

Biden: Afghanistan mission ends Aug. 31

President says that ‘speed is safety’ as US prepares to end nearly 20-year conflict

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Thursday said the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on Aug. 31, saying “speed is safety” as the United States seeks to end the nearly 20-year war.

“We did not go to Afghanistan to nation build,” Biden said in a speech to update his administration’s ongoing efforts to wind down the U.S. war in Afghanistan. “Afghan leaders have to come together and drive toward a future.”

Biden also amplified the justification of his decision to end U.S. military operations even as the Taliban make rapid advances in significant swaths of the country.

The effort to further explain his thinking on Afghanistan comes as the administration in recent days has repeatedly sought to frame ending the conflict as a decision that Biden made after concluding it’s an “unwinnable war” and one that “does not have a military solution.”

“How many more, how many more thousands of American daughters and sons are you willing to risk?” Biden said to those calling for the U.S. to extend the military operation. He added, “I will not send another generation of Americans to war in Afghanistan, with no reasonable expectation of achieving a different outcome.”

Biden said he didn’t trust the Taliban, but trusted the capacity of the Afghan military to defend the government.

Before his speech, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden administration officials always anticipated an “up-tick” in violence and greater turmoil as

the U.S. withdrawal moved forward. She added that prolonging U.S. military involvement, considering former President Donald Trump had already agreed to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 2021, would have led to an escalation of attacks on American troops.

“The question fundamentally facing him was after 20 years was he going to commit more American troops to a civil war in Afghanistan,” Psaki said.

Biden said it was “highly unlikely” that one government will control Afghanistan after the U.S. pullout, and urged the Afghan government to reach a deal with the Taliban.

The president added that there is no “mission accomplished” moment as the U.S. war comes to an end.

“The mission was accomplished in that we got Osama bin Laden, and terrorism is not emanating from that part of the world,” he said.

GAO says Pentagon should scale back F-35 program

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

The failure to control F-35 aircraft cost overruns should force the Pentagon to scale back its fleet of advanced warplanes unless it can find new savings, a government watchdog agency report said.

The development of the advanced F-35 fighter, the most costly weapon system in Defense Department history, has faced steadily rising costs for years. And while the military has tried to reduce expenses, those efforts “have produced limited results,” the Government Accountability Office report released Wednesday said.

“DOD’s inability to arrest the increases in F-35 sustainment costs and make progress toward the services’ established affordability constraints is due in part to the department not having a clear, strategic approach across the F-35 program,” the GAO said.

About 400 F-35s are already in service, making the aircraft a growing portion of the Pentagon’s tactical fleet.

The Pentagon plans to procure nearly

2,500 F-35s with an estimated life cycle cost exceeding \$1.7 trillion, the GAO said. About \$1.3 trillion of those costs are related to operating and sustaining the aircraft. The projection reflects an increase of more than \$150 billion over 2012 estimates, the GAO said. It is also billions more than the services can afford, making current plans unsustainable, the GAO said.

“We recommended, among other things, that Congress consider making future F-35 acquisitions contingent on progress reducing sustainment costs,” it said.

The GAO also recommended that Congress require the Pentagon to report annually on progress in meeting cost constraints and develop an affordable plan to sustain the future F-35 fleet.

The Air Force faces the greatest challenge in cutting costs. It is purchasing about 70% of the F-35s and must slash what it spends on each plane by 47%, or the readiness of its squadrons could be “negatively impacted,” the GAO said.

Even if the Air Force acquired all of its spare F-35 parts for free over the next few decades, it would still fall considerably short of that cost-cutting goal, the report said.

The F-35 program has faced problems and delays from the beginning. Many of the aircraft remain unable to carry out a full range of missions, the report said.

Between 2019 and 2020, the U.S. F-35 fleet’s average annual mission capable rate — the percentage of time during which the aircraft can fly and perform one of its tasked missions — improved from 59% to 69%. Its full mission capable rate improved from 32% to 39%.

“F-35 mission capable rates ... have recently improved, but still fall short of war-fighter requirements,” the GAO said.

The Defense Department partially concurred with the GAO recommendations in a written response included with the report. The Pentagon is updating an affordability strategy document that would span the expected life cycle of the F-35 and review cost-cutting constraints.

Rockets land near US Embassy in Baghdad

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Rockets landed in and around the heavily fortified Green Zone in the Iraqi capital Baghdad, which houses the U.S. Embassy, causing material damage early Thursday, Iraqi security forces said.

Two Katyusha rockets fell near the national security building and in an open courtyard inside the Green Zone. A third rocket fell in a nearby residential area, damaging a civilian vehicle, the statement by the Iraqi security media cell said.

The attack, which came shortly before daybreak, followed two separate attacks on

bases housing U.S. troops in western Iraq and across the border in Syria, where U.S.-led coalition forces are based. The drone attack Wednesday in eastern Syria was foiled while 14 rockets landed in Al-Assad Air Base in western Iraq, lightly wounding two personnel.

The attacks come as tension is on the rise between U.S. troops and Iran-backed fighters as Baghdad and Washington negotiate a timeline for foreign troop withdrawal from Iraq. The U.S. has blamed Iran-backed militias for attacks — most of them rocket strikes — that have targeted the American

presence in Baghdad and military bases across Iraq. More recently, the attacks have become more sophisticated, with militants using drones.

Late last month, U.S. warplanes hit facilities used by Iran-backed militia groups which the Pentagon said support drone strikes inside Iraq. Four Iraqi fighters were killed in the June 27 airstrikes.

A previously unknown group claimed responsibility for the Wednesday attack on Al-Assad Air Base, saying it was a message to U.S. troops in Iraq: “We will force you to leave our lands defeated.”

Thomas returns to Yokosuka to take helm of 7th Fleet

BY ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A familiar face has taken the helm of 7th Fleet, a command he described as a “supremely credible and integrated naval force” that gives the United States and its allies an upper hand over its rivals in the Indo-Pacific region.

Vice Adm. Karl Thomas assumed command of 7th Fleet on Thursday during a ceremony at Yokosuka’s Fleet Theater. He relieved Vice Adm. William Merz, who had led the nation’s largest overseas fleet since September 2019.

Thomas most recently served as assistant deputy chief of naval operations for operations, plans and strategy at the Pentagon, but previously served as the commander of 7th Fleet’s Task Force 70 and Carrier Strike Group 5.

“This is oddly, and pleasantly, very familiar,” he said during the ceremony. “Less than two years ago, my family and I left Yokosuka and wondered if we’d ever serve our Navy in this spectacular country again — and I certainly hoped that we would.”

Merz noted the novel challenges that arose during the last half of his tenure at 7th Fleet, primarily those resulting from the

coronavirus pandemic.

The pandemic’s onset was “followed shortly by our dramatic shift from our port-to-port routine to a new, no-port-at-all routine,” he said. “Through that, we learned some things about what it truly means to be a command ship.”

Merz, Thomas and several guest speakers took a moment during the otherwise upbeat ceremony to reflect on the critical nature of 7th Fleet’s mission in the Pacific.

Operating with up to 70 ships and submarines, 150 aircraft and approximately 20,000 sailors, the fleet routinely engages in bilateral and multilateral exercises with U.S. allies.

Taliban’s rapid advances putting many cities at risk

The Washington Post

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban’s mounting pressure campaign on key cities across Afghanistan continued Wednesday as fighters battled government forces in the capital of Badghis province, the latest advance in a string of attacks on government-controlled districts since foreign forces began to withdraw in May.

Clashes reached the city center Wednesday, but Afghan government officials said the city remains in government control. Videos circulated by Taliban spokesmen showed cheering civilians on the outskirts of Qala-e Nau as dozens of militants sped by on motorcycles. In a video released by the Afghan government, the province’s governor — holding a rifle and wearing an ammunition vest — pledged to defend the city.

“The Taliban suffered casualties and

were defeated,” Hasamuiddin Shams, the provincial governor, said in the video as explosions rumbled in the background. Hours later, Ajmal Omar Shinwari, a spokesman for Afghanistan’s security forces, said the city’s perimeter had been secured.

The assault on Badghis comes as the Taliban have besieged the capitals of several provinces across the country by overrunning surrounding districts, according to interviews with local officials. The territory grab has given the Taliban control of key roadways into and out of those areas, in what one Taliban commander said was the goal of the operation.

Many of the Taliban’s advances have faced little to no resistance in the wake of the United States’ withdrawal. Without close U.S. support, specifically airstrikes, Afghan forces have been unable to hold territory

even in parts of the country far from the Taliban’s traditional heartland in the south.

“It was exactly like a dam breaking down,” said Abdul Aziz Beg, a member of the Badghis provincial council who was in the city when the assault began.

Beg said the breach was triggered by the deputy police chief deserting his post. After he fled, the Afghan police staffing key checkpoints protecting Qala-e Nau abandoned their positions, he said, allowing Taliban fighters to easily enter the provincial capital.

Shinwari, the security forces spokesman, said the commander’s departure was planned, describing it as a “tactical retreat.”

Initially, the Taliban advances were met with government resistance, but after the militants secured a handful of victories, more districts began to surrender.

US jobless claims tick up 2K from a pandemic low

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans filing for unemployment benefits rose slightly last week even while the economy and the job market appear to be rebounding from the coronavirus recession with sustained energy.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims increased by 2,000 from the previous week to 373,000. Weekly applications, which generally track the pace of layoffs, have fallen steadily this year from more than 900,000 at the start of the year. The four-week average of applications, which smooths out week-to-week volatility, is now 394,500 — the lowest such level since the pandemic erupted in March 2020.

The rollout of vaccinations is driving a potent economic recovery as businesses reopen, employers struggle to fill jobs and consumers emerge from months of lockdown to travel, shop and spend at restaurants, bars, retailers and entertainment venues.

In the first three months of the year, the government has estimated that the economy expanded at a brisk 6.4% annual rate. In the April-June quarter, the annual

rate is thought to have reached a sizzling 10%. And for all of 2021, the Congressional Budget Office has projected that growth will amount to 6.7%. That would be the fastest calendar-year expansion since 1984.

The economy is recovering so quickly that many companies can't find workers fast enough to meet their increased customer demand. On Wednesday, the government said that U.S. employers posted 9.21 million jobs in May, the most since record-keeping began in 2000.

And in June, employers added a strong 850,000 jobs, and hourly pay rose a solid 3.6% compared with a year ago — faster than the pre-pandemic annual pace and a sign that companies are being compelled to pay more to attract and keep workers.

Still, the nation remains 6.8 million jobs short of the level it had in February 2020, just before the coronavirus pandemic tore through the economy and eliminated tens of millions of jobs. And weekly applications for unemployment benefits are still comparatively high: Before the pandemic, they were typically coming in at around 220,000 a week.

World deaths at 4M amid vaccine rush

Associated Press

The global death toll from COVID-19 eclipsed 4 million Wednesday as the crisis increasingly becomes a race between the vaccine and the highly contagious delta variant.

The tally of lives lost over the past year and a half, as compiled from official sources by Johns Hopkins University, is about equal to the number of people killed in battle in all of the world's wars since 1982, according to estimates from the Peace Research Institute Oslo.

The toll is three times the number of people killed in traffic accidents around the globe every year. It is about equal to the population of Los Angeles or the nation of Georgia. It is equivalent to more than half of Hong Kong or close to 50% of New York City.

Even then, it is widely believed to be an undercount because of overlooked cases or deliberate concealment.

With the advent of the vaccine, deaths per day have plummeted to around 7,900, after topping

out at over 18,000 a day in January.

But in recent weeks, the mutant delta version of the virus first identified in India has set off alarms around the world, spreading rapidly even in vaccination success stories like the United States, Britain and Israel.

Britain, in fact, recorded a one-day total this week of more than 30,000 new infections for the first time since January, even as the government prepares to lift all remaining lockdown restrictions in England later this month.

Other countries have reimposed preventive measures, and authorities are rushing to step up the campaign to dispense shots.

At the same time, the disaster has exposed the gap between the haves and the have-nots, with vaccination drives barely getting started in Africa and other desperately poor corners of the world because of extreme shortages of shots. The U.S. and other wealthy countries have agreed to share at least 1 billion doses with struggling countries.

Tears, prayer mark end to search for condo survivors

Associated Press

SURFSIDE, Fla. — A somber moment of silence marked the end of the two-week search for survivors of a Florida condominium collapse, as rescue workers stood at solemn attention and clergy members hugged a line of local officials while many of them sobbed.

The painstaking search for survivors shifted to a recovery effort at midnight Wednesday after authorities said they had come to the agonizing conclusion that there was "no chance of life" in the rubble of the Champlain Towers South condo building in Surfside.

"We have all asked God for a

miracle, so the decision to transition from rescue to recovery is an extremely difficult one," Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said at a news conference.

The death toll stood at 54 late Wednesday. Officials said 86 people were unaccounted for, although detectives were still working to verify that each of those listed as missing was actually in the building when it collapsed.

Rescuers had spent two weeks digging through the rubble, searching in vain for any sign of life, Levine Cava said.

"They've used every possible strategy, and every possible technology available to them to

find people in the rubble," she said. "They've removed over 7 million pounds of concrete and debris from the mound. They've used sonar, cameras, dogs, heavy machinery. They've searched for void spaces and they've searched for victims. They ran into a building they were told could collapse, and they braved fire, smoke, torrential rain and strong winds in the hopes of finding people alive."

Hours before the formal transition from rescue to recovery mission, those emergency workers joined local officials, rabbis and chaplains in a moment of silence.

An accordion player unseen

on a nearby tennis court played Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," which was followed by a piccolo playing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Firefighters from Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, the federal government and elsewhere were also present.

On a tall nearby fence, families and well-wishers had posted photos of the victims, supportive messages and flowers. Firefighters hung a banner atop the fence that read "Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Mourns With You."

Officials vowed to continue the recovery efforts until they find the remains of every one of the missing.

Storm heads north; 10 hurt at Navy base

Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. — Tropical Storm Elsa carved a destructive and soaking path up the East Coast after killing at least one person in Florida and spinning up a tornado at a Navy base in Georgia that flipped recreational vehicles upside-down and blew one of them into a lake.

Elsa's winds weakened to 40 mph, but it was dropping torrential rains over the Carolinas as it made its way through South Carolina early Thursday, the National Hurricane Center said in its latest update. Elsa was expected to move over North Carolina later in the day, pass near the eastern mid-Atlantic states by Thursday night and move near or over the northeastern United States on Friday.

Some re-strengthening was possible Thursday night and Friday while the system moves close to the northeastern U.S.

A tropical storm warning was in effect north of Great Egg Inlet to Sandy Hook, N.J., and for the coast of Long Island from East Rockaway Inlet to the eastern tip along the south shore and from Port Jefferson Harbor eastward on the north shore. A warning was also in effect from New Haven, Conn., to Merrimack River, Mass., including Cape Cod, Block Island, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.

There was a chance Long Island in New York would see sustained tropical storm-force winds late Thursday night and into Friday morning, the National Weather Service in New York

warned.

Elsa seemed to spare Florida from significant damage, though it still threatened flooding downpours and caused several tornado warnings. The coasts of Georgia and South Carolina were under a tropical storm warning. Forecasters predicted Elsa would remain a tropical storm into Friday, and issued a tropical storm watch from North Carolina to Massachusetts.

Authorities in Jacksonville, Fla., said one person was killed Wednesday when a tree fell and struck two cars. The National Weather Service reported 50 mph wind gusts in the city. The tree fell during heavy rains and no one else was injured, according to Capt. Eric Prosswimmer of the Jacksonville Fire Rescue

Department.

In nearby Camden County, Ga., a possible tornado struck a park for recreational vehicles at Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base. About 10 people were injured and taken to hospitals by ambulance, said base spokesman Scott Bassett. The extent of their injuries was not immediately clear. He said some buildings on the base appeared to have been damaged as well.

An EF-2 tornado flipped over multiple RVs, blowing one of the overturned vehicles about 200 feet into a lake, the National Weather Service said in a preliminary report early Thursday after its employees surveyed the damage. Debris from the RVs was strewn throughout the park, the agency said.

Trump files lawsuit against Facebook, Twitter, YouTube

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former President Donald Trump has filed suit against three of the country's biggest tech companies, claiming he and other conservatives have been wrongfully censored. But legal experts say the suits are likely doomed to fail, given existing precedent and legal protections.

Trump announced the action against Facebook, Twitter and Google's YouTube, along with the companies' Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey and Sundar Pichai, at a press conference Wednesday in New Jersey, where he demanded that his accounts be reinstated.

Trump has been suspended from the platforms since January, when his followers violently stormed the Capitol building, trying to block Congress from certifying Joe Biden's presidential win. The companies cited concerns that Trump would incite further violence and have kept him locked out. All three declined comment Wednesday.

"We're asking the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida to order an immediate halt to social media companies' illegal, shameful censorship of the American people," Trump said of the filings. "We're going to hold big tech very accountable."

Twitter, Facebook and Google are all private companies, and users must agree to their terms of service to use their products. Under Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, social media platforms are allowed to moderate their services by removing posts that, for instance, are obscene or violate the services' own standards, so long as they are acting in "good faith." The law also generally exempts internet companies from liability for the material that users post.

But Trump and some other politicians have long argued that Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms have abused that protection and should lose their immunity — or at least have it curtailed.

Police kill alleged assailants in Haitian president's death

The Washington Post

Police killed four alleged assailants and arrested two others suspected of assassinating Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, in an attack that has escalated a spiraling political and security crisis in the impoverished Caribbean nation.

The gunmen have not been identified, but Communications Minister Pradel Henriquez described them "foreigners."

The motivation for Wednesday's overnight attack is currently unknown. Moïse, 53, dissolved parliament in January 2020 and ruled by decree as opponents and protesters demanded that he step down. Armed gangs with unclear allegiances have seized control of growing portions of the country, terrorizing the population with kidnappings, rapes and killings.

"He had obviously many enemies," said Robert Fatton, a politics professor and expert on Haiti from the University of

Virginia. "There might have been some degree of complicity on the part of those protecting the president."

His death raises questions around who is in charge of the country. Moïse had been due to install Ariel Henry, a neurologist, as prime minister on Wednesday after dismissing his predecessor Claude Joseph — the latest in a revolving door of prime ministers. It was Joseph who announced Moïse's killing on Wednesday morning, and said he was now the head of Haiti's government.

In a separate Associated Press interview, however, Henry appeared to contradict Joseph.

"It's an exceptional situation. There is a bit of confusion," he said. "I am the prime minister in office."

The Supreme Court's chief justice, who might be expected to help provide stability in a crisis, died recently of COVID-19.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Stolen van gone, 5 kids in it found safe

MD GLEN BURNIE — A van was stolen from a Maryland grocery store parking lot with five children inside, but they were soon found nearby, police said.

Anne Arundel County police said in a news release that officers responded to a Giant Food Store in Glen Burnie around 11 p.m. Monday after a caller reported that someone stole their Honda Odyssey with their five children inside.

After a brief search, police said the children were found unattended about a mile away. The stolen van has not been found, police said.

Woman charged with helping grandson flee

LA PARADIS — The grandmother of a Louisiana man charged in a fatal hit-and-run was arrested for obstruction of justice Monday after authorities determined she helped her grandson flee the scene.

Hunter Mason Johnson is accused of hitting multiple vehicles and construction worker Brady Ortego with a Ford pickup truck while driving along Interstate 310 early in the morning of Jan. 14, according to a news release from the Louisiana State Police. Ortego, 44, was thrown from the Hale Boggs Bridge in St. Charles Parish into the Mississippi River, police said. His body has yet to be recovered.

Police said Johnson, 22, left his truck on the shoulder of the highway after the crash and fled on foot. State troopers dis-

covered that he contacted his grandmother, Marie Sally Dufrene, to pick him up, which they say “prevented investigators from making an arrest at that time.”

The 73-year-old was booked into the Nelson Coleman Correctional Center. Johnson was arrested March 12.

Theft suspect arrested after dye pack explodes

NJ NEWARK — Authorities say they have arrested a New Jersey bank robbery suspect seen on surveillance video as a red dye pack exploded during his escape.

Newark public safety officials said a police detective spotted the 27-year-old man Monday on the street and arrested him. He faces robbery and weapons charges, authorities said.

Authorities allege that the male suspect walked into a Capital One branch around 10 a.m. on Saturday and passed a note to a teller saying he had a gun and demanding money. Officials said the teller gave him money including a dye pack.

Officials released surveillance video showing the suspect walking east outside the bank wearing the backpack, but as he starts to cross a street beyond the bank property, the dye pack sends up a red cloud and he runs north out of camera view.

Officials seek to solve city's feral cat problem

MI MOUNT PLEASANT — Elected officials in Mount Pleasant are hoping the city and others in the community can work together to reduce

the numbers of feral cats roaming some neighborhoods.

City commissioners this week postponed a vote on changing the current animal ordinance that would allow the impoundment of abused or neglected animals and limit the number of dogs or cats to three per household, the Mount Pleasant Morning Sun reported Wednesday.

Commissioner Lori Gillis said during the meeting that she lives in a neighborhood with feral cats, and that 15 of them got into garages and used boats as scratching posts last year.

Toyota donates 32 cars to 11 technical schools

KY VERSAILLES — Toyota Motor Manufacturing of Kentucky is donating vehicles to the Kentucky Community and Technical College System for its automotive technology programs, officials said.

The company is giving 32 cars to 11 schools across the state, news outlets reported, citing a joint statement from Toyota and the school system. The cars are 2018-2021 models of the Camry, Avalon and Lexus, including several hybrid models.

They will be used to teach students about changing vehicle technology and to help prepare them for entry-level jobs.

Crews responding to fire find explosives

NY NORTH TONAWANDA — Authorities responding to a house fire found multiple explosive devices inside an apartment and a

man with burns to his face and hands, police said.

The apartment's occupant initially said he had burned food in the kitchen Sunday, but that didn't explain the large amount of smoke, police said, so detectives were called.

Police did not say what type of explosives were found but said charges against the occupant, who was taken to a hospital with burns, were pending.

The street in North Tonawanda, north of Buffalo, was shut down for much of the day Sunday.

2 charged as cops find animals put in cages

SC BISHOPVILLE — Two women face criminal charges after South Carolina Department of Natural Resources officers found more than 200 squirrels stacked in cages inside a mobile home near Bishopville.

The department said wildlife officers also found deer, armadillos and potentially invasive nutria on the property.

Officers went to the property Tuesday to serve search warrants related to illegal possession of deer. The women are also charged with inhumane treatment to animals and illegal possession of non-native wildlife species. All the crimes are misdemeanors. The women have been released from jail.

The two women told others they were rehabilitating wildlife, Lucas said. Some animals were in cages stacked in the mobile home's living room, while others were roaming the home. Other animals were kept outside.

— From wire reports

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Lightning repeat as Stanley Cup champs

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — It only took scoring once for the Tampa Bay Lightning to strike twice and repeat as Stanley Cup champions.

Backstopped by their star goaltender and the only two Tampa Bay players on the ice without their name on the Cup, the Lightning won it all for the second time in 10 months by beating the Montreal Canadiens 1-0 in Game 5 on Wednesday night.

Andrei Vasilevskiy had a series-ending shutout for an NHL-record fifth consecutive time dating to the 2020 final. Finishing with a handful in a frantic final minute, he made 22 saves to remain undefeated in games after a loss over the past two playoffs, both contested during a deadly pandemic with the Lightning coming out on top each time.

Ross Colton and David Savard weren't around last year and made sure to put their stamp on Tampa Bay's latest title run. Savard set up Colton's goal midway through the second period past Canadiens stalwart Carey Price that fired up the crowd of over

17,000 fans at Amalie Arena.

The scene couldn't have been any further from the mirthless, empty arena where the Lightning won the Cup last September in a quarantined bubble across the continent in Edmonton, Alberta. Tampa Bay joined Pittsburgh as the only back-to-back Cup winner in the salary-cap era, but even more impressively did it amid virus protocols with the shortest span between championships in the long history of the NHL.

Never losing twice in a row thanks to a combination of Vasilevskiy's brilliance and one of the deepest rosters constructed since the cap was implemented in 2005, the Lightning solidified their status as a modern-day dynasty.

How deep? Nikita Kucherov had 32 points to join Mario Lemieux as the only players to lead the postseason in scoring two years in a row, and Brayden Point scored 14 goals through three rounds. Kucherov, Point and defenseman Victor Hedman all played through injuries, too.

It was just too much for the Canadiens, who relied again on Price to keep them in a game. He finished with 29 saves — one too few to prevent a Cup celebration for Tampa Bay.

The sunbelt franchise in a nontraditional market that didn't even exist until 1992-93 went through the NHL's most storied franchise to do it. The Lightning won the Cup for the third time in franchise history and denied Montreal a 25th league championship banner.

The Lightning also added another title for "Champa Bay," with this title coming on the heels of Tom Brady leading the Buccaneers to a Super Bowl victory in February. The Tampa Bay Rays went to the World Series last fall.

Tampa Bay's mayor had suggested the Lightning lose Game 4 on the road so they could win at home, and she got her wish as coach Jon Cooper's team became the first since Chicago in 2015 to hoist the Cup on home ice.

Pliskova, Barty push on, set up matchup in final

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — It might have been difficult for Ash Barty to imagine that a trip to her first Wimbledon final was just around the corner when she stopped playing at last month's French Open with a hip injury.

Or even when she was two points from being pushed to a third set by Angelique Kerber in their semifinal at the All England Club.

Barty does not let obstacles trouble her for too long. She figures out a way. That's why she's ranked No. 1 and now stands one win from a second Grand Slam title after beating 2018 champion Kerber 6-3, 7-6 (3) on Thursday.

"I've had ups and downs and everything in between and I wouldn't change one day or one moment or one, kind of, road that we've taken in my path and my journey," said Barty, who was the 2011 junior champion at the All England Club and stepped away from tennis for almost two years starting in 2014

because of burnout. "It's been unique. It's been incredible. It's been tough. There have been so many things that led to this point."

Her opponent in Saturday's final will be No. 8 seed Karolina Pliskova, who emerged from a power-hitting and serving display to come back to defeat No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka 5-7, 6-4, 6-4.

Pliskova produced 14 aces, Sabalenka 18. The difference: Pliskova was broken just once, Sabalenka twice.

After going 0-for-8 on break points in the first set, the first set she's dropped in six matches, Pliskova "got a bit frustrated," she acknowledged afterward.

But she went 1-for-1 in that category in each of the last two sets.

"It was just super important to stay in the game, stay focused," said Pliskova, whose coach, Sascha Bajin, used to work with Naomi Osaka and was Serena Williams' hitting partner. "That's what I did."

Neither she nor Barty had ever been past the fourth round at the grass-court Grand Slam tournament.

Pliskova, a 29-year-old from the Czech Republic, was the runner-up at the 2016 U.S. Open to three-time major champion Kerber and used to be ranked No. 1.

The 25-year-old Barty won the 2019 French Open and is currently ranked No. 1. She is the first woman from Australia to reach the title match at Wimbledon since Evonne Goolagong won the trophy in 1980; Barty has been wearing an outfit intended as a tribute to Goolagong this fortnight.

"Now to kind of give myself a chance to create some history, almost in a way that's a tribute to her, is really exciting," Barty said.

She arrived in England not having competed since June 3, when she withdrew during her second-round match in Paris, in too much pain to continue.

"To be honest, it was going to

be touch-and-go. Everything had to be spot on to give myself a chance to play pain-free and to play knowing that I could trust my body," Barty said. "If you told me a month ago we'd be sitting in this position, I really wouldn't have thought that we would even get close."

On Thursday, she faced a big test in the second set, which Kerber was two points from owning when Barty served at deuce while trailing 5-2. The full-capacity crowd was backing the comeback effort for the 33-year-old German, too, with shouts of "Come on, Angie!" and "Go on, Kerber!"

But Barty steeled herself to hold there, then broke to get within 5-4 with a cross-court forehand passing winner.

That was part of a 38-16 advantage in total winners for Barty, responsible more than anything else for her triumph. And this was remarkable: She compiled that many point-ending shots while making only 16 unforced errors.

No fans allowed at Tokyo Olympics

BY HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Olympic events in and around Japan's capital will take place without fans in the stands, after the prime minister announced a state of emergency in Tokyo on Thursday to combat the surging number of coronavirus cases.

The local organizing committee met with the International Olympic Committee and made the no-spectators decision for venues in Tokyo and the nearby prefectures of Chiba, Saitama and Kanagawa, according to the Reuters news agency.

Hours earlier, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced the fourth emergency during a Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters meeting. It takes effect Monday and lasts until

Aug. 22, he said. The Olympics open July 23 and conclude Aug. 8.

"Although the number of new cases is declining in many areas in Japan, the number of infected cases is on the rise in metropolitan areas centering around Tokyo since the end of last month," he said.

"There is a need to strengthen measures in order to prevent the infection from spreading nationally again while considering the effects of the variant strain, although the number of those in serious condition and occupancy rate of beds in hospitals are low," Suga added.

The Japanese government will also extend focused, anti-infection measures for Osaka, Chiba, Saitama and Kanagawa prefectures until Aug. 22 but

will lift those restrictions in Hokkaido, Aichi, Kyoto, Hyogo and Fukuoka prefectures on Sunday as originally planned.

Kanagawa is home to several U.S. military installations, including Yokosuka Naval Base and the Army's Camp Zama.

Alcohol will be banned at areas under the state of emergency, Suga said, and in those areas under the focused anti-infection measures, depending on the situation.

Tokyo had implemented shortened hours for bars and restaurants that failed to slow the virus' spread, according to AP. A ban on alcohol sales would dampen festivities associated with the games in Tokyo's central wards, long-time pandemic hot spots.

The capital reported 896 new cases on Thursday. That

figure is in line with experts' earlier estimate that daily cases in Tokyo could hit 1,000 before the games, AP reported. Also Thursday, two U.S. military bases in Japan had reported new coronavirus patients as of 6 p.m.

One person at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni contracted the virus sometimes since Wednesday, according to a post on the base Facebook page.

Kadena Air Base on Okinawa had six people test positive since July 2, according to its Facebook page. One person tested positive after falling ill; two more tested positive during their 14-day restriction after travel outside Japan; and three quarantined as close contacts also contracted the virus, according to Kadena officials.

With Suns' stars rolling, Bucks need to step it up

Associated Press

PHOENIX — At their best, the Phoenix Suns have three players who can take over a game.

There's Chris Paul and Devin Booker, breaking down defenses from the backcourt. Deandre Ayton has been a beast on the backboards and almost automatic as a shooter.

When all three are rolling the way they were in Game 1 of the NBA Finals, it's easy to see why this could finally be the Suns' championship chance.

"We have a real team," Paul said Wednesday, "like a team where you can't just key on one guy or two guys."

The Milwaukee Bucks are supposed to have the same formula.

Yet just when Giannis Antetokounmpo came back, Jrue Holiday's game went away. And if the Bucks are going to compete they can't afford bad nights from those two or Khris Middleton.

"I think in that perfect, ideal world, all three guys are hitting and clicking and everything is perfect," Milwaukee coach Mike Budenholzer said. "But I'm guessing if you look at any team that has three great players or three really significant players, I bet a lot

of nights it's two out of three that they're going and playing well."

Antetokounmpo had 20 points and 17 rebounds in his return to the lineup, and it might be hard for the Bucks to ask for much more so soon after a left knee injury that looked like it could have knocked him out far longer.

But Milwaukee certainly can expect better from Holiday, who missed 10 of his 14 shots and finished with just 10 points in the Suns' 118-105 victory. And though he's long been regarded as one of the NBA's top defensive guards, he wasn't able to limit either Paul or Booker — though in fairness, maybe nobody could have Tuesday.

Holiday said he knows what he needs to do offensively.

"Pick my spots to be aggressive, and I think sometimes it's gotten me in trouble," Holiday said. "I think I've got to be aggressive from the beginning of the game. Sometimes it gets just a bit difficult, or it's just a bit different, again, because we have another ball handler and somebody that's great in transition and makes plays for others."

Holiday averaged 26 points and 11 assists in the two victories that Antetokounmpo missed to end the Eastern Conference fi-

nals. He took at least 20 shots in both games, playing with an aggression without the two-time MVP that he hasn't always provided in the postseason.

Budenholzer said that's the challenge of getting three players going at once.

"So it's harder than people realize," he said.

It wasn't any problem for Phoenix. Paul had 32 points and nine assists, Booker added 27 points and six assists, and Ayton finished with 22 points and 19 rebounds.

Paul in particular wore out the Bucks in the third quarter by exploiting their coverage of the pick-and-roll whenever it ended up with a big man such as Brook Lopez or Bobby Portis switching out to defend him. The crafty and creative All-Star guard could either blow by those players off the dribble, or step back away from them to launch deep jumpers.

Milwaukee has faced that problem before. The Bucks never got a handle on the Brooklyn Nets until first James Harden and then Kyrie Irving were injured, or Atlanta's Trae Young until he hurt his foot in the East finals.

Antetokounmpo said he was having no problems with his hyperextended left knee.

Ohtani hits 32nd homer in Angels' win

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Shohei Ohtani hit his major league-leading 32nd homer, a season high by a Japanese player in the major leagues, helping the Los Angeles Angels beat the Boston Red Sox 5-4 on Wednesday.

Fellow All-Star Jared Walsh homered twice for the Angels, who won for the sixth time in seven games and took two of three from the AL-leading Red Sox.

Ohtani topped Hideki Matsui's total with the 2004 Yankees by hitting a 433-foot shot to right off Eduardo Rodríguez (6-5), putting the Angels ahead to stay in the fifth inning. The two-way star has 15 homers in his past 20 games.

Rays 8-4, Indians 1-0: Five pitchers combined for seven hitless innings to help host Tampa Bay finish a doubleheader sweep of Cleveland.

Collin McHugh (two perfect innings), Josh Fleming (7-4 after allowing one walk in 2⅓ innings), Diego Castillo (one out), Matt Wisler (one inning) and Pete Fairbanks (one inning) combined in a game that will not go into the official list of no-hitters because it was shortened to seven innings under pandemic rules.

Mets 4-0, Brewers 3-5: Jacob deGrom allowed home runs to Luis Urias on his fourth pitch and another to Jace Peterson in the fifth on his way to a no-decision in the opener of host New York's doubleheader split with Milwaukee.

His ERA up to 1.08, deGrom said he will skip the All-Star Game.

Cubs 8, Phillies 3: Anthony Rizzo, Joc Pederson and Nico Hoerner each had two hits and an RBI to help host Chicago snap an 11-game losing streak with a win over Philadelphia.

The Cubs raced to an early five-run lead

off Zack Wheeler and then added on to halt their skid.

Braves 14, Pirates 3: Pinch-hitter Abraham Almonte had a go-ahead, two-run single off Kyle Crick (1-1) in a five-run sixth inning and added a two-run home run as visiting Atlanta avoided a series sweep.

Drew Smyly (7-3) overcame giving up a three-run home run to Jacob Stallings in the first inning to win his fifth straight start. Smyly labored through five innings, allowing nine hits and three walks while striking out four.

Yankees 5, Mariners 4: Aaron Judge capped his team's early offensive outburst against Seattle All-Star Yusei Kikuchi with his 20th home run of the season, and visiting New York held on for the win.

For the second straight game, the Yankees scored a flurry of runs in the first two innings. This time, they had to withstand Seattle's late rally.

Nationals 15, Padres 5: All-Star Juan Soto warmed up for the Home Run Derby by hitting a three-run shot in the first inning, and visiting Washington pounded Chris Paddack and San Diego.

Paddack (4-6) allowed nine runs, eight earned, and nine hits on 75 pitches in two-plus innings. He struck out two and walked one.

Tigers 5, Rangers 3: Pinch-hitter Miguel Cabrera hit a go-ahead infield single off the glove of reliever Joely Rodriguez in the seventh inning, overcoming two homers by Joey Gallo off Casey Mize to lead visiting Detroit past Texas.

Kyle Funkhouser (3-0) worked two scoreless innings. Gregory Soto, Detroit's only All-Star pick, got six outs for his seventh save.

White Sox 6, Twins 1: Lance Lynn (9-3)

allowed one run over six innings in his first start since earning a spot on the AL All-Star team and took over the AL ERA lead at 1.99 in leading visiting Chicago past Minnesota.

Before the game, the White Sox cut outfielder Adam Eaton.

Reds 5, Royals 2: Sonny Gray (2-4) gave up two runs and seven hits over seven innings, and Jonathan India hit a go-ahead, two-run double in the seventh off Scott Barlow (2-3) as visiting Cincinnati beat Kansas City.

Art Warren stranded the bases loaded in the eighth by retiring Hunter Dozier on an inning-ending flyout, and Heath Hembree pitched a perfect ninth for his fourth save.

Blue Jays 10, Orioles 2: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. had three hits and drove in two runs to increase his major league-leading RBI total to 73, Bo Bichette homered and visiting Toronto breezed past Baltimore.

Guerrero hit RBI singles in the first and fourth innings to help Toronto build a 6-0 lead. He also singled in third inning and finished 3-for-4. Bichette drove in three runs and had three hits, including a two-run drive into the left-field seats.

Marlins 9, Dodgers 6: Jesús Aguilar hit a tie-breaking three-run homer in the ninth inning and host Miami beat Los Angeles for the third straight game.

Astros 4, Athletics 3: Jose Altuve hit a three-run homer, and Kyle Tucker's tie-breaking solo shot in the seventh inning lifted host Houston over Oakland.

Diamondbacks 6, Rockies 4: Eduardo Escobar had a three-run homer among his three hits, and host Arizona beat Colorado.

Giants 5, Cardinals 2: Alex Wood pitched seven strong innings of three-hit ball, and host San Francisco defeated St. Louis.

England on verge of ending European soccer misery

Associated Press

LONDON — All the years of hurt, England fans sing about it. All that sense of entitlement, rival fans are irritated by it.

After decades of embarrassment and moaning at tournaments, the English have a chance to finally back up the bravado — just listen to the team anthem, “Football’s Coming Home” — with a trophy.

The nation that lays claim to being the inventor of soccer, but is more fittingly one of the sport's great underachievers, is back in a final — against Italy in the European Championships.

The teams will meet Sunday night at Wembley Stadium in London, where England will be going for its first major title since winning the 1966 World Cup on its home field. The Ital-

ians are unbeaten in 33 games.

It's been 55 agonizing years for England through 26 World Cups and European Championship tournaments, seven of which it didn't even qualify for.

Even less illustrious national teams like Denmark and Greece have won trophies since then. But England became all about falling short on a world stage it felt it should dominate.

Beating Denmark on Wednesday broke through the semifinal obstacle at least in the Euros, prevailing 2-1 in extra time and avoiding the penalty shootouts that have proved to be the team's nemesis.

“What a brilliant moment for us,” England coach Gareth Southgate said on the field with fans still singing into the night at Wembley. “Let's savor this.”