

US strikes Iran-backed militias in Iraq

By MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military on Tuesday conducted strikes on three facilities in Iraq used by Iranian-backed militias in retaliation for recent attacks against American forces in Iraq and Syria, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

“President [Joe Biden] and I will not hesitate to take necessary action to defend [U.S. and coalition troops] and our interests. We call on these groups and their Iranian sponsors to immediately cease these attacks,” Austin said in a statement announcing the strikes.

The strikes took place at about 12:15 a.m. local time against the

Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia group and other Iran-affiliated groups in Iraq, according to U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for U.S. military operations in the Middle East. The strikes were in retaliation for the attack on Saturday on al Asad Air Base in Iraq that caused at least four U.S. service members to suffer traumatic brain injuries. The attack targeted Kataib Hezbollah headquarters, storage, and training locations for rocket, missile and one-way attack drone capabilities.

The U.S. strikes hit militia facilities in Jurf al-Sakhar, which is south of Baghdad, al-Qaim, and another unnamed site in western Iraq, The Associated

Press reported. The latest strikes are the third set of attacks in three days. Airstrikes on Sunday killed three Islamic militants in Somalia and the U.S., along with the United Kingdom and other nations, conducted strikes against eight targets on Monday in areas of Yemen controlled by Houthi rebels.

CENTCOM said the strikes conducted by the U.S. and U.K. were also conducted with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands. The Iran-backed Houthis were targeted in retaliation for the group’s ongoing attacks on shipping lanes in the Red Sea.

“The thirty-plus attacks that the Houthis have launched on

commercial and naval vessels since mid-November constitute a threat to all countries that rely on international maritime shipping. We condemn these attacks, and demand an end to them,” the U.S. said in a multinational statement on Monday.

U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked 151 times by Iranian-linked militants since October, Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh said Monday.

The militant attacks began soon after Hamas fighters attacked Israel on Oct. 7. The U.S. has responded with numerous strikes, including one this month in Baghdad that killed an Iran-backed militia leader.

Ships with cargo for US agencies come under attack

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Two American-flagged ships carrying cargo for the U.S. Defense and State departments came under attack by Yemen’s Houthi rebels on Wednesday, officials said, with the U.S. Navy intercepting some of the incoming fire.

The attacks on the container ships Maersk Detroit and Maersk Chesapeake further raise the stakes of the group’s ongoing attacks on shipping through the vital Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

The U.S. and the United Kingdom have launched multiple rounds of airstrikes seeking to stop the attacks.

Meanwhile, Qatar, one of the world’s top exporters of liquified natural gas, warned that its deliveries were affected by ongoing Houthi attacks over Israel’s war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Danish shipper Maersk, in a

statement to The Associated Press, identified two of its vessels affected by the attacks as the U.S.-flagged container ships Maersk Detroit and Maersk Chesapeake. It said the U.S. Navy was accompanying its ships at the time.

“While en route, both ships reported seeing explosions close by and the U.S. Navy accompaniment also intercepted multiple projectiles,” Maersk said. “The crew, ship, and cargo are safe and unharmed. The U.S. Navy has turned both ships around and is escorting them back to the Gulf of Aden.”

Maersk said both vessels carried cargo belonging to the Defense and State departments, as well as other U.S. government agencies, meaning they were “afforded the protection of the U.S. Navy for passage through the strait.”

The ships were operated by

Maersk Line, a U.S. subsidiary of Maersk that is “suspending transits in the region until further notice,” the company said.

U.S. Central Command in an online statement blamed the Houthis for the attack, saying they fired “three anti-ship ballistic missiles.”

“One missile impacted in the sea,” the statement said. “The two other missiles were successfully engaged and shot down by the USS Gravelly,” an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer.

The Houthis, who have been launching attacks on ships since November over Israel’s war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, did not immediately acknowledge the incident.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea, saying they were avenging Israel’s offensive in Gaza against Hamas. But they

have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for global trade.

The U.S. and the U.K. have launched rounds of airstrikes targeting suspected missile storage and launch sites used by the Houthis in their attacks. The rebels now say they’ll target American and British ships as well.

Meanwhile, Qatar announced its shipments of liquified natural gas had been affected by the Houthi attacks.

Qatar, which has served as a key mediator between Hamas and Israel, has yet to see any of its ships attacked, however. A statement from its state-owned QatarEnergy producer said that its “production continues uninterrupted, and our commitment to ensuring the reliable supply of LNG to our customers remains unwavering.”

Trump's nomination path getting clearer

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — This time, New Hampshire didn't surprise.

Instead, its famously fickle voters stuck to the script of delivering a ringing ratification of the front-runner, Donald Trump, the former president. His victory over a defiant Nikki Haley cemented his hold on core Republican voters and substantially reduced the chances of any challenger overtaking him.

Never before has a presidential candidate won the first two contests on the primary nomination calendar — as Trump has now done — and failed to emerge as the party's general election nominee, substantially increasing the already quite likely prospect of a rematch between him and President Joe Biden.

Even so, there were signs of restiveness among voters for both men. Here are some key takeaways from Tuesday's New Hampshire primary.

Trump's glide path

New Hampshire seemed like a state that Trump could lose.

The state's moderate tradition, the participation of independents, a huge advertising disparity and even a popular governor were all working against the former president.

He overcame all of that, somewhat easily, putting himself on a glide path to a third consecutive Republican presidential nomination that can likely be stopped at this point only by an unprecedented collapse or unforeseen external circumstances.

His base, immovable so far, has given him a structural advantage that few non-incumbents have ever had.

He doesn't need to persuade any new voters to win the nomination, he simply needs to en-

sure his people turn out. According to AP VoteCast, only about half of New Hampshire Republican voters identify with Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement. And about half disagree with Trump's big lie that the 2020 election was stolen.

He won anyway.

A win with warnings

Trump may be unstoppable in the primary campaign, but Tuesday's vote offered evidence that he may have a more difficult time in the general election this fall.

Trump did not carry key groups of swing voters. Haley beat Trump among primary voters who identify as moderates, as well as independents. She also beat Trump among those with a college degree. And about half of New Hampshire Republican primary voters are very or somewhat concerned that Trump is too extreme to win the general election, according to AP VoteCast. Only about one-third said the same about Haley.

A significant number of voters in the Republican primary — about 4 in 10 — also believe Trump broke the law either in his alleged attempt to interfere in the vote count in the 2020 presidential election, his role in what happened at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, or the classified documents found at his Florida home after he left the White House.

Such legal troubles helped unify core Republican voters behind his candidacy in recent months, but it's hard to imagine those issues will be an asset with the much broader set of general election voters.

Trump is facing 91 felony counts across four criminal trials. And his court schedule is set up to ensure voters won't be able to forget about the legal

drama, even if they want to.

Haley pushing ahead

Haley's loss represents a significant defeat for anti-Trump forces that still exist within the Republican Party.

They finally got the head-to-head contest they had long been calling for. And it wasn't enough.

Still, Haley strongly suggested she would stay in the race until at least her home state primary in South Carolina on Feb. 24.

"New Hampshire is first in the nation, it's not last in the nation. This race is far from over," Haley told cheering supporters in Concord.

Haley's team was quick to note that roughly 5 in 10 primary voters do not support Trump. Her advisers insisted she will stay in the race to serve as a vehicle for those anti-Trump forces who are still hoping he might be forced out of the race by his legal problems, or perhaps a health emergency.

And at least for now, the 52-year-old former South Carolina governor still has math and donors on her side.

Trump cannot mathematically secure the delegate majority he needs to become the presumptive nominee before Super Tuesday on March 5. And, in exactly one week, Haley is scheduled to embark upon a fundraising tour that includes stops in New York, Florida, California and Texas.

Her campaign is also launching a new \$4 million advertising campaign in South Carolina that begins Wednesday.

Too little, too late?

For months, Haley and former Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis offered only muted criticism of the former president, wary of his popularity with the GOP base.

Each was more frontal in attacking him as voting drew nearer, especially Haley in the closing days before New Hampshire. It was too late to help DeSantis, who suspended his campaign Sunday after finishing a distant second in Iowa. This weekend, Haley drew attention to the 77-year-old former president seeming to confuse her and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, directly taking on his mental fitness in ways she'd only vaguely alluded to before.

The punches didn't land, but Haley continued them Tuesday night, digging again at Trump's mental fitness during her concession speech. "Most Americans do not want a rematch between Biden and Trump," Haley said. "The first party to retire its 80-year-old candidate is going to be the party that wins this election."

Biden win doesn't count

Joe Biden did not put his name on the ballot for the New Hampshire primary. The results are not binding for convention delegates. He won anyway, thanks to an aggressive write-in campaign. Biden muscled the Democratic National Committee into giving South Carolina, the state that set him on a path to the White House with a victory in 2020, the first official party primary. It's on Feb. 3.

Like Trump, Biden could read good news in the results, with roughly 8 in 10 Democrats approving of his handling of the economy, along with a warning: About half said that, at age 81, he's too old to run, and about half disapprove of his handling of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, according to AP VoteCast.

Both men are clearly in commanding positions ... for a rematch that many voters have said they do not want.

North Korea fires cruise missiles into Yellow Sea

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea fired several cruise missiles Wednesday, according to the South's military, another weapons demonstration on the Korean Peninsula as divisions between the neighboring countries widen.

The missiles were launched toward the Yellow Sea at 7 a.m., South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a text to reporters. No additional details were provided.

The South's military is "closely cooperating" with its American counterparts and the missiles are being analyzed by intelligence agencies from both countries, the message said. North Korea, which launched 24 ballistic missiles in 2023, kicked off the new year with a ballistic missile launch and artillery fire.

The regime fired around 350 artillery shells toward its southern maritime border in a three-

day span starting Jan. 5 and launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile toward the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, on Jan. 14.

Pyongyang is not explicitly banned by the U.N. Security Council from firing cruise missiles, unlike ballistic missiles. Cruise missiles are powered by jet engines and fly at lower altitudes than rocket-powered ballistic missiles.

Wednesday's launches come roughly a week after Kim threatened to amend the North's constitution to erase references to reunifying with South Korea and scrap a host of inter-Korean peace-building measures.

During a Supreme People's Assembly in Pyongyang on Jan. 15, Kim described South Korea as the North's "primary foe" and proposed destroying symbols of reunification, including an inter-Korean railway, communication lines and a monument in Pyongyang, according

to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

Satellite images obtained by Planet Labs suggested North Korea demolished the Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification, according to a Tuesday report from NK News, a news organization focused on the communist regime.

The 98-foot-tall, arched granite monument symbolized peace, independence and national solidarity, according to the South Korean Ministry of Unification's website. The project took North Korea two years to build and was completed in 2001.

The monument was last seen in satellite images four days after Kim's speech; it is unclear when it was removed, NK News reported.

Pyongyang's policy shift comes about a month after both Koreas abandoned their five-year military deconfliction agreement.

Lockheed says F-35 deliveries delayed

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

Lockheed Martin is again pushing back its timeline for upgrading the F-35 Lighting II, which prompted the company to cut the number of the fifth-generation fighter jets it expects to deliver to the U.S. military this year.

The first deliveries are likely to begin in the third quarter of 2024, CEO Jim Taiclet said during an earnings call Tuesday.

The latest iteration of the F-35 was originally slated to roll out in April 2023. Then the second quarter of 2024 became the target.

The delays stem from Technology Refresh 3, an upgrade that would provide better target recognition and advanced sensing, jamming and cybersecurity capabilities, among other things, according to the company.

Because of the setbacks, Lockheed will likely deliver between 75 and 100 F-35s this year instead of a planned 156, Taiclet said.

The world's largest defense contractor has been producing the new jets at its plant in Fort Worth, Texas, since July. Lockheed has been storing them until the technology upgrade is finalized.

"We are taking the time and attention to get this technology insertion right the first time because it will be absolutely worth it," Taiclet said, adding that the company is still trying to finish developing the upgrade before the third quarter.

Without payment for the aircraft, the company's F-35 revenues declined \$400 million last year.

Democratic lawmakers in Oregon backpedal on drug decriminalization

Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — Democratic lawmakers in Oregon on Tuesday unveiled a sweeping new bill that would undo a key part of the state's first-in-the-nation drug decriminalization law, a recognition that public opinion has soured on the measure amid rampant public drug use during the fentanyl crisis.

The bill would recriminalize the possession of small amounts of drugs as a low-level misdemeanor, enabling police to confiscate them and crack down on their use on sidewalks and in

parks, its authors said.

It also aims to make it easier to prosecute dealers, to access addiction treatment medication, and to obtain and keep housing without facing discrimination for using that medication.

"It's the compromise path, but also the best policy that we can come up with to make sure that we are continuing to keep communities safe and save lives," state Sen. Kate Lieber, a Portland Democrat, told The Associated Press.

Voters passed the pioneering

decriminalization law, Measure 110, with 58% support in 2020. But Democratic legislators who championed it as a way to treat addiction as a public health matter, not a crime, are now contending with one of the nation's largest spikes in overdose deaths, along with intensifying pressure from Republicans and growing calls from a well-funded campaign group to overhaul it.

Researchers say it's too soon to determine whether the law has contributed to the state's deadly overdose surge.

Russia accuses Ukraine of downing plane

Associated Press

A Russian military transport plane crashed Wednesday in a border region near Ukraine, and Moscow accused Kyiv of shooting it down, saying all 74 people aboard were killed, including 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war headed for a swap. Russia offered no evidence and Ukraine did not immediately confirm or deny it.

Video of the crash on social media from the Belgorod border region of Russia showed a plane falling from the sky in a snowy, rural area, and a massive ball of fire erupting where it apparently hit the ground.

The Associated Press could not confirm who was aboard or other details on what brought the plane down. Throughout the 700-day war, Russia and Ukraine have traded conflicting accusations, and establishing the facts has often been difficult, both because of the constraints of a war zone and because each side tightly controls information.

In a statement, the Russian Defense Ministry said the Il-76 transport plane was carrying 65 POWs, a crew of six and three Russian service members. It said Russian radar regis-

tered the launch of two missiles from Ukraine's Kharkiv region that borders Belgorod.

Hours after the crash, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine made no mention of it in a statement. But it added that Ukraine targets Russian military transport planes believed to be delivering missiles, especially near the border.

Russia lost two warplanes and two helicopters in its own airspace in one day in May 2023. Kyiv officials initially denied involvement but later said they had used Patriot missiles to hit the aircraft.

The Kharkiv and Belgorod regions have long been a focus of the fighting between the neighbors, including airstrikes with missiles and drones.

First responders rushed to the crash site in the Korochansky district of Belgorod, state news agency Tass reported, citing an emergency services official. The Defense Ministry in Moscow said a military commission was headed to the scene.

The Russian military said the POWs were being flown to the region for a prisoner swap when the plane was downed. The Il-76 is de-

signed to carry up to 225 troops, cargo, military equipment and weapons, according to Russia's military export agency.

The Ukrainian military intelligence spokesman, Andrii Yusov, confirmed to media that a prisoner swap was to happen Wednesday but was not going ahead. He said the agency is checking whether Ukrainian POWs were on the plane.

The Russian Defense Ministry said the plane was headed to the Belgorod region from the Chkalovsky airfield in the Moscow region, and the POW swap was scheduled to take place at the Kolotilovka crossing on the Russian-Ukrainian border. The crossing is about 85 miles west of the village of Yablono, near where the plane fell.

Russian officials and lawmakers expressed outrage and questioned whether there should be further prisoner swaps. The most recent one, brokered by the United Arab Emirates, took place this month and was the biggest to date, with 230 Ukrainian POWs returning home and 248 Russians released. It was the first in almost five months and the 49th of the war.

Patients, staff trapped in hospital amid fighting in southern Gaza

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces battled Palestinian militants on Wednesday near the main hospital in Gaza's second-largest city where medics said hundreds of patients and thousands of displaced people were trapped by the fighting.

Israel has ordered residents to leave a swath of downtown Khan Younis that includes Nasser Hospital and two smaller medical facilities as it pushes ahead with its 3-month-old offensive against Hamas. The United Nations humanitarian office said the area was home to 88,000 Palestinians and was hosting another 425,000 displaced by fighting elsewhere.

But the aid group Doctors Without Borders said fleeing was not an option for many. It said its staff was trapped inside Nasser with some 850 patients and thousands of displaced people because the surrounding roads were inaccessible or too dangerous. The hospital is one of only two in southern Gaza that can still treat critically ill patients, the group said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to press ahead with the offensive until "complete victory" against Hamas, which started the war with its assault across

the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people in Israel and abducting another 250.

The Israeli military said its forces were battling militants inside the city after encircling it the day before. It said aircraft were striking targets as part of the operations there and had also targeted suspected militants in central and northern Gaza.

Thousands of people fled south from Khan Younis on Tuesday toward the town of Rafah. The U.N. says some 1.5 million people are crowded into shelters and tent camps in and around Rafah, which is on the border with Egypt.

Even there, Palestinians have found little safety, with Israel regularly carrying out strikes in and around the town. Palestinian witnesses said that in recent days Israeli soldiers and tanks had pushed into parts of Muwasi, a sandy area along the coast that Israel had declared a safe zone, where tens of thousands of people were living in tents.

Hamas is still attacking Israeli forces, even in some of the most devastated areas, and firing rockets into Israel. An attack Monday near the border killed 21 soldiers as they were preparing explosives for a controlled demolition.

Sweden's NATO bid now faces 1 hurdle: Hungary

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish legislators on Tuesday endorsed Sweden's membership in NATO, lifting a major hurdle on the previously nonaligned country's entry into the military alliance.

Lawmakers ratified Sweden's accession protocol 287 to 55, with ruling party members saying the Nordic country's tougher stance on Kurdish militants was key to winning approval. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also previously linked the ratification to Turkey's desire to buy fighter jets from the U.S.

The ratification comes into effect after its publication in the Official Gazette, which was expected to be swift.

Hungary then becomes the only NATO member not to have ratified Sweden's accession.

NATO-member Turkey had been delaying Sweden's membership for more than a year, accusing the country of being too lenient toward groups that Ankara regards as security threats. It sought concessions from Stockholm, including moves to counter militants.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

20 people rescued from ice floe in Lake Erie

OH PORT CLINTON — Twenty people were rescued from an ice floe in Lake Erie, the Coast Guard said Monday.

The Coast Guard's Ninth District Great Lakes station said it received a report about 10:20 a.m. that the people were stuck on a mile-long floe about a half-mile off Catawba Island State Park near Port Clinton in Ohio.

A Coast Guard helicopter was sent from Air Station Detroit and two airboats headed to the scene from nearby Station Marblehead, said Petty Officer Jessica Fontenette. Rescuers from the Put-In-Bay fire department on South Bass Island and the Ottawa County sheriff's office also assisted.

NYC to wipe out \$2B in medical debt for 500K

NY NEW YORK — New York City intends to wipe out more than \$2 billion in medical debt for up to 500,000 residents, tackling a top cause of personal bankruptcy, Mayor Eric Adams announced Monday.

The city is working with RIP Medical Debt, a nonprofit that buys medical debt in bulk from hospitals and debt collectors for pennies on the dollar. The group targets the debt of people with low incomes or financial hardships and then forgives the amounts.

Under the program, the city will spend \$18 million over three years.

The mayor called the debt relief program the largest municipal initiative of its kind in the

country, though RIP Medical Debt has worked with other municipalities.

Wisconsin college to end in-person instruction

WI GREEN BAY — Another Universities of Wisconsin two-year campus plans to end in-person instruction in the face of financial hardships.

University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Chancellor Michael Alexander announced Friday that the university's branch campus in Marinette will cease in-person instruction at the end of the spring semester, WLUK-TV reported. The school will continue to offer online instruction.

The Marinette campus is one of three two-year branch schools that UWGB runs. The others are in Manitowoc and Sheboygan. Only 213 students enrolled at the Marinette campus for the 2023-24 academic year, about half of the enrollment at each of the other two-year campuses.

Gun shop that sold AR-15 used in bank shooting sued

KY LOUISVILLE — The Kentucky gun shop that sold an assault weapon to a man who used it to kill five co-workers and wrote in his journal the gun was "so easy" to buy is facing a lawsuit filed Monday from survivors and families of the victims.

The civil suit filed in Louisville alleges River City Firearms should have been more suspicious of the sale and noticed red flags when Connor Sturgeon bought the gun six days before the April 10 shooting. Sturgeon, 25, walked into

Old National Bank and opened fire on co-workers who were having a morning meeting, killing five and injuring several others. A responding police officer was also shot.

River City Firearms is a federally licensed dealer, which means sellers there are "trained to spot individuals who ... may have nefarious intentions," according to the lawsuit. Patrons inside the store said Sturgeon had little knowledge of firearms and appeared embarrassed during the purchase, the lawsuit said. The shop has a "legal duty" to withhold a sale from a buyer who it can reasonably tell might be a danger to others, the suit said.

Repeal on organized retail theft law blocked

VA RICHMOND — A move to repeal a new Virginia law that makes organized retail theft a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison was defeated for this year after members of a House subcommittee voted Monday to send the bill to the Virginia State Crime Commission for further study.

The new law, which went into effect in July, was passed by the state legislature last year with bipartisan support, including from Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin and state Attorney General Jason Miyares.

It makes it a Class 3 felony for anyone to conspire or act in concert with one or more people to steal retail merchandise with a value exceeding \$5,000 in a 90-day period, with the intent to sell the stolen goods for profit.

The Virginia law was passed at a time when viral videos on

social media showed groups of thieves brazenly stealing bags of merchandise from stores around the country. The National Conference of State Legislatures said then that at least two dozen states had enacted laws to address organized retail theft.

Corruption probe leads to dismissal of 150 DWIs

NM ALBUQUERQUE — More than 150 cases alleging that motorists drove while intoxicated have been dismissed as part of a federal public corruption investigation, authorities said.

The FBI investigation led the 2nd Judicial District Attorney's Office in Albuquerque to dismiss 152 misdemeanor DWI cases as of Friday morning, the office said. Those cases could still be refiled.

Search warrants were served at multiple locations last week, including at the homes of at least three Albuquerque police officers, the Albuquerque Journal reported. No one has been arrested or charged in the investigation as of late last week.

Three Albuquerque police officers combined filed 136 of the 152 DWI cases, according to court records. At least 107 of those were filed last year — making up 10% of such cases for the Albuquerque Police Department, records showed.

The fallout also led to the resignation of a prominent defense attorney, Thomas Clear III, as chairman of the New Mexico Law Offices of the Public Defender Commission. The 11-member panel operates as an independent agency. Clear served as chairman since August 2017.

— From wire reports



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Beltré, Mauer, Helton elected to Baseball HOF

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Todd Helton thought back to when he was a kid being coached by his father, Jerry, a minor league catcher in the 1960s.

“When I would go 1-for-3 — and it’s a bad day when you’re young — he’d say 1-for-3 gets you into the Hall of Fame,” Helton said.

Helton, Adrián Beltré and Joe Mauer were voted into Cooperstown on Tuesday, feeling elation and relief when they were rewarded with baseball’s highest honor.

Beltré was a no-doubt, first-ballot choice after batting .286 with 477 homers, 1,707 RBIs and 3,166 hits for four teams over 21 seasons. The third baseman appeared on 366 of 385 ballots (95.1%) cast by members of the Baseball Writers’ Association of America.

Helton made it on his sixth try, with voters taking time to warm to statistics inflated by the thin mile-high air of Denver’s Coors Field over 17 seasons, all with the Colorado Rockies. The first baseman got 307 votes for 79.7% after falling 11 short last year when Scott Rolen was elected. Helton

started at 16.5% support in 2019.

“I was the most superstitious guy in the world,” Helton said. “I hadn’t been superstitious in 10 years until today.”

Mauer (293, 76.1%) joined Johnny Bench and Iván Rodríguez as the only first-ballot picks who were primarily catchers, and at 40 became the youngest living Hall of Famer. He got 293 votes (76.1%), four more than the 75% needed, after batting .306 with 143 homers and 906 RBIs in 15 years, all with his hometown Minnesota Twins.

“Goes by way too fast,” Mauer said.

Beltré, Mauer and Helton will be inducted July 21 along with Jim Leyland, elected last month by the contemporary era committee for managers, executives and umpires. There are 273 players among 346 people in the Hall, and just 60 of those players were elected on the first try.

Beltré becomes the fifth Dominican-born Hall of Famer after Juan Marichal, Pedro Martínez, Vladimir Guerrero and David Ortiz.

“I’m proud of the fact that I

was able to play for a long time and be able to compete at the highest level,” Beltré said. “I’m honored to be in the Hall of Fame. It’s something that I never even dreamed of.”

Reliever Billy Wagner was five votes short at 284 (73.8%) but up from 68.1% last year. He will appear on the ballot for the 10th and final time in 2025, when Ichiro Suzuki and CC Sabathia are newly eligible.

Gary Sheffield got 246 votes for 63.9% in his final appearance on the BBWAA ballot, up from 55% last year and 11.7% in 2015. He is eligible for consideration by the contemporary baseball player committee, which next meets in December 2025.

Beltré, a four-time All-Star and five-time Gold Glove winner, played for the Los Angeles Dodgers (1998-2004), Seattle (2005-09), Boston (2010) and Texas (2011-18). His 2,759 games at third base are second to Brooks Robinson’s 2,870 and his 636 doubles are 11th.

Helton, a five-time All-Star first baseman and the 2000 major league batting champion, hit .345 with 200 homers and 791 RBIs at home and .287 with

142 homers and 547 RBIs on the road.

“Pitchers get hurt — they say you can’t throw in thin air. And then hitters get dinked because they play Colorado,” Helton said. “I’m not embarrassed or anything about my home and road numbers. Going on the road after hitting in Colorado is hard. The ball breaks more and it’s a huge adjustment going through the season.”

Mauer was a six-time All-Star, three-time Gold Glove winner and the 2009 AL MVP. An All-Star in six of his first 10 big league seasons and the only catcher to win three batting titles, Mauer moved to first base for his last five years following a concussion on a foul tip off the bat of the New York Mets’ Ike Davis on Aug. 19, 2013, an injury that ended Mauer’s season.

His concussion symptoms returned May 11, 2018, when he had whiplash while diving for a foul ball at Anaheim. He tried to play through it for a week but missed 25 games and retired after the season. He also had three knee operations.

“I feel effects of some of those things like that,” he said.

Zverev ousts Alcaraz, moves into Australian Open semis

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Alexander Zverev made no mistake with his second chance to close out a win over No. 2-ranked Carlos Alcaraz on Wednesday night and moved into an Australian Open semifinal against two-time finalist Daniil Medvedev.

The sixth-seeded Zverev was a up a break in the third set at 5-3 and missed a chance to serve it out, but the Olympic champion didn’t blink when he got another chance in the fourth, finishing off a 6-1, 6-3, 6-7 (2), 6-4 victory.

Alcaraz won Wimbledon last year and was the only player to beat 10-time Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic in a Grand Slam match in 2023. The 20-year-old Spaniard won’t get the chance in Australia this time.

It was Zverev’s first win over a top-5 player at a Grand Slam, and the reward was a spot in the semis for the seventh time at a major.

“Look, I’m playing one of the best players in the world, especially over the last two years,” Zverev said. “He’s been No. 1, No. 2 constantly. He’s won two Grand Slams. And when you’re up 6-1, 6-3, 5-2, you start thinking. I mean, we’re all human.”

“Then when you start winning, obviously your brain starts going. It’s not always helpful, but I’m happy I got it at the end. I fought back quite well in the end, didn’t let go.”

Medvedev, a two-time finalist in Australia, outlasted ninth-seeded Hubert Hurkacz 7-6 (4), 2-6, 6-3, 5-7, 6-4 to make it to the semifinals for the third time in four years. Djokovic will play Jannik Sinner in the other semifinal.

Zverev said he’d been taking some beatings from Medvedev recently but “maybe this will be it. Maybe this will be the place.”

No. 12-seeded Zheng Qinwen and Ukrainian qualifier Dayana Yastremska won women’s quarterfinals on Day 11 and will play their first Grand Slam semi when they meet after a night’s sleep.

The sixth-seeded Zverev was on top of Alcaraz early, getting 16 of his 18 first serves in-to play in the first set and winning the point on all but two.

He clinched the victory at about 1:20 a.m. local time, letting out a scream of relief and shaking both arms in celebration.

Medvedev’s celebration was more like a sigh of relief. He led 4-2 in the fourth set, but No. 9 Hurkacz rallied to force a fifth and took it to a grueling four hours.

Bucks fire Griffin despite 30-13 record

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — The Milwaukee Bucks fired Adrian Griffin as coach on Tuesday after just 43 games despite having one of the league's top records midway through his first season.

"This was a difficult decision to make during the season," Bucks general manager Jon Horst said in a statement announcing the move. "We are working immediately toward hiring our next head coach. We thank Coach Griffin for his hard work and contributions to the team."

Joe Prunty, who had been an

assistant coach on Griffin's staff, will serve as the Bucks' interim head coach. Horst was to speak at a news conference Wednesday, before the Bucks' home game with the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Milwaukee is 30-13 to tie the Minnesota Timberwolves for the league's second-best record entering Tuesday. The Bucks are 3½ games behind the Boston Celtics in the Eastern Conference.

But the dip in Milwaukee's defensive performance had raised concerns about the Bucks' viability as a championship contender even after they

had acquired seven-time all-NBA guard Damian Lillard before the season to team up with two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo.

The Bucks rank 22nd in the NBA in defensive rating — down from fourth a year earlier — despite having two of the NBA's top defenders in Antetokounmpo and 7-footer Brook Lopez. Antetokounmpo was named the NBA's defensive player of the year in 2020, while Lopez finished second in last season's balloting.

Milwaukee had given Griffin his first head coaching job last summer after firing Mike Bu-

denholzer, who led the Bucks in 2021 to their first title in half a century. The Bucks had posted the most combined regular-season and playoff wins of any team during Budenholzer's tenure and had the league's best regular-season record in three of his five seasons on the job.

Budenholzer's firing came after the top-seeded Bucks were stunned 4-1 by the Miami Heat in the first round of last season's playoffs.

Griffin, 49, had spent 16 seasons as an NBA assistant, including the last five with the Toronto Raptors. That followed a nine-year NBA playing career.

McCollum helps Pelicans set franchise points record

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — CJ McCollum went 9-for-13 from 3-point range and tied his season high with 33 points, Zion Williamson had 17 points and a career-high 11 assists as the New Orleans Pelicans set a franchise record for points with a 153-124 victory over the Utah Jazz on Tuesday night.

The Pelicans' previous record for points in a game was 149 in a victory over the Sacramento Kings in October 2018. The Pelicans also set a franchise record with 41 assists.

"It was just an incredible performance by the guys in that locker room, sharing the basketball, rebounding," Pelicans coach Willie Green said. "CJ ignited the whole group. He got us going early. It's extremely gratifying to see the team buy into what we're trying to accomplish. It's great for them to continue to trust that if the shots are open for us, we're going to take them."

The Pelicans put the ball in Williamson's hands as a point forward from the outset, and he responded by willingly distributing the ball. Williamson has

played the point sparingly this season at the end of quarters, but not usually at the start of the game when he is teamed with Brandon Ingram.

"It's just the coaches and my teammates trusting me to be 'Point Zion' throughout most of the game and where my teammates are going to be," Williamson said. "The coaches asked, 'What is your mindset at the beginning of a game?' and it was to get the lay of the land. The coaches told me I needed to be more aggressive at the start of the game."

Herb Jones had 22 for the Pelicans, Brandon Ingram scored 18 and Jonas Valanciunas added 17.

McCollum went 11-for-17 from the floor, and the Pelicans shot 57.1% from the field.

McCollum said he was energized by three days of rest, practice and film study following a disappointing loss to Phoenix last Saturday.

"The NBA should give us three days in between games more often," he said, laughing.

Utah, which lost its third consecutive game, was led by Collin Sexton with 22 points and seven

assists and Simone Fontecchio with 18 points.

Knicks 108, Nets 103: Jalen Brunson scored 30 points, Julius Randle added 30 points, nine rebounds and seven assists and host New York extended its winning streak to four games with a win over Brooklyn.

New York trailed by nine points at the start the fourth quarter and outscored the Nets 10-3 in the final two minutes to seal the win.

Mikal Bridges hit a career-high seven 3-pointers and scored 36 points for Brooklyn.

Clippers 127, Lakers 116: Kawhi Leonard had a triple-double, James Harden had 23 points and 10 assists and the Clippers beat the Lakers for their 11th win in 13 games.

Leonard had 25 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists, including three key ones in the fourth when the Clippers were clinging to a lead.

D'Angelo Russell led the Lakers with 27 points and 10 assists and Anthony Davis had 26 points and 12 rebounds with LeBron James watching from the bench.

James is day-to-day with left

ankle pain.

Thunder 111, Trail Blazers 109: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 33 points and Jalen Williams added 19 points, including the game-winner with two seconds left, to help host Oklahoma City beat Portland.

Gilgeous-Alexander intercepted a lob intended for Deandre Ayton right before the buzzer sounded, sealing Oklahoma City's seventh straight win over Portland.

Scout Henderson scored 19 points and Anfernee Simons added 17 for Portland.

Nuggets 114, Pacers 109: Nikola Jokic scored 31 points as part of his 13th triple-double of the season to help visiting Denver send Indiana to its third straight loss.

Jokic's final basket — a 3-pointer with 4.7 seconds left — sealed the win. The All-Star forward also had 13 rebounds and 10 assists as the Nuggets won their third straight.

Myles Turner had 22 points to lead the Pacers and Pascal Siakam added 16 points and 10 rebounds in his first home game since being traded from Toronto to Indiana last week.

Oilers stretch win streak to 14 games

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Warren Foegele and Evander Kane each had a goal and an assist and the Edmonton Oilers extended their winning streak to 14 games with a 4-1 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets on Tuesday night.

Connor McDavid and Dylan Holloway also scored for the Oilers (27-15-1), who scored three times in the third period to become the seventh team in NHL history to win 14 in a row. The league record for consecutive wins is 17 by the Pittsburgh Penguins in 1992-93. The 2016-17 Blue Jackets have the second-longest winning streak in NHL history at 16.

“I think we just all knew if we played our brand of hockey in the third, because we didn’t in the first two periods obviously, we liked our chances,” Kane said. “I thought we came out and did that for the most part.”

Edmonton goalie Stuart Skinner made 27 saves and won his 11th straight game, passing Grant Fuhr for the longest single-season winning streak in Oilers history.

“It means a lot,” said Skinner, who is 18-2 in his last 20 games. “I was feeling a lot of emotions, especially when I went out on the ice for the first star. It is pretty cool to be able to break a record from one of the best goalies to ever live.”

Foegele credited Skinner for being on his toes while the rest of the team looked to find its footing.

“That honestly could have been a 5-0 deficit after two periods. He was rock solid. He has been playing unbelievable,” Foegele said. “He has been unreal for the last few months.”

The Oilers are 22-3-0 in their last 25 games and have gone a franchise-record 12 games allowing two or fewer goals.

Dmitri Voronkov scored for the Blue Jackets (14-23-9), who have lost five of their last six games. Elvis Merzlikins finished with 20 saves.

Lightning 6, Flyers 3: Nikita Kucherov had three goals and an assist, leading visiting Tampa Bay past Philadelphia.

Kucherov moved into the NHL lead with 80 points, continuing his battle with Colorado’s Nathan MacKinnon for the top spot.

Sharks 3, Rangers 2 (OT): Tomás Hertl scored 1:29 into overtime and NHL-worst San Jose rallied past visiting New York for its first three-game winning streak of the season.

Senators 4, Canadiens 1: Shane Pinto scored his first goal since he completed a 41-game suspension for activities related to sports wagering, and visiting Ottawa beat Montreal for the second time in six days.

Blues 4, Flames 3: Brandon

Saad had two goals, helping visiting St. Louis rally past Calgary.

Brayden Schenn and Jordan Kyrou also scored for St. Louis (23-20-2), which trailed 3-1 in the second period.

Stars 5, Red Wings 4: Roope Hintz had two goals and an assist, leading visiting Dallas past Detroit.

Wild 5, Capitals 3: Marcus Johansson scored twice in host Minnesota’s third consecutive victory, and Joel Eriksson Ek and Marcus Foligno each had a goal and an assist.

Golden Knights 3, Islanders 2: Adin Hill made 40 saves in his return from an injury, leading visiting Vegas past New York.

Ducks 4, Sabres 2: Jakob Silfverberg scored two goals, defenseman Olen Zellweger had an assist in his NHL debut and host Anaheim snapped its three-game skid with a victory over Buffalo.

Cooper, South Carolina roll past No. 6 Kentucky

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Ta’Lon Cooper scored 20 points and Jacobi Wright had 14 with four 3-pointers as South Carolina pulled away in the second half and beat No. 6 Kentucky 79-62 on Tuesday night.

The Gamecocks (16-3, 4-2 Southeastern Conference) beat their highest-ranked opponent at home since taking down No. 1 Kentucky 68-62 14 years ago.

In this one, they held the nation’s top scoring team that averaged more than 91 points to its lowest output of the season.

Fans easily burst through the thin yellow ropes to rush the court and celebrate the latest high point in a surprising season. It should cost South Carolina a \$100,000 fine from the SEC under league policy, but no one was concerned about that at the moment.

It’s the third straight loss at South Carolina for the Wildcats (14-4, 4-2) and fourth in their last seven meetings in the series.

Rob Dillingham led Kentucky with 16 points and Antonio Reeves added 15.

Reeves, Kentucky’s leading scorer at 19.6 points a game, shook off a 1-for-7 shooting first half with seven points early after halftime and the Wildcats were within 40-38 with 15:04 to play.

No. 2 Purdue 99, Michigan 67: Lance Jones scored a season-high 24 points and Zach Edey added 16 points and 10 rebounds to lead the host Boilermakers to a rout of the Wolverines.

Jaelin Llewellyn led Michigan (7-12, 2-6) with 16 points.

No. 4 Houston 75, No. 21 BYU 68: L.J. Cryer scored 23

points to lead visiting Houston over BYU.

Noah Waterman led BYU with 17 points.

Texas 75, No. 11 Oklahoma 60: Max Abmas scored 22 points to help the visiting Longhorns roll past the Sooners.

Jalon Moore scored 15 points and Otega Oweh added 10 for Oklahoma.

No. 12 Duke 83, Louisville 69: Tyrese Proctor scored a career-high 24 points, including 13 after halftime with several clutch baskets, Mark Mitchell returned from injury to add 20 with 12 rebounds and the visiting Blue Devils outlasted the Cardinals.

Brandon Huntley-Hatfield had 20 points for Louisville (6-13, 1-7).

No. 13 Wisconsin 61, Minnesota 59: Tyler Wahl had 16

points and hit two free throws with 5 seconds left to help the visiting Badgers beat the rival Gophers.

Minnesota’s Elijah Hawkins had 16 points, nine assists, five rebounds and two steals.

No. 16 Dayton 66, La Salle 54: Daron Holmes II scored 22 points and Javon Bennett and Nate Santos each scored 13 to lead the visiting Flyers over the Explorers for their 13th straight win.

Andres Marrero led La Salle (10-9, 1-5) with 13 points.

No. 17 Creighton 85, Xavier 78: Trey Alexander scored a season-high 27 points and Baylor Scheierman had 15 of his 20 in the second half, leading the host Bluejays past the Musketeers.

Desmond Claude and Dayvion McKnight had 20 points apiece for Xavier (10-9, 4-4).