

Biden says Trump spread 'web of lies'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Thursday forcefully condemned Donald Trump's relentless election-overtaking efforts that sparked the deadly breach of the Capitol by his supporters and continues to motivate deep national division. He marked the anniversary by saying the rioters had held a "dagger at the throat of democracy" but failed to succeed.

Biden's criticism was blistering of the defeated president whom he blamed for the attack that has fundamentally changed Congress and the nation, and raised global concerns about the future of American democracy.

"For the first time in our history, a president not just lost an election, he tried to prevent the peaceful transfer of power as a violent mob breached the Capitol," Biden said. "You can't love your country only when you win."

His voice booming at times, filling the ornate Statuary Hall where rioters had laid siege, the president called on Americans to remember what they saw Jan. 6, 2021, with their own eyes: the mob attacking police, breaking windows, a Confederate battle flag inside the Capitol, gallows erected outside threatening to hang the vice president — all while Trump sat at the White House watching it on TV.

"The former president's supporters are trying to rewrite history. They want you to see Election Day as the day of insurrection and the riot that took place here on January 6 as a true expression of the will of the people. Can you think of a more twisted way to look at this country, to look at America? I cannot."

The president's remarks launched the start of daylong remembrance, drawing a contrast between the truth of what happened and the false narratives that persist about the Capitol assault, including the continued refusal by many Republicans to affirm that Biden won the 2020 election.

"We must be absolutely clear about what is true and what is a lie," he said. "The former president of the United States of America has spread a web of lies about the 2020 election."

He said: "We are in a battle for the soul of America."

"I did not seek this fight, brought to this Capitol one year from today. But I will not shrink from it either. I will stand in this breach, I will defend this nation. I will allow no one to place a dagger at the throat of this democracy."

Republican leaders and lawmakers are largely staying away from the day's remembrance events, viewing them as overly politicized.

From Florida, Trump dashed off a statement claiming Biden was trying to "further divide America. This political theater is all just a distraction."

Even among congressional Republicans who condemned the attack in the days afterward, most have stayed loyal to the former president.

"What brazen politicization of January 6 by President Biden," tweeted Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a sometimes Trump confidant.

The division is a stark reminder of the rupture between the two parties, worsening since hundreds of Trump's supporters violently pushed past police, used their fists and flagpoles to break through the windows of the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Biden's victory.

Rep. Liz Cheney, chair of the House committee investigating the attack and one of the few GOP lawmakers attending the Capitol ceremonies, warned that "the threat continues." Trump, she said, "continues to make the same claims that he knows caused violence on January 6."

"Unfortunately, too many in my own party are embracing the former president, are looking the other way or minimizing the danger," she told NBC's "Today." "That's how democracies die. We simply cannot let that happen."

Navy ousts its first sailors for refusing virus vaccine

By **CAITLIN DOORNBOS**

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy has ousted its first group of sailors for refusing the coronavirus vaccine, the service announced late Wednesday.

Twenty sailors who had just started their military careers were booted from the service through what's known as entry-level separations, the Navy said. These sailors were separated within their first 180 days of active-duty service during their initial training period.

No other separations have been issued, but those with longer tenures could face the same fate in the coming months if they

continue to refuse the vaccine, the Navy said.

Navy commanders were ordered Dec. 15 to begin the separation process for sailors who have refused to take the coronavirus vaccine. As of Wednesday, 5,268 active-duty and 2,980 Reserve sailors remained unvaccinated.

Most separations will happen in the first six months of 2022, though some could continue past June 1, Rear Adm. James Waters, the Navy's director of military personnel plans and policy, said last month.

The Navy has approved vaccine exemptions for some active-duty sailors. As of Wednesday, the service had issued eight

permanent medical exemptions, 242 temporary medical exemptions and 74 administrative exemptions, but no religious exemptions, according to the statement.

So far, the service has received 3,009 active-duty religious accommodation requests.

The Navy Reserve has also issued nine temporary medical and 31 administrative exemptions. No Reserve sailors have been approved for permanent medical or religious exemptions.

The lack of religious exemptions is not unique to the Navy. None of the five military branches have issued vaccine exemptions for religious reasons.

Attack drones continue harassing al Asad

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

Coalition defenses at Iraq's al Asad Air Base shot down another armed drone Thursday as the sprawling facility, which still houses American troops, thwarted its third attack in as many days.

It follows a barrage of rocket or drone incidents since New Year's Eve targeting foreign forces near Baghdad and in northeast Syria.

The series of daily attacks targeting coalition sites comes on the heels of a Dec. 31, 2021, deadline for Operation Inherent Re-

solve to transition from a combat mission to one focused only on training and advising Iraqi forces battling Islamic State.

Combat forces were withdrawn last month, but some 2,500 U.S. troops remain in the country for the new mission.

"Attacks are a dangerous distraction from our #AdviseAssistEnable mission and a threat to the Iraqi people," the coalition said in a statement Thursday.

While not deadly so far, this week's attacks appear to be aimed at harassing coalition forces, perhaps to raise tensions

and prompt a disproportionate response.

The United States has blamed Iranian proxy forces for the spate of attacks, which began as Tehran and its surrogates marked the anniversary Monday of the 2020 U.S. killing in Baghdad of Qassem Soleimani, a senior Iranian general responsible for overseeing armed groups outside Iran.

Iranian proxy groups have pledged revenge for Soleimani. They have waged a long campaign aimed at driving all U.S. forces from Iraq.

The Shiite militias and their

Iranian backers need a resistance campaign to look credible after a series of blunders late last year, but they may call it quits after this week if it doesn't draw an outsized U.S. response and if their supporters are satisfied, Michael Knights, a fellow at the Washington Institute who specializes in Iraq and Iran security affairs, and co-author Crispin Smith wrote in an analysis.

The unidentified drone downed Thursday did not cause any damage or casualties at the installation, Iraqi officials and the U.S.-led coalition said.

N. Korea says hypersonic missile made precise strike

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea's first weapons test of the new year, carried out Wednesday, was a hypersonic missile that "precisely" hit a target about 435 miles away, the country's state-run news agency said Thursday.

The Korean Central News agency said the launch had a "strategic significance" and that its missile glided 75 miles laterally after detaching to hit its target.

"The test launch clearly demonstrated the control and stability of the hypersonic gliding warhead, which combined the multi-stage gliding jump flight and the strong lateral movement," KCNA said in its announcement.

Hypersonic weapons travel at least five times faster than the speed of sound, or around 3,800 mph. The weapons can fly at lower altitudes and are harder to defend against due to their maneuverability.

The latest missile was detect-

ed by the South Korean and Japanese militaries at 8:10 a.m. Wednesday. Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi said initial estimates show a projectile flew about 310 miles and fell into the sea outside of his country's exclusive economic zone.

In a statement the same day, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, which oversees all U.S. forces in the Pacific, said the missile launch did "not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies."

The communist regime claimed it first tested a hypersonic weapon in September, after the U.S. and South Korean militaries detected a short-range missile fired from the North's eastern coast. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had vowed to develop longer-range intercontinental ballistic missiles as well as hypersonic aircraft.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who addressed the launch in a speech Wednesday, said his country "must not give up dialogue" with the North.

Dozens of protesters, police dead in Kazakhstan protests

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Security forces killed dozens of protesters and 12 police died during extraordinarily violent demonstrations in Kazakhstan that saw government buildings stormed and set ablaze, authorities said Thursday. One police officer was found beheaded in escalating unrest that poses a growing challenge to authoritarian rule in the Central Asian nation.

Despite the severe response by authorities, protesters took the streets again in the country's largest city, Almaty, a day after breaking into the presidential residence and the mayor's office there. Police were also out in force, including in the capital of Nur-Sultan, which was reportedly quiet, and Russian troops were on their way.

Video from the Russian news agency Tass showed police firing intensely on a street near Republic Square, where demonstrators had gathered, though they could not be seen in the footage. Late Thursday, Tass said protesters had been swept from the square but that sporadic gunfire in the

area continued.

Earlier, Russia's Sputnik news service reported that shots were fired as police surrounded one group of about 200 protesters in the city.

In the unrest on Wednesday, "dozens of attackers were liquidated," police spokeswoman Soltanat Azirbek told state news channel Khabar-24, using a term common to describe the killing of people thought to be extremists by law enforcement. Twelve police officers were killed and 353 injured, according to city officials cited by the channel. The Interior Ministry said 2,000 people have been arrested.

Although the demonstrations began over a near-doubling of prices for a type of vehicle fuel, their size and rapid spread suggest they reflect wider discontent in the country.

The government on Thursday announced a 180-day price cap on vehicle fuel and a moratorium on raising utility rates — an attempt to address the economic issues that catalyzed the protests, though it was unclear what, if any, effect the moves would have.

US hospitals seeing new kind of surge

Associated Press

Hospitals across the United States are feeling the wrath of the omicron variant and getting thrown into disarray that is different from earlier COVID-19 surges.

This time, they are dealing with serious staff shortages because so many health care workers are getting sick with the fast-spreading variant. People are showing up at emergency rooms in large numbers in hopes of getting tested for COVID-19, putting more strain on the system. And a surprising share of patients — two-thirds in some places — are testing positive while in the hospital for other reasons.

At the same time, hospitals have said the patients aren't as sick as those who came in during the last surge. Intensive care units aren't as full, and ventilators

aren't needed as much as they were before.

The pressures are nevertheless prompting hospitals to scale back non-emergency surgeries and close wards, while National Guard troops have been deployed in several states to help at medical centers and testing sites.

Nearly two years into the pandemic, frustration and exhaustion are running high among health care workers.

"This is getting very tiring, and I'm being very polite in saying that," said Dr. Robert Glasgow of University of Utah Health, which has hundreds of workers out sick or in isolation.

About 85,000 Americans are in the hospital with COVID-19, just short of the delta-surge peak of about 94,000 in early September, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The

all-time high was about 125,000 in January 2021.

But the hospitalization numbers do not tell the whole story. Some cases in the official count involve COVID-19 infections that weren't what put the patients in the hospital in the first place.

Dr. Fritz François, chief of hospital operations at NYU Langone Health in New York City, said about 65% of patients admitted to that system with COVID-19 recently were primarily hospitalized for something else and were incidentally found to have the virus. At two large Seattle hospitals over the past two weeks, three-quarters of the 64 patients testing positive for the coronavirus were admitted with a primary diagnosis other than COVID-19.

Joanne Spetz, associate director of research at the Healthforce Center at the University of Cali-

fornia, San Francisco, said the rising number of cases like that is both good and bad.

The lack of symptoms shows vaccines, boosters and natural immunity from prior infections are working, she said. The bad news is that the numbers mean the coronavirus is spreading rapidly, and some percentage of those people will wind up needing hospitalization. This week, 36% of California hospitals reported critical staffing shortages. And 40% are expecting such shortages.

Some hospitals are reporting as much as a quarter of their staff out for virus-related reasons, said Kiyomi Burchill, the California Hospital Association's vice president for policy and leader on pandemic matters.

In response, hospitals are turning to temporary staffing agencies or transferring patients out.

CDC urges boosters starting at age 12 to help fight omicron

Associated Press

The United States is urging that everyone 12 and older get a COVID-19 booster as soon as they're eligible to help fight back the hugely contagious omicron mutant that's ripping through the country.

Boosters were already encouraged for all Americans 16 and older, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Wednesday endorsed an extra Pfizer shot for younger teens — those 12 to 15 — and strengthened its recommendation that 16- and 17-year-olds get it, too.

"It is critical that we protect our children and teens from COVID-19 infection and the complications of severe disease," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC's director, said in a statement Wednesday night. "This booster dose will provide optimized protection against COVID-19 and the Omicron variant. I encourage all parents

to keep their children up to date with CDC's COVID-19 vaccine recommendations."

Giving teens a booster for a temporary jump in protection against infections is like playing whack-a-mole, cautioned CDC adviser Dr. Sarah Long of Drexel University. But she said the extra shot was worth it to help push back the omicron mutant and shield kids from the missed school and other problems that come with even a very mild case of COVID-19.

More importantly, if a child with a mild infection spreads it to a more vulnerable parent or grandparent who then dies, the impact "is absolutely crushing," said Dr. Camille Kotton of Massachusetts General Hospital.

The vaccine made by Pfizer and BioNTech is the only option for American children of any age. Boosters were opened to 16- and 17-year-olds last month.

No deal, no school: Chicago cancels classes for 2nd day

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Chicago school leaders canceled classes for a second straight day after failing to reach an agreement Wednesday with the teachers union over remote learning and other COVID-19 safety protocols in the nation's third-largest school district.

The Chicago Teachers Union, which voted to revert to online instruction, told teachers to stay home Wednesday during the latest COVID-19 surge while both sides negotiate, prompting district officials to cancel classes two days after students returned from winter break. Chicago Public Schools, like most other districts, has rejected returning to remote learning, saying it worsened racial inequities and was detrimental to academic performance, mental health and attendance. District officials insist schools can safely remain open with protocols in place.

School districts nationwide have grappled with the same issues, with most opting to stay open while ramping up virus testing, tweaking protocols and other adjustments amid the shifting pandemic. White House press secretary Jen Psaki, echoing President Joe Biden from a day earlier, said Wednesday that the country is better equipped now to make sure schools can safely open "including in Chicago."

District and union officials negotiated behind closed doors Wednesday afternoon but failed to produce an agreement. The issues include metrics that would trigger school closures and more COVID-19 testing. For instance, school leaders support remote learning only at the classroom and school level when there are outbreaks, as has been the case this year, versus a districtwide switch to remote learning, which the union has supported.

Maxwell to seek a new trial amid juror abuse claim

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Ghislaine Maxwell, convicted last week of conspiring to recruit and groom teenage girls to be abused by Jeffrey Epstein, plans to request a new trial after a juror in her case revealed he was a victim of sexual abuse, her defense lawyers said Wednesday.

The lawyers said in a letter to U.S. District Judge Alison J. Nathan that “based on undisputed, publicly available information, the Court can and should order a new trial without any evidentiary hearing.”

The judge set a schedule late Wednesday for the defense to ask for a new trial, saying it should make the request by Jan. 19, with prosecutors replying by Feb. 2.

She asked them to address whether “an inquiry of some kind” is permitted or required. Nathan also said she will offer a court-appointed lawyer for the juror.

The judge’s order came after defense lawyers said Maxwell “intends to request a new trial” with a submission that will include all known undisputed remarks of the juror, along with recorded statements and the questionnaire all jurors filled out.

“It is clear to Ms. Maxwell that based on this record alone, a new trial is required,” they said, urging that all trial jurors be examined to evaluate their conduct if a hearing occurs.

In interviews published Tuesday and Wednesday by The Independent and the Daily Mail, one juror described a moment during the deliberations when he told fellow jurors in Maxwell’s trial that, like some of the victims of the late financier Epstein, he had been sexually abused as a child. And he said he convinced other jurors that a victim’s imperfect memory of sex abuse doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.

“I know what happened when I was sexually abused. I remember the color of the carpet, the walls. Some of it can be replayed like a video,” he said he told the jury, according to The Independent. “But I can’t remember all the details, there are some things that run together.”

The judge denied a request by another defense lawyer who wrote a separate letter asking her to suspend all other post-trial motions in the case.

In their own letter to Nathan, even prosecutors said those reports “merit attention by the Court.”

Philadelphia house fire leaves at least 12 dead

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Two sisters and several of their children were among the 12 people killed when a fire tore through a Philadelphia rowhome that apparently had no working smoke detectors, fire officials said.

Eight children lost their lives in the Wednesday morning blaze — the city’s deadliest single fire in more than a century.

At least two people were hospitalized and some others managed to escape from the three-story brick duplex, which was public housing, officials said. The cause of the fire has not been determined. Officials said 26 people had been staying in the two apartments.

“I knew some of those kids — I used to see them playing on the corner,” said Dannie McGuire, 34, fighting back tears as she and Martin Burgert, 35, stood in the doorway of a home around the corner.

“I can’t picture how more people couldn’t get out — jumping out a window,” she said.

Officials did not release the names or ages of those killed in the blaze, which started before 6:30 a.m.

Family members on Facebook have iden-

tified two of the victims as sisters Rosalee McDonald, 33, and Virginia Thomas, 30. The siblings each had multiple children, but it’s unclear if all of them were home at the time of the fire or how many of them died. Messages were left with several people who said they knew or were related to the victims.

Fire officials initially said 13 people died, seven of them children, but those figures were updated Wednesday evening. Eight children and four adults were found dead, officials said.

None of the four smoke alarms appeared to be working, said Craig Murphy, first deputy fire commissioner. The alarms had been inspected annually, and at least two were replaced in 2020, with batteries replaced in the others at that time, Philadelphia Housing Authority officials said. It said the last inspection was in May 2021. Smoke detectors were working at that time, officials said.

The fire burned in a residential area of the Fairmount neighborhood, northwest of downtown and home to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and its famous steps from the film “Rocky.”

US jobless claims grow to 207K

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose last week but remained at historically low levels, suggesting that the job market remains strong.

U.S. jobless claims rose by 7,000 last week to 207,000. The four-week average of claims, which smooths out week-to-week gyrations, rose by nearly 4,800 to just below 205,000. Despite the increases, the numbers show that weekly claims are below the 220,000 typical before the pandemic struck the U.S. economy in March 2020.

The highly transmissible omicron variant does not appear to have triggered significant layoffs so far.

Altogether, nearly 1.8 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment aid the week that ended Dec. 25.

Employers are reluctant to let workers go at a time when it’s so tough to find replace-

ments. The United States posted 10.6 million job openings in November, the fifth-highest monthly total in records going back to 2000. A record 4.5 million Americans quit their jobs in November — a sign that they are confident enough in their prospects to seek something better.

The job market has bounced back from last year’s brief but intense coronavirus recession. When COVID hit, governments ordered lockdowns, consumers hunkered down at home and many businesses closed or cut back hours. Employers slashed more than 22 million jobs in March and April 2020, and the unemployment rate rocketed to 14.8%.

But massive government spending — and eventually the rollout of vaccines — brought the economy back. Employers have added 18.5 million jobs since April 2020, leaving the U.S. still 3.9 million jobs short of what it had before the pandemic.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Sheriff: Couple left son, 11, alone for 2 weeks

AZ ELFRIDA — An Arizona couple has been arrested after allegedly leaving their 11-year-old son home alone for two weeks.

The Cochise County Sheriff's Office arrested the couple last week after they returned to their home in Elfrida, about 100 miles southeast of Tucson. Authorities said the mother left the state before Thanksgiving and the father left a few days after the holiday.

Sheriff's deputies visited the home Dec. 12 after a caller said the boy may have been left alone, according to the sheriff's office Facebook page. Deputies were unable to reach the parents, and the boy was placed in foster care. He told authorities he had frozen food in the refrigerator and did not go to school for at least two weeks.

The sheriff's office said both parents have been indicted on charges of child neglect. The Associated Press is not identifying them to protect the identify of the boy.

Cruelty to child in car is among driver's charges

VT ST. JOHNSBURY — A Rhode Island man is facing a variety of charges after driving the wrong way on Interstate 91 and then fleeing from police with an unrestrained 6-year-old child in the front seat, Vermont State Police said.

Police received a report Sunday evening of a driver heading south in the interstate's northbound lane in Sheffield. Troopers located the vehicle after it

had turned around and was heading north in the northbound lane. The driver refused to stop and later crashed. The child suffered minor injuries.

The driver was charged with resisting arrest, attempting to elude, cruelty to a child, gross negligent operation and suspicion of driving under the influence.

Police: Bystander uses stun gun on shoplifter

SD SIOUX FALLS — Police in Sioux Falls say a bystander used a stun gun on a shoplifter who assaulted store employees.

Police said the 38-year-old man tried to steal from a convenience store the afternoon of Dec. 22. The man assaulted two employees before police arrived. The bystander stunned the man to stop him, the Argus Leader reported.

The alleged thief was arrested. Police Sgt. Travis Olsen said it doesn't appear the person who fired the stun gun will be charged.

Man loses hand after picking up firework

WA LONGVIEW — A New Year's Eve celebration turned to tragedy when police said a man lost his hand Sunday after he picked up a homemade explosive thrown toward him in Longview, Wash.

Longview Capt. John Reeves said Corey Bartlette, 25, of Longview, threw a tennis ball filled with explosives around midnight in the direction of a 49-year-old transient man.

Reeves said the man picked up the ball and "his hand was

blown off."

Bartlette was booked on suspicion of second-degree assault around 3 a.m. Sunday, the Daily News reported.

Man dies after falling through iced-over river

WI MILWAUKEE — A man died after he jumped out of an apartment window, ran onto the frozen Milwaukee River and fell through the ice, authorities said.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported the city's fire department got a call Monday morning of someone in the river on the city's lower east side.

First responders pulled Jeffrey Bishop, 31, from the water. He was taken to a hospital where he later died.

According to a medical examiner report, a neighbor saw Bishop break his second-floor apartment window and jump out of it.

Dog finds help, leads cops to owner's crash

NH LEBANON — A German shepherd named Tinsley, first thought to be a lost dog, successfully led New Hampshire state police to the site of its owner's rollover crash.

Both the vehicle's occupants were seriously hurt, but thanks to Tinsley's dogged efforts they quickly received medical assistance once officers discovered the truck, which went off the road near a Vermont interstate junction, WMUR-TV reported Tuesday.

"The dog was trying to show them something," said Lt. Da-

niel Baldassarre of the New Hampshire State Police. "He kept trying to get away from them, but didn't run away totally.

"It was kind of, 'Follow me. Follow me.' And they did that and you know, to their surprise to see the guardrail damaged and to look down to where the dog is looking at, it's just, they were almost in disbelief," he said.

A New Hampshire state trooper and Lebanon police responded to the crash site late Monday, just across the state line in Vermont.

Fire at amusement park damages roller coaster

PA CONNEAUT LAKE — A fire at a northwestern Pennsylvania amusement park has damaged a wooden roller coaster built more than eight decades ago.

WICU-TV said reports from Conneaut Lake Park late Tuesday afternoon indicated that a controlled burn near the carousel got out of hand.

The fire spread to nearby buildings and structures, including part of the Blue Streak roller coaster, the station reported. No injuries were reported.

The coaster was built in 1937 and has been opened and closed a number of times over the years. It didn't operate last year due to the need for a structural evaluation, officials said.

Conneaut Lake Park has operated as an amusement park since 1892, when it opened as Exposition Park, but has been closed a number of times during years of financial difficulty.

— From wire reports



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Carr set for biggest start of career

Associate Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — Derek Carr has started 126 games during his eight-year NFL career.

There has been none bigger than No. 127.

Carr will lead the Las Vegas Raiders into the NFL's final game on Sunday night against the Los Angeles Chargers in what likely will be an all-or-nothing showdown between AFC West rivals.

For Carr, who has one year left on his contract and who has expressed his feelings about being a Raider for life, the game on Sunday is the most consequential of his career.

"If you look back to the last three games, they've all been the biggest games of our career," Carr said Wednesday. "I feel like that's kind of been the feeling around our team and around my heart for the last month. And so, this one's exciting, obviously, because it's the last one and it really tells you what happens. But at the end of the day, I feel like the last month we've been playing in our playoffs."

That's because a 1-5 skid that followed a 5-2 start to the campaign left the Raiders near the bottom of the AFC standings.

Suddenly, though, a three-game win streak — including road wins in Cleveland and Indianapolis after Carr led last-minute, game-winning drives — has Las Vegas on

the brink of pulling off what seemed unimaginable less than a month ago.

The Raiders will make the playoffs for the second time in the past 19 seasons with a win. They also could sneak in with a loss if both Indianapolis and Pittsburgh lose, but the most direct path to extending the season would be win No. 57 for Carr.

Not to mention give Carr his first opportunity to compete in the playoffs.

Las Vegas was 12-3 when Carr went down with a broken leg in 2016 and wasn't able to play in the postseason. The Raiders, who are 44-67 since then, are 56-70 during Carr's career.

While there's no been no denying his ability to lead game-winning drives during his career, a win Sunday could silence the detractors who've questioned whether Carr is a quarterback who can lead a franchise to a championship, let alone the postseason.

Carr is one of 89 quarterbacks to start 100 or more games during the Super Bowl era (126). He joins Ryan Fitzpatrick (147) and Archie Manning (139 starts) as the only ones never to appear in a playoff game.

"He's definitely ready for this," Las Vegas defensive end Yannick Ngakoue said. "Just seeing over the course of these last couple of weeks, just the confidence and fire that I see from him. I love it. Super happy for him to be in this moment and I know he's

going to get the job done."

Despite the tumultuous off-field distractions the Raiders have dealt with following Jon Gruden's sudden resignation over an email scandal in October and star receiver Henry Ruggs III's release after a fatal DUI crash in November, Carr has continued to be the face of the franchise.

He's been a leader in the locker room and helped the team overcome adversity along the way while putting together a rather impressive season statistically. He ranks fourth in the NFL with 4,618 yards passing this season.

Carr hasn't been quite as sharp of late, turning the ball over at least twice in his last four starts as the Raiders have scored more than 17 points just twice in the past nine games.

But Carr has stepped up in key spots, leading fourth-quarter comebacks to beat both the Browns and Colts.

"What I love about Derek is when things get real, when things get like, 'it's time to go,' he got it done," linebacker KJ Wright said. "We know this game is going to be tight. We know it'll probably come down to a two-minute drill, and I know Derek Carr is going to find a way to get it done. He's a quarterback I always respected. Hopefully, we can just seal this deal and get this thing started."

Titans star running back Henry cleared to practice

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Tennessee Titans have made the easy move opening the 21-day window for Derrick Henry to practice Wednesday.

The next decision, particularly the timing, will be more challenging.

Taking the 2020 AP NFL Offensive Player of the Year off injured reserve by Sunday means he could help beat Houston, clinching the AFC's No. 1 seed. Waiting means the Titans try to earn the first-round bye without Henry, giving him more time to shake off the rust from missing the past nine weeks with a broken right foot.

"See how he responds and ask him to start doing some of those

things that he's going to need to do in the football game," coach Mike Vrabel said Wednesday. "No different than what we have done with any other guy that's come back from the injured reserve and as they start their return to play."

Tennessee has to balance Henry's health against the benefits of playing in a game compared to the quality of work available in practices at the end of the NFL regular season.

"We will try to do everything we can for the players that are coming back to try to recreate, to give them the confidence and the trust that they can go out there and do their job," Vrabel said. "We try and do that with every player that is returning."

Henry, who turned 28 on Tuesday, broke his right foot Oct. 31 and had surgery Nov. 2 to repair his fifth metatarsal. Henry led the league with 937 yards rushing when he was put on injured reserve, and the NFL's 2019 and 2020 rushing leader still ranks sixth in the league despite missing eight games.

The 6-foot-3, 247-pound Henry has been out nine weeks counting the Titans' bye Dec. 5. Henry is averaging a league-high 117.1 yards a game. He is averaging 4.3 yards per carry with 10 touchdowns rushing.

Tennessee (11-5) clinched its second straight AFC South championship last week with a 34-3 rout of Miami. A win Sunday over the Texans (4-12)

would give the Titans the franchise's third No. 1 seed in the AFC since leaving Texas and first since 2008. Even better would be practice for Henry.

But Henry has 461 yards rushing with five TDs combined in his past two games in Houston.

One factor could be the Texans play on an artificial surface, similar to Indianapolis where Henry played his most recent game. Using more of the 21-day window would allow Henry to return on natural grass in Nashville in the wild-card round at worst and divisional round with the bye as the No. 1 seed at best.

"There's a lot of factors that go into decisions that we make," Vrabel said.

IOC tells teams Olympics will proceed

Associated Press

GENEVA — A day after Switzerland's team leader asked for talks about possibly postponing the Beijing Olympics because of the coronavirus pandemic, the International Olympic Committee promised officials worldwide on Wednesday the Winter Games will go ahead as planned.

The Swiss Olympic committee said the IOC gave assurances about staging next month's event during a video conference call with teams.

The IOC also promised case-by-case assessments of athletes who recover after testing positive for COVID-19 ahead of traveling to China, the Swiss team said in a statement.

"The issue of a postponement is no longer relevant to all of us," Swiss team leader Ralph Stöckli said in the statement.

The International Olympic Committee is hoping to avoid a second straight delay. The Tokyo Games, originally scheduled to be held in 2020, were postponed by one year. That decision was made four months before

the scheduled opening ceremony.

However, Stöckli raised concerns about going ahead with the Beijing Olympics amid rising numbers of athletes being infected by COVID-19 when speaking Tuesday in a Swiss television interview.

"We must really discuss the possibility of a postponement of the Games," Stöckli had told French-language state broadcaster RTS. "If we don't have the best athletes there, that's going to be very, very difficult."

After listening to the IOC on Wednesday, the Swiss Olympic team said it is "happy to now have some certainty on this subject."

Another Swiss concern that was eased Wednesday related to waiting times after recovering from a COVID-19 infection before an athlete would be allowed to enter China. The IOC and Chinese organizers announced that a panel of international experts will evaluate individual cases and handle the issue in a "more flexible manner," the Swiss team said.

"It's a positive signal," Stöckli said, other-

wise given the high current case rates "we would have had to assume many athletes, no longer presenting any risk of infection, would have been deprived of their dream of participating in the Olympic Games."

Still, the team noted "very demanding" conditions to compete, qualify and prepare with the opening ceremony on Feb. 4 only 30 days away.

Stöckli acknowledged Wednesday "there will probably be disappointments" for athletes who end up being unable to compete.

Beijing organizers and the IOC are creating a health safety bubble for the Olympics with stricter testing and limits on travel and movement than were enforced at last year's Tokyo Games.

The rules include a 21-day quarantine for athletes, officials and workers not fully vaccinated, daily testing even for vaccinated people and also keeping local staff within the bubble.

International fans are again being kept away though tickets to attend events in stadiums will be sold to people living in China.

Djokovic in limbo, waits on ruling to enter Australia

Associated Press

Locked in a dispute over his COVID-19 vaccination status, Novak Djokovic was confined to an immigration detention hotel in Australia on Thursday as the No. 1 men's tennis player in the world awaited a court ruling on whether he can compete in the Australian Open later this month.

Djokovic, a vocal skeptic of vaccines, had traveled to Australia after Victoria state authorities granted him an exemption to the country's strict vaccination requirements. But when he arrived late Wednesday, the Australian Border Force rejected his exemption as invalid and barred him from entering the country.

A court hearing on his bid to stave off deportation was set for Monday, while the 34-year-old Serb and defending Australian Open champion was forced to wait it out in Melbourne at a secure hotel used by immigration officials to house asylum seekers

and refugees.

The tournament begins on Jan. 17. Djokovic is hoping to overtake rivals Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer in the record books and win his 21st Grand Slam singles title, the most by any player in men's tennis.

Djokovic's bid to get around the vaccine requirements so that he could play has caused an uproar and triggered allegations of special treatment in Australia, where people spent months in lockdown and endured harsh travel restrictions at the height of the pandemic.

After his long-haul flight, Djokovic spent the night trying to convince authorities he had the necessary documentation, to no avail.

"The rule is very clear," Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said. "You need to have a medical exemption. He didn't have a valid medical exemption. We make the call at the border, and that's where it's en-

forced."

Health Minister Greg Hunt said the athlete's visa was canceled after border officials reviewed Djokovic's medical exemption and looked at "the integrity and the evidence behind it."

While Djokovic has spoken out against vaccines, he has steadfastly refused to say whether he has gotten any shots against the coronavirus, though it is widely presumed he would not have sought an exemption if he had been vaccinated.

Federal Circuit Judge Anthony Kelly adjourned Djokovic's case to Monday. A lawyer for the government agreed the nine-time Australian Open champion should not be deported before then.

"I feel terrible since yesterday that they are keeping him as a prisoner. It's not fair. It's not human. I hope that he will win," Djokovic's mother, Dijana, said after speaking with him briefly by telephone from Belgrade.

She added: "Terrible, terrible accommodation. It's just some small immigration hotel, if it's hotel at all."

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that he had spoken to Djokovic and that his government asked that the athlete be allowed to move to a house he has rented and "not to be in that infamous hotel."

He added that Djokovic has been treated differently from other players.

"I'm afraid that this overkill will continue," Vucic said. "When you can't beat someone, then you do such things."

Asked about the confusion in Djokovic's case, Morrison said the onus is on the traveler to have the proper documentation on arrival.

The prime minister rejected any suggestion that Djokovic was being singled out but acknowledged that other players may be in Australia on the same type of medical exemption.

Mavs have Warriors' number on Dirk's day

Associated Press

DALLAS — Luka Dončić scored 26 points and the Dallas Mavericks celebrated before a ceremony to retire Dirk Nowitzki's number by beating cold-shooting Stephen Curry and the Golden State Warriors 99-82 on Wednesday.

The Mavericks knew the night belonged to their franchise icon, and that Nowitzki's No. 41 wasn't going to the rafters until after they played the team with the NBA's best record coming in.

Dallas responded with its first four-game winning streak of the season in Dončić's third game back since a career-long, 10-game absence caused by left ankle and knee issues and a positive COVID-19 test. The only concern for the Mavericks was Dončić limping off the floor in the final two minutes and not returning.

Curry was coming off his worst shooting night of the season and wasn't much better, going 5-for-24, including 1-for-9 from three-point range, to finish with 14 points.

Andrew Wiggins scored 17 points for Golden State. At 29-8, the Warriors dropped into a tie with the Phoenix Suns for the best record in the NBA.

Nets 129, Pacers 121: Kyrie Irving scored 22 points and sparked a big rally in the second half of his season debut, Kevin Durant had 39 and Brooklyn won at Indianapolis.

Irving is ineligible to play home games because he is not vaccinated as mandated in New York City, and the Nets had decided against allowing him to just play road games for most of the season.

But they changed their mind last month and were glad they did Wednesday, when Irving helped them charge back from a 19-point deficit. The point guard played 32 minutes as Brooklyn snapped a three-game losing streak.

Domantas Sabonis had 32 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for the Pacers, who have lost in six in a row. Lance Stephenson, who had two previous stints with the Pacers, scored 30 in his first home game with the Pacers after signing a 10-day contract.

Stephenson delighted the home crowd by scoring the final 20 points for the Pacers in the first quarter.

Hornets 140, Pistons 111: Kelly Oubre Jr. hit a career-high nine of host Charlotte's

franchise-record 24 three-pointers in a rout of Detroit.

Oubre had eight three-pointers in the fourth quarter, tying an NBA record set by Milwaukee's Michael Redd in 2002. Oubre was 8-for-9 on threes in the fourth quarter before being subbed out with 4:08 left and the Hornets leading by 35.

Spurs 99, Celtics 97: Gregg Popovich became the first to coach 2,000 NBA games with the same team, and Dejounte Murray scored 22 points to lead San Antonio to a win at Boston.

Devin Vassell and Derrick White each had 17 points to help the Spurs snap a four-game losing streak.

Jazz 115, Nuggets 109: Bojan Bogdanovic scored a season-high 36 points and Utah beat Denver to stretch its road winning streak to 10 games.

Rudy Gay had 18 points and Donovan Mitchell added 17 for the Jazz.

76ers 116, Magic 106: Joel Embiid scored 31 points, Tobias Harris added 22 and Philadelphia won at Orlando.

The 76ers, who notched their NBA-best 14th road victory of the season, tied a season high with a fifth straight win overall. They beat the Magic for the second time this season and 10th straight overall.

Raptors 117, Bucks 111: Pascal Siakam scored 33 points, OG Anunoby and Gary Trent Jr. had 22 apiece and visiting Toronto beat short-handed Milwaukee.

Fred VanVleet added 19 points for the Raptors. They improved to 18-17 and overcame the Bucks' hot-shooting first half and late rally.

Rockets 114, Wizards 111: Kevin Porter Jr. hit a three-pointer from the right wing with 0.4 seconds left to lift Houston to a win at Washington.

Heat 115, Trail Blazers 109: Max Strus had 25 points and Miami won at Portland to snap a two-game losing streak.

Timberwolves 98, Thunder 90: Karl-Anthony Towns had 17 points and 16 rebounds, while D'Angelo Russell struggled on 3-of-12 shooting in their return to the lineup for host Minnesota in a victory over Oklahoma City.

Hawks 108, Kings 102: Kevin Huerter scored five of his 25 points in the final 38 seconds and short-handed Atlanta won at Sacramento.

Oilers' McDavid misses loss as Stars return

Associated Press

Edmonton captain and reigning league MVP Connor McDavid went on the NHL's COVID-19 protocol list Wednesday, while the Dallas Stars and their captain Jamie Benn prepared to return to the ice after missing six games over 2½ weeks because of virus issues.

McDavid, forward Derek Ryan and defenseman Tyson Barrie were placed in COVID-19 protocols before the Oilers' game Wednesday night at Toronto.

The Maple Leafs beat Edmonton 4-2, handing the Oilers their 11th loss in 13 games. Ilya Mikheyev scored the tiebreaking goal on power play in the third period.

McDavid hadn't missed any of Edmonton's first 33 games. Maple Leafs star Auston Matthews was cleared for that game after a second false positive scare in recent weeks.

On Wednesday night, the NHL postponed three more games in Canadian cities because of the current attendance restrictions in some provinces. The league said the games — New Jersey at Montreal on Saturday night, New Jersey at Toronto on Jan. 17 and Chicago at Edmonton on Jan. 18 — will be rescheduled for later in the season when such restrictions may be eased or lifted.

Pens remain hot, roll past Blues

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Penguins have been the NHL's hottest team for the better part of a month. They struggled early against the St. Louis Blues. Sidney Crosby then took over.

Crosby and Evan Rodrigues scored 12 seconds apart in the third period, and the Penguins rallied for a 5-3 win over St. Louis on Wednesday night.

"I thought he was in beast mode tonight," Pittsburgh coach Mike Sullivan said. "When he's playing the game that way, he's the standard bearer for the team."

Bryan Rust scored twice and Brock McGinn also had a goal to help the Penguins win their ninth straight — their longest since winning 15 in a row in March 2013. It is the longest active streak in the league, tying Carolina for the longest of the season. Pittsburgh is 14-2-1 in its last 17 games.