

Austin: Russia has full range of options

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Friday the buildup of Russian forces along Ukraine's border has reached the point where President Vladimir Putin now has a complete range of military options, including actions short of a full-scale invasion.

"While we don't believe that President Putin has made a final decision to use these forces against Ukraine, he clearly now has the capability," Austin told a Pentagon news conference.

Austin said Putin could use any portion of his force of an estimated 100,000 troops to seize Ukrainian cities and "significant territories" or to launch "coercive acts or provocative political acts" like the recognition of breakaway territories inside Ukraine. He urged Putin to de-escalate the tensions.

Austin spoke alongside Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who said Russian forces near Ukraine include not only ground troops and naval and air forces but also cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, as well as special operations forces. He urged Putin to choose a diplomatic path over conflict.

"If Russia chooses to invade Ukraine, it will not be cost free, in terms of casualties and other significant effects," Milley said.

Earlier Friday, the Kremlin said Putin

told French President Emmanuel Macron that the West has failed to consider Russia's key conditions of halting further NATO expansion, stopping the deployment of alliance weapons near Russian borders, and rolling back its forces from Eastern Europe.

The U.S. and NATO formally rejected those demands this week, although Washington outlined areas where discussions are possible, offering hope that there could be a way to avoid war amid the troop buildup near Ukraine.

Despite that, U.S. President Joe Biden on Thursday warned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that there is a "distinct possibility" that Russia could take military action against the former Soviet state in February. Russia has repeatedly denied having any such plans.

Zelenskyy, however, sought to play down the war fears, saying Western alarm over an imminent invasion has prompted many investors in the country's financial markets to cash out.

"We don't need this panic," he said at a news conference. "It cost Ukrainians dearly."

Putin told Macron that Moscow will study the U.S. and NATO response before deciding its next move, according to a Kremlin account of their call. Earlier in the day, Putin held a weekly meeting of his Security

Council, saying only that it would address foreign policy issues.

Putin has made no public remarks about the Western response, but Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said it leaves little chance for reaching agreement.

"While they say they won't change their positions, we won't change ours," Lavrov told Russian radio stations in a live interview. "I don't see any room for compromise here."

"There won't be a war as far as it depends on the Russian Federation, we don't want a war," he added. "But we won't let our interests be rudely trampled on and ignored."

A senior Biden administration official said the U.S. welcomed Lavrov's comments that Russia does not war, "but this needs to be backed up with action. We need to see Russia pulling some of the troops that they have deployed away from the Ukrainian border and taking other de-escalatory steps."

Lavrov said the U.S. suggested the two sides could talk about limits on the deployment of intermediate-range missiles, restrictions on military drills and rules to prevent accidents between warships and aircraft. He said that Russia proposed discussing those issues years ago — but Washington and its allies never took them up on it until now.

Austin orders 'action plan' to limit civilian casualties

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Thursday ordered his staff to quickly develop an "action plan" for improving how the Pentagon limits and responds to civilian casualties caused by American airstrikes. He called protection of civilians vital to U.S. military success and a "moral imperative."

Austin said in a memo to senior civilian and military officials that he wants the plan to reach his office within 90 days. He said it should outline steps the Pentagon will take, and the resources it will require, to implement recommendations from previous studies of the problem.

Austin acted following a wave of criti-

cism of the Pentagon for an airstrike in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Aug. 29 that it initially termed a valid attack, despite 10 civilian deaths, but later acknowledged was a mistake in which the targeted individual turned out to not to be a militant, as first claimed by U.S. Central Command and Pentagon officials.

Austin also ordered the establishment of a "civilian protection center of excellence" to institutionalize improvements in this area.

"The protection of civilians is fundamentally consistent with the effective, efficient and decisive use of force in pursuit of U.S. national interests, and our efforts to mitigate and respond to civilian harm are a di-

rect reflection of U.S. values," Austin said in the memo. "It is a strategic and a moral imperative."

The American Civil Liberties Union welcomed Austin's move but questioned whether it is sufficient.

"While a serious Defense Department focus on civilian harm is long overdue and welcome, it's unclear that this directive will be enough," said Hina Shamsi, director of the ACLU's national security project. "What's needed is a truly systemic overhaul of our country's civilian harm policies to address the massive structural flaws, likely violations of international law and probable war crimes that have occurred in the last 20 years."

Governors file suit over Guard vaccine mandate

Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska — Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy has joined Texas Gov. Greg Abbott in seeking to block the U.S. Department of Defense from mandating COVID-19 vaccines for National Guard members who are under state command.

The Pentagon has required COVID-19 vaccination for all service members, including the National Guard and Reserve. Attorneys for the two governors, in an amended lawsuit dated Tuesday, say that when National Guard members are serving the state, the federal government has no command authority. The lawsuit said the mandate is an unconstitutional overstepping of bounds.

The case dealing with Alaska and Texas guard members is an amended version of the challenge filed by Texas earlier this month.

More than 220 members of the Texas Air National Guard and about 40% of Texas Army National Guard members are refusing

to be vaccinated for “either religious accommodation needs or otherwise,” according to the lawsuit. About 8% of Alaska Air and Army National Guard members have not received a first dose of any COVID-19 vaccine and of these members, “more than 90% have requested a medical or religious exemption, yet no such exemptions have been granted.”

“A small number of additional Alaska National Guard members are refusing any COVID-19 vaccine,” the lawsuit said.

The lawsuit names as defendants President Joe Biden, the Department of Defense and military officials.

The White House referred a reporter seeking comment on the lawsuit to the Department of Defense, which did not immediately respond to an email from The Associated Press.

A federal judge last month ruled against Oklahoma in its lawsuit challenging the vaccine mandates for the state’s guard members.

DOD seeks tech to clean up space

The Washington Post

The Pentagon wants to clean up space. Well, not all of it. But at least the increasingly polluted region in low Earth orbit, where thousands of bits of debris, spent rocket stages and dead satellites whiz uncontrollably, like so much flotsam.

All of that junk from decades of space travel is not just unseemly but poses serious risks to all sorts of satellites, including those the Pentagon and intelligence agencies use for national security. But tidying up space is far more difficult than cleaning a freeway or even an ocean. For one, objects in orbit are traveling incredibly fast — some 17,500 mph, or about five miles a second. Some of them are tumbling violently, making them difficult to grab. And it’s expensive to launch a spacecraft capable of sidling up to a piece of space garbage, grabbing it and tugging it out of orbit so that it can burn up in the atmosphere.

Still, the Defense Department, as well as

other government agencies, has grown convinced that as Earth’s orbit becomes more crowded — and dirty — something needs to be done. Even something as small as a screw acts like a bullet in space and can cause enormous damage.

Pieces of debris have cracked a window on the International Space Station. Last year, a micrometeorite shot right through the station’s robotic arm, leaving a bullet-sized hole. The Defense Department does not want that to happen to one of the satellites it uses for missile defense, or spying, or guiding precision munitions with GPS.

Recently, it has launched a program, called Orbital Prime, under the U.S. Space Force that would give companies seed money to develop the technology needed to clean up space. In the first round of the program, companies would win awards of \$250,000, with as much as \$1.5 million in a second round of funding.

Microsoft’s \$22B goggles still not combat-ready

Bloomberg News

Microsoft’s new multifunction goggle system for the U.S. Army shows promise, but the \$22 billion program isn’t yet ready for combat deployment, according to the Pentagon’s test office.

Despite progress since the contract was awarded in 2018, the system “has not yet demonstrated the capability to serve as a fighting goggle,” according to a non-public assessment by the Pentagon’s director of operational testing that was sent to the Army for review.

The report on the Integrated Visual Augmentation System, or IVAS, will be made public in the office’s upcoming annual report.

The program by the Redmond, Wash.-based company aims to develop a “heads-up display” for U.S. ground forces, similar to those for fighter pilots. The system — a customized version of Microsoft’s HoloLens goggles — would let commanders project information onto a visor in front of a soldier’s face and would include other features such as night vision.

Improved versions of goggle prototypes fielded for initial soldier evaluations “demonstrated growth capabilities” and “improved comfort and field of view,” according to the assessment.

The Army announced in October a delay in fielding the program to allow more time to prepare for the intense combat testing needed for full-rate production. The test, previously scheduled for last September, is now tentatively scheduled for May.

“The Army should develop an adequate test and evaluation strategy that quantifies improvements” to known deficiencies before the testing, according to the latest assessment.

Microsoft said it’s continuing to make improvements to the technology.

“Our close collaboration with the Army has enabled us to quickly build and iterate on IVAS to develop a transformational platform that will deliver enhanced soldier safety and effectiveness,” David Marra, Microsoft’s program director, said in a statement. “We continue to test and refine IVAS through soldier engagements, ensuring this state-of-the-art mixed-reality platform is effective, reliable, and exceeds the Army’s objectives.”

Key inflation rises, highest since 1982

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A measure of prices that is closely tracked by the Federal Reserve rose 5.8% last year, the sharpest increase since 1982, as brisk consumer spending collided with snarled supply chains to raise the costs of food, furniture, appliances and other goods.

The report Friday from the Commerce Department also said that consumer spending fell 0.6% in December. A wave of omicron cases discouraged many Americans from traveling, eating out or visiting theaters and other entertainment venues. At the same time, incomes rose 0.3% last month, providing fuel for future spending.

Stubbornly high inflation has hammered household budgets, wiped out last year's healthy wage gains and posed a severe political challenge to President Joe Biden and Democrats in Congress. It also led the Federal Reserve to signal Wednesday that it plans to raise interest rates multiple times this year beginning in March to try to get accelerating prices under control.

Chair Jerome Powell also made clear that the Fed will move to shrink its huge \$8.9 trillion of bond holdings soon after it starts raising rates, another step that will likely tighten credit, slow spending and potentially weaken the economy.

Speaking at a news conference Wednesday,

Powell acknowledged that inflation has gotten "slightly worse" in the past month. He cautioned that higher prices "have now spread to a broader range of goods and services," after initially affecting sectors of the economy, like factory-made products for homes, that were most disrupted by the pandemic.

Powell also said the Fed is increasingly focused on the question of whether rising wages are acting as a primary driver of inflation, by forcing companies to charge more to cover their higher labor costs. Such a "wage-price spiral," which the United States hasn't experienced since the 1970s, can make inflation difficult to cool.

Mich. school shooting suspect to plead insanity

Associated Press

SOUTHFIELD, Mich. — A teenager charged with killing four students at a Michigan high school will pursue an insanity defense, his lawyers said in a notice filed Thursday as he, his parents and school officials faced a new lawsuit over the attack at Oxford High School.

The notice, listed in a summary of case filings, should lead to mental health exams of 15-year-old Ethan Crumbley, who is charged as an adult with murder and other crimes for the shooting, which also wounded six other students and a teacher. Experts will consider whether the teen understood the wrongfulness of his conduct on

the day of the shooting.

The lawsuit, meanwhile, was announced on behalf of the parents of Tate Myre, who was slain Nov. 30, and other students who witnessed the shootings. It alleges negligence by school officials and Crumbley's parents over the attack.

"We're sad and heartbroken — our lives forever changed," William Myre said at a news conference. "Our family will never be the same. We're not doing good. All we do is walk around the house and think about Tate. We think about him every day. We sit in his room. We listen to his playlist off Spotify. We're not doing good, but we're going to find a way to get through it together."

er."

The lawsuit, which seeks at least \$25,000, names Oxford High School's dean of students, two counselors and three teachers as defendants. Crumbley and his parents also are named as defendants.

The Associated Press sent an email Thursday morning seeking comment from the school district.

The suspect's parents are accused of intentional, reckless and negligent conduct that led to the mass shooting. The Oxford High School staff and teachers are accused of gross negligence that led to the shooting by not removing the shooter from the school building earlier.

Coast Guard halts search for migrants in Florida

Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — The Coast Guard said it suspended its rescue operations at sunset Thursday after announcing earlier that afternoon that it had found four additional bodies in its search for dozens of migrants lost at sea off Florida.

Homeland Security Investigations officials have said they were actively investigating the case as a human smuggling operation.

Authorities have now found a total of five bodies, leaving 34 missing five days after the vessel capsized on the way to Florida from Bimini, a chain of islands in the Bahamas about 55 miles east of Miami.

Coast Guard Capt. Jo-Ann F. Burdian

said earlier the decision to suspend the search was not an easy one.

"We have saturated the area over and over again," she told a news conference. "We've had good visibility. ... We've overflood the vessel a number of times. ... It does mean we don't think it's likely that anyone else has survived."

The Miami office of Homeland Security Investigations has launched an inquiry, saying the migrants' journey was most certainly part of a human smuggling operation. Under federal law, a smuggler convicted of causing a death is eligible for execution.

"The goal of this investigation is to identify, arrest and prosecute any criminal or criminal organization that organized, facil-

itated or profited from this doomed venture," said HSI Miami Special Agent in Charge Anthony Salisbury.

Salisbury declined to give any information on the nationalities of the boat passengers but said investigators consider the lone survivor "a victim right now," not a suspect. Salisbury appealed to the public for tips to help identify who organized the boat crossing.

Authorities said the boat was found about 100 miles north of where it capsized, apparently pushed by the Gulf Stream, a warm, swift current that wraps around the Florida peninsula and flows along the Atlantic Coast of the United States. No one was wearing a life jacket, the rescued man told authorities.

Watchdog: HHS failing on health crises

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The government's main health agency is failing to meet its responsibilities for leading the national response to public health emergencies including the coronavirus pandemic, extreme weather disasters and even potential bioterrorist attacks, a federal watchdog said Thursday.

The nonpartisan Government Accountability Office said it is designating the Health and Human Services Department's leadership and coordination of public health emergencies as a "high risk" area for the government. While that designation carries no immediate penalties, it signals to Congress that lawmakers need to pay special attention to the agency's operations.

Long-standing "persistent deficiencies" at HHS "have hindered the nation's re-

sponse to the current COVID-19 pandemic and a variety of past threats," the GAO said in its report. "If left unaddressed, these deficiencies will continue to hamper the nation's ability to be prepared for, and effectively respond to, future threats."

The shortfalls include managing the medical supply chain, coordinating with federal and state agencies and providing clear and consistent communication to the public and the health care community, the GAO said.

The report is part of the GAO's evaluation of the government's pandemic response. It was released as senators of both parties came out with draft legislation this week calling for a close study of the pandemic and an overhaul of HHS' capabilities.

Among the lawmakers' priorities are closer congressional oversight of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an

HHS agency, building out the supply chain and improving coordination from the top rungs of HHS. Some of those address issues raised by the GAO report. The report did not assign blame to individual officials, in the current or past administrations.

Department spokesperson Sarah Loveheim said in a statement that "we're in a much stronger position than we were a year ago." She added that "we look forward to reading GAO's feedback on these important issues and sharing progress in this whole-of-government effort as we continue to work to ensure the American people are protected from future health-related emergencies."

The GAO said that of 115 recommendations it has made to HHS over the past 15 years on public health emergencies, 72 have not been fully put in place.

Human chain formed after Pa. bridge collapse

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — A bridge collapsed in Pittsburgh early Friday, requiring rescuers to rappel nearly 150 feet and form a human chain to reach occupants of a bus that had plummeted with the span into a park ravine.

The collapse came hours before President Joe Biden was to visit the city to promote his \$1 trillion infrastructure law, which has earmarked about \$1.6 billion for Pennsylvania bridge maintenance.

There were minor injuries from the collapse but no fatalities, said authorities, who also flew drones to make sure no one was under any collapsed sections. Five other vehicles

were also on the bridge at the time. The cause was being investigated and crews were searching under the debris for additional victims.

City officials said the 50-year-old Forbes Avenue Bridge over Fern Hollow Creek in Frick Park, came down at 6:39 a.m. Witnesses said the loud noise from the collapse was followed by a hissing sound and the smell of natural gas.

"The first sound was much more intense, and kind of a rumbling, which I guess was the structure, the deck hitting the ground," said Ken Doyno, a resident who lives four houses away. "I mean, the whole house rattled at that

point."

Ruptured gas lines along the bridge produced the leak and the supply of gas was shut off within a half-hour, city officials said.

Sam Wasserman, a spokesperson for Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey, said a few hours after the collapse that officials were evaluating the scene and an urban search-and-rescue team was still combing the area for any other possible victims.

He said most of the 10 people who were evaluated for injuries were first responders checked for exhaustion or because of the cold and snowy weather. Three people were taken to hospitals and none had critical injuries.

Study: Gas stoves bad for climate even when not running

Associated Press

Gas stoves are contributing more to global warming than previously thought because of constant tiny methane leaks while they're off, a new study found.

Even when they are not running, U.S. gas stoves are putting 2.6 million tons of methane — in carbon dioxide equivalent units — into the air each year, a team of California researchers found in a study published in Thursday's journal *Environmental Science & Technology*. That's equivalent to the annual amount of greenhouse gases from 500,000 cars or what the United States puts into the air every three-and-a-half hours.

"They're constantly bleeding a little bit of methane into the atmosphere all the time," said the study's co-author Rob Jackson, a Stanford University climate scientist.

That methane is on top of the 6.8 million tons of carbon dioxide that gas stoves emit into the air when they are in use and the gas is burned, the study said. Methane is a greenhouse gas that is dozens of times more potent than carbon dioxide but doesn't stay in the atmosphere nearly as long and isn't as plentiful in the air.

The researchers examined 53 home kitchens in California — many in bed and breakfasts they rented. They sealed most of the

rooms in plastic tarps and then measured emissions when the stoves were working and when they were not. And what was surprising was that three-quarters of the methane released happened while the stoves were off, Jackson said. Those are emissions releases that the government doesn't account for, he said.

"That's a big deal because we're trying to really reduce our carbon footprint and we claim that gas is cleaner than coal, which it is," said study lead author Eric Lebel, a scientist at PSE Healthy Energy, an Oakland nonprofit. But he said much of the benefit disappears when leaks are taken into account.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

World's oldest male gorilla dies at age 61

GA ATLANTA — The world's oldest male gorilla, named Ozzie, was found dead by his care team at the Atlanta zoo Tuesday, zoo officials announced. Ozzie was 61.

The cause of the gorilla's death was not immediately known though Ozzie began showing signs of low appetite last week, the zoo said in a news release. The zoo's veterinary team treated Ozzie for symptoms including facial swelling, weakness and inability to eat or drink fluids.

Ozzie, a lowland gorilla, was the world's oldest male gorilla and the third-oldest gorilla in the world.

"This is a devastating loss for Zoo Atlanta," said Raymond Kind, president and CEO of the zoo.

A necropsy will be performed by the University of Georgia Zoo and Exotic Animal Pathology Service in the College of Veterinary Medicine, the news release said.

Window washer working at high-rise dies in fall

CA SAN DIEGO — A window washer fell eight stories to his death Wednesday while working on a building in San Diego's East Village, authorities said.

The worker was on scaffolding that gave way and fell to the sidewalk, police said. He died at the scene.

His name wasn't immediately released.

The accident happened shortly before noon at Saint Teresa of Calcutta Villa, a newly opened

14-story building that will provide housing for more than 500 low-income and homeless people, the San Diego Union-Tribune reported.

The building is operated by Father Joe's Villages, a charity helping the homeless.

21 people charged with trafficking drugs

MN DULUTH — Twenty-one members of a drug-trafficking organization have been charged with transporting and distributing fentanyl and heroin in northern Minnesota, according to officials.

Duluth police said that between June and December of 2021, traffickers brought large amounts of drugs from Illinois to midlevel dealers and consumers in Carlton and St. Louis counties.

Fourteen people have been arrested and warrants have been issued for seven more.

The Lake Superior Drug and Violent Crime Task Force discovered that traffickers last year transported and sold more than 10 pounds of heroin and fentanyl, which had a street value of \$725,600, authorities said.

Earthquake warning app MyShake now available

WA SEATTLE — A new earthquake-warning app is available for Washington state.

The state said there are already two warning systems in place, but the MyShake app provides a third and possibly quicker option, The Seattle Times reported.

The app launched in 2019 and

sends alerts in California and Oregon. It became available in Washington on Wednesday.

The MyShake app can be downloaded for free through the Apple or Google Play app stores.

Chief quits after arrest for domestic violence

FL WINTER PARK — A central Florida police chief resigned Wednesday, a week after being arrested on a misdemeanor domestic violence charge.

Michael Deal's resignation as the Winter Park police chief was announced Wednesday by city manager Randy Knight, the Orlando Sentinel reported.

Three members of Deal's family told Seminole County deputies that Deal battered one of them during an argument Jan. 19 at their Sanford home. While attempting to leave, Deal grabbed a family member by the wrist and pushed the person out of his way, according to the arrest report.

Deal told the deputies he attempted to get around the alleged victim but never laid a hand on that person, the report said.

Deal was arrested on a misdemeanor domestic battery charge.

Sheriff: Hiker killed in fall while taking photo

AZ APACHE JUNCTION — A hiker camping on a peak in the Superstition Mountains east of metro Phoenix was found dead after apparently slipping while taking a photo and falling hundreds of feet, authorities said Wednesday.

day.

The body of Richard Jacobson, 21, was recovered after a hiking companion called 911 at approximately 12:45 a.m. Monday, the Pinal County Sheriff's Office said in a statement.

Jacobson's body was found nearly 700 feet below where the hikers were camping on top of Flatiron near Lost Dutchman State Park, the office said.

Prison for man who tried to breach cockpit

CA LOS ANGELES — A Mexican national was sentenced Wednesday to 18 months in federal prison for attempting to breach the cockpit of United Airlines plane and then jumping from the airliner taxiing at Los Angeles International Airport, federal prosecutors said.

Luis Armando Victoria Dominguez assaulted a flight attendant then opened the exit door and fell onto the runway last June, the U.S. Attorney's Office said in a statement.

The 34-year-old from La Paz, Mexico, pleaded guilty in October to one count of interference with flight crew members.

The judge on Wednesday also ordered him to pay more than \$20,000 in restitution.

Dominguez "sprinted" to the front of the plane, tried to get into the cockpit and then opened the door and jumped while another passenger unsuccessfully tried to restrain him, according to an FBI affidavit.

"Once ... Dominguez landed on the tarmac, he began crawling away from the aircraft. His right leg appeared broken," the affidavit states.

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Nadal, Medvedev to meet in historic final

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Rafael Nadal is within one victory of a men's record 21st Grand Slam singles title.

He'll have to beat second-seeded Daniil Medvedev in the Australian Open final on Sunday to make history. And Medvedev is chasing a piece of history of his own after beating Stefanos Tsitsipas 7-6 (5), 4-6, 6-4, 6-1 in a heated semifinal on Friday. The U.S. Open champion is aiming to be the first man in the Open era to win his second Grand Slam title at the next major tournament.

Nadal advanced to the final in Australia for the sixth time with a 6-3, 6-2, 3-6, 6-3 win in a mostly lopsided contest against seventh-seeded Matteo Berrettini in the first of the men's semifinals.

Medvedev had a more tempestuous and challenging run to back-to-back Australian Open finals. He had to deal with a hostile crowd in his second-round win over Nick Kyrgios, had to save a match point and rally from two sets down to beat Felix Auger-

Aliassime in a nearly five-hour quarterfinal win. Then he had to regain his composure after an angry outburst in the second set of the semifinals.

The Russian yelled at chair umpire Jaume Campistol in the changeover after serving a double-fault to concede a late break, getting a code violation for a visible obscenity when he made a gesture with his arm to the pro-Tsitsipas crowd, and then demanded that his opponent be cautioned for receiving coaching from his father — in Greek — from the stands.

Medvedev returned after Tsitsipas converted his third set point to level the match and he again urged the umpire to give the French Open runner-up a code violation.

He then took a five-minute break, took control late in the third set and then reeled off the last five games after Tsitsipas was eventually cautioned for coaching.

Nadal's run to a 29th Grand Slam final has been comparatively serene.

After the last point, he stopped, beamed a

wide grin and then punched the air three times.

Nadal arrived in Australia not knowing how long he would last after months off the tour dealing with a serious foot injury and then a bout of COVID-19. He skipped Wimbledon after losing in the French Open semifinals to Novak Djokovic, and didn't play at all after August.

"Every day has been an issue in terms of problems on the foot. Doubts still here ... probably for the rest of my career," Nadal said. "But for me it's amazing ... (to) just compete and play tennis at the high level again, facing the most important players of the world."

Last month, he wasn't even sure he'd be able to return to the tour. But he won a tune-up tournament in Melbourne and has taken six straight matches at the first Grand Slam event of the year.

One more and he'll break the record of 20 major championships he shares with Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic.

Receivers Kupp, Samuel surge into NFC title game

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Cooper Kupp led the league in every major receiving category this season, a triple crown feat accomplished only three times previously in NFL history.

Deebo Samuel also racked up huge numbers, but he wasn't content to just catch the ball. He also ran it and occasionally threw it while cementing his status as perhaps the most versatile, electrifying playmaker in football.

In a sport usually defined and dominated by quarterback play, two All-Pro receivers have propelled their teams to the NFC championship game. Sunday's meeting of NFC West rivals is the third opportunity this season to watch Kupp and Samuel on the same field near the end of spectacular seasons that could be remembered long after this showdown between the Los Angeles Rams (14-5) and the San Francisco 49ers (12-7).

"I can't believe we're not talking about Deebo Samuel and Cooper Kupp (being) more

highly regarded for MVP candidates," Rams defensive coordinator Raheem Morris said. "I know this is a quarterback-driven league, but these two players have absolutely defied some of the things that are out there."

... As a competitor, I can't wait to see it. As a fan, you can't wait to watch it, and that makes for a great matchup.

Kupp (1,993) and Samuel (1,845) ranked 1-2 in the NFC in all-purpose yards. Kupp's 2,209 yards from scrimmage this season, including the playoffs, are the most by a receiver in NFL history, while Samuel needs only 44 yards this weekend to pass Jerry Rice (1995) for second place on that list.

Kupp and Samuel carry an inordinate amount of weight for their teams' success for a receiver. The Rams and the 49ers probably wouldn't be in the NFC championship without the two of the game's top playmakers driving their offenses.

In fact, they probably wouldn't have won last week.

Kupp made an early 70-yard

TD catch followed by two stunning final-minute receptions to set up the winning field goal in Los Angeles' 30-27 win at Tampa Bay, finishing with 183 yards receiving.

Samuel salvaged his offense's shaky performance in freezing Green Bay. After his long kickoff return set up San Francisco's first field goal, he had a tough first-down catch and converted another third-and-long with a gritty run on the final drive to set up Robbie Gould's winning kick in the Niners' 13-10 upset.

"They're great football players that are complete receivers," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "When the ball is in (Samuel's) hands, good things happen. Cooper is very similar. We're just not giving him carries ... but he does so many different things. You're talking about two guys that have been instrumental in getting their teams to where they're at."

Kupp and Samuel have some similarities that might point to reasons for their success: Both played all four years of college

ball to emerge as more fully formed talents, yet neither was a first-round pick. Both landed with head coaches considered offensive gurus who specialize in getting the most out of their players' complete talents.

Samuel has become a position-less flex player under Kyle Shanahan, whose offense handed off to its best receiver 59 times this season. Samuel becomes something even more dangerous when he gets free to hit top speed, scoring an NFL-high nine TDs on runs outside the tackles.

"It's something that you really dream of as a coach, in terms of being able to utilize people in different ways to try to find advantageous looks," 49ers offensive coordinator Mike McDaniell said. "It's a lot easier to figure stuff out on Monday and Tuesday when the problem that you're trying to solve is, 'How do I get this guy the ball?' And on game day, 'Hey, Deebo, here's the ball.' That's the best thing for a coach that you could possibly imagine."

US men shut out El Salvador

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Antonee Robinson somersaulted a struggling United States into a strong position in World Cup qualifying, just like he did in September.

And when he broke through the freeze in the air and the offense, he celebrated with not a single handstand but a double.

"We're definitely one step closer," Robinson said after his 52nd-minute goal lifted the U.S. over El Salvador 1-0 on Thursday night to keep the Americans on track for a World Cup return. "It wasn't the prettiest game."

But his goal celebration on a 29-degree night was a showpiece worthy of a gymnast: a forward flip into a backward spring.

"It's just one of those muscle-memory things. I've been doing it since I was a kid," he said.

Robinson followed by grabbing his hamstring and then feigned a stiff-legged walk.

"He kind of scared me because I thought he pulled his hammy," Tim Weah said.

No worries. Robinson was mimicking a Kenyan player he saw while playing for Everton's youth team as a teenager in Africa.

"My friend's been on me for weeks to do that celebration, so I had to pull it out," Robinson said. "Didn't tell anyone, so there were a few people scared. It's all part of the fun of enjoying the game."

The U.S. has 18 points with five qualifiers left, one point behind Canada. Mexico has 17, followed by Panama (14), Costa Rica (12), Jamaica (seven), El Salvador (six) and Honduras (three).

Robinson scored after Weston McKennie played a long ball down the right flank to Weah, who let it bounce three times as he ran past Roberto Domínguez and Eduardo Vigil.

Goalkeeper Mario González made a sliding block on Weah, and the ball rebounded to Jesús Ferreira, a surprise starter in place of Ricardo Pepi. Ferreira headed the ball across the goalmouth and Christian Pulisic let it bounce past him to Robinson, who kicked it in with his left foot from 8 yards for his second international goal.

Morant, Wiggins named 1st-time starters for NBA All-Star Game

Associated Press

NEW YORK — LeBron James will return to Cleveland as an All-Star Game captain, with another former Cavaliers No. 1 pick joining him as this season's surprise selection.

Golden State's Andrew Wiggins was voted to his first All-Star Game, with Memphis guard Ja Morant also set for his debut.

MVP Nikola Jokic of the Denver Nuggets and Warriors superstar Stephen Curry joined those three Thursday as the other players voted as starters from the Western Conference.

The starters from the East were Brooklyn's Kevin Durant, Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo and Philadelphia's Joel Embiid in the frontcourt, along with Atlanta's Trae Young and Chicago's DeMar DeRozan.

James and Durant, as the leading vote-getters in each conference, will be the captains who draft players for the rosters for the Feb. 20 game in Cleveland.

James, who began his NBA career with the Cavaliers in 2003 and led them to the 2016

championship during his second stint there, was chosen as an All-Star for the 18th straight time. He has been a captain every year since the league went away from the East vs. West format, leading his team to a 4-0 record.

Durant's availability for the game is in doubt because of a sprained knee ligament. He was voted a starter for the 10th time, while Antetokounmpo was voted in for a sixth consecutive time, tying Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's franchise record for selections.

Embiid was voted a starter for the fifth straight season, the longest streak by a 76ers player since Allen Iverson was chosen seven straight times from 2000-06.

Fan ballots accounted for 50% of the vote, with a media panel and current players each accounting for 25%.

The format helped Wiggins edge teammate Draymond Green for the third West frontcourt spot. He received fewer player and far fewer media votes, but he ranked third among fans to sixth for Green. That gave Wiggins a weighted score of 4.25 points, while Green had 4.75.

76ers outduel LeBron-less Lakers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Meek Mill crashed a 76ers press conference and gave a shout-out to his favorite team. The rapper capped his impromptu remarks with "good win!"

The 76ers got it even with Joel Embiid having an off night by his own MVP-type standards.

Embiid had 26 points and nine rebounds, leading Philadelphia to a 105-87 victory over a Los Angeles Lakers team playing without LeBron James on Thursday night.

"I was not very good tonight, so I was happy my teammates were able to pick me up," Embiid said.

He still had a pretty good game. This is what counts these days as a subpar game for Embiid: He missed all five three-pointers and was only 8-for-13 from the free-throw line. He was 9-for-20 from the floor.

"He's doing everything for us on and off the floor," coach Doc Rivers said.

At least he had teammates to pick up the slack. Tobias Harris scored 23 points and Ty Maxey had 14 points and 10 assists.

Anthony Davis scored 31 points and grabbed 12 rebounds for the Lakers.

The 37-year-old James is day to day with

a sore left knee. James is second in the league in scoring at 29.1 points per game, on pace for his highest average since the 2009-10 season, and has scored at least 25 points in 18 straight games.

Warriors 124, Timberwolves 115: At San Francisco, Stephen Curry rediscovered his three-point touch after a rough shooting stretch and scored 29 points, Klay Thompson added 23 and Golden State beat Minnesota.

First-time All-Star Andrew Wiggins added 19 points and five rebounds against his former team in Golden State's 11th straight home win over the Wolves.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 31 points and 12 rebounds for Minnesota, which trailed 97-81 going into the fourth before beginning the final period on a 10-0 run to get back in it. Anthony Edwards added 27 points, six rebounds and six assists.

Curry shot 6-for-10 from long range — 10-for-20 overall — after going 3-for-23 on threes his previous two games. He also contributed eight rebounds and six assists. The reigning scoring champion and career three-point leader sat out a 119-99 loss at Minnesota on Jan. 16.

Kraken earn first-ever overtime win

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Adam Larsson scored the first overtime goal in Seattle Kraken history, lifting the expansion team to a 2-1 victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday night.

With the Kraken trailing 1-0, Jared McCann scored with 3:56 left in regulation against his former team to force overtime.

Larsson, who scored in consecutive games for the first time in his career, won it 1:17 into the extra period to give Seattle its fourth win in six games following a nine-game losing streak.

Philipp Grubauer stopped 23 shots while helping the Kraken snap the Penguins' six-game winning streak.

Seattle picked up just its fifth road win of the season, improving to 5-11-2 away from home.

Blue Jackets 5, Rangers 3: Boone Jenner and Sean Kuraly each had two goals and host Columbus scored four straight to rally from an early deficit and beat New York, breaking a three-game losing streak.

Gus Nyquist also scored, Zach Werenski had three assists and Patrik Laine contributed two for

the Blue Jackets, who trailed 2-0 less than five minutes into the game. Jenner also added an assist.

Canucks 5, Jets 1: J.T. Miller registered his second career hat trick and visiting Vancouver snapped a three-game skid.

The Jets have lost a season-high six games.

Miller scored once on the power play and twice at even strength for the Canucks, giving him a team-leading 15 goals on the season. He also added an assist.

Lightning 3, Devils 2: Anthony Cirelli had the tiebreaking goal midway through the third after failing to score on a second-period penalty shot, and host Tampa Bay edged New Jersey.

Cirelli made it 3-2 off a pass from Brayden Point at 11:55, exactly 1 minute after Jack Hughes tied it for the Devils.

Blues 5, Flames 1: Brandon Saad scored twice and had an assist, Ville Husso made 28 saves to win his sixth consecutive start, and host St. Louis cruised past Calgary.

Brayden Schenn had a goal and an assist, and Jordan Kyrou

and Ryan O'Reilly also scored for St. Louis. The Blues got some revenge for a blowout loss at Calgary three days earlier. The Flames outshot the Blues 48-21 in their 7-1 victory over the Blues on Monday.

Kings 3, Islanders 2: Andreas Athanasiou scored and assisted on Quinton Byfield's first NHL goal in his return from a long injury layoff, and Cal Peterson made 23 saves for visiting Los Angeles.

Adrian Kempe had an empty-net goal for the Kings, who won for the second time in three games against New York-area teams to start a six-game road trip. Peterson, who improved to 10-6-1 on the season, also defeated the New Jersey Devils last Sunday. The Kings lost to the Rangers 3-2 in a shootout on Monday, so Los Angeles earned five of a possible six points in the three games.

Hurricanes 3, Senators 2 (SO): Andrei Svechnikov scored the shootout winner to lift visiting Carolina past Ottawa.

Carolina's Nino Niederreiter scored with just about three minutes remaining in regulation to force overtime, and De-

rek Stepan had the team's other goal. Frederik Andersen made 37 saves.

Panthers 4, Golden Knights 1: Sam Bennett scored two goals to lift host Florida over Vegas.

Aleksander Barkov scored his 200th NHL goal and 500th NHL point, and had an assist, and Mason Marchment had an empty-net goal. Spencer Knight made 24 saves for the Panthers, who improved to 22-3-0 at home.

Ducks 5, Canadiens 4: Visiting Anaheim scored three first-period goals and Trevor Zegras scored twice in the second period to lead his team past Montreal.

Sam Carrick, Troy Terry and Cam Fowler had first-period goals for Anaheim, and Anthony Stolarz stopped 35 shots.

Oilers 3, Predators 2 (SO): Connor McDavid scored the shootout winner and added a goal in regulation for host Edmonton.

Evan Bouchard also scored for the Oilers, who have won three straight after going 2-11-2 in their previous 15 games. Mikko Koskinen stopped all three of Nashville's shootout attempts.

Ivey returns, No. 6 Purdue rolls to victory over Iowa

Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa — Isaiah Thompson scored a career-high 18 points and Jaden Ivey had 15 in his return from a hip injury as No. 6 Purdue defeated Iowa 83-73 on Thursday night.

Thompson came in averaging just 5.7 points per game but shot 6-for-8 from the field — including 4-for-6 on three-pointers.

Ivey, the team's leading scorer at 16.7 points per game, missed Sunday's 80-60 win at Northwestern. He didn't start this one, either, but played 21 minutes off the bench.

Sasha Stefanovich had 14 points for Purdue (17-3, 6-3 Big Ten).

Trevion Williams added 12 points and 10 rebounds.

Kris Murray led Iowa (14-6, 4-5) with 23 points and nine rebounds.

No. 2 Gonzaga 89, Loyola Marymount 55: Freshman center Chet Holmgren scored 21 points, grabbed nine rebounds and blocked three shots as the host Bulldogs pounded the Lions for their ninth straight victory.

Nolan Hickman had 11 points for Gonzaga (16-2, 5-0 West Coast Conference), which dropped behind top-ranked Auburn in the AP poll this week despite winning both its games last week. Gonzaga has won 63 consecutive home games, the longest streak in the nation.

No. 7 UCLA 81, California 57: Jaime Jaquez Jr. scored 15 points and the Bruins routed the visiting Golden Bears to give UCLA sole possession of first place in the Pac-12 with their fifth straight win.

Nine players scored for the Bruins on a night when they were missing leading scorer Johnny Juzang, who was sidelined by COVID-19 protocols. Cody Riley added a season-high 14 points, and Jules Bernard and Peyton Watson had 12 apiece.

No. 11 Wisconsin 73, Nebraska 65: At Lincoln, Neb., Brad Davison scored 17 of his 21 points in the first half, freshman Chucky Hepburn added 13 in his return to his home state, and the Badgers defeated the Cornhuskers.

Stanford 64, No. 15 USC 61: At Los Angeles, Jaiden Delaire scored 14 points, Harrison Ingram added 12 — including the go-ahead layup — and the Cardinal completed their first sweep of the Trojans in seven seasons.

No. 16 Ohio State 75, Minnesota 64: E.J. Liddell had 23 points and a career-high 15 rebounds to help the visiting Buckeyes muscle past the Golden Gophers.