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Biden urges concern, not alarm on omicron

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden urged concern but not alarm as the United States set records for daily reported COVID-19 cases and his administration struggled to ease concerns about testing shortages, school closures and other disruptions caused by the omicron variant.

In remarks Tuesday before a meeting with his COVID-19 response team at the White House, Biden aimed to convey his administration's urgency in addressing omicron and convince wary Americans that the current situation bears little resemblance to the onset of the pandemic or last year's deadly winter. The president emphasized that vaccines, booster shots and therapeutic drugs have lessened the danger for the overwhelming majority of Americans who are fully vaccinated.

"You can still get COVID, but it's highly unlikely, very unlikely, that you'll become seriously ill," Biden said of vaccinated people.

"There's no excuse, there's no excuse for anyone being unvaccinated," he added. "This continues to be a pandemic of the unvaccinated." He also encouraged Americans, including newly eligible teenagers 12 to

15, to get a booster dose of the vaccines for maximum protection.

Compared with last year, more Americans are employed, most kids are in classrooms, and instances of death and serious illness are down — precipitously so among the vaccinated.

"We're in a very different place than we were a year ago," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki when asked if the country had lost control of the virus.

Still, over the past several weeks Americans have seen dire warnings about hospitals reaching capacity amid staffing shortages, thousands of holiday flight cancellations in part because crews were ill or in quarantine and intermittent reports of school closures because of the more transmissible variant.

On a conference call with governors, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Biden's top COVID-19 science adviser, said Americans "should not be complacent" even though initial data shows the omicron variant to produce less severe disease than earlier strains. But, he said, the number of people getting infected by omicron "might overwhelm the positive impact of reduced severity" and "severely stress our hospitals."

While most schools across the country re-

main open, Biden took aim at those that have closed, saying he believes they have the money for testing and other safety measures.

"I believe schools should remain open," he said.

The president also announced that the U.S. is doubling its order for an anti-viral pill produced by Pfizer that was recently authorized by the FDA to prevent serious illness and death from COVID-19. That means 20 million doses, with the first 10 million pills to be delivered by June.

A senior administration official said that combined with other therapies, such as monoclonal antibodies and convalescent plasma, 4 million treatments that are effective against the omicron variant would be available by the end of January.

The pills are "a game changer and have the potential to dramatically alter the impact of COVID-19, the impact it's had on this country and our people," Biden said.

Biden is under pressure to ease a nationwide shortage of tests that people are using to determine whether they or their family members are infected. Long lines and chaotic scenes over the holidays marred the administration's image as having the pandemic in hand.

N. Korea appears to fire its first ballistic missile of 2022

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea apparently fired a single ballistic missile toward its eastern coast at 8:10 a.m. Wednesday, South Korea's military announced after the launch.

South Korean and U.S. intelligence agencies are analyzing the launch, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a text message to reporters.

"Our troops are maintaining their readiness posture and closely monitoring the move of the North Korean troops now," the message said.

In Japan, Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi on Wednesday said the military was analyzing the launch and that initial estimates show the projectile flew about 310 miles and fell into the sea outside of Japan's exclusive economic

zone.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida described the launch to reporters as "extremely regrettable" and vowed to "strengthen vigilance and surveillance."

"Including the repeated launches of ballistic missiles, North Korea's series of actions are a threat to the peace and security of Japan and the region," Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said during a press conference. "It is a serious issue not only for Japan, but for the entire international community."

The latest launch is the North's first since the ruling party announced Saturday via state-run media it would "pursue the build-up of the nation's defense capability with more strength without having to slow down even for a moment."

South Korean President Moon Jae-in brief-

ly addressed the launch and insisted "we must not give up dialogue with North Korea," during a railway construction ceremony in Gangwon province on Wednesday.

The launch comes amid ongoing discussions to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War, which ended with an armistice agreement over a peace treaty. Moon, whose term ends in May, has prioritized the goal of ending the decadeslong conflict and said it would normalize relations with Pyongyang.

South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong at a news conference last month said the United States and South Korea "effectively have agreed" on a draft declaration of a formal end to the Korean War.

"Our government views that an end-of-war declaration provides a very useful opportunity to resume dialogue in a current deadlock in talks with North Korea," Chung said.

Rockets hit bases with US troops in Syria

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

U.S. and partner forces were targeted by rocket fire at their base in northeastern Syria early Wednesday, the American-led coalition Operation Inherent Resolve said in a statement that blamed Iran-backed militia groups for the attack.

In addition, a Katyusha rocket struck an Iraqi military base hosting U.S. troops at Baghdad's international airport Wednesday, the Iraqi militaries reported.

No damage or casualties were reported from the Iraq attack, the third in as many days. The attacks started on Monday, the anniversary of a U.S. airstrike that killed Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad two years ago.

In Syria, troops at the base known as Green Village report-

ed no injuries in the attack that included eight rounds that struck in and near the outpost, causing "minor damage," according to the statement from the anti-Islamic State coalition. The attack came just one day after U.S. and coalition forces attacked several suspected rocket-launch sites near Green Village believed to pose an "imminent threat" to troops at the base, officials said.

After the attack Wednesday morning, coalition forces — which are officially in Syria to stamp out the remnants of ISIS alongside Syrian Democratic Forces — returned fire with six artillery rounds, striking the area from where the enemy rockets were launched, according to the coalition.

Army Maj. Gen. John W. Brennan Jr., the commander of Operation Inherent Resolve,

said the attacks were launched by Iran proxy forces from civilian infrastructure near Mayadin, Syria, and endangered civilians there and near Green Village.

"The coalition reserves the right to defend itself and partner forces against any threat, and will continue to do everything within its power to protect those forces," Brennan said. "Our coalition continues to see threats against our forces in Iraq and Syria by militia groups that are backed by Iran. These attacks are a dangerous distraction from our coalition's shared mission to advise, assist and enable partner forces to maintain the enduring defeat of [ISIS]."

Green Village sits just east of the Euphrates River in northeastern Syria adjacent to major oil fields. It is run by SDF forces but also houses several hundred

American and coalition partner troops who advise their Syrian partners there, defense officials have said.

The latest attacks come amid a recent uptick in violence aimed at bases in Iraq and Syria housing American forces.

In Iraq, at least four armed drones were shot down in two separate attempts to attack Iraqi bases housing American forces on Monday and Tuesday, U.S. and Iraqi officials said.

The coalition statement Wednesday was the first time that U.S. officials specifically blamed Iran-supported militias for attacks in recent days. John Kirby, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, told reporters Tuesday that such Iranian proxy forces were likely responsible for the attacks, but he also said he could not conclusively say who was responsible.

US begins its probe of Navy fuel leak's effect on civilians

Associated Press

HONOLULU — U.S. public health officials on Tuesday began investigating how civilians have been affected by the leakage of petroleum into Pearl Harbor's tap water from a Navy fuel storage facility.

The Hawaii state Department of Health said it asked the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to conduct the study. The department said the officials will survey civilians living in homes served by the Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam water distribution system. They will also try to reach people who may have been exposed to contaminated water at work or school.

The Navy's water system serves some 93,000 people in resi-

dential homes, offices, elementary schools and businesses in and around Pearl Harbor.

Starting in late November, about 1,000 people complained that their tap water smelled like fuel or reported physical ailments like nausea and rashes after ingesting it. Shortly after, the Navy said it detected petroleum in a drinking well that serves its water system. Navy officials said they believe leaks from its Red Hill tank farm polluted the well.

Dr. Diana Felton, the state toxicologist, said it's vital that authorities track how the incident affected all Hawaii residents. So far, only the Navy's water system has been affected. But Honolulu's water utility draws from the same aquifer as the Navy, and Hawaii officials are concerned leaks will contaminate its water too.

Japan blocks effort to stop relocation of USMC base

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The Japanese government last week turned aside another move by Okinawa's prefectural governor to halt work on an airfield fixed as the new home of Marine Corps aviation on the island.

Genjiro Kaneko, Japan's minister of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, on Dec. 28 overruled Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki, who in July revoked a permit to relocate endangered coral colonies at the construction site in Oura Bay at Henoko.

Kaneko's notice to Okinawa called Tamaki's revoking the permit from the Okinawa Defense Bureau "inappropriate," though the minister stopped short of a comprehensive explanation, a

spokesman for the prefectural Fisheries Division told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday.

A spokesman for the ministry, however, said the prefecture's claim that permit conditions were violated did not stand up. Kaneko, stating the work had already been completed, also dismissed a Defense Bureau request to review Tamaki's canceling a second permit to move another 830 coral colonies, the spokesman said.

Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi acknowledged Kaneko's ruling in comments to reporters Dec. 28.

The July 30 permit revocation was the latest attempt by Tamaki to halt the relocation of Marine air operations on Okinawa from Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, which is in a densely packed urban area, to the Marines' remote northern base Camp Schwab.

US, Germany say Russia threatens security

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States and Germany said Wednesday that Russia’s military buildup near Ukraine’s border poses an “immediate and urgent challenge” to European security and that any intervention will draw severe consequences.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock presented a unified front on Russia after a meeting in Washington. The severity of any response to a Russian invasion of Ukraine hinges largely on Germany, Europe’s biggest economy and a diplomatic heavyweight within the 27-nation European Union.

“Both Germany and the United States see Russia’s actions toward Ukraine as an immediate and urgent challenge to peace and stability in Europe,” Blinken said.

“We condemn Russia’s military buildup on Ukraine’s borders, as well as Russia’s increasingly harsh rhetoric as it continues to push the false narrative that Ukraine seeks to provoke (Russia),” he said. “That’s a little bit like the fox saying it had no choice but to attack the henhouse because somehow the hens presented a threat.”

Baerbock agreed. “We jointly reiterated that Russian actions and activities come with a clear price tag, and a renewed violation of Ukrainian sovereignty by Russia would have severe consequences,” she said.

The Blinken-Baerbock meeting followed a telephone call last week between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, a conversation Sunday between Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and a group discussion Tuesday among Biden’s national security adviser Jake Sulli-

van and his counterparts from the five Nordic nations.

It also preceded a flurry of meetings involving NATO foreign ministers, senior U.S. and Russian officials, the NATO-Russia Council and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe set for next week.

Western officials have hinted at any number of economically crippling sanctions that could be imposed should Russia act. Those include near total cutoff from the international financial system and steps toward greater NATO integration with non-allied European nations.

As the Biden administration moves to build international consensus around a set of possible punitive measures, Germany is clearly the linchpin. Securing its support will be key to both messaging and implementation of whatever is decided.

Texas governor files lawsuit over vaccine mandate

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott filed a lawsuit Tuesday against the federal government over the Defense Department’s mandate that all troops, including the National Guard, receive the coronavirus vaccine or face discharge from military service.

Abbott, along with fellow Republican governors of six other states, has said President Joe Biden and the Pentagon cannot order troops to be vaccinated unless they are deployed by the federal government. Otherwise, the troops are under the command of the governor.

“The federal courts have the power to decide whether President Biden violates the U.S. Constitution’s Second Militia Clause by undermining my commander-in-chief power, instead of federalizing Texas’s guardsmen to use his own commander-in-chief power,” Abbott wrote Tuesday in a letter to the state’s top general, Maj. Gen. Tracy R. Norris.

The case is not about “a position of pro- or anti-vaccine,” according to the lawsuit. “Instead, this case seeks protection from the federal government’s unconstitutional action to force Texas, through its governor, to submit to federal orders and impose federal-

ly dictated disciplinary action on its National Guardsmen,” according to the court documents filed in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division.

The Texas Military Department includes about 18,160 members of the Army National Guard and about 3,170 members of the Air National Guard, according to a 2018 staff report.

The Air Force set a Dec. 2 deadline for all airmen to receive the vaccine. In Texas, about 90% of Air National Guard troops are fully vaccinated, according to the Texas Military Department. The remaining airmen are going through the exemption process.

Manchin wary of rule change to pass voting legislation

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Sen. Joe Manchin sounded a skeptical note Tuesday about the prospects of easing the Senate’s filibuster rules, raising doubts about whether he will provide crucial support to the Democrats’ renewed push for voting legislation they say is needed to protect democracy.

Manchin told reporters it was his “absolute preference” that Republicans support any changes and he described acting on a purely partisan basis as a “heavy lift.” Still, he did not slam the door completely shut, saying he was exploring “the options we have open.”

“I think that for us to go it alone, no matter what side does, it ends up coming back at you pretty hard,” Manchin said.

Manchin’s skepticism comes just one day after Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced the Senate will vote soon on easing the filibuster rules.

In a letter Monday to colleagues, Schumer, D-N.Y., said the Senate “must evolve” and will “debate and consider” the rule changes by Jan. 17, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, as the Democrats seek to overcome Republican opposition to their elections law package.

The election and voting rights package has been stalled in the evenly split 50-50 Senate,

blocked by a Republican-led filibuster with Democrats unable to mount the 60 votes needed to advance it toward passage.

So far, Democrats have been unable to agree among themselves over potential changes to the Senate rules to reduce the 60-vote hurdle, despite months of private negotiations.

Two holdout Democrats, Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have tried to warn their party off changes to the Senate rules, arguing that if and when Republicans take majority control of the chamber, they would use the lower voting threshold to advance bills Democrats strongly oppose.

Fire's timing, location likely helped evacuees

Associated Press

DENVER — A late-season wildfire pushed by hurricane-force winds tore through two densely populated Denver suburbs and seemed destined to leave a trail of deaths. Yet only two people are unaccounted for out of some 35,000 forced from their homes.

It's a remarkably low number of possible casualties, according to disaster experts and authorities, all the more so because a public alert system did not reach everyone and the wintertime blaze caught many people off-guard.

Several factors broke in favor

of the evacuees: The blaze came during daylight and over the holidays when many were at home, in mostly affluent neighborhoods where most people have easy access to vehicles.

It also might have helped that the area has seasoned emergency management personnel who have worked other recent wildfires, major floods in 2013 and a supermarket mass shooting last March.

"In terms of the big picture it's a really miraculous evacuation," said Thomas Cova, a University of Utah professor who researches emergency management and wildfire evacua-

tions. "So close to populated areas... spot fires everywhere and 100-mile-per-hour winds — I think it's incredible that's there's only two people missing."

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis said the fire that destroyed almost 1,000 homes and damaged hundreds more stands as a warning: "When you get a pre-evac or evacuation notice, hop to it."

Officials have not said exactly how many people were contacted through the emergency system, which sends a recorded alert or text to phones. The alert undoubtedly saved lives, but

some residents affected by the fire complained in the aftermath that they never received it.

Neil Noble, who fled his Louisville home Thursday, said the first he heard of the fire was from a FedEx delivery driver who knocked on his door to drop off a package. After setting out for an errand and seeing gridlocked traffic as the smoke plume grew, he decided to leave with his three teenage children.

"I've talked to dozens of people, even those whose houses burned down, and nobody seems to have received any kind of notification," he said.

Ga. governor aims to loosen rules for carrying handguns

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Facing an unusual challenge from fellow Republicans in his bid for a second term, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp said Wednesday that he will push for a new state law which would loosen requirements to carry a handgun in public.

Kemp made the announcement at a gun shop outside Atlanta that bills itself as the "world's largest gun store," where he was joined by members of the National Rifle Association and state lawmakers.

Kemp did not lay out specific changes he was seeking but expressed support for what gun rights advocates call "constitutional carry." Multiple bills purporting to advance that idea in the state Legislature would do away with the need for a license to carry a handgun in public — either openly or concealed on one's body.

"Building a safer, stronger Georgia starts with hardworking Georgians having the ability to protect themselves and their families," Kemp said. "In the face of rising violent crime

across the country, law-abiding citizens should have their constitutional rights protected."

The move drew condemnation from gun safety advocates and the campaign of Kemp's likely Democratic opponent in this year's governor's race, Stacey Abrams.

Kemp emphasized his support for the 2nd Amendment during his first campaign for governor, appearing in multiple ads with shotguns, including one in which he brandished a shotgun at an actor playing a suitor of one of his daughters.

"The same guy who pointed a gun at a teenager on TV now panders with reckless proposals threatening Georgia lives," Abrams' campaign manager, Lauren Groh-Wargo, said in a tweet. "As her opponents run to dangerous extremes and fight desperately to salvage their political careers, @staceyabrams is fighting for Georgians and their safety."

More than 20 other states allow concealed weapons in public without a permit, according to Stateline, an initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Ex-NY governor will not face charge over groping allegation

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo won't face criminal prosecution over an allegation that he fondled an aide, after a prosecutor said Tuesday that he couldn't prove the case.

Three days before the Democratic ex-governor was due to answer the misdemeanor charge in court, Albany County District Attorney David Soares asked a judge to dismiss a criminal complaint the county sheriff filed in October.

"While we found the complainant in this case cooperative and credible, after review of all the available evidence, we have concluded that we cannot meet our burden at trial," Soares said in a statement, adding he was "deeply troubled" by the allegation.

Soares, a Democrat, didn't detail why he felt it would be tough to win a conviction.

In a letter to the judge, he said "statutory elements of New York law make this case impossible to prove." He added that multiple government inquiries into Cuomo's conduct had created "technical and procedural hurdles" regarding prosecutors' obliga-

tions to disclose evidence to the defense.

Soares said his office considered other potential criminal charges, but none fit the allegations.

Cuomo, who has vehemently denied the allegation, had no immediate comment on the development, first reported by The Times-Union of Albany.

The charges against Cuomo were based on allegations by Brittany Commisso, one of the governor's executive assistants before he resigned amid sexual misconduct allegations in August.

Commisso said Cuomo slid his hand up her blouse and grabbed her breast when they were alone in an office at the governor's mansion in Albany in late 2020.

Her lawyer, Brian Premo, said in a statement Tuesday that she "had no control over the filing or prosecution of criminal charges. She had no authority or voice in those decisions.

"The only thing she has any power over is her resolution to continue to speak the truth and seek justice in an appropriate civil action, which she will do in due course," he said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Father drove fast, but baby was faster

LA PINEVILLE—Her father was driving his work truck at 70 mph to a hospital, but a Louisiana New Year's baby was faster.

Isabella Grace Bordelon was born at 12:15 a.m. Jan. 1 on Louisiana Highway 28 in Pineville, news outlets reported. The hospital found her healthy, 7 pounds and 11 ounces and 19.75 inches long.

Amy Bordelon told The Town Talk that her contractions started as she, her husband, Josh, and their two older daughters were getting ready for bed on New Year's Eve.

Their home in Manifest is about 50 miles from the hospital in Alexandria. It was quicker to drive than to call an ambulance. They had just arrived in Pineville, across the Red River from Alexandria, when the baby made its entrance.

Feds: Cocaine shipped inside old television

RI PROVIDENCE — A Rhode Island man accused of taking possession of more than a kilogram of cocaine that had been shipped from Colombia inside an old television was detained by federal authorities, federal prosecutors said.

Jomar Cruz-Aponte, 25, of Pawtucket, is charged with conspiracy to possess 500 grams or more of cocaine with intent to distribute, according to a statement from the U.S. attorney's office in Providence.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection intercepted a package shipped from Colombia on Dec. 22 that, according to shipping

documents, contained an "old TV without commercial value," prosecutors said. But the tube-model TV was found to contain more than 1 kilogram of cocaine, prosecutors said.

Authorities removed the cocaine and delivered the package to a Pawtucket doorstep. Cruz-Aponte was seen by police taking the package and then leaving the area in a car, prosecutors allege.

Falling New Year's bullet hit boy, broke 2 teeth

LA NEW ORLEANS — Police were investigating after a 10-year-old boy was hit in the face by a bullet that was fired during New Year's Eve celebrations and fell from the sky.

The bullet went in Fabian Rivera's cheek and out his throat. It broke two of his teeth, he told WWL-TV. He was on a swing set in the backyard of a home in New Orleans when the bullet fell, WWL-TV reported.

Fabian was taken to a hospital, and is now recovering at home.

Man who saved girl from bay receives medal

MD BERLIN—A Maryland man who jumped into a bay from a bridge to rescue a drowning toddler was awarded the Carnegie Medal, a national honor that recognizes civilians who put themselves in dangerous situations to save others.

Jonathan Bauer, of Berlin, was among the 17 medal recipients that the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission announced last month. He will also receive a financial grant.

The 51-year-old leaped into Asawoman Bay in Ocean City on

May 2 to save a girl who was ejected from her family's pickup truck during a five-vehicle crash on the Route 90 bridge.

Bauer was on the bridge, and he got out of his vehicle to check on the truck that teetered over the guardrail. After noticing an empty car seat and the toddler in the bay, he jumped 30 feet into the water.

Dad buying chocolate milk for kids wins \$1M

VA CHESTERFIELD — A Virginia man who stopped by a convenience store to buy his kids chocolate milk also bought a \$1 million scratch-off lottery ticket.

WRIC reported that Dennis Willoughby, of Chesterfield County, bought the ticket at a 7-Eleven right before Christmas. He decided to buy the ticket while he was in the store.

The Virginia Lottery said Willoughby chose to receive a one-time cash payout instead of annual payments over 30 years. That makes him \$640,205 richer.

Firefighters rescue loon on frozen pond

ME MONMOUTH — A fire department came to the rescue of a loon on a frozen pond in Maine.

The problem for the birds at this time of the year is that ice can leave them without enough open water they need to take off. Because of the ice, the loon couldn't take flight from Tacoma Lake.

It took firefighters about two hours to get the bird, which was about a quarter-mile from shore, the Kennebec Journal reported.

Avian Haven, a rehabilitation center for wild birds, reached out

to the Monmouth Fire Department for help after keeping an eye on the iced-in loon on Tacoma Pond.

Fire chief accused of taking snowplow

VT BRATTLEBORO — A Vermont fire department chief was accused of removing a snowplow from a housing cooperative without authority.

Police said Rusty Sage, chief of the Marlboro Volunteer Fire Company, was arrested and charged with grand larceny in Brattleboro, the Brattleboro Reformer reported.

Brian Emerson, the president of the Tri-Park Cooperative Housing Cooperation, said he learned the plow was missing on Dec. 14. Emerson said Sage, who lives near the housing cooperative, was an on-call employee for it and was contacted on occasion for help plowing its roads.

Woman rescued after truck goes off cliff

WA KALAMA — Authorities said a woman was rescued after her pickup truck went off a cliff and into the river near Kalama.

KOIN reported that the Cowlitz County Fire District 5 received a report a vehicle went over an embankment.

Cowlitz Fire Chief Victor Leatzow said crews found a woman about 40-50 feet down the cliff, and the truck was another 10 to 30 feet below her.

The woman reportedly freed herself from the vehicle. Clark County's Regional Tech Rescue used ropes to help get the woman out.

— From wire reports

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Slumping Nets look to Irving for spark

Associated Press

Kyrie Irving might be just the jolt the Brooklyn Nets need to escape a midseason slump.

After refusing to get vaccinated against the coronavirus, Irving has been unable to play at home and for much of the season was unwelcome on the road. The Nets didn't want a part-time player, so they sent him away during the preseason.

Things changed. Brooklyn decided it needed whatever it could get from Irving and was expected to put him on the court for the first time this season Wednesday night at Indiana.

"It definitely gives us a spark," All-Star guard James Harden said. "Obviously we're on a three-game skid right now."

Those losses all came at home, and there's nothing Irving can do about the Nets' struggles in Brooklyn if he remains unvaccinated.

The vaccine is mandated for New York City athletes playing in public venues. He has said refusing it was what's best for him and that he was aware there would be consequences.

But he can play in road games in the cities where there is no mandate, including all the upcoming ones during a stretch that has the Nets away for seven of their next 11 games.

Coach Steve Nash did not say Irving would definitely debut Wednesday, but the guard was not listed on the injury report for the first time this season.

Even though he just recently started practicing for the first time since training camp, the Nets are confident Irving's entrance can only be a positive.

"I mean, have you watched him play? He's a master," Kevin Durant said. "He can score 60%, 70% of his shots if you don't guard him, and he's a high IQ player."

Irving's talent is undeniable. He averaged a career-best 26.9 points last season, becoming the ninth player in NBA history to shoot at least 50% from the field, 40% from three-point range and 90% from the free throw line.

There's still matters of chemistry and continuity that championship clubs crave, and Brooklyn will try to establish it with essentially two teams: one on the road with Irving, one at home without him.

The Nets are banking that Irving's close relationship with Durant, along with a roster of veterans such as Harden, LaMarcus Aldridge and Blake Griffin who are missing a championship to go with otherwise Hall of Fame-worthy résumés, will smooth what could normally be a bumpy transition.

"I think that they have a mature enough group, an experienced enough group to kind of understand the dynamics of the business of basketball, along with the rules that are in place that made the situation what it is," Los Angeles Clippers assistant coach Brian Shaw said. "So, they'll make the most of it."

That's what Brooklyn was counting on

when it reversed its decision last month and announced Irving would join the team for practices and road games. The team was criticized, but general manager Sean Marks pointed out that the organization's top priority is to win.

They couldn't do that without Irving last season, falling to Milwaukee in the Eastern Conference semifinals after he sprained his ankle in Game 4. It's unclear if they can win with Irving, who has a history of injuries and took a leave of absence from the team for personal reasons last season.

He's spent this one collecting a portion of his \$35 million salary not to play, forfeiting checks for the games he made himself ineligible for, but with the Nets paying him for the road games they barred him from. He's popped up occasionally on his social media platforms or as a spectator at Seton Hall games, but hasn't been playing against NBA competition.

There hasn't been time to get as much work as hoped when he came back, as he went into health and safety protocols Dec. 18, the day after his return was announced. But on a team that's showing flaws, whatever Irving can provide — whenever he can provide it — should solve some problems.

"Obviously we love to have Kyrie back. He's a special, special talent," Harden said. "But there's things that we need to correct internally and individually that can help us, and then adding Kyrie back is going to be more special."

Morant's strong finish lifts Grizzlies past Cavaliers

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Ja Morant scored six of his 26 points in the final 30 seconds, including the go-ahead basket, allowing the Memphis Grizzlies to extend their winning streak to six with a 110-106 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers on Tuesday night.

Morant gave Memphis a 106-104 lead with a double-pump short jumper, then stripped the ball from Brandon Goodwin and scored on Cleveland's subsequent possession with 22 seconds remaining.

After Lauri Markkanen's lay-up pulled the Cavaliers within 108-106, Morant made a pair of

free throws to lock up the Grizzlies' 10th road victory in their past 11 games. They won 118-104 at Brooklyn one night earlier.

Darius Garland had 27 points and 10 assists in his return to Cleveland's lineup after missing four games in the NBA's health and safety protocols, while Jarrett Allen had 22 points and 12 rebounds.

Lakers 122, Kings 114: LeBron James scored 14 of his 31 points in the fourth quarter, Malik Monk added 11 of his 24 in the final seven minutes, and host Los Angeles beat Sacramento for its fourth win in five games.

Talen Horton-Tucker scored

19 points for the Lakers, who rallied from a late seven-point deficit with one big basket after another from Monk and James. Monk hit six three-pointers in yet another impressive offensive game, and Russell Westbrook added 19 points and drew a key late charge as Los Angeles climbed back above .500.

Suns 123, Pelicans 110: Devin Booker scored 33 points, Chris Paul added 11 points and 15 assists, and Phoenix won at New Orleans.

Mikal Bridges added 23 points for the Suns, who picked up their seventh win over the Pelicans in the last nine games. Bridges and

Cameron Johnson (18 points) both made five three-pointers, while veteran center Bismack Biyombo shot 6-for-6 and scored 16.

Knicks 104, Pacers 94: RJ Barrett scored 24 of his 32 points in the first half, Julius Randle had 30 points and 16 rebounds in his first game after coming off the COVID-19 health and safety protocols list, and host New York beat Indiana.

Raptors 129, Spurs 104: Fred VanVleet scored 33 points, Pascal Siakam had 18 points and 12 rebounds, and host Toronto extended its winning streak to three by beating San Antonio.

No. 1 Bears top Sooners; win streak at 20

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — James Akinjo matched his career high with 27 points, Adam Flaggler scored 22 and top-ranked Baylor stretched its national-best winning streak to 20 games with an 84-74 win over Oklahoma on Tuesday night.

Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua added 12 points for the Bears (14-0, 2-0 Big 12), whose winning streak began with their six wins in last season's NCAA Tournament on their way to their first national championship.

After the Sooners (11-3, 1-1) got within 77-72 in the final minute on a fast-break layup by Umoja Gibson, LJ Cryer had a backcourt turnover.

Baylor sealed the game by making seven of eight free throws in the final 40 seconds.

Tanner Groves had 13 points to lead four players in double figures for first-year coach Porter Moser and Oklahoma. Jalen Hill and Gibson each had 12 points and Ethan Chargois had 10.

No. 2 Duke 69, Georgia Tech 57: Freshman Paolo Banchemo had 17 points and 11 rebounds, and the host Blue Devils beat the Yellow Jackets in Duke's return from a COVID-19 outbreak that led to a pair of postponements.

The Blue Devils (12-1, 2-0 Atlantic Coast Conference) had a rough night on offense and shot a season-low 37.3%. But their defense made things even tougher on Georgia Tech.

Michael Devoe, who came in averaging a league-best 21.2 points, finished with 21 points for Georgia Tech (6-7, 0-3). All but five of those came in the final 11-plus minutes.

No. 6 Kansas 74, Oklahoma State 63: David McCormack had 17 points and a career-high 15 rebounds, Ochai Agbaji scored 16 points, and the visiting Jayhawks overcame a scoreless streak of more than 9½ minutes to beat the Cowboys in the delayed Big 12 Conference opener for both teams.

Kansas (12-1) missed 19 straight shots to end the first half, allowing Oklahoma State (7-5) to pull even at 29-29 by halftime, but the Jayhawks made seven straight shots during a 20-8 run early in the second half that put them back ahead by double digits.

The Cowboys (7-5) came no closer than six points the rest of the way. Isaac Likekele led Oklahoma State with 16 points.

Kansas won its eighth straight game and its 31st consecutive conference opener.

No. 9 Auburn 81, South Carolina 66: Wendell Green Jr. scored a season-high 22 points and the visiting Tigers beat the Gamecocks for their 10th straight win.

Walker Kessler finished with 12 points, 10 rebounds and four blocks for Auburn (13-1, 2-0 Southeastern Conference), whose winning streak is its longest since it won 12 in a row from 2018-19.

No. 14 Texas 70, Kansas State 57: Marcus Carr scored 19 points, Timmy Allen had 17 and the visiting Longhorns rallied in the second half to beat the Wildcats.

Courtney Ramey added 14 points and Dylan Disu had 10 for Texas (12-2, 2-0 Big 12), which has won six in a row.

Marquette 88, No. 16 Providence 56: Justin Lewis had a career-high 23 points and 11 rebounds as the host Golden Eagles broke out of their slump and ended the Friars' eight-game winning streak.

Marquette (9-6, 1-3 Big East) emphatically ended its four-game skid by scoring 20 straight points late in the first half. The Golden Eagles' lead never dropped below 20 throughout the second half.

No. 20 Colorado State 67, Air Force 59: Isaiah Stevens scored 15 points as the host Rams shrugged off some rust following a nearly monthlong layoff due to COVID-19 concerns and held off the short-handed Falcons.

Ethan Taylor led Air Force (8-5, 1-1) with 19 points.

No. 21 LSU 65, No. 16 Kentucky 50: Tari Eason capped his 13-point performance with a dunk following a Wildcats turnover with 13 seconds left, and the host Tigers held on for the win.

Xavier Pinson added 11 points for LSU (13-1, 1-1 Southeastern Conference).

No. 24 Seton Hall 71, Butler 56: Jared Rhoden scored 17 points, Alexis Yetna had 14 points and 10 rebounds, and the Pirates beat the host Bulldogs.

Bryce Aiken added 12 points and seven assists for Seton Hall (10-3, 1-2 Big East).

Army 96, Bucknell 89: Jalen Rucker scored 21 points and Aaron Duhart scored 20 and the Black Knights earned a road win.

Josh Caldwell had 16 points and Charlie Peterson added 13 for Army (8-6, 2-0 Patriot League).

Navy 83, Boston University 71: John Carter Jr. scored a season-high 23 points as the host Midshipmen defeated the Terriers. Tyler Nelson added 20 points for Navy.

Daniel Deaver had 18 points and nine rebounds for the Midshipmen (9-4, 2-0 Patriot League).

Kansas State routs short-handed LSU in Texas Bowl

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Deuce Vaughn and the Kansas State Wildcats finished a streaky season on a positive note Tuesday night with a dominant 42-20 win over short-handed LSU in the Texas Bowl.

Vaughn, a sophomore running back and first-team All-American as an all-purpose player, rushed for 146 yards on 21 carries. He scored four touchdowns — three rushing and one receiving.

"The aggressiveness of our

play calling opened up the running game," Vaughn said. "Everybody was making plays, and our O-line stayed committed to the fight against a really good defense."

Kansas State (8-5) also got a strong performance from quarterback Skylar Thompson, who returned to make his final collegiate start after missing the regular season finale with an ankle injury.

"For him to be on point like he was and throwing strikes, he was phenomenal," Wildcats

coach Chris Klieman said. "To see him go out like that was huge. He wanted to play well in this moment and he did."

Thompson completed 21 of 28 passes for 259 yards and three touchdowns and was chosen Texas Bowl MVP. Malik Knowles had two touchdown catches and 42 yards receiving.

While the Tigers (6-7) had a tough time slowing Vaughn and Thompson, they had another uphill battle on offense.

With starting quarterback Max Johnson having trans-

ferred to Texas A&M, backup Myles Brennan recovering from surgery and a third-string freshman that would have had to burn his redshirt to play, LSU entered the game with a big question mark under center.

The Tigers turned to senior receiver Jontre Kirklind, who hadn't played quarterback since high school in 2016.

LSU didn't get a first down until late in the second quarter. By that time, the Wildcats already had 12 first downs and a 21-0 lead.

Panthers make Flames their 4th straight victim

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Patric Hornqvist scored twice, Sergei Bobrovsky stopped a season-high 47 shots and the Florida Panthers pushed their winning streak to four games by topping the Calgary Flames 6-2 on Tuesday night.

Joe Thornton got a history-making go-ahead goal late in the first period for Florida, which improved to 18-3-0 on home ice. Anthony Duclair, Ryan Lomberg and Lucas Carlsson also scored for the Panthers, and Brandon Montour had the second three-assist game of his career.

The 42-year-old Thornton has now scored in 26 consecutive years.

Carter Verhaeghe had two assists for Florida, which is now 19-0-0 when scoring at least four goals this season.

“It’s still early in the season,” Panthers interim coach Andrew Brunette said. “There’s a long way to go. But anybody that turns on a hockey game and watches the Florida Panthers play right now is going to be entertained. ... When we get wave after wave and get everybody rolling, we’re a pretty dangerous hockey team.”

Johnny Gaudreau got his 14th goal of the season for Calgary, and Blake Coleman also scored. Jacob Markstrom stopped 39 shots for the Flames.

Lightning 7, Blue Jackets 2: Ondrej Palat had two goals and an assist as visiting Tampa Bay snapped a three-game skid by routing Columbus.

Brayden Point added a goal and two as-

sists for the Lightning, who scored three power-play goals.

Tampa Bay goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 20 shots in his 17th win, tying Frederik Andersen of Carolina for the NHL lead.

Gus Nyquist had a goal and an assist for an illness-ravaged Columbus team.

Avalanche 4, Blackhawks 3 (OT): Cale Makar scored his 14th goal of the season 2:38 into overtime, and surging Colorado dealt host Chicago its fifth straight loss.

Defenseman Erik Johnson had two goals as the Avalanche won for the seventh time in eight games.

Alex DeBrincat scored two power-play goals on consecutive shots, and Jonathan Toews scored in the second period for the Blackhawks.

Bruins 5, Devils 3: David Pastrnak scored the tiebreaking goal with 5:49 left in the third period and host Boston beat New Jersey.

Curtis Lazar had a goal and an assist, Oskar Steen scored his first career goal and the Bruins won their third straight since returning after they had six consecutive games postponed because of COVID-19.

Trent Frederic also scored for Boston, and Brandon Carlo sealed it on a goal with 23 seconds to play.

Red Wings 6, Sharks 2: Tyler Bertuzzi and Pius Suter each scored twice, including short-handed goals on the same penalty, and host Detroit topped San Jose.

After Red Wings forward Giovanni Smith

was penalized five minutes for boarding and given a game misconduct for a hit against defenseman Jacob Middleton late in the first period, Suter scored on a breakaway and Bertuzzi added a goal off a feed from Carter Rowney in the second period, during the extended power play. Detroit hadn’t scored two short-handed goals on the same penalty kill since Dec. 17, 1999, against Colorado.

Jets 3, Coyotes 1: Connor Hellebuyck stopped 26 shots and visiting Winnipeg beat Arizona for its third straight win.

Evgeny Svechnikov, Pierre Luc-Dubois and Nikolaj Ehlers scored for the Jets.

Ducks 4, Flyers 1: Troy Terry scored his first NHL hat trick and host Anaheim defeated Philadelphia, giving Dallas Eakins his 100th NHL coaching win.

Terry, a right wing, is third in the league with 21 goals, including 11 that have tied the game or given the Ducks a lead. He had a pair of goals in the first period and completed the first hat trick of his five-year career with an empty-net goal with 49 seconds remaining.

Predators 3, Golden Knights 2: Filip Forsberg scored twice, Juuse Saros made 41 saves and visiting Nashville beat Vegas.

Yakov Trenin also scored for the Predators, who moved past St. Louis into first place in the Central Division with 44 points.

The Golden Knights, on a 10-3-1 run, lost their second straight at home but still lead the Pacific Division — and Western Conference — with 45 points.

Djokovic detained entering Australia for tournament

Associated Press

BRISBANE, Australia — Novak Djokovic is being held in a room with police out front after landing in Melbourne for the Australian Open, his father said Wednesday amid reports that a visa mix-up could jeopardize the top-ranked Serb’s entry into the country.

Djokovic received a medical exemption to play at the first Grand Slam tennis tournament of the season, where he is a nine-time winner and the defending champion. The exemption allows him to play regardless of his vaccination status for COVID-19, something he has not

disclosed, but he also needs to meet strict border regulations to enter the country.

“Novak is currently in a room which no one can enter,” Djokovic’s father, Srdjan Djokovic, told the B92 internet portal. “In front of the room are two policemen.”

Djokovic’s revelation on social media that he was heading to Australia seeking a record 21st major title sparked some debate and plenty of headlines on Wednesday, with critics questioning what grounds he could have for the exemption and backers arguing he has a right to privacy and freedom of choice.

Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley defended the “completely legitimate application and process” and insisted there was no special treatment for Djokovic.

The Victoria state government mandated that only fully vaccinated players, staff, fans and officials could enter Melbourne Park when the tournament starts on Jan. 17.

Only 26 people connected with the tournament applied for a medical exemption and, Tiley said, only a “handful” were granted.

The names, ages and nationalities of applicants were redacted

for privacy reasons before each application for a vaccine exemption was assessed by two independent panels of experts, and Tiley noted Djokovic is under no obligation to reveal his reason for seeking one.

But, he suggested, it would be “helpful” if Djokovic chose to explain it to a Melbourne public still getting over months of lockdowns and severe travel restrictions imposed at the height of the pandemic.

“I would encourage him to talk to the community about it,” Tiley said. “We have been through a very tough period over the last two years.”