

Afghan forces, Taliban in brutal fight

The Washington Post

NAWA, Afghanistan — The fight between Afghan government troops and the Taliban is entering a more brutal phase as a reduction in airstrikes against the militants by withdrawing U.S. forces has largely shifted combat to ground engagements, many on the edges of densely populated urban areas after some recent Taliban advances.

To clear pockets of this district, just a few hundred yards from the edge of Helmand's provincial capital, Afghan government forces under Gen. Sami Sadat moved house to house last month through tightly packed neighborhoods, often on foot, as Afghan aircraft carried out waves of heavy strikes.

The area had been densely mined by the Taliban, and weeks of clashes left the streets shredded: dirt roads littered with craters and mud-straw

walls pockmarked with bullets and shrapnel.

For months, the Taliban slowly expanded its influence across Afghanistan after signing the withdrawal deal with the United States. The halt in offensive U.S. operations, especially airstrikes and raids, allowed the group to mass fighters, gather supplies and chip away at government-held territory.

The country's south, specifically Helmand, witnessed some of the militants' most striking advances. By May 1, the date marking the start of the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban had massed hundreds of fighters in Helmand. And as the U.S. military handed over its last base here to the Afghan government, Taliban fighters launched a massive assault the same day on the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, overrunning

territory in three districts including Nawa.

While Nawa had fallen to the Taliban several times over the past two decades, residents say the current battle to retake the area is unlike the others before: It has dragged on for weeks rather than days, and both sides are using heavier weaponry.

The battle in Helmand could indicate how the war in Afghanistan will evolve once the U.S. and other NATO forces completely withdraw from the country. Over the past month, violence has escalated significantly. The Taliban carried out a wave of attacks on provincial capitals, initially triggering a collapse of government forces at several bases and outposts. Now, where the Afghan military is pushing back, both sides are increasingly turning to harsher tactics.

Taliban fighters are blanket-

ing territory with roadside bombs and booby-trapped explosives. And Afghan government forces on the offensive are waging exhausting ground operations covered by intense Afghan air support. Of the eight provinces where the Taliban gained territory last month, the Afghan military has advanced in three: Baghlan in the north, Laghman to the east and in Helmand, around its capital Lashkar Gah.

Where combat has flared, the war's new phase has proved deadlier for government forces, Taliban fighters and civilians alike. Civilian casualties were nearly three times higher in May than in the month prior. Local officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said casualties among Afghan troops in Helmand are about twice as high now as when the military had close U.S. air support.

Intel report does not confirm, or rule out, UFO activity

The Washington Post

A soon-to-be-released government report on unexplained aerial phenomena finds no proof of extraterrestrial activity, but cannot provide a definitive explanation for scores of incidents in which strange objects have been spotted in the sky, officials said on Thursday.

The findings of the report, due to be provided to Congress by the director of national intelligence as soon as this month, will offer no firm conclusions about what the objects — repeatedly detected by military pilots and others in recent years — might be, according to two officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to address a document that is not yet public.

That the report, whose conclusions were first described by the New York Times, does not rule out extraterrestrial activity is likely to further stoke what has become a highly

unusual national discussion about the possibility that unknown life-forms are visiting Earth, as senators, former CIA directors and former President Barack Obama express new openness to UFOs.

The report, mandated as part of a gargantuan pandemic relief package signed last year by then-President Donald Trump, emerges as what was once seen as a fringe conspiracy theory becomes more mainstream. It comes as years of political divisions and misinformation shake Americans' faith in their government and fuel doubt about established science.

Interest in the UFO report was stirred further last month when "60 Minutes" aired footage of infrared video of unidentified aerial phenomena, or UAPs in Pentagon parlance, taken by military aircraft. Ryan Graves, a retired Navy pilot, said that he and other pilots had similar sightings every day

for several years.

Objects recorded in such videos have baffled pilots, military and intelligence officials for their apparent defiance of known laws of flight and gravity, Luis Elizondo, a former military intelligence official, told reporters on an April roundtable call.

Among the early proponents in Washington of investigating unexplained aerial objects was former Senate majority leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., who urged the federal government to take the potential for UFOs seriously.

More than a decade later, others are calling for a thorough investigation, including Obama, former CIA director James Woolsey and Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla. Rubio, who serves on the Senate Intelligence Committee, has said the stigma associated with talking about potential UFOs shouldn't stand in the way of a serious probe.

PETA blasts military use of cobra blood

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An animal rights group on Thursday launched its third protest of the snake blood-drinking tradition associated with the multinational Cobra Gold military exercise in Thailand, this time taking its cause to the front steps of the Thai embassy and the U.S. defense secretary's home.

About 15 protesters from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals held graphic photos and signs in English and Thai outside the embassy of Thailand denouncing the practice of decapitating king cobras during the military exercise. They also had

planned to take their protest to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's Great Falls, Va., home Thursday evening.

PETA is known for its protests with graphic depictions of animal abuses often revealed through undercover investigations, but the gruesome images the group displayed Thursday of slaughtered snakes' blood dropped on the tongues of Marines in uniform were taken and published by the U.S. Army Pacific's public affairs office on March 2, 2020, as part of a media package on the exercise.

"The fact that the general public was able to see footage of our U.S. Marines taking part in something so cruel set this apart,"

PETA Associate Director Ashley Byrne said at the protest outside the embassy.

The exercise co-hosted by the U.S. and Thailand is the largest joint military exercise in Southeast Asia and includes training in disaster response, humanitarian assistance and jungle survival, according to the Army.

The blood-drinking tradition is part of the jungle-survival training, during which Thai instructors share their knowledge of life-sustaining sources of food and hydration, the Army said in a statement issued March 2, 2020. In a pinch, cobra blood can be used as an "alternative way to stay hydrated" in areas without clean water sources.

US to boost global vaccine sharing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden announced Thursday the U.S. will swiftly donate an initial allotment of 25 million doses of surplus vaccine overseas through the United Nations-backed COVAX program, promising infusions for South and Central America, Asia, Africa and others at a time of glaring shortages abroad and more than ample supplies at home.

The doses mark a substantial — and immediate — boost to the lagging COVAX effort, which to date has shared just 76 million doses with needy countries.

The announcement came just hours after World Health Organization officials in Afri-

ca made a new plea for vaccine sharing because of an alarming situation on the continent, where shipments have ground to "a near halt" while virus cases have spiked over the past two weeks.

Overall, the White House has announced plans to share 80 million doses globally by the end of June, most through COVAX. Officials say a quarter of the nation's excess will be kept in reserve for emergencies and for the U.S. to share directly with allies and partners.

Of the first 19 million donated through COVAX, approximately 6 million doses will go to South and Central America, 7 million to Asia and 5 million to Africa.

"As long as this pandemic is raging anywhere in the world, the American people will still be vulnerable," Biden said in a statement. "And the United States is committed to bringing the same urgency to international vaccination efforts that we have demonstrated at home."

U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said the U.S. "will retain the say" on where doses distributed through COVAX ultimately go.

The White House did not say when the doses would begin shipping overseas, but press secretary Jen Psaki said the administration hoped to send them "as quickly as we can logistically get those out the door."

US adds modest 559K jobs, sign of more hiring struggles

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. employers added 559,000 jobs in May, an improvement from April's sluggish gain but still evidence that many companies are struggling to find enough workers as the economy rapidly recovers from the pandemic recession.

Last month's job gain was above April's revised total of 278,000, the Labor Department said Friday. The unemployment rate fell to 5.8% from 6.1%.

The speed of the rebound from the pandemic recession has caught employers off

guard and touched off a scramble to hire. The reopening of the economy, fueled by substantial federal aid and rising vaccinations, has released pent-up demand among consumers to eat out, travel, shop, attend public events and visit with friends and relatives.

Many large chains, including Amazon, Walmart, Costco, and Chipotle, have raised starting pay to better attract applicants. Yet so far, those efforts aren't bearing much fruit. The number of people working or looking for work last month slipped slightly

in May after three months of gains.

The economy expanded last quarter at a robust 6.4% annual rate, and economists envision growth in the current quarter reaching a sizzling pace of 9% or more. All that growth, driven by higher spending, has raised inflation fears. But for now, it has mainly propelled demand for labor.

Job postings in late May were nearly 26% above pre-pandemic levels, according to the employment website Indeed. Government data shows that posted jobs are at the highest level on records dating back to 2000.

Dems propose \$547B public works bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Democrats are weighing in on the infrastructure negotiations between President Joe Biden and Senate Republicans by calling for a public works boost that would dedicate about \$547 billion over five years to roads, public transit systems and rail programs.

The proposal from Rep. Peter DeFazio, the Democratic chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, comes during a key moment of the infrastructure debate as the White House signals its desire to start wrapping up negotiations. The legislation's unveiling Friday comes as Biden prepares to hold another round of talks with the lead Senate Republican negotiator, Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia.

In his meeting earlier this week with Capito, Biden offered tax concessions aimed at reaching a bipartisan compromise on his over-

all infrastructure proposal. The two sides are at odds over how to pay for infrastructure projects, with Republicans ruling out higher corporate taxes and the White House rejecting a GOP proposal to use unspent COVID-19 relief funds.

Biden proposed a 15% minimum tax on corporations — there's no minimum tax now on corporate profits — and the possibility of additional revenues from increased IRS enforcement.

He is seeking roughly \$1 trillion in new infrastructure spending, down from an initial pitch of \$2.3 trillion. Senate Republicans have countered with only \$257 billion in additional spending on infrastructure as part of a \$928 billion package.

DeFazio's legislation, a reauthorization of surface transportation programs set to expire Sept. 30, doesn't address how to pay for the projects. He tacked on major invest-

ments in passenger and freight rail, key pieces of Biden's \$1.7 trillion American Jobs Plan within his committee's jurisdiction. He called the effort a "once-in-a-generation opportunity to move our transportation planning out of the 1950s and toward our clean energy future."

The bill is being closely watched as a building block toward a broader infrastructure package. DeFazio's panel is expected to debate and vote on the measure next week. It is not expected to attract much GOP support, as Republicans unveiled their own legislation recently that would authorize about \$400 billion over five years for road, bridge and transit programs.

A similar dynamic is playing out in the Senate, where a panel recently passed its version of the highway bill unanimously, but the lawmakers didn't have to vote yet on how they would pay for it.

Pence says he may never agree with Trump on Jan. 6

Associated Press

MANCHESTER, N.H. — Former Vice President Mike Pence says that he isn't sure that he and former President Donald Trump will ever see "eye to eye" over what happened on Jan. 6 but that he would "always be proud of what we accomplished for the American people over the last four years."

Pence, speaking at a Republican dinner Thursday in the early-voting state of New Hampshire, gave his most extensive comments to date on the events of Jan. 6, when angry Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, some chanting "Hang Mike Pence!" after the vice president said he did not have the power to overturn Democrat Joe Biden's election victory.

"As I said that day, Jan. 6 was a dark day in history of the United States Capitol. But thanks to the swift action of the Capitol Police and federal law enforcement, violence was quelled. The Capitol was secured," Pence said.

"And that same day, we reconvened the Congress and did our duty under the Constitution and the laws of the United States," Pence continued. "You know, President Trump and I have spoken many times since we left office. And I don't know if we'll ever see eye to eye on that day."

It was a rare departure for Pence, who spent four years standing loyally beside his boss amid controversy, investigation and impeachment. It comes as Pence con-

siders his own potential 2024 White House run and as Republicans, some of whom were angry at Trump in the days after the Jan. 6 insurrection, have largely coalesced back around the former president.

Pence praised Trump several times during his nearly 35-minute speech at the Hillsborough County Republican Committee's annual Lincoln-Reagan Awards Dinner in Manchester. He tried to turn the events of Jan. 6 back around on Democrats, saying they wanted to keep the insurrection in the news to divert attention from Biden's liberal agenda.

"I will not allow Democrats or their allies in the media to use one tragic day to discredit the aspirations of millions of Americans," Pence said.

Facebook suspends Trump's account for two years

Associated Press

Facebook says it will suspend former President Donald Trump's accounts for two years following its finding that he stoked violence ahead of the deadly Jan. 6 insurrection.

"At the end of this period, we will look to experts to assess whether the risk to public safety has receded. We will evaluate external factors, including instances of violence, restrictions on peaceful assembly and other markers of civil unrest," Nick Clegg, Face-

book's vice president of global affairs, wrote in a blog post Friday.

Facebook also plans to end a contentious policy championed by CEO Mark Zuckerberg that automatically exempted politicians from certain moderation rules on its site.

The social media giant said on Friday that while it will still apply this "newsworthiness" exemption to certain posts it deems to be in the public interest even if they violate

Facebook rules, it will no longer treat material posted by politicians any differently from what's posted by anyone else.

The move is in response to recommendations from the company's quasi-independent oversight board, which last month upheld a decision by Facebook to keep former President Donald Trump indefinitely suspended but said the company must decide what to do with his accounts within 6 months.

US traffic deaths up 7%, highest total since 2007

Associated Press

DETROIT — U.S. traffic deaths rose 7% last year, the biggest increase in 13 years even though people drove fewer miles due to the coronavirus pandemic, the government's road safety agency reported Thursday.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration blamed the increase on drivers taking more risks on less-congested roads by speeding, failing to wear seat belts, or driving while impaired by drugs or alcohol.

An estimated 38,680 people died in traffic crashes last year, the most of any year since 2007, the agency said in releasing preliminary numbers. Final numbers normally come out in the fall.

The increase came even though the number of miles traveled by vehicle fell 13% from 2019.

Motorcyclist deaths rose 9% last year to 5,015, while bicyclist deaths were up 5% to 846. Pedestrian deaths remained steady at 6,205, and the number of people killed in passenger vehicles rose 5% to 23,395, according to NHTSA.

Deaths involving a large truck fell 2%, while traffic fatalities among people 65 and older fell 9%.

The agency said it has data showing that speeds increased through the year, and examples of extreme speeding became more common.

Preliminary data from the Federal Highway Administration shows that vehicle miles traveled fell by about 430.2 billion miles last year when compared with 2019. There were 1.37 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled in 2020, up from 1.11 deaths a year earlier.

Protests in Minn. after man killed in arrest attempt

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Crowds vandalized buildings and stole from businesses in Minneapolis' Uptown neighborhood after officials said a man wanted for illegally possessing a gun was fatally shot by authorities who were part of a task force trying to arrest him that included U.S. Marshals.

Following the Thursday afternoon shooting, a small crowd gathered in the neighborhood where the man was shot, shouting expletives at police.

Later in the night, people vandalized "numerous" buildings and looted some, Minneapolis police spokesman John Elder said in an email to reporters early Friday. A dumpster was burned and windows were smashed. Arrest totals weren't expected to be available until later Friday.

Little is known about Thursday's shooting. The U.S. Marshals Service said a task force was trying to arrest the man on a state warrant for being a felon in possession of a firearm.

The man, who was in a parked car, didn't comply with law enforcement and "produced a handgun resulting in task force members firing upon the subject," the U.S. Marshals said in a statement. Task force members attempted life-saving measures, but he died at the scene, they said.

It was not clear how many law enforcement officers fired their weapons. A spokeswoman with the U.S. Marshals said the U.S. Marshals leads the task force, which is comprised of several agencies. Other agencies with personnel on the scene at the time of the shooting include sheriff's offices from Hennepin, Anoka and Ramsey counties, the Minnesota Department of Corrections and the Department of Homeland Security.

The U.S. Marshals said a female who was in the vehicle was treated for minor injuries due to glass debris.

According to the Minneapolis Star Tribune, an aerial view of the top level of the parking ramp where Thursday's shooting reportedly occurred showed a silver sport utility vehicle with a shattered back window. It was surrounded by many other vehicles near a white pop-up tent. Several officers were nearby and in a glass-enclosed stairwell.

The state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms both tweeted that they were responding to help investigate.

Police say third victim dies in banquet hall shooting in Miami

Associated Press

MIAMI — Police in South Florida announced "Operation Summer Heat" to combat escalating gun violence as a third person died from a gunshot wound suffered during a mass shooting outside a banquet hall near Miami.

Shaniqua Peterson, 32, died on Thursday afternoon, Miami-Dade police said in a news release.

She was among the 23 people shot early Sunday during a rapper's album release party at the El Mula Banquet Hall. Two of the victims remained in critical condition at a hospital, police said.

Other gun violence over the past week included a car chase and shooting near a Miami casino, a mass shooting in Wynwood that left one dead and six wounded and a shooting outside a South Beach restaurant that left a man paralyzed and a rapper behind bars.

The motive for the banquet hall shooting is still unknown, but investigators were focusing on social-media feuds involving the local rappers who hosted the show, the Miami Herald reported. This includes two rival groups whose tensions go back years and

have been fueled by threats made online and in rap lyrics, according to the Herald.

"A lot of these violent acts you're seeing on their social media. You're seeing them call each other out, they're giving verbal cues," Miami-Dade Police Director Alfredo "Freddy" Ramirez said during Thursday's press conference. "Some of the songs have verbal cues that are triggering rolling violence, real-time violence. Back in the '90s, it was drug turf wars. Here it's a little bit of that but a lot of it is showing off."

Peterson's relatives told news outlets she had a bullet lodged in her head and had been in a medically induced coma since the shooting.

"Our family wants the gun violence to end, for these predators to be caught. This shooting has shaken the family to its core," Peterson's family said in a statement.

Two 26-year-old men, Desmond Owens and Clayton Dillard III, also died in the banquet hall shooting.

Police said they've confirmed there were multiple shooters "from various locations" outside the banquet hall.

There is a reward for information that leads to an arrest of the people responsible.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Girls aged 9 and 4 drive car into semi

UT WEST VALLEY CITY — Two Utah girls aged 9 and 4 got behind the wheel of a car and crashed into a semi tractor-trailer as they tried to drive to California early Wednesday morning, police said.

The two girls emerged uninjured, as did the truck driver, authorities said. Their parents were asleep when the girls took the car, Detective Scott List with West Jordan Police Department told KUTV. They were awakened by police informing them about the crash.

The 9-year-old told police they were planning to drive cross country to go on a beach vacation, said West Valley City Police Lt. Sean McCarthy.

The crash happened when the 9-year-old driver side-swiped one driver, then swerved into the semi's path on a highway frontage road in the Salt Lake City suburb of West Valley City.

Man calls for help while floating downriver

ME LISBON — A Maine man who dialed 911 while being swept down the Androscoggin River survived the harrowing episode, officials said.

Conner O'Reilly, 21, of Topsham, had his cellphone, along with a lifejacket, as he floated down the river after his boat capsized, Lisbon Fire Chief Nate LeClair said.

The 911 call helped rescuers

locate him quickly before hypothermia set in. The water temperature in the area was close to 50 degrees.

A rescue boat located O'Reilly and took him ashore, where he was evaluated and allowed to return home. His sunken fishing boat will remain in the river until it can be salvaged.

Black bear makes a 50-mile trek in 10 days

NH NASHUA — A black bear out for a stroll managed to trek from Barre, Mass., to Nashua, N.H., in just 10 days, officials said.

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife tagged the bear on May 17 and released it in the Worcester County town, MassLive reported.

The bear opted not to stick around, however, and instead launched a 50-mile journey before winding up in Nashua, according to the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.

The bear was taken from Nashua to a wildlife management area in central New Hampshire, officials said.

Man killed when riding mower overturned

KS WICHITA — A man has died after becoming pinned under water by an overturned riding lawn mower in Wichita, police there said.

The accident happened around 2 p.m. Wednesday in east Wichita when the 40-year-old man was mowing property in a residential neighborhood, police said. Investigators said

the man was operating the mower when it slid into a lake on the property and pinned the man under the water.

Witnesses reported the man was submerged for about 10 minutes before first responders found him, Wichita Police Lt. Kris Henderson said. Medics pulled him from the water and performed CPR, but could not revive him.

Woman arrested in rally at mayor's home

GA SAVANNAH — A 21-year-old woman faces criminal charges after being accused of protesting after midnight outside the home of Savannah's mayor.

Police arrested Keijajah Brooks on charges of disorderly conduct and unlawful assembly. A Savannah police report said she was among a group of people shouting with a bullhorn outside the home of Mayor Van Johnson at 12:30 a.m. Monday.

Brooks was released from jail on a \$1,300 bond. She told WTOG-TV she was protesting because she believes the mayor's policies have encouraged gentrification of historically Black and poor neighborhoods in Savannah.

Man sentenced for assault of 2 on flight

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A California man has been sentenced to six months in prison for assaulting two flight attendants while traveling from San Diego to Albuquerque, N.M.

The office of the U.S. Attor-

ney for New Mexico announced the sentencing Wednesday of Alton James Johnson, 43, of Yuba City, Calif. James pleaded guilty to the assault on Jan. 12.

Prosecutors said in a plea agreement that Johnson repeatedly touched a female flight attendant on her legs during a December 2019 flight. She asked him to stop and he then grabbed her by the buttocks.

Prosecutors said a second flight attendant stepped in to help and he grabbed that attendant by the arm.

58 horses seized from ranch amid concerns

MT HELENA — About 60 horses have been seized from a ranch in Montana after police believe the animals were being neglected, authorities said.

The Lewis and Clark County sheriff's office moved 58 horses on Tuesday to the county fairgrounds so two veterinarians could assess the condition of the horses in states of neglect ranging from moderate to severe, The Independent Record reported.

The assessment will be used to criminally charge the owner of the horses. The sheriff's office has not yet identified the owner.

About 15 law enforcement officials, including a U.S. Forest Service ranger and a Department of Livestock employee, acted on a search warrant that was served Tuesday, Sheriff Leo Dutton said. Neighboring ranch workers also offered to help.

-From The Associated Press

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Suns eliminate Lakers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Devin Booker has a tattoo on his forearm of the message that Kobe Bryant wrote for him on a pair of shoes after they faced each other at Staples Center six years ago: “Be legendary.”

Back in the house his idol built with a chance to secure his first team playoff success, Booker put on a performance worthy of the Black Mamba’s legend and propelled the Phoenix Suns onward in the postseason.

Booker scored 22 of his 47 points in a phenomenal first quarter, and the Suns won their first playoff series since 2010, eliminating the defending NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers with a 113-100 victory in Game 6 on Thursday night.

After hitting eight three-pointers, grabbing 11 rebounds and going a stunning 15-for-22 from the field, Booker cast his eyes up at Bryant’s two retired numbers as he left the floor amid the cheers from a small, vocal road rooting section. Kobe is never far from Booker’s mind on the court, but his breakthrough playoff game felt like a testimonial to Booker.

“Honestly, I was thinking about Kobe and the conversations we had,” Booker said. “About what we went through, and the post-season, and being legendary and taking the steps to get there. Seeing that 8 and 24 up there, with the lighting Staples has, it’s like

it was shining down on you. I know he was here tonight, and I know he was proud.”

Afterward in the arena tunnel, Booker got a signed jersey from another hero and mentor: LeBron James, who could only marvel at his up-and-coming friend’s brilliance in Game 6.

“I love everything about D-Book,” James said. “We’ve had numerous conversations in the past. When you want to be legendary in this game, you’ve got to continue to improve not only your game, but also as a man. All the conversations we’ve had, I can tell he’s soaked them up and is using them to his advantage.”

Jae Crowder scored 18 points for the second-seeded Suns, who won three consecutive games to send James to a first-round series loss for the first time in his 18-year NBA career.

Phoenix will meet Denver in the second round. Game 1 is Monday in Phoenix.

Sensing a theme here: The Lakers are the third conference finalist from the 2020 postseason to be eliminated in the first round this year, joining Miami and Boston. All four finalists endured significant injury problems this season after a radically truncated offseason, but the Nuggets held off Portland in six games earlier Thursday to advance despite losing Jamal Murray to a knee injury in April.

Nuggets eliminate Blazers in Game 6

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — The Denver Nuggets were undaunted, even when down 14 points in the third quarter and facing an antagonistic Portland crowd.

Nikola Jokic had 36 points and the Nuggets eliminated the Portland Trail Blazers in six games with a 126-115 victory Thursday night.

“Nobody can take the fight out of us,” Jokic said. “We will just go out there and fight and that’s what we have been doing. We’re never going to quit. Quit is not in our vocabulary.”

Michael Porter Jr. added 26 points, including 22 in the opening quarter, for the third-seeded Nuggets. Denver will take on Phoenix, which eliminated the Los Angeles Lakers in Game 6, 113-100. Game 1 in the series is Monday in Phoenix.

Denver advanced to the Western Conference semifinals for the third straight season.

Damian Lillard finished with 28 points and 13 assists for the sixth-seeded Blaz-

ers. They led by 14 points in the third quarter but couldn’t stave off elimination.

Monte Morris hit a buzzer-beating three-pointer to close Denver to 101-98 heading into the last period. Jokic hit a three-pointer to put Denver ahead 108-106 and the Nuggets stretched it to 117-108 on Austin Rivers’ three with 3:52 left.

Portland tried to catch up, pulling to 121-115 on CJ McCollum’s layup, but Aaron Gordon hit a corner three-pointer that all but sealed it for Denver with less than a minute to go.

“I think the key was when they were going on runs and we weren’t playing our best every huddle was positive, staying engaged, demanding guys to be better, but staying together,” Denver coach Michael Malone said. “I think we’ve shown as a group that every time we hit adversity, most times, we never run from it. We buckle down, we embrace it, we find a way.”

Portland crumbled in the final quarter, outscored 28-14.

Williams moves into fourth round at French Open

Associated Press

PARIS — Even a 23-time Grand Slam champion needs to remind herself now and then how to play winning tennis.

Serena Williams employed verbal motivation to help her recover from a 4-1 deficit in the second set of a 6-4, 6-4 victory over fellow American Danielle Collins in the third round of the French Open on Friday.

Yelling, “C’mon,” and, “Move your feet,” Williams started dominating again with big serves and crushed returns that the 50th-ranked Collins had no answer for.

Aside from Williams, top women’s players continue to exit Roland Garros.

The latest to go home was third-seeded Aryna Sabalenka, who was upset by Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova 6-4, 2-6, 6-0.

Sabalenka’s 39 unforced errors helped Pavlyuchenkova reach the fourth round for the first time since she made it to the quarterfinals in Paris a decade ago.

Her next opponent will be Victoria Azarenka, who beat 23rd-seeded Madison Keys 6-2, 6-2 in 70 minutes. The two-time Grand Slam champion reached the fourth round for the first time since her semifinal run in 2013.

Unseeded Tamara Zidasek also advanced, reaching the second week at a major for the first time.

Early in the afternoon, play was interrupted by rain on all courts besides the main stadium — where the roof was closed. Federico Delbonis said the interruption helped him calm down after stress started to get hold of him toward the end of the second set of his match with Fabio Fognini.

Delbonis took a quick shower and eventually prevailed 6-4, 6-1, 6-3 to also reach the fourth round for the first time at a major.

Following a marathon five-set battle, Alejandro Davidovich Fokina upset 15th-seeded Casper Ruud 7-6 (3), 2-6, 7-6 (6), 0-6, 7-5 in 4 hours, 35 minutes.

Kei Nishikori followed up two consecutive five-setters with a one-set victory, reaching the second week of the clay-court Grand Slam for the seventh time after qualifier Henri Laaksonen retired with a thigh injury while trailing 7-5.

Nishikori will next play sixth-seeded Alexander Zverev, who beat Laslo Djere of Serbia 6-2, 7-5, 6-2. Second-seeded Daniil Medvedev also advanced with a straight-set win over big server Reilly Opelka of the United States.

Staal's OT goal gives Canes win

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Jordan Staal scored on a power play at 5:57 of overtime to give the Carolina Hurricanes a 3-2 victory over the Tampa Bay Lightning on Thursday night in Game 3 of the second-round series.

Staal deflected Sebastien Aho's shot with Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov serving a penalty for holding the stick to cut Tampa Bay's series lead to 2-1.

Game 4 is Saturday in Tampa. Carolina coach Rob Brind'Amour changed goaltenders, opting for Petr Mrazek after Alex Nedeljkovic started the first eight games of the playoffs. Mrazek stopped 35 shots.

"He was good," Brind'Amour said. "Did I expect him to be like that? I didn't really know what to expect, to be honest with you, he'd been out for so long. But he's a battler."

Brett Pesce and Aho also scored for Carolina.

"Feels great, obviously, but at the same time, it was only our first win in the series," said Aho, who finished with three points. "We just have to keep going to Game 4 and just do it over and over again and trust our system. But it obviously feels good to win."

Brayden Point and Alex Killorn had power-play goals for Tampa Bay, which outshot the Hurricanes 37-27.

"We did everything we wanted to do tonight except score one more goal than they did," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said.

Not so savvy

Tampa Bay defenseman David Savard missed his third consecutive game with an undisclosed upper-body injury. Though Savard practiced with the team Monday and coach Jon Cooper indicated Savard is expected to return in the series, he did not take part in the team's morning pregame skate.

Marchand lifts Bruins in OT

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Brad Marchand knew he didn't have a great angle on his shot in overtime. He just fired the puck at the net and it got past Islanders goalie Semyon Varlamov.

Marchand scored 3:36 into overtime and the Boston Bruins beat New York 2-1 Thursday night in Game 3 to take the lead in the second-round playoff series.

In the extra period, Charlie McAvoy brought the puck up ice along the left side and passed to Marchand, who skated along the boards and fired a sharp-angle shot into the top right corner.

"Obviously not a great one, but any puck, especially in overtime, has the chance to go in," Marchand said. "Can't pass up a shot, and that's another example of it. ... I tried to get

it on net and it found its way in. Very relieving."

Varlamov wasn't sure what happened on the shot and said he needed to see a replay.

"It was a weird shot, but the puck found the net," he said.

Craig Smith also scored for Boston, and Tuukka Rask stopped 28 shots — including five in overtime, as the Bruins took a 2-1 lead in the best-of-seven series.

"I try to be patient and calm in there," Rask said. "It doesn't matter what the situation is. You're just trying to make that save and give your team a chance to win, and fortunately we capitalized after."

Mathew Barzal scored the tying goal late in the third period for New York, and Varlamov — making his second straight start after Ilya Sorokin went in four straight games — finished with 39 saves.

"Both teams were playing hard," Barzal said. "It's tough for about 10 minutes and then it's the playoffs, so you turn the page. We know there's a lot of good things tonight to build off of, so we're excited. We've been in this situation before against Pittsburgh, so we're just going to grind."

Game 4 is Saturday night at Nassau Coliseum.

Boston got its first power play 1:38 into the third period and mustered five shots on goal during the advantage, but couldn't beat Varlamov.

Bruins defenseman Brandon Carlo was helped off the ice after a hard hit by Cal Clutterbuck near the end boards to Rask's right a little more than six minutes into the third. It left Boston with five defensemen. Cassidy said Carlo was talking in the locker after the game and would be re-evaluated Friday.

Giants win series opener against Cubs

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Brandon Crawford homered and drove in four runs, Anthony DeSclafani pitched six solid innings and hit an RBI double, and the San Francisco Giants beat the Chicago Cubs 7-2 on Thursday night.

Buster Posey and Alex Dickerson added two hits apiece to help the Giants win the opener of a four-game series.

Rays 9, Yankees 2: Ryan Yarbrough ended a 24-start skid with visiting Tampa Bay's first complete game in more than five years.

The AL East-leading Rays salvaged a four-game split, improving to 10-3 at Yankee Stadium since the start of last season.

Padres 4, Mets 3: Fernando Tatis Jr. returned to the lineup with a two-run homer that slipped out of center fielder Mason Williams' glove, and host San Diego held off New York.

Tatis also dashed home aggressively on a wild pitch as the

Padres ended a four-game skid in the opener of a seven-game homestand against a pair of first-place teams.

Braves 5, Nationals 1: Dansby Swanson kept up his power surge with a two-run homer in host Atlanta's four-run sixth inning.

Rockies 11, Rangers 6: Austin Gomber pitched six shutout innings, Charlie Blackmon homered and Colorado extended a franchise-worst 0-9 road trip for Texas and extend its longest losing streak since 2003 to nine games.

Mariners 6, Angels 2: At Anaheim, Calif., Jake Fraley hit his first major league homer, and Seattle began a 10-game road trip with a victory over Los Angeles.

White Sox 4, Tigers 1: Yoán Moncada and Jake Lamb homered for host Chicago, and Hall of Fame manager Tony La Russa closed in on John McGraw for second on baseball's career wins

list.

Brewers 7, Diamondbacks 4: Christian Yelich hit his second home run of the season, a three-run shot in the third inning that helped power host Milwaukee past Arizona.

Reds 4, Cardinals 2: Jesse Winker hit a two-run homer for visiting Cincinnati, and Vladimir Gutiérrez earned his first career win.

Red Sox 5, Astros 1: At Houston, Martín Pérez pitched 7²/₃ scoreless innings, and Boston avoided a four-game sweep.

Royals 6, Twins 5: At Kansas City, Mo., Salvador Pérez became only the fourth Kansas City player with consecutive multi-homer games, and Jarrod Dyson scored the tiebreaking run in the seventh inning when center fielder Gilberto Celestino made a pair of errors on a simple fly ball.

Pirates 5, Marlins 3: Jacob Stallings hit a three-run double in the eighth inning, lifting host Pittsburgh to the victory.

No. 1-seeded Sooners stunned by Dukes

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — James Madison looked like a Women's College World Series regular on Thursday.

It actually was the Dukes' first trip, and they made their first game memorable. Kate Gordon hit a solo homer in the top of the eighth inning and Odicci Alexander threw a complete game to help James Madison stun top-seeded Oklahoma 4-3 in eight innings.

The Dukes (40-2) got the win against a program that won national titles in 2000, 2013, 2016 and 2017 and was the runner-up in 2012 and 2019. In front of an amped-up crowd at the newly expanded USA Softball Hall of Fame Stadium just 25 miles from Oklahoma's campus, James Madison and its small group of energetic supporters looked right at home.

"I think with the mindset of just another game, we haven't looked past anybody," Gordon said. "We prepared. We had fun. In our pregame we were enjoying it. We're soaking in the fans, soaking in this atmosphere and

this experience."

The Dukes believe the win matters to more than just them.

"I think these players, they're playing for each other, but they're playing for a lot more," James Madison coach Loren LaPorte said. "We're playing for all the smaller schools out there that work just as hard."

Alexander controlled the action. The second-team NFCA All-American threw 129 pitches and struck out nine. She faced the top of Oklahoma's order in the eighth and escaped without allowing a run. The Dukes advanced to a winners bracket game against Oklahoma State on Friday. The Cowgirls defeated Georgia 3-2 on Thursday afternoon.

Oklahoma (50-3), which led the nation in home runs this season by a wide margin, never figured out the movement or the speed of Alexander's pitches.

"I think at the plate some of our plans got lost," Oklahoma coach Patty Gasso said. "You can see that by the way we were swinging. So we need to figure out why. Why did our plans get lost? Were

the lights too big for you? Was the speed too fast for you? The video will tell us exactly what we need to know, so we can work on fixing that as we go forward."

Shannon Saile pitched a complete game for Oklahoma. She gave up three hits and struck out nine. The solid performance wasn't enough, and now the Sooners will play Georgia in an elimination game on Saturday afternoon. Oklahoma won its first 33 games this season before losing at Georgia.

Gordon's blast in the eighth just cleared the fence in left center to give James Madison the lead.

Oklahoma State 3, Georgia 2: Chyenne Factor's two-run homer in the fourth inning helped the fifth-seeded Cowgirls defeat the Bulldogs in the opener for both teams.

Carrie Eberle gave up just one earned run in a complete game victory for Oklahoma State (48-10). She scattered seven hits, struck out two and walked one.

It was Eberle's first World Series appearance, and the first-team NFCA All-American han-

dled business in front of what amounted to a home crowd. The Cowgirls were playing about 60 miles from campus, and orange was plentiful in the stands.

Alabama 5, Arizona 1: Montana Fouts struck out 16 and allowed two hits in a complete-game victory, helping the third-seeded Crimson Tide beat the Wildcats in the opener for both teams.

Fouts threw 103 pitches, including 73 strikes. She regularly hit the low 70s on the radar gun, yet didn't allow a walk.

It was Alabama's 19th straight win. The Crimson Tide's last loss was on April 17.

UCLA 4, Florida State 0: Rachel Garcia threw a five-hitter and struck out 11 as the Bruins beat the Seminoles in the opener for both teams.

Garcia, a U.S. Olympian and two-time USA Softball Collegiate Player of the Year, threw 80 of her 112 pitches for strikes.

Florida State got runners to second base in the second, third, fourth and sixth innings. Even when it appeared things could unravel, Garcia remained calm.

Mikulak struggles at US Gymnastics Championships

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Sam Mikulak expected jitters at his first competition in 15 months.

What the six-time men's national gymnastics champion didn't expect was his body to give out on him. Yet as the 29-year-old walked onto the floor for his fifth event during the first day of U.S. Championships on Thursday, he could tell his tank was empty.

The result, a seventh-place finish and a likely end to his long run at the top. Mistakes on parallel bars, floor and pommel horse left him with a score of 82.450, well off the pace set by two-time NCAA champion Brody Malone at 86.250.

Yul Moldauer, the only man to win a national title outside of Mikulak since 2013, came off the horse in the middle of his routine but rallied to finish in a tie for second with Brandon Briones at 83.600.

Shane Wiskus, who left the University of Minnesota to train at the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Training Center last fall, took a major step after landing his vault but recovered to finish fourth.

Siebatcheu lifts US men over Honduras

DENVER — Honduras held the United States even for nearly an entire match, giving most of the young Americans their

first flavor of the even harsher rough-and-tumble that awaits in World Cup qualifying.

Shortly before the game would have gone to penalty kicks, Jordan Siebatcheu scored his first international goal in the 89th minute, and the U.S. beat Honduras 1-0 on Thursday night to reach the final of the first CONCACAF Nations League.

John Brooks lofted a pass to Weston McKennie, who cushioned a one-hop headed pass ahead of Siebatcheu's path. The 25-year-old forward, who made his international debut in March, leaned in front of Óscar Boniek García and leaped forward to nod the ball past goalkeeper Edrick Menjivar.

Amateur shares lead at US Women's Open

SAN FRANCISCO — High school junior Megha Ganne shot a 4-under 67 on Thursday to become the first amateur in 15 years to have a share of the lead after any round at the U.S. Women's Open.

The 17-year-old from New Jersey made back-to-back birdies on the back nine to take sole possession of the lead before making bogey on the 18th hole to end the day in a tie with Mel Reid.

Lexi Thompson, Yuka Saso and Shanshan Feng were two shots back.