

US B-52 again flies over Mideast

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — The U.S. military said Wednesday it again flew a B-52 bomber over the Middle East “to deter potential aggression” amid tensions with Iran, the first such flight under President Joe Biden.

The B-52 flew nonstop from Louisiana’s Barksdale Air Force Base into the region earlier in the day. The plane went over both the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia, according to flight-tracking data.

The U.S. military’s Central Command later published images of the bomber flying alongside Royal Saudi Air Force F-15s.

While not mentioning Iran in its statement, CENTCOM said the flight was meant to “showcase the U.S. commitment to regional security.”

The flights, the third-such operation this year, had become common in the last months of former President Donald Trump’s administration. Trump’s 2018 decision to unilaterally withdraw from Iran’s nuclear deal with world powers sparked a series of escalating incidents in the region.

Biden has expressed a desire to return to the deal if Iran honors the deal’s limits on its nuclear program.

Also Wednesday, Iranian and Taliban officials met in Tehran and accused the U.S. of provoking the continuation of war in Afghanistan, Iranian State TV reported.

Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, told visiting Taliban political chief Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar that the U.S.

seeks to continue the war in neighboring Afghanistan.

“The U.S. strategy supports the continuation of war and bloodshed among various Afghan groups in the political spectrum,” Shamkhani was quoted as saying. He said the U.S. tries to blame insecurity and instability in the country on individual Afghan groups.

There was no immediate comment from the U.S., which signed a peace agreement with the Taliban last February and met its goal this month of reducing the number of troops in Afghanistan to about 2,500.

Taliban representatives and the Afghan government earlier this month resumed peace talks in Qatar, the Gulf Arab state where the insurgents maintain an office. The stop-and-go talks are aimed at ending decades of conflict.

But frustration and fear have grown over a recent spike in violence, and both sides blame one another.

Baradar, who arrived Monday with a Taliban delegation, criticized the U.S. for allegedly breaking its commitments to the February deal. He did not elaborate.

Occasionally, Iranian and Taliban officials meet for what Tehran says are talks aimed at helping facilitate intra-Afghan dialogue.

Iran sees the presence of U.S. forces in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq as a threat on its doorstep and routinely calls for their departure.

Iran and Afghanistan have some 585 miles of common border.

Congress seeks to restore base construction funds

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Congress is asking the Department of Defense to return billions of dollars that former President Donald Trump diverted from local military base construction projects to fund the border wall and was never spent.

President Joe Biden canceled the national emergency declaration that Trump and the Defense Department had used to justify shifting \$3.6 billion from scores of military construction projects.

These include dozens of overseas projects such as new aircraft hangars at Yokota Air Base in Japan, a drone hangar at Kunsan Air Base in South Korea, a special operations parachute rigging facility in Baumholder in Germany and schools in Stuttgart, Wiesbaden and Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany.

Of the \$3.6 billion in military construction funds pulled for the border wall, \$922 million was spent, according to documents obtained by McClatchy. The remaining \$2.67 billion was either not yet designated for a specific border wall project or unspent, according to the documents.

Members of the House and Senate Armed Services and Appropriations committees have reached out to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Defense Department to see how those funds can be returned and the projects restored.

“The former administration robbed billions from military construction projects that would have supported military readiness, quality of life, and deterrence of national security threats abroad,” House Armed Services Committee Chairman

Adam Smith said in a statement.

“The Armed Services Committees along with our Appropriations colleagues work with the Department of Defense and the Army Corps of Engineers to understand how they are conducting the review required by the Executive Order, what the path forward is and if they need any authority, reprogramming approval, or other action from Congress to restore funding to the original authorized military construction projects,” the Washington Democrat said.

The Army Corps of Engineers halted construction of the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border last week following Biden’s executive order, which ended the national emergency declaration set by Trump.

After pushback from Congress, funding for some of the cut projects was restored, such as a new schoolhouse for Fort Campbell, Ky., but not for all of them.

As of January, there were 16 projects, ranging from a new submarine pier and maintenance facility in Washington to the expansion of a new missile field in Alaska to a new Marine Corps battalion complex at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, for which funding had not been restored.

Trump directed that the Defense Department send forces to the border with Mexico in spring 2018. Those troops were used to help lay miles of concertina wire to create a border fence and provide medical, logistical and surveillance support to border agents.

There are currently more than 3,600 troops deployed along the U.S.-Mexico border, according to Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Christian Mitchell.

Army OKs new grooming rules for females

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Female soldiers will be permitted by late February to wear several additional hairstyles in uniform under a new Army policy that is part of an effort to improve racial and gender equality throughout the service.

Senior leaders approved new policies last month that allow women to shave their heads or wear ponytails and hairstyle combinations such as braided twists and locs at the same time in uniform, according to service documents released Tuesday. The new grooming standards will take effect Feb. 25 alongside an updated version of AR-670-1, the Army's all-encompassing regulation governing appearance and how to wear uniforms, which was also announced Tuesday.

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston, the service's most senior enlisted soldier, told reporters Tuesday that the changes were driven by feedback from soldiers. He said many women detailed the struggles that they faced with grooming standards,

especially former policies that mandated women with long hair wear it in a bun.

"This is about listening to our soldiers, taking what they are saying and determining how can we incorporate that into the Army," Grinston said. "They spoke out, we listened, and I think we went through a really good process. I'm really excited about the changes we're making."

A uniform policy board of mostly female soldiers met in December and gave recommendations about changes they believed would benefit soldiers, said Army Sgt. Maj. Brian Sanders. The board did not meet in time to roll the new policies into the new AR 670-1, but Sanders said they would be included in that regulation next time it is updated. The changes include authorizing women to wear long ponytails during physical training, field training and combat operations. The policy allows women to wear the long ponytail out during fitness training, but female soldiers must tuck it into their Army Combat Uniform top when they are wearing a helmet.

Women for years had struggled to keep their helmets in the correct place while wearing a bun, Grinston said. The long ponytail option should allow them to properly wear headgear while shooting, he said.

The regulation changes also allow women to wear short ponytails in all uniforms if they are "unable to form a bun due to the length and/or texture of [their] hair." Those ponytails must not be wider than their heads, must not extend below the bottom of their uniform collars and cannot interfere with headgear.

Sanders said that regulation was geared largely toward women who had to go to great lengths to place their hair in a bun. A medical expert advising the panel concluded the change would help prevent alopecia and other forms of hair loss common in military women who force their hair into buns, Sanders said.

The panel also approved women to wear "multiple hairstyles at once as long as it is neat in appearance and does not impact the wear of headgear and equipment."

Contractor charged with exposing himself on Okinawa

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A civilian contractor working for the Marine Corps on Okinawa was arrested over the weekend for allegedly exposing himself to someone on school property on Jan. 18.

Christopher Davis, 29, parked outside the vocational school building in Chubu around 10:35 a.m. Jan. 18, an Uruma police spokesman told Stars and Stripes by phone on Monday.

He began speaking with a passerby from his vehicle, then exposed his gen-

itals, the spokesman said.

Police provided no further information about the passerby or the school.

Davis was taken into custody Saturday on a charge of public indecency, the spokesman said. The case was referred to the local prosecutor's office Monday.

The Uruma police spokesman declined to say which prosecutor's office would be handling the case. It's customary in Japan for some government officials to speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

The Marine Corps on Okinawa acknowledged on Tuesday that Davis was in custody.

A spokesman for Marine Corps Installations Pacific, 1st Lt. Timothy Hayes, in an email Tuesday referred questions to Okinawa Prefectural Police.

"US law enforcement has been assisting local authorities throughout this investigation and Marine forces will continue to cooperate with and support local authorities throughout this process and investigation," he wrote.

Philippines protests China law as 'verbal threat of war'

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — The Philippines has protested a new Chinese law that authorizes its coast guard to fire on foreign vessels and destroy other countries' structures on islands it claims, Manila's top diplomat said Wednesday.

Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr.

said in a tweet that the new Chinese law "is a verbal threat of war to any country that defies" it. Failure to challenge the law "is submission to it," he said.

China's Coast Guard Law, which was passed Friday, empowers the force to "take all necessary measures, including the use of weapons, when national sovereignty,

sovereign rights, and jurisdiction are being illegally infringed upon by foreign organizations or individuals at sea."

The law also authorizes the coast guard to demolish other countries' structures built on reefs and islands claimed by China and to seize or order foreign vessels illegally entering China's territorial waters to leave.

GOP largely sides against holding Trump trial

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — All but five Senate Republicans voted in favor of an effort to dismiss Donald Trump's historic second impeachment trial on Tuesday, making clear that a conviction of the former president for "incitement of insurrection" after the deadly Capitol siege on Jan. 6 is unlikely.

While the Republicans did not succeed in ending the trial before it began, the test vote made clear that Trump still has enormous sway over his party as he becomes the first former president to be tried for impeachment. Many Republicans have criticized Trump's role in the attack — before which he told his supporters to "fight like hell" to overturn his defeat — but most of them have rushed to defend him in the trial.

"I think this was indicative of where a lot of people's heads are," said South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Republican in the Senate, after the vote.

Late Tuesday, the presiding officer at the trial, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., was taken to the hospital for observation after not feeling well at his office, spokesman David Carle said in a statement. The 80-year-old senator was examined by the Capitol's attending physi-

cian, who recommended he be taken to the hospital out of an abundance of caution, he said. Later Tuesday, Carle said Leahy had been sent home and was looking forward to getting back to work.

Leahy presided over the trial's first procedural vote, a 55-45 tally that saw the Senate set aside an objection from Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul that would have declared the impeachment proceedings unconstitutional and dismissed the trial. The vote means the trial on Trump's impeachment will begin as scheduled the week of Feb. 8. The House impeached him Jan. 13, just a week after the deadly insurrection in which five people died.

What seemed for some Democrats like an open-and-shut case that played out for the world on live television is running into a Republican Party that feels very different. Not only do senators say they have legal concerns, but they are wary of crossing the former president and his legions of followers. It's unclear if any Republicans would vote to convict Trump on the actual charge of incitement after voting in favor of Paul's effort to declare it unconstitutional.

Ohio Sen. Rob Portman said after the vote that he had not yet made up his mind, and that

constitutionality "is a totally different issue" than the charge itself. But many others indicated that they believe the final vote will be similar.

The vote shows that "they've got a long ways to go to prove it," Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst said of House Democrats' charge. South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, a close Trump ally, said he thinks the vote was "a floor, not a ceiling."

Oklahoma Sen. James Lankford said he thinks that most Republicans will not see daylight between the constitutionality and the article of incitement.

"You're asking me to vote in a trial that by itself on its own is not constitutionally allowed?" he asked.

Conviction would require the support of all Democrats and 17 Republicans, or two-thirds of the Senate — far from the five Republicans who voted with Democrats on Tuesday to allow the trial to proceed. They were Sens. Susan Collins, of Maine; Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska; Mitt Romney, of Utah; Ben Sasse, of Nebraska; and Pat Toomey, of Pennsylvania — all recent critics of the former president and his effort to overturn President Joe Biden's win.

Storm-savvy Ala. town dazed by killer tornado

Associated Press

FULTONDALE, Ala. — James Scott has never lived anywhere other than a two-story house on hilly Darlene Drive north of Birmingham. But home will never be the same after a tornado smashed the structure into pieces, killed another teen and left the community devastated in the middle of the night.

Standing in the middle of the destruction Tuesday, the 19-year-old stared blankly at the rubble for a few moments, seemingly unsure what to do next.

"It's time to regroup and start cleaning," he said. "It's the best I can hope for."

The terrifying nighttime tornado that blasted through suburban Birmingham late Monday, trapping entire families in the remnants of shattered homes and injuring 30, left a trail of destruction that stunned even longtime residents used to Alabama's violent weather.

Tim Herring, who survived the

twister by huddling in a bathtub with his wife, Patti, as winds ripped off the roof of their house and splintered walls, had followed weather forecasts during the day and didn't expect the worst until it happened.

"I've lived here 64 years. I wasn't too worried," he said.

"I've helped folks after tornadoes," he added. "This time, it's us."

At least 30 people were injured as the tornado carved a 10-mile path through Birmingham's northern suburbs, an area severely damaged by a much larger tornado a decade ago. Ninth-grader Elliott Hernandez, 14, was killed and several relatives were critically injured when their home collapsed, trapping them in the basement, Fultondale Police Chief D.P. Smith said.

The National Weather Service said the twister was an EF-3 with 150 mph winds, capable of severely damaging well-constructed buildings.

Russia OKs extending the New START treaty with US

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian lawmakers Wednesday quickly approved the extension of the last remaining nuclear Russia-U.S. arms control, a fast-track action that comes just days before it's due to expire.

Both houses of parliament voted unanimously to extend the New START treaty for five years, a day after a phone call between U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin said they agreed to complete the necessary extension procedures in the next few days.

The pact's extension doesn't require congressional approval in the United States, but Russian lawmakers must ratify the move and Putin has to sign the relevant bill into law.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told lawmakers

that the extension will be validated by exchanging diplomatic notes once all the procedures are completed.

Upper house Speaker Valentina Matvienko said after the vote that the decision to extend the pact shows that Russia and the U.S. can reach agreements on major issues despite the tensions between them.

New START expires Feb. 5. After taking office last week, Biden proposed extending the treaty for five years, and the Kremlin quickly welcomed the offer.

The treaty, signed in 2010 by President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, limits each country to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers, and envisages sweeping on-site inspections to verify compliance.

Biden 'bringing back pros' for virus briefings

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — For nearly a year it was the Trump show. Now, President Joe Biden is calling up the nation's top scientists and public health experts to regularly brief the American public about the pandemic that has claimed more than 425,000 U.S. lives.

Administration experts plan to host briefings three times a week on the state of the outbreak, efforts to control it and the race to deliver vaccines and therapeutics to end it.

Expect a sharp contrast from the last administration's briefings, when public health officials were repeatedly undermined by a president who shared his unproven ideas without hesitation.

The new briefings are part of Biden's attempt to rebuild public confidence in institutions, particularly the federal government, with a commitment to share the bad news with the good.

Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS — All around New Orleans, thousands of houses are being decorated as floats because the coronavirus outbreak canceled the elaborate parades mobbed by crowds during the Carnival season leading to Mardi Gras.

Some smaller groups announced no-parade plans before the city did. Pandemic replacements include scavenger hunts for signature trinkets that would normally be thrown from floats or handed out from a streetcar, as well as outdoor art and drive-thru or virtual parades. The prominent Krewe of Bacchus has an app where people can catch and trade virtual trinkets during Carnival and watch a virtual parade Feb. 14, when the parade had been scheduled.

By Carnival season's official start Jan. 6, a Facebook group created to discuss the house floats had more than 9,000 members, including out-of-state "expats." About 3,000, including a few as far afield as England and Australia, will have their houses on an official online map, said Charlotte "Charlie" Jallans-Daly, one of two map-makers.

Houses are to be decorated at least two weeks before Fat Tuesday, which falls on Feb. 16 this year. With widespread addresses and two weeks to gawk, the hope is that people will spread out widely in time and space.

Washington

SEATTLE — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee on Tuesday touted big improvements in dis-

tributing the COVID-19 vaccines, but he also urged residents to remain vigilant as new, more contagious variants of the disease spread in the state.

Inslee said more than 36,000 doses were administered in Washington on Sunday and 39,000 on Monday — a big jump from about 16,000 a week earlier, and on the way toward the state's goal of 45,000 per day.

The number of vaccines actually administered could be even higher, given lags in reporting, but as of Monday more than 500,000 doses had been administered statewide, with four mass vaccination sites due to open this week.

West Virginia

CHARLESTON — A West Virginia judge on Tuesday denied an attempt by teachers unions to halt the state's decision to reopen classrooms last week amid the pandemic.

Kanawha County Judge Carrie Webster denied a temporary restraining order that sought to reverse the resumption of in-person learning in all 55 counties. The two largest unions wanted local school boards to decide reopening plans and allow more teachers to become fully vaccinated before going back to teach.

The West Virginia Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia had filed two separate lawsuits that were later consolidated. The unions had said it is unsafe to put teachers and workers back in classrooms as coronavirus cases still climb.

South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS — South Dakota health officials on Tuesday reported 202 new COVID-19 cases, lifting the number of positive tests to more than 107,000 since the start of the pandemic.

The COVID Tracking Project reports that over the past two weeks, the rolling average number of daily new cases has decreased by nearly 47%, which is a 5% improvement over numbers in Monday's report.

No new deaths were listed for the second day in a row, keeping the fatality count at 1,705. Hospitalizations dropped by nine to 152.

Officials reported that 78,228 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine have been administered and 18,220 people have received both shots. South Dakota is among the top five states in the country in doses administered per capita at 9,362 shots per 100,000 people, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK — An Arkansas judge on Tuesday dismissed a lawsuit challenging the early closing time for bars and some restaurants that was temporarily imposed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The lawsuit argued Gov. Asa Hutchinson and state officials did not have authority to order bars and restaurants to close by 11 p.m. Hutchinson announced the order in November in response to a surge in coronavirus cases, and in December it was extended to Feb. 3.

Pulaski County Circuit Judge Wendell Griffen, who dismissed the suit, called the rational basis for the early closing time "obvious" given how many people have died from COVID-19 nationally and in the state.

Hutchinson said he was glad Griffen dismissed the suit, but said a decision had not yet been made on whether to extend the early closing time. An attorney for the group of Fayetteville bars and restaurants challenging the early time said they were discussing whether to appeal the decision.

Florida

TALLAHASSEE — Seniors in Florida will get their second dose of a coronavirus vaccine, Gov. Ron DeSantis declared Tuesday, even as frustration grows nationally over spotty supplies of the doses.

Later in the day, President Joe Biden announced that states would get a roughly 16% increase in deliveries over the coming weeks, allowing more Floridians to get a shot in the arm against a disease that has infected 100 million worldwide and killed almost 2.2 million, including over 424,000 in the United States and 25,600 in Florida.

The rise in shipments translates to 307,000 first doses and 254,000 booster shots for Florida, according to the state health department. While good news for those waiting to get inoculated, it surely won't satiate the demand for the vaccine — even if the increased shipment does help ease concerns about the availability of the vaccine for the growing number awaiting booster shots.

Of the more than 1.4 million in Florida who have gotten shots, less than 11% have gotten their second dose, according to the latest records provided by the state Health Department. That means more than a million people — most of them at least 65 years old — are coming due for the second of two shots required to achieve the highest level of efficacy against the disease.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Swastikas found on home in historic neighborhood

AZ PHOENIX — A home in a historic Phoenix neighborhood was vandalized with anti-Semitic graffiti.

AZFamily.com reported that neighbors in the Willo district gathered to help Alba Rodriguez paint over swastikas on her and her fiancée's home.

Rodriguez told the TV station that the vandalism happened while they were out of town.

She was notified that someone kept ringing her doorbell. Rodriguez asked neighbors to check on her home. One alerted her to the graffiti they found and sent pictures.

Rodriguez's home was the only one that was tagged.

Resident using lighter as flashlight sparks fire

KS HUTCHINSON — A Hutchinson resident who used a lighter as a flashlight accidentally lit the underside of the bed, starting a fire that heavily damaged the house, fire officials said.

Firefighters responding to a call found heavy smoke and fire coming from a window on the front of the single-story home, the Hutchinson News reported.

The two adults and child who were in the home got out unharmed.

Crews were able to contain the fire to the room where it started, but the two-bedroom home sustained smoke and heat damage throughout, according to a news release.

Police: Thieves walk past body to steal valuables from home

MO LINCOLN COUNTY — Thieves walked past a man's body for months to steal from his property in eastern Missouri, authorities said.

Authorities found the body of a 60-year-old man in mid-December in a detached garage in rural Lincoln County,

Sheriff Rick Harrell said.

The thefts went on for months, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

The man was not reported missing because he was estranged from his family, who lived in other states. He also had two homes in Lincoln County, so neighbors were not surprised by his absence. Both homes were looted, Harrell said.

Woman charged with stealing from her employer, a church

GA GAINESVILLE — A north Georgia woman was arrested on charges that she stole about \$107,000 from the church where she worked.

The Hall County Sheriff's Office said Alycia Christy, 49, turned herself in on a felony theft charge Jan. 15.

Hall County Sheriff's Office spokesman Derreck Booth told The Times of Gainesville that Christy worked as an administrative assistant at Northlake Baptist Church and took funds from the church between January 2018 and January of this year. Investigators said she used the money to pay credit card bills.

Alleged leader of theft ring one out of 9 apprehended

RI PROVIDENCE — The alleged ringleader of a group accused of stealing about \$700,000 worth of excavators, boats, personal watercraft, all-terrain vehicles and trailers from dealers in four New England states was captured in Florida, federal prosecutors said.

Jose Montes, also known as Jose Rivera, 36, of Cranston, was apprehended in Winter Park, Fla., according to a statement from the U.S. attorney's office in Rhode Island.

Montes was one of nine people indicted in November on a variety of charges including interstate transportation of stolen property, receipt of stolen goods and conspiracy to commit interstate transportation of stolen property.

Three Bobcat excavators, 10 personal watercraft, four boats, eight all-terrain

vehicles and 10 trailers valued at nearly \$700,000 were stolen between November 2019 and July 2020.

Man held in 8 arsons that caused \$1.5M damage

VT STOWE — A Stowe man charged in eight arsons that police said caused more than \$1.5 million in damage to the resort community was arrested by federal agents.

Jeffrey Nolan, 62, made his initial appearance in federal court on a complaint of malicious damage or destruction, by means of fire, of property used in or affecting interstate commerce, federal prosecutors said. He was held pending further proceedings. The federal government plans to seek formal federal charges before a grand jury.

A series of fires over more than five years in Stowe has endangered the lives of residents and first responders, caused millions of dollars in damages to structures, displaced several people from jobs and created an atmosphere of anxiety for the town's residents, the office of the U.S. attorney said.

Nolan pleaded guilty earlier this month to eight state counts of arson.

Videos of 60 females found on camera in changing room

TN FRANKLIN — A Tennessee gym fired an employee who owned a camera found inside a girls' changing room, officials said.

The camera found at Premier Athletics in Franklin contained videos of 60 females, most of them underage, police told news outlets. Detectives are identifying the people shown in the videos and are notifying parents.

The gym told customers that the employee who owned the camera has been fired.

Premier Athletics trains cheerleaders, gymnasts and dancers, according to its website.

— From wire reports

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No one makes Baseball Hall of Fame

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Baseball Hall of Fame won't have any new players in the class of 2021 after voters decided no one had the merits — on the field or off — for enshrinement in Cooperstown.

Curt Schilling, Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens were the closest in voting by members of the Baseball Writers' Association of America released Tuesday, and the trio will have one more chance at election next year. It's the first time the BBWAA didn't choose anyone since 2013.

Schilling, a right-handed ace who won three World Series titles, finished 16 votes short of the 75% threshold necessary for enshrinement. He got 71.1% percent this time after coming up 20 votes shy at 70% last year.

Schilling's on-field accomplishments face little dispute,

but he has ostracized himself in retirement by directing hateful remarks toward Muslims, transgender people, journalists and others.

"It's all right, the game doesn't owe me anything," Schilling said during a live video stream on his Twitter account.

He later wrote on Facebook that he has asked the Hall of Fame to remove his name from next year's ballot. Hall of Fame Board Chairman Jane Forbes Clark said in a statement that the board "will consider the request at our next meeting."

Bonds (61.8%) and Clemens (61.6%) made minimal gains and joined Schilling in falling short on their ninth tries. Both face suspicions of performance-enhancing drug use — Clemens has denied using PEDs and Bonds has denied knowingly using PEDs.

Bonds also has been accused

of domestic violence and Clemens of maintaining a decadelong relationship with a singer who was 15 when they met.

Schilling, Clemens and Bonds will be joined on next year's ballot by sluggers Alex Rodriguez and David Ortiz. Rodriguez was suspended for the 2014 season for violating MLB's PED policy and collective bargaining agreement, and Ortiz's name allegedly appeared on a list of players who tested positive in 2003.

Omar Vizquel, an 11-time Gold Glove winner, dropped from 52.6% last year to 49.1% after his wife accused him of repeated domestic abuses in December. Braves star Andruw Jones, arrested in 2012 on a domestic violence charge, got 33.9% in his fourth year. Rockies slugger Todd Helton, who pleaded guilty to driving under the influence and was sentenced

to two days in jail last year, got 44.9% in his third time on the ballot.

Some players missed out over old-fashioned baseball disagreements, too. Slick-fielding third baseman Scott Rolen moved from 35.3% to 52.9% and hard-throwing closer Billy Wagner from 31.7% to 46.4%.

It's the ninth time the BBWAA didn't elect anyone and just the third time since 1971. With the Hall of Fame's Era Committees postponing their scheduled elections until next offseason because of the pandemic, there won't be a new Hall class for the first time since 1960.

BBWAA members are instructed to elect Hall members "based upon the player's record, playing ability, integrity, sportsmanship, character, and contributions to the team(s) on which the player played."

More empty Hall of Fame classes could be coming

Associated Press

It could be a while before the Baseball Writers' Association of America votes anyone new into the Hall of Fame.

BBWAA members delivered an empty class in this year's election, which was announced Tuesday night. Curt Schilling received the most support, but the former pitcher was selected on 71.1% of the ballots, falling 16 votes short of the 75% needed for induction. Barry Bonds (61.8%) and Roger Clemens (61.6%) were the next-highest finishers.

It was the first time since 2013 that the BBWAA didn't elect anyone. That year proved to be an exception. The writers elected 22 players from 2014-20. But there are signs that the 2021 shutout could be repeated next year — and perhaps the year after that as well.

Schilling came up short, his numbers barely budging from

last year. He's turned off voters with his behavior in recent years, including social media posts about Muslim extremists, transgender people and journalists.

Schilling wrote on Facebook that he has asked the Hall of Fame to remove his name from next year's ballot. Hall of Fame Board Chairman Jane Forbes Clark said in a statement that the board "will consider the request at our next meeting."

Bonds and Clemens appear to have stalled as well amid suspicions of performance-enhancing drug use.

Next year's ballot is expected to include Alex Rodriguez and David Ortiz for the first time. Rodriguez was suspended for the 2014 season for violating Major League Baseball's PED policy and collective bargaining agreement. The New York Times reported in 2009 that Ortiz was

among those who tested positive in a 2003 survey designed to determine the degree of steroids use in baseball.

Barring a significant change in the way the electorate approaches PEDs, it's possible the BBWAA won't vote anyone in next year, either. And the same could be true for 2023, when Carlos Beltrán — implicated in the Houston Astros' sign-stealing scandal — appears likely to be the top newcomer on the ballot.

Last chance

Bonds and Clemens have one more year on the writers' ballot, and Schilling does, too, unless the Hall abides by his request for removal. There was a time when Bonds and Clemens seemed to be making progress as new voters were added to the process, but now they're heading into their 10th and final chance.

"The turnover in the electorate seems to be good for a point or two every year, but they need, what, 13 or 14 points now?" said Ryan Thibodaux, whose online ballot tracker provides a running poll in the weeks leading up to the vote announcement. "They need to change a whole bunch of minds. It's basically if a bunch of people have decided that they're waiting until year 10 to make that switch, that's pretty much their hope."

Other newcomers

Although Rodriguez and Ortiz are the biggest additions, there are some other interesting new names expected for the 2022 ballot.

Ryan Howard and Jimmy Rollins each won an MVP, and Tim Lincecum won two Cy Young Awards. Prince Fielder and Joe Nathan are among the other eligibles.

Schultz's late goal helps Caps edge Isles

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Justin Schultz scored the go-ahead goal with 26.4 seconds left, Vitek Vanecek made 32 saves and the Washington Capitals beat the New York Islanders 3-2 on Tuesday night despite another injury to a key player.

Schultz's goal allowed the Capitals to narrowly avoid a fifth consecutive overtime game, which has never happened in franchise history.

Capitals defenseman John Carlson had a power-play goal, and Daniel Sprong scored his first with Washington.

Noah Dobson and Mathew Barzal scored for the Islanders, who got 33 saves from leading NHL goalie Semyon Varlamov in his first loss of the season after starting 3-0.

Blues 5, Golden Knights 4 (SO): David Perron and Brayden Schenn scored in a shootout to lift St. Louis to a win at Las Vegas.

Max Pacioretty got his seventh career hat trick for the Golden Knights, who were missing their entire coaching staff because of COVID-19 concerns. General manager Kelly McCrimmon took over head coaching duties and was assisted by staff from the team's minor league affiliate in the AHL, the Henderson Silver Knights.

Panthers 4, Blue Jackets 3 (SO): Patric Hornqvist scored

the tying goal with 3 seconds left in regulation and had the game winner in a shootout as Florida won at Columbus.

Hornqvist beat Joonas Korpi-salo in the fifth round of the shootout to end it after the Blue Jackets' Mikhail Grigorenko's try went into the pads of Panthers stopper Sergei Bobrovsky.

Sabres 3, Rangers 2: Jack Eichel, Dylan Cozens and Tobias Rieder scored and host Buffalo rallied to beat New York.

Chris Kreider and K'Andre Miller scored first-period goals for the Rangers.

Flyers 5, Devils 3: Nolan Patrick, Joel Farabee and Ivan Provorov scored third-period goals, and Philadelphia beat New Jersey for its first road win.

James van Riemsdyk scored two power-play goals and Brian Elliott made 23 saves as the Flyers came back to win after blowing an early two-goal lead. Provorov, who had an empty-net goal, and Claude Giroux each had two assists.

Bruins 3, Penguins 2 (OT): Craig Smith scored with 11 seconds left in overtime, and host Boston recovered after blowing a two-goal lead to beat Pittsburgh.

Brad Marchand had a short-handed goal and assisted on Nick Ritchie's goal to help the

Bruins earn their third straight victory. Tuukka Rask stopped 28 shots, giving up both Penguins goals after he injured himself midway through the third period.

Predators 3, Blackhawks 2 (OT): Roman Josi scored at 2:57 of overtime to give Nashville a victory over visiting Chicago.

Yakov Trenin and Mikael Granlund had the other goals for the Predators, who snapped a three-game losing streak.

Jets 6, Oilers 4: Nikolaj Ehlers had a goal and three assists and host Winnipeg rallied from a two-goal deficit and beat Edmonton.

Andrew Copp added two goals, including one into an empty net, and had two assists. Adam Lowry scored and set up two others for the Jets (5-2-0). Paul Stastny, with a goal and an assist, and Mathieu Perreault completed the scoring for Winnipeg, which got 22 saves from Connor Hellebuyck.

Kings 2, Wild 1: Carl Grundstrom and Kurtis MacDermid scored, and Calvin Peterson made 32 saves as Los Angeles held on to win at Minnesota.

The Kings have won three of four after starting the season 0-2-1.

Stars 2, Red Wings 1 (OT): Jason Dickinson scored 1:32 into overtime and Dallas won a third straight home game to start its delayed season, beating

Detroit.

The Red Wings controlled the puck for the first minute-plus of the 3-on-3 period before the Stars gained control and moved into the offensive zone.

Ducks 1, Coyotes 0: John Gibson stopped 31 shots for his second shutout in four starts, Danton Heinen scored and Anaheim won at Arizona.

Heinen scored his first goal of the season in the opening period and Gibson was sharp all night for his 21st career shutout. Gibson stopped 34 shots in a shutout against Minnesota on Jan. 18.

Maple Leafs 4, Flames 3: Mitch Marner's goal midway through the third period was the winner, and Toronto won at Calgary.

Auston Matthews also had a goal and an assist for the Maple Leafs (6-2-0). Wayne Simmonds and Travis Boyd also scored. Defenseman Morgan Rielly had a pair of assists.

Avalanche 7, Sharks 3: Brandon Saad scored twice, one in a three-goal flurry at the end of the first period, and Colorado defeated visiting San Jose.

Mikko Rantanen scored a goal for the sixth straight game to tie an Avalanche record, and Valeri Nichushkin added a short-handed goal and an assist in the rout. Joonas Donskoi, Devon Toews and Samuel Girard also scored.

Senior Bowl's role increases for NFL teams, prospects

Associated Press

MOBILE, Ala. — With whistles blowing and players moving from station to station, everything appeared to be business as usual Tuesday at the Senior Bowl — even if things are anything but normal.

NFL coaches, scouts and executives watched prospects Alabama quarterback Mac Jones, Sam Ehlinger of Texas and others try to improve their

draft stock on the field.

The football aspect hasn't changed, but the importance of this weeklong audition for senior NFL prospects is magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic with no NFL draft combine this year.

"This is a great opportunity for us to see the players live, up close, meet with them, talk to them," said the Miami Dolphins' Brian Flores, who is

coaching the National team. "Get some face time with them. Not on the iPhone but actual face time, literal face time, and get to know them as people, as players, things that make them tick. And we get to coach also. That's always fun.

"We're excited about this week and I think we'll get a lot out of it."

Among those going through practices are Heisman finalist

Jones, who is vying for first-round status — along with Crimson Tide tailback Najee Harris, North Carolina linebacker Chazz Surratt and Wake Forest defensive lineman Carlos Basham Jr. Florida quarterback Kyle Trask, another Heisman finalist, pulled out of the game because of an ankle injury.

There's a dose of normalcy, on the field at least, in an abnormal pre-draft process.

Wall lifts Rockets over former team

Associated Press

HOUSTON — On a minutes restriction because of a sore knee, Houston's John Wall had to wait until the seven-minute mark of the fourth quarter to reenter Tuesday night's game against his former team.

When he finally checked in, it didn't take long for him to put a punctuation mark on a solid performance by the Rockets.

Wall scored 24 points to help Houston to a 107-88 victory over Russell Westbrook and the Washington Wizards.

Wall had 15 points and four assists by halftime, including a left-handed layup that came after a nifty behind the back move and put the Rockets up 53-45 in the second quarter. He cooled off in the third, but got going again in the fourth to secure the win in his second game back after missing five with a sore left knee.

Houston was leading by six when Wall reentered the game. He scored five quick points before finding Victor Oladipo in the

corner near the Washington bench for a three-pointer to make it 93-79.

"I was itching to get back in in the fourth quarter," he said. "I wanted to play, especially against my old team. And we kind of separated ourselves right there."

Wall was selected by the Wizards with the No. 1 overall pick in the 2010 draft and spent his entire career with the organization before he was traded to the Rockets in December for Westbrook and a future first-round pick.

He insisted he didn't think he had anything to prove against the Wizards. But he did admit that he's having a great time with his new team after a rocky ending to his tenure in Washington.

Jazz 108, Knicks 94: Rudy Gobert had 18 points, 19 rebounds and four blocked shots, and host Utah earned its ninth consecutive win.

Royce O'Neale scored 20 points, helping the Jazz overcome a quiet night for Dono-

van Mitchell. Mike Conley had 19 points, seven rebounds, and five assists.

Mitchell finished with nine points on 3-for-15 shooting.

Austin Rivers scored 25 points for New York — all in the first half. Julius Randle had 18 points and 10 rebounds, and R.J. Barrett scored 17 in the Knicks' third straight loss.

Hawks 108, Clippers 99: Trae Young scored 38 points, helping host Atlanta stop Los Angeles' seven-game winning streak.

The Clippers were without three starters. Leading scorers Kawhi Leonard and Paul George were ruled out due to health and safety protocols. Guard Patrick Beverley missed the game with right knee soreness.

Reggie Jackson led Los Angeles with 20 points, eight assists and seven rebounds. Serge Ibaka had 15 points.

De'Andre Hunter had 22 points for the Hawks. Clint Capela collected 13 points and 19 rebounds.

No. 24 Oklahoma edges short-handed No. 5 Texas

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Austin Reaves scored 23 points and made two free throws with 18.3 seconds left that proved to be the difference as No. 24 Oklahoma beat short-handed No. 5 Texas 80-79 on Tuesday night.

Reaves' free throws gave the Sooners a three-point lead before Andrew Jones made two free throws seconds later to get the Longhorns within one. Texas nearly forced a turnover on the inbounds pass before fouling Oklahoma's Jalen Hill with 2.3 seconds to play.

Hill missed his first free throw, then intentionally missed his second but failed to hit the rim, giving the Longhorns the ball. The Sooners (10-4, 6-3) then intercepted a long pass to end the game, sending Texas (11-3, 5-2) to its second Big 12 home loss.

The Longhorns played without coach Shaka Smart, who announced Monday he has COVID-19 and is in isolation from the team and his family, and players Courtney Ramey, Jericho Sims and Brock Cunningham. Ramey and Sims are starters. The school did not immediately give a reason why the players were unavailable, and assistant coach K.T. Turner was the acting head coach for Texas.

No. 9 Alabama 70, Kentucky 59: Jaden Shackelford scored 21 points to help the host

Crimson Tide complete its first regular season two-game sweep over the Wildcats since 1989.

After a back-and-forth second half, Davion Mintz's three-pointer put Kentucky up 54-52 with 4:52 remaining in the game. The Alabama defense then made stops on five straight possessions which led to a 10-0 Crimson Tide (14-3, 9-0 SEC) run that essentially put the game away.

This game was much more tightly contested than the 85-65 Alabama win on Jan. 12, but in the end, the Wildcats' (5-10, 4-4 SEC) offense couldn't convert in the final few minutes of the game until it was too late.

Auburn 88, No. 12 Missouri 82: Sharife Cooper had 28 points, eight rebounds and seven assists to lead host Auburn to a win.

Auburn (10-7, 4-5 Southeastern Conference) raced out to a 14-point lead early, thanks in large part to some tenacious defense and rebounding.

No. 18 Tennessee 56, Mississippi State 53: Yves Pons scored 13 points and the host Vols overcame a miserable shooting night.

Pons was a critical force in the first half. In the final 2:30 of the game, it was freshman Keon Johnson who scored four of his eight points, while taking an important charging foul, to seal the victory for Tennessee (11-3, 5-3 Southeastern Conference).

Dayton 76, No. 22 Saint Louis 71: Jalen Crutcher scored 27 points and Ibi Watson added 18 to lead the Flyers to a road win.

The Billikens were playing their first game since Dec. 23 as the program suspended team activities due to a COVID-19 outbreak just before the team's first scheduled conference game Dec. 30.

Dayton (9-4, 5-3) opened the game on a 9-2 run in the first 3:57 and never trailed in the contest.

Duke 75, Georgia Tech 68: DJ Steward scored 19 points, Jalen Johnson added 18 and the host Blue Devils snapped a three-game losing streak.

Duke (6-5, 4-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) made seven of 10 foul shots in the last 79 seconds after Khalid Moore's layup with 1:40 left pulled the Yellow Jackets into a tie at 68.

Memphis 76, SMU 72: Alex Lomax came off the bench to score 14 points and lead the host Tigers.

D.J. Jeffries had 12 points for Memphis (9-5, 5-2 American Athletic Conference).

North Carolina 75, Pittsburgh 65: The Tar Heels won on the road and have won six of their past seven games, with a loss at Florida State being their lone setback.

LSU 78, Texas A&M 66: Cameron Thomas finished with 28 points and the visiting Tigers scored the final 18 points of the game.