

Russia pushes troops into Ukraine

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Shocked by Russian President Vladimir Putin's order to deploy troops to separatist regions of eastern Ukraine, world leaders moved quickly Tuesday to impose as forceful a response as possible in hopes of averting a full-blown war in Europe.

Germany made the first big move, taking steps to halt the process of certifying the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia — a massive, lucrative deal long sought by Moscow, but criticized by the U.S. for increasing Europe's reliance on Russian energy supplies.

The rest of the European Union soon followed, with a first set of sanctions taking aim at the 351 Duma legislators who voted in favor of recognizing separatist regions in Ukraine, as well as 27 other Russian officials and institutions from the defense and banking world. They also sought to limit Moscow's access to EU capital and financial markets.

"This package of sanctions ... will hurt Russia and it will hurt a lot," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said after chairing a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Paris.

"We will make it as difficult as possible for the Kremlin to pursue its aggressive policies," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

Outside the EU, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson named five Russian banks and three wealthy individuals who the UK hit with sanctions on Tuesday.

The White House called Russia's troop deployments an "invasion" — a red line that President Joe Biden has said would result in heavy U.S. sanctions against Moscow.

Biden said Tuesday that he's authorized the additional movement of U.S. forces and equipment already stationed in Europe to support Baltic allies — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — against Russian threats.

"Let me be clear: These are totally defensive moves on our part; we have no intention of fighting Russia," Biden said during a White House address. "We want to send an unmistakable message, though, that the United States, together with our allies, will defend every inch of NATO territory and abide by the commitments we made to NA-

TO."

Biden said the administration still believes that Russia is "poised to go much further in launching a massive military attack against Ukraine."

"I hope I'm wrong about that," he said. "I hope we're wrong about that. But Russia is only escalating its threat against the rest of Ukrainian territory, including major cities, including the capital city of Kyiv. There are still well over one hundred and fifty thousand Russian troops surrounding Ukraine."

And if Putin pushes further into Ukraine, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg insisted the West would move in lockstep. "If Russia decides once again to use force against Ukraine, there will be even stronger sanctions, even a higher price to pay," he said.

The West insisted Putin's bold moves in Ukraine violated countless international agreements and since diplomacy has failed, it was time to move toward action.

Western powers have long made clear the fate of Ukraine wasn't worth a direct military confrontation with Russia and the potential of a world war, so sanctions were the only, limited, option to channel their anger.

"No lows too low, no lies too blatant, no red lines too red to cross," Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said in summing up the political disgust felt by nations from Europe to North America and the democracies hugging Russia's borders in Asia like Japan and South Korea.

However, Putin continued to knock the world off-kilter with a strategy where confusion about the true extent of an invasion, which would automatically kick in major sanctions, remained unclear and debatable.

Russia said it was sending what it called "peacekeepers" into eastern Ukraine, but Borrell stressed they were "troops" on sovereign Ukrainian territory.

"I wouldn't say that's a fully-fledged invasion, but Russian troops are on Ukrainian soil," Borrell said.

British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace didn't mince words. "Russia has already invaded Ukraine. They did it in 2014, occupied illegally Crimea and Donbas. This is a further invasion of their sovereign territory," Wallace said.

Whatever the description, the latest developments were enough to force the 27-na-

tion bloc into a mode of high alert, and the EU's foreign ministers stressed the sanctions announced Tuesday were done in close consultation with the United States and other Western allies.

They stopped short of the "massive" package threatened by the EU and Washington for a full military invasion into national territory that Kyiv still controls.

"The way we respond will define us for the generations to come," Simonyte said.

Too much too soon, though, could also hurt the international response, said Britain's Johnson. "This the first tranche, the first barrage of what we are prepared to do and we hold further sanctions at readiness to be deployed," he told British lawmakers.

"This is a first step," agreed French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. "We have more ammunition."

Hopes are dwindling that a major conflict can be averted. Putin's directive came hours after he recognized the two Ukrainian separatist regions, setting up Russian military support and antagonizing Western leaders who regard it as a breach of world order.

On Tuesday, Russian lawmakers on authorized Putin to use military force outside the country — a move that could presage a broader attack on Ukraine after the U.S. said an invasion was already underway there.

Members of Russia's upper house, the Federation Council, voted unanimously to allow Putin to use military force outside the country — effectively formalizing a Russian military deployment to the rebel regions, where an eight-year conflict has killed nearly 14,000 people.

Shortly after, Putin laid out three conditions to end the crisis that has threatened to plunge Europe back into war, raising the specter of massive casualties, energy shortages across the continent and economic chaos around the globe.

Putin has blamed NATO for the current crisis and called the U.S.-led alliance an existential threat to Russia.

The global condemnation came amid rising skirmishes in the eastern regions of Ukraine that Western powers believe Russia could use as a pretext for an attack on the Europe-leaning democracy that has defied Moscow's attempts to pull it back into its orbit.

5th Fleet plans launch of joint drone force

Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — The U.S. Navy's Mideast-based 5th Fleet announced Monday the launch of a new joint fleet of unmanned drones with allied nations to patrol vast swaths of the region's volatile waters as tensions simmer with Iran.

Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, who leads the 5th Fleet, told The Associated Press that 100 unmanned drones, both sailing and submersible, would dramatically multiply the surveillance capacities of the U.S. Navy, allowing it to keep a close eye on waters critical to the flow of global oil and shipping.

Trade at sea has been targeted in recent years as Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers collapsed.

"By using unmanned sys-

tems, we can just simply see more. They're high-reliability and remove the human factor," Cooper said on the sidelines of a defense exhibition in Abu Dhabi, adding the systems are "the only way to cover on whatever gaps that we have today."

Cooper said he hopes the drone force using artificial intelligence would be operational by the summer of 2023 to put more "eyes and ears on the water."

The Bahrain-based 5th Fleet includes the crucial Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which 20% of all oil passes. It also stretches as far as the Red Sea reaches near the Suez Canal, the waterway in Egypt linking the Mideast to the Mediterranean, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait off Yemen.

The high seas have witnessed

a series of assaults and escalations in recent years, following former President Donald Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the nuclear deal and reimpose devastating sanctions.

A maritime shadow war has played out as oil tankers have been seized by Iranian forces and suspicious explosions have struck vessels in the region, including those linked to Israeli and Western firms. Iran has denied involvement in the attacks, despite evidence from the West to the contrary.

"It's been well-established that Iran is the No. 1 in the primary regional threat we are addressing," Cooper said. "There's the ballistic missile, cruise missile and UAV (drone) component, both in their capability and their mass prolifera-

tion, as well as well as the proxy forces."

Iran sponsors proxy militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen that give it a military reach across the region.

As Yemen's 7-year-old civil war grinds on, the Iran-backed Houthi rebels have dispatched bomb-laden drone boats toward Saudi waters that have damaged vessels and oil facilities.

"What the Houthis are doing, it is an entirely completely different operation that's offensively oriented," Cooper said. "What we are doing is inherently defensively oriented."

There has also been a recent string of tense encounters between Iranian and American naval boats in Mideast waters. The confrontations have underscored the risk of an armed clash between the nations.

Push seen for permanent bases in countries near Russia

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The establishment of permanent American military bases in allied countries near Russia has been a NATO taboo for 25 years.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement Monday recognizing the independence of two self-proclaimed "people's republics" in eastern Ukraine and subsequent movement of troops toward the breakaway territories could be the impetus to cast aside an agreement limiting how NATO members base troops on the alliance's eastern flank.

"I believe the alliance and/or the U.S. are going to seriously reconsider our position on permanent basing in Poland, Romania and the Baltic countries," said retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, who led the U.S. Army in Europe from 2014 to 2017.

In an effort to assuage Kremlin fears about NATO, the alliance signed an agreement with Russia in 1997 that aimed to promote transparency and trust.

The NATO-Russia Founding Act said that no permanent allied bases would be set up in new member countries in the east, and troop deployments would be limited in scope and duration.

"I think that act of good faith on our part has been rewarded with continuous Russian aggression," Hodges said.

Now pressure is building in NATO to stake out a more formidable military presence in countries once dominated by the Soviet Union, the predecessor of today's Russian Federation.

Critics of the NATO-Russia Founding Act say it became a relic following the 2008 war Russia waged against Georgia and its first invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

Russia loyalists in the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics, and nearby parts of the Donbas region, have since been at war with the Ukrainian central government for several years. At times, Russian military members have fought alongside them.

Following Putin's announcement Monday, Russian forces moved toward the region openly as "peacekeepers."

Putin's recent actions may be swaying allies who were hesitant to pull the plug on the founding act until now.

Earlier this month, French diplomats indicated an inclination to discard the act should Russia launch a new invasion in Ukraine, the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* reported last week.

Other allies say it's past time for NATO to go bigger in the east. Poland and Romania have

long sought permanently based U.S. troops on their territory.

Putin's comments Monday about Ukraine, which he described as part of Russia's "spiritual space," were likely to heighten the sense of urgency among NATO allies Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, all of which have complicated histories with Russia and notable Russian-speaking communities.

On Saturday, during a joint news conference with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Lithuania's foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, reaffirmed his country's quest for permanent American troops.

So far, the U.S. has sent 5,000 extra troops to Europe in response to the crisis around Ukraine, where between 169,000 and 190,000 Russian military members are assembled along the border areas, according to U.S. estimates.

3 convicted of hate crimes in Arbery killing

Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. — The three men convicted of murder in Ahmaud Arbery's fatal shooting were found guilty of federal hate crimes Tuesday for violating Arbery's civil rights and targeting him because he was Black.

The jury reached its decision after several hours of deliberation on the charges against father and son Greg and Travis McMichael and neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan.

During the trial, prosecutors showed roughly two dozen text messages and social media posts in which Travis McMichael and Bryan used racist slurs and made derogatory comments about Black people. The FBI wasn't able to access Greg McMichael's phone because it was encrypted.

The McMichaels grabbed guns and jumped in a pickup truck to pursue Arbery after

seeing him running in their neighborhood outside the Georgia port city of Brunswick in February 2020. Bryan joined the pursuit in his own pickup and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael fatally shooting Arbery. The killing became part of a larger national reckoning on racial injustice after the graphic video leaked online two months later.

Defense attorneys contended the three didn't chase and kill Arbery because of his race but acted on the earnest, though erroneous, suspicion that Arbery had committed crimes in their neighborhood. Police found Arbery, 25, had no weapon and no stolen items. Prosecutors said he was merely out jogging.

The panel of eight white people, three Black people and one Hispanic person received the case Monday following a week-

long trial in U.S. District Court.

The trial closed Monday with prosecutors saying Arbery's slaying on a residential street was motivated by "pent-up racial anger," revealed by the defendants' electronic messages as well as by witnesses who testified to hearing them make racist tirades and insults.

"All three defendants told you loud and clear, in their own words, how they feel about African Americans," prosecutor Tara Lyons told the jury Monday.

Defense attorneys insisted that past racist statements by their clients offered no proof they violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he's Black. They urged the jury to set aside their emotions.

The McMichaels and Bryan, convicted of murder last fall in a Georgia state court, pleaded not guilty to the federal charges.

Trial in Floyd killing heads to closing arguments

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Closing arguments were expected Tuesday in the federal trial of three former Minneapolis police officers charged with violating George Floyd's civil rights, with jurors to get the case after a month of testimony.

Thomas Lane was the final officer to present his defense, testifying Monday he didn't realize how dire Floyd's condition was while handcuffed, facedown on the street with Officer Derek Chauvin's knee pressed to his neck — until paramedics turned Floyd over.

"What went through your mind when you saw his face there, once he was tipped over?" Earl Gray, Lane's attorney, asked.

"Um. He didn't look good," Lane said.

Lane, J. Alexander Kueng and Tou Thao are charged with depriving Floyd of his right to medical care as Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for 9½ minutes. Lane held the 45-year-old Black man's feet, Kueng knelt on his back and Thao held back bystanders.

Kueng and Thao are also charged with failing to intervene to stop Chauvin in the May 25, 2020, killing that triggered protests worldwide and a re-examination of racism and policing.

Chauvin pleaded guilty in the federal case in December, months after being convicted of state murder and manslaughter charges.

The judge and attorneys have indicated closing arguments could take almost the

whole day Tuesday. The jury will get instructions from the judge before deliberations begin.

Prosecutors have argued that the officers violated their training by not rolling Floyd onto his side or giving him CPR. Defense attorneys have attacked the department's training as inadequate and have highlighted a culture that they said emphasized deference to senior officers like Chauvin.

Prosecutors said at the start of the trial that the officers stood by as Chauvin slowly killed Floyd in front of them.

Lane, who is white; Kueng, who is Black; and Thao, who is Hmong American, also face a separate state trial in June on charges alleging that they aided and abetted murder and manslaughter.

Senate confirms Kurilla to lead US Central Command

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

Army Lt. Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla will take responsibility for all U.S. military operations in the Middle East and neighboring nations in the coming weeks.

The Senate on Thursday voted unanimously to confirm Kurilla's nomination to lead U.S. Central Command and be promoted to a four-star general. He will soon replace Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, who has commanded CENTCOM since 2019, according to the Pen-

tagon. McKenzie is scheduled to retire in April.

Kurilla, who now commands the Army's 18th Airborne Corps, is a 1988 U.S. Military Academy at West Point graduate whose storied career has seen him lead special operations and conventional forces in Panama, Iraq and Afghanistan. He has commanded the 82nd Airborne Division, the elite 75th Ranger Regiment and its 2nd Battalion, and he has also served as the assistant commander of the Joint Special Operations Command and as the

Pentagon's deputy director for special operations and counterterrorism.

He will take over a CENTCOM in transition, after the U.S. military last year withdrew all its forces from Afghanistan and ended its official combat mission in Iraq. Nonetheless, some 2,500 American troops remain in Iraq to train that nation's forces in their ongoing fight with the remnants of Islamic State. Another roughly 1,000 U.S. forces remain in Syria, where they primarily work with local forces battling ISIS terrorists there.

Court eyes refusal of services to gay couples

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court has agreed to hear a new clash involving religion and the rights of LGBTQ people in the case of a Colorado web designer who says her religious beliefs prevent her from offering wedding website designs to gay couples.

The high court said Tuesday it would hear the case of Lorie Smith. The Denver-area designer offers graphic and website design services and wants to expand to wedding website services, but she says her religious beliefs would lead her to decline any request from a same-sex couple to design a wedding website.

She also wants to post a statement on her website about her beliefs. Doing those things, how-

ever, would run afoul of a Colorado anti-discrimination law. Smith had argued the law violates her free speech and religious rights.

The Supreme Court said in taking the case that it would look only at the free speech issue. It said it would decide whether a law that requires an artist to speak or stay silent violates the free speech clause of the First Amendment. The case is expected to be argued in the fall.

Smith's attorney, Kristen Waggoner, said in a statement after the court agreed to hear the case that "Colorado has weaponized its law to silence speech it disagrees with, to compel speech it approves of, and to punish anyone who dares to dissent."

Colorado Attorney General

Phil Weiser said the Supreme Court has consistently held that anti-discrimination laws like the one in his state apply to all businesses selling goods and services.

"Companies cannot turn away LGBT customers just because of who they are," Weiser said in an emailed statement. "We will vigorously defend Colorado's laws, which protect all Coloradans by preventing discrimination and upholding free speech."

In a 2-1 ruling last year, the Denver-based 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals denied Smith's attempt to overturn a lower court ruling throwing out her legal challenge. The panel said Colorado had a compelling interest in protecting the "dignity interests" of members of marginalized groups through its law,

the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act.

The law, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, is the same one at issue in the case of Colorado baker Jack Phillips that was decided in 2018 by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The high court said at the time that the Colorado Civil Rights Commission had acted with anti-religious bias against Phillips after he refused to bake a cake for two men who were getting married.

But it did not rule on the larger issue of whether a business can invoke religious objections to refuse service to LGBTQ people.

The Arizona-based Alliance Defending Freedom represented Phillips and represents Smith.

Canada extends powers used by its police to end blockades

Associated Press

TORONTO — Canadian lawmakers voted Monday night to extend the emergency powers that police can invoke to quell any potential restart of blockades by those opposed to COVID-19 restrictions.

Lawmakers in the House of Commons voted 185-151 to affirm the powers. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said earlier that the powers were still needed despite police ending the occupation of the nation's capital by truckers over the weekend and police ending border blockades before that.

Emergency Preparedness Minister Bill Blair said the protesters were going for the "lifeblood of this nation, which is trade with the United States."

Trudeau noted there were some truckers just outside Ottawa who might be planning further blockades or occupations. His public safety minister said there was an attempt to block a border crossing in British Columbia over the weekend.

The emergencies act allows authorities to declare certain areas as no-go zones. It also allows police to freeze truckers' personal and corporate bank accounts and compel tow truck companies to haul away vehicles.

The trucker protest grew until it closed a handful of Canada-U.S. border posts and shut down key parts of the capital for more than three weeks. But all border blockades have now ended and the streets around the Canadian Parliament are quiet. Ottawa protesters who vowed never to give up are largely gone, chased away by police in riot gear in what was the biggest police operation in the nation's history.

Opposition New Democratic Party leader Jagmeet Singh's party supported it, ensuring Trudeau had enough votes.

Singh said they know there are protesters waiting in the surrounding areas of Ottawa and in the capital itself.

"They need to be cleared out," said Singh.

Season over, Mexico City mulls ban on bullfighting

Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — This season's bullfights in Mexico City may be the last, as legislators in the city assembly seek to revive a bill banning the activity.

This year's season closed Sunday at the city's Plaza Mexico arena, and it was marked — as has become routine — by protesters.

Last year, the assembly's Animal Welfare Commission gave preliminary approval to a law banning public events "at which animals are subject to mistreatment and cruelty that result in their death." But the bill never made it to a vote before the full assembly.

Animal rights activist Alberto Luvianos says legislators may have been cowed by the potential lost income.

"They (legislators) recognized that animals have rights, but the issue they are worried about is the income from bullfighting," said Luvianos, who estimated

the fights create about 3,000 jobs.

The bullfighting associations claim the real number is 10 times that amount.

Evangelina Estudillo is one of them. She has worked as a street vendor outside the arena for 20 years, and the income helped her raise nine children. The prospect of a ban makes her uneasy.

"The president would have to do something," Estudillo said. "Look how many families rely on this."

Since 2013, four states in Mexico have already banned bullfights, and polls indicate substantial support for a ban. A ban in Mexico City — currently the largest venue for the events — would be an international setback for bullfighting.

"I respect those who are against it, but I don't agree," said Paco Dominguez, who sells bullfighting merchandise and posters. "I see it as an art, a part of culture, and I make a living off of it."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Wedding guest killed by officer at reception

FL WINTER PARK — Police in Florida said a guest at a wedding reception was shot and killed by an officer responding to a disturbance call about a man assaulting other guests.

Police in Winter Park said the man attacked and knocked one of the officers unconscious before he was shot, news outlets reported. Officials did not identify the man or the officers involved.

The police department said one officer first spoke to the man, who prompted the call for help at the Winter Park Library and Events Center, not far from Downtown Orlando.

A statement from the police said the man attacked a second officer, and during that altercation the officer “discharged his weapon.”

Man held on \$1M bail for alleged anti-gay attack

IL DECATUR — A 19-year-old man has been held on \$1 million bail after an alleged anti-gay attack that sent the victim to the hospital.

Decatur police allege Ethan Dickerson restrained and hit the victim repeatedly with a pipe wrench at a Decatur home. Authorities said Dickerson allegedly threatened to kill the victim in a homophobic rant, according to The (Decatur) Herald & Review.

Dickerson faced preliminary charges of attempted first-degree murder, aggravated battery, aggravated unlawful restraint, home invasion, and a hate crime.

Police found the victim in the kitchen with multiple lacerations

on the head and a “significant” amount of blood loss. The victim was transported to a local hospital for non-life-threatening injuries that required stitches.

Steakhouse employee accused of beef theft

GA ROSWELL — A man who had just been hired by an upscale steakhouse in Georgia is accused of stealing \$15,000 of beef from an outdoor cooler.

The man was scheduled to begin work Friday at Uncle Jack’s in Roswell, but allegedly stole the expensive meat on Feb. 14 and Thursday, WSB-TV reported.

Warrants accuse the man of two counts of second-degree burglary, Roswell police told the station.

The first theft included Kobe and Wagyu beef, ahi tuna, and “long bones,” which William Degel, owner of the New York-based chain, described as “Fred Flintstone racks of beef” on bones about 20 inches long.

Degel, in New York, told WSB that better locks were installed on the cooler after Monday’s theft but surveillance video from Thursday showed the man cutting them off.

The head chef recognized the man as an applicant who had been in the restaurant just days before, the station reported.

Man strangled woman who broke into home

MO ST. LOUIS — A man fatally choked a woman who broke into his St. Louis home, police said.

Police investigators said the 34-year-old woman broke into the home and a man inside the home confronted her and put

her in a chokehold until she was dead.

The incident is being investigated as a homicide, police said, and the man was arrested. Police did not immediately release the names of the woman killed or the man arrested and did not release any other information.

Equipment failure sends raw sewage into river

MI FLINT — Officials have issued a health advisory for the Flint area after equipment failed at a municipal pumping station, sending an unknown amount of raw sewage into the Flint River.

Genesee County Health Department officials recommended people avoid bodily contact with the Flint River due to the untreated sewage, The Flint Journal reported.

Jeanette Best, Flint’s water pollution control manager, did not say how many gallons of raw, untreated sewage was discharged into the river.

The discharge at the station, which is under construction, happened due to equipment failure, she said.

Double-booked surgeries lead to \$14.6M deal

MA BOSTON — Massachusetts General Hospital will pay \$14.6 million to settle a lawsuit that alleged overbilling for double-booked surgeries that were simultaneously overseen by the same surgeon.

It’s the third time since 2019 that the Harvard-affiliated teaching hospital agreed to pay millions to resolve a claim stemming from the controversial practice, the Boston Globe reported.

The three out-of-court settlements total \$32.7 million, the newspaper said.

The case stemmed from a whistleblower who said five orthopedic surgeons kept patients under anesthesia longer than necessary because they were juggling procedures in dual operating rooms.

Dr. Lisa Wollman, an anesthesiologist, alleged the hospital violated Medicare and Medicaid rules that require surgeons to be present for critical parts of operations and also failed to designate a backup surgeon for trainees who might need immediate help.

The lawsuit alleged government insurance programs were overbilled for anesthesia services because procedures were prolonged by surgeons moving back and forth between operating rooms.

Public lighthouse on island closed for repairs

SC HUNTING ISLAND — The only historic lighthouse regularly open to the public in South Carolina is closed for repairs, earlier than planned.

The weekly inspection of the Hunting Island State Park lighthouse found new cracks in the structure built in 1875, leading officials to close it indefinitely until repairs are made.

This closure happened months before the park planned a lengthy closure to do \$3 million in renovations to the black-and-white striped 136-foot tall lighthouse.

A lighthouse was first built on the island in 1859, then rebuilt in 1875 after being destroyed in the Civil War.

— From wire reports

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NBA regular season begins stretch run

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — When the All-Star break ends, the stretch run begins.

There isn't much time left in the NBA season. The All-Star weekend came at about the 60-game mark for teams, far beyond the midpoint of the 82-game schedule. It's a sprint to the finish now, and the Brooklyn Nets and Los Angeles Lakers have to prove they have the legs to make a run.

The Nets could have Kevin Durant and Ben Simmons on the floor soon to spark a surge. But the Lakers might be without Anthony Davis for more than a month because of a foot injury, putting a heavy burden on LeBron James.

Injured and inconsistent, neither team is a sure thing to even make the postseason. Both have performed far below expectations, with the Lakers only 27-31. But poor play in the winter is

quickly forgotten if a team warms up come springtime, just as the Milwaukee Bucks did last year.

"As a team, we started playing good basketball towards the end," Giannis Antetokounmpo said. "Maybe we can do it again. Who knows? We're in a good place. We have a hell of a team."

The Bucks are actually only in fifth place, but that means little in the tightly packed Eastern Conference. Miami and Chicago are tied at the top, surprising Cleveland and Philadelphia are 2½ games back and Milwaukee is just percentage points behind them.

There's more separation out West, where Phoenix has pulled away to a 6½-game lead over Golden State by winning seven straight to run its record to 48-10.

Even those teams have concerns, with Phoenix bracing for a lengthy absence for Chris Paul

and Golden State still going without Draymond Green because of a back injury.

Brooklyn hopes its injury issues are almost over. Durant is nearing a return after missing a month with a sprained left knee ligament, though coach Steve Nash said he isn't expecting the All-Star forward to be ready when the team resumes its season Thursday against Boston.

Injuries are a part of every season, but the usual problems this season were compounded for some teams by the coronavirus. An outbreak within the Nets contributed to them deciding to bring the unvaccinated Kyrie Irving back part time even though he still can't play in home games. The Atlanta Hawks lost nine of 12 games during one rough stretch in December, having to sign multiple players just to field a team while their regulars were out.

They have been trying to

climb out of that hole and are 10th in the East a year after reaching the Eastern Conference finals.

"At one point it was crazy. Like, just going out there and not knowing any of your teammates besides two of them," All-Star Trae Young said. "It was different, but like the world might not always, always see that and see the struggle early on and understand that's the reason. So now that we're here, we're starting to pick things up and guys are getting healthy. It's going to be good for us if we keep it going."

The play-in helps them. For the second straight year, the teams in the Nos. 7-10 spots will play for the final two postseason spots in each conference. Right now, both the eighth-place Nets and ninth-place Lakers would find themselves there.

There's still time to climb, but not much.

Dragic to sign with Brooklyn

Associated Press

Goran Dragic plans to sign with Brooklyn, giving the Nets a veteran boost in the backcourt.

Agent Bill Duffy said Monday that Dragic was going to Brooklyn, where the Nets need guard help after trading James Harden to Philadelphia.

Ben Simmons, acquired in that deal, isn't ready to play after sitting out all season, and Kyrie Irving still can't play in home games because he hasn't met New York City's vaccine requirement.

Dragic played in just five games this season in Toronto, where he was traded from Miami in the offseason in the deal for Kyle Lowry. The Raptors dealt him to San Antonio at the trade deadline. Dragic then agreed to a buyout and became a free agent.

Dragic has averaged 13.9 points for his career.

NFL combine loosens virus rules

Associated Press

Players attending the NFL's scouting combine won't have to stay in a "bubble" as originally ordered after organizers loosened regulations Monday night after getting blowback for strict COVID-19 rules issued over the weekend.

In a memo sent to all invitees and obtained by The Associated Press on Monday night, the National Invitational Combine said, "We encourage all players to remain within the secure Combine areas at all times for your safety."

"However, if you would like to leave the secure areas during free time in your schedule, you are now permitted to do so at your own risk."

The memo indicated prospects would still be limited to a single support person such as an athletic trainer or massage therapist they can bring to the

combine, although players will be free to meet with others off-site.

"As has been the case throughout the pandemic, we continue to evolve our Combine policies and procedures in consultation with medical experts," the memo said. "While masks continue to be required for air travel and during medical exams at the Combine (players and medical personnel), wearing a mask at other times while on site is recommended, but not required."

The memo said that if players preferred "to remain in the secure areas and have approved medical support personnel (physical therapist, massage therapist, or approved athletic trainer) enter the secure area to provide medical treatments, please follow the previously communicated procedure" in which they would have to regis-

ter that individual for approval by the NIC.

The changes came 48 hours after prospects were told in a memo they would be restricted to a "bubble" while at the combine, which rankled players and their agents.

The idea of a boycott was bandied about in response to the rules issued over the weekend, but several agents said they couldn't in good conscience advise their clients to skip the combine, which will take place in Indianapolis from March 1-7.

The organization that oversees the operation of the annual NFL scouting combine informed draft prospects in a memo Saturday that they'd be in a bubble in secure locations, and that any player who violates the policy "at any time will be disqualified from further participation and sent home."

Medina Spirit stripped of Derby win

Associated Press

Medina Spirit was stripped of the victory in last year's Kentucky Derby and Mandaloun was declared the winner after a ruling by state racing stewards on Monday.

The since-deceased Medina Spirit tested positive after the race last May for a steroid, betamethasone, that is legal in Kentucky but banned on race day. The positive test threw the world's best-known horse race into turmoil and cast an unflattering spotlight on trainer Bob Baffert, considered the face of horse racing after he guided horses to the Triple Crown in 2015 and 2018.

Medina Spirit finished half a length ahead of Mandaloun in the race, giving Baffert what was then his seventh Kentucky Derby title. Baffert was subsequently banned for two years by Churchill Downs following the positive test.

Monday's decision by the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission makes Medina Spirit the second horse in the 147-year history of the race to be disqualified for a banned substance; the first was Dancer's Image in 1968, a decision that gave Forward Pass the victory. The only other disqualification was in 2019 when Maximum Security was penalized because of interference, giving Country House the win.

Following the announcement by the rac-

ing stewards, Churchill Downs issued a statement declaring Mandaloun the Kentucky Derby winner and congratulating owner and breeder Juddmonte Farms, trainer Brad Cox and jockey Florent Geroux. Cox becomes the first Louisville native to win the Derby, and Mandaloun's owners will receive the \$1.8 million winner's purse.

"We look forward to celebrating Mandaloun on a future date in a way that is fitting of this rare distinction," the statement said.

The track planned to replace Medina Spirit with Mandaloun on the paddock sign honoring the Derby winner on Tuesday. Mandaloun is set to run in the \$20 million Saudi Cup in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Saturday. The winner receives \$10 million.

The racing commission also suspended Baffert for 90 days and fined the Hall of Fame trainer \$7,500 on Monday. The decision followed a Feb. 14 hearing that was closed to the public and media.

Clark Brewster, an attorney for Baffert, said he would appeal the ruling.

"This ruling represents an egregious departure from both the facts and the law," Brewster said, "but the numerous public statements by KHRC officials over the last several months have made perfectly clear that Bob Baffert's fate was decided before we ever sat down for a hearing before the

three stewards, one of whom is directly employed by Churchill Downs as the racing director at Turfway Park."

The California Horse Racing Board said it will honor Baffert's suspension at its tracks. He is based at Santa Anita, where he has already won some of this season's 3-year-old prep races for the Kentucky Derby.

The CHRB also said it will honor any stay or preliminary injunction if granted by Kentucky racing officials or a court.

Medina Spirit collapsed and died on Dec. 6 of a heart attack following a training run at Santa Anita less than a month after finishing second in the Breeders' Cup Classic at Del Mar. A necropsy found no definitive cause of the horse's death.

Baffert initially denied wrongdoing after a post-race drug test revealed 21 picograms of betamethasone in the horse's system. Baffert later acknowledged treating the horse with a topical ointment containing the corticosteroid for a skin inflammation.

Churchill Downs subsequently suspended Baffert, citing a recent spate of failed drug tests by his horses. Baffert sued the racing commission last June, seeking custody of remnant samples of Medina Spirit's blood and urine for subsequent testing to prove that the steroid did not come from an injection.

Flames tie franchise mark with 10-game win streak

Associated Press

CALGARY, Alberta — Elias Lindholm's go-ahead goal with 47 seconds remaining extended his goal streak to eight games and the Calgary Flames tied a franchise record with their 10th consecutive victory, winning 3-1 over the Winnipeg Jets on Monday.

The 10-game winning streak ties a franchise record. It was done on two occasions, the previous time was in 2016-17 with the streak beginning five years ago Monday. The other time was in 1978-79, when the franchise was in Atlanta.

"Ten in a row is nice," Lindholm said. "We were struggling a little bit there before we started this streak. It's nice to see it go in. It was a tough game, it was tight.

Not a lot of chances, but we stuck with it."

Sean Monahan and Tyler Tofoli, into an empty net, also scored for Calgary. Jacob Markstrom got the start for the Flames, making 22 stops.

Hurricanes 4, Flyers 3 (OT): Brett Pesce scored 4 minutes, 42 seconds into overtime, Vincent Trocheck had a goal and an assist and Metropolitan Division-leading Carolina won at Philadelphia. Nino Niederreiter and Teuvo Teravainen also scored for the Hurricanes, who won their third straight.

Gerry Mayhew, Patrick Brown and Oskar Lindblom tallied goals for the Flyers. Philadelphia, playing its second contest of a club-record eight-game home-stand, lost its fifth in a row and

18th in the past 20.

The game appeared headed for a shootout at the expiration of the five-minute 3-on-3 session before Trocheck's pass on a 2-on-1 was corralled out of the air by Pesce, who shot high over Martin Jones for his fourth of the season.

Bruins 5, Avalanche 1: David Pastrnak had two goals and an assist and host Boston rolled past Western Conference-leading Colorado.

Patrice Bergeron, Jake DeBrusk and Charlie Coyle also scored for the Bruins, who have won two straight. Jeremy Swayman had 28 saves and Taylor Hall added three assists.

It was a makeup for their Dec. 23 matchup that was postponed because of a league-wide out-

break of COVID-19 cases.

Canadiens 5, Maple Leafs 2: Josh Anderson and Cole Caufield had three-point games and host Montreal beat Toronto for its third straight victory.

Anderson had two goals and an assist, and Caufield a goal and two assists for the Canadiens. Rem Pitlick also scored and Brendan Gallagher had two assists. Samuel Montembeault made 35 saves.

Canucks 5, Kraken 2: Tyler Motte had a goal and an assist, and host Vancouver sent Seattle to its fourth straight loss.

Travis Hamonic, Vasily Podkolzin, Bo Horvat and Tanner Pearson also scored for the Canucks. Juho Lahmmikko, Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller each had two assists.

Michigan's Howard suspended 5 games

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Michigan basketball coach Juwan Howard has been suspended the final five games of the regular season and fined \$40,000 for hitting a Wisconsin assistant in the head, triggering a postgame melee.

The Big Ten Conference also on Monday suspended three players one game for the altercation following the Badgers' 77-63 win on Sunday: the Wolverines' Moussa Diabate and Terrance Williams II, and Jahcobi Neath of Wisconsin.

Badgers coach Greg Gard was fined \$10,000 for violating the conference's sportsmanship policy, but was not suspended. Howard is expected to be back for the Big Ten tournament, which begins March 9 in Indianapolis.

"After taking time to reflect on all that happened, I realize how unacceptable both my actions and words were, and how they affected so many," Howard said Monday in a statement released by the university. "I

am truly sorry."

Phil Martelli will serve as Michigan's interim coach in Howard's absence. The Wolverines' final five regular-season games are home contests with Rutgers on Wednesday, No. 15 Illinois on Sunday, Michigan State on March 1 and No. 25 Iowa on March 3 plus a visit to No. 22 Ohio State on March 6.

"Big Ten Conference coaches and student-athletes are expected to display the highest level of sportsmanship conduct," Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren said in a statement. "I am grateful for the partnership with Michigan Athletics Director, Warde Manuel and Wisconsin Athletics Director, Chris McIntosh. Our expectation is that the incident yesterday will provide our coaches and student-athletes with the opportunity to reflect, learn and move forward in a manner that demonstrates decorum and leadership on and off of the court."

Howard, a former NBA player and the reigning Associated Press men's coach of the year, was upset after Gard called a time-

out with 15 seconds left and his team leading by 15 on Sunday.

The altercation began in the postgame handshake line, when Gard grabbed Howard by the arm in an attempt to explain why he called the timeout. Howard yelled "Don't (expletive) touch me!" and put his right index finger in Gard's face as the two began to argue.

"At that point, I felt it was time to protect myself," Howard said in his postgame news conference.

After the two coaches were separated, Howard swung his right hand and struck Badgers assistant Joe Krabbenhoft on the left side of the head with an open hand.

"Someone touched me and I think it was very uncalled for, for them to touch me, as we were verbalizing and communicating with one another," Howard said Sunday. "That's what escalated it."

Players from each side got involved in the skirmish, and video appeared to show Diabate and Neath throwing punches.

Guards lift No. 10 Baylor past Oklahoma State in OT

Associated Press

STILLWATER, Okla. — Baylor coach Scott Drew got the kind of performance he expects from guards Adam Flagler and James Akinjo.

Flagler scored a career-high 29 points, and Akinjo's pull-up jumper with 14 seconds remaining in overtime provided the winning points as No. 10 Baylor defeated Oklahoma State 66-64 on Monday night.

"James and Adam — I mean, that's as good a backcourt as anyone in the country that starts for us," Drew said.

Flagler missed last Saturday's game against TCU with a knee injury. He made 11 of 20 field goals and 7 of 13 three-pointers in his return.

"Our trainer was the MVP for this game because he was able to get Adam back and able to play, and obviously, he looked pretty good," Drew said.

Flagler also drew two charges in overtime.

"Those are huge, huge plays," Drew said. "Momentum plays.

But you can't leave doubt, either. On the road, you get back-to-back calls. I mean, they've got to be legit. You're there. No questions asked. And Adam put itself in that position to get those calls."

The Cowboys' Isaac Likekele missed a three-pointer at the buzzer that would have won it.

Matthew Mayer added 12 points for the Bears (23-5, 11-4 Big 12).

Bryce Thompson scored 15 points and Moussa Cisse added 12 points, 10 rebounds and five blocks for Oklahoma State (13-14, 6-9). The Cowboys beat Baylor 61-54 on Jan. 15 when the Bears were ranked No. 1.

Neither team scored at the start of the game until a layup by Mayer with 17:32 remaining in the first half. Oklahoma State missed its first nine shots before Likekele's bucket got the Cowboys on the board just over five minutes into the game.

Baylor opened with a 6-0 lead and extended its advantage to 10-2 before Oklahoma State rallied. The Cowboys took their first

lead, 21-20, on a pullup jumper by Thompson. Cisse's alley-oop dunk on an assist from Thompson with 31 seconds remaining in the first half gave Oklahoma State a 36-29 lead — a score that held until the break.

No. 12 UCLA 66, Arizona State 52: Jaylen Clark had 16 points and nine rebounds in his third straight start and the host Bruins avoided a second-half collapse to beat the Sun Devils for their third consecutive win.

UCLA (20-5, 12-4 Pac-12) led by 17 in the first half before Arizona State began its comeback bid. The Sun Devils (10-16, 6-10) closed to 46-45 on a basket by Marreon Jackson that capped a 24-12 surge to open the second half.

David Singleton's three-pointer beat the shot clock, sparking a 14-2 run that kept the Bruins ahead for good.

DJ Horne, Jay Heath and Jackson scored nine points each for Arizona State, whose three-game winning streak ended.

Jules Bernard also had 16 points for UCLA. Jaime Jaquez

Jr. added 13 points and 10 rebounds. Johnny Juzang returned to score 10 after missing Saturday's game against Washington with a hip injury when he fell off a scooter.

No. 22 Ohio State 80, Indiana 69 (OT): Malaki Branham scored 27 points and the host Buckeyes rallied to beat the Hoosiers in overtime.

Indiana led by four with 2:47 to go in regulation, but E.J. Liddell forced a steal with 1:11 remaining and slammed home the tying dunk with six seconds left.

The Hoosiers jumped ahead by two early in overtime, but Jamari Wheeler hit a go-ahead three-pointer with 2:58 left as Ohio State took the lead for good.

Branham, a freshman guard born in Columbus, finished 9-for-13 from the field and topped his season average by 16 points. Liddell had 16 points.

Xavier Johnson led Indiana with 16 points, going 10-for-10 from the free-throw line. Trayce Jackson-Davis and Race Thompson added 13 apiece.