

Russia warning US not to put troops in Central Asia

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia has strongly warned the United States against deploying its troops in the former Soviet Central Asian nations following their withdrawal from Afghanistan, a senior diplomat said in remarks published Tuesday.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said that Moscow conveyed the message to Washington during Russian President Vladimir Putin's summit with U.S. President Joe Biden in Geneva last month.

The warning comes as the U.S. military said last week that 90% of the withdrawal of U.S. troops and equipment from Afghanistan is complete. Biden said the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on Aug. 31.

"I would emphasize that the redeployment of the American permanent military presence to the countries neighboring Afghanistan is unacceptable," Ryabkov said. "We told the Americans in a direct and straightforward way that it would change a lot of things not only in our perceptions of what's going on in that important region, but also in our relations with the United States."

He added that Russia has also issued the warning to Central Asian nations.

"We cautioned them against such steps, and we also have had a frank talk on the subject with our Central Asian allies, neighbors and friends and also other countries in the region that would be directly affected," Ryabkov said in an interview published in the *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn* magazine.

On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are all members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and any presence of foreign troops on their territories must be endorsed by the security pact.

He added that none of those countries have raised the issue.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan both host Russian military bases. Kyrgyzstan, which

hosted a U.S. military base that supported operations in Afghanistan, closed it in 2014.

Uzbekistan, which also hosted a U.S. base, ordered it shut in 2005 amid tensions with Washington.

Uzbekistan's Defense Ministry reaffirmed in May that the country's constitution and its military doctrine rule out the presence of any foreign troops on its territory.

"I don't think that the emergence of new American military facilities in Central Asia would promote security in the region," Lavrov said.

The Biden administration has reportedly considered Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, as well as Kazakhstan, as possible staging areas for monitoring and quickly responding to possible security problems that may follow the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

"I don't think that anyone is interested in becoming a hostage to such U.S. policy and intentions, and in inviting retaliation," Lavrov said. The Russian foreign minister questioned what results would be achieved with a small U.S. presence outside Afghanistan when a 100,000-strong NATO force inside the country "failed to do anything."

"Most probably, they simply want to ensure their military presence in Central Asia and be able to influence the situation in this region."

As the American and NATO troops were swiftly pulling out, the Taliban have made quick gains across the country. They claimed Friday that they control 85% of Afghanistan's territory.

Russian officials expressed concern that the Taliban surge could destabilize Central Asia. Taliban advances have forced hundreds of Afghan soldiers to flee across the border into Tajikistan, which called up 20,000 military reservists to strengthen its southern border with Afghanistan.

Last week, a senior Taliban delegation visited Moscow to offer assurances that its advances in Afghanistan do not threaten Russia.

Thousands flee Afghanistan as Taliban surge keeps growing

Associated Press

CAMP ISTIQLAL, Afghanistan — Sakina, who is 11, maybe 12, walked with her family for 10 days after the Taliban seized her village in northern Afghanistan and burned down the local school.

They are now among around 50 families living in a makeshift camp on a rocky patch of land on the edge of the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. They roast in plastic tents under scorching heat that reaches 110 degrees Fahrenheit at midday. There are no trees, and the only bathroom for the entire camp is a tattered tent pitched over a foul-smelling hole.

As the Taliban surge through northern Afghanistan — a traditional stronghold of U.S.-allied warlords and an area dominated by the country's ethnic minorities — thousands of families like Sakina's are fleeing their homes, fearful of living under the insurgents' rule.

In the past 15 days, Taliban advances have driven more than 5,600 families from their homes, most of them in the northern reaches of the country, according to the government's Refugee and Repatriations Ministry.

In Camp Istiqlal, family after family, all from the Hazara ethnic minority, told of Taliban commanders using heavy-handed tactics as they overran their towns and villages — raising doubts among many over their persistent promises amid negotiations that they will not repeat their harsh rule of the past.

A February 2020 agreement the Taliban signed with the United States reportedly prevents the insurgents from capturing provincial capitals. Yet two — Kandahar in the south and Badghis in the north — are under siege. In the capital of Kabul, where many fear an eventual Taliban assault, a rocket defense system has been installed, the Ministry of Interior said over the weekend.

US wildfires threaten homes, land in West

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Wildfires that torched homes and forced thousands to evacuate burned across 10 parched Western states Tuesday, and the largest, in Oregon, threatened California's power supply.

Nearly 60 wildfires tore through bone-dry timber and brush from Alaska to Wyoming, according to the National Inter-agency Fire Center. Arizona, Idaho and Montana accounted for more than half of the large active fires.

The fires erupted as the West was in the grip of the second bout of dangerously high temperatures in just a few weeks. A climate change-fueled megadrought also is contributing to conditions that make fires even more dangerous, scientists say.

The National Weather Service says the heat wave appeared to have peaked in many areas, and excessive-heat warnings

were largely expected to expire by Tuesday. They continued into Tuesday night in some California deserts, however, and many areas were still expected to see high in the 80s and 90s.

In Northern California, a combined pair of lightning-ignited blazes dubbed the Beckwourth Complex was less than 25% surrounded after days of battling flames fueled by winds, hot weather and low humidity that sapped the moisture from vegetation. Evacuation orders were in place for more than 3,000 residents of remote northern areas and neighboring Nevada.

There were reports of burned homes, but damage was still being tallied. The blaze had consumed 140 square miles of land, including in Plumas National Forest.

A fire that began Sunday in the Sierra Nevada south of Yosemite National Park exploded over 14 square miles and was

just 10% contained. A highway that leads to Yosemite's southern entrance remained open.

The largest fire in the United States lay across the California border in southwestern Oregon. The Bootleg Fire — which doubled and doubled again over the weekend — threatened some 2,000 homes, state fire officials said. It had burned at least seven homes and more than 40 other buildings.

Elsewhere, a forest fire started during lightning storms in southeast Washington grew to 86 square miles. It was 20% contained Monday.

In Idaho, Gov. Brad Little mobilized the National Guard to help fight twin lightning-sparked fires that have together charred nearly 24 square miles of dry timber in the remote, drought-stricken region.

Japan details 'sense of crisis' regarding Taiwan

BY SETH ROBSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Japanese military planners are focused on Taiwan "with a sense of crisis," according to a Ministry of Defense report released Tuesday.

"Stabilizing the Taiwan situation is important for Japan's national security and stability of the international community," states the annual white paper, which was adopted by the country's cabinet that day. "We need to pay close attention with a sense of crisis more than ever before."

The United States and Japan have been strengthening their alliance as China continues to expand its military with the stated goal of occupying Taiwan, a U.S.-armed democracy the communists regard as a rebellious province.

The allies would have to de-

fend Taiwan in the event of a major problem, Japan's deputy prime minister, Taro Aso, said during a political fundraising event July 5, according to Kyodo News.

An invasion of the island by China could be seen as an existential threat, allowing Japan to exercise the right to collective self-defense, he said, according to the report.

Asked about the comments at a press conference the next day, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby told reporters that U.S. policy on Taiwan remains unchanged.

"We continue to observe the One-China Policy," he said, referring to one acknowledging that Beijing believes it has sovereignty over Taiwan. The sides split during a civil war in 1949. China considers the island a break-away province that should be brought under its control by force if necessary.

US, UK carrier strike groups train together for first time

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The USS Ronald Reagan and the HMS Queen Elizabeth strike groups conducted a large-scale exercise in the Indian Ocean on Monday, marking the first time the two carriers have trained together.

Along with the amphibious ready group led by the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima and the Dutch frigate HNLMS Eversten, the strike groups worked through a variety of training scenarios in the Gulf of Aden, between Yemen, Somaliland and Somalia.

"Our team was proud to operate alongside the U.K. Carrier Strike Group during this unique opportunity to hone the full scope of our mutual capabilities," said Rear Adm. Will Pennington, commander of the Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group and Task Force 50, in a press release Tuesday. "By operating together at sea, we deepen our coalition part-

nerships and extend our global reach throughout the region's critical waterways."

The exercise focused on the "full spectrum of maritime warfare operations" including anti-air, anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare tactics.

The ships' crews in several scenarios practiced precision maneuvering, hunted simulated enemy submarines, defended against simulated air and surface threats and conducted long-range maritime strikes against simulated enemy combatants, the U.S. Navy said.

Lt. Cmdr. Joe Kelly, spokesman for Task Force 50, said in an email Tuesday that the exercise was the first time the Ronald Reagan and Queen Elizabeth had steamed together.

Monday's exercise took place during the Ronald Reagan's deployment to the Middle East, where it has been assisting the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

Consumer prices surge by most since 2008

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Prices for U.S. consumers jumped in June by the most in 13 years, extending a run of higher inflation and fueling concerns that the rapidly rebounding economy is making goods and services increasingly expensive.

Tuesday's report from the Labor Department showed that consumer prices in June rose 0.9% from May and 5.4% over the past year — the sharpest 12-month inflation spike since August 2008. Excluding volatile oil and gas prices, so-called core inflation rose 4.5% in the past year, the

largest increase since November 1991.

The pickup in inflation, which has coincided with the economy's rapid recovery from the pandemic recession, has heightened concerns that the Federal Reserve might feel compelled to begin withdrawing its low-interest rate policies earlier than expected.

If so, that would risk weakening the economy and potentially derailing the recovery. Fed officials have repeatedly said, though, that they regard the surge in inflation as a temporary response to supply shortages and other short-term disruptions as

the economy quickly bounces back.

The jump in prices stems in many cases from a shortage of components and goods throughout the economy, from semiconductors to used cars, as well as surging demand from consumers who are increasingly traveling, shopping and eating out — and too few workers to serve them. Wages have increased sharply as a result, along with restaurant meals, airline fares and hotel rates.

Last month alone, average used car prices soared 10.5% — the largest such monthly increase

since record-keeping began in January 1953. That spike accounted for about one-third of the monthly increase for the third straight month.

Hotel room prices soared 7% in June. And the cost of new cars leaped 2%, the biggest monthly increase since May 1981. Auto prices have soared because the shortage of semiconductors has forced car makers to scale back production.

Restaurant prices rose 0.7% in June and 4.2% in the past year, a sign that many companies are raising prices to offset higher labor costs.

Biden balances fighting rising crime, reforming police

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Facing rising fears of summer violence, President Joe Biden is embarking on a political high-wire act, trying to balance his strong backing for law enforcement with the police reform movement championed by many of his supporters.

His focus Monday was on crime.

Biden met at the White House with urban leaders — including Eric Adams, the heavy favorite to be the next mayor of New York City — about increased shootings, as Democrats warily watch a surge across the nation. Though limited to what can be done at the federal level, Biden promised to support efforts on the

ground to combat crime.

"We know when we utilize trusted community members and encourage more community policing, we can intervene before the violence erupts," the president said.

The meeting was the second in just three weeks, underscoring the political concern crime has become for Democrats as they look to protect their thin margins in Congress. Big city mayors and lawmakers have sounded the alarm on the rise in crime, believed partly fueled by destabilizing forces of the pandemic, and polls suggest it is an increasing matter of concern for many Americans.

White House aides believe that Biden,

with his long legislative record on crime as a former senator, is not easy to paint as soft on the issue. And the president has been clear that he is opposed to the "defund the police" movement, which has been effectively used against some Democrats to paint them as anti-law enforcement.

The president promoted the money for policing in his COVID-19 relief bill and, reflecting on his nearly four decades in the Senate, declared that "Most of my career has been on this issue."

At the same time, Biden has also tried to boost progressives' efforts to reform policing and has backed a bill that, after initial promise, has stalled in the Senate.

Weighing how to honor dead at 'holy site' of collapsed condo

Associated Press

SURFSIDE — As crews keep searching for the last missing remains of the souls who perished in their collapsing beachfront condos nearly three weeks ago, the question is swirling across the ruins of the Champlain Towers South: What will become of the ground that bears so much pain?

"There's a lot of emotion. People talk about it as a holy site," said Miami-Dade Police Director Alfredo Ramirez. "People want some sort of connection

with their family member."

Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett suggested Monday that with scores of families still processing their losses, it's too soon to come up with anything specific. But he said the tragedy — now with 94 people confirmed dead and 22 others still missing — compels that something be placed on the site to remember them.

"I think the first thing we need to do is get the families situated, so they have a semblance of their life back — get them to the point

where they aren't burdened by the grief and emotion that they're going through right now," Burkett said.

"It's obvious that this has become much more than a collapsed building site," the mayor said. "It has become a holy site."

An impromptu memorial sprung up along a nearby tennis court soon after the collapse. Its fence is now festooned with drying bouquets and fading photographs of those confirmed dead and those yet to be found. Candles and candles line the street,

and stars of David are interspersed throughout the scene. There are teddy bears, toys, shoes — all in tribute to the scores of victims.

Within the rubble, personal items are being collected and will eventually be returned to their owners or next of kin. The twisted steel rebar and shards of concrete that have been hauled away, under the escort of police, are being kept in storage for investigators who are gathering clues as to what made 12 stories plunge to the ground on June 24.

Cuba ups police patrols after rare protests

Associated Press

HAVANA — Cuban police are out in force on the country's streets as the president is accusing Cuban Americans of using social media to spur a rare outpouring of weekend protests over high prices and food shortages.

The demonstrations in several cities and towns were some of the biggest displays of antigovernment sentiment seen in years in tightly controlled Cuba,

which is facing a surge of coronavirus cases as it struggles with its worst economic crisis in decades as a consequence of U.S. sanctions imposed by President Donald Trump's administration.

Many young people took part in Sunday's demonstrations in Havana. Protests were also held elsewhere on the island, including in the small town of San Antonio de los Baños, where people objected to power outages

and were visited by President Miguel Díaz-Canel.

The demonstrators disrupted traffic in the capital for several hours until some threw rocks and police moved in and broke them up.

Internet service was spotty, possibly indicating an effort to prevent protesters from communicating with each other.

In a statement Monday, U.S. President Joe Biden said Cuban protesters were asserting their

basic rights.

"We stand with the Cuban people and their clarion call for freedom and relief from the tragic grip of the pandemic and from the decades of repression and economic suffering to which they have been subjected by Cuba's authoritarian regime," Biden said.

The U.S. urges the Cuban government to serve their people "rather than enriching themselves," Biden added.

Fire kills scores in Iraqi COVID-19 hospital ward

Associated Press

NASIRIYAH, Iraq — The death toll from a fire at a hospital coronavirus ward climbed to 92 on Tuesday as anguished relatives buried their loved ones and lashed out at the government over the country's second such disaster in less than three months.

Health officials said scores of others were injured in the blaze that erupted Monday at al-Hussein Teaching Hospital in Nasiriyah.

The tragedy cast a spotlight on what many have decried as widespread negligence and mismanagement in Iraq's hospitals after decades of war and sanctions.

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi convened an emergency meeting and ordered the suspension and arrest of the health director in Dhi Qar province, the hospital director and the city's civil defense chief. The government also launched an investigation.

The prime minister called the catastrophe "a deep wound in the consciousness of all Iraqis."

In the holy city of Najaf, the dead were laid to rest. Mourning families stood over coffins in the mosque to say one last prayer.

Their tears were tinged with anger, with some saying the disaster could have been prevented. They blamed both the provincial government and the central government in Baghdad.

Ahmed Resan, who witnessed the blaze, said it began with smoke. "But everyone ran away — the workers and even the police. A few minutes later, there was an explosion," he said. He said firefighters arrived an hour later.

"The whole state system has collapsed, and who paid the price? The people inside here. These people have paid the price," Haidar al-Askari seethed at the scene.

Overnight, firefighters and rescuers — many holding flashlights and using blankets to extinguish small fires — searched through the ward in the darkness. As dawn broke, bodies covered with sheets could be seen laid out on the ground outside the hospital.

Officials at one point said the fire was caused by a short circuit but gave no details. Another official said the blaze erupted when an oxygen cylinder exploded. The officials were not authorized to talk to the news media and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Rioting, looting continues over ex-leader's jailing in S. Africa

Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG — The death toll from rioting in South Africa rose to 45 on Tuesday as police and the military tried to halt the unrest in poor areas of two provinces that began last week after the imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma.

Many of the deaths in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces occurred in chaotic stampedes as scores of people stole food, electric appliances, liquor and clothing from stores, officials said.

Sporadic violence broke out after Zuma on Thursday began serving a 15-month sentence for contempt of court. He had refused to comply with a court order to testify at a state-backed inquiry investigating allegations of corruption while he was president from 2009 to 2018.

The unrest then spiraled into a spree of looting in township areas of the two provinces, witnesses said, although it has not spread to South Africa's other seven provinces, where police are on alert.

"The criminal element has hijacked this situation," said Premier David Makhura of Gauteng province, which includes Johannesburg.

More than 400 people were arrested in Gauteng, but the situation was far from under control, he said.

"We understand that those unemployed have inadequate food. We understand that the situation has been made worse by the pandemic," an emotional Makhura said on the state South African Broadcasting Corp. "But this looting is undermining our businesses here (in Soweto). It is undermining our economy, our community. It is undermining everything."

As he spoke, the broadcast showed police trying to bring order to the Ndofaya shopping mall, where 10 people were crushed to death in a looting stampede. A couple of gunshots could be heard.

Makhura appealed for leaders of political, religious and community organizations to urge people to stop the looting.

At least 19 had been killed in Gauteng, including the 10 at the mall in the Meadowlands area of Soweto, Makhura said.

At least 26 people had been killed in KwaZulu-Natal province, many crushed in the shops, premier Sihle Zikalala told the press on Tuesday.

The deployment of 2,500 soldiers to support the South African police has not yet stopped the rampant looting, although arrests are being made at some areas in Johannesburg, including Vosloorus in the eastern part of the city.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman seeks owner of wallet from mid-1980s

NC ELIZABETHTOWN — A woman in North Carolina said she's searching for a man who lost his wallet in a lake in the mid-1980s.

WRAL reported that Sarah Foor and her husband were fishing at Jones Lake State Park near Elizabethtown when she reeled in the wallet.

Inside she found a faded driver's license, a library card and an array of expired credit cards. It also held a senior photo that's dated from the 1983-84 school year.

Beef parfaits and vegan brats among fair foods

IN INDIANAPOLIS — Beef parfaits, vegan brats and Fruity Pebbles funnel cakes are among the new culinary creations being offered at the Indiana State Fair this year.

Fair officials have announced 23 new items on top of the typical fair food like corn dogs.

Other foods include deep-fried cheesecake, iced coffee floats and a Buttermilk Waf-flewich, which is a grilled cheese sandwich made with two buttermilk waffles.

Man drives into bar and fires gun after removal

GA HIRAM — Several people were injured after a driver ran his truck into a Georgia restaurant while firing a gun, police said.

The Hiram Police Department said the incident occurred at 278 South Bar & Grill. Eduardo Morales, 34, was arrested, police said.

Hiram police said Morales had been asked to leave the bar earlier in the night because he was intoxicated. He left the restaurant but returned in his black Dodge Ram 2500 and began firing a weapon into the club through the window of his truck.

"When his weapon was empty, Morales then drove the vehicle into the bar through the front doors striking numerous patrons," police said in a press release.

Submissions wanted for state's biggest trees

MI ANN ARBOR — Re-Leaf Michigan again is seeking the largest trees in the state.

The Ann Arbor-based tree planting and education nonprofit is hosting its 15th biennial Michigan Big Tree Hunt contest.

The trees can be found in backyards, local parks and even along hiking trails. Certificates and prizes are awarded for the largest tree submitted from each county, for the overall largest tree found by different age groups, and for the largest white pine.

Sinkhole collapses under 2 parked cars

NY NEW YORK — A sinkhole on a Manhattan street collapsed under two parked cars, prompting renewed criticism of the city's infrastructure several days after heavy rains caused severe subway flooding.

There were no injuries reported after the sinkhole on the Upper West Side left an SUV

with its back end stuck and the car behind it tilting forward.

New Super Mario 64 game sells for \$1.56M

TX DALLAS — An unopened copy of Nintendo's Super Mario 64 has sold at auction for \$1.56 million.

Heritage Auctions in Dallas said that the 1996 game sold breaking its previous record price for the sale of a single video game.

A spokesman did not immediately respond to an inquiry about who purchased the game.

In April, the auction house sold an unopened copy of Nintendo's Super Mario Bros. that was bought in 1986 and forgotten about in a desk drawer for \$660,000.

Tall ship Eagle to visit bicentennial celebration

ME PORTLAND — The Coast Guard tall ship Eagle is going to be paying a visit for Maine's delayed bicentennial celebration.

The 295-foot, three-masted barque will be docked at the Ocean Gateway in Portland from Aug. 6 through Aug. 9.

The Maine Bicentennial Commission, the nonprofit sponsoring organization, aims to honor the state's shipbuilding and seafaring history.

Woman seeks dog that ran away after car crash

FL DELAND — A central Florida woman is hoping that someone has found a 2-year-old dog that bolted from his family's car after a fatal crash.

The Shih Tzu, named Alfred, ran from the family's SUV after it was rear-ended by a pickup truck, The Daytona Beach News-Journal reported.

Valerie Boldt heard about the incident and is hoping that someone will return the dog. To help, she created a Facebook profile under the name "Help-Bring AlfredHome."

The truck failed to slow down as it approached the 2018 Toyota RAV4, in which the dog and his owner, a 13-year-old girl, were riding, the Florida Highway Patrol said in a report.

The crash sent the SUV off the road and into a tree. It overturned and caught fire, troopers said.

The driver and the 13-year-old girl died in the crash. Everyone else in the SUV suffered minor injuries.

State bans large balloon release to help wildlife

RI PROVIDENCE — Rhode Island has banned the release of large numbers of balloons in a move to protect wildlife.

Under a new law signed by Gov. Dan McKee, the state will prohibit anyone from intentionally releasing 10 or more helium or other lighter-than-air balloons outdoors.

Supporters said balloon releases are an environmental nuisance that poses a serious threat to birds, marine animals and other wildlife that ingest or become entangled in balloon litter.

Violators face a fine of \$100 when the new rule takes effect in November.

— From wire reports

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Surgery hasn't kept Condie from climbing

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Kyra Condie lay on the operating table as doctors broke her back and put it back together.

They worked through an incision running from her neck nearly the length of her back, removing, rotating, realigning and resetting each of 10 vertebrae. Rods were inserted to stabilize the spine while the bones fused together.

Blood, donated to herself two months earlier, flowed back into the 13-year-old's veins. By the time the more than six hour surgery was done, she was three inches taller, no longer stunted by severe scoliosis.

Cathy Condie had the typical worries of a mother: paralysis, nerve damage, infection.

Kyra never blinked, viewing it as just another obstacle in her way — a tenacity that has allowed her to reach all the way to the Olympic rings.

"She took it on like, 'I'm going to get through this,'" Cathy Condie said. "Don't tell me much about it, I'm just going to go, like she does with every-

thing."

Sport climbing will make its Olympic debut at the Tokyo Games in a fusion of strength, stamina and speed.

None of the other 39 athletes climbing the walls at Aomi Urban Sports Park have a story like the 24-year-old Condie's.

Like many future professional climbers, Kyra spent her childhood scaling everything in her path.

She was moved from a crib as a baby because she kept climbing out, and if her parents looked away for a second, they'd find her atop something — a cliff, the cover of the playground equipment, door frames, the refrigerator.

Tom and Cathy knew they weren't going to stop their aggressively independent daughter from climbing, so they taught her how to get back down.

By 11, Kyra started taking climbing more seriously and joined a team at a local gym in St. Paul, Minn. She didn't win competitions right away, but had a work ethic unlike any of

the other kids.

But the more she climbed, the more her back hurt.

Kyra rarely complained, so her parents knew something wasn't right. Even so, they figured the pain was from climbing too hard.

"I felt like an 80-year-old woman complaining about my back all the time," Kyra said.

Kyra, as she always does, took matters into her own hands, first with a Google search, then by asking someone at her gym to check for scoliosis. That led to a trip to the doctor and X-rays revealing an S-shaped curve in her spine, already arching well over 50 degrees — life-threatening if she didn't get it fixed.

The first doctor told Kyra climbing may no longer be in her future. A nurse added it wouldn't be a big deal, that she would have a family some day and climbing wouldn't be as important.

What they didn't understand was the determination of the young girl in front of them.

"It didn't sit well with me,

even at that age," Kyra said.

The Condie's went to two more doctors, both of whom said she could be back climbing within four months. They went with the consensus and, not long before her 14th birthday, Kyra underwent surgery to correct a 72-degree curve in her spine.

Because her spine was fused into place, Kyra was unable to arch her back and had trouble bending sideways — important skills for high-level climbers.

Undeterred, she found new ways to work up the wall, honing her technique and problem solving. Kyra's method isn't always the easiest, but it works for her.

She willed herself into becoming one of the world's best sport climbers.

"I was always kind of defiant and didn't like being told I couldn't do something," she said. "Also, kind of the aspect of I was not naturally the best. I wasn't used to winning but I really wanted to win. That coupled with having something to overcome really stoked my training."

Alonso earns \$1 million with Home Run Derby win

Associated Press

DENVER — Pete Alonso's words were as bold as his home runs.

"I'm the best power hitter on the planet," the New York Mets first baseman proclaimed after winning his second straight Home Run Derby. "Being able to showcase that and put on a fun display on for the fans is truly a dream come true for me."

Alonso danced to the title, besting Shohei Ohtani, Trey Mancini and Juan Soto on a night of record long balls in the thin Rocky Mountain air of Coors Field.

He hit 74 total home runs and beat Mancini 23-22 in the final round Monday, joining Ken Griffey Jr. (1998-99) and Yoenis Céspedes (2013-14) in winning consecutive titles.

Alonso earned \$1 million — more than his \$676,775 salary. He's made \$2 million in Home Run Derby winnings compared to about \$1.47 million in career salary from the

Mets through the end of this season.

"My parents let me stay up past my bedtime to watch this," the 26-year-old recalled. "That was one of the few nights of the year I got to stay up past of my bedtime and watch. Watch incredible feats you don't see in a regular baseball game. To be able to do back to back is really special to me."

He has a chance to match Griffey, who also won in 1994, as the only three-time champions.

Batting second, Alonso trailed 22-17 after the first two minutes of the final round, then hit six homers on six swings over the first 28 seconds of his final minute.

Mancini, who returned this season from cancer treatment, was the sentimental favorite, while Alonso was the most animated of the eight sluggers as the longball competition returned after a one-year absence caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

With custom bats in the Mets' royal blue

and orange, and matching shoes and batting gloves, Alonso was a human bobblehead, nodding on beat in the batter's box as he stepped out and danced. He motioned with his arms to whip up fans during a timeout.

Alonso hit a first-round record 35 dingers, seven more than Josh Hamilton in 2008 at the original Yankee Stadium, and topped Kansas City's Salvador Pérez with 27. Alonso, batting second, beat Soto 16-15 in the second round. Alonso's longest drive of the night traveled 514 feet.

Mancini missed the 2020 season while undergoing chemotherapy for stage 3 colon cancer, treatment he finished last Sept. 21 at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The 29-year-old Baltimore Orioles first baseman hit .256 with 16 homers and 55 RBIs going into the All-Star break. His oncologist, Dr. Nilo Azad, threw out the ceremonial first pitch at Camden Yards before the Orioles' hosted the Chicago White Sox last Friday night.

Antetokounmpo makes mark in Finals

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo shook his head, unwilling to place himself in the class of the only player with a longer streak of 40-point games in an NBA Finals.

"I'm not Michael Jordan," Antetokounmpo said.

No, but he's exactly the player the Milwaukee Bucks need if they are going to win their first title in 50 years. They can tie the series against the Phoenix Suns in Game 4 on Wednesday.

With 42 and 41 points in his last two games, Antetokounmpo has joined LeBron James, Shaquille O'Neal, Jerry West and Rick Barry as players to have two straight 40-point outings in the NBA Finals.

That's halfway to Jordan, who did it four consecutive times in 1993 against Phoenix.

"I'm not Michael Jordan," Antetokounmpo repeated. "But you know, all I care about right now, it's getting one more, that's all. Just take care of business, doing our job."

When Antetokounmpo returned from a knee injury with 20 points and 17 rebounds in Game 1 of the series, he delivered good numbers.

But the 6-foot-11, 250-pound Antetokounmpo will always collect stats. With his long arms and longer strides, he can easily get himself near enough to the basket to snatch a rebound

or drop in a bucket.

Good numbers don't mean it was a great game.

Perhaps still uncertain of the knee or just readjusting to teammates who had played well without him, Antetokounmpo didn't seize the moment the way Milwaukee needs. He took only 11 shots — fewer than three teammates.

The last two games were the Greek Freak these NBA Finals demand.

He had 42 points and 12 rebounds in Game 2, then 41 points, 13 rebounds and six assists as the Bucks finally got on the board in Game 3 with a 120-100 victory.

"He's just doing whatever it takes to help his team, to help us," Milwaukee coach Mike Budenholzer said. "He's in an aggressive mindset."

The two-time MVP needs to stay in it.

Attacking the paint as he did in Game 3 presents problems for which the Suns may not have the answers. He helped send Deandre Ayton to the bench in foul trouble after the center had Phoenix leading early in the second quarter. And he created open shooting space for Jrue Holiday and Khris Middleton to get some clean looks after both struggled in Game 2.

Antetokounmpo largely kept that game from turning into a blowout by himself. With

his teammates supporting him better at home, it was the Bucks who won big.

"When guys make shots, it just makes it tough on the opposing team because now he's really just playing 1-on-1, and good luck with that," teammate Bobby Portis said.

The Suns don't have a lot of size outside of Ayton, but sometimes Antetokounmpo helps his opponents by settling for jumpers that remain a weaker part of his portfolio.

From his very first basket of Game 3, when he jumped over a defender to grab a rebound that he put back while being fouled, he made it clear he was going to keep going to the rim. When Phoenix stopped him by fouling, he made them pay by making 13 of 17 free throws.

"He's physical. When he gets downhill, gets to the basket, gets to the free-throw line, it encourages him to keep going. And he was hitting his free throws ... and that just kind of opens up his whole game," Suns reserve Cam Johnson said. "So it's on us to stop him, give him more resistance."

Nobody knew what Antetokounmpo could still do when he went down in Game 4 of the Eastern Conference finals against Atlanta with a hyperextended left knee. Even if he could come back — and it wasn't clear he would until shortly before tipoff of the finals opener — it was hard to imagine he could deliver the type of historic performances he has.

Team USA falls again, this time to Australia

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — These games don't count. Right now, that is the only saving grace for USA Basketball.

And for quite probably the first time in 29 years of NBA players suiting up for the national team, there was a smattering of boos when a game ended — on home soil, no less.

Patty Mills scored 22 points and Australia held the United States without a field goal for the final 4:34 on the way to beating the Americans 91-83 on Monday night, dropping the three-time defending Olympic gold medalists to 0-2 in their five-game slate of exhibitions leading up to the Tokyo Games.

"I thought we got better tonight," said U.S. coach Gregg

Popovich, whose team lost to Nigeria on Saturday. "After a short time together, there's a lot of things that have to be covered, but the first half and the second half were two different beasts.

"In the first half, we defended the way we wanted to defend. ... We rebounded better. We moved the ball better at the offensive end and had more pace. In the second half, we tired out."

Joe Ingles scored 17 points, Matisse Thybulle scored 12 and Chris Goulding had 11 for Australia.

"We walked into this game expecting to win," Ingles said.

With good reason. Starting with the World Cup quarterfinals in China two years ago and then their two exhibitions in Vegas, the U.S. is 1-4 in its last five

games with NBA players against international competition.

In the most recent 105 games that preceded those, the U.S. went 101-4.

Damian Lillard led the U.S. with 22 points, while Kevin Durant scored 17 and Bradley Beal finished with 12. But the Americans wasted a 10-point second-half lead, and have dropped back-to-back games for just the third time since NBA players began wearing the red, white and blue in 1992.

The other instances: two straight in the 2002 FIBA World Championship and two straight in the 2019 Basketball World Cup. The U.S. finished sixth in the first tournament, seventh in the other. And while these are glorified scrimmages, this

much is already certain — a medal seems far from a lock for the U.S.

"It's not the first time that I've seen Team USA be tested," Lillard said. "Maybe not beat two times in a row, but I've seen it before. These other teams and these other countries just continue to improve. These players, they get better, they get more confident and they also want to beat us badly. It's definitely noticeable when you're on the court."

Jayson Tatum's layup with 4:35 left put the Americans up 82-80. Australia outscored the U.S. 11-1 the rest of the way, and Mills — who plays for Popovich in San Antonio — did most of the damage for the Boomers down the stretch.

US softball team wins twice in Iwakuni

JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — Heavy rainfall and flooding failed to keep the U.S. Olympic softball team from its practice and exhibition games throughout the week.

The U.S. team's first exhibition game was a doubleheader at the Atago Sports Complex against Iyo Bank Vertz, a corporate team. The first pitch was scheduled for 10 a.m. Friday but was pushed to 5 p.m. because of heavy rainfall throughout the day. Team USA closed both games with shutout victories, the first 1-0 and the second 8-0.

The squad is now 8-0 in exhibitions at Atago after winning 3-1 against Toyota and defeating Hitachi 4-1 on Tuesday.

"It's a great opportunity to pack up the kids and see a little bit of America, because they

haven't seen it in three years," Marine spouse April Elliott said on Friday while attending the games.

Brad Cramer, the ROTC instructor and softball coach at Matthew C. Perry High School on the air station, said he is attending all the U.S. softball team's exhibitions and events at Iwakuni.

"Since the Olympics is not going to be open to the public, this is going to be as close as we are going to get to see it in person," he said. "That's part of the reason I came out to the games."

Early morning Thursday at 1:24 a.m., Iwakuni experienced two minor earthquakes within an hour of each other with a maximum intensity of a 3.0 on the Richter scale.

Heavy rainfall going into Friday caused flooding and landslides in the area, causing road closures and train cancellations

in and out of Iwakuni, making it difficult for some spectators to attend.

On Thursday, the International Olympic Committee announced that the Tokyo Games will be a non-spectator event, which was announced hours after Tokyo extended its state of emergency.

The Olympic athletes also held a Q&A event Saturday for Japanese and American children.

"How can I pitch the fast ball like you?" one Japanese youngster asked pitcher Monica Abbott.

"My mom always told me to eat my vegetables," she replied, and the surrounding crowd burst into laughter. Abbott followed by demonstrating the stages of a fast pitch.

Perry High softball team captain Sera Shimakura asked: "As a captain, what is the best way to

get your team members motivated and confident enough to call out plays?"

Olympic outfielder Haylie McCleney fielded the question.

"Learn who it is you're leading and what is it that motivates them, and you need to have the ability to pull that out of them. And you need to be everyone's biggest hype man," she said.

Shimakura was satisfied.

"The answer was very constructive and really good advice," she said. "I want to be like them when I grow up."

The U.S. Olympic softball team is scheduled to play in Fukushima July 21 and 22 in the opening rounds of the Olympic Games. The U.S. is scheduled to face Italy first and then Canada, according to the official schedule online.

The games officially begin July 23 with closing ceremonies on Aug. 8.

Lowry begins quest to retain British Open title

Associated Press

SANDWICH, England — Shane Lowry kept the silver claret jug for 722 days, the most by any British Open champion in some 75 years. He returned it on Monday to the R&A at Royal St. George's with mixed emotions.

Sure, he was sad to part with it. But that meant it was time to play golf's oldest championship, and that was plenty enticing to Lowry and the rest of the field.

"Coming back here and having the big grandstands and having the crowds out there and all that type of stuff, and everything that comes along with the Open Championship, I think that's going to be pretty cool this week," Lowry said.

"I'm really looking forward to the week ahead," he said after returning golf's oldest trophy. "Not that I'm ready to give the claret jug back. I'm happy it's here and I'm happy I'm here defending, and I'm really looking forward to the week."

The British Open was the only major canceled last year by the COVID-19 pandemic as the others were moved around to different spots on the calendar. Now it's the last major of the year that has brought remind-

ers the pandemic has not entirely gone away.

Zach Johnson, the 2015 champion at St. Andrews, saw his streak of 69 consecutive majors end when he tested positive for the coronavirus before boarding a charter flight from the John Deere Classic in Illinois.

Johnson is the fifth player to be withdrawn from a major championship since the pandemic, but the first since Sergio Garcia and Joaquin Niemann had positive tests ahead of the 2020 Masters in November.

And while the British Open might look normal, especially when 32,000 fans start arriving for the opening round on Thursday, it will be anything but that off the course.

Strict protocols from the R&A forbid players (or caddies) from staying with one another. Each player can have a core group of three additional people, which includes a caddie, coach, manager, family member or a trainer.

They are not to go to grocery stores or restaurants or otherwise mix with the general public.

It's different, to be sure. Lowry, however,

doesn't see it as a burden. After all, this is a major championship and he's the defending champion. Even as an Irishman, he's not one to hit the town at night looking for some diversion.

"It's a bubble, but I don't think I'll be doing anything different than I normally do," Lowry said. "I come to the golf course, I play, and I go home and we have dinner in the house, and that's it. ... Watch a bit of TV and have some food in the evenings."

"You don't do anything else the week of big tournaments. You're kind of resting up as much as you can, and you're obviously here playing and practicing all day every day when you're here."

Practice was limited for Lowry on Monday with a gray sky and rain over the southeastern English links course. He walked the front nine until seeing what appeared to be a break in the weather, and then played 12 holes.

The rain has left Royal St. George's slightly softer, which could eliminate some of the wild bounces for which these rolling fairways are famous. It has been described in some quarters as playing golf on the surface of the moon.