

Hurdles in EU leaders' plan for Ukraine

Associated Press

LONDON — As the United States and Russia push ahead — so far without Ukraine at the table — on talks to end the war, political and military leaders in Europe are fleshing out details of a plan for European forces to help ensure Moscow doesn't attack again.

After months of quiet discussions, the proposal has become increasingly public. It will likely be on the agenda when U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron, two major backers of the idea, visit Washington on separate days this week for talks with President Donald Trump.

Starmer, who will visit Thursday, has stressed the force won't work without American military might to back it up. Persuading Trump to provide it could be a tall order.

The security guarantee that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy really wants is NATO membership. European members of the military alli-

ance still back that goal, but the U.S. looks to have taken it off the table, along with Ukrainian hopes of regaining the 20% of its territory seized by Russia.

In the absence of NATO membership, Zelenskyy has said that more than 100,000 European troops could be needed in Ukraine to guarantee the conflict doesn't flare up again after a ceasefire.

But Western officials have said what's being discussed is a "reassurance force," not an army of peacekeepers posted along the 600-mile front line in Ukraine's east.

The proposal supported by the United Kingdom and France would see fewer than 30,000 European troops on the ground in Ukraine — away from the front line at key infrastructure sites such as nuclear power plants — backed by Western air and sea power.

Under the plan, the front line would largely be monitored remotely, with drones and other technology.

Air power based outside Ukraine — perhaps in Poland or Romania — would be in reserve to deter breaches and reopen Ukrainian airspace to commercial flights. That could include American air power.

"There must be a U.S. backstop because a U.S. security guarantee is the only way to effectively deter Russia from attacking Ukraine again," Starmer said on Monday.

Trump has long expressed the view that Washington's NATO allies don't pull their weight and that Europe must do more for its own security.

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has told European allies that "there will not be U.S. troops deployed to Ukraine," but hasn't ruled out American support such as air transport or logistics.

Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump's Ukraine envoy, said during a recent visit to NATO that all options must be kept on the table because the shape of any force will depend on the outcome of

peace negotiations that have yet to be held.

Jamie Shea, a former senior NATO official, said that "different people in the administration are sending different signals ... Who do you believe is an issue?"

It's unclear whether Ukraine will be happy with the proposal.

Russia, meanwhile, has rejected the idea outright. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that deployment of troops from NATO nations, even if not under the banner of the alliance, "will certainly be unacceptable for us."

The U.K., France and the Nordic and Baltic states that are the closest NATO nations to Russia appear most likely to play the main roles in any force.

The success of the plan depends on the nature of any agreement to stop the fighting.

Russia has around 600,000 troops in Ukraine, and analysts have said any ceasefire deal that leaves the bulk of them there is a recipe for renewed conflict.

Trump fires Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, Navy head

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was fired Friday night by President Donald Trump as Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the chief of naval operations, was also relieved of duty.

"I want to thank General Charles 'CQ' Brown for his over 40 years of service to our country, including as our current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Trump said in a post on Truth Social. "He is a fine gen-

tleman and an outstanding leader, and I wish a great future for him and his family."

Reports have circulated Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth would fire senior officers who were promoted during former President Joe Biden's administration and replace them with others more aligned with Trump's agenda.

Brown and Franchetti were reported last week as being on the list of names to be fired. Franchetti was relieved of duty Friday, according to a military official who spoke on condition

of anonymity.

Trump in his social media post nominated retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan "Razin" Caine to be the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"During my first term, Razin was instrumental in the complete annihilation of the ISIS caliphate. It was done in record setting time, a matter of weeks," Trump said. "Many so-called military 'geniuses' said it would take years to defeat ISIS. Gen. Caine, on the other hand, said it could be done quickly, and he delivered. Despite being highly

qualified and respected to serve on the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the previous administration, Gen. Caine was passed over for promotion by Sleepy Joe Biden. But not anymore!"

Trump added he has directed Hegseth to solicit nominations for five additional high-level positions, which will be announced soon.

Minutes after the post, Hegseth in a statement said the Pentagon would be looking for chief of naval operations and Air Force vice chief of staff nominations.

US, Mexico agree to military collaboration

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Military commanders from the U.S. and Mexico have agreed to conduct coordinated patrols, share more information and establish channels for instant communication as part of increased border security each country has put in place in the past month.

The changes stemmed from a recently held meeting between Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, commander of U.S. Northern Command, and Gen. Ricardo Trevilla Trejo, secretary of national defense for Mexico.

The coordinated patrols will occur with each country's troops remaining on their re-

spective sides of the Rio Grande, the river that divides the U.S. and Mexico, Kasper said.

Guillot told the Senate Armed Services Committee this month that the Pentagon had recently approved sharing more of the information that it has about the distribution and production of the synthetic drug fentanyl, which has caused a spike in U.S. overdose deaths in recent years.

However, NORTHCOM could use more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to better combat the drug crossing the border as well as expanded authorities to allow for more advise and assist operations between U.S. and Mexi-

can forces, Guillot said.

The military coordination is part of a bulked-up U.S. effort along the border after President Donald Trump signed executive orders on Jan. 20 — his first day back in office — that have increased the number of active-duty troops supporting the Department of Homeland Security. There are about 4,200 troops working on border security with the expectation it will rise.

U.S. troops have been deployed to the southwest border since 2018, but Trump said he wants the mission to be a top priority for the Defense Department. Most of the work at the border is in a support role for the Department of Homeland

Security such as air and ground surveillance monitoring and adding additional barriers to existing border wall.

The Army recently released photos from Texas that showed soldiers working in Uvalde, about 50 miles in from the border, inspecting trains for migrants alongside Customs and Border Protection agents.

Mexican officials ramped up the country's border security in early February after Trump threatened to impose tariffs unless the country did more to prevent migrants from reaching its northern border and crossing between legal ports of entry into the U.S. and stop fentanyl crossing into America.

Bomb threat made against US base in Tokyo

By SETH ROBSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Japanese police are investigating a bomb threat against this key U.S. military hub in western Tokyo that also serves as the headquarters of U.S. Forces Japan.

The threat was sent Thursday as a comment through the Fussa city website, demanding approximately \$120,000 to prevent

an attack between Sunday and Monday, a city official told Stars and Stripes by phone Friday.

The same amount of money was demanded in a Tuesday threat against 32 U.S. military installations on Okinawa, which was sent via emails to the Okinawa prefectural and Naha city websites, according to officials.

Fussa police and the North Kanto Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan's Ministry of Defense, were notified of the Yokota

threat, the city official said. Police searched areas near the base and alerted U.S. officials, a Fussa police spokesman confirmed.

Officials declined to provide further details, such as the identity of a suspect or where the ransom money was to be sent, citing the ongoing investigation.

Yokota's gates were closed for about a half-hour Thursday afternoon.

U.S. security officials are

working with their Japanese counterparts to investigate the bomb threat to American military facilities in the country, USFJ spokesman Air Force Capt. Danny Rangel said by email Friday evening.

"At this time, we do not perceive a credible threat to our SOFA population," he said, referring to American personnel in Japan under the status of forces agreement between the two allies.

Hegseth defends firings of several Pentagon leaders

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is defending President Donald Trump's firing of the nation's senior military officer and a wave of dismissals at the Pentagon, insisting that they weren't unusual despite accusations that the administration is injecting politics into the military.

"Nothing about this is unprecedented," Hegseth told "Fox News Sunday" about Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown Jr. being dismissed Friday night as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Brown was just the second Black general to serve as chairman. His 16 months in the post were consumed with the war in

Ukraine and the expanded conflict in the Middle East.

Hegseth said Friday's dismissals affected six three- and four-star generals and were "a reflection of the president wanting the right people around him to execute the national security approach we want to take."

Retired Gen. George Casey, commander of U.S. and multi-

national forces in Iraq from 2004 to 2007 under Republican President George W. Bush, called the firings "extremely destabilizing." He also noted that the Trump administration can change Pentagon policy without changing personnel, but added, that what happened is "within the president's prerogative."

Agencies balk at Musk's work directive

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Key U.S. agencies, including the FBI and State Department, have instructed their employees not to comply with cost-cutting chief Elon Musk's demand that federal workers explain what they accomplished last week — or risk losing their jobs.

That resistance has intensified a pervasive sense of chaos and confusion, while highlighting a potential power struggle among President Donald Trump's allies, that is affecting federal employees across the country as a new workweek is about to begin.

Musk's team sent an email to hundreds of thousands of federal

employees on Saturday giving them roughly 48 hours to report five specific things they had accomplished last week. In a separate message on X, Musk said any employee who failed to respond by the deadline — set in the email as 11:59 p.m. EST Monday — would lose their job.

Democrats and even some Republicans were critical of Musk's unusual directive, which came just hours after Trump encouraged him on social media to "get more aggressive" in reducing the size of the government through his so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE.

Sen. John Curtis, R-Utah, was among the members of Trump's

own party who had concerns. Utah has 33,000 federal employees.

"If I could say one thing to Elon Musk, it's like, please put a dose of compassion in this," Curtis said. "These are real people. These are real lives. These are mortgages. ... It's a false narrative to say we have to cut and you have to be cruel to do it as well."

Rep. Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., also questioned the legal basis the Trump administration would have for dismissing tens of thousands of workers for refusing to heed Musk's latest demand, though the email did not include the threat about workers losing their jobs.

Labor unions have threatened lawsuits, while several agency leaders, including Trump appointees, encouraged their workers not to cooperate.

FBI Director Kash Patel, an outspoken Trump ally, instructed bureau employees to ignore Musk's request, at least for now.

"The FBI, through the Office of the Director, is in charge of all of our review processes, and will conduct reviews in accordance with FBI procedures," Patel wrote in an email confirmed by The Associated Press. "When and if further information is required, we will coordinate the responses. For now, please pause any responses."

IRS layoffs could affect taxpayers, refunds this year

The Washington Post

The Internal Revenue Service has begun firing thousands of employees as part of another round of layoffs targeting federal workers, The Washington Post reported last week. The mass firings come during a busy tax filing season, with taxpayers expected to file more than 140 million tax returns by the April 15 deadline.

Of the 7,000 IRS employees expected to be laid off, 5,000 come from the tax agency's enforcement and collections section, which in recent years has worked to increase audits of the country's wealthiest taxpayers

and more strictly enforce rules governing certain businesses.

The layoffs are part of the Trump administration's goal to dramatically shrink the federal workforce.

Experts have said the planned layoffs at the IRS could jeopardize tax collection and taxpayer services. Here's what you need to know.

■ How many people work at the IRS?

For years, the IRS has been starved of funding, leaving the tax agency understaffed and ill-equipped to assist taxpayers with filing tax returns, process returns and crack down on tax

avoidance. In 2022, congressional Democrats narrowly passed the Inflation Reduction Act, which allocated \$80 billion to the IRS over 10 years, marking the biggest boost to the tax agency's budget in history. Congress has clawed back some of that funding since then.

Last year, the agency grew by about 10% — from about 90,000 employees to 100,000 employees, according to The Post. About 7% of the agency will be laid off.

■ How will the layoffs affect tax returns and refund processing?

The IRS has said publicly that personnel critical to the tax filing

season are ineligible for the "deferred resignation" plan that encouraged federal workers to quit, indicating that the layoffs may not affect employees who process tax returns or assist taxpayers with filing tax returns.

In a statement Thursday, former IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig said "there should not be a significant impact on current filing season operations," because the firings were confined to probationary employees who work in the Small Business Self-Employed Division of the IRS, not those who work in the Wage and Investment Division, which handles taxpayer services.

Police officer killed in Pennsylvania hospital shooting

Associated Press

YORK, Pa. — A man armed with a pistol and carrying zip ties entered a Pennsylvania hospital's intensive care unit Saturday and took staff members hostage before he was killed by police in a shootout that also left an officer dead, authorities said.

Three workers at UPMC Memorial Hospital, including a

doctor, a nurse and a custodian, and two other officers were shot and wounded in the attack, York County District Attorney Tim Barker said. A fourth staffer was injured in a fall.

Gunfire erupted after officers went to engage the shooter, whom Barker identified as Diogenes Archangel-Ortiz, 49. He said Archangel-Ortiz was holding at gunpoint a female staff

member who had her hands bound with zip ties when police opened fire.

"This is a huge loss to our community," Barker said at a press conference following the shooting. "It is absolutely clear, and beyond any and all doubt, that the officers were justified in taking their action using deadly force."

Barker added that while the

investigation is in its early stages, it appears Archangel-Ortiz had previous contact with the hospital's ICU earlier in the week for "a medical purpose involving another individual" and he intentionally targeted the workers there.

The officer who died was identified as Andrew Duarte of the West York Borough Police Department.

Pope critical, with early kidney failure

Associated Press

ROME — Pope Francis remained in critical condition Sunday and blood tests show early kidney failure, but he remains alert and “well-oriented” and attended Mass, the Vatican said, as the 88-year-old pontiff battles pneumonia and a complex lung infection.

In a late update, the Vatican said Francis hadn’t had any more respiratory crises since Saturday night but was still receiving high flows of supplemental oxygen.

Some blood tests showed “initial, mild, kidney failure,” but doctors said it was under control. The decreased platelet count, necessary for clotting, that was first detected Saturday was stable.

“The complexity of the clinical picture, and the necessary wait for drug therapies to provide

some feedback, dictate that the prognosis remains reserved,” the doctors concluded.

Prayers for him poured in from around the world, from his native Argentina to the seat of Sunni Islam in Cairo to schoolchildren in Rome.

In New York, Cardinal Timothy Dolan admitted what church leaders in Rome weren’t saying publicly: that the Catholic faithful were united “at the bedside of a dying father.”

“As our Holy Father Pope Francis is in very, very fragile health, and probably close to death,” Dolan said at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, without saying if he had independent information about the pope’s condition.

Doctors have said Francis’ condition is touch-and-go, given his age, fragility and pre-existing lung disease. His condition has

revived speculation about what might happen if he becomes unconscious or otherwise incapacitated.

Francis was supposed to have celebrated Mass on Sunday morning in St. Peter’s Basilica and ordained deacons as part of the Vatican’s yearlong Holy Year commemoration. The organizer of the Holy Year, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, celebrated the Mass in his place and offered a special prayer for Francis from the altar before delivering the homily the pope had prepared.

“Even though he is in a hospital bed, we feel Pope Francis close to us. We feel him present among us,” Fisichella told the hundreds of white-robed deacons.

A pre-written message that had been prepared for Francis to read Sunday but did not deliver said he was “confidently continuing my

hospitalization at the Gemelli Hospital, carrying on with the necessary treatment; and rest is also part of the therapy!” The message asked for prayers for him — as he always asks — and noted the upcoming anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, “a painful and shameful occasion for the whole of humanity.”

Meanwhile in Argentina, Catholics prayed for the pope at the Buenos Aires cathedral and the city’s iconic obelisk was lit up “Francis, the city prays for you.”

In Cairo, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, the seat of Sunni learning who forged a close bond with Francis, wished him well.

And school children from around Rome deluged the Gemelli hospital with get-well cards, while Italian bishops led rosary prayers and celebrated special Masses across Italy.

Israel delays the release of more Palestinian prisoners

Associated Press

TELAVIV, Israel — Israel says the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners is delayed “until the release of the next hostages has been assured, and without the humiliating ceremonies” at handovers of Israeli captives in Gaza.

The statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office came early Sunday as military vehicles that normally move in advance of the buses carrying prisoners left the open gates of Ofer prison, only to turn around and go back in.

The release of 620 Palestinian prisoners had been delayed for several hours and was meant to occur just after six Israeli hostages were released on Saturday. It was meant to be the largest one-day prisoner release in the Gaza ceasefire’s first phase.

Israel’s announcement abruptly put the future of the truce into further doubt.

The Palestinian Authority’s commission for prisoners’ affairs confirmed the delay “until further notice.” Associated Press video in the West Bank showed prisoners’ families, waiting outdoors in near-freezing weather, apparently dispersing. One woman was shown walking away in tears.

Five of the six hostages freed Saturday had been escorted by masked, armed militants in front of a crowd — a display that the U.N. and Red Cross have criticized as cruel after previous handovers.

The Israeli statement cited “ceremonies that demean the dignity of our hostages and the cynical use of the hostages for propaganda purposes.” It was likely a reference to a Hamas video showing two hostages who have yet to be released watching a handover in Gaza on Saturday and speaking under duress.

Zelenskyy would step down for peace and NATO status

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Sunday he would be ready to give up the presidency if doing so would achieve a lasting peace for his country under the security umbrella of the NATO military alliance.

Speaking at a forum of government officials in Kyiv marking the three-year anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Zelenskyy said, “If to achieve peace, you really need me to give up my post, I’m ready.”

Responding to a journalist’s question on whether he’d trade his office for peace, Zelenskyy said, “I can trade it for NATO.”

His comment appeared to be aimed at recent suggestions by President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin that elections should be held in Ukraine despite Ukrainian

legislation prohibiting them during martial law.

Earlier on Sunday, Zelenskyy said Russia launched 267 strike drones into Ukraine overnight on Saturday.

The attack came as leaders in Kyiv and across Europe are seeking to navigate rapid changes in U.S. foreign policy under Trump, who in a matter of days has upended years of firm support for Ukraine, leading to fears that he would join with Moscow to force a settlement to the war without involving Ukraine and its European backers.

Zelenskyy has expressed fears that Trump pushing a quick resolution would result in lost territory for Ukraine and vulnerability to future Russian aggression, though U.S. officials have asserted that the Ukrainian leader would be involved if and when peace talks actually start.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Vape distributors sued over candy e-cigarettes

NY ALBANY — New York is suing some of the country's biggest distributors of electronic cigarettes, accusing the companies of violating state laws that prohibit the sale of vaping flavors and designs that appeal to children.

Attorney General Letitia James announced the lawsuit targeting middlemen that distribute fruit- and candy-flavored e-cigarettes like Puff Bar and Elf Bar to hundreds of convenience stores and gas stations across the state. The approach differs from past litigation by New York and other states, which targeted vaping manufacturers, such as Juul Labs.

Chinese-made disposable e-cigarettes like Elf Bar have become the top choice among high school and middle school students. None of the products are approved by federal health regulators but they continue shipping into the United States, often mislabeled as batteries, cell phones or other products.

The state's nearly 200-page legal complaint points to "widespread evidence of illegal conduct, including documents showing illegal shipments of flavored vapes to New York."

Trump eyes used planes to serve as Air Force One

DC WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said he is considering buying used Boeing aircraft — perhaps from an overseas seller — to use as Air Force One when he's aboard, as he fumes over the U.S. plane-maker's delays in producing two specially modified ones for presidential use.

Speaking to reporters aboard one of the two nearly 35-year-old Boeing 747-200 aircraft in current use, Trump said, "We're looking at alternatives, because it's taking Boeing too long."

Boeing has the contract to produce updated versions, based on the more modern Boeing 747-8, but delivery has been delayed while the aircraft maker has lost billions of dollars on the deal, which was negotiated by Trump during his first term in office.

Delivery was initially set for 2024, but has been pushed to some time in 2027 for the first plane and in 2028 — Trump's final year in office — for the second, according to the U.S. Air Force.

Woman, child help bust man out of jail, cops say

AK NOME — A woman and child helped a man escape from lockup in a remote Alaska village, officials said.

The 35-year-old man was accused of driving an ATV while intoxicated, Alaska State Troopers said in a Feb. 18 dispatch. The man fled when police from Stebbins tried to arrest him Feb. 14, troopers said, but officers eventually caught up to him and placed him in a holding cell.

Hours later, a 21-year-old woman and a juvenile, whose age wasn't provided, showed up to the public safety building, where they "assaulted the jail guard, broke cameras off the wall and damaged the cell door as they helped" the 35-year-old escape, troopers said.

Troopers based in Nome flew to the village Feb. 15 and found the 35-year-old at home, where he was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence, es-

cape, resisting arrest, criminal mischief and a probation violation, troopers said.

The 21-year-old was arrested on suspicion of criminal mischief, assault, escape and contributing to the delinquency of a minor, according to troopers.

Police force put on leave after corruption cited

AL HANCEVILLE — A small Alabama city placed its entire police force on administrative leave a day after a grand jury recommended the department be disbanded, saying it has "operated as more of a criminal enterprise than a law enforcement agency."

Hanceville Mayor Jim Sawyer said Thursday in a statement that the Cullman County Sheriff's Department will temporarily take over law enforcement duties as city officials mull the next steps.

Cullman County District Attorney Champ Crocker announced that the grand jury had indicted the Hanceville police chief and four of his officers, who are accused of mishandling or removing materials from the department's evidence room.

Citing what it called a "rampanant culture of corruption," the grand jury recommended that the department be "immediately abolished."

Scottish Highland bull on loose in rural hill country

CT KENT — A Scottish Highland bull is the talk of the town in the rural hills of western Connecticut, where it has been roaming for over a month in the frigid winter weather after escaping from its confines.

Local residents have reported

sporadic sightings, including a few over the past week, said Lee Sohl, the animal control officer in Kent. It was recently seen just over the town line in New Milford.

The owner, Jo Ann Joray, said there have been people out looking for the bull, but they haven't been able to catch it.

Photos posted on social media by people who have spotted the bull have drawn a range of comments, with some expressing sympathy for the animal's plight, to others saying the bull is adorable to one saying it would produce good steaks.

Musk urges deorbiting space station in 2 years

FL ORLANDO — Elon Musk is calling for the International Space Station to be deorbited as soon as two years from now.

In posts to X, Musk said, "It is time to begin preparations for deorbiting the (space station). It has served its purpose. There is very little incremental utility. Let's go to Mars."

When pressed for whether or not he meant to up the current schedule that calls for it to be safely brought down after 2030, Musk said, "The decision is up to the President, but my recommendation is as soon as possible. I recommend 2 years from now."

SpaceX has a contract to build a deorbit vehicle based on its Dragon spacecraft to do the deed, but also has potentially several crewed trips to the space station for both NASA and commercial companies visiting the station as well.

SpaceX also flies cargo missions twice a year to the space station.

— From wire reports

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Shiffrin gets milestone 100th victory

Associated Press

SESTRIERE, Italy — Mikaela Shiffrin is 100% the best in skiing's World Cup history book.

Shiffrin's record-extending 100th career World Cup race win Sunday fulfilled a quest put on hold by a serious crash in November.

Back to racing in her favored slalom event, Shiffrin kept and added to her first-run lead to finish 0.61 seconds ahead of Zrinka Ljusic. Shiffrin's U.S. teammate Paula Moltzan was third, 0.64 back.

Shiffrin, 29, also tied a World Cup record for men and women, as her 155th career top-3 finish on the podium matched Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark.

Shiffrin crossed the finish

line and took a long look at the scoreboard showing her victory. She then looked again over her left shoulder with an expression of amazement.

She lay down on the snow with her right hand to her helmet, and was helped to her feet by Moltzan, who hugged her.

Shiffrin cried at first when she was asked in a post-race interview what it meant after all she had been through in the past few months.

"Everyone had been so nice and so supportive. I am so grateful, thank you," she said.

Shiffrin's 99th win came exactly three months ago in a slalom at Gurgl, Austria.

No. 100 had been within clear sight one week later when Shiffrin crashed out of a giant sla-

lom at Killington, Vt., while racing fast as the first-run leader.

The injuries she suffered in a tumbling fall — severe trauma to her oblique muscles and a deep puncture wound — sidelined her for several weeks and left "PTSD-like" anxiety about racing giant slalom.

In two giant slaloms at Sestriere, she placed 25th Friday and on Saturday finished outside the top-30 fastest racers in the first run for the first time since 2012.

Shiffrin showed no sign of nerves with an aggressive second run to victory, a full half-second faster than Ljusic, who is a three-time winner this season in World Cup slaloms.

"A lot of things had to go right in my direction for this to hap-

pen. But I did something right, too," a tearful Shiffrin said.

Shiffrin and Stenmark are the greatest record-setters in the World Cup's 58-year history.

"She's much better than I was. You cannot compare," Stenmark said in an interview with The Associated Press in 2023.

Shiffrin broke his record of 86 World Cup wins in March 2023, almost 34 years after his last victory. Stenmark's 86th — a giant slalom at Aspen, Colo., in February 1989 — also was his 155th and last podium result.

Shiffrin matched Stenmark's tally of top-3 results in six fewer starts. Sunday was her 278th World Cup race and Stenmark's last podium was in his 284th, according to ski-db.com.

Doncic breaks through as Lakers beat Nuggets

Associated Press

DENVER — Now, that's what the Los Angeles Lakers had in mind when they pulled off their shocking trade for Luka Doncic this month.

After going 1-2 and averaging 14.7 points in his first three games with the Lakers following his departure from Dallas, the 25-year-old superstar had by far his best game in an LA uniform Saturday night in Denver.

Doncic scored 32 points, grabbed 10 rebounds, dished out seven assists and stole four passes while leading the Lakers to a 123-100 wipeout of the Nuggets, who had won nine consecutive games.

"Finally feel like myself a little bit," Doncic said. "Playing this game, this is what I love. Just finally being myself a little bit, that's why I was smiling all game."

So was LeBron James, who chipped in 25 points, 10 rebounds, five assists and three blocks — and several times was

on the receiving end of Doncic's long passes for fast-break buckets as Los Angeles led wire-to-wire against its recent nemesis.

"I am a natural-born wide receiver and he's a natural-born quarterback," cracked James.

Doncic said his chemistry with the Lakers, James included, is still budding.

"This is my fourth game," Doncic said. "Chemistry takes time. You saw today that it's getting better. Every day, it's getting better. ... Hard, different, but I'm happy to be playing basketball. Every day is going to get better for me. I'm happy to be here. I'm happy for the new journey."

Although they surrendered Nikola Jokic's 26th triple-double of the season, Los Angeles held the reigning MVP to just 2-of-7 shooting and forced him into an uncharacteristic half dozen turnovers.

"It was their night," Jamal Murray sighed. "Offensively and defensively."

Suns 121, Bulls 117: Devin

Booker had 29 points and eight assists, Kevin Durant scored 27 points and Bradley Beal had 25 in his return to the starting lineup to help visiting Phoenix beat Chicago to end a four-game losing streak.

Josh Giddey led Chicago with 24 points and had 10 assists and eight rebounds. The Bulls have lost six straight.

Phoenix missed its first seven attempts and shot 29.2% in the first quarter.

Nets 105, 76ers 103: Nic Claxton scored 16 points and tipped in the winner as time expired, Cam Johnson had 23 points and visiting Brooklyn edged Philadelphia.

Tyrese Maxey buried a 3 with 25 seconds left that tied it at 103 and helped the 76ers rally from a 17-point deficit.

The game seemed set for overtime when Keon Johnson missed a long 3, only for Claxton to be in the right spot to score at the horn and send the Nets storming onto the court in a wild celebration.

Jazz 124, Rockets 115: Keyonte George scored 30 points and Lauri Markkanen added 23 points and 10 rebounds to rally host Utah to a victory over Houston.

Alperen Sengun led the Rockets with 27 points and 12 rebounds. Jalen Green added 25 points and 10 assists, and Amen Thompson had 23 points.

Trail Blazers 141, Hornets 88: Anfernee Simons hit five 3-pointers and scored 25 points in the largest blowout victory in Portland history, a romp over visiting Charlotte.

The 53-point margin topped the franchise record of 50 set in a 129-79 home victory over Cleveland on Nov. 21, 1982.

Toumani Camara added 20 points, 10 rebounds, six assists, a steal and two blocks for the Blazers. Shaedon Sharpe had 20 points off the bench, and Jabari Walker had 20 points and 14 rebounds.

Miles Bridges led the Hornets with 17 points. Nick Smith Jr. had 14 points.

No. 5 Houston holds off No. 8 Iowa St.

Associated Press

HOUSTON — L.J. Cryer scored 28 points, Milos Uzan added 19 points and No. 5 Houston held on to beat No. 8 Iowa State 68-59 on Saturday.

Cryer and Uzan combined to shoot 18-for-27, including 8-for-12 on 3-pointers. Emanuel Sharp added 11 points for the Cougars (23-4, 15-1 Big 12), who won their sixth straight.

Milan Momcilovic scored all 16 of his points in the second half to lead a furious rally for the Cyclones (21-6, 11-5). Nate Heise added 12 points, and Tamin Lipsey scored 11.

Trailing by 16 midway through the second half, Iowa State used an 18-3 run to cut the lead to 48-47 on a 3-pointer by Heise with eight minutes remaining. Houston responded with four straight points to push the lead back to five.

No. 1 Auburn 82, Georgia 70: Johni Broome scored a season-high 31 points and added 14 rebounds as the host Tigers defeated the Bulldogs.

For the second straight game, Auburn (25-2, 13-1 SEC) found itself in a tight contest against an unranked opponent before pulling away in the final minutes.

Broome took over in the second half, including a run of seven straight points for the Tigers. The double-double was his 17th of the season.

No. 2 Florida 79, LSU 65: Rueben Chinyelu had a career-high 19 points to go with 13 rebounds and the visiting Gators roared back from an eight-point second-half deficit to beat the Tigers.

Thomas Haugh scored 16 points, Alijah Martin added 14 and Walter Clayton Jr. 13 for Florida (24-3, 11-3 SEC), which won its sixth straight.

The Gators surged into the lead for good with a 15-2 run that gave them a 53-48 lead. Chinyelu scored seven points during that spurt, including a put-back

as he was fouled.

No. 3 Duke 110, Illinois 67: Cooper Flagg had 16 points in his Madison Square Garden debut and seven players scored in double figures for the Blue Devils in a blowout of the Illini.

Isaiah Evans paced Duke (24-3) with 17 points off the bench, and Kon Knueppel added 15. The Blue Devils built a 23-point lead in the first half and were never threatened while setting a season scoring high.

No. 4 Alabama 96, No. 17 Kentucky 83: Mark Sears scored 30 points and the host Crimson Tide came from behind for a win over the Wildcats.

Alabama (22-5, 11-3 Southeastern Conference), which had lost its previous two games, got 19 points from Aden Holloway, who made five 3-pointers. Chris Youngblood had 14 points.

Koby Brea led Kentucky (18-9, 7-7 SEC) with 20 points.

No. 6 Tennessee 77, No. 7 Texas A&M 69: Chaz Lanier had a season-high 30 points, including 8 3-pointers to lead the visiting Volunteers over the Aggies.

Lanier, a senior transfer from North Florida, went 8-for-13 from beyond the arc and 10-for-18 overall in game that featured 11 lead changes and eight ties.

Jordan Gainey made a 3-pointer with 3:33 to left to give Tennessee (22-5, 9-5 Southeastern Conference) a 63-59 lead. Zakai Zeigler hit a 3 in front of the Vols' bench on an inbound pass with 21 seconds remaining to seal the victory.

No. 9 Texas Tech 73, West Virginia 51: JT Toppin scored 22 points, freshman Christian Anderson had a season-high 21 points with five 3-pointers in his first career start to help the host Red Raiders beat the Mountaineers.

Toppin and Texas Tech (21-6, 12-4 Big 12) overcame a slow start, with the 6-foot-9 reigning AP national player of the week making nine of his last 10 shots

after missing his first six.

Oregon 77, No. 11 Wisconsin 73 (OT): Nate Bittle had 23 points and Jackson Shelstad made a desperation 3 to force overtime that led to a Ducks win over the host Badgers.

Bittle, a 7-foot center, scored six points in overtime to help snap Wisconsin's five-game winning streak. Shelstad scored 13 points as Oregon (20-8, 9-8 Big Ten) extended its winning streak to four.

Arkansas 92, No. 15 Missouri 85: Zvonimir Ivisic scored 20 points, Johnell Davis added 18 and the host Razorbacks beat the Tigers for their third win over a top-15 team this season.

Ivisic and Davis made back-to-back 3-pointers during a second-half run that saw Arkansas (16-11, 5-9 Southeastern Conference) turn a three-point deficit into a seven-point lead with less than eight minutes to play.

No. 18 Clemson 79, SMU 69: Jaeden Zackery had 19 points, including a career-best five 3-pointers before halftime, plus six rebounds, seven assists and five steals to help the visiting Tigers beat the Mustangs.

Chase Hunter added 17 points and Viktor Lakhin had 16 for Clemson (22-5, 14-2 Atlantic Coast Conference), who are tied for second with Louisville and one game behind Duke.

BYU 96, No. 19 Arizona 95: Richie Saunders scored 23 points, including two free throws with 3.2 seconds left, to give the visiting Cougars a win over the Wildcats.

It was BYU's fourth win in a row and second consecutive over a ranked opponent.

Saunders was 8-for-10 from the field and hit 3 of 4 3-pointers as the Cougars (19-8, 10-6 Big 12) shot 55.4% and made 14 of 31 from 3-point range.

Arizona (18-9, 12-4) got 27 points from Caleb Love.

Oklahoma 93, No. 21 Mississippi State 87: Jeremiah Fears had 27 points and a career-high 10 assists, as the host Sooners

defeated the Bulldogs to snap a five-game skid and revive their NCAA Tournament hopes.

Fears, an 18-year-old freshman, made 7 of 12 field goals and 11 of 14 free throws. It was one of his most efficient performances overall and his second-best scoring effort of the season.

No. 23 Kansas 96, Oklahoma State 64: Hunter Dickinson had 16 points and 11 rebounds, and four other Jayhawks scored at least 14 as host Kansas demolished the Cowboys.

The Jayhawks (18-9, 9-7 Big 12) used a well-rounded offensive attack and held Oklahoma State to almost 30 points below its season average.

Vanderbilt 77, No. 24 Mississippi 72: Chris Manon's 3-pointer with 4:53 left put the host Commodores ahead to stay as Vanderbilt snapped a three-game skid.

Manon finished with a season-high 16 points. Jason Edwards added 15, Tyler Nickel had 13 and Devin McGlockton scored 10.

First-year coach Mark Byington has the Commodores (18-9, 6-8 Southeastern Conference) closer to an NCAA Tournament berth after being picked to finish last in the SEC. Vanderbilt has three wins over ranked opponents.

No. 25 Louisville 89, Florida State 81: Chucky Hepburn made five free throws down the stretch as part of his 29 points, J'Vonne Hadley added 18 points as the host Cardinals withstood several second-half rallies to hold off the Seminoles for their fifth consecutive win.

Louisville (21-6, 14-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) led 39-19 late in the first half before Florida State closed within six points several times in the second half. Hadley and Terrence Edwards Jr. (16 points) made layups for a double-digit advantage, and Hepburn followed with a basket in the paint and two free throws for a 74-61 cushion.

Steeves gets first goal in Maple Leafs' win

Associated Press

TORONTO — Alex Steeves scored his first NHL goal as the Toronto Maple Leafs jumped out to an early lead and beat the Carolina Hurricanes 6-3 Saturday night.

Pontus Holmberg had two goals and an assist, John Tavares had a goal and an assist and David Kampf and Auston Matthews also scored for Toronto. Matthews and Holmberg had empty-net goals after Carolina cut the lead to 4-3 in the third. Holmberg was credited with his first goal after Hurricanes captain Jordan Staal accidentally put the puck in his own net.

Steeves, 25, who leads the AHL with 29 goals, also had an assist in his 12th NHL game. Anthony Stolarz made 31 saves.

Shayne Gostisbehere and Andrei Svechnikov each had a goal and an assist, and Jaccob Slavin also scored for Carolina. Pyotr Kochetkov stopped 17 shots.

The Hurricanes finally started to push after Kampf's 3-0 goal, but Stolarz was there to make a string of big saves. William Nylander then set up Tavares moments later to stretch the home team's lead to four goals.

Flyers 6, Oilers 3: Matvei Michkov and Sean Couturier each had a goal and two assists, and Owen Tippett scored two goals as host Philadelphia beat Edmonton.

In the first game back from the 4 Nations Face-Off break for both teams, Michkov opened the scoring in the first period when he followed his own missed shot and put the rebound past Stuart Skinner, who made 26 saves.

In the second period, Michkov made two no-look passes that turned into goals. He found Couturier with a cross-ice pass on the doorstep and later with a pass into the slot for Tippett's second tally on a 2-on-none breakaway.

Wild 4, Red Wings 3 (OT): Marco Rossi scored with 1:25 re-

maining in overtime as visiting Minnesota rallied for a victory over Detroit.

Rossi had just come out of the penalty box after being called for hooking. He wound up with a breakaway and his shot squirted past the goal line.

Matt Boldy had a goal and an assist for the Wild, who rallied from a 3-1 third-period deficit. Marcus Foligno and Vinnie Hinostroza also scored and Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 27 shots.

Capitals 8, Penguins 3: Jakob Chychrun scored twice during a second-period surge and visiting Washington raced past Pittsburgh.

Chychrun beat Alex Nedeljkovic twice in less than four minutes to break open a tie game. Aliaksei Protas and Tom Wilson pushed the Capitals' lead to 6-2 by the end of the period as Metropolitan Division-leading Washington improved to 13-1-6 in its past 20 games.

Penguins captain Sidney Crosby — fresh off Team Canada's victory at 4 Nations — scored his 18th goal of the season on a backhand 6:36 into the second that briefly tied the game before the Caps took firm control. The goal was the 610th of Crosby's career, tying him with Bobby Hull for 18th in NHL history.

Sabres 8, Rangers 2: Rasmus Dahlin scored twice and had an assist, and host Buffalo capitalized on a five-goal first period in a win over New York.

Tage Thompson and Ryan McLeod each scored twice, and Jason Zucker had three assists in the teams' return from the 4 Nations Face-Off break. Jack Quinn and Henri Jokiharju also scored. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen stopped 26 shots and the Sabres improved to 5-1 in their past six games.

The Rangers' Chris Kreider and Mika Zibanejad scored second-period goals. New York failed to build on the momentum of its pre-break 11-5-2 run that pushed it to within four points of

eight place in the Eastern Conference.

Ducks 3, Bruins 2 (OT): Leo Carlsson scored with 1:21 left in overtime to give visiting Anaheim a victory over Boston and extend its winning streak to four straight games.

Trevor Zegras and Frank Vatrano also scored for the Ducks. Anaheim goalie John Gibson, a topic of trade talks, stopped 19 shots before leaving after two periods with an unspecified upper-body injury; Lukas Dostal made 10 saves after replacing him.

The Ducks led 2-0 before Elias Lindholm scored on a five-on-three power play after David Pastrnak drew back-to-back tripping penalties. With goalie Jeremy Swayman pulled for an extra skater, Morgan Geekie tied it 2-2 with 1:11 left in regulation on a slap shot from the left circle.

Predators 2, Avalanche 1: Jonathan Marchessault scored at 9:11 of the third period to give host Nashville a victory over Colorado.

Justin Barron also scored and Juuse Saros made 31 saves for the Predators, who have won two straight.

Stars 4, Devils 2: Evgenii Dadonov and defenseman Thomas Harley scored first-period goals and Casey DeSmith made 31 saves as visiting Dallas defeated New Jersey.

Matt Duchene and Wyatt Johnston also scored for the Stars in the teams' first game after the 4 Nations Face-Off tournament break.

Kraken 2, Panthers 1: Jared McCann scored the go-ahead goal in the third period and visiting Seattle held on to beat Florida.

Kaappo Kakko also had a goal and Joey Daccord stopped 26 shots for the Kraken, who snapped a three-game losing skid and split the two-game season series against the Atlantic Division-leading Panthers.

Blue Jackets 5, Blackhawks

1: Zach Werenski scored and had two assists, and Kent Johnson scored twice for host Columbus in a victory against Chicago to end a four-game losing streak.

Denton Mateychuk and Adam Fantilli each scored, Dmitri Voronkov had two assists and Elvis Merzlikins made 27 saves.

Jets 4, Blues 3 (SO): Gabriel Vilardi tied it with 28 seconds left with goalie Eric Comrie off for an extra attacker, Kyle Connor scored in the shootout and visiting Winnipeg beat St. Louis for its team-record ninth straight win.

Vilardi also scored in the first period. Nikolaj Ehlers added a goal in regulation and Comrie made 21 saves. The Jets had won eight straight on two previous occasions, the last coming from Oct. 9-26 this season.

Canadiens 5, Senators 2: Brendan Gallagher had a goal and an assist, Sam Montembeault made 25 saves and visiting Montreal beat Ottawa.

Cole Caufield, Patrick Laine, Josh Anderson and Juraj Slafkovsky also scored for the Canadiens. Nick Suzuki had two assists.

Kings 5, Utah 3: Drew Doughty had a goal and two assists to lead host Los Angeles past Utah.

Kevin Fiala, Alex Laferriere, Trevor Lewis and Mikey Anderson also scored as the Kings improved their record at home to 18-3-2. Darcy Kuemper made 25 saves.

Golden Knights 3, Canucks 1: Brandon Saad scored off a rebound from the left circle 18 seconds into the third period to put host Vegas ahead for good and it extended its winning streak to three games with a victory over Vancouver.

The Golden Knights took sole possession of first place in the Pacific Division, moving two points ahead of the Edmonton Oilers. The Canucks' three-game winning streak ended.