

President Biden steps onto world stage

Associated Press

CARBIS BAY, England — President Joe Biden stepped onto the global stage Thursday, meeting with Britain's prime minister and outlining plans for the U.S. to donate 500 million vaccine doses around the globe.

Biden had arrived in Britain on Wednesday, landing at RAF Mildenhall and greeting U.S. service members based there. It was just the first stop on his first overseas trip.

The president seeks to reaffirm to allies his commitment to the U.S. role abroad, which stands in contrast to former President Donald Trump's "America First" approach. Biden will meet with Group of Seven leaders before continuing to Brussels for a NATO summit, a meeting with heads of the European Union and face-to-face meetings with other world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva.

On Thursday, Biden and Prime Minister Boris Johnson met for more than an hour and signed a document "building on the commitments and aspirations set out 80 years go" by predecessors Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in the Atlantic Charter.

That document led to the United Nations and NATO. The new one looks to the chal-

lenge posed by countries like China and Russia with its promises to promote free trade, human rights and a rules-based international order, and to counter "those who seek to undermine our alliances and institutions."

The new charter also took aim at "interference through disinformation" in elections and murky economic practices, charges that the West has leveled at Moscow and Beijing.

The two leaders also promised to build stronger global defenses against health threats, ahead of a summit dominated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Later Thursday, Biden outlined plans for the U.S. to donate 500 million vaccine doses around the globe over the next year, on top of 80 million doses he had already pledged by the end of the month. U.S. officials said Biden would also ask fellow G-7 leaders to do the same.

The U.S. has faced mounting pressure to outline its global vaccine sharing plan, especially as inequities in supply around the world have become more pronounced and the demand for shots in the U.S. has dropped precipitously in recent weeks.

"We have to end COVID-19, not just at home — which we're doing — but everywhere," Biden told American servicemem-

bers Wednesday at RAF Mildenhall in England. He added that the effort "requires coordinated, multilateral action."

The new U.S. commitment is to buy and donate 500 million Pfizer doses for distribution through the global COVAX alliance to 92 lower-income countries and the African Union, bringing the first steady supply of mRNA vaccine to the countries that need it most. A price tag for the 500 million doses was not released, but the U.S. is now set to be COVAX's largest vaccine donor in addition to its single largest funder with a \$4 billion commitment.

The global alliance has thus far distributed just 81 million doses and parts of the world, particularly in Africa, remain vaccine deserts. White House officials hope the ramped-up distribution program can be the latest example of a theme Biden plans to hit frequently during his week in Europe: that Western democracies, and not rising authoritarian states, can deliver the most good for the world.

Also Thursday, the Pew Research Center released surveys conducted in 16 countries that showed majorities of the citizens across the nations — more than 6 in 10 in each — express confidence in Biden to "do the right thing" in world affairs.

Marine Corps general fired over deadly AAV sinking

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps has fired its inspector general in connection with an assault amphibious vehicle accident last year in which nine service members died, the service announced Wednesday.

Maj. Gen. Robert Castellvi will not return to his position after Marine Commandant Gen. David Berger suspended him May 3 amid an investigation into the formation of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which now oversees the AAV platoon that suffered the accident, the service said in a statement.

At the time of the accident, Castellvi served as commanding general of the 1st Marine Division, which was in charge of the AAV platoon in the training accident that killed eight

Marines and one sailor about 70 miles off California's southern coast.

"The commandant took adverse administration action against him," the Corps said in its statement. "The commandant personally and formally counseled him for his failure to properly train the Marines and sailors for whom he was entrusted and for the inadequate evaluation of the AAV platoon before it was attached to the 15th MEU."

An investigation published March 25 found maintenance procedures on the AAV were disregarded and troops were not properly trained in evacuation and safety procedures.

"Contributing factors included lack of training, the material condition of the AAVs assigned to 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, lack of safety boats in the water, a higher-than-

anticipated sea state, and insufficient buoyancy provided by personal flotation devices at depth," the service said in a March statement announcing the findings. The investigation also determined Castellvi "bears some responsibility" in the accident, according to a Wednesday report by The Associated Press.

His removal comes after some family members of the troops who died in the sinking questioned why no generals were punished in the accident, according to the AP.

Castellvi's punishment did not include a reduction in rank, but his removal as inspector general will remain part of his permanent record "and must be considered if he is evaluated for promotion, retention, or roles of responsibility," according to the service's Wednesday statement.

Okinawa Marines resume AAV drills in water

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The Marine Corps has resumed waterborne assault amphibious vehicle operations on Okinawa, nearly a year after nine service members died while training in one of the vehicles off the California coast.

A “demanding” training began last week and was completed Tuesday by Marines from Company B, 3rd Assault Amphibian Battalion following a “thorough” review of safety, maintenance and operating processes and procedures, a III Marine Expeditionary Force statement said.

The maneuvers were conducted in compliance with updated policies and procedures following the fatal accident on July 30, 2020, according to the statement.

The incident took the lives of eight Marines and one sailor from Bravo Company, Battalion Landing Team 1/4 of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit. The Marine Corps called it the deadliest AAV training accident in its history.

III MEF heralded the “return” of an “important capability,” its statement said. “Everything possible” is being done to ensure safety.

“We completed a rigorous review to ensure we can operate our [amphibious assault vehicles] safely, protect our Marines and Sailors, and complete our mission responsibly,” the III MEF commander, Lt. Gen. H. Stacy Clardy, said in the statement. “We will continue to mitigate risk while employing a ready and capable force to deter aggression and respond to crisis

in the region in support of our nation’s interests and our allies and partners.”

The AAV now in use was first fielded in 1983 to ferry Marines from ship to shore for both combat and humanitarian operations, according to the Marine Corps. It resembles an armored tank that can traverse both land and sea. It was designed to carry 21 combat-equipped troops and a crew of three at a maximum speed of 8 mph at sea. The 26-ton vehicles are much faster on land at a maximum of 45 mph.

The vehicles have been at the heart of Marine operations in the Pacific in recent years, often seen during exercises plunging into the surf off the back of one of the Navy’s amphibious assault ships and heading toward shore for a beach raid.

The platform came under in-

tense scrutiny after last year’s accident, about 70 miles off California’s southern coast. The AAV began taking on water while returning to the USS Somerset.

After the incident, waterborne use of the vehicles was suspended by Commandant Gen. David Berger while a review of equipment, procedures and training was conducted. The AAVs were inspected to ensure watertightness, bilge pump function and emergency lighting.

An investigation found proper maintenance had been disregarded, Marines had not been properly trained and leadership had failed to evacuate personnel in a timely manner. The Corps also determined there was a lack of safety boats in the water that day, high waves and deficient personal flotation devices.

DOD implements China Task Force proposals

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday issued a department-wide directive with initiatives meant to close “the say-do gap” between stated counter-China objectives and established policies and operations, a senior defense official told reporters.

The largely classified initiatives are based on recommendations by the Pentagon’s China Task Force, the official said during a teleconference. President Joe Biden announced the task force in February to assess the Defense Department’s China-related programs, policies and processes and identify top priorities and recommendations for the Pentagon.

“This directive from the secretary is ultimately about getting the department’s house in order

and ensuring that the department lives up to the stated prioritization of China as the number one pacing challenge,” said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The task force consisted of 23 members from across the Defense Department, including representatives from each service branch, several joint-staff combatant commands, the intelligence community and Austin’s office, the official said.

The group “reviewed thousands of pages of documents, strategies and analysis,” interviewed “hundreds of current and former DOD officials,” and consulted Congress, the National Security Council and the State Department during their analysis, the official said.

“We decided early on that we didn’t want to produce a set of aspirational recommendations

that would just sit on a shelf, so our team sought to understand the critical debates inside the department and what would be required to bring greater focus, unity of effort and coordination on the China challenge,” the official said.

The United States first identified China as a “strategic competitor” in the 2018 National Defense Strategy because of the nation’s rapid military expansion and modernization, “influence operations and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage.”

While the 2018 strategy “was critically important in highlighting the need to prioritize China,” the task force found “a ‘say-do gap’ between the stated prioritization of China and what we saw in a number of areas related to

attention, resources and processes,” the official said. “The directive today is really about ensuring that the department lives up to that prioritization.”

The Biden administration is drafting a new national defense strategy, which will be shaped in part by the task force’s findings, the official said. It is expected to remain critical of China.

The task force gave Austin their findings in April. He used them to issue the Wednesday directive with set “deadlines as soon as 30, 45, 60 days and beyond for components to come back with proposed courses of action and plans for implementation,” the official said.

The findings and most of Austin’s initiatives remain classified, but the Pentagon will “provide updates to Congress and publicly when possible,” the official said.

Missiles target Iraqi bases that host US

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Multiple rockets targeted two Iraqi military bases hosting U.S.-led coalition troops and foreign contractors Wednesday, Iraqi security officials and the military said.

Three rockets hit Balad Air Base, north of Baghdad, without causing any casualties or damage, an Iraqi military statement said. The base housed foreign contractors.

Hours later, at least one missile hit close to a military base next to Baghdad airport, two Iraqi security officials said. It was unclear whether the explosion was caused by a rocket or a drone strike.

One Iraqi security official said they had heard two rockets. The second said preliminary findings indicated it had been a drone attack and a trailer belonging to the coalition was set on fire by the attack. There were no casualties, they said.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the strikes, but U.S. officials have previously blamed Iran-backed Iraqi militia factions for such assaults.

The attacks are the latest in a string that continue to target the U.S. presence in Iraq. Over a dozen have targeted Iraqi

military bases and Baghdad's highly fortified Green Zone since President Joe Biden assumed office this year. More than 10 people have been killed, including two foreign contractors.

Lockheed Martin announced last month that it was withdrawing contractors maintaining Iraq's F-16 fighter jets from the Balad base over security reasons.

Recent attacks have featured more sophisticated weaponry, such as drones, which has alarmed U.S. and Iraqi military officials. The attacks occur as Baghdad and Washington work on drawing up a timetable for the withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq.

Advocates: Get Afghans who helped US forces to Guam

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. should evacuate thousands of interpreters and others who aided the U.S. military and government to the Pacific territory of Guam while they await decisions on their immigration visas, advocates and lawmakers said.

Worsening security in Afghanistan as U.S. troops withdraw has led to fears that those who worked with foreign forces may be left vulnerable to Taliban retribution.

"We must evacuate our Afghan friends and allies immediately," said a letter sent to President Joe Biden last week by the bipartisan Honoring Our Promises Working Group, which includes 21 House lawmakers led by Reps. Seth Moulton and Jason Crow, both military veterans.

"We also recommend that the President's Interagency Task Force specifically consider the option of using Guam as a temporary evacuation site before moving our friends and allies to more permanent locations within the continental United States," the letter said.

More than 18,000 applicants

have applied for the Special Immigrant Visa, which allows those facing threats after aiding the U.S. to immigrate with their families.

The vetting process for each SIV applicant could take far longer than the 90 or fewer days left until the U.S. withdraws all forces from Afghanistan. Moving families to Guam would allow them to be screened and processed for asylum in safety, the letter said.

Guam has hosted evacuees from America's wars before. After the fall of Saigon, the U.S. used Guam as a staging area to sort approximately 130,000 Vietnam War refugees, prior to moving them to mainland U.S. military bases for final processing.

The island is ready to answer the call again if asked, said Jose Terlaje, a member of Guam's Senate.

Terlaje said the primary concerns from islanders are where the evacuees will be housed and how COVID-19 measures will be implemented.

No order from the federal government has been given yet, Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero told the Guam Daily Post.

Afghan special ops troops could train in Europe

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Afghan special operations troops could be headed to Europe for a NATO training mission that is expected to continue after the U.S.-led coalition completes its withdrawal from the country, the top U.S. military commander in Europe said.

Gen. Tod Wolters, who serves as head of U.S. European Command and as NATO's supreme allied commander, said the alliance is looking at several possible locations to host Afghan forces.

"We are in the process of looking at out-of-country special forces training in certain locations, to bring NATO special forces activities out of Afghanistan, into a remote location, probably somewhere in Europe," Wolters said Wednesday during a discussion at the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based think tank.

The U.S. and its allies are in the midst of a rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is expected to be complete by September. The U.S. has moved at least 500 C-17 loads of material out of Afghanistan and has turned over six military sites to the

Afghan Defense Ministry, according to U.S. Central Command, which as of Tuesday estimated that the U.S. has completed more than "50% of the entire retrograde process."

Wolters said the aim is to continue training Afghan special operations troops in combat tactics and techniques.

On Monday, NATO leaders will gather in Brussels for a summit that brings together allied heads of state, including President Joe Biden. The meetings will focus on NATO's 2030 initiative, which seeks to adapt the alliance for future threats. Among the issues to be discussed is getting NATO more focused on China's emergence as an economic and military rival.

Still, the conflict in Afghanistan, where allies have been involved for the past two decades, will factor into the talks. Despite overwhelming superiority in numbers, firepower and mobility, the combined U.S., NATO and government forces haven't been able to inflict a decisive defeat on the Taliban guerrillas.

"We are still going to find ways to work with Afghanistan from a NATO perspective," Wolters said.

Keystone pipeline nixed after Biden firm on permit

Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — The sponsor of the Keystone XL crude oil pipeline pulled the plug on the contentious project Wednesday after Canadian officials failed to persuade President Joe Biden to reverse his cancellation of its permit on the day he took office.

Calgary-based TC Energy said it would work with government agencies “to ensure a safe termination of an exit” from the partially built line, which was to transport crude from the oil sand fields of western Canada to Steele City, Neb.

Construction on the 1,200-mile pipeline began last year when former President Donald Trump revived the long-delayed project after it had stalled under the Obama administration. It would have moved up to 35 million gallons of crude daily, connecting in Nebraska to other pipelines that feed oil refineries on the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Biden canceled the pipeline’s border crossing permit in January over long-standing concerns that burning oil sands crude could make climate change worse and harder to reverse.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had objected to the move, raising tensions between the United States and Canada. Officials in Alberta, where the line originated, expressed frustration in recent weeks that Trudeau wasn’t pushing Biden harder to reinstate the pipeline’s permit.

Alberta invested more than \$1 billion in the project last year, kick-starting construction that had stalled amid determined opposition to the line from environmentalists and Native American tribes along its route.

Alberta officials said Wednesday

that they reached an agreement with TC Energy, formerly known as TransCanada, to exit that partnership. The company and province plan to try to recoup the government’s investment, although neither offered any immediate details on how that would happen.

“We remain disappointed and frustrated with the circumstances surrounding the Keystone XL project, including the cancellation of the presidential permit for the pipeline’s border crossing,” Alberta Premier Jason Kenney said.

IG probe: Protest not broken up for Trump photo op

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An internal government investigation determined that the decision to forcibly clear racial justice protesters from an area in front of the White House last summer was not influenced by then-President Donald Trump’s plan to stage a Bible-toting photo opportunity at that spot.

The report released Wednesday by the Interior Department’s inspector general concludes that the protesters were cleared by U.S. Park Police last June 1 so that a contractor could get started installing new fencing.

The demonstrators were protesting the death of George Floyd,

who died after a then-Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck and pinned him to the ground for about 9 ½ minutes. A half-hour after the Washington protesters were forced from the area with pepper pellets and flash-bangs, Trump walked across Lafayette Park amid the lingering scent of pepper spray and delivered a short speech while holding a Bible in front of St. John’s Church.

Park Police officials had already planned to clear the area and “had begun implementing the operational plan several hours before they knew of a potential Presidential visit to the park,” Inspector General Mark

Lee Greenblatt said in a statement accompanying the report.

The report documents Trump’s attorney general, William Barr, encouraging commanders shortly before the push to clear the protesters because of Trump, but being dismissed.

In a remarkable exchange, the report recounts the testimony of an unnamed Park Police operations commander: “The Attorney General asked him, ‘Are these people still going to be here when POTUS (President of the United States) comes out?’ The USPP operations commander told us he had not known until then that the President would be

coming out of the White House and into Lafayette Park. He said he replied to the Attorney General, ‘Are you freaking kidding me?’ and then hung his head and walked away. The Attorney General then left Lafayette Park.”

The report determined the decision to clear the protesters was justified, but law enforcement agencies on the scene failed to effectively communicate with each other and failed to communicate warnings to the protesters about the impending crackdown. Law enforcement agencies moved ahead of schedule and started engaging with protesters before they were sufficiently warned.

US unemployment claims fall for a sixth straight week

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell for the sixth straight week as the U.S. economy reopens rapidly after being held back for months by the coronavirus pandemic.

Jobless claims fell by 9,000 to 376,000 from 385,000 the week before, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The number of people signing up for benefits exceeded 900,000 in early January and has fallen more or less steadily

ever since. Still, claims are high by historic standards. Before the pandemic brought economic activity to a near-standstill in March 2020, weekly applications were coming in below 220,000.

Nearly 3.5 million were receiving traditional state unemployment benefits the week of May 29, down by 258,000 from 3.8 million the week before.

Businesses are reopening rapidly as the rollout of vaccines allows Americans to feel more comfortable returning to restaurants,

bars and shops. The Labor Department reported Tuesday that job openings hit a record 9.3 million in April. Layoffs dropped to 1.4 million, the lowest in records dating back to 2000. Four million people also quit their jobs in April, another record and a sign that they are confident enough in their prospects to try something new.

In May, the U.S. economy generated 559,000 new jobs, and the unemployment rate dropped to 5.8% from 6.1% in April. Many economists expected even faster

job growth. The United States is still short 7.6 million jobs from where it stood in February 2020.

But employers are posting vacancies faster than would-be applicants can fill them. Many Americans are contending with health and child care issues related to COVID-19 and with career uncertainty after the coronavirus recession wiped out many jobs for good. Some are taking their time looking for work because expanded federal jobless benefits pay more than their old jobs.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Jury awards \$7.5M to man cleared of murder

IL CHICAGO — A jury on Tuesday awarded \$7.5 million to a man who was exonerated after spending nearly 30 years in prison for a murder in Chicago.

Daniel Andersen sued a group of current and former Chicago police officers, arguing that he was coerced into confessing to the slaying of Cathy Trunko in 1980. His lawyers also said that DNA results years later eliminated a link to the 20-year-old victim, the Chicago Sun-Times reported.

"The entire criminal case was a lie," Jonathan Loevy said in his closing argument.

Andersen was released from prison in 2007 and subsequently received a certificate of innocence.

A lawyer for the officers, Timothy Scahill, argued that Trunko and Andersen had not been completely excluded from the knife blade, which was found a few blocks away.

FBI, police dig to confirm cemetery burials accurate

MI DETROIT — Authorities using a backhoe were digging at a Detroit cemetery Monday in response to complaints that some deceased might not be buried in the right graves.

The FBI joined Detroit police at Gethsemane Cemetery, although no crimes were suspected. Seven graves were checked; six appeared to be proper, WDIV-TV reported.

A police commander, Eric Decker, said a marker was in the wrong place but the "loved one has been found."

There were many calls after a complaint earlier this year about

an improper burial.

The cemetery, which opened in 1909, is owned by the city but managed by a contractor, WDIV reported.

Town: Ferris wheel must be moved from its spot

MD OCEAN CITY — The company that owns a historic amusement park on the Ocean City, Md., boardwalk will be penalized for violating a zoning code if it doesn't move its Ferris wheel, the town council decided.

Trimper's Rides received its first fine over the weekend for violating the town's right of way on the boardwalk, the Salisbury Daily Times reported. The company said moving the Ferris wheel and other rides could cost more than \$100,000.

Antoinette Bruno, the president of Trimper's Rides, told the town council at its meeting on Monday night that the placement of the ride was the result of human error. She also said the company didn't know where the property line was before building the Ferris wheel.

A surveyor contracted by the company found that the ride is at least 10 feet over the amusement park's property line, town leaders who reviewed the findings said.

Ocean City officials said they support the Ferris wheel but told Trimper's it can't stay where it is.

6-year-old boy who drove, crashed SUV isn't injured

ME LIVERMORE FALLS — A 6-year-old boy took the keys to an SUV, drove it and crashed it Saturday, but was not injured, police in Maine said.

The child's caretaker told police in Livermore Falls the boy had gone to bed around 8 p.m. but

then got up and took the keys to the SUV from a nightstand, WCVB-TV reported. He drove up and down a street and crashed the vehicle while attempting to do a U-turn. The SUV was wedged between a utility pole and a building.

No one was hurt, police said.

Owl rescued after getting stuck in batting cage

KS MAIZE — A great horned owl is on the road to recovery after getting stuck in the netting of a Kansas batting cage.

KSNW-TV reported that the owl was discovered Monday in the small town of Maize. Police contacted a local raptor center for help. Ken Lockwood of Eagle Valley Raptor Center talked officers through the process of removing the owl from the netting. The owl was then placed in a cardboard box and delivered to the center.

The owl had some damaged feathers but is expected to heal in a few weeks.

Police: 2 in custody, 1 sought in air rifle incident

OH CINCINNATI — Authorities in Ohio say two sisters charged with shooting at homeless people with an air rifle from a car in Cincinnati are now in custody, and a third person is being sought.

Brittany Hopper, 29, and Kelsey Hopper, 28, have been charged with three counts of assault, accused of firing a BB gun at two people in the Over-The-Rhine neighborhood early in the morning on June 3, Cincinnati police said. Police said the sisters turned themselves in Tuesday.

Police also said they are seeking a third person in the case; their post didn't announce any charges against the 30-year-old

man but said he has two unrelated outstanding warrants.

The police department had released surveillance footage on Twitter showing the car pulling up to a group of people lying on the sidewalk and at least two people are visible holding an air rifle out of the car window at different times. The car pulled away and then reversed back where the occupants again pointed the BB gun out of the window, the footage shows.

The car was later impounded, police said, but not before someone spray-painted the hood seemingly to attempt to prevent it from being identified. The shooting caused minor injuries to the people hit by the pellets.

Smokies visitors cited for feeding 100-pound bear

TN GATLINBURG — Some visitors to Great Smoky Mountains National Park have been accused of feeding peanut butter to a bear.

The feeding was captured on video, and rangers said the visitors confessed and were cited on Saturday, news outlets reported.

The 100-pound male bear had been feeding on walnuts for several weeks along Cades Cove Loop Road, rangers said. Biologists suspected it was fed by visitors because it started to appear food-conditioned.

"Managing wild bears in a park that receives more than 12 million visitors is an extreme challenge and we must have the public's help," Park Wildlife Biologist Bill Stiver said. "It is critical that bears never be fed or approached — for their protection and for human safety."

The bear was tranquilized and marked with an ear tag. It was released in the same general area.

— From wire reports

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Paul leads Suns in rout of Nuggets

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Chris Paul is a 36-year-old man who can still put together an NBA point guard's version of a virtuoso performance: Fifteen assists, no turnovers and it led to another blowout playoff victory for his rolling Phoenix Suns.

"I feel good," Paul said. "I feel really good." Apparently so.

The ageless Paul added 17 points, Devin Booker had 18 points and 10 rebounds and Phoenix routed the Denver Nuggets 123-98 on Wednesday night to take a 2-0 lead in the Western Conference semifinals.

Deandre Ayton had 15 points and 10 rebounds, and Mikal Bridges added 16 points for the balanced Suns in their fifth straight victory.

Paul was particularly impressive and it appears his ailing right shoulder — which greatly limited his play against the Los Angeles Lakers in the first round — isn't much

of a problem anymore. The 11-time All-Star had 21 points and 11 assists in Game 1.

Nikola Jokic had 24 points and 13 rebounds for Denver, a day after getting the NBA's Most Valuable Player award. But the Nuggets couldn't find anyone else to score consistently, leaving them reeling going back to Denver for Game 3 on Friday night.

"This was an embarrassing performance for myself all the way to the last player," Denver coach Michael Malone said. "We are walking out here with our heads held down and rightfully so. There was a reason that their crowd was yelling 'Suns in four!' and they are calling for a sweep because if we play like this in Denver, this is going to be a really quick series."

Later, Malone added he felt the Nuggets "quit tonight, which is something that you never want to see."

Said Jokic: "They are playing better than us. They are making shots, being more ag-

gressive, finding the open man. It looks real bad out there. We need to change everything."

The Suns had a 10-point halftime lead and Jae Crowder added a pair of three-pointers early in the third to make it 60-43. Phoenix took an 86-67 advantage into the fourth. The Suns led by 31 in the final quarter as they relentlessly pushed the ball even as the lead built.

"It's the NBA — crazy things can happen no matter how big of a lead you have," Suns forward Torrey Craig said.

Hurting Nuggets: Some of Denver's better players are dealing with injuries, including forward Michael Porter Jr. (back) and guard Will Barton (hamstring). Both were listed on the injury report.

Porter started and played 27 minutes, finishing with 11 points and six rebounds but shot just 3-for-13. Barton played 16 minutes and had 10 points.

NBA Draft class of 2018 leading way in 2021 playoffs

Associated Press

Phoenix's Deandre Ayton had Guy Fieri leaping out of his court-side seat with a thundering dunk. Atlanta's Trae Young had Spike Lee leaving early in disappointment. Dallas' Luka Doncic impressed Paul George so much that the Clippers' veteran insisted on trading jerseys with the youngster.

They're all part of the NBA's draft class of 2018.

And that group, so far, might be the class of these playoffs.

Doncic is gone, but plenty of others — Young, Ayton, Michael Porter Jr., Mikal Bridges, Kevin Huerter, Bruce Brown and more — from the group that got drafted three years ago — remain. And they've seemed right at home in this postseason, even though for many it's the first time on this big a stage.

"I think it's the best class in NBA history," Ayton, the Phoenix center who went No. 1 overall in that class three years ago, said after the Suns won their first-round series over the 2020 NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers. "That's how I feel. ... Guys like Luka, MPJ

and Trae, it's been great to watch us young guys go at it. We're not backing down."

Quite the contrary. They're showing up.

Entering Tuesday, those drafted in 2018 had combined for 21 games of at least 20 points in these playoffs. The only draft class with more so far in these playoffs was the 2011 group — which has 22, led by the likes of Kawhi Leonard, Kyrie Irving and Tobias Harris.

Doncic, whose Dallas Mavericks lost a seven-game series to the Los Angeles Clippers in Round 1, had six of those 20-point games. Young, whose Atlanta Hawks took a 1-0 series lead into Game 2 of the Eastern Conference semifinals against Philadelphia on Tuesday, also had six — in his first six playoff games.

"I'm not satisfied," Young said after Round 1, a series against New York that he punctuated with a theatrical bow at Madison Square Garden. "Winning feels good. It feels better."

Doncic leads — and will likely finish — as the playoff scoring leader this season, at 35.7 points per game. He's in line for a rookie

extension this summer that will exceed \$200 million, and there's little doubt that the Mavericks will slide that piece of paper his way.

"He just plays with so much confidence, and his game is just so beyond his age," George said of Doncic. "He pretty much can pick up and read almost any defense. ... He's going to be great. He's got a big, huge future ahead of him."

Doncic is far from the only one in the class of 2018 that has a big, huge future — and some big, huge paychecks — awaiting him. Young is averaging 30.2 points entering Tuesday's game in Philadelphia. Ayton, in his first playoffs, is shooting 78% from the field, something nobody in NBA history with more than 50 shot attempts has done in their first trip to the postseason.

Suns guard Chris Paul has said all season that Ayton has all the tools — and no one would argue that now.

"It's great to see it coming together for him," Paul said.

Some of the class of 2018 are full-time starters in these play-

offs, like Young for the Hawks, Ayton and Bridges for Phoenix, Porter Jr. in Denver. Others, like Brown with the Nets, got called upon to be a spot starter. And some have the closer role; Huerter, for example, has been on the floor for most of the fourth-quarter action for the Hawks in the postseason, and his brilliant pass to John Collins late in Game 1 of the win in Philadelphia led to a clear-path foul that helped the Hawks seal the victory.

"I'm just trying to impact winning and that's any way I can right now in the playoffs," Huerter said.

And while Huerter doesn't deny that his 2018 draft class — he went 19th, while Ayton went No. 1, Young No. 3, Doncic No. 5 (Young and Doncic were traded for one another), Bridges went 10th and Brown was a steal at No. 42 — has signs of being special, he knows it'll take more than one good postseason run for the group to be anointed as great.

Ayton fully believes the 2018 takeover is coming.

"It's the new generation of the league," he said.

Pederson, Alcantara lift Cubs past Padres

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Joc Pederson of the Chicago Cubs hit a towering, game-tying home run off San Diego ace Yu Darvish and, as he approached third base on his trot, mimicked the stutter step Padres star Fernando Tatis Jr. does after he homers.

If Tatis can have fun, so can he, Pederson figured.

"I see Tatis, he has a lot of homers, he's done it, he's having fun out there," Pederson said after the Cubs beat former teammate Darvish and San Diego 3-1 on Wednesday. "He's got some of the most swag in the game. Our team's just having fun."

Pederson also did the stutter step after homering in San Francisco during the weekend.

"If I keep hitting homers, I'm going to keep doing it," he said.

Sergio Alcantara also homered and Jake Arrieta threw five strong innings for Chicago, which took two of three. The Cubs beat the Padres five times in six games in a 10-day stretch,

including a three-game sweep at Wrigley Field last week.

Athletics 4, Diamondbacks 0: Sean Manaea (5-2) pitched six innings of two-hit ball, and Oakland handed Arizona its 19th straight road loss, the longest such streak in major league baseball since 1985.

Rangers 4, Giants 3 (11): Brock Holt hit a game-ending single with two outs in the 11th inning and host Texas beat San Francisco for its second win in 14 games.

Mets 14, Orioles 1: Kevin Pillar and Billy McKinney each homered twice, and New York beat Matt Harvey (3-7) decisively for the second time this season, rolling at Baltimore.

Phillies 2, Braves 1: Luke Williams walked host Philadelphia off with his first big league homer, hitting a two-run shot with two outs in the ninth inning to beat Atlanta.

Astros 8, Red Sox 3: Jose Altuve and Alex Bregman homered to help Jake Odorizzi (1-3)

pick up his first win since 2019, and Houston won at Boston.

Yankees 9, Twins 6: Gerrit Cole pitched six sharp innings amid the hubbub in the game around pitcher grip aids, and Giancarlo Stanton hit two of New York's four home runs in a win at Minnesota.

Angels 6, Royals 1: Griffin Canning (5-4) pitched five-hit ball into the seventh inning, Anthony Rendon hit a two-run double and Los Angeles swept visiting Kansas City.

Reds 7, Brewers 3: Vladimir Gutierrez (2-1) pitched seven effective innings, Tyler Stephenson drove in three runs and host Cincinnati stopped Milwaukee's five-game winning streak.

Mariners 9, Tigers 6 (11): Jake Fraley made a game-saving catch in the ninth inning, then drove in the go-ahead run in the 11th to lead Seattle to a win at Detroit.

Rockies 4, Marlins 3: Raimel Tapia hit two doubles, singled

and scored twice, and Colorado earned a rare road victory over Miami, handing Bud Black his 300th win as its manager.

Nationals 9, Rays 7 (11): Starlin Castro drove in a run with a double during a two-run 11th inning and Washington won at AL East-leading Tampa Bay.

Cardinals 8, Indians 2: Adam Wainwright (4-5) allowed two runs in seven innings, Tyler O'Neill homered twice and host St. Louis snapped a six-game losing streak with a win over Cleveland.

Dodgers 2, Pirates 1: Justin Turner hit two home runs and Los Angeles got 7½ scoreless innings from its bullpen in a victory at Pittsburgh in a game delayed 70 minutes at the start due to rain.

Blue Jays 6, White Sox 2: Randal Grichuk hit a long home run and Toronto took advantage of a season-high four errors by host Chicago as well as a bases-loaded walk.

Islanders take Bruins in 6 games, reach Cup semis

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — The New York Islanders got another big second period and ran past the Boston Bruins for a return trip to the Stanley Cup semifinals.

Brock Nelson scored twice in New York's three-goal second, Semyon Varlamov stopped 23 shots and the Islanders beat the Bruins 6-2 in Game 6 on Wednesday night in a front of a raucous home crowd at Nassau Coliseum.

"It was awesome," Nelson said. "The place was rocking tonight. The fans were feeding us energy. The team played great. One of those nights (coach) Barry (Trotz) touched on after the game, you'll always remember moments like that. That was a big game, a big team effort from everybody."

Kyle Palmieri, Travis Zajac, Cal Clutterbuck and Ryan Pulock also scored to help New York set up a rematch with the defending champion Tampa Bay Lightning. Josh Bailey and Jean-Gabriel Pageau each had two assists.

"You need everyone going to beat a team like that," Bailey said. "I thought from Varly

right on out, everyone in the lineup was contributing, playing the way we needed to play to get the win. Certainly happy to move on."

The Lightning beat the Islanders in six games in the bubble in Edmonton last year.

"We feel we have some unfinished business," Bailey said. "We'll enjoy tonight and we'll start getting ready."

Brad Marchand scored twice for Boston, and Tuukka Rask made 23 saves. The Bruins, who reached the Stanley Cup Final two years ago, were eliminated in the second round for the second straight year.

"They're a good defensive team," Boston coach Bruce Cassidy said. "They manage pucks clearly better than us. We're not getting those free chances they got in terms of mismanaging pucks. They do play a good game that way, they don't beat themselves."

With the Bruins on the power play, Marchand got the puck in front of the net and put a backhand past Varlamov from the right side at 5:38 of the third to cut Boston's deficit to 4-2. It was Marchand's fifth of the series and eighth of the postseason.

New York's stifling defense limited the Bruins to just five shots on goal in the third. With the minutes winding down on Boston's season, the Islanders hemmed the Bruins in their end of the ice, preventing them from pulling Rask for an extra skater until 1:25 left.

Clutterbuck scored an empty-netter with 59 seconds left to seal it, and Pulock added another 11 seconds later.

After outscoring Boston 8-3 in the middle periods of the first five games, New York had three more in the second — for the third time in the series.

Nelson stole the puck from Matt Grzelcyk, took off on breakaway and beat Rask into the top right corner at 5:20 to put the Islanders up 2-1. Bailey stole an outlet pass from Rask and fed Nelson streaking to net, and Nelson beat the goalie from the right side with 7:23 left in the second for his second of the night and sixth of the playoffs.

With the Bruins trailing 3-1 in the elimination game, Cassidy broke up his Perfection Line of David Pastrnak-Marchand-Bergeon.

Djokovic, Nadal advance to semifinals

Associated Press

Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal know there's something special about the two of them meeting in the French Open semifinals — even if they'd prefer, of course, for it to happen a round later.

"Each time we face each other, there's that extra tension and expectations," the top-seeded Djokovic said. "Just vibes are different walking on the court with him."

The third-seeded Nadal's take?

"In some way," he said, "we are practicing, we are living the sport, for these moments."

Whatever the quality of play might be between Nadal and Djokovic in Paris on Friday — their semifinal will follow the one between No. 5 Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece and No. 6 Alexander Zverev of Germany — the numbers associated with the matchup are overwhelming.

Start with the big picture: Nadal is two wins away from his 21st Grand Slam title, which would break the men's mark he currently shares with Roger Federer.

Djokovic is trying to get to No. 19, which would leave him just one behind his rivals.

Nadal is 105-2 at Roland Garros — Djokovic is responsible for one of those defeats, in the 2015 quarterfinals; Robin Soderling the other — and eyeing a 14th championship at the clay-court major.

Djokovic won La Coupe des Mousquetaires in 2016 and could join Rod Laver and Roy Emerson as the only men to win each of the four Grand Slam tournaments twice.

"It's not like any other match. Let's face it, it's the biggest challenge that you can have — playing on clay against Nadal on this court, in which he has had so much success in his career," Djokovic said. "In the final stages of a Grand Slam, it doesn't get bigger than that."

It is their 58th showdown, more than between any other two men in the Open era, which dates to 1968; Djokovic leads 29-28.

Nadal is ahead 10-6 at the Slams, 7-1 at the French Open (including a straight-set victory in the 2020 final) and 19-7 on clay (including a win in last month's Italian Open final).

This one comes in the semifinals, rather than the final, because Nadal recently slid from No. 2 to No. 3 in the rankings. The tournament seedings strictly follow the rank-

ings, so Nadal got no boost for his dominance at the place, and a random draw determined which half of the bracket he was placed in.

"It's going to be a special match," said 10th-seeded Diego Schwartzman, who lost to Nadal in the quarterfinals Wednesday but not before ending his 36-set winning streak in Paris. "Everyone wants to see that."

The women's final Saturday will be No. 31 seed Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova against No. 17 Maria Sakkari or unseeded Barbora Krejčíková. The last four women all were first-time major semifinalists.

No matter what happens Friday, the men's final will be Old vs. New.

That's because it will pit someone in his 30s who is one of the greatest ever — Nadal, 35, or Djokovic, 34 — against someone in his 20s with plenty of potential but zero Grand Slam titles — Tsitsipas, 22, or Zverev, 24.

Tsitsipas vs. Zverev offers a glimpse of what the future of men's tennis could be.

Both are all-court, all-surface players who are 6-foot-4 or taller. And both have now become regulars in the latter stages of majors.

Congress: NCAA needs NIL help

Associated Press

A federal law governing how college athletes can earn money off their fame and celebrity seems certain to pass — at some point.

There is no real debate among lawmakers on Capitol Hill about whether athletes should be permitted to monetize their name, image and likeness.

"There is broad consensus that Congress should pass a law that grants athletes NIL rights," Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) said Wednesday during a hearing held by the Senate Commerce Committee.

But less than a month before NIL laws go into effect in several states, NCAA President Mark Emmert was back in Washington renewing his plea for help from Congress — help that is unlikely to come as soon as the NCAA would like.

For some lawmakers, federal regulation of college sports should not end with NIL and the time is right to tackle other issues — from long-term health care and educational opportunities for athletes to more uniform and enforceable safety standards.

"To race to just an NIL bill and not ad-

dress these injustices is tragic," Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), a former Stanford football player, said before Emmert and five other witnesses testified before the committee.

Wicker wants to take a different approach, calling for a "more focused bill on a faster timeline."

Emmert said the NCAA plans to act on its proposed NIL legislation soon.

"Preferably by the end of the month," Emmert said.

The Division I Council meets June 22-23 and could take action then, but only a federal law can preempt state laws in Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and New Mexico that are set to go into effect July 1.

Earlier Wednesday, Connecticut became the 19th state to pass NIL legislation. Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), who has sponsored with Booker the sweeping College Athlete Bill of Rights, said he would block any federal NIL bill that is less permissive than Connecticut's.

"We need to listen to the athletes," Blumenthal said. "They are the ones who are all too frequently outnumbered in this conversation."

Sooners slam past Seminoles, forcing Game 3

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Jocelyn Alo knew her hit was gone as soon as she made contact.

Oklahoma's slugger blasted a go-ahead homer in the sixth inning, and the Sooners beat Florida State 6-2 on Wednesday night to force a decisive Game 3 for the Women's College World Series title.

It was Alo's 33rd home run of the season. The USA Softball Collegiate Player of the Year added to her school record. But this one was different.

"I did know it was out," Alo said. "And I think the last time I circled the bases that quickly was probably my freshman year, my first-ever home run."

The final game was played Thursday afternoon. Oklahoma (55-4) is seeking its fifth national championship. Florida State (49-12-1) is trying for its second title in four years.