

Biden seeks Russia nuclear treaty extension

The Washington Post

President Joe Biden is seeking a five-year extension with Russia on the only remaining treaty limiting the world's two largest nuclear arsenals just days before it expires, said two senior U.S. officials.

At the same time, his administration is preparing to impose new costs on Russia pending a newly requested intelligence assessment of its recent activities. The officials said Biden is ruling out a "reset" in bilateral relations with Moscow as many new U.S. presidents have done since the end of the Cold War.

"As we work with Russia, so, too, will we work to hold Russia accountable for their reckless and aggressive actions that we've seen in recent months and years," said a senior U.S. official, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive security matter.

The decision to seek a five-year treaty extension, which Russia supports but the Biden administration hadn't settled on until now, reflects the rapidly approaching dead-

line for Washington to renew the New START pact Feb. 5, the officials said.

Former President Donald Trump tried to conclude a shorter extension with Moscow in the final months of his presidency, but he failed to reach an agreement after his nuclear envoy spent months trying to persuade China to join the accord before dropping that demand.

Letting the treaty expire would allow Moscow and Washington to deploy an unlimited number of nuclear-armed submarines, bombers and missiles in what many experts fear could spark a nuclear arms race and further exacerbate U.S.-Russia relations.

"New START is manifestly in the national security interest of the United States and makes even more sense when the relationship with Russia is adversarial," the senior U.S. official said.

As the Biden administration informs Moscow of its terms for an extension, the president will order Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines to provide him a full

intelligence assessment of Russia's alleged interference in the 2020 election, use of chemical weapons against opposition leader Alexei Navalny and bounties on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, officials said.

Biden is also asking Haines for an assessment of the massive cyberattack on federal agencies and departments related to the SolarWinds software breach, which many analysts and government officials have blamed on Russia. The request for the intelligence assessments will go out this week, said the officials.

Biden's plans for potential punitive actions toward Russia at the outset of the administration is unique among his recent predecessors, all of whom attempted to turn a new page in the hopes of encouraging a more productive relationship.

"This will be the first post-Soviet U.S. administration that has not come into office vowing to forge a warmer relationship with Russia," said Angela Stent, a senior intelligence official on Russia during the George W. Bush administration.

Biden to kick off national coronavirus initiatives

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Deep in the deadliest coronavirus wave and facing worrisome new mutations, President Joe Biden will kick off his national COVID-19 strategy to ramp up vaccinations and testing, reopen schools and businesses, and increase the use of masks — including a requirement that Americans mask up for travel.

Biden also will address inequities in hard-hit minority communities as he signs 10 pandemic-related executive orders Thursday. Those orders are a first step, and specific details of many administration actions are still being spelled out.

The new president has vowed to take far more aggressive measures to contain the virus than his predecessor, starting with stringent adherence to public health guidance. He faces steep obstacles, with the virus actively spreading in most states, slow progress on the vaccine rollout and political uncertainty over whether congressional

Republicans will help him pass a \$1.9 trillion economic relief and COVID response package.

"We need to ask average Americans to do their part," said Jeff Zients, the White House official directing the national response. "Defeating the virus requires a coordinated nationwide effort."

Biden officials say they're hampered by lack of cooperation from the Trump administration during the transition. They say they don't have a complete understanding of their predecessors' actions on vaccine distribution. And they face a litany of complaints from states that say they are not getting enough vaccine even as they are being asked to vaccinate more categories of people.

Biden acknowledged the urgency of the mission in his inaugural address. "We are entering what may well be the toughest and deadliest period of the virus," he said before asking Americans to join him in a moment

of silence in memory of the more than 400,000 people in the United States who have died from COVID-19.

Biden's top medical adviser on COVID-19, Dr. Anthony Fauci, also announced renewed U.S. support for the World Health Organization after the Trump administration had pulled out of the global body. Fauci said early Thursday that the U.S. will join the U.N. health agency's efforts to bring vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics to people in need, whether in rich or poor countries, and will resume full funding and staffing support for WHO.

The U.S. mask order for travel being implemented by Biden will apply to airports and planes, ships, intercity buses, trains and public transportation. Travelers from abroad must furnish a negative COVID-19 test before departing for the U.S. and quarantine upon their arrival. Biden has already mandated that masks be worn on federal property.

Indo-Pacific allies congratulate Biden

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — America's most important allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, along with its greatest strategic rival, took to social media to congratulate President Joe Biden on his inauguration Wednesday.

Biden, 78, took over for a Trump administration that played hardball with Japan and South Korea in an effort to get them to pay more for their own defense; started a trade war with an increasingly aggressive China; and held summit meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in an unsuccessful attempt to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

"America is back," South Korean President Moon Jae-in tweeted after Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were sworn in. "America's new beginning will make democracy even greater. Together with the Korean people, I stand by your journey toward 'America United.'"

The alliance between the U.S. and South Korea will grow stronger by working together to address global issues such as public health, security, the economy and climate change, Moon said.

"The U.S. will surely succeed in building back better, and the world will be amazed," he tweeted, using Biden's campaign slogan. "[South Korea] will walk along with the new Biden administration from the start. We go together!"

A new U.S. administration will likely move quickly to resolve a dispute with South Korea over the cost of supporting 28,500 American troops on the divided peninsula, Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and Ralph Cossa, a former Air Force officer and president emeritus of the Pacific Forum think tank in Hawaii, told Stars and Stripes in November.

Seoul and Washington have been at odds over former President Donald Trump's demand that South Korea substantially increase the amount it pays to host a U.S. military presence, a contract called the Special Measures Agreement. The previous agreement expired in December 2018.

In April, the U.S. government furloughed about 4,500 South Korean base employees, about half its local workforce, for nearly three months when the countries failed to agree on a plan.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, in a tweet to Biden and Harris, described Japan and the U.S. as allies tied firmly by bonds and shared universal values.

"I look forward to working with you and your team to reinforce our alliance and to realize a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Suga wrote, using a U.S. catchphrase often said in relation to freedom-of-navigation exercises in the South and East China seas that irk Beijing.

In a call following his November election win, Biden told Suga the U.S. would defend

the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which are administered by Japan but claimed by China and Taiwan. Chinese vessels in 2020 made a record 333 trips to the area around the uninhabited islands, besting the previous year's record of 282.

Security experts expect the new administration to drop hardball negotiating tactics used by the Trump administration over Japan's contribution to the cost of basing approximately 54,000 U.S. troops in the country, but that Japan will likely pay more if asked.

The allies are negotiating ahead of the expiration of a five-year cost-sharing deal at the end of March. Trump had demanded Japan pay \$8 billion a year, up from \$2.5 billion, for hosting U.S. troops in the country, former national security adviser John Bolton wrote in his memoir, "The Room Where It Happened," published in June.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison also tweeted his congratulations to the new U.S. leaders.

"The Australia-US Alliance has never been more important. I wish you both every success for your time in office and look forward to working closely with your new administration," he wrote.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted his "warmest congratulations" to Biden and Harris. "I look forward to working with him to strengthen India-US strategic partnership," he wrote.

Norquist takes over as acting defense secretary

By **COREY DICKSTEIN**
Stars and Stripes

David Norquist, a Pentagon mainstay throughout former President Donald Trump's term, was sworn in Wednesday as the acting defense secretary, taking over the Defense Department's top position until a permanent choice is approved by Congress.

Norquist, who has served as the Pentagon's No. 2 civilian since July 2019, took over responsibility for the Defense Department shortly after President Joe Biden was sworn into office at the Capitol, Pentagon officials said. Before he served as deputy secretary of defense, Norquist served as the Pentagon comptroller — its

top financial official — beginning in June 2017.

A longtime government finance official, Norquist previously served as an Army budget analyst, a House Appropriations Committee staffer, and in former President George W. Bush's Homeland Security Department and Pentagon. As deputy defense secretary, Norquist has been responsible for the day-to-day business operations of the Defense Department, managing the Pentagon's massive budget, and overseeing efforts to reform the military's acquisition and accounting practices.

Norquist avoided the spotlight during the Trump administration, surviving in the Pentagon as five men — two Senate-con-

firmed and three acting — served as defense secretary for Trump. Among his noted accomplishments, Norquist in 2019 guided the Pentagon through its first-ever audit.

Trump passed over Norquist for acting defense secretary when he fired Mark Esper shortly after his election loss in November. He instead picked Christopher Miller, a former Army Special Forces officer, to lead the Pentagon during his final weeks in office.

Miller served as acting defense secretary for 72 days. Norquist's term could be shorter, as Biden awaits Congress to vote on his defense secretary pick, retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin.

New-look Senate confirms Biden's DNI pick

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Three new senators were sworn into office Wednesday after President Joe Biden's inauguration, securing the majority for Democrats in the Senate and across a unified government to tackle the new president's agenda at a time of unprecedented national challenges.

In a first vote, the Senate confirmed Biden's nominee for Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines. Senators worked into the evening and overcame some Republican opposition to approve his first Cabinet member, in what's traditionally a show of good faith on Inauguration Day to confirm at least some nominees for a new president's administration.

Haines, a former CIA deputy director, will become a core member of Biden's security team, overseeing the agencies that make up the nation's intelli-

gence community. She was confirmed 84-10.

The new Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., urged colleagues to turn the spirit of the new president's call for unity into action.

"President Biden, we heard you loud and clear," Schumer said in his first speech as majority leader. "We have a lengthy agenda. And we need to get it done together."

Vice President Kamala Harris drew applause as she entered the chamber to deliver the oath of office to the new Democratic senators — Jon Ossoff, Raphael Warnock and Alex Padilla — just hours after taking her own oath at the Capitol alongside Biden. The three Democrats join a Senate narrowly split 50-50 between the parties, but giving Democrats the majority with Harris able to cast the tie-breaking vote.

Ossoff, a former congressional aide and investigative journalist,

and Warnock, a pastor from the late Martin Luther King Jr.'s church in Atlanta, won run-off elections in Georgia this month, defeating two Republicans. Padilla was tapped by California's governor to finish the remainder of Harris' term.

Taken together, their arrival gives Democrats for the first time in a decade control of the Senate, the House and the White House, as Biden faces the unparalleled challenges of the COVID-19 crisis and its economic fallout, and the nation's painful political divisions from the deadly Jan. 6 siege of the Capitol by a mob loyal to Donald Trump.

Congress is being called on to consider Biden's proposed \$1.9 trillion COVID recovery package, to distribute vaccines and shore up an economy as more than 400,000 Americans have died from the virus. At the same time, the Senate is about to launch an impeachment trial of

Trump, charged by the House of inciting the insurrection at the Capitol as rioters tried to interrupt the Electoral College tally and overturn Biden's election. The Senate will need to confirm other Biden Cabinet nominees.

And Republican leader Mitch McConnell is refusing to enter a power-sharing agreement with Senate Democrats unless they meet his demands, chiefly to preserve the Senate filibuster — the procedural tool often used by the minority party to block bills under rules that require 60 votes to advance legislation.

McConnell, in his first speech as the minority party leader, said the election results with narrow Democratic control of the House and Senate showed that Americans "intentionally entrusted both political parties with significant power." The GOP leader said he looked forward to working with the new president "wherever possible."

Biden revokes Trump report lauding 'patriotic education'

Associated Press

President Joe Biden revoked a recent Trump administration report that aimed to promote "patriotic education" in schools but that historians mocked and rejected as political propaganda.

In an executive order signed on Wednesday in his first day in office, Biden disbanded Donald Trump's presidential 1776 Commission and withdrew a report it released Monday. Trump established the group in September to rally support from white voters and as a response to The New York Times' "1619 Project," which highlights the lasting consequences of slavery in America.

In its report, which Trump hoped would be used in classrooms across the nation, the commission glorifies the country's founders, plays down America's role in slavery, condemns the rise of progressive

politics and argues that the civil rights movement ran afoul of the "lofty ideals" espoused by the Founding Fathers.

The panel, which included no professional historians of the United States, complained of "false and fashionable ideologies" that depict the country's story as one of "oppression and victimhood." Instead, it called for renewed efforts to foster "a brave and honest love for our country."

Historians widely panned the report, saying it offers a false and outdated version of American history that ignores decades of research.

"It's an insult to the whole enterprise of education. Education is supposed to help young people learn to think critically," said David Blight, a Civil War historian at Yale University. "That report is a piece of right-wing propaganda."

Guard helicopter crash kills 3 during drill in NY

Associated Press

MENDON, N.Y. — Three National Guard members on a training flight were killed Wednesday when their helicopter crashed in a farmer's field in western New York.

The craft, a UH-60 Black Hawk medical evacuation helicopter, crashed around 6:30 p.m. in Mendon, N.Y., a rural town south of Rochester, officials said.

The circumstances were under investigation. The Federal Aviation Administration said it would take part.

The helicopter flew out of the Army Aviation Support Facility at Rochester International Airport, and was assigned to C Company of the 1st Battalion, 171st General Support Aviation Battalion, according to Eric Durr, public affairs director of the New York State Division of

Military and Naval Affairs.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said flags on state buildings would be lowered to half-staff on Thursday to pay tribute to the troops.

"National Guard members are our citizen soldiers who voluntarily serve and protect both here and abroad, and I extend prayers and condolences from all New Yorkers to the family, loved ones and fellow soldiers of these honorable heroes," he said in a statement.

Monroe County Sheriff Todd Baxter said at a news conference that witnesses who called 911 reported hearing the sounds of an engine sputtering and said the aircraft was flying very low.

There were no survivors of the crash, he said.

Baxter called the three guard members "great Americans."

Slight drop in US jobless benefits seekers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell slightly last week to 900,000, still a historically high level that points to ongoing job cuts in a raging pandemic.

The Labor Department's report Thursday underscored that President Joe Biden has inherited an economy that faltered this winter as virus cases spiked, cold weather restricted dining and federal rescue aid expired. The government said 5.1 million Americans are continuing to receive state jobless benefits, down from 5.2 million in the previous week. That suggests that while some of the unemployed are finding jobs, others are likely using up their state benefits and transitioning to separate extended-benefit programs.

More than 10 million people are receiving aid from those extended programs, which now offer up to 50 weeks of benefits, or from a new program that provides benefits to contractors and the self-employed. All told, nearly 16 million people were on unemployment

in the week that ended Jan. 2, the latest period for which data is available.

"Unemployment claims continue to show a job market unable to progress further as long as COVID-19 remains in the driver's seat," said Daniel Zhao, senior economist at Glassdoor. "While the vaccine offers a light at the end of the tunnel, we're still far away from a complete reopening of the economy that could drive rehiring and stem further layoffs."

New viral infections have begun to slow after months of relentless increases, though they remain high and are averaging about 200,000 a day. The number of deaths in the United States from the pandemic that erupted 10 months ago has surpassed 400,000.

Economists say one factor that has likely increased jobless claims in the past two weeks is a government financial aid package that was signed into law in late December. Among other things, it provided a \$300-a-week federal unemployment benefit on top of regular state jobless aid. The new

benefit, which runs through mid-March, may be encouraging more Americans to apply for aid.

Once vaccines become more widely distributed, economists expect growth to accelerate in the second half of the year as Americans unleash pent-up demand for visiting movie theaters and concert halls, travel and dining out. Such spending should, in theory, boost hiring and start to regain the nearly 10 million jobs lost to the pandemic.

Last week, Biden unveiled a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus plan that would provide, among other things, \$1,400 checks for most Americans, which, on top of the \$600 checks already being distributed, would bring the total to \$2,000 per adult.

The new plan would also make available \$400 a week in federal benefits for jobless Americans and extend a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures through September. Biden's proposal will require congressional approval, and some congressional Republicans have already expressed reservations about its size.

States run out of vaccine; appointments canceled

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The push to inoculate Americans against the coronavirus is hitting a roadblock: A number of states are reporting they are running out of vaccine, and tens of thousands of people who managed to get appointments for a first dose are seeing them canceled.

Karen Stachowiak, a first-grade teacher in the Buffalo area, spent almost five hours on the state hotline and website to land an appointment for Wednesday, only to be told it was canceled. The Erie County Health Department said it scratched vaccinations for over 8,000 people in the past few days because of inadequate supply.

"It's stressful because I was so close. And my other friends that are teachers, they were able to book appointments for last Saturday," Stachowiak said. "So many people are get-

ting theirs in, and then it's like, 'Nope, I've got to wait.'"

The reason for the apparent mismatch between supply and demand in the United States was unclear, but last week, the Department of Health and Human Services suggested that states had unrealistic expectations for how much vaccine was on the way.

In any case, new shipments go out every week, and both the government and the drugmakers have said there are large quantities in the pipeline.

The shortages are coming as states dramatically ramp up their vaccination drives, at the federal government's direction, to reach people 65 and older, along with certain others. More than 400,000 deaths in the U.S. have been blamed on the virus.

In the U.S., some states have suggested they may run out by Thursday and are unclear when new doses will arrive.

15 new virus cases at bases in Japan, S. Korea

By JOSEPH DITZLER

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — U.S. military bases in Japan and South Korea reported 15 new coronavirus cases as of 6 p.m. Thursday, while Japan's capital city counted over 1,000 new patients for the ninth straight day.

Naval Air Facility Atsugi, 24 miles southwest of central Tokyo, reported four new coronavirus infections: One tested positive after recently arriving in Japan and three were already quarantined, said base spokesman Sam Samuelson. He did not know why the three were quarantined.

Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, 500 miles west of Tokyo, reported one new coronavirus patient, an individual screened prior to deployment and already isolated, according to a Facebook post.

In a separate post Thursday,

installation commander Col. Lance Lewis passed word that the Moderna vaccine against COVID-19, the coronavirus respiratory disease, will arrive soon.

"No Marine or Sailor likes be on the defensive, so I'm pleased to say that this weekend, we go on the attack with the arrival of the vaccine for which your chain of command will have the details about priorities and mechanics," Lewis wrote. "Although it remains voluntary at this time, I encourage everyone to get the vaccine when your name is called."

The vaccine, which initially arrived at six other installations in Japan on Dec. 26, is distributed according to priorities set in a three-phase plan that starts with medical care providers, first responders and security forces and culminates with the healthy, general population.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Conviction overturned over prosecutor's 'Shining' reference

NJ TRENTON — The New Jersey Supreme Court has overturned a man's bank robbery conviction because of a prosecutor's reference to a classic horror movie.

During closing arguments in the case against Damon Williams, the prosecutor showed jurors a photo from the movie "The Shining" depicting a character played by Jack Nicholson telling his terrified wife and son, "Here's Johnny!" moments after breaking through a door with an ax. The reference was meant to illustrate that actions can speak louder than words, and to support the prosecutor's contention that Williams should be convicted of a more serious offense even though no threatening words were spoken to the bank teller in Camden County in 2014.

The jury convicted Williams of second-degree robbery, which requires the use of force or the threat of force, rather than third-degree theft. Prosecutors argued that Williams' conduct before and after passing a note to the teller supported the more serious charge. Williams is currently serving a 14-year term.

A unanimous Supreme Court disagreed Tuesday, writing that prosecutors "must walk a fine line" when comparing a defendant with "an individual whom the jury associates with violence or guilt."

Legislative panel OKs permanent home delivery of alcohol

AR LITTLE ROCK — An Arkansas Senate panel on Tuesday advanced legislation allowing home delivery of alcohol by liquor stores, a measure that would make permanent something that's been temporarily allowed during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Senate City, County and Local Affairs Committee approved the bill, which would allow deliveries by retail liquor permit holders. The deliveries would not be allowed outside the county where the permit holder is located.

Arkansas allowed home delivery of alcohol by liquor stores in March when it imposed restrictions on bars and restaurants because of the coronavirus. Under the measure now

heading to the full Senate, the deliveries could only be made by the permit-holder and not a third-party delivery system.

Assistant manager accused in lottery ticket theft while in charge

FL JACKSONVILLE — An assistant manager of a convenience store has been arrested in a case involving stolen Florida Lottery scratch-off tickets.

The tickets taken from a Jacksonville Circle K store were worth a combined total of \$6,520, according to the Nassau County Sheriff's Office.

Sheriff's deputies arrested Richard Dwayne Fonville, 37, of Hilliard, on Monday on theft charges. An arrest report said Fonville was left in charge of the store for a few days over the holidays while the manager was assigned to another one.

When the manager returned to the store on Dec. 29, she found some inconsistencies in the lottery ticket sales record, the report said. She reviewed security footage, which showed Fonville removing scratch-off tickets from the counter on those dates, the Florida Times-Union reported. The video showed Fonville scan the tickets to find the winners without scratching them off.

The manager told investigators the tickets were never paid for, but the amount each ticket won was taken from the cash register.

Maskless customer hits grocery store worker with glass bottle

WA SPOKANE — Witnesses told deputies a man became "irate" over grocery store employees' requests that he wear a mask, ultimately attacking an employee with a glass bottle, according to a Spokane County Sheriff's Office news release.

Once he is arrested, deputies will recommend felony charges of robbery and second-degree assault, the Spokesman-Review reported.

Around 9:40 a.m. Friday, Spokane Valley Deputies responded to a report of a disorderly customer who was refusing to leave the Grocery Outlet, officials said. A store employee told deputies the man was not wearing a mask and employees asked him several times to put a mask on. After ignoring the requests, at the checkout stand, an employee

refused to sell goods costing about \$15 total to the man. He "became irate," and the two argued, the release said.

The man walked out without paying for the items and an employee confronted him, the release said. The suspect threw a coffee bottle at the employee that struck him in the head before shattering on the ground, officials said.

The customer then picked up a piece of the broken bottle, "holding it as a weapon," and threatened the employee, the release said. The suspect fled before police arrived.

Section of road closed because of persistent drag racing

NM FARMINGTON — Officials have closed a section of road on the Navajo Nation through the end of February because of concerns about persistent drag racing.

The Farmington Daily Times reported Monday that the Bureau of Indian Affairs Division of Transportation closed 2.5 miles of Navajo Route 4178 with concrete barriers and signs near the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry farm and food product company.

Genevia Cundiff, the security manager at NAPI, said no accidents or fatalities have been caused by drag racing but "it's a risk we do not want to take."

Police: Man helped woman load car with groceries, then took it

MO ST. LOUIS — St. Louis police are searching for a man who appeared at first to be a good Samaritan by helping an elderly woman load groceries — only to pull out a gun and take her minivan moments later.

Police say the carjacking happened Saturday. The 76-year-old victim said she was picking up a food donation from a church when a man came over and helped her put the groceries into her vehicle. The woman said she thanked the man and offered him a ride out of gratitude. Police say that as they drove, the man pulled out a pistol and ordered her out of her 2006 Dodge Caravan. She complied and the man drove away.

— From wire reports

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Final 4 NFL playoff defenses don't rest

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Leslie Frazier's faith in his Bills defense never wavered, even at the lowest point of Buffalo's season.

It was mid-November and the Bills were entering their bye week on the heels of a 32-30 defeat at Arizona. Immediately dubbed "The Hail Murray," the Cardinals won on Kyler Murray's desperation 43-yard touchdown pass to DeAndre Hopkins, who outleaped three defenders in the end zone with 2 seconds left.

Frazier, Buffalo's defensive coordinator, recalled collecting his thoughts on the flight home when frustration turned to hope in coming to the realization of how the experience could become a valuable motivating tool.

"I said to myself, 'If we handle this the right way, this could turn out to be a positive instead of a negative.' It didn't have to be something that carried over to the next one and affect the rest of your season," Frazier said this week. "To our players' credit, I think they rebounded. ... That was a hard loss for a lot of reasons and they didn't let it hold them back."

The Bills (15-3) have won eight straight since and are preparing to make their first AFC championship game appearance in 27 years Sunday, when Buffalo travels to face the top-seeded Kansas City Chiefs (15-2).

Though much of the credit for Buffalo's success has centered on a dynamic Josh Allen-led

offense, the defense has shown signs of shedding its early season deficiencies to find itself gradually peaking over the final half of the year.

Buffalo has allowed just 137 points since the loss to Arizona after giving up 273 points in its first 10 games. And rather than blowing leads, the defense is now closing out victories as evidenced in two playoff wins.

Safety Micah Hyde, one of the defenders burned by Hopkins, sealed a 27-24 wild-card win over Indianapolis by batting down Philip Rivers' desperation pass intended for T.Y. Hilton as time ran out. On Saturday, cornerback Taron Johnson punctuated the defense's most complete performance by returning Lamar Jackson's interception for an NFL playoff record-matching 101-yard touchdown in a 17-3 win over Baltimore.

The outings validated the patience Frazier showed in a unit that opened the season allowing an average of 387 yards over its first six games, following consecutive losses to Tennessee and Kansas City. And it brings confidence to a group eager to show it's better than the unit that was trampled by the Chiefs in allowing a season-worst 245 yards rushing in a 26-17 loss on Oct. 15.

The Bills aren't the only defense to have overcome obstacles among the four remaining playoff teams.

The Chiefs' defense is no pushover despite finishing the season 16th in yards allowed.

Kansas City limited Buffalo to a season-low 206 yards of offense in Week 6; limited the Saints to 285 yards in a 32-29 win at New Orleans on Dec. 20 in Drew Brees' return after missing a month with rib injuries; and finished the season tied for ninth in the NFL in forcing 26 takeaways.

In the NFC, the Packers are allowing an average 306 yards offense over their past seven outings. And Green Bay is coming off a 32-18 divisional-round win over the Rams in which Los Angeles finished with a time of possession of 23 minutes and 48 seconds.

As for Tampa Bay, the Buccaneers head to Green Bay coming off a 30-20 win over New Orleans in which their defense forced four turnovers, three leading to touchdowns, and limited the Saints to 73 yards offense and four first downs on their final four possessions.

The Buccaneers were led by second-year linebacker Devin White, who had an interception, recovered a fumble, and tied a franchise record with 11 tackles in his playoff debut.

Since allowing a combined 956 yards in back-to-back losses to the Rams and Chiefs in late November, the Buccaneers have returned from their bye week to to allow a combined 1,943 yards and force 10 takeaways in their past six.

Mahomes practices, remains in concussion protocol

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes remained in the NFL's concussion protocol Wednesday, but practiced in a limited capacity, raising hopes that the reigning Super Bowl MVP can play in Sunday's AFC title game against Buffalo.

The Chiefs typically breeze through their midweek practice with little contact before ramping things up with their longest workout Thursday, and coach Andy Reid said afterward that fit perfectly with what Mahomes was able to do.

"He looked good," Reid said. "He's in the protocol so there's only certain things he can do, but he took all the snaps and he feels good. So, I mean, we're just going to follow this protocol as close as we possibly can."

There are five steps in the league's return-to-play protocol: rest until signs and symptoms return to baseline clearance to begin cardio; stretching and balance training with medical oversight; an increase in

exercises that includes monitored strength training; the resumption of non-contact football activities; and finally, the player is cleared by team physicians and passes an independent neurological exam, at which point he is cleared to practice and play.

Reid didn't specify which step Mahomes was in Wednesday, but the work he described coincides with the fourth step. If all goes well, that could mean the Chiefs' quarterback is cleared to participate more fully in practice Thursday or Friday.

"He's done well up to this point and they just progress you through the day," Reid said, "so today was limited work and no contact, I think was the schedule for today. And that's kind of what we're doing on Wednesday, so it fit perfectly with that."

Mahomes was hurt in the third quarter of last Sunday's 22-17 victory over the Cleveland Browns when he was tackled around the neck while keeping the ball on a quarterback option. His head did not appear to strike the ground hard — if at all — and that led to reports that he had tweaked a nerve

that runs up the neck.

Chad Henne finished the game and would be the starter if Mahomes was unable to play against the Bills.

"It's definitely not the easiest if you don't get the reps during the week," Henne said, "but mentally you have to stay in it. When Patrick was in last week, during every practice, Matt (Moore) and I are in the back doing our drops, our progressions. That doesn't change. After practice we get the throws we need that Patrick took and we go about our business."

The return of Mahomes was only the start of the positive injury news for Kansas City.

Defensive back Bashaud Breeland, who also left the Browns game with a concussion, got in some limited work as the Chiefs moved practice from outdoors inside because of gusty winds.

The availability of their No. 1 cornerback is important with Bills quarterback Josh Allen riding a hot streak and All-Pro wide receiver Stefon Diggs coming to town.

Cavaliers spoil Irving's 1st game back

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Kyrie Irving returned from his personal “pause” to score 37 points in his first game with Kevin Durant and James Harden, but the new-look, star-studded Brooklyn Nets gave up 42 to Collin Sexton and lost 147-135 in double overtime to the Cleveland Cavaliers on Wednesday night.

Sexton scored 15 points in the second OT — most of them over Irving. Sexton made two three-pointers and fed Taurean Prince for another in a span of 55 seconds to help Cleveland put away Brooklyn.

Durant led the Nets with 38 points and Harden added 21. But Brooklyn's “Big 3” couldn't do enough to outlast Sexton, who missed the Cavs' last five games with a sprained ankle.

As he knocked down one big shot after another in the second OT, players on Cleveland's bench were tackling each other in delight. Cedi Osman added 25 points and Prince — acquired in the four-team deal that brought Harden to Brooklyn — had 17 in his Cavs debut.

The Nets overcame a 13-point deficit in the fourth quarter and tied it at 113-all on Irving's putback with 1:10 left.

76ers 117, Celtics 109: Joel Embiid had 42 points and 10 rebounds, Tobias Harris added 22 points and host Philadelphia beat Boston.

Embiid topped 40 points for the second time in three games. He shot 12-for-19 from the floor (one three-pointer) and was 17-for-21 from the free-throw line. He did it in 34 minutes and scored 20 points in a half (22 in the first) for the fifth time this season.

Clippers 115, Kings 96: Kawhi Leonard scored 32 points, Paul George added 19 and host Los Angeles beat Sacramento for its season-high fifth consecutive victory.

The Clippers handed the Kings a 38-point loss at their place last Friday. A new week didn't change anything. Sacramento dropped its fourth in a row and sixth in seven games.

Hawks 123, Pistons 115 (OT): Trae Young scored 38 points, John Collins had 31 and host Atlanta rallied to beat Je-

rami Grant and Detroit.

Grant had a career-high 32 points, including all of the Pacers' nine points in overtime, to continue his hot start to the season. But Detroit fell to 3-11, the worst record in the Eastern Conference.

Mavericks 124, Pacers 111: Kristaps Porzingis had season highs of 27 points and 12 rebounds to help Dallas win at Indiana.

Luka Doncic added 13 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists, and the Mavs snapped their first three-game losing streak in almost two years.

Magic 97, Timberwolves 96: Cole Anthony hit a hurried three-pointer at the buzzer and Orlando won at short-handed Minnesota to stop a six-game losing streak.

Nikola Vucevic had 28 points and eight rebounds for the Magic. Evan Fournier added 24 points in his return after missing nine games with lower back spasms.

Suns 109, Rockets 103: Deandre Ayton had season highs with 26 points and 17 rebounds and Phoenix won at

Houston to end a two-game skid.

The Suns won for the first time since Jan. 9. Between the two losses, they had three games postponed because of health and safety protocols after playing at Washington.

Warriors 121, Spurs 99: Stephen Curry had 26 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists in Golden State's victory over visiting San Antonio.

Rookie James Wiseman added 20 points, six rebounds and four assists, and Draymond Green had six of the Warriors' 31 assists. Golden State made it consecutive impressive wins after erasing a 14-point deficit in the fourth quarter of a 115-113 road victory over the Lakers on Monday.

Heat 111, Raptors 102: Kendrick Nunn scored 28 points and injury-plagued Miami pulled away in the second half to beat Toronto in Tampa, Fla..

Nunn came off the bench and shot 9-for-12 and had eight rebounds in 35 minutes. Kelly Olynyk added 15 points, eight rebounds and eight assists.

Watson powers Providence past No. 11 Creighton

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Nate Watson scored a career-high 29 points and Providence turned back Creighton each time it pulled close, beating the 11th-ranked Bluejays 74-70 on Wednesday night.

Providence (8-6, 4-4 Big East) won for the first time in four games and avenged a crushing loss to the Bluejays three weeks ago. Creighton (10-4, 6-3) lost its second straight after one of its worst offensive games of the season.

Alyn Breed had 15 points, David Duke added 12 and Jimmy Nichols Jr. scored 10 for the Friars, who were playing the third of four

straight road games.

Damien Jefferson scored a career-best 26 points for the Bluejays. Marcus Zegarowski, who missed the previous two games with a left hamstring injury, had 17 points and Christian Bishop added 12.

Georgia Tech 83, No. 20 Clemson 65: The host Yellow Jackets returned from a 17-day layoff with one of their most impressive showings of the season, getting more than 20 points from three players and routing the Tigers.

Michael Devoe led the way with 22 points, while Moses Wright and Jordan Usher chipped in with 21 apiece.

Georgia Tech (7-3, 3-1 Atlantic Coast Conference) built a nine-point halftime lead and handed Clemson its second straight blow-out loss.

No. 8 Houston 86, Tulsa 59: Marcus Sasser scored 26 points, Quentin Grimes added 18 points and seven rebounds as the host Cougars avenged their only loss of the season.

Sasser, who scored 18 points in the first half, finished 8-for-15 from the field, including 6-for-12 on three-pointers. Tramon Mark had 11 points and six rebounds for Houston.

The Cougars (12-1, 7-1 American) shot 43%, including 13-for-32 on three-pointers. Houston

outrebounded Tulsa 52-24, and had a 26-7 advantage in second-chance points.

The Cougars won their fifth straight since falling to the Golden Hurricane 65-64 in Tulsa on Dec. 29.

No. 10 Wisconsin 68, Northwestern 52: Tyler Wahl paced a balanced attack with 14 points and the host Badgers pulled away in the second half in a win over the Wildcats.

D'Mitrik Trice added 12 points, Brad Davison 11 and Potter 10 for Wisconsin (12-3, 6-2 Big Ten).

Chase Audige had 16 points and Miller Kopp 10 for Northwestern (6-7, 3-6), which has lost six straight.

Theodore's 2 goals lead Vegas past Arizona

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Shea Theodore scored two goals, Marc-Andre Fleury made 21 saves and the Vegas Golden Knights defeated the Arizona Coyotes 5-2 on Wednesday night.

It marks the first time the Golden Knights have started 4-0-0 in their four-year existence. They're the first team in the NHL to reach four wins this season.

"I think the biggest thing about those games was we got better," Fleury said. "We're not going to win them all, but I think if we can keep improving on our game and get better as a team we'll do well."

Vegas certainly looked improved from Monday's scrappy come-from-behind win in the first of four straight games against Arizona, using speed and crisper passes to execute a fluid attack all night. The balanced Golden Knights had 10 skaters with at least one point.

Alex Tuch added a goal and two assists, Mark Stone had a goal and an assist, and Alex Pietrangelo scored his first goal

with Vegas.

"I thought our game overall was better than it was the night before," coach Peter DeBoer said. "The big guys led the way on the scoresheet, but also in our play. Four games in, there's always work to do, but I liked the things we fixed from the prior game."

Nick Schmaltz and Phil Kessel scored for Arizona (1-2-1). Darcy Kuemper made 24 saves.

Sharks 2, Blues 1 (SO): Tomas Hertl scored the only goal in a four-round shootout to lift visiting San Jose over St. Louis.

Marcus Sorensen scored the tying goal late in the second period and Martin Jones made 22 saves for the Sharks, who snapped a six-game losing streak to the Blues that started in the 2019 playoffs.

Jones denied all four St. Louis shooters in the tiebreaker.

Brayden Schenn scored in his second consecutive game and Jordan Binnington made 37 saves for the Blues.

San Jose appeared to get the game-winner with 11 seconds left in overtime, but the officials

quickly waved it off for goaltender interference on Ryan Donato. After a replay review, the call was upheld.

Wild 3, Ducks 2: Joel Eriksson Ek had a goal and an assist, including the game-winning score early in the third period, and visiting Minnesota capped a successful season-opening road trip with a win over Anaheim.

Ryan Hartman and Nick Bonino also scored for the Wild, who have won three of their first four games. Kaapo Kahkonen made 22 saves.

Nicolas Deslauriers and Cam Fowler scored for the Ducks, and Ryan Miller stopped 29 shots.

Oilers 3, Maple Leafs 1: Leon Draisaitl broke a tie on a power play midway through the third period in visiting Edmonton's victory over Toronto.

Draisaitl, the reigning NHL MVP and Art Ross Trophy winner, ended the Oilers' 0-for-12 power-play drought.

Kailer Yamamoto was credited with the opening goal for Edmonton after the Maple Leafs

fumbled the puck into their own net in the first. Mikko Koskinen made 25 saves, and Josh Archibald scored into an empty net with 1:06 left.

Auston Matthews scored for Toronto, and Frederik Andersen made 19 saves.

Canucks 6, Canadiens 5 (SO): Bo Horvat scored the shootout winner and host Vancouver overcame Tyler Toffoli's hat trick to beat Montreal.

Horvat, the Vancouver captain, put a shot between the legs of goalie Carey Price to make the Canucks winners in their home opener.

Horvat and Brock Boeser each finished with two goals and an assist for Vancouver in regulation. Tyler Motte also scored and J.T. Miller had three assists.

Braden Holtby stopped 31 shots in regulation and overtime.

Price made 23 saves for the Canadiens, unbeaten in regulation this season. Jesper Kotkanen had a goal and an assist, and Brendan Gallagher scored his first of the season.

Capitals place 4 on COVID list, including Ovechkin

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin and three other Washington Capitals players were added to the NHL's COVID-19 list Wednesday and the team was fined \$100,000 by the league for violating coronavirus protocols, including a gathering in a hotel room.

In addition to three-time MVP Ovechkin — one of just eight players in NHL history with more than 700 goals — the Capitals joining the COVID-19 list were center Evgeny Kuznetsov, defenseman Dmitry Orlov and top goalie Ilya Samsonov.

"I regret my choice to spend time together with my teammates in our hotel room and

away from the locker room areas," Ovechkin said in a statement issued by the Capitals. "I will learn from this experience."

The Capitals themselves said they were "disappointed by our players' choice to interact in their hotel room and outside of team approved areas." Saying it accepts the NHL's decision, the team vowed to "reiterate the COVID-19 protocols in place to make sure the players are in full compliance moving forward."

Five players from the Carolina Hurricanes also are on the league's COVID-19 list, and that team's games were called off by the league through "at

least" Saturday.

The postponements were announced Wednesday, a day before the Hurricanes were set to host the Florida Panthers in their home opener. The teams were scheduled to play again Saturday.

The NHL said the Hurricanes' training facilities are closed and will stay that way "until further notice." The league is reviewing and revising Carolina's schedule.

The Capitals were punished by the league for "social interactions among team members who were in close contact and who were not wearing face coverings."

This is the first instance this season of Capitals players ap-

pearing on the NHL's COVID-19 list, which could include those who test positive, have a potential exposure or face quarantine requirements.

Being on that list would make Ovechkin and the others unavailable for practice, but it is possible that they could be allowed back with the team in time to play in Washington's next game, which is Friday against the visiting Buffalo Sabres.

Washington has played four games so far, going 2-0-2.

This is not the first postponement involving the Hurricanes: Their game at Nashville on Tuesday was the NHL's first postponement since the season began this month.