

Taliban attacks prompt questions on troop exit

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon on Thursday said the Taliban's refusal to meet commitments to reduce violence in Afghanistan is raising questions about whether all U.S. troops will be able to leave by May as required under the peace agreement.

Pentagon chief spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. stands by its commitment for a full troop withdrawal, but the agreement also calls for the Taliban to cut ties with al-Qaida and reduce violence. Echoing what senior military and defense leaders have asserted in recent months, Kirby said the Taliban have not yet met the requirements set in the peace agreement.

"Without them meeting their commitments to renounce terrorism and to stop the violent attacks against the Afghan National Security Forces, it's very hard to see a specific way forward for the negotiated settlement," Kirby said. "But we're still committed to that."

White House and State Department officials have made it clear that President Joe Biden's administration plans to take a new look at the peace agreement, which was signed last February with the Trump White House.

The White House said Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, told his Afghan counterpart in a phone call last Friday that the new administration will "review" the deal. And newly installed Secretary of

State Antony Blinken said Wednesday the administration wanted to take a detailed look to "understand exactly what is in the agreement" before deciding how to proceed.

"The Taliban are not meeting their commitments to reduce violence and reduce their ties to al-Qaida," Kirby told a Pentagon press conference on Thursday. "As long as they're not meeting their commitments, it's going to be difficult for anybody at that negotiating table to meet their commitments. In fact it wouldn't be the wise course. We obviously are still committed to ending this war, but we want to do it in a responsible way."

The peace agreement called for the U.S. to reduce troop levels to 2,500, and then to remove all forces by May. Former President Donald Trump ordered U.S. troops levels in Afghanistan cut to 2,500 just days before he left office, presenting Biden with difficult decisions about how to retain leverage against the Taliban in support of peace talks.

A key concern in the Pentagon is the continued high levels of Taliban violence against the Afghans. And some U.S. officials have questioned the wisdom of fully withdrawing if violence remains high.

Military officials have said there are now 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, mainly conducting counterterrorism operations.

The Taliban and the Afghan government earlier this month resumed peace talks.

Navy's fitness testing delayed due to outbreak

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy announced Wednesday that it is pushing back the start of its physical fitness test from March to July because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Shifting the Physical Fitness Assessment cycle to July "allows Navy to execute the official [Physical Fitness Assessment] after the primary influenza season while allowing time for vaccines to be more widely distributed," according to the Navy's administrative message posted Wednesday.

The required testing is typically done twice a year, however with the pandemic, the Navy reduced it to just one. The window to take the test for 2021 will now be from July 1 to Dec. 31.

The delay also means that sailors have more time to practice the test's new events, the forearm plank and the 2,000-meter row. The new events were announced in November as ways to improve the physical readiness of sailors. The change eliminated the curl-up, which the Navy says can aggravate lower back problems.

Sailors who fail their test will be allowed to take another official or mock test before Dec. 31 to get a passing score, according to the Navy. It will be up to commanders to decide how many chances a sailor gets to retake the test.

Half of Pentagon's vaccines have been administered

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department has received more than 794,000 doses of the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine but only about half of them have been administered, defense officials said Thursday.

Since the Defense Department began re-

ceiving doses in December, more than 389,000 doses have been given to personnel, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. The doses have been provided to 306 department sites, Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs, the Joint Staff surgeon, said.

Though Friedrichs did not say why half of

the department's allocated doses remain unused, he acknowledged the vaccines received during the last two weeks have been administered.

"And that's an example of the great work done by many people across our bases and in our communities to make sure that we're as efficient as possible with this," he said.

Austin backs Biden anti-assault effort

Austin American-Statesman

In the wake of a series of well-documented failures in the way Fort Hood leaders responded to sexual assault cases among soldiers, the military's top civilian leader under President Joe Biden is backing an aggressive approach to prevent such crimes across all services and ranks.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin this month ordered military leaders to submit by Feb. 5 summaries detailing all actions taken last year to prevent sexual assault and harassment. He also requested "frank" data-driven assessments of programs that show promise and ones that fell short.

Austin's orders followed a similar request from Biden to start finding ways to stop sexual assault in the military. As a

presidential candidate, Biden last year said he supported allowing military members outside of a victim's chain of command to investigate and prosecute sex-related crimes.

During Austin's Senate confirmation hearing on Capitol Hill last week, lawmakers asked if he supported that approach, when previous studies found that 64% of military sexual assault survivors reported experiencing some form of retaliation by their chain of command for reporting the abuse.

Many sexual assaults in the military go unreported because under military justice rules, unit commanders — not independent prosecutors — decide how to handle cases. In many cases, the unit commanders have

personal relationships with both the victim and the accused.

Some senators used Fort Hood as an example of failure, urging the retired four-star Army general to pledge that he would follow through with his promises of change.

"I certainly believe we need to do better, a lot of things better, in terms of investigations and prosecutions," Austin said in response. "I think we have to look at this holistically. This starts with me."

Austin in his written orders said he will "aggressively support" Biden's pursuit of holding accountable those accused of sexual assault. If Austin does push for independent prosecutors, which Biden agreed was necessary, he would be the first defense secretary to support such a change.

Biden taking 'creative steps' for virus aid

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration said on Friday it's taking "creative steps" to get broader public support for its \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 rescue plan, as attempts to strike a deal with Republicans have led to concerns about delays in coronavirus relief and Senate Democrats prepared to pass the measure along party lines.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said President Joe Biden fully recognizes the importance of speaking directly to the American people about his plan for vaccinations and supporting the economy, but the pandemic has limited his ability to safely travel the coun-

try to drum up support. That has left the administration relying on TV interviews with local media and outreach to governors and local officials as well as to progressive and civic groups.

"We're taking a number of creative steps, a little outside of the box," Psaki said. "Certainly, his preference would be to get on a plane and fly around the country."

Despite Biden's calls for unity, Democrats said the stubbornly high unemployment numbers and battered U.S. economy leave them unwilling to waste time courting Republican support that might not materialize. They also don't want to curb the size and scope of a pack-

age that they say will provide desperately needed money to distribute the vaccine, reopen schools and send cash to American households and businesses.

The standoff over Biden's first legislative priority is turning the new rescue plan into a political test — of his new administration, of Democratic control of Congress and of the role of Republicans in a post-Trump political landscape. Democrats in the House and the Senate are operating as though they know they are on borrowed time. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi are laying the groundwork to start the go-it-alone approach as soon as next week.

Single-shot J&J vaccine found to be 66% effective

The Washington Post

A single-shot coronavirus vaccine from pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson was 66% effective at preventing moderate and severe illness in a massive global trial, findings released Friday show. But its performance was stronger in the United States and weaker in South Africa, where a worrisome coronavirus variant now dominates — a complicated result that reflects the evolution of the pandemic.

The results, reported in a news release, put a third vaccine on the horizon in the

United States — one with logistical advantages that could simplify distribution and expand access to shots in the United States and worldwide. Johnson & Johnson is expected to apply for emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration next week. If the review follows the path of two earlier vaccine candidates, the shot could be authorized and available to the public by late February or early March.

The vaccine was 72% effective at protecting against moderate to severe illness in the United States, but it was 66% effective in La-

tin America and 57% effective in South Africa, where concerning variants have taken root. It was 85% effective overall at preventing severe disease.

The one-shot vaccine could be a "game changer," according to Jonathan Temte, a vaccine expert at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, because it can be stored for months at refrigerator temperature. The single shot could also streamline the vaccination effort, freeing mass vaccination clinics from the need to recall people for boosters.

Reliance on executive orders draws fire

Associated Press

President Joe Biden and aides are showing touches of prickliness over growing scrutiny of his heavy reliance on executive orders in his first days in office.

The president in just over a week has already signed more than three dozen executive orders and directives aimed at addressing the coronavirus pandemic as well as a gamut of other issues including environmental regulations, immigration policies and racial justice.

Biden has also sought to use the orders to erase foundational policy initiatives by former President Donald Trump, such as halting construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall and reversing a Trump-era Pentagon policy that largely barred transgender people from serving in the military.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Thursday that Biden's early reliance on executive action is at odds with the Democrat's pledge as a candidate to be a consensus builder.

Biden on Thursday framed his latest executive actions as an effort to "undo the damage Trump has done" by fiat rather than "initiating any new law." During a

brief exchange with reporters in the Oval Office after signing two more executive orders, he noted he was working simultaneously to push his \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 aid package through Congress. After being asked by a reporter if he was open to splitting up the relief package, the president responded: "No one requires me to do anything."

Earlier in the day, White House communications director Kate Bedingfield bristled at the criticism of Biden's executive orders in a series of tweets, adding, "Of course we are also pursuing our agenda through legislation. It's why we are working so hard to get the American Rescue Plan passed, for starters."

In his Senate floor speech Thursday morning, McConnell offered a misleading broadside that Biden as a candidate had declared "you can't legislate by executive action unless you are a dictator."

In fact, Biden at an October ABC News town hall had said there are certain "things you can't do by executive order unless you're a dictator" during an exchange about how quickly he'd push his plan to raise taxes on corporations and wealthy Americans.

Biden and aides, including top White House economists, have said that they believe executive action is a pale substitute for legislative action. At the same time, they've defended the heavy use of executive action at the start of the administration as a necessary stopgap to address the worst public health crisis in more than a century and reverse some of Trump's policies.

"There are steps, including overturning some of the harmful, detrimental and, yes, immoral actions of the prior administration that he felt he could not wait to overturn, and that's exactly what he did," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

While Biden has used executive action more frequently out of the gate than recent White House predecessors, he's not alone in being a heavy user of presidential fiat — or being criticized by the opposition party for doing so.

Bill Clinton had 364 orders over two terms, George W. Bush signed 291 over his eight years in office and Barack Obama issued 276. Trump in his one term signed 220 orders.

Pelosi wants security money, cites 'enemy' in Congress

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers face threats of violence from an "enemy" within Congress, and more money is needed to protect them, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday, a startling acknowledgment of escalating internal tensions over safety since this month's Capitol attack by supporters of former President Donald Trump.

The California Democrat's remarks came as the acting chief of the Capitol Police said separately that "vast improvements" are needed to protect the Capitol and adjacent office buildings, including permanent fencing. Such barricades have ringed the complex since the deadly Jan. 6 riot, but many lawmakers have long resisted giving the nation's symbol of democracy the look of a besieged compound, and leaders were noncommittal about the idea.

Pelosi focused her comments on the anxiety and partisan frictions that have persisted in Congress since Trump supporters' assault on the Capitol, which led to five deaths. She told reporters she thinks Congress will need to provide money "for more security for members, when the enemy is within the

House of Representatives, a threat that members are concerned about."

Asked to clarify what she meant, Pelosi said, "It means that we have members of Congress who want to bring guns on the floor and have threatened violence on other members of Congress."

She did not suggest how much money might be needed.

Some lawmakers who voted for this month's House impeachment of Trump have reported receiving threats, and initial moves to enhance safety procedures have taken on clear partisan undertones. Some Republicans have loudly objected to having to pass through newly installed metal detectors before entering the House chamber, while Pelosi has proposed fining lawmakers who bypass the devices.

Pelosi did not say whom she meant by her reference to an "enemy" within the House, and a spokesperson provided no examples when asked.

Earlier this month, the HuffPost website reported that Rep. Andy Harris, R-Md., set off a newly installed metal detector while trying to enter the House chamber and was

found to be carrying a concealed gun. Other Republicans have also talked about carrying firearms, which lawmakers are permitted to do, though not on the House or Senate floors.

Since the attack, the Capitol grounds have been surrounded by barrier fences and patrolled by National Guard troops. Yogananda D. Pittman, acting chief of the Capitol Police, said in a statement that based on security assessments by her agency and others, some changes should be lasting.

"In light of recent events, I can unequivocally say that vast improvements to the physical security infrastructure must be made to include permanent fencing, and the availability of ready, back-up forces in close proximity to the Capitol," said Pittman, whose agency provides security for Congress.

Pelosi took no immediate stance about Pittman's proposal for permanent fencing. Drew Hammill, the speaker's spokesperson, said she would await a Capitol security review led by retired Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré "to understand what infrastructure changes are necessary."

Virus variant from S. Africa detected in US

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — A new variant of the coronavirus emerged Thursday in the United States, posing yet another public health challenge in a country already losing more than 3,000 people to COVID-19 every day.

The mutated version of the virus, first identified in South Africa, was found in two cases in South Carolina. Public health officials said it's almost certain that there are more infections that have not been identified yet. They are also concerned that this version spreads more easily and that vaccines could be less effective against it.

The two cases were discovered in adults in different regions of the state and do not appear to be connected. Neither of the people infected has traveled recently, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control said Thursday.

"That's frightening," because it means there could be more undetected cases within the state, said Dr. Krutika Kuppalli, an infectious diseases physician at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. "It's probably more widespread."

Viruses constantly mutate, and coronavirus variants are circulating around the globe, but scientists are primarily concerned with the emergence of three that researchers believe may spread more easily. Other variants first reported in the United Kingdom and Brazil were previously confirmed in the U.S.

New York

ALBANY — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration confirmed Thursday that thousands more nursing home residents died of COVID-19 than the state's official tallies had previously acknowledged, dealing a potential blow to his image as a pandemic hero.

The surprise development, after months of the state refusing to divulge its true numbers, showed that at least 12,743 long-term care residents died of the virus as of Jan. 19, far greater than the official tally of 8,505 on that day, cementing New York's toll as one of the highest in the nation.

Those numbers are consistent with a report released just hours earlier by Attorney General Letitia James charging that the nursing home death count could be off by about 50%, largely because New York is one of the only states to count just those who died on facility grounds, not those who later died in the hospital.

The 76-page report from a fellow Democratic official undercut Cuomo's frequent argument that the criticism of his handling

of the virus in nursing homes was part of a political "blame game," and it was a vindication for thousands of families who believed their loved ones were being omitted from counts to advance the governor's image as a pandemic hero.

Hawaii

HONOLULU — The Hawaii National Guard said Thursday seven members who traveled to Washington to help provide security on Inauguration Day have tested positive for COVID-19.

All were in isolation and haven't displayed symptoms, the Guard said in a news release.

Hawaii sent 200 Guard members to the nation's capital for the mission. All were tested after they flew home to Honolulu on four different flights last weekend and Tuesday.

Those who tested negative will still be required to complete a 14-day quarantine.

Texas

Texas has now administered more than 2 million COVID-19 vaccinations, state health officials said Thursday, and the new Biden administration could help determine who's next in line.

But Texas surpassed the milestone for doses while lurching toward the end of the state's deadliest month of the pandemic. Of the more than 35,000 reported COVID-19 deaths in Texas, more than 1 in 5 have come in January.

January's grim tally climbed Thursday with more than 470 newly reported deaths. But hospitalizations continued trending downward to just under 12,400 patients, as officials see encouraging signs that cases may be leveling off after a bleak surge that accelerated after the Christmas holidays.

Illinois

SPRINGFIELD — Illinois public health officials announced Thursday nearly 56,000 people in the state were vaccinated against COVID-19 on Wednesday as state Republicans question Gov. J.B. Pritzker on why Illinois' efforts in the area are lagging.

In a letter addressed to Pritzker, members of the Senate Republican Caucus said Illinois ranks 47th in overall vaccine distribution, with just 4.8% of Illinoisans receiving at least one shot as of Thursday.

"We are asking for you to provide a clear explanation to legislators and to the citizens of Illinois as to why Illinois is among the worst states in regard to getting vaccines out to those who need it most," the caucus said in the letter, adding that putting the blame on former President Donald Trump or the fed-

eral government is unsatisfactory.

State officials say more than 829,000 shots have been administered since the federal government shipped vaccines to the state. But only 178,684 state residents have received the required two doses.

Maryland

ANNAPOLIS — Maryland restaurants will be able to stay open later at night next week, Gov. Larry Hogan announced Thursday.

Starting Monday, restaurants won't have to close by 10 p.m. The statewide order for 50% indoor capacity at restaurants will remain in place.

The state's COVID-19 data trends show continued improvement, the governor said in announcing the decision.

For example, the statewide positivity rate has dropped by 34.7%. That's the lowest reported since Nov. 13.

The statewide case rate has dropped by 37%. Hospitalizations have fallen by 16%. That includes a decrease of 11% in the past two weeks.

The state reported 2,190 new cases on Thursday. That is 42% lower than the new case high reported on Dec. 4.

Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS — Improving coronavirus statistics have led New Orleans officials to ease some virus-related restrictions and announce plans for students to return to classrooms, but bars in the city will stay closed for indoor service through the usually raucous Mardi Gras season, city officials said Wednesday.

A weeks-old public gathering ban — gatherings of people who are not part of the same household were prohibited — will be eased beginning Friday. Indoor gatherings of up to 10 people and outdoor gatherings of up to 25 people will be allowed. Capacity limits on restaurants — and bars that provide restaurant-style food service — will go from 25% to 50%.

New Orleans education officials said students in kindergarten through eighth grade will begin returning to class on Monday. Most high school students will continue online learning until later in February, although until then, Superintendent Henderson Lewis said, some in-class lessons for groups of 15 or fewer students will be provided for those with special needs.

The easing of restrictions comes as local authorities report that the percentage of positive COVID-19 tests has dropped below 5%.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Money recovered from nonprofit that was set up to help vets

NH HANOVER — The New Hampshire attorney general's office says it has recovered more than \$400,000 from a nonprofit that misappropriated funds meant to help military veterans.

Danielle Goodwin, co-founder and former director of Project VetCare, pleaded guilty in 2018 to diverting money from the Hanover charity for her personal use. She was sentenced to 3 ½ to seven years in state prison and required to pay back nearly \$100,000. She was released from prison last month.

The Valley News reported the Charitable Trust Division of the attorney general's office said in a report Tuesday that funds recovered from Project VetCare included \$20,000 for a van for the Disabled American Veterans, and \$196,000 to the Veterans County program of the Easter Seals of New Hampshire and Vermont.

Deputy recovering after being shot 4 times while on duty

TX HOUSTON — A Houston-area deputy was recovering at a hospital on Wednesday after being shot while responding to a call about a suspicious person.

Two deputies had approached the individual Tuesday evening when the man pulled out a gun and started firing at them, said Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez.

One deputy was hit four times, with his most serious injuries to his hands, Gonzalez said.

Navy seeks return of badger statue loaned to state Capitol

WI MADISON — The Wisconsin badger statue that has served as a literal touchstone for so many Capitol building visitors that they've rubbed the finish off his nose could be headed to another den soon.

Navy officials want the statue they loaned to the state more than 30 years ago back. But state historians aren't letting it go without a fight.

The badger is synonymous with Wisconsin.

It was selected as the state's official animal because lead miners in the state's early days were said to burrow into the ground like badgers. The University of Wisconsin-Madison's athletic teams are known as the Badgers, the school's mascot is a sassy badger named Bucky and an image of a badger adorns the state flag (although he looks more like a short-tailed beaver than a badger to the untrained eye).

Replicas of badgers can be found throughout the state Capitol. But the Badger and Shield statue holds a special place of honor outside the governor's office.

Officials warn that erratic raccoons are a threat to pets

LA NEW ORLEANS — Sightings of erratic raccoons have prompted officials at New Orleans City Park to put up warning signs about the infected animals, who can pose a danger to pets.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries told WWL-TV that the raccoons have canine distemper, a virus that affects a wide variety of mammals and can be deadly to cats and dogs.

Officials from the agency were brought in for an inspection after officials at the park received reports about the erratic raccoons, City Park COO Robert DeVeney said. While the infected animals do not pose a danger to humans, officials are concerned about pets and reminding people to keep their dogs on a leash.

Police: 2 inmates who escaped now captured after sightings

AZ COOLIDGE — Two inmates who escaped from an Arizona prison in Florence last weekend were recaptured in Coolidge, police in the nearby Pinal County city said Thursday.

Coolidge police officers and U.S. deputy marshals captured and arrested David T. Harmon and John B. Charpiot after police received calls from at least two residents who reported having seen the inmates, the Police Department said in a statement.

The two inmates were being held pending pickup by the state Department of Corrections.

tions, Rehabilitation and Reentry, police said.

Harmon and Charpiot escaped last Saturday from the Arizona State Prison Complex in Florence by using tools to breach a fence, officials said previously.

Report: Bad month ends bad year for casinos' house winnings

NV LAS VEGAS — December was a historically bad month for Nevada casinos at the end of a historically bad year in a key measure of gambling activity, according to a report Thursday by state casino regulators.

The state Gaming Control Board blamed the coronavirus pandemic after reporting that casino house winnings totaled \$7.8 billion for 2020, down 34.6% from the previous year and the lowest for a calendar year since 1997.

The figure that the board dubs "casino win" came in at about \$12 billion in 2019 and 2018.

December's monthly total of \$683.7 million was down 35.4% compared with the same month in 2019.

Board analyst Michael Lawton said that made December the worst full month for gambling statewide since August 1997, and the worst full month for the Las Vegas Strip since December 1993.

Emergency preparedness head to return following his suspension

LA NEW ORLEANS — The emergency preparedness director for the city of New Orleans will be allowed to return to his job following his early January arrest on a driving-while-intoxicated charge, city officials said Thursday.

But Collin Arnold will first complete a suspension that has been extended from 20 to 60 days before he returns as Mayor LaToya Cantrell's director of New Orleans Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. And, New Orleans news outlets report, he also will lose his driving privilege for city vehicles.

— From wire reports

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Decimated Heat off to tough start

Associated Press

MIAMI — As if losing the NBA Finals isn't bad enough, there now seems to be a curse that stretches into the following season.

The Miami Heat aren't believing that quite yet — even after a disastrous start to the 2020-21 campaign.

The reigning Eastern Conference champions are 6-12, matching the franchise's worst 18-game start since opening 4-14 in 2007-08. The roster has been decimated by injuries and virus-related issues, and the current losing streak reached five games after a 108-104 loss to the Los Angeles Clippers in a game where Miami led by 18 points early but wound up trailing by as many as 19.

"Heat Nation, we are going to figure this out," All-Star center Bam Adebayo said. "Just bear with us. We are going to figure this out. I can promise them that we are going to figure this out. I know that they're tired of seeing us lose. We're tired of losing. We have to figure this out."

The next chance to get things right comes Saturday when Miami hosts Sacramento.

The year after losing the finals has not been kind to the most recent teams who

have dropped the title series. Cleveland lost the finals in 2018, LeBron James left to join the Los Angeles Lakers and the Cavaliers haven't been close to the same since. Golden State lost the finals in 2019, saw most of the roster get hurt, watched Kevin Durant leave for Brooklyn and finished last season with the NBA's worst record.

It's not that bad for the Heat. Bad enough, though.

Jimmy Butler has missed 12 of Miami's 18 games, mostly because of the league's health and safety protocols established for safe play during the coronavirus pandemic. Avery Bradley, brought in as a free agent, has missed 10 games, and most of that is because of virus-related issues. Tyler Herro missed seven games with neck spasms. Meyers Leonard, a key performer last season, has appeared in only three games this season and is now out with a shoulder injury.

The Heat have used 13 starting lineups, are 0-10 when shooting less than 48%, set an NBA record on Wednesday by missing 15 3-point tries in the first quarter and are shooting 29% from beyond the arc in this five-game losing streak.

"You can't make an excuse for it," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "You just have

to continue to grind, to learn, to compete for each other, get better. There are certain points where we are and we just need to be more consistent with it. We will be getting guys back soon enough."

Miami's seven most experienced players, in terms of years in the NBA, were all unavailable Thursday.

This was the lineup the Heat started the fourth quarter with against the Clippers: Gabe Vincent and Max Strus, who are on two-way contracts; Precious Achiuwa, who is a rookie; KZ Okpala, a second-year pro who played in five games last season; and Herro, a second-year guard who hadn't played in two weeks.

"A lot of dudes that are playing right now are the young guys, including me," Adebayo said.

Help is on the way. The Heat hope Butler can play Saturday. Dragic isn't expected to be out for long. Herro, in his return game Thursday, led a big fourth quarter comeback attempt.

He insists the turnaround is coming.

"No one's sorry for us," Herro said. "There's no excuses. We're just going to continue to get better and hopefully one day we can get everybody back and show everybody what we're made of."

Pistons hand Lakers 2nd consecutive loss

Associated Press

DETROIT — Blake Griffin scored 23 points and the Detroit Pistons took advantage of Anthony Davis' absence in a 107-92 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Thursday night.

LeBron James had 22 points and 10 assists, but only two of those points came after half-time. The defending champions have lost back-to-back games, the first losing streak of any kind for the Lakers since before last year's playoffs.

Davis was out with a right quad contusion, and Los Angeles — which lost by a point at Philadelphia on Wednesday night — faded in the fourth quarter against the Pistons.

Detroit led by one before Griffin's three-pointer with 6:54 remaining started a 16-0

run. The Lakers went nearly seven minutes without scoring.

Wayne Ellington added 20 points for the Pistons.

Rockets 104, Trail Blazers 101: Victor Oladipo scored 25 points and host Houston shook off a terrible first quarter and held on late to beat Portland.

The Rockets were down by 20 points in the first quarter before using a big second to take the lead and hold on down the stretch for their fourth straight victory.

Christian Wood finished with 22 points and 12 rebounds in his return after missing three games with a sprained right ankle. John Wall had 20.

Damian Lillard had 30 points and nine assists for Portland.

Clippers 109, Heat 105: Nicolas Batum scored 18 points

and visiting Los Angeles used a 20-2 run in the third quarter to beat short-handed and reeling Miami.

Lou Williams had 17 points for the Clippers, who were again without Kawhi Leonard and Paul George because of the league's virus protocols and Patrick Beverley with right knee soreness. The Clippers won despite trailing by 18 early.

Tyler Herro returned after missing seven games with neck spasms and scored 19 points for Miami, which dropped its fifth straight.

The Heat welcomed back about 1,500 fans, all of whom had to get past virus-sniffing dogs or pass a rapid coronavirus test, for the first time since last season was suspended on

March 11.

Suns 114, Warriors 93: Mikal Bridges scored 20 points, Deandre Ayton added 12 points and 13 rebounds and Phoenix pulled away in the second half to beat visiting Golden State.

The Suns snapped a three-game losing streak and moved back above .500 at 9-8. The Warriors fell to 10-9.

Frank Kaminsky narrowly missed a triple-double with 12 points, 13 rebounds and eight assists, and Abdel Nader added 16 points and five rebounds. All-Star guard Devin Booker missed his third straight game with a sore hamstring.

Stephen Curry led the Warriors with 27 points.

Gonzaga stretches streak to 20 games

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The No. 1 Gonzaga Bulldogs looked like mere mortals for the first eight minutes before they started showing their swagger.

Drew Timme wishes they'd start doing that from the opening tipoff.

Timme scored 21 points and Corey Kispert had 19 for No. 1 Gonzaga, which routed San Diego 90-62 Thursday night for its 20th straight victory dating to last season.

Jalen Suggs added 17 for Gonzaga (16-0, 7-0 West Coast), which beat San Diego for the 13th straight time.

"We've just got to do a better job internally. There's nothing that any team does to us that we can't handle," Timme said. "Coming into the environment, especially like this, like every environment, there's no energy, no fans, you've got to create it on your own. We've got to do a better job of coming out ready from the jump.

"They kind of got into us the first half and we looked like a

regular team, I felt like. Missed our assignments and coverages. But the second half, coach lit into us like we needed to get lit into because we did not play good and we responded. We showed what we're capable of but it's a recurring thing and we need to get it in check."

After a slow start, the Zags used a 15-0 run in the first half to take control and then ran away in the second half.

Kispert keyed an impressive stretch when Gonzaga expanded a 40-29 halftime lead to 58-38 just seven minutes into the second half. The senior forward made a layup and then hit a floater and then added a transition three-pointer. Timme followed with a three-point play for a 58-38 lead.

Gonzaga continued to pile on as Suggs hit a three, was fouled and converted the four-point play. Timme converted a three-point play and Kispert hit another transition three to make it 72-46 with 7:34 to go.

Julian Strawther had 11 points and Anton Watson 10 for

Gonzaga, which shot 57.6% from the field. Andrew Nembhard had 10 of Gonzaga's 23 assists.

Finn Sullivan scored 16, Ben Pyle 12 and Vladimir Pinchuk 11 for USD (2-7, 1-4).

USD led for the first 12 minutes before Gonzaga went on its 15-0 run.

No. 6 Houston 83, Tulane 60: At New Orleans, Cameron Tyson scored a career-high 31 points, hitting a career-best nine three-pointers, and the Cougars routed the Green Wave.

Tramon Mark added 16 points and Justin Gorham had 15 rebounds to help Houston (14-1, 9-1 American Athletic Conference) win its seventh straight.

Tyson, a reserve in his first season with Houston since transferring from Idaho, entered the game having played in just seven contests without a start and was averaging three points per game. But he was a 42.9% three-point shooter at Idaho two seasons ago and wasn't shy about shooting from

deep at Tulane, where he received his most playing time this season (26 minutes).

Jordan Walker scored 16 points and Gabe Watson added 13 points for Tulane (6-5, 1-5).

No. 15 Kansas 59, TCU 51: David McCormack scored 15 points, Dajuan Harris and Tyon Grant-Foster provided a boost off the bench, and the host Jayhawks slogged their way past the turnover-prone Frogs to snap a rare three-game skid.

Ochai Agbaji added 13 points for the Jayhawks (11-5, 5-4 Big 12), who once again struggled offensively but made enough free throws down the stretch to beat the Horned Frogs (9-6, 2-5) for the eighth straight time.

They also managed to avoid their longest losing streak since the 1988-89 team dropped eight in a row.

Mike Miles hit five three-pointers and had 18 points for the Horned Frogs, who turned the ball over 22 times while shooting just 35% from the field. R.J. Nembhard added 12 points, well below his average of 17.2.

NBA makes more schedule changes, pushes back times

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NBA rescheduled four games Thursday, along with making several time changes to upcoming contests.

Toronto's game in Boston will now be Feb. 11, moved up from Feb. 12. Detroit will play at Boston on Feb. 12, moved up from Feb. 14.

And on Feb. 14, Boston will go to Washington while New Orleans will visit Detroit. Both of those games were intended to have been played sometime in the season's second half, which will take place between March 11 and May 16.

Also Thursday, the league pushed back the start times of 16 upcoming contests. That has happened to about three dozen games so far in order to allow

for more time to process COVID-19 tests before players take the floor.

The NBA said Wednesday it would begin rescheduling some games because of the postponements that have occurred this season for virus-related reasons. The league said it would specifically "focus on the teams with the most postponed games to date," which would include Washington, Memphis and Boston.

The Wizards have had six games postponed and two games rescheduled already. The Grizzlies have seen six of their games postponed and Boston is among the clubs with three games that were called off so far.

The NBA has postponed 22

games this season, 21 since Jan. 10.

In other NBA virus news:

■ Alex Lasry, a 33-year-old Milwaukee Bucks executive and son of a billionaire, received the coronavirus vaccine this week at a senior living center in Milwaukee despite not being part of a group currently eligible for the shots in Wisconsin.

"This week I was vaccinated!" Lasry tweeted on Friday after the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel first reported it. "My wife got a call from her uncle that works in a facility that had extra doses that were going to go to waste if not used right away. With Lauren early in her pregnancy, we wanted to ensure our home, and entire com-

munity is safe for everyone."

Lasry, a New York City native who is a hedge fund manager, is considering running for the U.S. Senate in Wisconsin in 2022.

Lasry, the son of Bucks co-owner Marc Lasry, tweeted that his vaccination was "pure happenstance, but I'm incredibly thankful." Alex Lasry told the newspaper his wife's uncle who called about the vaccine is rabbi at Ovation Chai Point Senior Living.

Gov. Tony Evers said during a Friday update on Wisconsin's vaccination efforts that state health officials are encouraging providers to use all the vaccine they have.

"They should just get it in somebody's arm," Evers said.

NFL revenues not as bad as anticipated

Associated Press

New York Giants co-owner John Mara could have been speaking for all in the tight-lipped world of NFL finances by saying his club's pandemic-induced losses in revenue have been substantial but not crippling.

The biggest positive in this season of COVID-19 might not be measurable: the value of finishing on time in Tampa with the Super Bowl between Tampa Bay and Kansas City on Feb. 7.

"They got all the games in," said Marc Ganis, co-founder of Chicago-based consulting group Sportscorp and a confidant of many NFL owners. "They got 'em all in on time, within the 17-week window. That's enormous.

"We're not taking it for granted, but the effort that was necessary by tens of thousands of people, family members, to make that happen, the sacrifices that were necessary, the union stepping up together with the league,

that's an incredible accomplishment done without bubbles."

The biggest negative, said Ganis, was revenues on the lower end of what was hoped since the majority of stadiums either didn't have fans at all or just a few thousand at most.

In keeping with a previous estimate that revenues could be down by at least \$100 million for each of the 32 teams, Ganis says the league missed out on \$3 billion to \$4 billion while playing in the pandemic. But Mara says the losses are manageable.

"It was a huge financial hit for us this year, no question about it," Mara said. "But it's not going to affect our ability to be active in free agency or to do what we have to do to improve the team. Hopefully this is a one-year thing and we'll be able to have fans back in the building next season."

It remains to be seen whether a legacy of cooperation will last between owners and the union

after essentially negotiating two collective bargaining agreements in a matter of months.

The first was a new 10-year agreement that passed on a close vote by the players just as the pandemic was gripping the country. In retrospect, it looks like a good move given the financial uncertainty with ongoing COVID-19 concerns.

The second was a plan for playing in the pandemic, including an all-virtual offseason and the players' demands to dump preseason games and be tested daily while accepting limits to social interaction in their personal lives.

Another part of the negotiation was assuring the salary cap would be no lower than \$175 million per team, with the league holding out hope of keeping it much closer to the 2020 figure of \$198.2 million.

"None of us are going to be surprised that there's going to be a significant drop-off from overall

revenue," union executive director DeMaurice Smith said. "I'm just happy that we have a floor for the cap next year. And because of that floor, teams at least have a solid number in order to figure out how to restructure contracts, if that's what they want to do.

"One effect of the 2011 CBA was to allow teams to carry over money from previous years and put that money into the salary cap this year. And if there was ever a time where I was glad that we negotiated for that carryover effect, it's now."

With the majority of revenue tied to national TV contracts that benefit all teams equally, the NFL was well-positioned to handle the pandemic as long as games could be played.

While the TV ratings were down 7% during the regular season, Ganis said the NFL actually widened the gap with other pro sports leagues and non-sports entertainment.

Carolina scores only goal in OT to beat Tampa Bay

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Martin Necas beat Andrei Vasilevskiy at 1:12 of overtime and Carolina beat the Tampa Bay Lightning 1-0 on Thursday night in the Hurricanes' return from a pause due to COVID-19 concerns.

Necas scored off a perfect feed from Jordan Staal on the left side, charging in to put the puck past Vasilevskiy's attempted save. That came after both Vasilevskiy and Carolina's Petr Mrazek stopped everything that came their way through three periods.

Vasilevskiy made 34 saves, and Mrazek had 32.

The Hurricanes had played just three games before having to shut down workouts and postpone four games due to COVID-19 protocols, the first coming nine days ago. Carolina ultimately

had six players go on the NHL's daily unavailability list, with Staal returning in time to play this game but five others — including forward Teuvo Teravainen and defenseman Jaccob Slavin — still sidelined.

Capitals 6, Islanders 3: Zdeno Chara scored for the first time with his new team to cap a five-goal second period, and host Washington came back to stun New York.

Canadiens 4, Flames 2: Carey Price made 23 saves, Brendan Gallagher, Shea Weber, Josh Anderson and Tyler Toffoli scored and unbeaten Montreal won its home opener against Calgary.

Bruins 4, Penguins 1: Anders Bjork's pass deflected off a defender's rear end and Sean Kuraly's leg to break a second-period tie in Boston's victory over visiting Pittsburgh.

Stars 7, Red Wings 3: Joe Pavelski scored his fourth goal of the season, Jake Oettinger stopped 20 shots in his first NHL start and Dallas beat Detroit to finish undefeated on a season-opening, four-game homestand.

Flyers 3, Devils 1: Carter Hart made 33 saves and fourth-line forward Michael Raffl scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period in Philadelphia's road victory over New Jersey.

Maple Leafs 4, Oilers 3: Auston Matthews scored on a power play with 6:24 left to lift visiting Toronto over Edmonton.

Rangers 3, Sabres 2 (OT): No. 1 draft pick Alexis Lafreniere scored his first goal 2:47 into overtime to lift visiting New York past Buffalo.

Canucks 4, Senators 1: Brock Boeser had two goals and

an assist, and host Vancouver beat Ottawa for the third time in four nights to sweep a three-game series.

Blue Jackets 3, Panthers 2 (SO): Alexandre Texier slickly beat Chris Driedger in the fourth round of a shootout to help host Columbus beat Florida.

Coyotes 3, Ducks 2: Christian Dvorak scored his second goal late in the third period, Darcy Kuemper stopped 14 shots and host Arizona beat Anaheim.

Avalanche 3, Sharks 0: Nazem Kadri had two goals, one midway through the third period to snap a scoreless tie, and host Colorado beat San Jose.

Wild 6, Kings 3: Kirill Kaprizov scored the second goal of his rookie season to cap his team's three-goal first period and host Minnesota beat Los Angeles.