

Some Iraqi militias challenge Iran directive

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iran's expeditionary Quds Force commander brought one main directive for Iraqi militia faction leaders long beholden to Tehran, when he gathered with them in Baghdad last month: Maintain calm, until after nuclear talks between Iran and the United States.

But he was met with defiance. One of the six faction leaders spoke up in their meeting: They could not stay quiet while the death of his predecessor Qassem Soleimani and senior Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a U.S. drone strike went unavenged.

Militia attacks have only been increasing against the U.S. on military bases in both Iraq and Syria. Three missile attacks in the last week alone resulted in minor injuries, stoking fears of escalation.

The details from Esmail Ghaani's visit, confirmed to The Associated Press by three Shiite political officials and two senior militia officials, demonstrate how Iranian-aligned Iraqi militia groups are asserting a degree of independence, sometimes even flouting orders from Tehran. Iran now relies on Lebanon's Hezbollah for support in reining them in, and there is potential that Iran's new president could play a role in doing the same.

The officials spoke on condition of ano-

nymity to discuss the private meetings.

Iran's influence, sustained by ideological ties and military support, has frayed because of the U.S. killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis last year, because of differing interests and because of financial strains in Tehran. With nuclear talks restarting following U.S. President Joe Biden's inauguration this year, these differences have come to the fore.

"Iran isn't the way it used to be, with 100% control over the militia commanders," said one Shiite political leader.

Increasing rocket and drone attacks targeting American troops in Iraq and Syria have alarmed Western and coalition officials. There have been at least eight drone attacks targeting the U.S. presence since Biden took office in January, as well as 17 rocket attacks, according to coalition officials.

The attacks are blamed on the Iranian-backed militias that make up the bulk of Iraq's state-supported Popular Mobilization Forces. The Biden administration has responded by twice targeting Iraqi militia groups operating inside Syria, including close to the Iraqi border.

"What is taking place now is when Ghaani asks for calm, the brigade leaders agree with him. But as soon as he leaves the meeting, they disregard his recommendations," said another Shiite political leader.

The loudest of the defiant militia voices

has been Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Asaib Ahl al-Haq faction, which also maintains a political party. On June 17, only days after Ghaani's meetings with the militias, he said in a televised address that they would continue to target the U.S. "occupier" and that they will not take into consideration nuclear talks.

"And that decision is an Iraqi one," he said.

The coalition has formally ended combat operations and reduced troop levels significantly in the last year. Only 2,500 U.S. troops remain in Iraq and discussions are ongoing with NATO to transfer to an advisory mission. Iraq still needs coalition support in surveillance and intelligence gathering and airstrikes against Islamic State targets.

Some argue the ongoing attacks benefit Iran by maintaining pressure on the U.S.

During talks with Shiite political officials during his visit, Ghani said Iran doesn't interfere in their political work, but that military matters were different. "These must be approved by the Revolutionary Guard," one political leader recounted him saying.

Still, Ghaani did not reprimand the militia groups during the meeting. Instead, he told them he understood their concerns.

Iran has struggled to fill in the gap left in the absence of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, who were commanding figures able to push factions into line and resolve disputes among them.

Marines bolster embassy security after Eswatini unrest

By CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

Over a dozen Marines with a diplomatic security unit created in the wake of the 2012 Benghazi attacks in Libya were deployed to Eswatini, a southern African kingdom previously known as Swaziland, after pro-democracy demonstrations erupted last month.

The short-notice deployment June 30 of the Quantico, Va.-based Marine Security Guard Security Augmentation Unit, or MSAU, was its 106th mission since the outfit was created under the Obama administration in 2013, the Marine Corps said in a statement this week.

The team's primary mission is to protect

U.S. diplomatic and consular facilities facing increased threat, or in situations such as natural disasters and VIP visits.

"Since it was established, the MSAU has been deployed on average every eight days," the statement said.

The tiny mountain kingdom of Eswatini is ruled by Africa's last absolute monarch, King Mswati III, who protesters accused of human rights abuses and running a repressive government, The Associated Press reported.

Mswati's family, including 15 wives, live a lavish lifestyle while most of the country's 1.1 million people are impoverished, human rights groups say.

"Unrest first began ... in May, when stu-

dents took to the streets to call for accountability for the death of a 25-year-old law student, allegedly at the hands of the police," the United Nations said this week. "In late June, these protests grew into daily pro-democracy marches."

Among their political and economic grievances, the demonstrators sought the lifting of a ban on all opposition political parties that has been in effect since 1973, the AP reported. Videos on social media showed people burning tires and barricading streets in Manzini, the country's largest city, and the central town of Matsapha.

The government ordered businesses to close and imposed a strict curfew to quell the violence, the AP reported June 29.

Elsa soaks NYC as it races up coast

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Fast-moving Tropical Storm Elsa hit the New York City region with heavy rain and high winds Friday, toppling trees and hindering some rail service as it churned its way toward New England.

Maximum sustained winds from the storm peaked near 50 mph as it moved through New York City and Long Island, the National Hurricane Center said in an 8 a.m. update.

Wind speeds had ticked down from overnight readings as high as 78 mph in coastal New Jersey that appeared to be “associated with nearby tornadoes,” the center reported.

There were some snags on commuter rail lines Friday, with slight delays on the Harlem Line north of the city and service suspended

on the Long Island Rail Road’s Oyster Bay Branch because of fallen trees. The storm struck a city already reeling from a deluge Thursday that flooded roads and at least one subway station.

Up to 6 inches of rain was possible in some areas Friday, enough to cause flash flooding. The hurricane center said a tornado or two was possible through early afternoon Friday over parts of Long Island and southeastern New England.

The strongest winds were expected to stay off the coast of New England. But the storm was expected to bring heavy rain — up to 4 inches on the Maine coast — before blowing into the Bay of Fundy and Canada late Friday.

Heavy rain had ended in New York City by

mid-morning.

The system was already blamed for one death in Florida on Wednesday. And Elsa also previously caused a damaging tornado in Georgia.

A tropical storm warning Friday morning stretched along parts of the East Coast from New Jersey to Massachusetts. Forecasters said Elsa was moving northeast at 31 mph.

Elsa was forecast to become a post-tropical cyclone by Friday night.

Scattered power outages were being reported along Elsa’s path Friday morning, with about 24,000 homes and businesses without electricity from Delaware to Massachusetts, according to the website poweroutages.us.

Rescuers vow to find all condo collapse victims

Associated Press

SURFSIDE, Fla. — Rescue workers now focused on finding remains instead of survivors in the rubble of a Florida condominium collapse vowed Thursday to keep up their search for victims until they cleared all the debris at the site.

Earlier, a fire official told family members at a meeting that crews “will not stop working until they’ve gotten to the bottom of the pile and recovered every single of the families’ missing loved ones,” Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett said at an evening news conference. He did not identify the official, but said the families were grateful.

“This is exactly the message the families

wanted to hear,” he said.

During the day, the death toll rose to 64, with another 76 people unaccounted for, Miami Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said earlier. Detectives are still working to verify that each of those listed as missing was actually in the building when it collapsed.

Levine Cava said teams paused briefly atop the pile to mark the two-week anniversary of the disaster, but there was no let-up in the pace or number of rescuers at the site.

“The work continues with all speed and urgency,” she said. “We are working around the clock to recover victims and to bring closure to the families as fast as we possibly can.”

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.

Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Chief Alan Cominsky said Wednesday he expects the recovery effort will take several more weeks. He added crews are now using heavier equipment, expediting the removal of debris.

“We are expecting the progress to move at a faster pace,” he added.

No one has been pulled out alive since the first hours after the 12-story building fell on June 24.

Pfizer to seek authorization for 3rd vaccine dose as booster

Associated Press

Pfizer is about to seek U.S. authorization for a third dose of its COVID-19 vaccine, saying Thursday that another shot within 12 months could dramatically boost immunity and may help ward off the latest worrisome coronavirus mutant.

Research from multiple countries shows the Pfizer shot and other widely used COVID-19 vaccines offer strong protection against the highly contagious delta variant, which is spreading rapidly around the world and now accounts for most new U.S. infec-

tions.

Two doses of most vaccines are critical to develop high levels of virus-fighting antibodies against all versions of the coronavirus, not just the delta variant — and most of the world still is desperate to get those initial protective doses as the pandemic continues to rage.

But antibodies naturally wane over time, so studies also are underway to tell if and when boosters might be needed.

On Thursday, Pfizer’s Dr. Mikael Dolsten told The Associated Press that early data from the company’s booster study suggests peo-

ple’s antibody levels jump five- to 10-fold after a third dose, compared to their second dose months earlier. In August, Pfizer plans to ask the Food and Drug Administration for emergency authorization of a third dose, he said.

But FDA authorization would be just a first step — it wouldn’t automatically mean Americans get offered boosters, cautioned Dr. William Schaffner, a vaccine expert at Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

Public health authorities would have to decide if they’re really needed, especially since millions of people have no protection.

2 US men among suspects held in Haiti

Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — Haitian authorities have made more arrests in the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, raiding Taiwan's Embassy where several suspects are believed to have sought refuge, while also detaining two Haitian Americans and several former Colombian soldiers allegedly tied to the plot.

In all, 17 suspects have been detained and another eight are being sought, according to National Police Chief Léon Charles.

"We are going to bring them to justice," the police chief said, as the 17 handcuffed suspects sat on the floor during a news conference Thursday.

Investigative Judge Clément Noël told the French-language newspaper *Le Nouvelliste* that the Haitian-Americans arrested, James Solages and Joseph Vincent, said the attackers originally planned only to arrest Moïse, not kill him. Noël said Solages and Vincent were acting as translators for the attackers, the newspaper

reported Friday.

Moïse's brazen killing at his home in an attack before dawn Wednesday that also seriously wounded his wife stunned a nation already reeling from poverty, widespread violence and political instability.

Interim Prime Minister Claude Joseph, who assumed leadership with the backing of police and the military, declared a two-week "state of siege," and asked people to return to work and reopen businesses that were shut down in normally bustling Port-au-Prince. He also ordered the international airport to reopen.

Colombia's government said it had been asked by Haiti about six of the suspects, including two of the three killed, and had determined they were retired members of its army. It offered its full cooperation.

"A team was formed with the best investigators," said Gen. Jorge Luis Vargas, the head of Colombia's police. "They are going to send dates, flight times, financial information that is already being

collected to be sent to Port-au-Prince."

U.S.-trained Colombian soldiers are heavily recruited by private security firms in global conflict zones because of their experience in a decades-long war against leftist rebels and powerful drug cartels.

The U.S. State Department said it was aware of reports that Haitian Americans were in custody but would not comment.

Solages, 35, described himself as a "certified diplomatic agent," an advocate for children and budding politician on a now-removed website for a charity he started in 2019 in south Florida to assist resident of his home town of Jacmel, on Haiti's southern coast.

Solages also said he had worked as a bodyguard at the Canadian Embassy in Haiti, and on his Facebook page, which was also taken down after news of his arrest, he showcased photos of armored military vehicles and a shot of himself standing in front of an American flag.

Canada's foreign relation de-

partment released a statement that did not refer to Solages by name but said one of the men detained for his alleged role in the killing had been "briefly employed as a reserve bodyguard" at its embassy by a private contractor. He gave no other details.

Calls to the charity and Solages' associates at the charity went unanswered.

However, a relative in south Florida said Solages doesn't have any military training and he doesn't believe he was involved in the assassination.

"I feel like my son killed my brother because I love my president and I love James Solages," Schubert Dorisme, whose wife is Solages' aunt, told WPLG in Miami.

Meanwhile, Taiwan's Embassy in Port-au-Prince said Haitian police had arrested 11 people who tried to break into the Taiwanese Embassy in Port-au-Prince early Thursday.

It gave no details of their identities or a reason for the break-in.

African American girl makes history as spelling bee champ

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Zaila Avant-garde understood the significance of what she was doing as she stood on the Scripps National Spelling Bee stage, peppering pronouncer Jacques Bailly with questions about Greek and Latin roots.

Zaila knew she would be the first African American winner of the bee. She knew Black kids around the country were watching Thursday night's ESPN2 telecast, waiting to be inspired and hoping to follow in the footsteps of someone who looked like them. She even thought of MacNolia Cox, who in 1936 became the first Black finalist at the bee and wasn't allowed to stay in the same hotel as the rest of the spellers.

But she never let the moment become too big for her, and when she heard what turned out to be her winning word — "Murraya," a genus of tropical Asiatic and Australian trees — she beamed with confi-

dence. It was over.

Declared the champion, Zaila jumped and twirled with joy, only flinching in surprise when confetti was shot onto the stage.

"I was pretty relaxed on the subject of Murraya and pretty much any other word I got," Zaila said.

The only previous Black champion was also the only international winner: Jody-Anne Maxwell, of Jamaica, in 1998. The bee, however, has still been a showcase for spellers of color over the past two decades, with kids of South Asian descent dominating the competition. Zaila's win breaks a streak of at least one Indian-American champion every year since 2008.

Zaila has other priorities, which perhaps explains how she came to dominate this year's bee. The 14-year-old from Harvey, La., is a basketball prodigy who owns three Guinness world records for dribbling multiple balls simultaneously and hopes to one day play in the WNBA or even coach in the NBA.

Suicidal teen arrested after taking over plane in Alaska

Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska — A passenger on a small plane bound for a tiny western Alaska community said he tried to end his life when he took control of the plane's yoke and caused it to nosedive before the pilot was able to regain control and safely land the aircraft, Alaska State Troopers said.

The incident occurred Wednesday on a flight between Bethel and Aniak, which is about 90 miles northeast of Bethel. Troopers said a preliminary investigation indicated that an 18-year-old passenger got up from his seat and took control of the yoke before the pilot was able to regain control of the plane with help from passengers.

The man told Trooper Jason Bohac he tried to end his life while on the plane and indicated he had spoken with behavioral health officials before but felt it hadn't

helped, according to an affidavit by Bohac that accompanied assault and attempted assault charges.

The Cessna Caravan had six people on board, with all five passenger seats occupied, said Austin McDaniel, a troopers spokesperson. The plane landed safely in Aniak, and the 18-year-old was arrested, troopers said.

McDaniel said by email that the man "had asked the pilot to fly the plane earlier during the flight and initially asked to sit in the unoccupied co-pilot seat. Both requests were denied by the pilot."

McDaniel said the aircraft had no barrier between the rest of the aircraft and the pilot and co-pilot seats. Barriers are not typical in this type of aircraft in Alaska, he said.

The plane was in the process of landing when the incident occurred, about 5 miles from the airport, McDaniel said.

Days of aftershocks likely after quake in Calif., Nev.

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A magnitude 6 earthquake jolted both sides of the California-Nevada border, tossed boulders onto a major roadway and was felt as far off as Las Vegas and even San Francisco, with days of aftershocks predicted, authorities said.

The quake shortly before 4 p.m. Thursday was centered south of Lake Tahoe near Walker, a rural community of a few hundred households in the eastern Sierra Nevada. No major damage or injuries were reported, authorities said.

It was followed by dozens of aftershocks, including at least a half-dozen of magnitude 4 or above, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

“The ground was shaking pretty bad, and then everything started falling,” said Carolina Estrada, manager at Walker Coffee Company. Syrup bottles broke, dishes fell to the ground and the roof of the shop caved in a bit.

The shaking lasted 30 seconds or more, she said.

“We ran out of the building,” Estrada said. But the shaking continued, and “boulders the size of cars” fell onto nearby U.S. 395, she said.

The California Highway Patrol said some cars were struck by rocks but there weren’t any injuries. Video from drivers showed cars slowly navigating around big blocks of stone that littered the roadway.

At one point, rockslides closed about 40 miles of the interstate, a major route through the northern Sierra Nevada, but the road reopened some hours later.

Boxes flew off the shelves at Smith’s Food and Drug in Gardnerville, Nev.

“Our whole entire store was shaking,” said Brittany Oswald, who works at the store’s deli. “I just stood there and held onto a table, and waited for it to end.”

The seismic waves rolled out across the eastern Sierra — where thousands of people camp and hike in national forests — westward through California’s agricultural Central Valley and were felt about 250 miles away in San Francisco. Sacramento also felt the shaking and so did Las Vegas, about the same distance southeast of Walker.

“People in the area should expect aftershocks for days following an earthquake of this size,” said Jason Ballman with the Southern California Earthquake Center at the University of Southern California.

Governor asks Californians to cut water use

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Thursday asked people and businesses in the nation’s most populous state to voluntarily cut how much water they use by 15% as the Western United States weathers a drought that is rapidly emptying reservoirs relied on for agriculture, drinking water and fish habitats.

The water conservation is not mandatory, but it demonstrates the growing challenges of a drought that will only worsen throughout the summer and fall and is tied to more intense wildfires and heat waves. Temperatures in parts of the region are spiking again this week as firefighters battle several wildfires in Northern California and other states but are less extreme than the record heat wave that may have caused hundreds of deaths in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia in late June.

California’s most important reservoirs are already at dangerously low levels and will likely reach historic lows later this year. Lake Oroville in Northern California is at 30% capacity, and state officials worry water levels could get so low they might have to shut down a hydroelectric plant later this year. Along the Russian River, officials fear Lake Mendocino could empty later this year.

“This is jaw-dropping, what’s happening in the West Coast of the United States,” Newsom said Thursday during a news conference at Lopez Lake, a reservoir in San Luis Obispo County formed by a dam on the Arroyo Grande Creek that is at 34% capacity.

A historic drought tied to climate change is gripping the U.S. West and comes just a few years after California declared its last dry spell over in 2016. The earlier drought in California depleted groundwater supplies and changed how people use water, with many people and businesses ripping out landscaping and replacing it with more drought-tolerant plants.

Compared to before the previous drought, urban water usage in California is down an average of 16%. But scientists say this drought is already hotter and drier than the earlier one, accelerating the impact on people and the environment.

Given how low California’s reservoirs already are, Karla Nemeth, director of the California Department of Water Resources, said Newsom’s request for people to use less water is about planning for next year.

Biden tells Putin Russia must crack down on cybercriminals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a Friday phone call that he must “take action” against cybercriminals acting in his country and that the U.S. reserves the right to “defend its people and its critical infrastructure,” the White House said.

The conversation came less than a month after the two leaders met in Geneva, when Biden warned against continuing cyberattacks on U.S. businesses and infrastructure emanating from Russia.

A new ransomware attack linked to the REvil hacking group based in Russia caused widespread disruption last weekend, affecting as many as 1,500 businesses.

The White House said “President Biden underscored the need for Russia to take ac-

tion to disrupt ransomware groups operating in Russia and emphasized that he is committed to continued engagement on the broader threat posed by ransomware.

“President Biden reiterated that the United States will take any necessary action to defend its people and its critical infrastructure in the face of this continuing challenge,” the White House added.

A May attack on a pipeline that supplies roughly half the fuel consumed on the East Coast caused the company to temporarily halt operations.

Colonial Pipeline paid roughly \$4.4 million in ransom, and U.S. authorities were able to claw back a large portion of that sum.

Hackers also extorted an \$11 million ransom payment from JBS SA, the world’s largest meat processor.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Mom complains of Suboxone in son's meal

ME AUBURN — Police have charged two Maine people with drug crimes after a mother complained that she found a medication used to treat opioid use disorder in her son's Happy Meal box at McDonald's.

Auburn police said Wednesday they reviewed video surveillance footage and concluded the incident was the result of an accident by an employee. They said the employee had the medication, Suboxone, in a shirt pocket and bent over to retrieve something when it fell out, landing in the Happy Meal box.

Police said the employee who dropped the prescription had obtained it illegally from another employee earlier in the shift. They charged one employee with unlawful possession of drugs and another with unlawful trafficking in schedule drugs.

Teen shot in neck after sneaking out to buy gun

MO ST. LOUIS — A 16-year-old was shot in the neck and critically wounded early Wednesday after sneaking out of his St. Louis home to buy a firearm, authorities say.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that police don't have a suspect but believe the gunman is the person the boy had arranged to meet in the city's Carondelet neighborhood. During the transaction, the boy was shot and the suspect took off, police said.

The boy, whose name has not been released, is among more than 50 youths in the St. Louis

region to be injured or killed by gunfire this year.

Owner faces homicide charge after dog attack

AZ PHOENIX — A dog owner has been arrested after his four Staffordshire terrier mix dogs fatally attacked a 77-year-old woman, Phoenix police said.

Maria Ruiz suffered multiple critical injuries in the attack Tuesday morning and was taken to the hospital, where she was pronounced dead, according to police. They said the victim was on her front porch when she was attacked by the dogs without any provocation.

The owner of the dogs had been contacted in the past by Maricopa County Animal Care and Control about his dogs escaping and was told to fix a gate to keep the dogs secured, police said.

The 33-year-old man has been booked into jail on suspicion of one count of negligent homicide.

Man detained after climbing to top of church

CA LOS ANGELES — A man who was naked except for shorts and one sock climbed to the top of a soaring church tower in East Los Angeles on Wednesday night, set a fire at the base of a cross, then apparently tried to evade surrounding police by leaping from roof to roof of nearby buildings before he was taken into custody.

It was unclear what prompted the man to climb up scaffolding at St. Mary's, a Roman Catholic church in Boyle Heights.

A witness told KCBS-TV that the man threw his clothes off the top of the church. News helicop-

ters showed the man as he climbed up scaffolding to the top of the bell tower, which is more than 130 feet tall, and apparently tried to push over the cross at its apex before setting a fire at its base. The fire did not spread.

Authorities: Suspect shoots, kills police dog

MO ST. JOSEPH — Authorities say a suspect shot and killed a St. Joseph police dog while officers served a warrant.

The St. Joseph News-Press reported that Valdez McDonald, 24, was barricaded in a home when officers responded Wednesday night. St. Joseph Police Commander David Hart said that as officers tried to negotiate with him, he fled and shot the German shepherd, named Max.

"Max performed his duties heroically and protected the lives of others on scene," police said in a statement.

McDonald is charged with third-degree domestic assault and jailed without bond.

According to a probable cause statement, McDonald abused a woman by hitting her in the head with multiple objects. Documents state he also pointed an AR-15 style rifle at the woman's chest.

State to ban single-use plastic bags in 2024

CO DENVER — Colorado will ban single-use plastic bags and polystyrene food containers in 2024 under a law signed by Gov. Jared Polis.

Colorado Politics reported the law signed Tuesday allows retail stores to use up their inventory by June 1, 2024, and to charge

customers 10 cents per bag starting Jan. 1, 2023. SNAP, or food stamp, participants won't be charged the fee, and small stores with three or fewer locations, farmers markets and roadside stands are exempt.

Food retailers have until Jan. 1, 2024, to use up their inventory of polystyrene takeout food containers.

Missing 12-foot python found in mall crawl space

LA BATON ROUGE — A 12-foot python that escaped from its enclosure inside Louisiana's largest shopping mall has been found, authorities said Thursday.

The snake was recaptured in a ceiling crawl space early Thursday morning after two days of searching, WBRZ-TV reported.

Video posted by the station shows workers using a ladder as Cara — wrapped around the shoulder and back of one of them — is carried down. The yellow and white Burmese python was taken to the Louisiana School of Veterinary Medicine for a health check.

Cara slithered out of her enclosure at the Blue Zoo in the Mall of Louisiana in Baton Rouge on Tuesday.

"While we've created a very secure home for Cara, our Burmese Python, she has slithered out of her exhibit," the Blue Zoo said in a statement after it escaped. "Cara is a non-poisonous, friendly snake that enjoys her time interacting with guests during our Snake Education Shows."

Pythons slowly squeeze their prey to death before swallowing them. Cara was described as "very sweet" by her handlers.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Suns take 2-0 series lead over Bucks

Associated Press

The ball went from Chris Paul to Devin Booker and didn't stop moving until Deandre Ayton scored after every Suns player had touched it.

The 10-pass sequence was the prettiest play of the NBA Finals and the kind the one-man-show Bucks couldn't dream of.

"We actually talked about that play right after the game, me and Mikal (Bridges), and he was like, 'I think that was the most pumped I've ever been after a play,'" Booker said. "And I was like, 'Me too.'"

Imagine the feeling if his team gets two more wins.

Booker scored 31 points, Paul had 23 and the Suns beat Milwaukee 118-108 on Thursday night in Phoenix to take a 2-0 series lead.

The Suns have never been closer to an NBA title. Not bad for a team whose coach told them earlier this season that he had the league's sorriest starting unit, forcing the players to figure things out.

"We did and we're going to keep it going," Paul said.

Booker made seven three-pointers and the Suns went 20-for-40 behind the arc. Bridges scored 27 points, and Paul finished with eight assists.

The Suns surged ahead late in the first half, withstood Giannis Antetokounmpo's all-around effort to bring the Bucks back,

and walked off winners again as fans swung orange rally towels all around them.

Antetokounmpo had 42 points and 12 rebounds in his second game back after missing two games because of a hyperextended left knee.

The Suns never even had a lead in the NBA Finals until their 118-105 victory in Game 1. They dropped the first two games in both 1976 and 1993, their only other appearances, and didn't win more than two games in either series.

They've already got two this time and will go after a third Sunday in Milwaukee, which will host the NBA Finals for the first time since 1974.

"We know what the deal is," Antetokounmpo said. "We've got to go back home and protect home."

Jrue Holiday played more aggressively but didn't shoot a whole lot better than in Game 1, scoring 17 points but hitting only 7-for-21. Khris Middleton was 5-for-16, forcing Antetokounmpo to carry an even heavier load on his sore left leg.

It adds up to the Bucks having to overcome a 2-0 deficit for the second time this postseason. They did it against the Brooklyn Nets in the Eastern Conference semifinals, but had some help when first James Harden and then Kyrie Irving were injured.

Now they are facing a Suns team loaded with weapons all over the lineup, and

showed off all of them in their highlight play.

They whipped the ball all around the perimeter for the final basket of the first half. It went from Paul to Booker to Jae Crowder to Bridges, back to Crowder to Paul, then over to Crowder and once again Bridges. He then finally fed it inside to Ayton, who scored while being fouled with 14.9 seconds left for a 56-45 lead at the break.

The Bucks could only dream of having that many guys involved. Antetokounmpo's 15 field goals were more than twice as many as any other Milwaukee player.

Crowder had 11 points and 10 rebounds, shooting 4-for-8. He missed all eight attempts in Game 1.

Phoenix opened a 65-50 lead with a good start to the third, but Antetokounmpo — and pretty much only Antetokounmpo — kept the game from getting away from the Bucks. He scored 20 of the Bucks' 33 points in the third, the first 20-point period in the finals since Michael Jordan against the Suns in 1993.

"Nothing Giannis does surprises me anymore. He's got the nickname Freak for a reason," Bucks guard Pat Connaughton said. "I will say it's incredible what he's been able to do, and it hasn't happened without time he's put in to get himself ready, get his body better and continue to do the things that he does to be a two-time MVP."

US Select Team loses three players to virus concerns

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The USA Select Team will be without three players for the remainder of Olympic training camp for coronavirus-related reasons, though there are no indications that any cause for concern exists past those players.

The U.S. Olympic team practiced for a third consecutive day Thursday, with the remaining members of the select team taking part in that workout. Players on both the Olympic team and the select team — a group of 17 players that were brought in to scrimmage and practice against the Tokyo-bound club — are tested daily.

"I think we all know (the pandemic) is not over yet," U.S. coach Gregg Popovich said.

"That goes without saying. Everybody has to still be vigilant and careful."

A person with knowledge of the situation said the three players involved for the virus-related reasons were Immanuel Quickley of the New York Knicks and Charlotte Hornets teammates P.J. Washington and Miles Bridges. The person, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because neither USA Basketball nor the players revealed names publicly, said one of the three had tested positive for COVID-19 and the two others were being held out over possible exposure concerns. The person did not reveal which player tested positive.

"It's confined to that," Popov-

ich said, referring to the three select players that he did not identify in his comments.

The news came on the same day that Olympic organizers and Japanese government officials revealed that, because of a state of emergency in response to rising virus numbers, they decided to ban fans from Tokyo-area stadiums and arenas for the games that begin in two weeks.

Fans from abroad were banned months ago, and now, so are Japanese fans from almost all Olympic events. A small number will be at some; basketball is not one of those sports.

U.S. Olympic forward Draymond Green, who was on the team that won gold at the Rio Games in 2016 as well, said the

Americans may reap a small benefit from playing in an empty arena in Tokyo.

"If anything, it may help us because everybody's normally pulling to see us lose," Green said. "You get a lot of these countries that really feed off their crowd, and you'll have other countries coming to support those countries, to beat us. So if anything, it may help us. It's unfortunate, obviously, what's happening in Japan. The cases are rising. You hate to see it happen. But just from a pure basketball standpoint, I don't think gives us a disadvantage."

Tokyo reported 920 new cases on Wednesday, the highest total there since May 13. The new-case number dipped slightly Thursday, to 896.

McGregor acts up ahead of UFC 264

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Conor McGregor wore a plaid purple suit and sunglasses when he performed some of his greatest Vegas hits at his UFC 264 news conference Thursday ahead of his latest attempt to roll back the mixed martial arts clock.

The biggest star in combat sports preened, strutted and misbehaved at T-Mobile Arena, delighting his fans in a raucous crowd anticipating the finale to one of the biggest fight trilogies in recent history on Saturday night.

McGregor threw a bottle of Dustin Poirier's hot sauce into the stands early on and then prowled the stage, security guards separating him from his opponent. He threw a kick at Poirier during their event-ending faceoff — when he was too far away to connect, of course.

In between, the loquacious Irishman insulted Poirier's wife, repeatedly vowed to kill

Poirier in the cage, questioned Poirier's love for his native Louisiana and called Poirier a common epithet that's much less loaded on McGregor's side of the pond.

Poirier and the assembled fans got another recital of McGregor's classic verbal combination of dexterity and brutality, the secret to burrowing inside the heads of several opponents during his rocket ride into the sports stratosphere in the previous decade.

"On Saturday night, you're going to get walked around that octagon like a dog and then put to sleep," McGregor said to Poirier.

"He's not in the same stratosphere as me," McGregor insisted later. "The man looks disgraceful up here. He looks frail at this weight now. The weight cut is getting to him."

"He's going out on a stretcher in this fight," McGregor said finally.

And while McGregor's fans drank it up faster than a double shot of their hero's Proper Twelve whiskey, Poirier appeared to weather the verbal blows perfectly well.

"You used to be a lot better than that, man," Poirier said during a rare break in the barrage. "The trash talk was a lot better than that."

After all, McGregor's carefully crafted persona doesn't hit quite so hard when McGregor has had his hand raised in victory just once since the Obama administration: For all his fame, fortune and celebrity, he's 1-2 in the cage and 0-1 in the boxing ring since November 2016.

Poirier laughed at the difference from the promotion for their second fight last January, when McGregor was disarmingly friendly and charming throughout. Even with a resumption of hostilities, Poirier insisted he won't allow McGregor into his head as he did in

2014, when McGregor knocked him out in their first meeting.

"I see a man here that I've defeated, and I know I can defeat again," Poirier said.

McGregor has reached a level of power in the fight game where he's no longer defined by mere wins and losses. His appearances in a cage or a ring are international events, and he has built a celebrity persona that towers above his peers even as its foundation of sports success eroded over the past half-decade.

But instead of settling into what would likely be several comfortable years fighting non-title UFC spectacles and taking more cash-grab boxing matches, McGregor chose to return to his last defeat. Instead of moving on, he wants to go back, to get it right — and to set a new path in front of the UFC's first full-capacity crowd in its hometown since the start of the pandemic.

Italy's Berrettini reaches his first Grand Slam final

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — Cries of "Vai!" (Go!), "Forza!" (Let's go!) and even "Andiamo, amore mio!" (Let's go, my love!) rang through Centre Court, supporting Matteo Berrettini in his native tongue on his way to becoming Italy's first Grand Slam finalist in 45 years.

With booming serves delivering 22 aces, and powerful forehands helping compile a total of 60 winners, the No. 7-seeded Berrettini used an 11-game run to grab a big lead and then held on to beat No. 14 Hubert Hurkacz 6-3, 6-0, 6-7 (3), 6-4 at Wimbledon on Friday.

"I have no words. Really. Just, 'Thanks.' And I need, I think, a couple of hours to understand what happened," Berrettini told the capacity crowd. "I just know I played a great match. I never dreamed about this because it was too much, even for a dream."

On Sunday, he will go up against either No. 1 Novak Djokovic, a 19-time major champion, or No. 10 Denis Shapovalov, a first-time Slam semifinalist. Djokovic was leading

their semifinal two sets to none.

Berrettini has created quite a sporting Sunday in London for Italy. After he plays in the Wimbledon final that afternoon — the first for a man from his country in a title match at any major since Adriano Panatta won the 1976 French Open — Italy will meet England at Wembley Stadium in the final of soccer's European Championship that night.

"So far, it's the best day, tennis-wise, of my life," said the 25-year-old Berrettini, who lost his only previous major semifinal at the 2019 U.S. Open. "Hopefully Sunday's going to be even better."

He's now on an 11-match winning streak on grass courts, including a title at the Queen's Club tuneup last month, when he became the first man since Boris Becker in 1985 to win the trophy in his debut at that event. Becker went on to triumph at Wimbledon that year.

The outcome Friday seemed to turn early against Hurkacz, never before past the third round at a Slam but coming off victories over eight-time Wimbledon champion Roger Federer and No. 2 Daniil Medvedev.

derer and No. 2 Daniil Medvedev.

A key moment, oddly enough, came less than 20 minutes in, when Hurkacz was ahead 3-2 and held a break point. That was erased by Berrettini — no surprise here — by a service winner at 130 mph, punctuated by one of his many yells of "Si!"

From there, Hurkacz morphed from the guy coming off the biggest win of his career — in straight sets in the quarterfinals against his idol, Federer — back to the player who arrived in England on a six-match losing streak.

More than 50 minutes passed before Berrettini dropped another game, a stretch that gave him the first two sets and a 1-0 lead in the third.

He (almost) couldn't miss. Hurkacz (almost) couldn't connect.

In the first set, for example, the 6-foot-5, barrel-chested Berrettini compiled 21 winners — 11 off his forehand — and just eight unforced errors. Hurkacz, by contrast, did not accrue a single groundstroke winner in that span.

Grand Slam helps Padres top Nationals

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Welcome home to Slam Diego, Daniel Camarena.

The rookie reliever hit a stunning grand slam off Washington ace Max Scherzer and his hometown San Diego Padres overcame an eight-run deficit, finally beating the Nationals 9-8 Thursday night on Trent Grisham's RBI single in the ninth inning.

The Padres matched the biggest comeback in franchise history, helped by Fernando Tatis' 28th home run and Grisham's two-out hit.

But it was Camarena's blow that really jolted the crowd at Petco Park.

Camarena, who went to Cathedral Catholic High, was called up earlier in the day for his second stint with the Padres.

He replaced Yu Darvish starting the fourth inning after the All-Star's left hip tightened up, and allowed Trea Turner's second homer of the game, a two-run drive that gave the Nationals an 8-0 lead.

With the Padres' bullpen taxed in recent days, manager Jayce Tingler had Camarena bat for himself against the struggling Scherzer with the bases loaded and two outs in the fourth. The left-hander golfed a 1-2 fastball deep into the right-field stands to send the fans into a frenzy and pull the Padres to 8-6.

Camarena said he was just trying to put the ball in play, "especially against Max, like that's hard to do, so I was just trying with everything I had to put a ball in play."

He was as stunned as every-

one else in the ballpark

"Oh my God, I blacked out," he said. "I hit first base and then all of a sudden I noticed the lights were flashing in the stadium and that's when it kind of hit, like, 'Oh my God, I just hit a home run.' Not only that, a grand slam."

Camarena had struck out in his only previous big league at-bat during his debut earlier this season. In the minors, he was 5-for-28 (.179) with no extra-base hits and zero RBIs. Triple-A teammate Gosuke Katoh, who's also from San Diego, had given him a bat and batting gloves.

Camarena became the second pitcher in history whose first hit was a grand slam. The first was Bill Duggleby of the Philadelphia Phillies on April 21, 1898.

The 28-year-old Camarena

was the first relief pitcher to hit a grand slam since Pittsburgh's Don Robinson on Sept. 12, 1985, and was the first Padres player, pitcher or position player, to have a grand slam for his first hit. The last player in the majors to do that was San Francisco's Brandon Crawford on May 27, 2011, at Milwaukee.

"I think more than anything, everybody was in shock," Grisham said of the slam. "Shock and excitement. We had four runs on the board and we were back in it."

It was the first home run Scherzer allowed to a pitcher in a 14-year career that includes three Cy Young Awards and seven All-Star selections. It was the fourth time he's given up a grand slam — Vladimir Guerrero Jr. of Toronto also hit a slam off him this year.

Urias gets 11th win, leads Dodgers past Marlins

Associated Press

MIAMI — Julio Urias allowed Jazz Chisholm's leadoff homer, then pitched shutout ball through the seventh inning for his major league-leading 11th win, and the Los Angeles Dodgers beat the Miami Marlins 6-1 Thursday to avoid a four-game sweep.

Chisholm put Miami ahead when he drove a 2-0 fastball off the facade above right-center field for his 10th homer.

Urias (11-3) allowed just four more hits, struck out nine and walked two, throwing a season-high 101 pitches. With the score 1-1, Urias singled leading off the fifth, starting a five-run inning.

"It's truly a blessing to pitch in a season as a full-time starter," Urias said through a translator. "To be able to accomplish that feat is something I take a lot of pride in."

Blake Treinen pitched a two-hit eighth and Garrett Cleavinger a perfect ninth.

"I think today it was first and foremost about Julio," Los Angeles manager Dave Roberts said. "He understood the situation we were in as far as needing to win a ballgame, where the pitching was at. Early he didn't have command of his secondary stuff but found a way to get through seven innings and pitch really well. That was huge."

Sandy Alcantara (5-8) allowed five runs

and seven hits in four-plus innings. His two shortest outings this season have been against the Dodgers, including a May 14 start at Los Angeles in which he allowed eight runs and seven hits in 1½ innings.

Phillies 8, Cubs 0: Brad Miller hit three home runs in a game for the first time in his career and visiting Philadelphia routed sinking Chicago.

Miller hit a solo drive in the third inning and added two-run homers in the fifth and seventh innings.

Brewers 5, Reds 3: Avisail Garcia hit a tiebreaking, two-run homer in the eighth inning as host Milwaukee boosted its NL Central lead to seven games over Cincinnati.

The matchup marked the first of seven straight games between the top two teams in the division — four in Milwaukee and, after the All-Star break, three in Cincinnati.

Indians 7, Royals 4: Franmil Reyes hit a three-run homer with two outs in the ninth inning as host Cleveland ended a nine-game losing streak, its longest under manager Terry Francona.

After Kansas City manager Mike Matheny elected to have reliever Greg Holland (2-4) walk the dangerous José Ramírez to put runners at first and second, Reyes made him pitch with his blast into the left-field seats.

Mariners 4, Yankees 0: Rookie Logan Gilbert (3-2) pitched one-hit ball over seven innings, struck out a career-high eight and retired his final 18 batters to lead host Seattle past New York.

Kyle Seager and Dylan Moore homered off Jordan Montgomery (3-4) as Seattle salvaged the final game of the three-game set.

Twins 5, Tigers 3: Ryan Jeffers and Miguel Sanó homered, leading J.A. Happ and host Minnesota over Detroit.

Jeffers' homer with one out in the fifth inning marked Minnesota's first runner against Tigers starter Tarik Skubal.

Athletics 2, Astros 1: Jed Lowrie and Matt Olson drove in runs to back Frankie Montas (8-7), who allowed one run and five hits in 6 2/3 innings and struck out 10 to lead visiting Oakland past Houston.

The Athletics stopped a three-game skid and ended the Astros' six-game winning streak.

Rockies 9, Diamondbacks 3: Dom Nunez, hitting just .159, doubled twice and singled as visiting Colorado avoided a three-game sweep by Arizona.

The Diamondbacks are a major league-worst 25-64. The Rockies won for just the seventh time in 40 road games this season. They're 31-17 at Coors Field.