canadiens' 10-game skid.

William Nylander had two goals and T.J. Brodie scored his first goal since Jan. 5 for the

Maple Leafs. Jack Campbell made 28 saves.

Kings 5, Coyotes 3: Drew Doughty and Adrian Kempe scored two goals apiece and Los Angeles rallied to win at Arizona.

Doughty, Kempe and Trevor Moore each scored in a 3:39 span early the third period as the Kings overcame a two-goal deficit for the second time in two nights, following a 4-3 overtime victory at Vegas on Friday. Cal Petersen had 20 saves.

Los Angeles is 6-0-2 in its last eight road games and has won its last six games in Arizona.

Clayton Keller, Lawson Crouse and Anton Stralman scored and Karel Vejmelka stopped 34 shots for the Coyotes, who were playing their first game in eight days.

Ducks 7, Canucks 4: Adam Henrique and Nicolas Deslauriers each scored two goals and Anaheim won at Vancouver to snap a four-game slide. Troy Terry added a goal and an assist, and Richard Rakell and Sam Steel also scored for the Ducks, who were 0-3-1 in their previous four games. Trevor Zegras had three assists.

Anaheim's John Gibson stopped 16 shots and picked up an assist on the Ducks' opening goal.

Elias Pettersson had a goal and two assists for the Canucks, whose modest two-game winning streak ended. Tanner Pearson, Quinn Hughes and Conor Garland all had a goal and an assist. Thatcher Demko allowed five goals on 14 shots before being replaced by Jaroslav Halak early in the second period. Halak finished with nine saves on 11 shots.

Hill wins as crash ends Xfinity opener

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Austin Hill won the Xfinity Series opener at Daytona International Speedway following Myatt Snider's airborne crash that shredded a chunk of catchfence directly in front of where Michael Jordan was watching Saturday night.

Jordan was on the backside of the catchfence with driver Bubba Wallace, an amateur photographer who often takes pictures during NASCAR's lower-series events. The field soared past them on the final lap when Snider was hit from behind, causing

Snider to turn right into the wall. Snider was then hit again by another car and that contact caused Snider's car to sail up into the fence and then bounce back onto the track. The shredded carcass was stripped to a heap of battered steel and even the engine block was ripped from the car.

Snider was able to climb from his car by himself. Hill, meanwhile, had pulled alongside leader AJ Allmendinger on the final lap and was scored ahead when NASCAR called the caution. NASCAR had to review the finish before ruling the win for

Hill, who moved up from the Truck Series this season to for a full-time Xfinity ride with Richard Childress Racing.

Hill's win in his very first race with RCR was the first victory this week at Daytona for Chevrolet. Ford had won two Daytona 500 qualifying races and Friday night's Truck Series opener, won by Zane Smith in his first race for Front Row Motorsports.

Hill made it three consecutive nights that a new driver-team pairing went to Daytona's victory lane. Brad Keselowski won a Thursday night qualifier with RFK Racing, the rebrand of

Jack Roush's team that Keselowski joined as a part-owner.

Hill said he used the entire race to work with spotter Derek Kneeland to ensure that Hill was learning enough to make a plan on how to attack at the end.

"I was learning all night. I kept telling him, 'I'm just putting that in the bank. I'm putting that in the bank. I'm putting that in the memory bank to remember for late in the race,'" Hill said. "We timed it perfectly. Obviously, that caution came out, but we had a heck of a run, so who knows what would have happened there."

Appleby, Florida slip past No. 2 Auburn

Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Tyree Appleby scored 20 of his 26 points in the second half, Colin Castleton added 19 and Florida rallied to beat No. 2 Auburn 63-62 on Saturday to extend its home dominance in the series.

The Tigers (24-3, 12-2 Southeastern Conference) lost their second straight on the road and dropped their first game in regulation. They previously lost to UConn and Arkansas in overtime.

Appleby had everything to do with this one, which was Florida's 14th straight win over Auburn in Gainesville. The senior made 6 of 9 shots in the second half, including 4-for-6 from three-point range, and was perfect from the free-throw line.

Still, the Tigers had a chance in the final seconds. Wendell Green Jr. got the ball with 7.1 seconds to play and was dribbling at the top of the key when he tried to pass to Walker Kessler down low. The Gators (17-10, 7-7) knocked it away, and the clock ran out.

No. 1 Gonzaga 81, Santa Clara 69: Drew Timme had 23 points and nine rebounds, Andrew Nembhard scored 21 and the host Bulldogs beat the Broncos to clinch their 10th straight West Coast Conference regular-season title.

Rasir Bolton added 18 points for Gonzaga (23-2, 12-0), which won its 16th consecutive game and its 67th straight at home, a streak that dates to 2018 and is the longest in the nation. The Zags are the current front-runner for the top seed in the NCAA Tournament.

No. 3 Arizona 84, Oregon 81: Benedict Mathurin scored 24 points, Kerr Kriisa hit a crucial three-pointer and the host Wildcats

got past the Ducks.

No. 4 Kentucky 90, No. 25 Alabama 81: Kellan Grady made seven threes for a season-high 25 points and Oscar Tshiebwe added 21 points with 14 rebounds for the host Wildcats, who had to rally twice.

Short-handed because of injuries to starting guards TyTy Washington Jr. and Sahvir Wheeler, Kentucky (22-5, 11-3 Southeastern Conference) trailed 46-34 with 3½ minutes remaining before halftime before closing with 13 straight points for their first lead. Grady's three-pointer capped the run that drew a thunderous roar in Rupp Arena.

No. 6 Kansas 71, West Virginia 58: Ochai Agbaji scored 23 points, and David McCormack had 19 points and 11 rebounds to help the Jayhawks win on the road.

Kansas (22-4, 11-2) maintained its two-game lead in the Big 12 over No. 7 Baylor and No. 11 Texas Tech with five games remaining before the conference tournament.

No. 7 Baylor 72, TCU 62: Jeremy Sochan matched his season high with 17 points as five players scored in double figures for the host Bears, who led throughout despite missing two hurting guards.

Baylor (22-5, 10-4 Big 12) played with only six players, except for a two-minute stretch by a seldom-used sophomore in the first half, while bouncing back from a 10-point loss at No. 11 Texas Tech three nights earlier.

No. 9 Duke 88, Florida State 70: Freshman Paolo Banchemo scored 17 points as the host Blue Devils avenged last month's one-point overtime loss to the Seminoles and took sole possession of first place in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

No. 10 Villanova 74, Georgetown 66:

Justin Moore scored 15 of his 19 points in the second half to lead the host Wildcats to their fifth straight win.

No. 11 Texas Tech 61, No. 20 Texas 55: Bryson Williams scored 17 points as the Red Raiders held off a late charge by the host Longhorns to earn a sweep of the regular-season series in the heated rivalry.

No. 12 Illinois 79, No. 19 Michigan State 74: Kofi Cockburn scored 27 points and Jacob Grandison had a season-high 24 as the visiting Fighting Illini moved into a first-place tie with No. 5 Purdue in the Big Ten.

No. 13 UCLA 76, Washington 50: Jaylen Clark and David Singleton posted career highs in scoring as the host Bruins shook off a slow start to defeat the Huskies.

No. 23 Arkansas 58, No. 16 Tennessee 48: The host Razorbacks held the Volunteers to two field goals in the final eight minutes and used a late 11-1 run to win for the 11th time in 12 games.

Iowa 75, No. 18 Ohio State 62: Keegan Murray scored 24 points as the visiting Hawkeyes used a big run early in the second half to pull away.

Murray made 10 of 17 shots to lead Iowa (18-8, 8-7 Big Ten), which trailed by four points with 17:35 left before going on a 17-4 run.

No. 21 Murray State 62, UT-Martin 60: KJ Williams made a three-point play with 10 seconds left as the visiting Racers rallied for their 16th straight win.

No. 24 UConn 72, Xavier 61: R.J. Cole and Tyler Polley each scored 16 points for the host Huskies, who have won four of five.

Maldonado, Ike lead No. 22 Wyoming past Air Force

Associated Press

LARAMIE, Wyo. — Hunter Maldonado scored 29 points and Graham Ike had 27 to lead No. 22 Wyoming to a 75-67 victory over Air Force on Saturday.

Maldonado also had eight assists and seven rebounds, and Ike had 12 rebounds for the Cowboys (22-4, 11-2 Mountain West Conference).

Freshman Lucas Moerman scored a career-high 15 points for the Falcons (10-15, 3-11).

The last time the two teams played, on Jan. 28, it was in Colorado Springs, Colo., where Mal-

donado grew up. He scored 31 points and made the game-winning layup as time expired in Wyoming's 63-61 win.

Wyoming led by as many as 13 points in the first half but ended up with a 30-26 lead at the half after being held scoreless over the final 5 minutes. Air Force closed the half on an 8-0 run capped with a three-pointer by Moerman.

A.J. Walker (15 points) and Jake Heidbreder (11 points) also scored in double figures for the Falcons.

American 83, Army 67: Colin

Smalls had 17 points to lead five Eagles players in double figures in a win over the visiting Black Knights.

Johnny O'Neil and Matt Rogers added 14 points apiece for American (8-19, 4-11 Patriot League). Stacy Beckton Jr. and Elijah Stephens chipped in 13 points each.

Charlie Peterson had 13 points for Army (13-15, 7-9), whose losing streak stretched to six games.

Holy Cross 55, Navy 50: Gerald Gates had 24 points and 12 rebounds as the visiting Crusaders downed the Midshipmen.

Bo Montgomery had 15 points and 10 rebounds for Holy Cross (9-18, 7-8 Patriot League). Kyrell Luc added seven assists.

Navy's 26.6 field goal percentage represented the worst mark by a Crusaders opponent this season.

Tyler Nelson had 15 points for the Midshipmen (18-9, 11-5), whose four-game winning streak came to an end. Greg Summers added six rebounds.

John Carter Jr., who led Navy in scoring entering the matchup with 13 points per game, went 0-for-6 from the floor.