

Europe peace shattered by attack on Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Thursday, unleashing airstrikes on cities and military bases and sending troops and tanks from multiple directions in a move that could rewrite the world's geopolitical landscape. Ukraine's government pleaded for help as civilians piled into trains and cars to flee.

President Vladimir Putin ignored global condemnation and cascading new sanctions as he unleashed the largest ground war in Europe in decades, and chillingly referred to his country's nuclear arsenal. He threatened any foreign country trying to interfere with "consequences you have never seen."

Ukrainian officials said their forces were battling Russians on a multiple fronts, and had lost control of the decommissioned Chernobyl nuclear power plant, scene of the world's worst nuclear disaster.

"Russia has embarked on a path of evil, but Ukraine is defending itself and won't give up its freedom," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy tweeted.

Later, he offered Russia an end to the hostilities.

"It wasn't Ukraine that chose the path of war, but Ukraine is offering to go back to the path of peace," he said.

Zelenskyy, who earlier cut diplomatic ties with Moscow and declared martial law, described Russian forces advancing on a series of fronts, including a "difficult situation" developing in Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, just over 12 miles away from the eastern border with Russia, and Russian troops slowly advancing from the north on the city of Chernihiv. He said a Russian airborne unit at an airport just outside Kyiv, the capital, was being de-

stroyed.

He appealed to global leaders, saying that "if you don't help us now, if you fail to offer a powerful assistance to Ukraine, tomorrow the war will knock on your door."

Both sides claimed to have destroyed some of the other's aircraft and military hardware, though little of that could be confirmed.

Hours after the invasion began, Russian forces seized control of the zone around the now-unused Chernobyl plant after a fierce battle, Zelenskyy adviser Mykhailo Podolyak told The Associated Press.

A Ukrainian official said Russian shelling hit a radioactive waste repository and an increase in radiation levels was reported. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive matter.

A nuclear reactor at the plant 80 miles north of Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, exploded in 1986, sending a radioactive cloud across Europe. The damaged reactor was covered by a protective shelter several years ago to prevent radiation leaks.

"This is one of the most serious threats to Europe today," Podolyak said.

The chief of the NATO alliance said the "brutal act of war" shattered peace in Europe, joining a chorus of world leaders who decried the attack, which could cause massive casualties, topple Ukraine's democratically elected government and upend the post-Cold War security order. The conflict was already shaking global financial markets: Stocks plunged and oil prices soared amid concerns that heating bills and food prices would skyrocket.

Condemnation rained down not only from the U.S. and Europe, but from South Korea, Australia and beyond — and many

governments readied new sanctions. Even friendly leaders like Hungary's Viktor Orban sought to distance themselves from Putin. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he aimed to cut off Russia from the U.K.'s financial markets as he announced sanctions in response to the invasion.

A senior U.S. official said the U.N. Security Council was expected to vote Friday on a resolution condemning Russia for the attack and demanding the immediate withdrawal of its forces. The vote will proceed even though the legally binding measure will almost certainly be vetoed by Russia, said the official, who wasn't authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

While some nervous Europeans speculated about a possible new world war, the U.S. and its NATO partners have so far shown no indication they would join in a war against Russia. They instead mobilized troops and equipment around Ukraine's western flank — as Ukraine pleaded for defense assistance and help protecting its airspace.

The attacks came first from the air. Later Ukrainian authorities described ground invasions in multiple regions, and border guards released footage showing a line of Russian military vehicles crossing into Ukraine's government-held territory. European authorities declared the country's airspace an active conflict zone.

It wasn't until late Thursday afternoon that Russia confirmed that its ground forces had moved into Ukraine, saying they'd crossed over from Crimea, the southern region that Russia annexed in 2014.

After weeks of denying plans to invade, Putin launched the operation on a country the size of Texas that has increasingly tilted to-

ward the democratic West and away from Moscow's sway. The autocratic leader made clear earlier this week that he sees no reason for Ukraine to exist, raising fears of possible broader conflict in the vast space that the Soviet Union once ruled. Putin denied plans to occupy Ukraine, but his ultimate goals remain hazy.

Ukrainians who had long braced for the prospect of an assault were urged to shelter in place and not to panic.

"Until the very last moment, I didn't believe it would happen. I just pushed away these thoughts," said a terrified Anna Dovnya in Kyiv, watching soldiers and police remove shrapnel from an exploded shell. "We have lost all faith."

With social media amplifying a torrent of military claims and counter-claims, it was difficult to determine exactly what was happening on the ground.

Associated Press reporters saw or confirmed explosions in the capital, in Mariupol on the Azov Sea, Kharkiv in the east and beyond. AP confirmed video showing Russian military vehicles crossing into Ukrainian-held territory in the north from Belarus and from Russian-annexed Crimea in the south.

Russian and Ukrainian authorities made competing claims about damage they had inflicted. Russia's Defense Ministry said it had destroyed scores of Ukrainian air bases, military facilities and drones, and confirmed the loss of a Su-25 attack jet, blaming it on "pilot error." It said it was not targeting cities, but using precision weapons and claimed that "there is no threat to civilian population."

Ukraine's armed forces reported at least 40 soldiers dead, and said a military plane carrying 14 people crashed south of Kyiv.

Biden ups Russia sanctions after attack

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Thursday announced a new round of sanctions targeting Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, charging that Russian leader Vladimir Putin “chose this war” and that his country will bear the consequences of his action.

The sanctions target Russian banks, oligarchs and high-tech sectors, Biden said. The United States and its allies will block assets of four large Russian banks, impose export controls and sanction oligarchs.

Biden also said the U.S. will be deploying additional forces to Germany to bolster NATO after the invasion of Ukraine, which is not a member of the defense organization.

The penalties fall in line with the White House’s insistence that it would look to hit Russia’s financial system and Putin’s inner circle, while also imposing export controls that would aim to starve Russia’s industries and military of U.S. semiconductors and other high-tech products.

“Putin is the aggressor,” Biden said. “Pu-

tin chose this war, and now he and his country will bear the consequences.”

Biden, for now, held off imposing some of the most severe sanctions, including cutting Russia out of the SWIFT payment system, which allows for the transfers of money from bank to bank around the globe, or Russia’s energy sector.

Biden announced the sanctions while Ukraine’s government reported mounting casualties as Russian forces attack from the east, north and south.

Biden spoke to Americans from the White House hours after holding a virtual meeting with the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Italy and Japan. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also joined the meeting.

The president also met with his national security team Thursday morning in the Situation Room as he looked to flesh out U.S. moves in the rapidly escalating crisis.

While Biden described the sanctions as severe, Ukrainian officials urged the U.S. and West to go further and cut the Russians from the SWIFT financial system.

“We demand the disconnection of Russia from SWIFT, the introduction of a no-fly zone over Ukraine and other effective steps to stop the aggressor,” Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a tweet.

The Biden administration, however, has shown some reluctance to cut Russia from SWIFT, at least immediately, because of concerns the move could also have enormous ramifications for Europe and other Western economies.

Biden, answering questions from reporters, appeared to push a decision on SWIFT to European allies.

“It is always an option but right now that’s not the position that the rest of Europe wishes to take,” Biden said.

He also contended that the financial sanctions he announced would be more damaging to Russia.

World leaders move to slap sanctions on the Kremlin

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — World leaders Thursday condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as “barbaric” and moved to slap unprecedented economic sanctions on Moscow and those close to President Vladimir Putin.

The West and its allies showed no inclination to send troops into Ukraine, which is not a member of NATO, and risk a wider European war. But NATO reinforced its member states in Eastern Europe as a precaution against an attack on them, too.

“Make no mistake: We will defend every ally against any attack on every inch of NATO territory,” said NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg.

In the meantime, the allies began to take steps aimed at isolating Moscow and forcing it to pay so high a price that it changes course.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson called the attack “hideous and barbaric” and said of Putin: “Now we see him for what he is — a bloodstained aggressor who believes in imperial conquest.”

As the first major leader to make a big move, Johnson announced a freeze on the assets of all large Russian banks and plans to bar Russian companies and the Kremlin from raising money on British markets.

Britain will also ban the export to Russia of a wide range of high-tech products, including semiconductors, and prohibit the nation’s flagship airline, Aeroflot, from landing at British airports.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Stoltenberg both called the invasion a “barbaric” attack on an independent nation that threatened “the stability in Europe

and the whole of the international peace order.”

The European Union scheduled an emergency summit in Brussels. Von der Leyen threatened to hit Russia with “massive and targeted sanctions.” She said she would put to EU leaders late Thursday a proposal that would target strategic sectors of the Russian economy by blocking access to key technologies and markets.

She said the sanctions, if approved, “will weaken Russia’s economic base and its capacity to modernize. And in addition, we will freeze Russian assets in the European Union and stop the access of Russian banks to European financial markets.”

In the days before the attack, Germany suspended approval of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia, and the EU imposed sanctions against hundreds of Russian lawmakers

and other officials and institutions from the defense and banking worlds. The EU also sought to limit Moscow’s access to capital and financial markets.

Separately, the U.N. is expected to vote Friday on a resolution condemning Russia and demanding the immediate withdrawal of all its forces. But Moscow is certain to veto.

Von der Leyen insisted all Western powers were in lockstep on the crisis. Even Hungary, an often recalcitrant member of the EU, promptly condemned the attack, raising hopes that the 27 states would quickly achieve the required unanimity for the sanctions package.

Highlighting a widening rift in superpower relations, China stood alone in failing to condemn the attack and instead accused the United States and its allies of worsening the crisis.

Army general suspended for public affairs leadership concerns is cleared to retire

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Army's top public affairs soldier, who was suspended from her duties last year amid toxic leadership allegations, has been cleared to retire from the service as a brigadier general, a service spokesperson said Wednesday.

An Army inspector general investigation found Brig. Gen. Amy Johnston's leadership violated service policy, the spokesperson said on condition of anonymity.

Johnston, the Army chief of public affairs, was issued a general officer's memorandum of reprimand following the IG investigation, a typically career-ending administrative punishment, but she will retire with the benefits of a one-star general, the spokesperson said.

"The Department of the Army inspector general investigation into ... Johnston has concluded and appropriate administrative action was taken," the spokesperson wrote in an email. "She is in transition status preparing for her approved retirement."

Her official retirement date was not immediately available on Wednesday, the spokesperson said.

Johnston, who previously used the last name Hannah, became chief of public affairs in April 2019, putting her in charge of the Army's communications activities and its efforts to shape the service's public appearance. In that role, she was also the Army's top adviser on public messaging for the service's top leaders.

Before her arrival at the Pentagon, Johnston served as director of the Army's Marketing and Research Task Force in Washington, D.C., and as the

top public affairs officer for the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., and for the Army secretary.

She was suspended in September following a command climate survey that showed some 97% of Army public affairs personnel felt they had experienced a hostile work environment under her leadership, an Army official said at the time.

Complaints filed with the inspector general made similar accusations about Johnston's leadership, the official said. Among the complaints made by Army public affairs officials were allegations Johnston belittled subordinates in meetings, according to an Army official.

Army public affairs officials also reported high rates of racial and sexual harassment in their workplaces and feelings the service undervalued the role of public affairs, according to Army Times, which cited leaked service documents.

Johnston also played a role in building the Army's communication response to the 2020 disappearance and death of Spc. Vanessa Guillen at Fort Hood, Texas, according to an Army investigation.

The report from the investigation found the response was ineffective and the case became the impetus for an ongoing effort to improve Army public affairs.

Michael Brady, the civilian principal deputy chief for Army public affairs, has filled in as the Army's top public affairs official in Johnston's absence.

The Army has not named a permanent replacement for the retiring general, the service spokesperson said.

12 USAF officers sue over exemption denials

Associated Press

TOLEDO, Ohio—A dozen U.S. Air Force officers have filed a lawsuit against the federal government after the military denied their religious exemptions to the mandatory COVID-19 vaccine.

The officers, mostly from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, along with a handful of airmen and reservists, accused the Air Force of using a double standard when approving the requests.

The Air Force, according to the lawsuit filed last week, had allowed more than 3,000 medical and administrative exemptions but only nine religious exemptions.

"The granting of more than one thousand medical and administrative exemptions belies any assertion that vaccination is mission-critical and that no exemptions can be granted," the lawsuit said.

A message seeking comment on the lawsuit was left with an Air Force spokesperson Wednesday.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and military leaders have said the vaccine is critical to maintaining military readiness and the health of the force. But members of Congress, the military and the public have questioned if the exemption reviews have been fair.

Combined, the services have received more than 14,000 requests for religious accommodations. The Marine Corps had allowed three as of last week while the Army and Navy had not approved any.

At least 97% of the troops in each service have gotten at least one shot, while those who refuse can face discipline up to being discharged from the service.

Those who filed the lawsuit in Ohio said they had followed their chain of command and each had talked with an Air Force chaplain to determine the sincerity of their beliefs. Many also said they already had been infected with COVID-19 and that antibody tests show they now have natural immunity, according to the lawsuit.

Okinawa police: Marine beat 2 men while drunk

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa—A Marine from Camp Kinser is facing assault and injury charges for allegedly fighting with two men while drunk, according to Japanese police.

Police arrested Lance Cpl. Lewis Nyoo Kah, 21, in Naha city shortly after the incident occurred around 5:50 a.m. Sunday, a Naha police station spokesman said by phone Thursday.

Kah allegedly picked a fight with a local man on the street when two other men, both 45, intervened, the spokesman said. Kah struck one in the face and

pushed the other to the ground, the spokesman said. He struck the man on the ground several times, injuring his face, the spokesman said.

One of the men called police and Kah, who was intoxicated, was arrested on the spot, the spokesman said. Some government officials in Japan customarily to speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

Kah was still being held Thursday at the Naha police station, and has refused to speak with investigators, the spokesman said.

Police plan to charge him with one count of assault and one count of causing bodily injury, the spokesman said.

Child poverty rising after tax credit expires

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of children in America living in poverty jumped dramatically after just one month without the expanded child tax credit payments, according to a new study. Advocates fear the lapse in payments could unravel what they say were landmark achievements in poverty reduction.

Columbia University's Center on Poverty and Social Policy estimates 3.7 million more children were living in poverty by January — a 41% increase from December, when families received their last check. The federal aid started last July but ended after President Joe Biden's Build Back Better bill stalled in the sharply divided Congress. Payments of up to \$300 per child were delivered directly to bank accounts on the

15th of each month, and last week marked the second missed deposit of the year.

The Columbia study, which combines annual U.S. Census data with information from the Census Bureau's monthly Current Population Survey bulletins, found that the monthly child poverty rate increased from 12.1% in December to 17% in January. That's the highest level since December 2020, when the U.S. was grappling with high unemployment and a resurgence of COVID-19. Black and Latino children experienced the highest percentage point increases in poverty — 5.9% and 7.1% respectively.

Megan Curran, policy director for the Center on Poverty and Social Policy, said the sudden spike shows how quickly the payments became core to household financial stability for

millions of families after only six months.

"It really had a huge impact right off the bat," Curran said. "We saw food insecurity drop almost immediately as soon as the payments started ... all of that progress that we made could now be lost."

Curran said the increase in children living in poverty could also partially reflect rising prices.

The new numbers represent a serious setback from the original goals of the child tax credit program, which ambitiously sought to cut nationwide child poverty in half. As part of Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 rescue package last year, the existing child tax credit program was massively reshaped, boosting the amount of the payments, greatly expanding the pool of eligible families and de-

livering the money in monthly installments designed to be incorporated into day-to-day household budgets.

The program extended payments of \$250-per-month for children ages 6 through 17 and \$300-per-month for those under 6 to most families in the country, at an annual cost of about \$120 billion. The goal was to put discretionary cash in the hands of parents along with the freedom to spend it as they saw fit month-to-month.

Republican lawmakers are generally unified in opposition to the expanded tax credit — describing it as excessive, inflationary and a disincentive to work. But when it was originally passed, many Democrats openly declared their intention to make the payments a permanent anchor of the American social safety net.

Convoy opposing COVID-19 mandates leaves from Calif.

Associated Press

ADELANTO, Calif. — A small convoy of truckers demanding an end to coronavirus mandates began a cross-country drive from California to the Washington, D.C., area on Wednesday.

Several hundred people rallied in a parking lot in the cold, wind-swept Mojave Desert town of Adelanto before about two dozen trucks and a number of other vehicles hit the road. It wasn't clear how many intended to go all the way.

"To the truck drivers around the world: Now is your time to stand up. Now is your time to usher in a renaissance time of freedom," truck driver and event organizer Brian Brase told the rally. "Do not bow down."

Convoy vehicles carried signs with slogans such as "Legalize freedom" and "Let them breathe."

It was one of several U.S. con-

voys organized online and modeled on the recent Canadian truckers' protests that shut down U.S.-Canadian border crossings and besieged the streets of the capital, Ottawa, for weeks. The convoys all have different starting points, departure dates and routes.

A statement issued by organizers of the Adelanto group said "COVID is well-in-hand now, and Americans need to get back to work in a free and unrestricted manner."

It pledged a "100% safe, lawful and peaceful journey" that will "terminate in the vicinity of the DC area, but will NOT be going into DC proper." Arrival was scheduled for March 5.

The protest comes as average daily COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are continuing to fall in the U.S., an indicator that the omicron variant's hold is weakening across the country, and mandates are being loosened or lifted.

Winter storm hits across the American heartland

Associated Press

DALLAS — Freezing rain and drizzle is disrupting travel from Central Texas to the Great Lakes, with ice-glazed roads leading to hundreds of traffic accidents.

Hundreds of flights were canceled Wednesday at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport as Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas braced for an ice storm.

More than half an inch of ice could accumulate in parts of the Ozarks through Friday morning, while another area of freezing rain was expected to hit south-central Pennsylvania and western Maryland, the National Weather Service said.

In Arkansas, dozens of schools were closed or switched to remote learning Thursday as another round of freezing rain was expected by midday.

Airlines had canceled more than 2,000 Thursday flights by Wednesday night, according to

the FlightAware.com tracking site. About half of them were at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, where temperatures were expected to top out above freezing only briefly late Thursday afternoon.

DFW Airport is the biggest in the American Airlines network, and American had canceled 21% of its Thursday flights by Wednesday night, according to FlightAware.

Meanwhile, heavy snow was expected in upstate New York and New England later this week, with more than 6 inches possible through Saturday morning.

Winter took a fleeting break in the Northeast on Wednesday, with temperatures soaring into the 60s before plunging within hours. The weather whiplash marked the second time in less than a week that there was to be a temperature swing of more than 40 degrees in 24 hours.

Lead prosecutors of Trump probe resign

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The two prosecutors in charge of the Manhattan district attorney's criminal investigation into former President Donald Trump and his business dealings suddenly resigned Wednesday, throwing the future of the probe into question just as pressure was building on Trump on several legal fronts.

A spokesperson for District Attorney Alvin Bragg confirmed the resignations of Carey Dunne and Mark Pomerantz, top deputies who had been tasked with running the investigation on a day-to-day basis. Both started on the Trump probe under former District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., and Bragg asked them to stay when he took office in January.

Dunne, the office's former general counsel, argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in a successful, multiyear fight for Trump's tax records. Pomerantz, a former mafia prosecutor, was brought out of private practice by Vance last year to add his expertise in white collar investigations and had been involved in questioning witnesses before the grand jury.

"We are grateful for their service," Bragg spokesperson Danielle Filson said. She declined to comment further, saying the investigation is ongoing.

The New York Times, citing sources, reported that the grand jury investigation had stalled, with no sessions in the last month, and that Dunne and Pomerantz quit after

Bragg raised doubts about pursuing a case against Trump himself. No former president has ever been charged with a crime.

So far, the nearly three-year investigation has resulted only in tax fraud charges against Trump's company, The Trump Organization, and its longtime finance chief Allen Weisselberg relating to lucrative fringe benefits such as rent, car payments and school tuition.

Messages seeking comment were left for Dunne and Pomerantz.

Trump did not immediately respond to the news. In a telephone interview, his lawyer Robert Fischetti said: "I'm a very happy man. In my opinion, this investigation is over."

Texas orders probe on gender-confirming care

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has ordered the state's child welfare agency to investigate reports of gender-confirming care for kids as abuse, a directive that opponents say is a first by any governor over GOP efforts to restrict transgender rights.

The immediate impact of the order, which Abbott issued Tuesday, was unclear and a spokesman for the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services said there were no open cases based on the governor's directive.

Abbott's letter to state agencies came after Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton this week released a non-binding legal opinion that labeled certain gender-confirming treatments as "child abuse." That goes against the nation's largest medical groups, including the

American Medical Association, which have opposed Republican-backed restrictions filed in statehouses nationwide.

The uncertainty over the impact is largely due to the fact that attorney general opinions do not carry the weight of law. In Houston, the county office that represents the state in civil child abuse cases said it would not take any actions based on the letter, and Texas' largest child welfare advocacy group said it was unclear what judges and prosecutors would do with the opinion.

The opinion by Paxton is directed at treatments that include puberty blockers and hormone therapy. It comes months after Texas Republican legislators — who filed more anti-LGBTQ proposals last year than in any other statehouse — proposed laws banning such treatments but failed to pass them.

VA Bible lawsuit rejected; separate display proposed

Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. — A judge agreed to dismiss a nearly 3-year-old lawsuit Wednesday over a Bible displayed on a table at a New Hampshire veterans hospital after the plaintiffs' lawyer proposed a separate display and sought to work with the hospital.

Two U.S. Air Force veterans filed the lawsuit in federal court in 2019 against the Manchester VA Medical Center director, saying the Bible's inclusion on a "missing man" table near the entrance honoring fallen or missing veterans and prisoners of war is a violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The case went to mediation.

"One of the focuses was us putting up our own table," attorney Lawrence Vogelmann, who represents the veterans, said at a hearing in requesting the dis-

missal. He said the Department of Veterans Affairs has a specific procedure for requesting a table and would negotiate the details with the hospital's lawyers in an effort to avoid any more litigation.

An attorney representing the hospital director did not object to the voluntary dismissal request and agreed it would be fine for the veterans to use the hospital's procedure.

The lawsuit said the table should be a memorial to all who have served. The veterans had suggested replacing the Bible with a "book of faith" containing the writings and prayers from seven religious groups. Government lawyers argued the lawsuit should be dismissed, saying that some of the allegations were vague and undefined, and that the lead plaintiff acknowledged he wasn't offended by the display.

STARS  AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Morant, Grizzlies have title aspirations

Associated Press

Ja Morant's goal is to give the Memphis Grizzlies much more than the memorable highlight 360-degree dunk during his first All-Star Game.

The third-year point guard plans on delivering Memphis an NBA title.

"Our goal is to win the championship, and I feel like as long as we stay locked in, continue to grow together, play together, that goal can be achieved," Morant said. "We just got to stay the course, take it day by day and let it play out."

After having to play their way into the postseason last season, the surprising Grizzlies have the NBA's third-best record overall with 22 games remaining. They trail only Phoenix (48-10) and Golden State (42-17) with Memphis (41-19) just 1½ games back of the Warriors.

It's an impressive turnaround after being 9-10 on Nov. 27 with Morant first out with an injured left knee, then health and safety protocols that cost him 12 games. Since then, the Grizzlies are 32-9 and lead the NBA in several statistical categories.

Memphis is tied with Charlotte as the NBA's top scoring team, averaging 113.8 points a game. The Grizzlies also lead the league in rebounds (48.9), steals (10.1) and blocks (6.3) per game even with injuries limiting Dillon Brooks — their best perimeter defender — to 21 games.

Golden State coach Steve Kerr said he believes Memphis is solid on both ends of the floor.

"A really good two-way team, creative on both ends," Kerr said. "Even with the guys they have out, they're really deep and flexible."

This is what the Grizzlies wanted when controlling owner Robert Pera shook up his front office in April 2019 and made Zach Kleiman general manager. Memphis already had Jaren Jackson Jr. as the fourth overall pick in 2018, then nabbed Morant at No. 2 in 2019.

Kleiman has assembled a very young and deep team with 12 Grizzlies in their third NBA season or less. Center Steven Adams, a trade acquisition last summer, is the oldest in his ninth season. Rookie Ziaire Williams, the 10th overall pick, currently is a starter along with Desmond Bane, the 30th pick in 2020.

Third-year coach Taylor Jenkins has gotten them to play stingy defense led by Jackson, third in the NBA blocking 2.17 shots per game. They turn blocks and steals into more fast-break points than anyone else in the league with Memphis finishing with lots of high-flying dunks.

"When we do that, it's a spark, and we're really dangerous when we get out into the open court," Jenkins said.

Preparing for the Grizzlies requires a lot

of attention to Memphis' transition defense. Detroit coach Dwane Casey credits Memphis with having excellent defensive hands and Jenkins and his staff putting them in a system that fits the team perfectly.

"They're a handful," Casey said. "I don't see a lot of weaknesses. You look at other teams in the West, and you see the Memphis Grizzlies right there at the top."

Memphis is 19-0 when scoring at least 120 points, and it started February scoring at least 120 points in six straight games, the longest streak by any NBA team this season.

Morant is the reason for the Grizzlies' high hopes as they begin the second half Thursday night at Minnesota.

He's the NBA's seventh-leading scorer averaging 26.8 points a game. He's also on pace to become the sixth player in league history to average at least 25 points, five rebounds and five assists a game at the age of 22 or younger. The others are Oscar Robertson, Michael Jordan, Tracy McGrady, LeBron James and Luka Dončić.

Giannis Antetokounmpo, the Finals MVP who led Milwaukee to the title last summer, said Morant and Memphis is another small market team that can compete for the championship.

"He has an unbelievable team," Antetokounmpo said. "They have great culture, a great coach. The sky is the limit for them."

No. 11 Providence holds off Xavier in triple OT

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Jared Bynum scored 27 points, including a key three-pointer, to help 11th-ranked Providence hold off Xavier 99-92 in triple overtime Wednesday night.

A.J. Reeves added 16 points and Al Durham had 13 to help the first-place Friars (23-3, 13-2 Big East) win their second consecutive overtime game. They are 3-0 in OT this season — all in the past four games — and it's the first time in school history Providence has won 13 Big East games.

No. 3 Auburn 77, Mississippi 64:

Walker Kessler had 12 points, 10 rebounds and eight blocked shots to lead the host Tigers past the Rebels.

No. 6 Kentucky 71, LSU 66:

Bryce Hopkins came off the bench to score a career-high 13 points, including 11 to fuel the host Wildcats' 15-2 second-half surge, and Oscar Tshiebwe and Keion Brooks Jr. made late free throws to help them beat the Ti-

gers.

No. 7 Duke 65, Virginia 61:

A.J. Griffin hit back-to-back three-pointers and scored on a drive after making just one basket in the first 36 minutes and the visiting Blue Devils edged the Cavaliers.

No. 13 Wisconsin 68, Minnesota 67:

Steven Cowl had 20 points and seven rebounds and the visiting Badgers held off the Golden Gophers.

No. 14 Houston 81, Tulane 67:

Kyler Edwards scored 14 of his 21 points in the second half, and the Cougars earned a road win.

No. 20 Texas 75, TCU 66:

Andrew Jones scored 21 points and the host Longhorns rallied from 10 points down in the second half to pull out a win.

Creighton 81, St. John's 78: Arthur Kaluma made a layup with 2:02 left to give the visiting Bluejays the lead for good.

SMU 75, Tulsa 61: Marcus Weathers tallied 14 points and 13 rebounds to lead the

Mustangs to their 14th consecutive home win.

Notre Dame 79, Syracuse 69: Paul Atkinson Jr. scored 20 points with a career-high 17 rebounds to lead the Fighting Irish to a win at home.

VCU 72, George Mason 66: Sophomores Ace Baldwin Jr. and Mikeal Brown-Jones combined for 25 second-half points to lead the host Rams to a win.

Seton Hall 66, Butler 60: Alexis Yetna had 10 points and 10 rebounds to lift the host Pirates past the Bulldogs.

Army 73, Bucknell 60: Jalen Rucker had 21 points for the host Black Knights.

Josh Caldwell had 19 points for Army (14-15, 8-9 Patriot League), which snapped its six-game losing streak.

Navy 52, Loyola (Md.) 50: John Carter Jr. posted 19 points to lead the host Midshipmen to a win.

Richard Njoku had seven rebounds for Navy (19-9, 12-5 Patriot League).

Source: Champions League final leaving Russia

Associated Press

UEFA will no longer host the Champions League final in St. Petersburg after Russia launched a wide-ranging attack on Ukraine on Thursday, the Associated Press has learned.

An extraordinary meeting of the UEFA executive committee will be held on Friday to discuss the geopolitical crisis and when officials are set to confirm taking the May 28 showpiece game out of Russia, a person with knowledge of the process said on Thursday. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private talks.

UEFA did publicly rebuke Russia and said it was dealing with the "situation with the utmost seriousness and urgency" while confirming the meeting for 0900 GMT on Friday.

"UEFA shares the international community's significant concern for the security situation developing in Europe and strongly condemns the ongoing Russian military invasion in Ukraine," the governing body said in a statement.

"We remain resolute in our solidarity with the football community in Ukraine and stand ready to extend our hand to the Ukrainian people."

As Russia's threats toward Ukraine had grown through the week, the British government and fan groups had already called for the final not to be played in St. Petersburg, where the stadium is sponsored by Russian state-owned energy giant Gazprom.

The company is also the main sponsor of

Schalke, but the German second-division club said on Thursday that the Gazprom logo was being removed from its jerseys.

A senior Gazprom executive also quit the supervisory board of the Gelsenkirchen-based club after being a target of U.S. sanctions. Matthias Warnig is CEO of the newly built but never operated Russia-to-Germany Nord Stream 2 pipeline which is a multibillion-dollar project of Gazprom and European companies.

Critics said Schalke was used to popularize Gazprom in Germany as it pushed to construct the gas pipelines under the Baltic Sea, which bypassed Ukraine. Gazprom has been a sponsor since 2006 and provided the cash that fueled a run to the Champions League semifinals in 2011.

German newspaper Bild this week began covering the Gazprom logos on Schalke jerseys with "Freedom for Ukraine" to protest against Russia's deepening military intervention in Ukraine.

UEFA's sponsorship by Gazprom is also under scrutiny with its branding having a significant profile this week at Champions League round of 16 games.

UEFA's leadership had held off making a call on the Champions League final venue until Russia on Thursday started to target cities and military bases in Ukraine with airstrikes and shelling as tanks and troops rolled across the border.

The International Olympic Committee said it "strongly condemns the breach of the Olympic Truce by the Russian govern-

ment," days after the end of the closing of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

The truce is intended to secure safe passage for athletes during the Games and, in the long term, promote the idea of working toward world peace. It runs until the end of the Paralympics, which are due to open in Beijing on March 4.

The International Paralympic Committee condemned Russia and said it held talks with sports officials in Ukraine, which still plans to compete in Beijing and requires safe passage for its athletes.

"This is a truly horrible situation, and we are greatly concerned about our National Paralympic Committee and Para athletes from Ukraine," IPC President Andrew Parsons said. "Our top priority right now is the safety and well-being of the Ukrainian delegation, with whom we are in regular dialogue."

Russia's name, flag and anthem are already barred from the March 4-13 Paralympics in Beijing over previous doping disputes. Its team is due to compete as RPC, short for Russian Paralympic Committee.

Russia has violated the Olympic Truce three times in 14 years, fighting a war with Georgia over the disputed territory of South Ossetia during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and launching a military takeover that annexed the Crimean peninsula of Ukraine after the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics closed.

Focus is also turning to Russia hosting other major sports events in the coming months.

US women's national soccer team shuts out Iceland

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Catarina Macario and Mallory Pugh each scored two goals and the U.S. women's national team beat Iceland 5-0 on Wednesday night to win the SheBelieves Cup.

The Americans won the annual four-team tournament, now in its seventh year, for the third straight year.

The United States has 17 straight shutouts on American soil, dating to March 2020. The national team also is unbeaten in 65 straight games at home.

Kristie Mewis also scored in the victory that came as the team celebrated an agreement

with U.S. Soccer to settle a dispute over equitable pay with the men's national team.

The two sides announced the agreement early Tuesday. Under the terms, U.S. Soccer will pay the players \$24 million and commit to equitable pay and bonuses in the future. The women filed a lawsuit alleging gender discrimination in 2019.

The deal is contingent on a new collective bargaining agreement. The two sides are currently in negotiations following the Dec. 31 expiration of the last CBA.

Many of the veterans from the national team, including Alex

Moran, Megan Rapinoe, Christen Press and Tobin Heath, were not on the roster for the SheBelieves Cup as coach Vlatko Andonovski looked at younger players ahead of World Cup qualifying this summer.

"We're performing well, there's still a lot of room for improvement and growth in this group," Andonovski said. "But I feel we can all see the potential. I said this before, it's a process, it's going to take time. I'm very happy with the result, very happy with the players, but realistically this is still not good enough. We still have to get better as we go forward."

Macario scored in the 37th minute with a blast from the top corner of the box that bounced off the post and into the net.

Making her third straight start in the tournament, Macario navigated a tough angle for her second goal into the far corner in the 45th minute. She has five international goals in 15 appearances.

Pugh added a goal in the 60th off a pass from Ashley Sanchez, then took a pass from Macario for her second in the 75th. Pugh has 21 goals and 21 assists in 70 matches with the United States.

Mewis added the final goal in the 88th minute.

Tampa's Perry scores 400th NHL goal

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Corey Perry became the 103rd NHL player to reach 400 goals and the Tampa Bay Lightning beat the Edmonton Oilers 5-3 on Wednesday night.

Perry had a nifty deflection of Mikhail Sergachev's shot from the left circle during a power play that put Tampa Bay up 4-1 with 4:36 remaining in the second period.

"It's exciting," Perry said. "It's a great personal accomplishment. I have to give a lot of credit to the guys I've played with. I never thought growing up that I'd get 400 goals in the NHL."

The 36-year-old Perry scored his first career goal for Anaheim against Edmonton in his third NHL game on Oct. 1, 2005.

"Four-hundred goals, it's amazing," said Lightning forward Pat Maroon, who had the second assist on Perry's goal.

Maroon, Steven Stamkos, Brayden Point and Nikita Kucherov also scored for the Lightning, who were coming off a seven-day break. Andrei Vasi-

levskiy stopped 27 shots.

"It wasn't the prettiest game but we found a way to get the job done," Maroon said. "We stuck with it."

Connor McDavid had two goals for Edmonton, Zach Hyman scored in his fifth straight game and Leon Draisaitl added three assists. Mike Smith, pulled from a start Sunday against Minnesota after allowing four goals on seven shots, made 18 saves.

"We generated lots of chances," McDavid said. "I thought we did an alright job keeping them in check, but they're a great team. They just find ways to win games, and that's what they did tonight."

Avalanche 5, Red Wings 2: Gabriel Landeskog opened the scoring 1:12 in and capped it with an empty-netter for his 25th goal of the season, helping NHL-leading Colorado beat host Detroit.

Tyson Jost, Nazem Kadri and Valeri Nichushkin also scored and Pavel Francouz stopped 31 shots. The Avalanche beat the Red Wings for the eighth con-

secutive time.

Filip Zadina and Robby Fabbrì scored for Detroit. Thomas Greiss made 26 saves.

Darren Helm, facing his former team for the first time, had an assist on Landeskog's opening goal. Helm played 744 regular-season games with the Red Wings.

Stars 3, Jets 2 (OT): Tyler Seguin scored 54 seconds into overtime on a play that required a review, lifting host Dallas over Winnipeg,

Seguin's shot in transition was stopped by Connor Hellebuyck, and the goalie reached for the puck in the air as Seguin sent it back toward the goal. The original call was that Josh Morrissey had kept the puck out of the net with his stick, but a video review showed the puck across the goal line.

Stars captain Jamie Benn and Denis Gurianov also scored, and Jake Oettinger made 20 saves. Blake Wheeler and Mark Scheifele scored for the Jets. Hellebuyck stopped 36 shots.

Kings 3, Coyotes 2: Viktor Arvidsson broke a tie with 3:39

left with his second goal in visiting Los Angeles' victory over Arizona.

The Kings have won five straight road games and are 7-0-2 in their past nine, with the last two coming in Arizona. Los Angeles beat the Coyotes 5-3 on Saturday in a game rescheduled from Dec. 27 because of COVID-19.

Blake Lizotte also scored for the Kings, and Cal Petersen made 17 saves for his second consecutive win over Arizona. Clayton Keller and Barrett Hayton scored for the Coyotes, and Scott Wedgewood stopped 32 shots.

Canadiens 4, Sabres 0: Samuel Montembeault made 32 saves for his first NHL shutout, Nick Suzuki scored his second goal of the game on a penalty shot and host Montreal beat Buffalo for its fourth straight victory.

Cole Caufield had a goal and an assist, and Jake Evans added an empty-netter.

Craig Anderson made 25 saves for the Sabres, who have lost four in a row.