

Military leaders defend diversity training

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The leaders of the military's service academies on Wednesday defended the value of diversity training and fostering inclusion among cadets, pushing back against Republican lawmakers seeking to end such practices.

The superintendents of the Military Academy, the Naval Academy and Air Force Academy said their diversity and inclusion efforts help build cohesive teams critical to national security and that those efforts did not distract from war fighting, as some Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee have argued.

"We must embrace diversity as a strength," said Lt. Gen. Richard Clark, superintendent of the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. "Our cadets have to lead people who don't look like them, who don't think like them, who don't talk like them, but ultimately they have to build and lead teams with one common goal: to defend the Constitution of the United States."

Clark told lawmakers that cadets at the

academy received 16 hours of diversity, equity and inclusion training across all four years of schooling, compared to more than 1,000 hours of warfighter training. But those numbers did not reassure Republicans who are concerned the military and service academies are overly consumed with pushing a "woke" agenda focused on liberal social justice policies.

"Much of diversity, equity and inclusivity training not only doesn't work to decrease bias but is actually the weaponization of one ideological position: identify over all else," said Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., the chairman of the committee's personnel panel.

Republicans have long attacked diversity initiatives in the military and vowed to undo them after taking control of the House this year. A defense policy bill passed last week with almost no Democratic support eliminates all diversity, equity and inclusion offices at the Defense Department and prevents the Pentagon from using affirmative action in admission to the academies.

The hearing on Wednesday follows a Supreme Court decision last month that struck

down race-conscious admissions at all colleges and universities except the military academies "in light of the potentially distinct interests that military academies may present."

The academy superintendents said they are still assessing the Supreme Court ruling but have never elevated an applicant due to their race or ethnicity. They said the academies "look at the whole person" when evaluating applicants, including objective criteria such as class rank and academic achievement and subjective factors such as an applicant's personal background.

Lt. Gen. Steve Gilland, superintendent at the Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., said the academy has class composition goals based on the composition of the Army officer corps, but "if we don't meet those goals, then we don't meet them." Clark said the Air Force Academy has application goals based on the demographics of the Air Force.

"We look at the nation's demographics so we can ensure we reach every community," Clark said.

Official: US working to get soldier back from N. Korea

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

NAGANO, Japan — The United States is working to ensure the safety and return of a U.S. soldier who crossed into North Korea on Tuesday and has not been heard from since, a top U.S. diplomat told reporters Thursday in Japan.

Pvt. Travis King, 23, entered North Korea at the Joint Security Area, the site in the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea. King reportedly left a tour group and bolted over a concrete curb separating the two countries.

"We are working very hard to ascertain information regarding his well-being," U.S. special representative for

North Korea policy Sung Kim told reporters at a meeting with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts in Nagano.

"We are actively engaging to ascertain his safety and return," Kim said.

Pyongyang was not responding to U.S. attempts to communicate about King, The Associated Press reported Thursday. His flight into the severe, isolated regime comes at a difficult time in North Korea's already fraught relations with the U.S. and the wider world.

King was released July 10 from a South Korean prison, where he had been held for six weeks on assault charges. U.S. Army authorities on Monday escorted him to a security

checkpoint at Incheon International Airport, where he was scheduled for a flight to Fort Bliss, Texas, to face further disciplinary action and discharge.

But he never boarded the flight and instead turned up in a tour group at the border village of Panmunjom, where the 1953 Korean War armistice was signed and where he bolted across the dividing line, according to U.S. officials.

Kim met Thursday with Fumakoshi Takehiro, director general of Japan's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau at the Foreign Ministry, and Kim Gunn, South Korean representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs, to discuss

North Korean issues at Prince Hotel Karuizawa West, a mountain golf resort and conference center.

Before King's disappearance, the three-party talks were set against an increased tempo of North Korean weapons tests, including an intercontinental ballistic missile fired July 12, and the USS Kentucky, the first nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarine to visit South Korea in 42 years.

The talks also coincided with warming relations between South Korea and Japan, long at odds over lingering issues such as Japan's use of Korean forced labor during its 1910-1945 occupation of the peninsula.

Russia's 'retaliatory' strikes hit Ukraine cities for 3rd night

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia pounded Ukraine's southern cities Thursday with drones and missiles for a third consecutive night, targeting some of the country's critical grain export infrastructure and helping to drive up food prices in countries facing hunger.

At least two people in the besieged port city of Odesa were killed in the strikes, which came days after President Vladimir Putin pulled Russia out of a wartime deal that allowed Ukraine to send grain to some needy countries.

The attacks came after Moscow vowed "retribution" earlier this week for an attack that damaged a crucial bridge between Russia and the Moscow-annexed Crimean Peninsula. Russian officials blamed that strike on Ukrainian drone boats.

Odesa Gov. Oleh Kiper said Ukrainian air defenses destroyed all of the 12 Iranian-made Shahed drones and two Kalibr missiles that targeted Odesa.

But he added that air defense systems were unable to shoot down some incoming missiles, in particular the X-22 and Onyx types. He didn't say how many

missiles got through. The Russian military described its strikes on Ukraine's southern city of Odesa as "retaliatory."

The Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement that it targeted "production shops and storage sites for unmanned boats" in Odesa and the nearby city of Chornomorsk. In the Mykolaiv area, the Russian military claimed to have destroyed Ukraine's fuel infrastructure facilities and ammunition depots. Neither sides' claims could be independently verified.

The two people who died in Odesa were a 21-year-old security guard and another person who was found dead under rubble by a search-and-rescue operation, according to Kiper, who said the strikes had destroyed administrative and residential buildings near the port.

In Mykolaiv, another southern city close to the Black Sea, at least 19 people were injured overnight, the region's governor, Vitalii Kim, said in a statement on Telegram. Russian strikes partially destroyed one building and started a large blaze. Two people were hospitalized, including a child, according to the regional governor.

Senate proposal makes exit from NATO harder

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

A bill making its way through Congress seeks to prohibit presidents from unilaterally pulling the country out of NATO, a move that coincides with alliance skeptic Donald Trump's front-runner status as the Republican presidential nominee in 2024.

By a 65-28 vote Wednesday, the Senate passed the bipartisan amendment to the pending 2024 National Defense Authorization Act. All the no votes were cast by Republicans.

Withdrawal from NATO would require two-thirds approval in the Senate or an act of Congress under the provisions of the legislation.

"America is strong on our own and even stronger with our allies," Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said in a statement Wednesday. "Congress stands with this historic alliance."

Florida Republican Sen. Marco Rubio, a co-sponsor, said in a statement any attempt to leave NATO would require rigorous debate and the input of the American people.

"NATO serves as an essential military alliance that protects shared national interests and enhances America's international presence," Rubio said.

The bill also would prohibit any funding to support a withdrawal from the alliance should a president attempt to leave NATO without Senate approval. The bill further authorizes Congress to challenge an administration in court over the matter.

For decades, the U.S. commitment to NATO was never a source of contention in the political mainstream, where support was bipartisan.

However, the Trump presidency created doubts, given his open questioning of the value of the alliance and the U.S.'s place in it.

Trump also made lackluster defense spending by many European countries, most notably Germany, a centerpiece of his criticism that U.S. taxpayers were subsidizing security in Europe.

Still, NATO enjoys broad support among Americans, with polling routinely showing majorities across the political spectrum hold favorable views of the alliance.

South Korean president warns N. Korea against nuclear attack

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

South Korea's leader boarded a nuclear-capable U.S. ballistic missile submarine this week to warn that a nuclear attack by North Korea "would lead to the end of the regime."

The USS Kentucky, an Ohio-class submarine, the largest subs ever built for the U.S. Navy, arrived Tuesday at South Korea's Naval Fleet Headquarters in Busan, the country's largest port.

President Yoon Suk Yeol, standing in front of the Kentucky on Wednesday with U.S. sailors, said Washington and Seoul would continue to "enhance the visibility of U.S. strategic assets deployment" in and around the Korean Peninsula.

"This deployment of [the Kentucky] shows the willingness of South Korea and the U.S. to regularly deploy strategic assets and defend their ability to implement extended deterrence," he said.

The submarine's arrival "makes clear ... that if North Korea provokes, it would lead to the end of the regime," Yoon said.

"South Korea and the U.S. will continue to respond overwhelmingly and resolutely to North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile threats through regular deployment of strategic assets," he said.

The Kentucky, homeported at Naval Submarine Base Bangor, Wash., can carry 20 nuclear-tipped Trident II D-5 ballistic missiles that have a range of 4,000 miles, according to the Navy's website.

Tornado wrecks Pfizer plant in N. Carolina

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — A tornado heavily damaged a major Pfizer pharmaceutical plant in North Carolina on Wednesday, while torrential rain flooded communities in Kentucky and an area from California to South Florida endured more scorching heat.

Pfizer confirmed that the large manufacturing complex was damaged by a twister that touched down shortly after midday near Rocky Mount, but said in an email that it had no reports of serious injuries. A later company statement said all employees were safely evacuated and accounted for.

Parts of roofs were ripped open atop its massive buildings. The Pfizer plant stores large quantities of medicine that were tossed about, said Nash County Sheriff Keith Stone.

"I've got reports of 50,000 pallets of medicine that are strewn across the facility and damaged through the rain and the wind,"

Stone said.

The plant produces anesthesia and other drugs as well as nearly 25% of all sterile injectable medications used in U.S. hospitals, Pfizer said on its website. Erin Fox, senior pharmacy director at University of Utah Health, said the damage "will likely lead to long-term shortages while Pfizer works to either move production to other sites or rebuilds."

The National Weather Service said in a tweet that the damage was consistent with an EF3 tornado with wind speeds up to 150 mph.

The Edgecombe County Sheriff's Office, where part of Rocky Mount is located, said on Facebook that they had reports of three people injured in the tornado, and that two of them had life-threatening injuries.

A preliminary report from neighboring Nash County said 13 people were injured and 89 structures were damaged, WRAL-

TV reported.

Three homes owned by Brian Varnell and his family members in the nearby Dortches area were damaged. He told the news outlet he is thankful they are all alive. His sister and her children hid in their home's laundry room.

"They got where they needed to be within the house and it all worked out for the best," Varnell said near a home that was missing exterior walls and a large chunk of the roof.

Elsewhere in the U.S., an onslaught of searing temperatures and rising floodwaters continued, with Phoenix breaking an all-time temperature record and rescuers pulling people from rain-swamped homes and vehicles in Kentucky.

Forecasters said little relief appears in sight from the heat and storms. For example, Miami has endured a heat index of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or more for weeks, with temperatures expected to rise this weekend.

Jobless claims decline again amid strong labor market

Associated Press

Fewer Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week with the labor market continuing to cruise along despite higher interest rates intended to cool hiring.

U.S. applications for jobless claims fell 9,000 to 228,000 for the week ending July 15, from 237,000 the previous week, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out some of the weekly volatility, fell by 9,250 to 237,500.

Jobless claim applications are viewed as reflective of the number of layoffs in a given week.

For three weeks in late May and early June, jobless claims had appeared to reach a sustained, higher level, above 260,000. But the past four weeks, claims have retreated and the labor market remains historically healthy.

Since more than 20 million jobs vanished when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, U.S. employers have added

jobs at a blistering pace, more often than not beating forecasts. Despite the fastest interest rate hikes since 1989, the unemployment rate has hardly budged and remains historically low at 3.6%.

Fed officials have said that the unemployment rate needs to rise well past 4% to bring inflation down, but a report last week showed that consumer prices fell to their lowest level since early 2021 — 3% in June compared with a year earlier — and much closer to the Fed's target of 2%.

Girl burned by McDonald's nugget awarded \$800,000

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — A South Florida jury awarded \$800,000 in damages to a little girl who received second-degree burns when a hot Chicken McNugget fell on her leg as her mother pulled away from the drive-thru of a McDonald's restaurant.

Lawyers for the family of Olivia Caraballo, who was 4 when she was burned in 2019, were seeking \$15 million in damages. Jurors reached their verdict after deliberating for less than two hours on Wednesday, the South Florida SunSentinel reported.

The jury's verdict form allotted \$400,000 in damages for the past four years, and another \$400,000 for the future from the McDonald's

USA and its franchise operator, Upchurch Foods. A separate jury decided in May that the company and franchise owner were liable for the injury, which occurred outside a McDonald's in Tamarac, near Fort Lauderdale.

"I'm actually just happy that they listened to Olivia's voice and the jury was able to decide a fair judgment," Olivia's mother, Philana Holmes, told reporters outside the courtroom. "I'm happy with that. I honestly had no expectations, so this is more than fair for me."

She testified on Tuesday that Olivia, now 8, calls the scar on her inner thigh her "nugget" and is fixated on having it removed, the newspaper reported.

Lawyers for McDonald's argued that the child's discomfort ended when the wound healed, which they said took about three weeks. They contended that the girl's mother is the one who has the problem with the scar, and told jurors that \$156,000 should cover damages, both past and future.

"She's still going to McDonalds, she still asks to go to McDonald's, she's still driving through the drive-thru with her mom, getting chicken nuggets," defense attorney Jennifer Miller said in her closing argument Wednesday. "She's not bothered by the injury. This is all the mom."

Defense attorneys declined to speak after the verdict.

IRS' free-file tax plan draws support, protest

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An IRS plan to test drive a new electronic free-file tax return system next year has got supporters and critics of the idea mobilizing to sway the public and Congress over whether the government should set up a permanent program to help people file their taxes without needing to pay somebody else to figure out what they owe.

On one side, civil society groups this week launched a coalition to promote the move toward a government-run free-file program. On the other, tax preparation firms like Intuit — the parent company of TurboTax — and H&R Block have been pouring millions into trying to stop the idea cold.

The advocacy groups are exponentially out-monied.

An April AP analysis found

that overall, Intuit, H&R Block, and other private companies and advocacy groups for large tax preparation businesses, as well as proponents in favor of electronic free file, have reported spending \$39.3 million since 2006 to lobby on “free-file” and other matters. Federal law doesn’t require domestic lobbyists to itemize expenses by specific issue, so the sums are not limited to free-file.

Intuit spent at least \$25.6 million since 2006 on lobbying, H&R Block about \$9.6 million and the conservative Americans for Tax Reform roughly \$3 million.

In contrast, the NAACP has spent \$140,000 lobbying on “free-file” since 2006 and Public Citizen has spent \$110,000 in the same time frame.

“What we have on our side is public opinion,” said Igor Vol-

sky, executive director of the liberal Groundwork Action advocacy group.

Volsky’s organization and leaders from Public Citizen, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, Code for America, the Economic Security Project and others launched the “Coalition for Free and Fair Filing” on Wednesday. The group’s mission is to “ensure all U.S. taxpayers can easily file tax returns and get the tax credits they deserve by safeguarding and expanding” the new IRS program.

“The overwhelming majority of people demand a free-file option,” Volsky said. “Now the question for us is how do you channel that into effective political pressure.”

The IRS in May released a report that said most taxpayers are interested in filing their taxes di-

rectly to the IRS for free, and concurrently announced plans to launch the pilot program for the 2024 filing season. The goal is to test a direct file system that will help the IRS decide whether to move forward with a more permanent program.

That idea has faced the immediate threat of budget cuts from congressional Republicans.

Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee in June proposed a budget rider that would prohibit funds to be used for the IRS to create a government-run tax preparation software, unless approved by a group of House and Senate committees.

The move “safeguards the IRS from an obvious conflict of interest where the tax collector becomes the tax preparer,” the bill’s summary states.

IRS whistleblowers air claims about Hunter Biden case, deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans raised unsubstantiated allegations Wednesday against President Joe Biden over his family’s finances as they summoned IRS whistleblowers to testify publicly for the first time about claims the Justice Department improperly interfered with a tax investigation into Biden’s son Hunter.

Lawmakers heard from the two IRS agents assigned to the Hunter Biden case, which looked into his failure to pay taxes, for six hours of testimony. The hearing came after the president’s son pleaded guilty last month to misdemeanor tax charges in what Republicans have derided as a “sweetheart” deal.

Still, House Republicans are deepening their own investigation, making broad claims of corruption and wrongdoing by the Bidens, which they acknowledge have not been proven to be true.

“We will continue to follow the money trail,” said Rep. James

Comer, chairman of the House Oversight and Accountability Committee, as he opened the session. The White House, in a statement, called the investigation and subsequent hearing part of “politically-motivated attacks on a Trump-appointed U.S. attorney, the rule of law, and the independence of our justice system.”

IRS supervisory special agent Greg Shapley, and a second agent, Joe Ziegler, claimed there was what Shapley called in testimony a pattern of “slow-walking investigative steps” into Hunter Biden, including in the months before the 2020 election that Joe Biden won.

One of Shapley’s most detailed claims was that U.S. Attorney David Weiss in Delaware, the federal prosecutor who led the investigation, asked for special counsel status in order to bring the tax cases against Hunter Biden in jurisdictions outside Delaware but was denied. Weiss and the Justice Department have denied that.

Swedish Embassy in Iraq is stormed by protesters

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Protesters angered by an Iraqi man in Sweden who threatened to burn a copy of the Quran stormed the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad early Thursday, overrunning the diplomatic compound and starting a fire.

Hours later, Iraq’s prime minister cut diplomatic ties with Sweden in protest over the desecration of the Islamic holy book.

Protesters occupied the diplomatic post for several hours, waving flags and signs showing the influential Iraqi Shiite cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr, and setting a small fire. The embassy staff had been evacuated a day earlier.

The attack came ahead of a protest by an Iraqi asylum-seeker who burned a copy of the Islamic holy book during a previous demonstration last month. He threatened to do the same thing again in Stockholm.

After protesters left the Swedish Embassy, diplomats announced it had closed to visitors, without specifying when it would reopen.

Following a meeting with security officials, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani said in a statement that Iraqi authorities would prosecute those responsible for starting the fire and referred to an investigation of “negligent security officials.”

However, the statement also said that the Iraqi government had informed Sweden on Wednesday that Iraq would cut off diplomatic relations should the Quran burning go forward.

Al-Sudani soon announced he had ordered the expulsion of the Swedish ambassador from Iraq and the withdrawal of the Iraqi charge d’affaires from Sweden.

The announcement came after two men held an anti-Islam protest on a lawn about 300 feet from the Iraqi Embassy in Stockholm.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man inadvertently films his drowning, officials say

AK JUNEAU — An Alaska man inadvertently filmed his own drowning on a glacial lake with a GoPro camera mounted on his helmet, but authorities who recovered the camera have not yet found his body, officials said Tuesday.

Alaska State Troopers said teams would continue to search Mendenhall Lake for the body of Paul Rodriguez Jr., 43, of Juneau.

Troopers said a helmet with a camera attached to it that was confirmed to have belonged to Rodriguez was recording on July 11 when his kayak overturned and he went into the water.

"The recording continued showing that the kayak overturned due to a strong current coming from the glacier," Troopers spokesperson Tim DeSpain said by email.

Juneau police on Monday said Rodriguez was believed to have gone missing on July 11. Police received a report Sunday from U.S. Forest Service employees that a vehicle had been parked at the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area since July 11 and determined it was registered to Rodriguez.

Search conducted in Tupac's 1996 killing

NV LAS VEGAS — Las Vegas police confirmed Tuesday that they served a search warrant this week in connection with the long-unresolved killing of Tupac Shakur, propelling the case back into the spotlight nearly 30 years after his death.

Shakur, one of the most prolific figures in hip-hop, was

gunned down the night of Sept. 7, 1996, in a drive-by shooting in Las Vegas. He was 25.

No arrests have ever been made. Yet attention on the case, which has seen its share of conspiracy theories, has endured for decades.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department said in a statement that the search was conducted Monday in Henderson, but the agency did not say whether a suspect has been identified. It's also unclear what they were looking for and where they were looking.

Shakur was shot while sitting inside a black BMW with Marion "Suge" Knight, head of Death Row Records. He was rushed to a hospital, where he died six days later.

Advocates: Move youths held at adult prison

LA NEW ORLEANS — Juveniles held in a former death row building at a Louisiana prison for adults are suffering through dangerous heat and psychologically damaging isolation in their cells with little or no mental health care, inadequate schooling and foul water, advocates say in a federal court filing asking a judge to order that the youths be moved.

The document, filed in Baton Rouge and dated Monday, says state officials have broken promises to provide constitutionally acceptable facilities for young people housed at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola — a remote prison farm with a notorious history of violence. Advocates for the juveniles are asking for an order ending the housing of juveniles at the Angola facility.

Lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union and other inmate advocates accompanied the filing with affidavits from three youths who are or have been housed at the facility. All talked of foul water from unsanitary faucets in their cells and inedible food.

Gov. John Bel Edwards announced last July that juveniles would be housed at the temporary facility at Angola, with an aim of ending the practice the following spring, once renovations were complete at a northeast Louisiana juvenile facility. The target date was recently pushed to late November.

Human waste leaks from truck, causing crashes

CT BRIDGEPORT — Human waste leaking from a tractor trailer on a Connecticut highway caused crashes including one involving two state police cruisers as vehicles spun out of control, authorities said.

No major injuries were reported in Monday night's mayhem on Interstate 95 in Bridgeport. Troopers arrested the truck driver on several charges, alleging he knew there was a leak but kept driving.

The wrecks began shortly after 11 p.m. when the leaking waste caused extremely slick conditions in the northbound lanes, state police said.

No injuries as jet's slide lands in neighborhood

IL CHICAGO — An emergency evacuation slide fell from an airliner Monday and landed in the backyard of a home near Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, causing no injuries but damaging a roof, of-

ficials and witnesses said.

The Federal Aviation Administration said a United Airlines Boeing 767 had landed safely at O'Hare on Monday on arrival from Switzerland when maintenance workers realized an emergency slide was missing from the plane's side. The aircraft was carrying 155 passengers and 10 crew.

WLS-TV reported that Patrick Devitt was not home at the time but his son and father-in-law were present and heard a "boom" shortly after noon. Devitt said the slide hit part of his house, damaging the roof, downspout and a window screen.

County has 7th case of locally acquired malaria

FL SARASOTA — A southwest Florida county has documented a seventh case of malaria, state authorities said.

The Florida Department of Health reported a new locally acquired case of malaria in Sarasota County during the week of July 9-15. That's in addition to five cases last month and one case in May.

Sarasota County and Manatee County directly to the north have been under a mosquito-borne illness alert for nearly a month. The area is located on the Gulf of Mexico, just south of Tampa Bay.

Sarasota County officials have been using aircraft, trucks and ground crews to apply insecticide to the area where the malaria cases were reported. Mosquito control workers are trapping the insects and sending them to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for evaluation.

— From wire reports

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New Zealand tops Norway on emotional 1st day

Associated Press

AUCKLAND, New Zealand — On a day that started with tragedy, the Football Ferns triumphed.

Hannah Wilkinson scored to open the second half and New Zealand went on to upset Norway 1-0 on Thursday for its first-ever win at the Women's World Cup, hours after a shooting in downtown Auckland shocked the host nation.

A gunman stormed a high-rise construction site near Norway's team hotel and opened fire, killing two people. The gunman was found dead after a police shootout.

There was increased security at Eden Park stadium, where 42,137—a record crowd for a soccer match in New Zealand—were on hand to cheer on the home team, co-hosts of the tournament with Australia. New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins was among those at the game. He went into the locker room after the game and thanked the team for an inspirational performance.

After an opening ceremony that honored New Zealand's Indigenous heritage, there was a moment of silence for the victims of the shooting. Four people were

wounded in the attack, including a police officer.

New Zealand's Football Ferns had played in five previous World Cups, but hadn't won a match.

"We really wanted to inspire young girls across the nation and I think we did that tonight. We showed that anything is possible," said captain Ali Riley, who had happy tears in her eyes.

Norway couldn't finish off its chances in the first half while the Ferns defended well. Ada Hegerberg's attempt in the 37th minute was deftly defended by Rebekah Stott and the match was scoreless after the first half.

The first woman to win the prestigious Ballon d'Or award, Hegerberg has 43 goals in 77 international appearances. Currently playing professionally for Lyon, she has scored a record 59 goals in the Champions League. But she couldn't find the back of the net in Auckland.

Instead, Wilkinson scored in the opening moments of the second half. Jaqui Hand moved up the right side and placed a perfect cross at Wilkinson's feet for the goal. While the home crowd wildly celebrated, Norway goalkeeper Aurora Mikalson stood with her hands on her hips.

Norway won the World Cup in

1995. At the last tournament in 2019, the team fell to England in the quarterfinals. At the Women's Euro in 2022, England routed the Norwegians 8-0. In the run-up to this game, winger Caroline Graham Hansen called the World Cup a chance to "start fresh."

"(It's) the opening game, they are the hosts. We have talked about this. We knew they were going to go out there and be aggressive," Norway midfielder Guro Reiten said. "We knew exactly how they wanted to play but still, we were so poor, especially in that first half. I'm very disappointed."

Tuva Hansen nearly tied it for Norway in the 83rd, but her shot caromed off the crossbar. The Ferns had a chance to double their lead in the 89th after video review awarded them a penalty, but Ria Percival's attempt hit the post.

Stoppage time stretched for more than 10 minutes before the whistle blew and New Zealand's bench rushed the field in celebration. Riley pounded her chest for the electrified fans.

"It's really hard to put into words, but absolutely surreal," Ferns defender Katie Bowen said of the drought-breaking victory.

"I mean we made history tonight, but we can't rest on that. Our goal is to get out of the group."

New Zealand got the nod to stage the World Cup's first game, although co-host Australia's match against Ireland in Sydney started about an hour after full time in Auckland.

Considered the favorites in Group A, the Norwegians went into the game 5-1-1 all-time against New Zealand, with the only loss coming in a 2019 exhibition match.

Norway coach Hege Riise said that her players were not impacted by the shooting, despite the incident happening near their hotel.

"We knew it was under control, we felt safe. Some players slept through it," Riise said. "We had an early morning meeting with everyone. It hasn't had an effect on how we performed in the game."

Up next: Group A play continues Friday with Switzerland playing the Philippines in Dunedin. New Zealand's next match is Tuesday against the Philippines in Wellington, while Norway plays Switzerland in Hamilton. The top two teams in the group will advance to the knockout stage.

Australia endures Kerr's injury, defeats Ireland

Associated Press

SYDNEY — Rocked by the late withdrawal of Sam Kerr through injury, Australia needed time to settle before getting off to a winning start at the Women's World Cup on Thursday with a 1-0 victory over Ireland.

Steph Catley swept home a 52nd-minute penalty to end Ireland's resistance and spark an eruption of joy from fans inside Stadium Australia.

There was also no shortage of relief from the majority of the 75,784-strong crowd after the tournament co-hosts struggled to cope without the country's all-time leading scorer Kerr, who will also miss the second game of Group B against Nigeria because of a calf injury.

By the final whistle Kerr was on the field,

arm-in-arm with her teammates as they gathered in celebration after being pushed to the limit by Ireland.

The crowd only learned of Kerr's injury about an hour before kickoff.

The Chelsea striker sustained the injury in practice on Wednesday and it is not certain she will be back to face Canada in the team's last Group B game in Melbourne on July 31, with medical staff waiting to assess her recovery.

Mary Fowler, who has Irish heritage, replaced Kerr in Australia's attack, but while the Manchester City forward is a highly rated prospect, the absence of the team's iconic captain was clear.

Kerr was considered one of the stars of the tournament and the face of the Matildas' bid to

be crowned world champions for the first time. Without her leading the attack against Ireland, Australia appeared short of ideas or cutting edge.

Despite the roars of encouragement from inside the stadium, the home team rarely looked like opening the scoring in the first half.

The Australians were gifted the chance to take the lead shortly after the break when Marissa Sheva bundled Hayley Raso to the ground in the area.

Referee Edina Alves pointed to the penalty spot and Catley converted by sending Ireland goalkeeper Courtney Brosnan the wrong way as she calmly finished with her left foot.

Up next: Australia plays Nigeria in Brisbane on July 27, a day after Ireland takes on Canada in Perth.

Rice helps Arsenal finish off All-Stars

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — If this was the reception for Declan Rice in the U.S. capital, imagine this season in London.

Arsenal's new midfield star came on as a second-half substitute and helped finish off a 5-0 victory over the MLS All-Stars on Wednesday night. Gabriel Jesus, Leandro Trossard, Jorginho, Gabriel Martinelli and Kai Havertz all scored — but those weren't the only highlights for the many red-clad Arsenal supporters in the crowd at Audi Field.

Rice moved from West Ham to the Gunners for a British-record transfer fee last weekend, reported to be \$138 million. The crowd roared when he came in just over an hour into the match, and cheered again when he possessed the ball.

U.S. national team forward Folarin Balogun, whose days at Arsenal could be numbered, also came on for the London club at the same time as Rice.

By then, the Gunners had a 3-0 lead.

"I think we were suffocated with the weather ... and we could not really control the game," Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta said. "But it's true that we were exceptional in both boxes today. Every time we got in the final third in good position, we put the ball in the back of the net."

The MLS has defeated the likes of Chelsea and Bayern Munich in the past in this format, which generally results in competitive games with more defending than some other All-Star events. The MLS team — which did not include recent Miami addition Lionel Messi — received four yellow cards before halftime.

"I thought the referee made the game a little bit about himself once again," said former Manchester United star and current D.C. United coach Wayne Rooney, who led the MLS team. "I think that's something that needs improv-

ing in the MLS. I've said it all season, so it's a good opportunity for me to bring it up again."

Jesus opened the scoring with a beautiful chip in the fifth minute. His shot from outside the penalty area sailed past goalkeeper Roman Burki of St. Louis and bounced in off the left post.

Trossard doubled the lead in the 23rd with another goal from outside the penalty area, a bit more toward the middle — and struck harder — than Jesus' shot.

Trossard was shaken up early in the second half and was replaced by a substitute.

In the first minute after halftime, St. Louis defender Tim Parker was called for a handball in the penalty area, and Jorginho made it 3-0. Martinelli and Havertz scored late to make it a five-goal margin.

"Arsenal showed the quality which they have," Rooney said. "I thought the All-Star lads, a little bit nervous and

hesitant, especially first half when we got into some good areas."

Havertz is another newcomer to Arsenal, having been signed away from Chelsea.

"He gives you something very different, with quality, with his size as well, when you have to beat the press for example, and use him as an attacking man," Arteta said. "I'm sure throughout the season and throughout games as well, we are going to have the option to use him in different positions."

U.S. defender Auston Trusty was in the game at the end for Arsenal along with Balogun.

"I think they deserved to enjoy that moment and get that recognition and play in front of their crowds," Arteta said.

Preparing for its Premier League opener against Nottingham Forest on Aug. 12, Arsenal plays friendlies against Manchester United on Saturday at East Rutherford, N.J., and vs. Barcelona on July 26 at Inglewood, Calif.

Messi set for Inter Miami debut in League's Cup match

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — The seats at DRV PNK Stadium filled up quickly with fans eager to get a glimpse at Inter Miami's new superstar.

Lionel Messi — arguably the greatest soccer player ever — stood on a runway in the middle of the field looking out at his new home.

"Thank you, Miami," Messi said to the crowd. "I'm happy to be here with you all."

The next chapter of the 36-year-old's storied career will begin here. Not at Camp Nou in Barcelona or Parc des Princes in Paris. At Inter Miami's DRV PNK Stadium — a cozy venue in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., decorated with the team's pink and black colors.

Messi will make his Inter Miami debut Friday against Cruz Azul in the League's Cup. Coach Tata Martino told ESPN on Wednesday that he hasn't decided if Messi and fellow Inter Miami newcomer Sergio Busquets will start, or how long they will play.

When the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner announced in June that he would join Inter Miami, the club — which is only in its fourth season — had to rush to add renovations to the stadium to accommodate the added attention.

For now, Inter Miami plays home matches at the 18,000-seat stadium about 45 minutes north of the site in Miami where the team wants to build a permanent complex. DRV

PNK Stadium was built on the previously named Lockhart Stadium, which was originally designed for high school sports. It sits across the street from Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport, where Messi and his family arrived last week.

Silver bleachers were added last week to the northeast and southeast corners, increasing capacity by about 3,000 seats. That will still leave it well short of the nearly 100,000 seats at Camp Nou, where Messi rose to international stardom.

"You probably could never add enough seats to accommodate all of the interest that the team is experiencing," said Stephanie Toothaker, outside counsel for Inter Miami. "I

think we've done as much as we can in such a short period of time."

Inter Miami co-owner David Beckham can relate to the adjustment of coming from overseas to play in MLS. Beckham in 2007 joined the LA Galaxy after spending the early years of his career playing at Old Trafford with Manchester United then at Santiago Bernabeu Stadium with Real Madrid.

The league was much different when Beckham made his transition.

"I think there was 15 teams in the league at that point," Beckham said. "Not many teams had soccer-specific stadiums. Now, there's 30 teams in the league, and most of the teams have stadiums."

Yanks show frustration at end of trip

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Carlos Rodón and Tommy Kahnle visibly displayed the New York Yankees' struggles.

Rodón sarcastically blew a kiss while walking to the dugout after the second inning and Kahnle took out his frustrations on a cooling fan in the dugout on Wednesday during the Yankees' 7-3 loss to the Los Angeles Angels.

The loss marked the first time in 14 years New York was swept in a three-game series by the Angels. The Yankees completed a 1-5 trip that saw them drop to last place in the AL East. They have lost four straight and nine of 11.

Manager Aaron Boone admitted: "We stink right now."

"We're not very good right now. We understand that and certainly this is a low point for us," he said. "So acknowledging that we're not in a good place as a team right now and we're not playing anywhere near the ball we need to be able to play to put

ourselves in a good position at the end of the season."

After giving up a pair of two-run homers and four runs in the first two innings, Rodón blew a kiss to fans who were booing him as he approached the dugout.

Rodón has a 7.36 ERA in his first three outings after signing a \$162 million, six-year contract, his season delayed by a forearm injury in spring training and then back trouble during his rehab.

Rodón said he didn't hear what fans were saying, but he understood their frustrations.

"A fan was angry as they should be. I'm angry, too. I was just angry at myself and blew a kiss unfortunately," said Rodón, who allowed six runs, four hits and five walks in 4½ innings. "It was the best reaction I could give. Better not to give a reaction, I guess."

Boone said he understands Rodón's frustration, but blowing a kiss was better than doing something worse.

"When you're in the arena, and you're going through it, sometimes you do things you don't necessarily want to engage in," Boone said. "Hopefully he'll learn from that and move on, but I think it was better than getting into a shouting match or doing something that we would regret."

Kahnle, who did not allow a run in his first 16 appearances this season and 21 straight outings dating to last season, has given up a run in each of his past three.

During the eighth inning, he walked two and allowed a ground-rule RBI double to Taylor Ward, which gave the Angels more breathing room.

Kahnle made a slow walk back to the dugout. After having his glove checked by an umpire, he walked into the dugout and threw his glove at a floor fan, which was propped up. He then stomped on it twice.

"Everyone's different. I used to throw my helmet sometimes or snap or get mad. It's not for

everyone," Boone said. "Be authentic. I know we all care a lot. And sometimes in this game, when you get beat up a little bit and you're taking your lumps it comes out in certain ways."

The biggest frustrations though might be with the offense.

New York struck out 42 times during the Angels series, one shy of a team record in a three-game series. Sean Casey was brought on as hitting coach, but the Yankees batted .171 during the trip.

"We're not showing much signs of life or stringing anything together," said Anthony Volpe, who has only four hits in his last 39 at-bats. "The game is going to be the game. The more consistently we can win pitches and AB's I feel like the results will start to come."

While the Yankees (50-47) are nine games off the lead in the AL East, they are only 3½ games out of the final wild card spot. They are 15-22 since Aaron Judge got hurt on June 3.

Truex struggling between NASCAR retirement, return

Associated Press

LOUDON, N.H. — With three wins, a lead in the points standings, and a NASCAR championship push ahead, the good times are rolling again for Martin Truex Jr.

So why quit now?

Joe Gibbs asked himself the same question about Truex as the Hall of Fame owner tries to keep Monday's winner at New Hampshire in the fold of his eponymous race team for one more season.

The 82-year-old Gibbs playfully nudged Truex to make the call soon: Retire or give it another run at JGR.

"He tells me the same thing every year, that I'm right in the middle of trying to make this decision," Gibbs said. "I go,

come on, what are you talking about, man? You're making money, you're having fun, you're driving race cars. Come on."

If Gibbs can't get an easy answer yet, maybe he should consult Truex's dad.

The retired racer, who won a regional stock car race at New Hampshire 29 years earlier, believed a big rebound season for his son may fuel the resolve to return in the No. 19 Toyota in 2024.

"The way they're running, I would be surprised if he retired," the elder Truex said Tuesday by phone. "But that's up to him."

The JGR driver has publicly pondered retirement for a second straight season. Truex

quieted season-long speculation last June that he could retire at the end of 2022 with a succinct statement: "I'm back."

Last year, the possibility of retirement seemed a bit more understandable. The 43-year-old Truex struggled in the first season of NASCAR's new Next Gen stock car. He failed to win a race or make the playoffs for the first time since 2014 when he drove for now-defunct Furniture Row Racing, the organization where he shortly underwent a career rebirth and won the 2017 championship.

Once FRR went away, Truex moved to Gibbs and won seven races in his first season. He's a three-time championship runner-up since moving to Gibbs and he's won 19 races since

joining the organization — including his first one in 30 tries at New Hampshire.

Truex insisted he's honestly conflicted about the outcome.

"I'm bad at making big decisions," he said.

Truex has figured out the car and the results show he's in sync with crew chief James Small. He has won three of the last 10 Cup races — oddly, Dover and New Hampshire were on Mondays — and has four other top 10s over that span.

"I think it's just learning these new cars," Truex Sr. said. "It's a whole new different package. It takes a little time, especially with no practicing. So whoever hits it is gonna look like a superstar."

And that's his son right now.