

Baltic nations sending arms to Ukraine

Associated Press

HELSINKI — The Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will send U.S.-made anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine in a move that Washington says it is fully endorsing amid Kyiv's escalating tensions with Russia.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a tweet posted on Saturday that Washington saluted the three Baltic NATO nations and former Soviet republics "for their longstanding support to Ukraine."

"I expedited and authorized and we fully endorse transfers of defensive equipment @NATO Allies Estonia Latvia Lithuania are providing to Ukraine to strengthen its ability to defend itself against Russia's unprovoked and irresponsible aggression," Blinken said in another tweet.

Dmitry Peskov, spokesperson for Russian President Vladimir Putin, last week described western arms supplies to Ukraine as extremely dangerous and said they "do nothing to reduce tensions."

Moscow has massed tens of thousands of troops at the border with Ukraine, leading to fears of an invasion. The West has rejected Moscow's main demands — promises from NATO that Ukraine will never be added as a member, that no alliance weapons

will be deployed near Russian borders, and that it will pull back its forces from Central and Eastern Europe.

A meeting Friday between Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov ended with no breakthrough.

In a joint statement published late Friday, the defense ministers of the three Baltic states said they "stand united in our commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in face of continued Russian aggression."

They said Estonia would provide Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank weapons while Latvia and Lithuania were sending Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and other related equipment to bolster Kyiv's defensive military capabilities.

"Today Ukraine is at the forefront of separating Europe from the military conflict with Russia. Let's face it — the war in Ukraine is ongoing and it is important to support Ukraine in every way we can so that they can resist the aggressor," Minister of Defense of Estonia Kalle Laanet said.

It wasn't immediately clear when the weapons and equipment would be sent to Ukraine.

In a separate development, Estonia is seeking Germany's approval to send Soviet-

made howitzers, which once belonged to East Germany, to Ukraine. Estonia acquired the howitzers from non-NATO member Finland, which in turn had bought them from Germany's military surplus supply in the 1990s.

The German government said Friday that it was considering Estonia's request to pass the howitzers on to Ukraine but gave no timeline for a decision. Berlin said it planned to coordinate the issue with Finland, which has received a similar approval request from Estonia.

Some recent media reports suggested German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Cabinet has blocked Estonia's transfer of weapons to Kyiv, pointing to strains in the West's response to the Ukraine crisis.

Meanwhile, Russia has further upped the ante by announcing more military drills in the region. It also has refused to rule out the possibility of military deployments to the Caribbean, and Putin has reached out to leaders opposed to the West.

Putin has described NATO membership for Ukraine and the others as well as the alliance's weapons deployments there as a red line for Moscow, warning that he would order unspecified "military-technical measures" if the demands aren't met.

Truman strike group to participate in NATO exercise

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group will participate in a NATO exercise in the Mediterranean Sea starting Monday amid simmering tensions over Russia amassing troops along its border with Ukraine, the Pentagon's chief spokesman said Friday.

Neither John Kirby nor Navy officials would specify what elements of the strike group would participate alongside the aircraft carrier, though the ship was operating last month with the guided-missile destroyers USS Banbridge, USS Cole, USS Gravelly and USS Jason Dunham, according to a Dec. 23 service statement.

"[The exercise is] designed to demon-

strate NATO's ability to integrate the highest maritime strike capabilities of an aircraft carrier strike group to support the deterrence and defense of the alliance," Kirby said during a news briefing at the Pentagon.

Though it comes at a time when NATO-Russian tensions are running high as Russia has deployed thousands of troops along its border with Ukraine, Kirby said NATO allies have been planning the exercise, dubbed Neptune Strike 2022, for about two years.

"It wasn't planned back in 2020 anticipating a Russian move on Ukraine and ... the exercise itself is not designed against the kinds of scenarios that that might happen with respect to Ukraine," he said.

Still, Kirby did not say why NATO mem-

bers decided to continue with the exercise given the tensions with Russia.

"We constantly look at exercises and training and ask ourselves ... do we really need to do it now? Should we speed it up? Should we shorten it?" he said. "There was due consideration given about tensions right now about our exercise posture and after all that consideration and discussion with our NATO allies, the decision was made to move ahead."

The strike group will operate under NATO's control during the exercise, which will run through Feb. 4, Kirby said. Militaries from other NATO members will join the U.S. during Neptune Strike, though Kirby declined to specify what other nations will participate.

Judge blocks federal vaccine mandate

The Washington Post

A federal judge in Texas has blocked another of the Biden administration's vaccine requirements as the political war over coronavirus prevention measures shows no sign of abating.

U.S. District Judge Jeffrey Vincent Brown, nominated in 2019 to the federal bench by President Donald Trump, said that the Biden administration's vaccine mandate for federal workers and contractors constituted an overreach of executive authority.

"What is that limit? As the court has already noted, Congress appears . . . to have

limited the President's authority in this field to workplace conduct," Brown wrote in his opinion, adding, "For its part, this court will say only this: However extensive that power is, the federal-worker mandate exceeds it."

The ruling amounted to another blow to the administration's most ambitious public health measures — its work to corral the pandemic through vaccinations — and it is only the latest measure to be invalidated by the actions of appointees of Trump and other Republicans.

But it is probably not the final word. The Justice Department filed an appeal to the

ruling, and the case could be heard by the Supreme Court.

The requirement was expected to apply to more than 3 million federal employees and at least 4 million federal contractors. It included the military but not Postal Service workers.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Friday that 98% of federal workers were already vaccinated. That figure includes workers who have received or requested exemptions from the vaccine, government officials later pointed out.

"Obviously, we are confident in our legal authority here," Psaki said.

SDF clash with ISIS near prison in Syria

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Kurdish-led fighters advanced slowly Saturday under the cover of U.S.-led coalition air power in Syria's northeast. Intense clashes with Islamic State militants took place around a prison where thousands of extremists were held, officials said.

Fighting broke out Thursday night when ISIS unleashed its biggest attack in Syria since the fall of its "caliphate" three years ago. More than 100 militants assaulted the main prison holding suspected extremists in the northeastern city of Hassakeh, sparking a battle with U.S.-backed Kurdish fight-

ers that has so far left dozens dead.

The U.S.-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces brought more reinforcements into Hassakeh in an attempt to regain control of areas taken by ISIS, residents said. More civilians fled the areas of fighting as sounds of explosions echoed in the city and black smoke billowed from the Gweiran Prison area on the southern edge of Hassakeh.

"The battles are taking place on the edge of the prison," SDF spokesman Siamand Ali told The Associated Press, adding that most of the prison is under their control apart from a small part that is held by rioting pris-

oners. He added that fighting is also ongoing in the nearby Zuhour neighborhood, where ISIS fighters were holed up.

Ali said SDF fighters and U.S.-led coalition aircraft targeted a technical academy building where dozens of "Daesh terrorists took positions." Ali, who used an Arabic acronym to refer to ISIS, said SDF fighters are advancing slowly in order to protect the lives of civilians as ISIS gunmen are holed up in alleys and in residential homes.

Ali said some 45 ISIS gunmen were killed in the fighting, adding that a statement will be issued later about the casualties among SDF fighters.

More troops set to aid hospitals in 8 US states

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

About 220 medical troops are set to deploy in the coming days to hospitals in eight states to aid staffs overburdened by the recent surge in coronavirus cases across the United States, military officials announced Friday.

The deployments of teams of doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists includes about 120 active-duty troops announced earlier this month by President Joe Biden and another 100 announced Friday by U.S. Army North. The troops from the Army, Navy and Air Force will deploy to medical fa-

cilities in Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Texas, Army officials said.

The new wave of deployments will boost the number of active-duty troops aiding U.S. hospitals to about 400, according to Army North. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin last month approved the military to deploy up to 1,000 new medical troops into U.S. hospitals, if requested by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"As our support to FEMA and the whole-of-government response to the pandemic expands due to a surge in hospitalizations, we are committed to working alongside our

civilian medical partners to assist hard-hit states and communities in need," said Lt. Gen. John Evans, the U.S. Army North commander. "Whether military or civilian, we are in this fight together."

Pentagon officials have declined to say how long the troops were expected to deploy. John Kirby, the Defense Department's top spokesman, said earlier this month that they would not be "open-ended" deployments but end dates have yet to be determined.

"We don't think that they will last an inordinate amount of time," Kirby told reporters Jan. 13.

Jan. 6 panel obtains Trump records

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The National Archives and Records Administration has provided a House committee with more than 700 pages of presidential documents after the Supreme Court rejected a bid by former President Donald Trump to block the release.

The House panel investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection received the documents Thursday evening, according to a person familiar with the handover who requested anonymity to discuss it. The Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that the archives could turn over the documents, which include presidential diaries, visitor

logs, speech drafts and handwritten notes dealing with Jan. 6 from the files of former chief of staff Mark Meadows.

Trump's lawyers had hoped to prolong the court fight and keep the documents on hold.

The documents, which the panel first requested in August, will add to the tens of thousands the committee has already gathered as it investigates the attack by a violent mob of Trump's supporters and what the former president and his aides were doing while it unfolded. The panel has done around 350 interviews and plans a series of hearings and reports this year as it seeks to compile the most comprehensive account-

ing yet of the insurrection.

Trump's lawsuit to block the release was one of several attempts to obstruct the committee's work as he and his allies have downplayed the attack. Hundreds of Trump's supporters violently pushed past police and broke through windows and doors of the Capitol, interrupting the certification of President Joe Biden's victory.

As the sitting president, Biden approved the release of most of the records. But the White House did ask the panel to defer some of its requests, citing national security and executive privilege concerns designed to protect the office of the presidency.

4 NYC police officers shot in 4 days

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A New York City police officer was killed and another critically wounded Friday night while answering a call about an argument between a woman and her adult son, officials said, making four officers shot in the city in as many days.

Just three weeks into their jobs, Mayor Eric Adams — a former police captain himself — and Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell stood before the media at a Harlem hospital, denouncing the spate of violence against the New York Police Department.

"Countless officers lined this hallway af-

ter carrying him in and grieve for their brother while praying with everything they have for the other" officer, Sewell said. "I am struggling to find the words to express the tragedy we are enduring. We're mourning, and we're angry."

Adams said, "This was just not an attack on these brave officers. This was an attack on the city of New York."

Adams called for federal authorities to do more to round up stolen guns like the one used in Friday's shooting inside a Harlem apartment.

"There are no gun manufacturers in New York City," he said. "We don't make guns

here. How are we removing thousands of guns off the street and they still find their way into New York City, in the hands of people who are killers?"

The officer who was killed was identified as Jason Rivera, 22, who joined the force in November 2020, and the wounded officer as Wilbert Mora, 27, who's been with the NYPD for four years.

Friday night's shooting came three nights after an officer was wounded in the leg in the Bronx during a struggle with a teenager who also shot himself. On Thursday, a narcotics detective was shot in the leg on Staten Island.

FBI: Laundrie admitted to killing in notebook

Associated Press

FORT COLLINS, Colo. — The boyfriend of slain cross-country traveler Gabby Petito admitted killing her in a notebook discovered near his body in a Florida swamp, the FBI announced Friday.

It was the first time authorities squarely pinned the blame for Petito's death on Brian Laundrie, though he was the prime suspect all along.

Investigators meanwhile announced that Laundrie, 23, had sent text messages to intentionally deceive people that Petito, 22, was still alive after he beat and strangled her in late August, according to a statement released by the FBI in Denver.

"All logical investigative steps have been concluded in this case," FBI Denver Division

Special Agent in Charge Michael Schneider said in the statement. "The investigation did not identify any other individuals other than Brian Laundrie directly involved in the tragic death of Gabby Petito."

Petito's body was found Sept. 19 at a campground near Grand Teton National Park in northwestern Wyoming. A coroner determined she'd died about three weeks earlier of "blunt-force injuries to the head and neck, with manual strangulation."

Laundrie returned home to Florida in early September but went missing soon after. In October, his parents found an item belonging to him in a nature preserve near their house.

Further searching turned up Laundrie's remains, a revolver, backpack and the notebook. Medical examiners determined Laundrie

died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The FBI did not specify what, exactly, Laundrie had written in the notebook and in the texts he'd sent to mislead. The texts were sent between Laundrie's phone and Petito's phone, according to the statement.

"The timing and content of these messages are indicative of Mr. Laundrie attempting to deceive law enforcement by giving the impression that Ms. Petito was still alive," the statement said.

Grand Teton was the last place the couple visited during a cross-country van trip last summer that ended with Laundrie mysteriously returning home alone in the vehicle. Laundrie and Petito grew up on Long Island, N.Y., but were living in Florida in recent years.

Mom: Teachers manipulated girl over gender

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A mother who claims teachers secretly manipulated her 11-year-old daughter into changing her gender identity and name has filed a legal case against a tiny California school district.

Spreckels Union School District was responsible for “extreme and outrageous conduct” that led the student on a path toward transitioning as a boy and drove a wedge between mother and child, according to the claim filed Wednesday by a conservative legal group.

Jessica Konen said two middle school teachers who ran the school’s Equality Club — later known as UBU (You Be You) — planted the seed that her daughter was bisexual in 6th grade and then introduced the idea she was transgender.

The legal claim — a precursor to a lawsuit — follows a dustup in the district last fall after the author of a book widely criticized as “anti-transgender” quoted the two teachers speaking at a conference about how to run an LGBTQ+ club in a conservative community.

Spreckels is a speck of a town in the agricultural Salinas Valley, about 90 miles south of San Francisco. It was once home to the

world’s largest sugar refinery and was the setting for some scenes in the 1955 film based on John Steinbeck’s “East of Eden.”

While Konen said her daughter had revealed she was bisexual, the mother was unaware she was identifying as a boy until she was called to a meeting at the Buena Vista Middle School principal’s office in December 2019 when her daughter was in 7th grade.

She wasn’t told the purpose of the meeting until her daughter entered the room and sat across a table from her and teacher Lori Caldeira broke the news.

“I literally was caught off guard. I was blindsided,” Konen said. “I didn’t even know what to feel like because I didn’t even know where it came from.”

Konen said she began to cry.

She said her daughter was also caught by surprise. She had told teachers she wanted to notify her mom, but didn’t know they set the meeting up that day.

Konen said she gave the school permission to use a boy’s name for attendance purposes and tried to be supportive, but it was difficult.

When schools went to remote learning during the pandemic in March 2020, Konen

said her daughter began returning to her “old self” and now uses her given name.

But it wasn’t until this fall that Konen began to question how her daughter got on the path to a different identity after the article by Abigail Shrier circulated around town.

In a leaked recording from a California Teachers Association conference, Caldeira and Kelly Baraki were quoted discussing how they kept meetings private and “stalked” students online for recruits.

“When we were doing our virtual learning — we totally stalked what they were doing on Google, when they weren’t doing school work,” Baraki said. “One of them was googling ‘Trans Day of Visibility.’ And we’re like, ‘Check.’ We’re going to invite that kid when we get back on campus.”

Neither Caldeira nor Baraki could be reached by The Associated Press for comment. Caldeira told the San Francisco Chronicle the quotes were accurate but taken out of context or misrepresented. The stalking comment was a joke, she said.

Caldeira, who has been awarded as a role model for inclusion, defended their work, saying students set the agenda and the teachers were there to provide honest and fair answers to their questions.

Fire near Big Sur forces evacuations

Associated Press

BIG SUR, Calif. — A wind-driven wildfire broke out late Friday in the rugged mountains above Big Sur, forcing residents to evacuate from their homes and authorities to shut down a stretch of Pacific Coast Highway.

The fire started in a canyon and was pushed by 35 mph winds to the sea, jumping the highway and burning on the west side. It burned at least 2.3 square miles and was 5% contained, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said Saturday.

The Monterey County Sheriff’s office ordered evacuations in the Palo Colorado Canyon around 9:30 p.m. and shut down an iconic stretch of the twisting Highway 1.

Strong winds were recorded in higher elevations across the San Francisco Bay Area overnight.

The National Weather Service said a similar windy event happened nearly a year ago on Jan. 18. A red flag warning of extreme fire danger was issued then due to the strong winds and much drier conditions.

Coastal areas from South Carolina to Virginia hit with snow and ice

Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. — A layer of ice and a blanket of snow covered coastal areas stretching from South Carolina to Virginia early Saturday after a winter weather system brought colder temperatures and precipitation not often seen in the region.

Authorities urged drivers to stay off the roads and highways, which forecasters said are slick and snow-packed in the storm’s aftermath.

They also warned of black ice.

Temperatures were cold for the Southeast states.

Meteorologists said they likely won’t rise above the 30s in Virginia and much of North Carolina during the day and will drop into the 20s and even teens in some places on Saturday night.

By about 7 a.m. Saturday, the storm had mostly blown off the Atlantic Coast, leaving as much as six inches of snow in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, meteorologists said.

“The snow has stopped, the sun is up, temps remain below freezing and roads remain hazardous to motorists. Stay home and avoid travel today,” the Virginia Department of Transportation tweeted on Saturday morning.

Further south, there was ice in parts of coastal North Carolina, which stretched along much of the South Carolina coast as well, although in much smaller amounts.

“There was basically a glaze reported as far south as Charleston,” said Carl Morgan, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Wilmington. “We’re talking less than a 10th of an inch of freezing rain.”

The snowfall in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina mirrored the forecast of 4 to 6 inches, said Mike Montefusco, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Wakefield, Va.

He said Saturday’s cold temperatures would keep the snow from melting at least until Sunday, when temperatures were expected to reach the 40s.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Batman-theme alert transmitted by mistake

MO JEFFERSON CITY — The Missouri State Highway Patrol alert sent cellphones blaring statewide: Authorities in Gotham City, Mo., were searching for a purple and green 1978 Dodge 3700GT.

But there is no Gotham City, Mo., and the car referenced was the one used by the Joker in the 1989 “Batman” movie. Soon after, the patrol sent another saying to disregard it.

The patrol said a routine test of Missouri’s Blue Alert system was inadvertently transmitted statewide.

The system is meant to let the public know when a police officer is killed or seriously injured in the line of duty.

Girl Scouts hoping to save old cabin

IA CRESTON — A group of Girl Scouts tied to a southwestern Iowa cabin since it was built nearly 100 years ago is hoping to save the building from being demolished.

Creston’s Parks and Recreation Board is threatening to raze the cabin that sits in the city’s McKinley Park if the structure isn’t restored by spring, television station WHO 13 reported.

The water main supplying the cabin is made of clay, said Audrey Wright, the Union County Girl Scout service unit manager, and the city is requiring it to be replaced for water service to continue to the cabin. The cabin’s walls have also begun to crumble as it has sat empty for nearly two years since the CO-

VID-19 pandemic began, and snow has been piling up inside the building.

A Facebook page titled “Save the Girl Scout Cabin at McKinley Park” is soliciting donations to repair the cabin.

Bar worker pins man with gun to round

NH EXETER — A bar employee helped stop a “dangerous and frightening situation” by pinning a man to the ground after he threatened people in the business with a loaded gun, police in New Hampshire said.

Police said the man, 49, from East Kingston has been charged with four counts of criminal threatening with a deadly weapon.

Witnesses told police the man entered the Shooters Pub in Exeter just before closing on Jan. 14 and said he was looking for his credit card. An employee said she didn’t have it.

Others in the bar began laughing about something else, witnesses said. The man said if they thought the situation was so funny, then he was going to get his gun.

An employee pushed the door into the man and shoved him, witnesses said. The two men and the gun fell to the floor. Police found the man pinned down by an employee.

Man gets 15 years for posting bomb guides

FL MIAMI — A South Florida man has been sentenced to 15 years in prison for posting bomb-making instructions on the internet for people who he believed were Is-

lamic terrorists.

Samuel Baptiste, 29, was sentenced in Miami federal court, according to court records. He pleaded guilty in October to attempting to provide material support to terrorists.

According to an indictment, Baptiste posted documents online in November 2016 that included “Instructions: How to Make a Homemade Pipe Bomb,” “Pipe Bombs,” “Improvised Explosive Devices” and “Improvised Munitions Black Book, Volume 1.”

Prosecutors said Baptiste posted the information for people who he believed were acting on behalf of Islamic State.

Ballpark deaths labeled suicide, homicide

CA SAN DIEGO — San Diego police have determined the causes of death of a 40-year-old woman and her 2-year-old son who plunged from the third level of San Diego’s Petco Park, just as thousands of baseball fans were heading inside for a Padres game last year.

Raquel Wilkins’ death on Sept. 25, has been classified as a suicide, and her son Denzel Browning-Wilkins’ death has been classified as a homicide, the San Diego Police Department said.

Dan Gilleon, an attorney for Wilkins’ family, disputed the findings, saying the deaths were a tragic accident.

Ex-Chick-fil-A workers get prison in fraud case

AL BIRMINGHAM — Two former Alabama Chick-fil-A employees have been sentenced to prison for

their roles in a scheme to steal nearly \$500,000 from the Georgia-based fast-food firm, according to a statement from the U.S. Department of Justice.

A plea agreement states that the two devised a scheme to divert \$492,000 in customer payments away from the Chick-fil-A in the city’s Five Points South neighborhood and direct them instead to bank accounts under their control.

The men used fraudulent email and digital payment accounts that looked like official Chick-fil-A accounts, prosecutors said.

Larry James Black, Jr., 37, of Center Point, Ala., was sentenced to 30 months in prison after pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud.

Joshua Daniel Powell, 40, of Moody, Ala., was sentenced to 15 months in prison. Powell had pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud.

Man lying on road run over by police SUV, dies

CO AURORA — A man who was lying on a road in a Denver suburb died after he was run over by a police vehicle, authorities said.

The man, 37, from Salt Lake City was hit by an Aurora Police Department officer driving a fully marked police SUV, the Colorado State Patrol said in a statement.

The unidentified man, who was pronounced dead at the scene, had been wearing dark clothes and was seen drunk at a nearby store before he was run over, according to a statement from the state patrol.

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Brady, Bucs get another shot at Rams

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Tom Brady and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers are excited about another opportunity to face a regular-season nemesis in the playoffs.

The defending Super Bowl champions host the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC divisional round Sunday, looking to avenge a pair of losses to the only team they've played but yet to beat since Brady joined the Bucs in 2020.

The New Orleans Saints have been Brady's biggest nemesis the past two seasons. However, the Rams have been tough on the 44-year-old quarterback, too.

Brady is 2-0 in postseason rematches against opponents who defeated Tampa Bay during the regular season, beating the Saints on the road in last year's playoffs before taking down Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl.

Now, the Rams (13-5) stand between the Bucs (14-4) and another trip to the NFC cham-

pionship game.

"I think all of these games are little bit independent from one another. Yeah, we played them earlier in the year, but it's a very different team we had, and I think a little bit of a different team they had, too, so they are each their own individual type of game," Brady said of Tampa Bay's recent success in the playoffs against opponents that beat them earlier in the season.

"The point is it doesn't really matter what happened ... when we played them last. It's really about this game and what we learned from the last game," he added. "Any time you know your opponent, I think that gives you a little bit of understanding of kind of what they do well, things you wish you would've done. But it's a very talented football team, one of the great teams in the NFL. ... It's going to be a very, very difficult game for us."

The Bucs are 29-9, including 5-0 in the playoffs, since Brady's arrival. The Saints and

Rams have handed them six of those losses.

The eventual division winners met in Week 3 in Los Angeles, with the Rams getting off to a fast start en route to a 34-24 victory. Brady attempted 55 passes and threw for 432 yards but just one touchdown in that game. He was also Tampa Bay's leading rusher with 14 yards that day. That's never a good sign for the Bucs.

Los Angeles cornerback Jalen Ramsey noted a lot has changed since, ranging from the Bucs having a different look due to injuries and the Rams adding Odell Beckham Jr. on offense and Von Miller on defense.

"That was a while ago. Different people have stepped up for each team ... and a lot more is on the line right now," Ramsey said.

What hasn't changed is what the Rams feel they have to do to win.

In addition to another strong performance from quarterback

Matthew Stafford, who got the first postseason win of his 13-year career last week, Los Angeles feels it's imperative that the Aaron Donald-led pass rush have a big game, too.

"Seems like Week 3 was an eternity ago now," coach Sean McVay said, adding the Rams embrace the challenge of facing Brady and the defending champs.

"It's a great opportunity. ... I'm hoping that we continue to earn more opportunities," Stafford said. "That's the goal at this point — find ways to win games, no matter what it looks like."

Looking back

This is the third playoff meeting between the Bucs and Rams, who faced each other in low-scoring NFC championship games played after the 1979 and 1999 seasons. The Rams won both times, prevailing 9-0 in Tampa on Jan. 6, 1980, and 11-6 in St. Louis on Jan. 23, 2000.

Bills face Chiefs in rematch of AFC championship

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Stefon Diggs walked off the field inside Arrowhead Stadium back in October with two very distinct feelings: elation that his Bills had avenged an AFC title game loss to the Chiefs and the conviction that they would meet again.

Get ready for the latest throwdown between two of the league's best teams Sunday night.

Fresh off a near-perfect 47-17 blowout of New England last weekend, Diggs and the Bills are headed back to Kansas City for the divisional round of the playoffs. And awaiting them are Patrick Mahomes and the high-flying Chiefs, who turned around their season after a lackluster start and then throttled

Pittsburgh 42-21 in their wildcard matchup.

"They've got all the talent in the world," Diggs said. "They've been playing at a high level. They've been to the Super Bowl twice. They have a hell of a quarterback, hell of receivers, good defense — they're a great team."

Turns out he wasn't the only one that anticipated another showdown, either.

"We'll probably play them a lot of times. It'll be great competition," Mahomes said, "and it's definitely going to be a great challenge for us as a team to compete with them."

Indeed, it's difficult to find a game with more star power than this one.

Josh Allen threw five TD pas-

ses against the Patriots to set a Bills playoff record, while Diggs and resurgent running back Devin Singletary give him plenty of playmakers. On the other side, the Buffalo defense featuring All-Pro safety Jordan Poyer and running mate Micah Hyde led the league in just about every meaningful statistical category.

Buffalo, which has lost eight consecutive playoff games away from home, scored on each of its first seven drives against the Patriots and became the first NFL team to finish a playoff game with no punts, field goals or turnovers.

"It's tough to have a perfect game," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said, "and they did a nice job with it last week."

As for the Chiefs? Well,

they've merely won their past five playoff games at Arrowhead Stadium.

Mahomes became the first player to throw for at least 400 yards and five touchdowns with fewer than 10 incompletions in the postseason in last week's romp past Pittsburgh. His familiar targets, Travis Kelce and Tyreek Hill, did most of the work while the suddenly stout Kansas City defense held the Steelers to 44 yards in the first half.

Throw in the fact that both teams are intimately familiar with each other — Bills coach Sean McDermott even spent most of his formative years working for Reid in Philadelphia — and the stage is set for a riveting matchup.

Curry buzzer-beater lifts Warriors to win

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Stephen Curry hit a game-winning 20-foot jumper from the top of the key to beat the final buzzer, scoring 22 points and sending the Golden State Warriors past the Houston Rockets 105-103 on Friday night.

The sellout crowd went into a frenzy, confetti fell and Curry pumped his arms while dancing at midcourt — exhaling after he had missed two three-pointers in the final 1:48. It was the first buzzer-beating winning shot of Curry's career.

Curry overcame a slow start to lift the tired, mentally spent Warriors back up from an ugly loss to Indiana a night earlier. He also dished out 12 assists.

Christian Wood had 12 of his 19 points in the first quarter and grabbed 15 rebounds and Kevin Porter Jr. scored 17 points for Houston, which wrapped up a five-game road trip.

Nets 117, Spurs 102:

James Harden had 37 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds, spoiling Dejounte Murray's ninth triple-double of the season as visiting Brooklyn overpowered

San Antonio.

Murray had 25 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for his second straight triple-double and 13th of his career, one shy of David Robinson's franchise record. Harden's triple-double was his 66th, which is eighth on the all-time list.

Kyrie Irving scored 24 points and LaMarcus Aldridge added 16 for the Nets, who are missing star Kevin Durant because of a knee injury.

Lakers 116, Magic 105: At Orlando, Fla., LeBron James scored 29 points and played exclusively at center in the second half as Los Angeles rallied from an eight-point halftime deficit.

Los Angeles coach Frank Vogel replaced starting center Dwight Howard with James to start the second half, and the Lakers opened the third quarter on a 20-2 run. They outscored Orlando 31-16 in the third, making 13 of 23 shots and 5 of 8 three-pointers in the frame.

Bucks 94, Bulls 90: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 30 points and 12 rebounds to help the host Bucks overcome Grayson Allen's ejection.

Chicago's DeMar DeRozan scored 35 points, but missed a three-pointer that would have put the Bulls ahead with 23 seconds left. Milwaukee's Khris Middleton made two free throws with 15.8 seconds remaining to close out the scoring.

The Bulls were playing their first game since announcing Thursday that guard Lonzo Ball needs surgery on his left knee. Ball averages 13 points, 5.4 rebounds and 5.1 assists.

Grizzlies 122, Nuggets 118: Ja Morant scored 38 points and Memphis overcame Nikola Jokic's fourth straight triple-double to beat visiting Denver.

Jaren Jackson Jr. added 20 points, including a three on a feed from Morant with 41 seconds left after the Nuggets got within 115-111. De'Anthony Melton had 21 points and nine rebounds off the bench as the Grizzlies won for the second time in four games since snapping their 11-game win streak.

Jokic had 26 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists. It was his NBA-best 11th triple-double of the season.

Trail Blazers 109, Celtics

105: Jusuf Nurkic grabbed an offensive rebound and hit a shot from the lane with 14 seconds left and Portland rallied past host Boston.

Hawks 110, Heat 108: At Atlanta, Trae Young scored 28 points, Kevin Huerter added 21 and the Hawks won their third straight game after nearly blowing an 18-point lead.

Clippers 102, 76ers 101: Reggie Jackson scored 19 points, including two free throws with 18.2 seconds remaining and visiting Los Angeles rallied from a 24-point second-half deficit.

Hornets 121, Thunder 98: Terry Rozier scored 24 points, Miles Bridges added 22 points and 14 rebounds, and host Charlotte defeated Oklahoma City.

Raptors 109, Wizards 105: Fred VanVleet hit a tiebreaking three-pointer with 59 seconds to play, and host Toronto hung on after blowing an 18-point fourth-quarter lead.

Jazz 111, Pistons 101: At Salt Lake City, Rudy Gobert scored 24 points, grabbed 13 rebounds and blocked four shots to lead Utah.

No. 14 Michigan State stops streaking No. 8 Wisconsin

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — Malik Hall scored 14 points and No. 14 Michigan State beat No. 8 Wisconsin 86-74 on Friday to snap the Badgers' seven-game winning streak.

Max Christie, Tyson Walker and A.J. Hoggard scored 12 points apiece for the Spartans (15-3, 6-1 Big Ten), who shot 53% (29 of 55) from the field.

Michigan State had six days to stew over its previous game, a 64-62 home loss to Northwestern last Saturday.

"I'm happy we got a win and I'm happy we played better," coach Tom Izzo said. "It was hell these last three days. That's the way it's supposed to be."

Michigan State moved into first place in the conference, ahead of Wisconsin (15-3, 6-2) and Illinois.

Johnny Davis scored 25 points and Brad Davison added 22 for Wisconsin, which struggled to score in the first half, fell behind by double digits and couldn't catch up.

"We made Davis work for everything, and he's just a great player," Izzo said.

The Badgers were without Tyler Wahl, who averaged 15.3 points over the previous seven games, because of a right ankle injury. Coach Greg Gard said Wahl's absence was a big factor.

"He's important to us but we have to have other guys step up,

specifically on defense," Gard. "He's an important part of who we are on both ends of the floor."

Michigan State out-rebounded Wisconsin 39-20, led by Joey Hauser's 11 boards.

"If you look at our team, everybody scored (and) everybody did something," Izzo said. "It wasn't smooth but we shot well, we took care of the ball decently, but the big key was the rebounding."

Maryland 81, No. 17 Illinois 65: At College Park, Md., Donta Scott scored a career-high 25 points and the Terrapins took advantage of Kofi Cockburn's absence to beat the Illini.

Cockburn was out with a con-

cussion, and the Illini (13-5, 6-2 Big Ten) lost for the second consecutive game after winning six straight. It was a much-needed victory for Maryland, which has struggled all season and already went through a coaching change when Mark Turgeon exited in early December.

Alfonso Plummer scored 18 points for Illinois, which was coming off a double-overtime loss to No. 4 Purdue on Monday night. The Illini got Andre Curbelo back in that game after he'd been out since November with his own concussion-related issues. Then they had to face Maryland (10-9, 2-6) without Cockburn, their star big man.

Medvedev wins over Aussie Open crowd in victory

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — As Daniil Medvedev sat court-side trying to re-hydrate during a changeover, an image of nine-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic flashed up in the stadium behind him.

It was in the third set Saturday, and it was like the absent No. 1 was looking over the shoulder of the player who is effectively the No. 1 seed at the year's first Grand Slam tournament.

Medvedev, who lost last year's Australian Open final to Djokovic but avenged that with a victory over the Serb for the U.S. Open title, reached the fourth round for the fourth straight year at Melbourne Park with a 6-4, 6-4, 6-2 win over Botic van de Zandschulp.

The 25-year-old Russian was a conspicuous fan favorite on Margaret Court Arena, too, two days after being unsettled by the boos and jeers of a parochial crowd on Rod Laver Arena when he ended the run of mercurial Aussie Nick Kyrgios.

He avoided another match against an Australian in the fourth round when wild-card entry Chris O'Connell lost to Maxime Cressy 6-2, 6-7 (6), 6-3, 6-2.

Cressy's win means there's two 24-year-old Americans who'll be in the fourth round of a major for their first time.

No. 70-ranked Cressy is in his fourth Grand Slam tournament. No. 20-ranked Taylor Fritz finally made it in his 22nd attempt, with a 6-0, 3-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-3 win over No. 15 Roberto Bautista Agut, and said it

"means a ton."

Fritz next plays French Open runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas, who fended off Benoit Paire 6-3, 7-5, 6-7 (2), 6-4.

No. 9 Felix Auger-Aliassime progressed with a 6-4, 6-1, 6-1 win over No. 24 Dan Evans, winning 14 of the last 16 games, and will next face 33-year-old Marin Cilic, the 2014 U.S. Open champion and a runner-up in Australia in 2018.

Cilic upset fifth-seeded Andrey Rublev 7-5, 7-6 (3), 3-6, 6-3 just before midnight in the last singles match completed on Day 6.

On the women's side, two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep is into Week 2 at Melbourne Park for the fifth consecutive year after a 6-2, 6-1 victory over Danka Kovinic.

She'll be joined by second-seeded Aryna Sabalenka, who advanced 4-6, 6-3, 6-1 over No. 31 Marketa Vondrousova.

In other third-round matches, 27th-seeded Danielle Collins of the U.S. rallied from a set and a break down to beat 19-year-old Clara Tauson 4-6, 6-4, 7-5. She'll next meet No. 19 Elise Mertens, who advanced 6-2, 6-2 over Zhang Shuai.

No. 7 Iga Swiatek beat No. 25 Daria Kasatkina 6-2, 6-3. The 2020 French Open champion will next play Sorana Cirstea, who had a 6-3, 2-6, 6-2 win over 10th-seeded Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova.

Halep's next opponent will be Alize Cornet, who celebrated her 32nd birthday with a 4-6, 6-4, 6-2 victory over 2021 French Open semifinalist Tamara Zidansek.

DeAngelo, Hurricanes double up Rangers

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Tony DeAngelo had a goal and two assists against his former team as the Carolina Hurricanes beat the New York Rangers 6-3 on Friday night.

Sebastian Aho also had a goal and two assists, while Vincent Trocheck, Seth Jarvis, Jesper Fast — another former Ranger — and Nino Niederreiter also scored in the first meeting of the season between the top two teams in the Metropolitan Division. Teuvo Teravainen and Andrei Svechnikov had two assists apiece, and Frederik Andersen stopped 20 shots in Carolina's third straight win.

Mika Zibanejad and Chris Kreider each had a power-play goal and an assist for the Rangers. Greg McKegg, an ex-Hurricanes player, got his first goal of the season. Alexander Georgiev, playing for the first time in more than a week, made 29 saves.

Penguins 5, Blue Jackets 2: Sidney Crosby notched his 15th career hat trick and added an assist to lead visiting Pittsburgh to its fourth straight win.

Brian Dumoulin had a goal and two assists, Mike Matheson added a goal and an assist, and Bryan Rust had two assists for the Penguins, who have won 15 of their last 17 games.

Islanders 4, Coyotes 0: Ilya Sorokin stopped 17 shots for his fourth shutout of the season, Brock Nelson scored twice and host New York got its third straight win.

Scott Mayfield had a goal and an assist, and Austin Czarnik also scored to help the Islanders win for the seventh time in nine games (7-1-1). Sorokin, who has seven career shutouts, got his sixth win in his last eight starts and has only allowed 15 goals over that stretch. The 26-year-old goaltender is 11-7-5 in his

second NHL season.

Stars 5, Red Wings 4 (OT): Roope Hintz scored a power-play goal at 2:51 of overtime to lift visiting Dallas.

It was the second win in a row for the Stars, who rallied from a one-goal deficit late in the third period to send it to the extra period.

Wild 5, Blackhawks 1: Ryan Hartman scored twice, Marcus Foligno had a goal and an assist, and visiting Minnesota won for the fourth time in five games.

Calen Addison and Brandon Duhaime also had goals for the Wild.

Ducks 5, Lightning 1: Derek Grant scored two goals, John Gibson made 32 saves and host Anaheim emphatically snapped a four-game losing streak.

Kevin Shattenkirk and Vinni Lettieri had a goal and an assist apiece, and Nicolas Deslauriers added a short-handed, empty-netter for the Ducks with 7:37 to play. Anaheim reclaimed sole possession of second place in the Pacific Division by routing the overall NHL co-leaders for only its third win in 12 games.

Blues 5, Kraken 0: Ville Husso stopped 27 shots, Tyler Bozak scored shot-handed and visiting St. Louis beat Seattle.

The Blues have won two straight and five of six. Bozak and Brayden Schenn scored in the first period, and Pavel Buchnevich, Colton Parayko and Jordan Kyrou scored in the third. Parayko's goal came on a penalty shot.

Panthers 2, Canucks 1 (SO): Aleksander Barkov scored the deciding goal in the shootout and visiting Florida beat Vancouver.

Sam Reinhart scored in regulation for Florida, and Spencer Knight stopped 27 shots in the win. The Panthers are 10-1-1 in their last 12 games.