

US, Russia agree to work to end war

Associated Press

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Russia and the U.S. agreed Tuesday to start working toward ending the war in Ukraine and improving their diplomatic and economic ties, the two countries' top diplomats said after talks that reflected an extraordinary about-face in U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump.

In an interview with The Associated Press after the meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the two sides agreed broadly to pursue three goals: to restore staffing at their respective embassies in Washington and Moscow, to create a high-level team to support Ukraine peace talks and to explore closer relations and economic cooperation.

He stressed, however, that the talks — which were attend-

ed by his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, and other senior Russian and U.S. officials — marked the beginning of a conversation, and more work needs to be done.

Lavrov echoed Rubio's remarks and said "the conversation was very useful."

"We not only listened, but also heard each other," he said.

Trump's national security adviser, Michael Waltz, and special Mideast envoy Steven Witkoff joined Rubio at the table, along with Lavrov and Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign affairs adviser, Yuri Ushakov.

No Ukrainian officials were present at the meeting, which came as the beleaguered country is slowly but steadily losing ground against more numerous Russian troops.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his country

would not accept any outcome from the talks since Kyiv didn't take part, and he postponed his own trip to the kingdom scheduled for Wednesday.

European allies have also expressed concerns that they are being sidelined.

Rubio said Tuesday that ending the war in Ukraine could "unlock the door" for "incredible opportunities that exist to partner with the Russians geopolitically on issues of common interest and, frankly, economically on issues that hopefully will be good for the world and also improve our relations in the long term."

His comments were further evidence of the remarkable U.S. reversal on Russia after years in which Trump's predecessor, Joe Biden, led international efforts to isolate Moscow.

Tuesday's meeting was

meant to pave the way for a summit between Trump and Putin. After the talks ended, Ushakov and Waltz said no date has been set yet for that summit. Ushakov told Russian television that a meeting was "unlikely" to take place next week, while Waltz said he thought it could be arranged in the coming weeks.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Lavrov mentioned the same three goals as Rubio and said that Washington and Moscow agreed to appoint representatives to carry out "regular consultations" on Ukraine.

"I have reason to believe that the American side has started to better understand our position" the Russian foreign minister said.

Witkoff said the meeting was "positive, upbeat, constructive. Everybody was there to get to the right outcome."

Chinese helo flies within 10 feet of Philippine patrol plane

Associated Press

OVER THE SCARBOROUGH SHOAL, South China Sea — A Chinese navy helicopter flew within 10 feet of a Philippine patrol plane on Tuesday in a disputed area of the South China Sea, prompting the Filipino pilot to warn by radio: "You are flying too close, you are very dangerous."

The Chinese helicopter was attempting to force a Cessna Caravan turboprop plane belonging to the Philippine Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources out of what China claims is its airspace over the hotly disputed Scarborough Shoal off the northwestern Philippines.

An Associated Press journalist and other invited foreign media on the plane witnessed the tense 30-minute standoff as the Philippine plane pressed on with its low-altitude patrol around Scarborough with the Chinese navy helicopter hovering close above it or flying to its left in cloudy weather.

"You are flying too close, you are very dangerous and endangering the lives of our crew and passengers," the Philippine pilot told the Chinese navy helicopter by radio at one point. "Keep away and distance your aircraft from us, you are violating the safety standard set by FAA and ICAO."

The pilot was referring to the

standard distance between aircraft required by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and the International Civil Aviation Organization to prevent air disasters.

There was no sign that the Philippine plane had to alter its planned path and altitude to avoid a collision.

The Philippine Coast Guard and the Bureau of Fisheries said in a statement that they remain "committed to asserting our sovereignty, sovereign rights and maritime jurisdiction in the West Philippine Sea, despite the aggressive and escalatory actions of China."

They referred to the Philippine name for the stretch of wa-

ters in the South China Sea closer to the Philippines' western coast.

The Chinese military, referring to Scarborough Shoal by its Chinese name, said the plane had "illegally entered the airspace of China's Huangyan Island without the Chinese government's permission."

The Chinese Southern Theater Command organized naval and air forces to track and warn the plane away, Senior Col. Tian Junli, spokesperson for the command, said in a written statement posted online.

The Philippines "confused right and wrong and spread false narratives," the statement said.

Most Army food funds were not used on meals

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

The Army spent nearly 70% of the money it collected from enlisted troops' food allowances on expenses other than meals, even as it struggles to provide them with a nutritious diet, according to a recent report.

Published Friday by Military.com, the report cited financial records the Army provided from 11 of its largest bases.

More than \$151 million of the \$225 million deducted from soldiers' paychecks in fiscal year 2024 was "returned to the big pool of Army funds" and spent elsewhere between October 2023 and September 2024, according to an unnamed service official cited by the news site.

The figures apply to junior enlisted soldiers living at the Army bases. At Fort Bragg, N.C., for example, the Army collected \$34.6

million from soldiers and spent \$16.6 million on food. At Fort Cavazos, Texas, the service garnished \$42.5 million and spent \$11.7 million on meals, the report said.

Only two of the 11 bases put more than half of the funds toward meals: Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, collected \$7.5 million and spent \$4 million, while Fort Bliss, Texas, collected \$22 million and spent \$11 million, according to the report.

Starting in 2002, enlisted service members began paying for their meals and received a monthly basic allowance for subsistence, or BAS, to offset that cost. BAS is not calculated based on a service member's income but rather on the Department of Agriculture's food cost index, which measures the average cost of food.

The allowance is currently

\$466 per month for enlisted troops and \$321 for commissioned officers. The enlisted allowance has risen each year from \$369 in 2019, according to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service's website.

Congress has been aware of the issue. In July 2020, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense reported that the Defense Department may not be "using those funds efficiently or exclusively for the intended purpose" of providing meals to troops.

"The committee is also concerned that the [Defense Department's] current food system is overly complex and inefficient, which may result in higher costs per meal at dining facilities, unnecessary internal competition between on-base food service providers, and poor food service planning," the subcommittee's

report said.

Four months earlier, then-Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, questioned then-Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy about the unspent funds during a House Appropriations hearing.

"Either the Army dining facilities are purchasing and preparing three meals a day per soldier, and then wasting half the food, or the money is not being spent on the soldiers' food, and it's being spent on something it's not appropriated for," Ryan said during the hearing, according to an Army Times report. "I'm not really sure what's worse."

Food prices in the U.S. are expected to rise by 2.2% in 2025, according to a Department of Agriculture study published Jan. 24. Grocery store purchases are forecast to increase by 1.3%; meals outside the home are expected to rise by 3.6%, the study said.

Egypt's rebuilding plan keeps Palestinians in Gaza

Associated Press

CAIRO — Egypt is developing a plan to rebuild Gaza without forcing Palestinians out of the strip in a counter to President Donald Trump's proposal to depopulate the territory so the U.S. can take it over.

Egypt's state-run Al-Ahram newspaper said the proposal calls for establishing "secure areas" within Gaza where Palestinians can live initially while Egyptian and international construction firms remove and rehabilitate the strip's infrastructure.

Egyptian officials have been discussing the plan with European diplomats as well as with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, according to two Egyptian officials and Arab and Western diplomats. They are also discussing ways to fund the

reconstruction, including an international conference on Gaza reconstruction, said one of the Egyptian officials and an Arab diplomat. The officials and diplomats spoke on condition of anonymity because the proposal is still being negotiated.

The proposal comes after an international uproar over Trump's call for the removal of Gaza's population of some 2 million Palestinians. Trump said the United States would take over the Gaza Strip and rebuild it into a "Riviera of the Middle East," though Palestinians would not be allowed back.

Palestinians have widely said they will not leave their homeland, while Egypt, Jordan — backed by Saudi Arabia — have refused Trump's calls for them to take in Gaza's population.

Hamas says it plans to free 6 Israeli hostages Saturday

Associated Press

CAIRO — A top Hamas leader says the militant group will release six living Israeli hostages on Saturday and the bodies of four hostages on Thursday, including the remains of the Bibas family that have become symbols of Israeli suffering in the war.

The fate of Shiri Bibas and her two young sons, Ariel and Kfir, reflected the feeling of helplessness as dozens of hostages remain in Gaza after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack. Israel has said it is extremely concerned about their condition but has not confirmed their deaths.

Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya, in prerecorded remarks on Tuesday, did not elaborate beyond saying that the "Bibas family" would be included in the handover of four bodies.

The six to be released on Saturday are the last living hostages to be freed under the first phase of the ceasefire in Gaza.

Three hostages had been expected to be freed on Saturday. It was not clear why Hamas changed the plan.

The warring sides have yet to negotiate the second and more difficult phase, in which Hamas would release dozens more hostages in exchange for a lasting ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal.

The releases have come in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

The ceasefire that began in mid-January has paused the deadliest fighting ever between Israel and Hamas, surged aid into devastated Gaza and allowed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to return to their homes.

Schools given deadline to end DEI programs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is giving America's schools and universities two weeks to eliminate diversity initiatives or risk losing federal money, raising the stakes in the president's fight against "wokeness" and sowing confusion as schools scramble to comply.

In a memo Friday, the Education Department gave an ultimatum to stop using "racial preferences" as a factor in admissions, financial aid, hiring or other areas. Schools are being given 14 days to end any practice that treats students or workers differently because of their race.

The sweeping demand could upend education in myriad ways. The memo targets college admissions offices, ordering an end to personal essays or writing prompts that can be used to predict an applicant's race. It

forbids dorms or graduation events for students of certain races. Efforts to recruit teachers from underrepresented groups could be seen as discrimination.

It's meant to correct what the memo described as rampant discrimination, often against white and Asian students.

"Schools have been operating on the pretext that selecting students for 'diversity' or similar euphemisms is not selecting them based on race," said Craig Trainor, acting assistant secretary for civil rights. "No longer. Students should be assessed according to merit, accomplishment and character."

The memo itself doesn't change federal law but reflects a change in the federal government's interpretation of antidiscrimination laws.

Under its broad language, nearly any practice that brings race into the discussion could be

considered discrimination.

As legal justification for the new memo, it cites the 2023 Supreme Court decision barring race as a factor in college admissions. Although the ruling applied only to admissions, the memo says it "applies more broadly."

"Put simply, educational institutions may neither separate or segregate students based on race, nor distribute benefits or burdens based on race," it said.

It's an extension of President Donald Trump's executive order banning diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

On Monday the Education Department announced it also cut \$600 million in grants for organizations that train teachers. The programs promoted "divisive" concepts like DEI, critical race theory and social justice activism, the department said.

The department memo appears to take aim at scholar-

ships reserved for students from certain racial backgrounds. There's been legal debate about whether the Supreme Court decision extends to financial aid, with some schools and institutions deciding to scrap racial requirements for certain scholarships.

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators said there's no consensus on the question, and the group is trying to understand how the memo could affect student aid.

"What we do know, however, is that 14 days is insufficient time for schools to assess and implement any necessary changes to be in compliance," the group said in a statement. "The last thing students need when making plans about how to pay for college is uncertainty over when or whether they will receive financial aid they've been relying on."

Social Security head steps down over DOGE access

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Social Security Administration's acting commissioner has stepped down from her role over Department of Government Efficiency requests to access Social Security recipient information, according to two people familiar with the official's departure who were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Acting Commissioner Michelle King's departure from the agency over the weekend — after more than 30 years of service — was initiated after King refused to provide DOGE staffers at the SSA with access to sensitive information, the people said Monday.

The White House has replaced King as acting commissioner with Leland Dudek, who currently works at the SSA, the

people said.

King's exit from the administration is one of several departures of high-ranking officials concerned about DOGE staffers' potential unlawful access to private taxpayer information.

DOGE has accessed Treasury payment systems and is attempting to access Internal Revenue Service databases.

Since Republican President Donald Trump has retaken the White House, his billionaire adviser Elon Musk has rapidly burrowed deep into federal agencies while avoiding public scrutiny of his work through the DOGE group.

The future of Social Security has become a top political issue. About 72.5 million people, including retirees, disabled people and children, receive Social Security benefits.

Mexico threatens to sue Google over Gulf of America

The Washington Post

Mexico is threatening to take Google to court over its "Gulf of America" name change on maps for users in the United States, pointing out that much of the body of water lies outside U.S. maritime borders in regions controlled by Mexico and Cuba.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Monday at a news conference that President Donald Trump's executive order to rename the Gulf of Mexico applied only to the U.S. continental shelf — the area of seabed to which the U.S. lays claim to under the law of the sea and maritime agreements with other coastal states.

It has asked Google to fully restore the name "Gulf of Mexico" to its Maps service for areas outside U.S. territory.

"What Google is doing here is changing the name of the continental shelf of Mexico and Cuba," Sheinbaum told reporters.

"Gulf of America" went into official use last week on a U.S. government database of geographic names, as well as on Google Maps.

Google said at the time that people in Mexico would still see the name "Gulf of Mexico," while those outside the two countries would see both names.

Sheinbaum first said last week that Mexico was considering a civil lawsuit against Google after the company's decision to use the name specified by Trump.

Google did not immediately respond Monday to a request for comment on the threat of a lawsuit.

GOP mulls Medicaid cuts, work demands

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans are weighing billions of dollars in cuts to Medicaid, threatening health care coverage for some of the 80 million U.S. adults and children enrolled in the safety net program.

The signing up of millions of additional Americans for taxpayer-funded health care coverage like Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act's marketplace during the Biden administration was lauded by Democrats as a success. But Republicans, who are looking to slash federal spending and offer lucrative tax cuts to corporations and wealthier Americans, now see a big target ripe for trimming. The \$880 billion Medicaid program is financed mostly by federal tax-

payers, who pick up as much as 80% of the tab in some states. And states, too, have said they're having trouble financing years of growth and sicker patients who enrolled in Medicaid.

To whittle down the budget, the GOP-controlled Congress is eyeing work requirements for Medicaid. It's also considering paying a shrunken, fixed rate to states. All told, over the next decade, Republican lawmakers could try to siphon billions of dollars from the nearly-free health care coverage offered to the poorest Americans.

Weeks before Congress began debating those changes, Republican governors in Arkansas, Ohio and South Dakota were making moves to implement Medicaid work rules of

their own, likely to be approved by President Donald Trump's administration.

And other cuts could be on the way. Already on Friday, the Republican administration announced it would shrink the Affordable Care Act's navigator program annual budget by 90% to \$10 million. Navigators are stationed throughout the country to help people enrolled in ACA and Medicaid coverage and have helped boost enrollment in health care programs.

Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana has floated the idea of tying work to Medicaid.

"It's common sense," Johnson said. "Little things like that make a big difference not only in the budgeting process but in the morale of the people. You know,

work is good for you. You find dignity in work."

But about 92% of Medicaid enrollees are already working, attending school or caregiving, according to an analysis by KFF, a health policy research firm.

Republicans have suggested a work requirement similar to the conditions for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly called food stamps. Those ages 16 to 59 must work or volunteer at least 80 hours a month if they are not in school, caring for a child under age 6, disabled, pregnant or homeless. On average, a SNAP enrollee's monthly household income is \$852, and the enrollee typically receives \$239 in benefits.

North Dakota breaks records for low temperatures

Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. — North Dakota felt more like the North Pole on Tuesday as lows broke records in the state capital of Bismarck and other parts of the state that had stood for more than a century.

Bismarck hit minus 39 on Tuesday, breaking the record of minus 37 set in 1910 for the same

date, said National Weather Service Meteorologist James Telken in Bismarck.

And late on Monday, Bismarck set a record of minus 35, shattering a 150-year-old record of minus 30 for the date of Feb. 17.

Much of the Midwest including Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska is also gripped by low temperatures double digits be-

low zero.

People should make sure to bundle up with hats, jackets and other winter gear even if they are outside for only a few minutes in such subzero cold, and they should bring pets indoors, Telken said. Warm clothing is especially important for drivers should they become stranded, he added.

A gradual warmup is expected with lows on Wednesday night across most of North Dakota forecasted to be in the minus 10s to minus 20s. By Thursday, lows are projected to be in the single digits above and below zero.

Forecasted highs for Monday are in the 50s for parts of southwestern and south-central North Dakota, he said.

All survive as Delta jet flips upside down in Toronto

Associated Press

TORONTO — A Delta Air Lines jet flipped on its roof while landing Monday at Toronto's Pearson Airport, but all 80 people on board survived and those hurt had relatively minor injuries, the airport's chief executive said.

Snow blown by winds gusting to 40 mph swirled when the flight from Minneapolis carrying 76 passengers and four crew attempted to land at around 2:15 p.m. Communications between the tower and pilot were normal

on approach and it's not clear what went so drastically wrong when the plane touched down.

Peter Carlson, a passenger traveling to Toronto for a paramedics conference, said the landing was "very forceful."

"All the sudden everything just kind of went sideways and then next thing I know it's kind of a blink and I'm upside down still strapped in," he told CBC News.

Canadian authorities held two brief news conferences but provided no details on the crash. Video posted to social media

showed the aftermath with the Mitsubishi CRJ-900LR overturned, the fuselage seemingly intact and firefighters dousing what was left of the fire as passengers climbed out and walked across the tarmac.

"We are very grateful there was no loss of life and relatively minor injuries," Deborah Flint, CEO of Greater Toronto Airports Authority, told reporters.

Delta CEO Ed Bastian said in a statement that "the hearts of the entire global Delta family are with those affected."

Toronto Pearson Fire Chief Todd Aitken said 18 passengers were taken to the hospital. Earlier in the day, Ornge air ambulance said it was transporting one pediatric patient to Toronto's SickKids hospital and two injured adults to other hospitals in the city.

Emergency personnel reached the plane within a few minutes and Aitken said the response "went as planned." He said "the runway was dry and there was no cross-wind conditions."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Taxidermy animals will move to new homes

SD SIOUX FALLS — Crocodiles, monkeys, tigers, zebras and dozens of other taxidermy animals will move to new homes after concerns about arsenic exposure forced the closure of the South Dakota museum where they had been displayed for decades.

The Delbridge Museum of Natural History at the Great Plains Zoo in Sioux Falls closed in August 2023 after testing showed potentially hazardous levels of arsenic present in 80% of the specimens of the Brockhouse Collection.

The decision raised concerns that the 152 specimens, some dating back to the 1940s, would no longer be displayed.

But after a search, the Sioux Falls City Council unanimously approved a resolution for donating the mounts to several institutions.

Under the deal, 117 specimens will go to the University of Notre Dame Museum of Biodiversity, 33 to the Atlanta-based Oddities Museum Inc., and two to the Institute for Natural History Arts Inc. in New Jersey.

Man on death row again seeks a postponement

SC COLUMBIA — A condemned man who is the next person scheduled to be put to death in South Carolina is again asking for his execution date to be postponed because his lawyers have not received the autopsy report from the last execution two weeks ago.

The state Supreme Court rejected a similar request earlier this month by Brad Sigmon. But his attorneys said in a motion that the situation has become more urgent because he faces a Feb. 21 deadline to decide whether to die by lethal injection, firing squad or electric chair.

Sigmon's execution is currently scheduled for March 7.

He was convicted in the 2001 baseball bat killings of his girlfriend's parents at their home in Greenville County. They were in separate rooms, and Sigmon went back and forth as he beat them to death, investigators said.

Teacher probed over assassination threat

NY NEW YORK — A high school teacher in south New Jersey is being investigated by the Secret Service over a social media post mulling the assassination of President Donald Trump.

Fred Wilson, an 11th grade special education and social studies teacher at Egg Harbor Township High School, originally made the remarks on his Facebook page, which has since been deleted, the Press of Atlantic City reported.

"I think we are at the moment where assassination is at least a talking point," wrote Wilson, who has been with Egg Harbor School District since 2003.

Though it's unclear when exactly the post written, screenshots have been shared across several social media platforms since at least Feb. 7.

Egg Harbor Township Capt. Cherie Burgan confirmed that authorities had received several reports about Wilson's al-

leged social media activity.

Suspect in rapper's killing seeks to delay his trial

NV LAS VEGAS — Attorneys for the man suspected of killing rap icon Tupac Shakur want to delay next month's trial, saying more time is needed for investigative work to ensure that Duane "Keffe D" Davis gets a fair trial.

The motion filed Friday in a Nevada court provides insight into Davis' defense, noting that a private investigator has identified witnesses who can testify that he was not at the scene of the 1996 shooting, nor was he in Las Vegas at the time.

The motion also suggests that someone else may have orchestrated the shooting and that witnesses who could testify on the matter are being interviewed.

The defense team said in a statement that the new developments and the need to interview key witnesses necessitate a delay. A hearing had been scheduled for Tuesday to discuss the timing of the trial, currently set to begin in March.

Search continues for body of missing boater

GA ATLANTA — Rescuers searched for a second body a week after two boaters went missing on a Georgia lake that draws tourists from around the South.

The body of Joycelyn Wilson, a mathematics instructor at Spelman College, a historically black institution in Atlanta, was found Sunday in Lake Oconee.

Her boating partner Gary Jones remains missing. Jones is a track and field coach at the

Westminster Schools, an exclusive Atlanta private school community.

Their empty boat had been discovered Saturday night, circling in the water.

Jones' shoes were later found floating in the water not far from where Wilson's body and the boat were discovered.

Putnam County Sheriff Howard Sills is not describing the case as a boating accident or anything else at this point.

Cannabis agency begins accepting applications

MN SAINT PAUL — Eighteen months after Minnesota legalized marijuana for adult use, the state's new cannabis agency will officially begin to accept applications Tuesday for the first round of marijuana business licenses. The licenses will be awarded to qualified applicants in lotteries later this spring.

The opening of the application window marks a key milestone on the path toward launching the state's legal marijuana market for the Office of Cannabis Management. The agency has faced challenges in recent months — including a change of leadership in January, just weeks after it canceled a planned social equity license preapproval lottery amid a wave of litigation from applicants who alleged they were unfairly disqualified.

The OCM posted application instructions and other resources for prospective cannabis entrepreneurs on its website last week.

Applications for most license types will be accepted until March 14.

— From wire reports

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Stretch run toward NBA playoffs underway

Associated Press

The trade deadline is gone. The All-Star break has just ended. Luka Dončić is with the Los Angeles Lakers. Jimmy Butler is with Golden State. Anthony Davis is with Dallas, though it's unknown when he'll play again.

The dust has settled. It's time for the stretch run.

Here comes the fun part of the season. Every club has between 26 and 30 games remaining in this 7½-week sprint to the April 13 finish line, play resuming Wednesday when Charlotte faces the Lakers. And teams will point to recent history as proof that just getting into the playoffs means anything can happen: No. 5, No. 6, No. 7 and No. 8 seeds have made their way to the conference finals in the last two years alone.

"I'm looking forward to the challenge," said the Warriors' Stephen Curry, the now two-time All-Star Game MVP. "It's basically a playoff game every single night, and that usually brings the best out of you."

Some teams can go ahead and start planning for the playoffs.

Oklahoma City and Cleveland are both 44-10, tied for the best record in the league. Defending champion Boston, currently No. 2 in the Eastern Conference, re-

mains on pace to obliterate league records for 3-pointers made and attempted in a season. The Celtics, New York, Denver, Houston and the Lakers all have winning percentages over .600, which is an excellent sign — 132 of the last 133 teams to reach the break with such a record have wound up making the postseason.

"We have obviously a pretty good basketball team," said Thunder All-Star guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the current MVP favorite according to BetMGM Sportsbook. "We have a little bit more experience. We have an opportunity to, for sure, win an NBA championship. Now we're going to have to earn it."

Then there's the other end of the spectrum, that being the teams that are out of the mix.

Over the last 20 seasons, 98.8% of the teams that have winning percentages under .400 at the break wind up missing the playoffs. If that form holds, that eliminates Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Toronto, Charlotte, Utah, New Orleans and Washington.

So based on the numbers, that means seven teams are in, seven teams are out, and 16 teams remain in the middle fighting for what will be the last nine playoff

spots — five to be clinched on or before the end of the regular season April 13, four others to be won in the play-in tournament later that week.

"The last 25 to 30 games are really important for everyone," said Miami guard Tyler Herro, the league's new 3-point shootout champion. "We've got a new group, in a sense, and we're going to hit the ground running. It's going to happen fast. Everything is going to matter throughout this next month and a half."

The Heat traded Butler to Golden State, getting back Andrew Wiggins in return. San Antonio landed De'Aaron Fox from Sacramento, and the Los Angeles Clippers — who have barely had Kawhi Leonard available this season, but he's playing now — figure they're right in the mix to challenge as well.

"I think we got a really good chance," Clippers All-Star guard James Harden said. "We added some shooting, we added some defense and obviously with a healthy Kawhi we've got a chance to compete with anybody. So I think for us, it's just finding out how we want to play and attacking it."

Milwaukee added Kyle Kuzma, moving Khris Middleton — a

Bucks mainstay for years — to Washington in that deal. And Phoenix didn't trade Kevin Durant, which is a sign the Suns are hoping their star trio of him, Devin Booker and Bradley Beal can make a push.

"We're all figuring it out, man," Durant said. "We've got 28, 29 games to go to figure it out. That's the fun part, trying to figure out how to get out of a slump."

Davis' injury obviously isn't great for the Mavericks, especially with it compounded by a rash of other injuries to Dallas' big-man corps. Dončić is still working his way back into form after a calf issue, so he and James will likely need more time to figure out the best way for this new star duo to work. Butler went to the Warriors with hopes of being the jolt that gets Curry, Draymond Green and coach Steve Kerr back to title contention.

But a lot of teams have hope. And they all know that now's the time to make a move. Let the stretch run begin.

"I think, 27 games or so left to make a push," Curry said. "All we want is just to get into a playoff series and have a fighting chance to be a tough out against anybody in the West, and we have a good opportunity in front of us to do that."

Flagg's double-double lifts No. 3 Duke past Virginia

Associated Press

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — Freshman star Cooper Flagg had 17 points and 14 rebounds, notching his seventh double-double of the season before halftime, as No. 3 Duke cruised past Virginia 80-62 on Monday night.

The Blue Devils (23-3, 15-1 ACC), who also got 17 points from Kon Knueppel, have won three straight since their lone conference loss Feb. 8 at No. 18 Clemson.

Andrew Rohde had 15 points, five rebounds and five assists for the Cavaliers (13-13, 6-9).

Duke forward Maliq Brown, who grew up in Virginia about an hour from Charlottesville, sustained an apparent left shoulder injury with 1:21 left in the first half. He immediately headed to the locker room and did

not return.

Brown, a junior transfer from Syracuse, had two points, two assists and a rebound in 10 minutes.

Rohde rifled a perfect pass to a cutting Taine Murray for what appeared destined to be a back-door layup for the Cavaliers. Instead, Flagg swatted the shot away. The Blue Devils got a 3-pointer from Tyrese Proctor at the other end, part of a 16-2 run that put them ahead 27-14 with 8:19 left in the first half.

One of the ACC's best rivalries over the past decade was no contest on this night. From 2012-23, no Virginia-Duke game had a margin of victory greater than 10 points. That run ended last year at Duke when the Blue Devils rolled 73-48.

No. 19 Arizona 74, Baylor 67: Tobe Awa-

ka had 14 points and 12 rebounds as the visiting Wildcats moved into second place alone in the Big 12 Conference with a win over the Bears.

Caleb Love and Henri Veesaar each had 13 points for Arizona (18-8, 12-3), which dropped six spots in the latest AP Top 25 poll earlier Monday after back-to-back losses last week to Kansas State and No. 5 Houston.

VJ Edgecombe scored 24 points for Baylor (16-10, 8-7). Norchad Omier had his 82nd career double-double — and 14th this season — with 15 points and 13 rebounds. Jayden Nunn added 10 points.

The Bears were within three points twice in the final minute, but the Wildcats made seven consecutive free throws in the final 49 seconds — and went 9 of 12 in the final 1:21.

Sweden hands US 1st loss in 4 Nations

Associated Press

BOSTON — The first match-up between the United States and Canada in the 4 Nations Face-Off left both sides — and most hockey fans, too — wanting more.

That's just what they'll get.

The North Americans played their way into a rematch in Thursday's championship game, even with the U.S. losing 2-1 to Sweden in the round-robin finale on Monday. The U.S. team had already clinched a spot in the title game, and Canada earned its way there by beating Finland 5-3 earlier Monday to finish the group stage.

"It will be a hard-fought battle. That's what I would anticipate," U.S. coach Mike Sullivan said. "I feel like I get the best seat in the house, being behind the bench and being up close to it. To watch what these guys do on the ice at the pace that they're able to do it, sometimes we just marvel at what goes on up

there."

Sweden rallied after falling behind just 35 seconds into the game to hand the U.S. its first loss in the tournament that brought the game's greatest players back to the international stage after sitting out the past two Olympics.

"They're (Canada) gonna be extremely hungry. They don't want to lose two to us," American forward Dylan Larkin said.

"I think there'll be some nerves, but I hope it's that level that it was in Montreal."

Chris Kreider gave the Americans the lead in the opening minute on Monday night, but Gustav Nyquist tied it a dozen minutes later and Jesper Bratt gave Sweden the lead with less than a minute remaining in the first period. Samuel Ersson made 31 saves, shutting the U.S. down for the game's last 59:25.

Officially, the nightcap meant nothing to either the Americans or Swedes: The U.S. had already

clinched a spot in Thursday night's championship game, and Sweden needed the Canadians to falter for a chance in the final.

"I don't think there was too much of a shock," U.S. forward Jack Hughes said. "They're obviously a great team and I know they're champing at the bit to get us again. We're really excited that we get them, and that's kind of what we were looking for."

With some fans wearing powdered wigs and colonial-era tricorn hats, the Boston crowd belted "The Star-Spangled Banner" before the game — a response to the Canadians who booed the U.S. national anthem before the early games in Montreal. Chants of "U-S-A!" rang out through the TD Garden in the final minutes, with goalie Jake Oettinger pulled for an extra skater, but the Americans couldn't beat Ersson to force overtime.

Instead, the Americans will

regroup for the tournament final.

"The first game (against Canada on Saturday) was such a great hockey game. And I think it's great for hockey that there's an opportunity for these two teams to meet again," Sullivan said. "Obviously, both teams have star power all around the lineup. It was a very competitive hockey game, the first game. I would anticipate the next one will be every bit as competitive, if not more."

The U.S. faced Sweden a player down with Auston Matthews out, then Brady Tkachuk left in the second period after colliding with Ersson in the crease. More disappointing for Boston fans: Bruins defenseman Charlie McAvoy being scratched from the lineup.

Sullivan said the team had not moved to bring in roster reinforcements.

"We're hoping to get some of these guys back," he said.

Canada tops Finland, sets up rematch with Americans

Associated Press

BOSTON — Nathan MacKinnon scored twice. Connor McDavid had a goal and an assist. Sidney Crosby flipped in an empty-netter from center ice after Finland cut a four-goal deficit to one in the final minutes.

Canada's best players came through in the 4 Nations Face-Off on Monday to earn a rematch of their fight-filled preliminary bout with the United States. The rivals will meet in the tournament final.

"That's what you need: big plays from big-time players," Crosby said after the 5-3 victory over Finland. "These guys are used to playing in these big games under the spotlight and delivering. They did again tonight."

Canada and the U.S. will play on Thursday night in a sequel to a round-robin game in Montreal last week that started with three

fighters and ended with the Americans celebrating a 3-1 victory. Canadian forward — and Boston Bruins captain — Brad Marchand will take the ice as an opponent at the TD Garden in a series where fans had to be asked not to boo the opponents' national anthem.

"We're obviously really excited about (having) another crack at these guys. It's going to be an intense game, for sure," Marchand said in the visitor's locker room, down the hall from the one where he has changed for 16 seasons.

"There's no bigger rivalry in hockey than Canada-U.S., and I think it's the matchup that everybody wanted," Marchand said. "So it's going to be an extremely intense game, one we're all going to be looking forward to."

Jordan Binnington stopped 23 shots for Canada on the same ice

where he clinched the 2019 Stanley Cup for the St. Louis Blues. Brayden Point also scored and Sam Reinhart had three assists as the Canadians opened a 4-0 lead in the first 25 minutes.

The tournament is the NHL's return to international competition after sitting out the 2018 and 2022 Olympics. It delivered last week's intense U.S.-Canada game against a backdrop of frosty real-world relations between the countries, spurred by President Donald Trump's talk of tariffs — or even turning Canada into the 51st U.S. state.

The Americans fell to Sweden 2-1 on Monday night in a game that lost any meaning once Canada clinched the second spot in the final. The U.S. won both of its previous round-robin games, earning the top spot in the pool.

After fiery play in Montreal last week, Monday's game was

preceded by tepid booing during the Canadian national anthem and all of the intensity of a mid-winter NHL game between two teams with interim coaches.

And then, the Finns found life.

Finland's Esa Lindell scored with seven minutes left to make it 4-1, and Mikael Granlund scored twice in the final 100 seconds with the goalie off for an extra attacker. Crosby ended the suspense when he flipped a loose puck from center ice into the empty net.

"Got a couple of goals there late and came really close, but not today," Finnish forward Aleksander Barkov said. "Obviously, it's not an easy task to come back from a 4-0 deficit against maybe the best team in the world. So I think we did well there at the end. But the rest of the 50 minutes we could have and should have probably played a little better."

Red Sox's Devers won't give up third base

Associated Press

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Boston's ballyhooed signing of Alex Bregman was met with considerable resistance Monday when Rafael Devers said he wouldn't cede third base.

Devers, a three-time All-Star, has played the hot corner for the Red Sox since 2017 and himself received a major deal just two years ago.

"Third base is my position," Devers said through an interpreter. "It's what I play. I don't know what their plans are. We had a conversation. I made it clear on what my desires were. Whatever happens from here, I don't know."

When asked if he would be willing to become a designated hitter, without waiting for his interpreter to relay the question, Devers said, "No."

Boston signed Bregman on Saturday to a three-year, \$120 million contract that includes a \$5 million signing bonus. A two-time All-Star, Bregman has hit more than 20 home runs each of the past three seasons.

Landing Bregman was a key, the Red Sox hope, to ending a stretch in which Boston has missed the playoffs five of the past six years.

Devers signed an 11-year, \$331 million contract in January 2021 and has been even more

productive in recent seasons than Bregman. Devers hit 28 homers and drove in 83 runs last season despite playing just 138 games because of an assortment of injuries. The year before, he had 33 homers and 100 RBIs while playing in 153 games.

That production and the financial investment by the Red Sox could give Devers some leverage in his push to stay at third.

Boston manager Alex Cora noted that Devers "was very vocal last year" about how the club needed to improve.

"The decisions that are going to be made here about roster construction and about what

we're going to do in the future, we're going to make sure we have the best team possible out there," Cora said. "(Devers) has a lot of pride. We know that. He feels like he's a third baseman. He's going to work out as a third baseman and then we'll make decisions accordingly.

"I think here it's not about Bregman or Devers or Cora. It's about the Red Sox. Whatever decision we make is for the benefit of the team."

Cora said Bregman could wind up at second or third base and Devers at third or DH.

"There's competition here," Cora said. "I think flexibility and versatility are huge for us."

Guerrero plans to become free agent after this season

Associated Press

DUNEDIN, Fla. — Vladimir Guerrero Jr. plans to become a free agent after the season following the passing of his deadline Tuesday to reach a long-term agreement with the Toronto Blue Jays.

"The last couple days, the front office, my lawyers, my agents, they met, both (sides) tried but obviously we couldn't get an agreement," Guerrero said through interpreter Hector Lebron at Blue Jays camp. "We never got to the point where I felt like I wanted to do the deal."

A four-time All-Star at age 25, Guerrero said during the offseason that he would cut off negotiations when he reported for spring training.

"I don't want, especially my teammates, to go through any distractions about that," Guerrero said. "I'm here today and I'm ready. I want to win a lot of games and I want to make it to the playoffs. That's all that's in my head right now."

Guerrero has a \$28.5 million, one-year contract and will be perhaps the top free agent on the market one year after

Juan Soto signed a record \$765 million, 15-year contract with the New York Mets.

Guerrero hit .323 last season with a .940 OPS, 30 homers and 103 RBIs.

"We worked very hard and the motivation is still there," Toronto general manager Ross Atkins said. "I'm confident that every thought, idea we had — every dollar that we had — was communicated. But we're obviously disappointed to not have gotten that done. ... It doesn't change our desire. We will certainly be motivated and remain motivated."

Guerrero came up through the Blue Jays system, made his big league debut in 2019 and has a .288 average, .863 OPS, 160 homers and 507 RBs.

Toronto president Mark Shapiro, team chairman Edward Rogers and Rogers Communications Inc. CEO Tony Staffieri were involved in the negotiations.

Turner joining Cubs on \$6 million, 1-year deal

MESA, Ariz. — Justin Turner has agreed to a \$6 million, one-year deal with the Chicago

Cubs, according to a person with direct knowledge of the situation, giving the team additional infield depth.

Turner can earn an additional \$2.5 million in bonuses, according to the person who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity Tuesday because the contract was pending a physical.

The addition of Turner would give the team some security at third base should Matt Shaw need more seasoning in the minors. The 23-year-old Shaw has been slowed by a left oblique issue in spring training.

The 40-year-old Turner could also back up Michael Busch at first and play DH. Turner played for Toronto and Seattle last year, batting .259 with 11 homers, 55 RBIs.

Turner fits an offseason pattern for the Cubs after they added outfielder Kyle Tucker and relievers Ryan Pressly and Ryan Brasier — all World Series winners.

Athletics sign manager Kotsay to extension

MESA, Ariz. — Manager Mark Kotsay helped the Athlet-

ics navigate a difficult three seasons while the franchise lost a lot of games, built a young roster and dealt with an emotional departure from Oakland.

Now he gets the chance to lead during potentially happier times.

Kotsay and the Athletics announced Monday that they've agreed to a contract extension through the 2028 season that includes a club option for 2029. The deal coincided with the team's first full-squad workout of spring training.

The 49-year-old Kotsay is in his fourth season with the Athletics and has led the team through a period of upheaval that's included a move from Oakland to Sacramento, Calif., where they will play at a minor league stadium for the next few seasons. The eventual plan is to end up in Las Vegas.

The A's had a 69-93 record last season, which was a 19-win improvement over a 112-loss season in 2023. The team appears to be on the rise with a young lineup that includes Brent Rooker, Shea Langeliers, Lawrence Butler and JJ Bleday.