

Scientists: Other worrisome variants on way

Associated Press

Get ready to learn more Greek letters. Scientists are warning that omicron's whirlwind advance practically ensures it won't be the last version of the coronavirus to worry the world.

Every infection provides a chance for the virus to mutate, and omicron has an edge over its predecessors: It spreads faster despite emerging on a planet with a stronger patchwork of immunity from vaccines and prior illness.

That means more people in whom the virus can further evolve. Experts don't know what the next variants will look like or how they might shape the pandemic, but they said there's no guarantee the sequels of omicron will cause milder illness or that existing vaccines will work against them. They urge wider vaccination now, while today's shots still work.

"The faster omicron spreads, the more opportunities there are for mutation, potentially leading to more variants," said Leonardo Martinez, an infectious disease epidemiologist at Boston University.

Since it emerged in mid-November, omicron has raced across the globe like fire through dry grass. Research has shown the variant is at least twice as contagious as delta and at least four times as contagious as the original version of the virus. Omicron is more likely than delta to reinfect individuals who previously had COVID-19 and to cause "breakthrough infections" in vaccinated people, while also attacking the unvaccinated. The World Health Organization reported a record 15 million new COVID-19 cases for the week of Jan. 3-9, a 55% increase from the previous week.

Along with keeping comparatively healthy people out of work and school, the ease with which the variant spreads increases the odds the virus will infect and linger inside people with weakened immune systems — giving it more time to develop potent mutations.

"It's the longer, persistent infections that seem to be the most likely breeding grounds for new variants," said Dr. Stuart Campbell Ray, an infectious disease expert at Johns Hopkins University. "It's only when you have very widespread infection that you're going to provide the opportunity for that to occur."

Because omicron appears to cause less severe disease than delta, its behavior has kindled hope that it could be the start of a trend that eventually makes the virus milder like a common cold.

It's a possibility, experts have

said, given that viruses don't spread well if they kill their hosts very quickly. But viruses don't always get less deadly over time.

A variant could also achieve its main goal — replicating — if infected people developed mild symptoms initially, spread the virus by interacting with others, then got very sick later, Ray explained by way of example.

"People have wondered whether the virus will evolve to mildness. But there's no particular reason for it to do so," he said. "I don't think we can be confident that the virus will become less lethal over time."

Getting progressively better at evading immunity helps a virus to survive over the long term. When SARS-CoV-2 first struck, no one was immune. But infections and vaccines have conferred at least some immunity to much of the world, so the virus must adapt.

Woman convicted of killing soldier's young son in S. Korea

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

PYEONGTAEK, South Korea — A woman accused in the September killing of a U.S. soldier's 3-year-old son was convicted Friday by a South Korean court and sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Jamaica Eblacas, 30, was found guilty of killing the boy, Noa Calhoun, the son of Army Pvt. James and Kourtney Calhoun, by a three-judge panel at the Pyeongtaek Branch of the Suwon District Court. Neither James nor Kourtney Calhoun appeared in court on Friday.

Eblacas admitted during a November court appearance to killing the child. She was charged with murder in conjunction with child abuse, which carries a minimum of three years in prison and

a maximum penalty of death under South Korean law. Prosecutors had recommended a 30-year sentence.

Eblacas' actions were "serious and cruel," Chief Judge Kim Seyong said during the sentencing.

"She does not seem to have been reflecting on herself sincerely," Kim said, referring to previous court appearances in which Eblacas failed to respond to questions from the bench or the prosecutor.

The court also banned Eblacas from working for any child-services organization for 10 years after serving her sentence.

James Calhoun, a former 2nd Infantry Division soldier stationed at Camp Humphreys, knew Eblacas, a Filipina bartender,

through a mutual acquaintance, he told Stars and Stripes in December.

Calhoun left Noa and his 7-year-old brother in Eblacas' care while he hung out with friends the night of Sept. 5, he said in December. He said he expected to pick them up the following morning.

Instead, police responding to a disturbance call the following morning discovered Noa's body, bruised and lacerated, in a home near Eblacas' workplace, near Camp Humphreys' main gate.

In sentencing Eblacas, the court considered that she may have been mentally "unfit" at the time of the killing, the judge said. Eblacas' statements during her previous court appearances were mostly incomprehensible, according to her court translator.

Eblacas' defense attorney, Jung Wang Jae, argued that she displayed symptoms of schizophrenia during a previous marriage and spoke of casting out "evil spirits" while in police custody after the killing.

"I hope the court takes it into consideration that ... the defendant's religious issue has mixed with the defendant's psychiatric issue," Jung told the court Dec. 22. "Even if the defendant was not mentally defective, it was a situation that the defendant was at least mentally weak at the time."

Jung said Eblacas did not cooperate with him and refused a psychiatric exam. Following the hearing, he told Stars and Stripes the sentence was "appropriate" but that he planned to file an appeal.

Polarized US hinders Biden's promised progress

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — From the inaugural platform, President Joe Biden saw American sickness on two fronts — a disease of the national spirit and the one from the rampaging coronavirus — and he saw hope, because leaders always must see that.

“End this uncivil war,” he implored Americans on Jan. 20, 2021. Of the pathogen, he said: “We can overcome this deadly virus.”

Neither malady has abated.

For Biden, it's been a year of lofty ambitions grounded by the unrelenting pandemic, a tough hand in Congress, a harrowing end to a foreign war and rising fears for the future of democracy itself. Biden did score a public-works achievement for the ages. But America's cracks go deeper than pavement.

In this midterm election year, Biden confronts seething divisions and a Republican Party that propagates the delusion that the 2020 election, validated as fair many times over, was stolen from Donald Trump. That central, mass lie of a rigged vote has become a pretext in state after state for changing election rules and fueling even further disunity and grievance.

In the dispiriting close of Biden's first year, roadblocks stood in the way of all big things pending.

The Supreme Court blocked his vaccinate-or-test mandate for most large employers. Monthly payments to families that had slashed child poverty ran out Friday, with no assurance they will be renewed. Biden's historic initiative to shore up the social safety net wallowed in Congress. And people under 40 have never seen inflation like this.

After his lacerating speech in Atlanta invoking the darkest days of segregation, he saw his

voting-rights legislation run aground when Democratic Sen. Krysten Sinema, of Arizona, announced her opposition to changing Senate rules to allow the bill to pass by a simple majority.

Altering the rules would only “worsen the underlying disease of division infecting our country,” she said.

For all of that, Barack Obama was on to something when he paid his old vice president an odd compliment late in the 2020 campaign. Elect Joe Biden, he said, and after four years of flamboyant Trump dramas, folks could feel safe ignoring their president and vice president for a spell.

“You're not going to have to think about them every single day,” Obama said. “It just won't be so exhausting. You'll be able to go about your lives.”

Indeed America saw normalcy, some say dignity, return to the White House. Pets came back and so did daily press briefings for the public.

The Trump-era political muzzle came off public-health authorities, freeing them to confuse the public all on their own.

First lady Jill Biden's studded “Love” jacket at a global summit not-so-subtly countered the “I Really Don't Care, Do U?” jacket her predecessor wore in a visit to a migrant child detention center.

The discipline, drive and baseline competence from the new White House produced notable results. Biden won a bipartisan infrastructure package that had eluded his two predecessors, coming away with a legacy-shaping fix for the rickety pillars of industry and society.

Biden steered more judges through Congress to the federal bench than any recent predecessor. He won approval of a

Cabinet that was half women and a minority of white people for the first time.

“I think it's a lot of achievements, a lot of accomplishment, in the face of some very serious obstacles,” Biden's chief of staff, Ron Klain, told The Associated Press on the cusp of Biden's second year. “The Biden presidency remains a work in progress.”

Matthew Delmont, a civil rights historian at Dartmouth, expected more from Biden by virtue of his decades of experience as a savvy operator in the capital.

He had anticipated a far more effective COVID-19 response and more urgency, sooner, in countering the rollback of voting rights and tilting of election rules that Republicans are attempting.

“There's something to be said for the professionalism of the White House and not going from one fire to the next,” Delmont said. “What I worry is that the Washington he understands isn't the Washington we have anymore.”

Political science professor Cal Jillson at Southern Methodist University in Dallas said Biden has displayed “warning track power” — the ability in baseball to hit long but not, as yet, over the fence.

In Biden, Jillson sees a leader who brought the even keel that Obama had talked about but also one who only rarely delivers a speech worth remembering.

“While there are vast partisan differences in how Biden is seen, in general he is seen as stable but not forceful,” he said.

In large measure, Biden's innate civility and predictability brought the sort of climate change that the world could get behind.

Here once more was a president who believed deeply in alli-

ances and vowed to repair an American reputation frayed by the provocateur in office before him.

There would be no more puzzling feelers about buying Greenland. No more doting looks at Russian President Vladimir Putin — instead, Biden stepped up diplomatic confrontation over Putin's designs on Ukraine. There would be no eerie uplit gatherings around glowing orbs with rulers of dissent-crushing Arab countries like Trump's photo op with the Saudis.

But the world also witnessed Biden's debacle in Afghanistan, a chaotic withdrawal that brought more than 124,000 to safety but stranded thousands of desperate Afghans who had been loyal to the U.S. and hundreds of U.S. citizens and green-card holders.

Discounting warnings from military and diplomatic advisers, Biden misjudged the Taliban's tenacity and the staying power of Afghan security forces that had seen crucial U.S. military support vanish. He then blamed Afghans for all that went wrong. Millions of Afghans face the threat of famine in the first winter following the Taliban takeover.

All presidents enter the world's most powerful office buoyed by their victory only to confront its limitations in time. For Biden, that happened sooner than for most. A polarized public, Trump's impeachment trial and an evenly divided Senate saw to that.

Meantime, day after day, event after event, it was the virus that commanded Biden's attention.

“That challenge casts a shadow over everything we do,” Klain said. “I think we've made historic progress there but it's still a challenge.”

Hostages safe following Texas synagogue standoff

Associated Press

COLLEYVILLE, Texas — Authorities on Sunday identified a 44-year-old British national as the man who took four people hostage at a Texas synagogue for 10 hours before an FBI SWAT team stormed the building, ending a tense standoff that President Joe Biden called “an act of terror.”

Malik Faisal Akram was shot and killed after the last of the hostages got out around 9 p.m. Saturday at Congregation Beth Israel near Fort Worth. In a statement, the FBI said there was no indication that anyone else was involved, but it didn’t provide a possible motive.

Akram could be heard ranting on a Facebook livestream of the services and demanding the release of a Pakistani neuroscientist who was convicted of trying to kill U.S. Army officers in Afghanistan. The FBI and police spokeswomen declined to answer questions Saturday night about who shot Akram when the standoff ended.

Video from Dallas TV station WFAA showed people running out a door of the syn-

agogue, and then a man holding a gun opening the same door just seconds later before he turned around and closed it. Moments later, several rounds of gunfire could be heard, followed by the sound of an explosion.

Biden said the suspect was able to purchase weapons on the street and may have only been in the country a few weeks. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement did not immediately respond to questions Sunday about Akram’s immigration status and history.

London’s Metropolitan Police said in a statement that its counterterrorism police were liaising with U.S. authorities about the incident.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Matt DeSarno said the hostage-taker was specifically focused on an issue not directly connected to the Jewish community, and there was no immediate indication that the man was part of any broader plan. But DeSarno said the agency’s investigation “will have global reach.”

It wasn’t clear why Akram chose the synagogue.

Winter storm blasts South with snow, ice

Associated Press

ATLANTA — A dangerous winter storm combining high winds and ice was sweeping through parts of the U.S. Southeast on Sunday, knocking out power, felling trees and fences and coating roads with a treacherous frigid glaze.

Tens of thousands of customers were without power in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Florida. More than an inch of snow fell per hour in some parts of the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee and Virginia, according to the National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center.

The storm was making air travel extremely difficult in some parts of the South. The nation’s hardest-hit airport — Charlotte Douglas International in North Carolina — remained open around dawn Sunday, the airport said in a weather briefing. But more than 1,000 Sunday flights in Charlotte were canceled — more than 80% of the airport’s Sunday schedule, according to the flight tracking service flightaware.com. Charlotte is a major hub in the South for American Airlines.

In Atlanta, where Delta Air Lines operates its main hub, more than 300 Sunday flights have been canceled.

Conditions were expected to continue to deteriorate later Sunday, and possible ground stops were possible at airports in the Washington, D.C., area, the Federal Aviation Administration said in its air traffic control plan for Sunday.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation said Sunday that Interstate 95 was closed in both directions between Lumberton and Fayetteville due to low-hanging power lines. Freezing rain had been reported in the area. Transportation officials advised drivers to take a detour and said they hope to reopen the road by 2 p.m.

More than 250,000 customers were without power by late morning Sunday, according to poweroutage.us. Especially hard hit was Georgia, with nearly 110,000 outages. South Carolina had nearly 90,000 customers without power. The remaining outages were in Florida, North Carolina and Tennessee.

Crews pretreated roadways in Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia, but officials still urged people to stay off them unless travel was necessary. The Tennessee Highway Patrol said in a tweet that some roads in East Tennessee were snow-covered and that troopers were working several accidents due to ice.

Captor sought release of woman jailed for trying to kill US soldiers

The Washington Post

The man who took hostages at a Dallas-area synagogue Saturday night was apparently motivated by his anger over the U.S. imprisonment of Aafia Siddiqui, 49, a Pakistani woman being held in a federal prison in Fort Worth for trying to kill American soldiers.

That’s according to a law enforcement official speaking under condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing investigation, who also told The Washington Post that early in the standoff, the hostage-taker said he wanted a rabbi in New York to know that he was taking the hostages because he wanted Siddiqui freed.

The standoff ended Saturday night with law enforcement freeing the hostages and the suspect dead.

Siddiqui has long been a cause celebre in Islamist militant circles, with frequent demands for her release.

Saturday’s events at the Texas synagogue have reignited interest in the story of the woman widely known as “Lady al-Qaida.” At

its center is an enigmatic and extremely educated mother who apparently cast off a comfortable, successful professional life in pursuit of terrorism — and would be called, at one time, the “most wanted woman in the world.”

Siddiqui was convicted on terrorism charges in 2010 and sentenced to 86 years in prison after opening fire on Americans. She is slated for release in 2082.

Her case is so compelling because she is “not the prototype of a ... regular terrorist.” While elements from Islamist groups want her release, others “might think that what happened [to her] is injustice and they want to free her for humanitarian reasons.”

Various extremist groups have tried to negotiate for her release over the years, including al-Qaida, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and Islamic State.

Meanwhile, protests in Pakistan over her detention have fueled a broader online movement dedicated to proving she was tortured by U.S. soldiers and then wrongfully convicted.

Ukraine: Russia behind recent cyberattack

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine said Sunday that Russia was behind a cyberattack that defaced its government websites and alleged that Russia is engaged in an increasing “hybrid war” against its neighbor.

The statement from the Ministry of Digital Development came a day after Microsoft said dozens of computer systems at an unspecified number of Ukrainian government agencies had been infected with destructive malware disguised as ransomware. That disclosure sug-

gested the attention-grabbing defacement attack on official websites last week was a diversion.

“All evidence indicates that Russia is behind the cyberattack. Moscow continues to wage a hybrid war and is actively building up its forces in the information and cyberspaces,” the ministry statement said.

The attack comes as the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine looms and diplomatic talks to resolve the tense standoff appear stalled.

Microsoft said in a short blog

post Saturday that it first detected the malware on Thursday. That would coincide with the attack that simultaneously took some 70 Ukrainian government websites temporarily offline.

Microsoft said in a different, technical post that the affected systems “span multiple government, non-profit, and information technology organizations.” It said it did not know how many more organizations in Ukraine or elsewhere might be affected but said it expected to learn of more infections.

A top private sector cybersecurity executive in Kyiv, Oleh Derevianko, told The Associated Press that the intruders penetrated the government networks through a shared software supplier in a supply-chain attack like the 2020 SolarWinds Russian cyberespionage campaign that targeted the U.S. government.

In the mass web defacement, a message left by the attackers claimed they had destroyed data and placed it online, which Ukrainian authorities said had not happened.

Pacific tsunami threat recedes, volcano ash slows response

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — The tsunami threat around the Pacific from a huge undersea volcanic eruption receded Sunday, but the massive ash cloud covering the tiny island nation of Tonga prevented surveillance flights from New Zealand to assess the extent of damage.

Satellite images showed the spectacular eruption Saturday evening, with a plume of ash, steam and gas rising like a mushroom above the blue Pacific waters. A sonic boom could be heard as far away as Alaska.

In Tonga, it sent tsunami waves crashing across the shore and people rushing to higher ground.

The eruption cut the internet to Tonga, leaving friends and family members around the world anxiously trying to get in touch to figure out if there were any injuries. Even government websites and other official sources remained without updates on Sunday afternoon.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ar-

dern said there had not yet been any official reports of injuries or deaths in Tonga, but cautioned that authorities hadn’t yet made contact with some coastal areas and smaller islands.

“Communication with Tonga remains very limited. And I know that is causing a huge amount of anxiety for the Tongan community here,” Ardern said.

She said there had been significant damage to boats and shops along the Tongan coastline. The capital, Nuku’alofa, was covered in a thick film of volcanic dust, Ardern said, contaminating water supplies and making fresh water a vital need.

Aid agencies said thick ash and smoke had prompted authorities to ask people to wear masks and drink bottled water.

In a video posted on Facebook, Nightingale Filihia was sheltering at her family’s home from a rain of volcanic ash and tiny pieces of rock that turned the sky pitch black.

“It’s really bad. They told us to stay in-

doors and cover our doors and windows because it’s dangerous,” she said. “I felt sorry for the people. Everyone just froze when the explosion happened. We rushed home.” Outside the house, people were seen carrying umbrellas for protection.

Ardern said New Zealand was unable to send a surveillance flight over Tonga on Sunday because the ash cloud was 63,000 feet high but that they hoped to try again on Monday, followed by supply planes and navy ships.

One complicating factor to any international aid effort is that Tonga has so far managed to avoid any outbreaks of COVID-19. Ardern said New Zealand’s military staff were all fully vaccinated and willing to follow any protocols established by Tonga.

The tsunami waves caused damage to boats as far away as New Zealand and Santa Cruz, Calif., but did not appear to cause any widespread damage. Tsunami advisories were earlier issued for Japan, Hawaii, Alaska and the U.S. Pacific coast.

Kazakhstan raises death toll to at least 225 in days of protests

Associated Press

MOSCOW — A top law-enforcement official in Kazakhstan said Saturday that 225 people died during the violent demonstrations that shook the country this month, a significantly higher number than previously announced.

Serik Shalabayev, head of the criminal prosecution service in

the general prosecutor’s office, said 19 police officers or servicemen were among the dead, news reports said. More than 4,300 people were injured, he said.

The previous official death toll was 164.

Demonstrations started on Jan. 2 in the oil and gas-rich Central Asian nation to protest a

sharp rise in fuel prices. They quickly spread nationwide, widened into a general protest against the country’s authoritarian government and descended into violence within several days, especially in Almaty, the country’s largest city. Protesters stormed government buildings and set them ablaze.

At the request of President

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization sent a force of more than 2,000 soldiers, mostly Russians, to act as peacekeepers. The Russian Defense Ministry said Saturday that its troops had returned home, but it was unclear if forces from other alliance countries remained in Kazakhstan.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Border agents seize bushmeat at airport

MN MINNEAPOLIS — U.S. customs agents said they confiscated bushmeat multiple times at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport since December.

WCCO-TV reported that Customs and Border Patrol officers seized more than 100 pounds of bushmeat from U.S. citizens returning from Liberia.

According to state agriculture officials, bushmeat is raw or underprocessed meat from wild animals such as monkeys, cane rats, bats and other primates. It can cause infection in humans and spread the Ebola virus. The confiscated meat was destroyed.

Lawmaker proposes mandatory neck guards

CT HARTFORD — A Connecticut state lawmaker said she plans to introduce legislation requiring all hockey players to wear a neck guard or a similar protective device following the death of a 10th-grade player whose neck was cut by a skate.

While the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference requires all hockey players to wear neck protection, the rules don't apply to private schools or youth hockey programs, according to Rep. Nicole Klarides-Ditria, R-Seymour, a certified sports athletic trainer.

Benjamin Edward "Teddy" Balkind, 16, a hockey player at the private coeducational St. Luke's School in New Canaan, died Jan. 6 after falling to the ice and being cut on the neck by the skate of another player who was unable to stop.

2 former top officials to repay thousands to zoo

OH COLUMBUS — Two former top officials will repay thousands of dollars to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium after audits found improper spending and questionable business practices cost the institution more than \$630,000.

The zoo's board of directors approved a \$132,000 settlement with former chief financial officer Greg Bell during a special meeting, the Columbus Dispatch reported. Board Chairman Keith Shumate also said Tracy Murnane, the former director of purchasing, agreed to repay \$11,000. Bell and Tom Stalf, the zoo's former president and chief executive officer, both resigned in March after an investigation by the newspaper found they allowed relatives to live in houses owned or controlled by the zoo and sought tickets for family members to zoo entertainment events.

Scientists: 1st wild bird flu case in US in 5 years

SC COLUMBIA — A duck killed by a hunter in South Carolina had a contagious and dangerous bird flu that has not been detected in the wild in the United States in five years, officials said.

The flu poses a low risk to people but can spread quickly through chicken houses and other poultry businesses.

The Eurasian H5 avian influenza was first detected by Clemson University scientists and confirmed by federal testing, the school said in a news release.

Anyone who has poultry, including backyard farms, needs to

review their practices to keep birds safe, said State Veterinarian Michael J. Neault, who runs Clemson's Livestock Poultry Health program.

Program will let teens become semi drivers

MI DETROIT — The federal government is moving forward with a plan to let teenagers drive big rigs from state to state in a test program.

Currently, truckers who cross state lines must be at least 21 years old, but an apprenticeship program required by Congress to help ease supply chain backlogs would let 18-to-20-year-old truckers drive outside their home states.

The pilot program, detailed in a proposed regulation from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, would screen the teens, barring any with driving-while-impaired violations or traffic tickets for causing a crash.

The American Trucking Association, a large industry trade group, supports the measure as a way to help with a shortage of drivers. The group estimates that the nation is running over 80,000 drivers short of the number it needs.

Dog saved from house damaged in landslide

WA SEATTLE — A dog named Sammy was rescued from a house that collapsed in a landslide in Seattle's Magnolia neighborhood.

The Seattle Fire Department said on Twitter that firefighters responded to reports of a dog possibly trapped inside the wreckage of the house. Veterinarians on scene examined the

black Labrador, who seemed alert and wagged her tail upon seeing homeowner Didi Fritts, video from the TV station showed.

On Jan. 7, a landslide caused the house to slide off its foundation, leaving James Fritts trapped inside, while wife Didi was able to crawl to safety. Firefighters extricated James Fritts. James and Didi Fritts sustained minor injuries.

Their other dog Lilly died in the collapse, The Seattle Times reported.

3 charged with beating airline security worker

NY NEW YORK — Three women face federal charges of attacking an airline security worker who tried to block them from boarding a flight at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport in September because of their allegedly problematic behavior, including a refusal to wear a face mask properly.

Prosecutors said the women had ordered a total of about nine alcoholic drinks in four hours at airport bars while waiting for a delayed departure to San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Sept. 22.

A Delta security officer and a gate agent approached the trio in the jetway and asked them to go back, saying they could get a flight later in the day, according to court papers.

They said the women refused, and one of them hit the security officer in the head with his two-way radio, another punched the gate agent in the face when the agent tried to intervene and the third stepped on the security officer's face as all three kicked and hit him after he fell to the floor.

— From wire reports



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Australia deports Djokovic after ruling

Associated Press

Instead of starting the defense of his Australian Open title on Monday, Novak Djokovic was on his way home, a stunning and unprecedented end to his run of success at Melbourne Park.

Djokovic has won nine of his 20 Grand Slam trophies at the Australian Open — including three in a row — and was scheduled to play in the main stadium to conclude Day 1 of the tournament.

But the No. 1-ranked player in men's tennis had to be deported from Australia after three Federal Court judges decided unanimously Sunday to affirm the immigration minister's right to cancel Djokovic's visa. The ruling was made less than 18 hours before the first Grand Slam matches of 2022 were scheduled to begin.

Djokovic said he was "extremely disappointed" by the legal outcome but respected the decision and would cooperate in his "departure from the country." He also said he planned "to rest and to recuperate."

The 34-year-old from Serbia was trying to use a medical exemption approved by two independent medical panels and Tennis Australia to get around the requirements that ev-

eryone at the Australian Open — players, their support teams, spectators and others — be inoculated against COVID-19.

Djokovic is not vaccinated, and the government said his presence could stir up anti-vaccine sentiments.

The saga started on Jan. 5, when Djokovic's flight landed at a Melbourne airport.

"I am uncomfortable that the focus of the past weeks has been on me," he said Sunday, "and I hope that we can all now focus on the game and tournament I love."

Tennis Australia issued a statement saying it "respects the decision of the Federal Court" and added: "We look forward to a competitive and exciting Australian Open 2022 and wish all players the best of luck."

Djokovic's absence means just one past champion is in the men's bracket: 2009 winner Rafael Nadal. And that also means now it is only Nadal who will have a chance to claim a 21st Grand Slam title and break a tie with Djokovic and Roger Federer (who is sidelined after a series of knee operations).

Djokovic's dominance in Grand Slam play of late has been particularly impressive, winning four of the last seven major tournaments and finishing as the runner-up at two others.

The only time he did not get at least to the final in that span was at the 2020 U.S. Open, where he was disqualified in the fourth round for hitting a ball that inadvertently hit a line judge in the throat after a game.

Last season, Djokovic went 27-1 at majors, coming within a victory in the U.S. Open final of becoming the first man since 1969 to win a calendar-year Grand Slam.

On Monday night, Djokovic was supposed to play Miomir Kecmanovic, a Serbian ranked 78th, at Rod Laver Arena, the main stadium.

Instead, Kecmanovic will head to a smaller arena to face 150th-ranked Salvatore Caruso of Italy, a so-called "lucky loser" — someone who loses in qualifying rounds but gets access to the main draw because someone else withdraws after the first day's schedule was released.

Third-seeded Alexander Zverev's opener against Daniel Altmaier was moved to Rod Laver Arena.

The Federal Court's decision was as polarizing as Djokovic's vaccination status in a city where residents spent more than 250 days in lockdown and faced harsh travel restrictions at the height of the coronavirus pandemic.

Oklahoma St. hands No. 1 Baylor 2nd loss in a week

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Bryce Thompson scored the game's final six points and finished with 19 as Oklahoma State beat No. 1 Baylor 61-54 on Saturday, giving the Bears consecutive home losses for the first time in nearly six years.

The Bears (15-2, 3-2 Big12) are likely to lose their spot at the top of the AP Top 25 this week.

LJ Cryer had 18 points for Baylor, which had won a national-best 21 games in a row before its loss Tuesday to Texas Tech.

Oregon 79, No. 5 Southern California 69: The Ducks knocked off a top-five team for the second time in two games behind Will Richardson's career-high 28 points.

Northwestern 64, No. 10 Michigan State 62: Ryan Young had 18 points and eight rebounds, helping the Wildcats hold on for their first road win over a top 10

team in nearly five years.

Mississippi State 78, No. 24 Alabama 76: Andersson Garcia made a free throw with 3.7 seconds left and Iverson Molinar had a game-high 24 points to help the host Bulldogs hold off the Tide.

No. 2 Gonzaga 115, Santa Clara 83: Drew Timme scored 32 points to lead the visiting Bulldogs to their 24th consecutive West Coast Conference victory.

No. 3 UCLA 81, Oregon State 65: At Los Angeles, Johnny Juzang scored 19 of his 24 points in the second half when the Bruins pulled away to beat the Beavers.

No. 4 Auburn 80, Mississippi 71: Walker Kessler scored 20 points and grabbed 10 rebounds, and the visiting Tigers rallied to beat the Rebels.

No. 6 Arizona 82, Utah 64: Azoulas Tubelis scored 32 points, Christian Koloko added 16 points, and the host Wildcats

dominated the Utes inside for the win.

No. 8 Duke 88, N.C. State 73: Mark Williams had 19 points, 11 rebounds and eight blocks as the host Blue Devils dominated inside with Hall of Fame coach Mike Krzyzewski back after missing a game due to illness.

No. 9 Kansas 85, West Virginia 59: David McCormack had 19 points and 15 rebounds as the Jayhawks overcame a sluggish start to rout the visiting Mountaineers.

No. 11 Houston 66, Tulsa 64: Kyler Edwards made seven three-pointers as part of his 29 points, and the visiting Cougars held off several rallies by the Golden Hurricanes for a narrow victory.

Arkansas 65, No. 12 LSU 58: At Baton Rouge, La., Jaylin Williams hit a tiebreaking three-pointer to send the Razorbacks to their first road win of the season.

No. 15 Iowa State 79, No. 21 Texas 70: Gabe Kalscheur scored 22 points, including six three-pointers, as the host Cyclones held on against the Longhorns.

No. 17 Xavier 80, Creighton 73: Colby Jones scored 14 of his 16 points in the second half as the host Musketeers rallied.

Kansas State 62, No. 19 Texas Tech 51: Nijel Pack scored 14 points and Mark Smith made a key three late as the host Wildcats ended a four-game losing streak.

No. 18 Kentucky 107, No. 22 Tennessee 79: Freshman TyTy Washington Jr. scored a career-high 28 points as the host Wildcats shot a season-high 68%.

Marquette 73, No. 20 Seton Hall 72: Greg Elliott made a tie-breaking free throw with 1.7 seconds left as the host Golden Eagles won for the fourth straight time.

Allen-led Bills rout division rival Pats

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — The lingering sting of being embarrassed on home turf by the New England Patriots didn't sit well with defensive end Jerry Hughes and the Buffalo Bills.

On Saturday night, the Bills did something about it by erasing any doubt of who now rules the AFC East.

Josh Allen set a team playoff record with five touchdown passes, including two to Dawson Knox, and Devin Singletary ran for two scores in the first half of a 47-17 throttling of the division-rival Patriots in a wild-card playoff game.

Meanwhile, Hughes was part of a defense that ended Mac Jones' rookie season by intercepting him twice, sacking him three times and limiting him to throwing two mean-nothing touchdown passes in the second half with the game well out of reach.

In defeating New England for the second time in three weeks, Hughes noted he was motivated by how reporters specifically questioned safeties Jordan Poyer and Micah Hyde as being embarrassed following a 14-10 loss on Dec. 6. It was a game in which the Patriots attempted just three passes while trampling Buffalo's defense with 222 yards rushing to counter wind gusts of 30-plus mph.

"There was a lot of disrespect coming toward our defense. And so we felt like the only way to shut people up is to go out there and

play football and let you guys sit and watch and talk," Hughes said. "And that's what we're doing right now, playing football."

The margin of defeat was the largest in the playoffs for New England in coach Bill Belichick's tenure, which began in 2000.

And while the winds were relatively calm Saturday, the Bills were hot in frigid conditions, with a game-time temperature of 7 degrees.

Allen finished 21-for-25 for 308 yards in a game Buffalo became the NFL's first team in the Super Bowl era to score on each of its seven possessions that didn't end with a kneeldown.

"That sounds like some Pop Warner stuff," defensive tackle Harrison Phillips said.

No need to remind Patriots linebacker Matthew Judon.

"Shoot, every drive we couldn't get a stop was frustrating," Judon said. "It wasn't only one play. It wasn't one, single player. It was everything. It was the whole game."

The Allen-led offense was so efficient it gained 480 yards offense on just 51 snaps before backup Mitchell Trubisky finished the game with three kneeldowns.

"I think we feel good," Allen said. "There's some things that we can clean up and work on. But at the end of the day, we moved on, we're on to the next one and it doesn't matter what we did today. It's what we do next week."

The third-seeded Bills advanced to the divisional round to host either the Cincinnati Bengals, who beat the Raiders earlier in the day, or travel to Kansas City, depending on the outcome of the Chiefs' game against Pittsburgh on Sunday. A trip to Kansas City would feature a rematch of last year's AFC championship game, which the Chiefs won 38-24.

The 30-point margin of victory and 47 points scored were the second most by Buffalo in a playoff game behind a 51-3 win over the Los Angeles Raiders in the AFC championship game on Jan. 20, 1991.

The game was essentially over at halftime, when the Bills gained 300 yards of total offense, had 19 first downs and built a 27-3 lead.

They rolled into the postseason by winning their final four games to clinch their second consecutive division title. After losing 35 of 40 meetings to New England from 2000 to 2019, Buffalo has now defeated the Patriots in four of the past five meetings, coinciding with Tom Brady's departure to Tampa Bay.

New England limped into the playoffs by losing three of its last four games, and was effectively outclassed in Jones' postseason debut.

"Get ready to go next year. There's nothing we can do now that can change the outcome of what happened tonight or whatever, the last, since December," center David Andrews said. "It's frustrating. It's disappointing. Missed opportunity. It's fleeting."

Bengals hold off Raiders, end 31-year playoff slump

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Paul Brown Stadium nearly shook in triumph. The city of Cincinnati might have, too.

Its latest hero, Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow, merely seemed to shrug after leading his team to its first playoff victory in 31 years, 26-19 over Las Vegas on Saturday in an AFC wild-card game.

"It's exciting for the city, for the state, but we are not going to dwell on that, we are moving forward," said Burrow, who threw two touchdown passes. "This is expected, this isn't like the icing on top of the cake, this is the cake. So we are moving on."

Burrow led an efficient offense that scored on six drives, Evan McPherson became the first rookie to make four field goals without a miss in a postseason debut, and Germaine Pratt sealed it with a fourth-down interception in the dying seconds.

It was a victory three decades in the making for the Bengals (11-7). After going from worst to first in the AFC North with a generally young roster, they ended that embarrassingly long postseason drought that included eight consecutive defeats.

Their next opponent will depend on results in the other two AFC wild-card games this weekend.

"It's going to be fun tomorrow to watch the games knowing we have the win," said Burrow, the top overall selection in the 2020 draft who led the NFL in completion percentage this season. He went 24 for 34 for 244 yards Saturday.

Helped by some problematic officiating by Jerome Boger's crew that might have allowed Burrow's touchdown pass to Tyler Boyd to count when it shouldn't have, the Bengals also extended a lengthy postseason drought for the Raiders (10-8). Las Vegas, which won its final four games to squeeze into the playoffs, last won in the postseason in the 2002 AFC championship game.

Cincinnati made it 4 for 4 on scoring drives late in the first half, though with some controversy. Burrow rolled right to avoid pressure and threw from close to the sideline. Play continued despite an erroneous whistle by an official, who thought Burrow stepped out of bounds. Boyd caught the 10-yard pass in the back of the end zone for a 20-6 lead. The play counted, to protests from the Raiders, who cited the rule that the ball should be returned to the previous spot.

And Las Vegas lost by seven points.

"We just ran out of time today," said interim coach Rich Bisaccia.

Bruins, Hall slip past Predators in OT

Associated Press

BOSTON — Taylor Hall scored off a rebound of David Pastrnak's shot 1:41 into overtime, lifting the Boston Bruins to a 4-3 win over the Western Conference-leading Nashville Predators on Saturday for their fifth straight win.

Pastrnak took a shot from the right circle and the puck slipped behind Saros, where Hall poked it in for the game-winner.

Brad Marchand, Craig Smith and Mike Reilly also scored for the Bruins, who are 8-1 since New Year's Day. Linus Ullmark made 26 saves.

Colton Sissons, Luke Kunin and Ramon Josi each had a goal for Nashville, which has only lost three times in regulation in its last 18 games (13-3-2). Juuse Saros made 40 saves for the Predators.

Capitals 2, Islanders 0: Tom Wilson scored early, Alex Ovechkin added an empty-net goal late, and Vitek Vanecek made 23 saves to lead Washington to a win at New York.

Vanecek picked up his seventh win of the season and his third career shutout as the Capitals snapped a four-game skid (0-2-2).

Hurricanes 4, Canucks 1: Martin Necas had a goal and an assist on his 23rd birthday and host Carolina stopped a two-game skid.

Vincent Trocheck also had a goal and an assist for the Hurricanes, who regained their scoring touch after being shut out for the first time this season two nights earlier. Sebastian Aho and Steven Lorentz had the other Carolina goals and Andrei Svechnikov posted two assists. Frederik Andersen made 30 saves.

Rangers 3, Flyers 2: Chris Kreider scored with 6:30 left, fellow All-Star Adam Fox had two assists and visiting New York beat slumping Philadelphia.

Panthers 9, Blue Jackets 2: Carter Verhaeghe and Anton Lundell each scored twice, MacKenzie Weegar tied a career-best with four points and NHL-leading Florida scored early and often over visiting Columbus.

Red Wings 4, Sabres 0: Tyler Bertuzzi had a goal and two assists, and Alex Nedeljkovic stopped 22 shots for his fourth career shutout as host Detroit snapped a four-game losing streak.

Lightning 3, Stars 1: Ross Colton had the tiebreaking goal on a breakaway midway through the third period, Andrei Vasilevskiy

stopped 19 shots, and Tampa Bay handed Dallas its seventh consecutive road loss.

Maple Leafs 6, Blues 5: Ilya Mikheyev scored the go-ahead goal with 3:15 remaining to lifting Toronto to a win at St. Louis.

Blackhawks 3, Ducks 0: Marc-André Fleury stopped 37 shots for his third shutout of the season and host Chicago won its fourth straight.

Avalanche 5, Coyotes 0: Mikko Rantanen and Nathan MacKinnon scored two goals each, Darcy Kuemper had 20 saves for his first shutout of the season, and visiting Colorado improved to 7-0-1 in its last eight games.

Penguins 2, Sharks 1 (OT): Jake Guentzel scored 37 seconds into overtime, Luis Domingue had 40 saves in his season debut and Pittsburgh won at San Jose.

Kings 3, Kraken 1: Adrian Kempe scored his 17th goal of the season early in the first period, Phillip Danault scored twice and visiting Los Angeles won its fourth straight.

Senators 6, Oilers 4: Josh Norris scored twice, including the tiebreaking goal as Ottawa tallied five times in the third period to rally to a win at Edmonton.

Jokic triple-double rallies Nuggets past Lakers

Associated Press

DENVER — Nikola Jokic had 17 points, 13 assists and 12 rebounds for his eighth triple-double of the season and the Denver Nuggets routed the Los Angeles Lakers 133-96 on Saturday.

Rookie Bones Hyland had career highs of 27 points and 10 rebounds, and Jeff Green scored a season-high 26 points in the Nuggets' second straight blowout victory.

The Lakers have lost three straight after winning four in a row. LeBron James had 24 points and nine rebounds, but made just 9 of 23 field goals.

Jokic notched the 65th triple-double of his career just 2:10 into the second half and sat out the final 14 minutes.

Nets 120, Pelicans 105: James Harden had 27 points, 15 assists and eight rebounds, and host Brooklyn routed New Orleans despite losing Kevin Du-

rant in the first half to a left knee sprain.

Durant was hurt with 5:44 left in the second quarter when Pelicans forward Herbert Jones was driving down the court and crashed into Nets backup guard Bruce Brown, who fell backward into Durant's knee.

Durant briefly limped around the court before asking to be taken out of the game. He finished with the 12 points and was walking with a limp when he left the arena midway through the fourth quarter. Coach Steve Nash said Durant he will have an MRI exam Sunday.

Raptors 103, Bucks 96: Pascal Siakam had 30 points, 10 assists and 10 rebounds for his second career triple-double and Toronto overcame an early 15-point deficit to win at cold-shooting Milwaukee.

OG Anunoby added 24 points to help the Raptors improve to

3-0 this season against the defending champion Bucks, who shot a season-low 33.8%. Toronto has won five straight in the series.

Celtics 114, Bulls 112: Robert Williams hit a pair of free throws with 9.7 seconds left and host Boston scored the final eight points to edge Chicago.

Williams, who tied it at 112 with two foul shots with 31 seconds to go, finished with 14 points and 13 rebounds. The Celtics rallied after trailing 112-106 with 1:57 to play.

76ers 109, Heat 98: Joel Embiid scored 25 of his 32 points in the second half and Philadelphia won at Miami.

Knicks 117, Hawks 108: RJ Barrett scored 26 points, Julius Randle added 24 and visiting New York beat Atlanta for its third straight victory.

The Knicks improved to 22-21, the first time they've been over .500 since Dec. 2. They have won

five of six, but began the night in 10th place in the Eastern Conference.

Cavaliers 106, Thunder 102: Darius Garland had 27 points and a career-high 18 assists and visiting Cleveland overcame an 18-point deficit to beat Oklahoma City for its fourth straight victory.

Mavericks 108, Magic 92: Kristaps Porzingis scored 12 of his 19 points in the first quarter of his first game in two weeks, and host Dallas cruised past Orlando.

Trail Blazers 115, Wizards 110: Anfernee Simons scored 31 points and tied a career high with 11 assists, Jusuf Nurkic had 23 points and 14 rebounds and Portland won at Washington.

Spurs 101, Clippers 94: Derrick White had 19 points in his return from a five-game absence, Dejounte Murray added 18 points and host San Antonio beat Los Angeles to snap a five-game skid.