

US to send Ukraine medium-range rockets

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The United States will send high-tech, medium-range rockets to Ukraine as part of another \$700 million in military aid to help its forces stop advancing Russian troops in the eastern Donbas region, a senior White House official said Tuesday.

“We are giving the Ukrainians a range of capabilities that we think are commensurate with the fight that they are in on the battlefield and the conditions that exist today,” the official told reporters by phone.

The new aid package, which was to be announced Wednesday, will include High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS. Ukrainian officials have been pleading with U.S. officials for weeks to get the rocket systems, which can strike targets roughly 50 miles away.

Some critics have argued sending the rocket systems could escalate the month-long war, but Ukraine has agreed to a U.S. stipulation that the rockets not be used against targets in Russia, the White House official said.

“The Ukrainians have given us assurances they will not use these systems against targets in Russian territory and based on those assurances, we’re very comfortable that they will not,” the official said.

President Joe Biden pledged Monday that he would not send Ukraine “rocket systems that can strike into Russia,” though any ammunition placed close enough to the Russian border could fire into enemy territory.

The fighting in Ukraine has been focused recently in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, which the Pentagon has said requires longer-range munitions such as these types of rockets. Russia has made incremental progress in the region, a senior U.S. defense official said Friday, but the Ukrainians continue their fierce resistance.

The official said criticisms about the potential for the rockets to be used against targets inside Russia distract from “the Russian assault on a sovereign country.”

“Russia is attacking inside Ukraine, not the other way around,” the official said. “I think that can’t be stated enough because it’s definitely a Russian goal to obfuscate that fact.”

The new aid package will also include helicopters, tactical vehicles, artillery rounds, counter-fire radars, air-surveillance radars and Javelin missiles, the official said.

His announcement triggered an angry response in Moscow. “We believe that the United States is deliberately and diligently ‘pouring fuel on the fire,’” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a news briefing. “Such deliveries do not contribute to ... the Ukrainian leadership’s willingness to resume peace talks.”

Russia views any U.S. pledge to send advanced rocket systems and munitions to Ukraine “extremely negatively,” Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the state-owned news outlet RIA Novosti. He called U.S. military support of Ukraine “unprecedented” and “dangerous.”

Some U.S. rocket systems can launch as far as 186 miles, depending on the type of munition, but the U.S. is not sending ammunition that can travel about 46 miles, “at this time,” the official said.

“We’ve decided not to provide the longer-range munitions ... and have communicated that to the Ukrainians,” the official said.

White House scrambles to contain inflation damage

The Washington Post

The White House launched a new push Tuesday to contain the political damage caused by inflation after President Joe Biden complained for weeks to aides that his administration was not doing enough to publicly explain the fastest price increases in roughly four decades.

Aiming to demonstrate to the public that it is responding to its concerns, Biden met with Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell in the Oval Office, wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal about inflation and sent top aides across major networks to push the administration’s economic message.

The flurry of activity comes after Biden has privately grumbled to top White House officials over the administration’s handling of inflation, expressing frustration over the past several months that aides were not doing enough to confront the problem directly, two people familiar with the president’s com-

ments said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to describe private conversations.

The flurry of moves reflects a new urgency within the White House as it grapples with the growing likelihood that high inflation will extend through the midterm elections, eclipsing Biden’s agenda and undermining his ability to tout his accomplishments — and that there may be little Biden can do about it.

With price hikes reaching 8% in April, the pressures appear unlikely to abate soon amid the ongoing fallout of the war in Ukraine, coronavirus lockdowns in China and a surge in gas prices likely to be exacerbated by the summer driving season, all factors beyond the president’s control.

Fuel prices hit a record high Tuesday, with a gallon of gas now costing \$4.62 on average — a 52% increase from last year — according to AAA, after the European Union announced progress on a deal to ban Russian energy imports.

That leaves Biden struggling to show that at least he understands that Americans are suffering and is doing what he can.

On Tuesday, the administration’s top economic officials fanned across cable news channels and appeared in the White House press briefing room to underscore their efforts to fight the price increases.

While not announcing any new measures to combat inflation, the White House insisted the American economy is in a strong position for the Fed to tame high prices, because high growth and low unemployment create a buffer against future interest rate hikes.

Appearing with Powell and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen in the Oval Office, Biden said he and the central bank share a “laser focus” on addressing inflation. “My top priority ... is addressing inflation in order to transition from a historic recovery to a steady growth that works for American families,” Biden said.

Ramstein explains canceling drag queen event

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — It was late March when drag queen Stacey Teed got the call about performing in a storytelling event for children at Ramstein's library, which was in search of a drag queen reader.

Teed, a performer associated with the local entertainment group Fans of the Monarchy of RoyalTEA Drag Family, had done a similar reading for the military community at an off-base site last year and said it was "very well-received."

Now, days after announcement of the cancellation of the Drag Queen Story Time that had been slated for Thursday at the Ramstein library, conflicting explanations are being offered.

News that Ramstein was quashing the Pride Month

event came late last week amid a high-profile backlash that included a complaint from U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, who called on the Air Force to investigate.

Teed said the reason she was given for the cancellation was "an outpouring of complaints."

On Wednesday, the 86th Airlift Wing at Ramstein said the decision was mainly rooted in base officials' desire for a more comprehensive focus instead of one dedicated solely to drag queens.

"Rather than viewing the reading as acceptable or not, base leaders decided it would be better to broaden it to reflect and include the larger LGBTQ+ community, in an attempt to make it more inclusive, rather than focus exclusively on one aspect of it," Lt. Col. Will Powell, an 86th Airlift Wing spokesman, said in a statement Wednesday.

No wing leader instructed the library to cancel the event, but base officials didn't have enough time to modify it, the wing said.

"This decision was not based on individuals speaking out against the event or LGBTQ+ community," the wing said.

Base officials said that so far, no events have been approved for Pride Month, which is in June, but they added that they are trying to get some lined up.

When contacted Wednesday by Stars and Stripes, a representative of the Ramstein library declined to comment.

Still, for base officials, the public controversy over the drag queen event has thrust the Air Force into the middle of a culture clash over how transgender issues should be dealt with in the public square, especially among children.

For Rubio, R-Fla., and many

other conservatives, addressing gender identity with school-age children amounts to sexualizing them in inappropriate ways.

"These inappropriate events are extremely divisive at home for good reason; in all cases, they place young children in close proximity with adults who are intentionally and explicitly sexualized," Rubio wrote in a May 27 letter to Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall.

Rubio called on the Air Force to cancel the event and investigate to determine how frequently such readings have been held on bases and how much government funding has been used to support the events.

The 86th Airlift Wing said it has not yet been issued a direct order from the Air Force to launch such a probe.

Baltic exercise may be showcase for Finland, Sweden

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

An annual U.S.-led naval exercise in the Baltic region that starts this weekend could allow Finland and Sweden to demonstrate their maritime prowess, potentially underscoring the contributions they might make as NATO members.

Both countries long have been participants in Baltic Operations, or BALTOPS, but this year Sweden hosts the exercise, which kicks off Sunday.

"Nordic navies excel at using small missile-armed warships and shore-based aircraft in concert with geography to make things tough on an aggressor," said James R. Holmes, a professor at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.

He also noted the stealth Swedish submarine presence, which is an integral part of the country's defense efforts.

That strategy results in an imposing access- and area-denial network that NATO could use to effectively bar Russian

egress into the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean via the Skagerrak strait and Kattegat sea area.

Sweden and Finland will join 14 NATO countries, including Germany, France and Turkey, as participants in BALTOPS, which focuses on amphibious operations, gunnery, anti-submarine and air defense exercises.

Mine clearance operations, explosive ordnance disposal, use of unmanned underwater vehicles and medical response are also included, U.S. Naval Forces Europe said in a statement on Friday.

Sweden and Finland ditched decades of neutrality and applied for NATO membership May 18, one of the biggest geopolitical consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24.

A successful exercise "can show everyone that Sweden is a worthy partner for peace and war, which is what NATO is all about," Holmes said, adding that "an excellent performance in BALTOPS should

smooth the admissions process."

He pointed out, however, that Turkey's opposition to Swedish accession into NATO would have to be addressed.

Turkey has also objected to Finland's application, saying both countries would need to make a serious commitment to addressing Turkish security concerns, which include perceived support of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which Ankara regards as a terrorist group.

BALTOPS hosts are decided years in advance, so the choice of Sweden is unrelated to the war in Ukraine or the NATO bid, said Sebastian Bruns, a Fulbright scholar in residence at the U.S. Naval Academy and maritime expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

"Rather, Sweden cleverly plays the long game here in that it has since 2014 been a strong naval player who shows its active role in BALTOPS as tensions progressively rose," Bruns said.

Police: Door not locked before attack

Associated Press

An exterior door at Robb Elementary School did not lock when it was closed by a teacher shortly before a gunman used it to get inside and kill 19 students and two teachers, leaving investigators searching to determine why, state police said Tuesday.

State police initially said a teacher had propped the door open shortly before Salvador Ramos, 18, entered the school in Uvalde, Texas, on May 24.

They have now determined that the teacher, who has not been identified, propped the door open with a rock, but then removed the rock and closed the door when she realized there was a shooter on campus, said Travis Considine, chief communications officer for the Texas Department of Public Safety. But, Considine said, the

door that was designed to lock when shut did not lock.

“We did verify she closed the door. The door did not lock. We know that much and now investigators are looking into why it did not lock,” Considine said.

Investigators confirmed the detail through additional video footage reviewed since Friday’s news conference when authorities first said the door had been left propped open. Authorities did not state at that time what had been used to prop open the door.

Considine said the teacher initially propped the door open, but ran back inside to get her phone and call 911 when Ramos crashed his truck on campus.

“She came back out while on her phone, she heard someone yell, ‘He has a gun!’, she saw

him jump the fence and that he had a gun, so she ran back inside,” removing the rock when she did, Considine said.

Steve McCraw, the head of DPS, hadn’t said why the teacher initially propped open the door when it was first detailed Friday. The first mention of a door left propped open, which officials now say didn’t happen, led to questions about the teacher’s actions and whether she had made a horrific mistake.

Since the shooting, law enforcement and state officials have struggled to present an accurate timeline and details of the event and how police responded, sometimes providing conflicting information or withdrawing some statements hours later. State police have said some accounts were preliminary and may change as

more witnesses are interviewed.

San Antonio attorney Don Flanary told the San Antonio Express-News that the Robb Elementary School employee, whom he’s not naming, first propped open the door to carry food from a car to a classroom, and that she immediately moved to close it when she realized the danger.

“She kicked the rock away when she went back in. She remembers pulling the door closed while telling 911 that he was shooting,” Flanary told the newspaper.

“She thought the door would lock because that door is always supposed to be locked,” Flanary said.

Flanary did not immediately return telephone messages left at his office from The Associated Press.

Cosby faces sexual abuse claim in suit

Associated Press

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — Bill Cosby is again facing sex abuse allegations as attorneys give opening statements in a civil trial that’s one of the last remaining legal claims against the comedian.

Lawyers for 64-year-old Judy Huth will outline the evidence they plan to present that Cosby forced her to perform a sex act at the Playboy Mansion in 1975 when she was 16 years old.

Cosby’s attorneys, who have said no sexual abuse happened, are likely to emphasize that the burden of proving the nearly 50-year-old case lies entirely with the plaintiffs.

They have acknowledged Cosby took Huth to the Playboy Mansion, as a photo from the visit shows, but said they believe she wasn’t a minor when it happened.

Baby formula makers to meet with Biden on easing shortage

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is set to meet with infant formula manufacturers as his administration works to ease nationwide shortages by importing foreign supplies and using the Defense Production Act to speed domestic production.

The White House said Biden would host a roundtable Wednesday with leaders of manufacturers ByHeart, Bubs Australia, Reckitt, Perrigo Co. and Gerber.

The list is notable for who isn’t on it: Abbott Nutrition, the company whose Michigan plant was shut down in February over safety concerns, sparking the shortage in the United States.

Biden will be joined by Heath and Human Services

Secretary Xavier Becerra and Surgeon General Vivek Murthy.

The meeting is expected to provide an update on what the administration has dubbed Operation Fly Formula to import formula from overseas into the U.S. and deploy the Korean War-era production law to require suppliers of the formula manufacturers to prioritize their orders in a bid to ease any production bottlenecks.

Those measures will help but won’t immediately bring an end to formula supply shortages that have left people who depend on formula facing empty shelves or limits on purchases.

The Food and Drug Administration began honing in on Abbott’s plant last fall while

tracking several bacterial infections in infants who had consumed formula from the facility. The four cases occurred between September and January, causing hospitalizations and two deaths.

After detecting positive samples of rare but dangerous bacteria in multiple parts of the plant, the FDA closed the facility and Abbott announced a massive recall of its formula on Feb. 17.

U.S. regulators and Abbott announced an agreement last month that would help pave the way for reopening the plant, though production has not restarted.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment on why Abbott was not included from Wednesday’s meeting.

NY lawmakers begin abortion protection vote

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York would expand legal protections for people seeking and providing abortions in the state under a legislation package that lawmakers began debating Tuesday.

Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul has called for New York to increase legal protections for abortion services in case the U.S. Supreme Court overrules *Roe v. Wade's* nationwide right to abortion this summer. Hochul didn't specify Tuesday whether she would sign the half-dozen abortion-related bills that lawmakers plan to pass this week.

"In anticipation of a Supreme Court decision that could overturn *Roe v. Wade*, Governor Hochul has been taking action to safeguard abortion access in New

York, including directing \$35 million to support providers, and we have been working with the legislature on additional actions to protect abortion rights in our state before the end of session," Hochul said. Lawmakers in the state Assembly and Senate began voting on the bills Tuesday, with votes expected through Thursday, according to spokespeople for the two chambers' leaders.

One bill would protect abortion providers from arrest, extradition and legal proceedings in other states by forbidding New York state and local courts and law enforcement agencies from cooperating in most scenarios. Exceptions could include criminal cases where another state's governor says someone committed a crime there, and later fled to New York.

Under another bill, New York would protect the right of people to seek abortion or gender affirming care in the state. People could sue for unlawful interference with their right to reproductive health care when other people or entities bring civil or criminal charges against them for seeking, accessing or providing abortions.

A bill would allow abortion providers and patients — as well as their family members — to participate in an existing state program that lets people shield their address from abusers.

The bill, sponsored by state Sen. Cordell Cleare, a Democrat, follows similar changes to the law in California and New Jersey.

An online summary of the bill on the state's website cites data suggesting threats against abor-

tion providers, employees and patients have been increasing in recent years. The National Abortion Federation says death threats against providers more than doubled from 92 in 2019, to 200 in 2020.

The bills were expected to pass largely on party lines in the Legislature, where Democrats hold supermajorities in both chambers.

New York plans to give abortion providers \$35 million to expand services and boost security in anticipation of an influx of out-of-state people seeking abortions in New York if the U.S. Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*.

Republican lawmakers on Tuesday argued that New York should prohibit the use of taxpayer dollars to help fund abortions for out-of-state residents.

Company to Las Vegas chapels: No more Elvis-themed weddings

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Las Vegas chapels of love that use Elvis Presley's likeness could find themselves becoming Heartbreak Hotels.

The licensing company that controls the name and image of "The King" is ordering Sin City chapel operators to stop using Elvis-themed ceremonies, the Las Vegas Review-Journal reported on Monday.

Authentic Brands Group sent cease-and-desist letters in early May to multiple chapels, which are expected to be compliant by now. With Elvis so closely tied to Vegas's wedding industry, some say the move could decimate their businesses.

"We are a family-run business, and now we're hanging with the big dogs," said Kayla Collins, who operates Las Vegas Elvis Wedding Chapel.com and the Little Chapel of Hearts with her husband. "That's our bread and butter. I don't get it. We were just hitting our stride again through COVID, then this happens."

Clark County Clerk Lynn Goya, who led a marketing campaign promoting Las Vegas as a wedding destination, said the order for chapels to stop using Elvis couldn't have come at a worse time for the sector. The city's wedding industry generates \$2 billion a year, and officials say Elvis-themed weddings represent a significant number of the ceremonies performed.

"It might destroy a portion of our wedding industry. A number of people might lose their livelihood," Goya said.

One chapel last weekend had its Elvis impersonator change instead into a leather jacket, jeans and a fedora for a "rock 'n' roll" themed ceremony, the Review-Journal reported.

Graceland Wedding Chapel, which performs 6,400 Elvis-themed weddings per year, has not been served a warning yet, according to manager Rod Musum.

Authentic Brands Group did not immediately respond Tuesday to an emailed request for comment.

Shanghai coming back to life as COVID-19 lockdown eases

Associated Press

SHANGHAI — Traffic, pedestrians and joggers reappeared on the streets of Shanghai on Wednesday as China's largest city began returning to normalcy amid the easing of a strict two-month COVID-19 lockdown that has drawn unusual protests over its heavy-handed implementation.

Shanghai's Communist Party committee, the city's most powerful political body, issued a letter online proclaiming the lockdown's success and thanking citizens for their "support and contributions." The move came amid a steady rollback in compulsory measures that have upended daily life for millions while severely disrupting the economy and global supply chains.

While defending President and Communist Party chief Xi Jinping's hardline "zero-COVID" policy, the country's leadership appears to be acknowledging the public backlash against measures seen as trampling already severely limited rights to privacy

and participation in the workings of government. In one such step, the Cabinet's Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism issued a letter Tuesday laying out rules banning "non-standard, simple and rude indoor disinfection" by mostly untrained teams in Shanghai and elsewhere that have left homes damaged and led to reports of property theft.

Full bus and subway service in Shanghai was being restored from Wednesday, with rail connections to the rest of China to follow. Still, more than half a million people in the city of 25 million remain under lockdown or in designated control zones because virus cases are still being detected.

The government says all restrictions will be gradually lifted, but local committees still wield considerable power to implement sometimes conflicting and arbitrary policies. Negative PCR tests for COVID-19 taken within the previous 48 hours also remain standard in Shanghai, Beijing, and elsewhere for permission to enter public venues.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man arrested after attacks on churches

NC FAYETTEVILLE — Police arrested a man who was captured on videotape throwing a Molotov cocktail at a North Carolina church, and investigators said he threw another device at a different church.

Deputies with the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office responded just after 10:30 a.m. on Sunday to a church in Hope Mills, where the Molotov cocktail was thrown, news outlets reported. About a half-hour later, a similar report was made at a church in Fayetteville.

At one of the churches, a man was seen on video getting out of a car with what appeared to be a bottle in his hand before throwing it toward the steps of a building. There was a small fire near a sidewalk and patch of grass, according to the video that sheriff's office posted on Facebook.

Authorities arrested Terry Wayne Raeford, 57, of Fayetteville, on Monday and filed multiple charges against him.

'Gifting' cannabis now carries up to \$1K fine

CT HARTFORD — The practice of exchanging cannabis or cannabis-related products for donations or other purchases — known as "gifting" — could now carry a heavy price tag in Connecticut.

Under legislation recently signed by Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont, towns can fine residents up to \$1,000 for gifting a cannabis plant or related products.

The state also has the authority to issue \$1,000 fines for not

paying state sales taxes on the exchanges.

Unregulated cannabis bazaars have cropped up around the state since the drug was legalized last year. Thousands of people have attended the events, often paying a fee to be admitted, and exchanged cannabis-related products for other items or received them along with the purchase of an item such as a T-shirt.

Chapel dating to 1800 gets preservation grants

NH RYE — A nonprofit group is getting money to help preserve a 19th-century chapel on an island off New Hampshire.

Star Island Corp. received the grants in support of work to preserve the 222-year-old Gosport Chapel on Star Island. The group received a \$10,000 grant from the 1772 Foundation in cooperation with N.H. Preservation Alliance and another \$10,000 from Cogswell Benevolent Trust.

The island opens up for its season in the middle of June. One of the long-standing traditions on the island is lantern-lit evening services at the chapel.

Officials investigate sick, dying brown pelicans

CA LOS ANGELES — Wildlife authorities are trying to determine why large numbers of California brown pelicans are being found sick and dying.

Hundreds of the pelicans, which are a protected species in the state, have been admitted to wildlife rehabilitation facilities in Southern and Central California since about May 13, the Cali-

fornia Department of Fish and Wildlife said in a statement.

"The pelicans have been found emaciated and frequently with secondary injuries or broken wings. Many of these birds died shortly after arrival at a facility," it said.

Results of postmortem examinations and testing of pelicans brought to rehabilitation facilities indicate the birds are dying from starvation-related problems, and there are no indications of disease or unusual parasites.

Girl, 9, survives rare attack from cougar

WA FRUITLAND — A 9-year-old girl survived a cougar attack after wandering up a trail with two friends while camping in northwest Washington state.

The girl fought back while her friends ran for their lives. Adults rushed to help and found the girl covered in blood. She was soon airlifted to a hospital, where she's recovering after surgery for multiple wounds to her head and upper body. Others found the young male cougar and killed it.

Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Staci Lehman said cougar attacks are rare, with only two fatalities in the last century in Washington state.

\$2M church relic stolen, angel statues beheaded

NY NEW YORK — Police said someone broke into the altar at a New York City church, stole a \$2 million gold relic and removed the head from two angel statues last week.

The incident happened at St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church, which was closed for construction at the time. Camera recordings from the church's security system were also stolen, the church's pastor said.

The diocese said the thief or thieves made off with a tabernacle dating to the church's opening in the 1890s. The tabernacle is made of 18-carat gold and decorated with jewels, police and the diocese said. It's valued at \$2 million. Angel statues flanking the tabernacle were decapitated and destroyed, the diocese said.

2 hurt in fireworks incident at desert site

NV RENO — Two men were seriously injured in a northern Nevada desert in a fireworks incident over the weekend at a large gathering of people at a popular off-roading and party area, authorities said.

One man was hospitalized in critical condition for a punctured lung he suffered when he was struck in the chest by a firework that went into a crowd of people after exploding in the hand of a man who lit it, the Washoe County Sheriff's Office said in a statement.

The man who lit the firework was standing on a rock outcropping before a crowd of 500 people, the statement said. He suffered "major deformities and injuries to his left hand," the statement said.

The incident occurred at Moon Rocks, a desert area with prominent rock features on federally owned land about 20 miles north of Reno.

— From wire reports

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Celtics, Warriors go at it for NBA crown

Associated Press

Somewhere, Gregg Popovich must be pleased.

Ime Udoka and Steve Kerr played for Popovich with the San Antonio Spurs, both served as assistant coaches under him, and neither makes any effort to hide the affinity they have for the NBA's career victory leader.

And now, Udoka and Kerr are about to go head-to-head — in the NBA Finals.

The title matchup is set: It'll be Udoka and the Eastern Conference champion Boston Celtics facing Kerr and the Western Conference champion Golden State Warriors, a series that begins Thursday night in San Francisco. The teams split their two regular-season meetings, each winning on the other's home floor.

The Warriors have been waiting for an opponent since last Thursday after needing only five games to beat Dallas for the West title. The Celtics got there the hard way, winning Game 7 in Miami on Sunday night to capture the East.

"We stayed with it. We believed in each other. We made a commitment on the defensive end," said Boston forward Al

Horford, who, after 141 playoff games, is headed to the NBA Finals for the first time. "That was the biggest thing, defending."

For the Celtics, it's a chance at an 18th NBA championship — which would break the tie with the Los Angeles Lakers for the most in league history. For Golden State, it's a chance at a seventh crown — which would break a tie with the Chicago Bulls for third-most in league history.

It's also a rematch of the 1964 Finals, when Bill Russell and the Celtics topped the Warriors in five games.

"I've said it many times: You go to the Finals, it's almost a two-month journey filled with stress and fatigue and everything else," said Kerr, who gave his team Friday and Saturday off before bringing them back to work Sunday. "So, if you can get a little bit of a break, it's very meaningful. Hopefully, we can get healthy and have a few days of really good prep and be ready to go on Thursday."

Golden State won at Boston 111-107 on Dec. 17, behind 30 points from Stephen Curry.

The Celtics rolled on the Warriors' home floor in the rematch

on March 16, winning 110-88 in the game in which Curry injured his foot — and that's where his regular season ended.

Curry was ready to go for the playoffs. So was the rest of his team. It is 12-4 in the playoffs, getting through Denver, Memphis and Dallas to get to the title round.

"It all starts with Steph," Kerr said.

Udoka has a chance to become the 10th coach to win a title in his first season. Eddie Gottlieb (1947 Philadelphia Warriors), Buddy Jeanette (1948 Baltimore Bullets), John Kundla (1949 Minneapolis Lakers), George Senesky (1956 Philadelphia Warriors), Paul Westhead (1980 Los Angeles Lakers), Pat Riley (1982 Los Angeles Lakers), Tyrone Lue (2016 Cleveland Cavaliers) and Nick Nurse (2019 Toronto Raptors) are eight of the coaches who have pulled off the feat.

The other name on that list is Kerr — who did it with Golden State in 2015, the start of this run of greatness from the Warriors. That was the beginning of six Finals appearances in eight years, the two exceptions being when injuries and a roster reset kept

them from the playoffs in 2020 and 2021.

"You can't take it for granted," Curry said after the West title series. "Nothing's ever guaranteed. We understand how hard it is to win. We've said that until we're blue in the face the last two years. This is definitely special. Proud of everybody that is in that locker room, that came with it all year. Now we have an opportunity to go finish a job."

Udoka played for Popovich and later was a San Antonio assistant. Kerr played for the Spurs, then assisted Popovich with USA Basketball through last summer's Tokyo Olympics — when the Americans won a fourth consecutive gold medal.

Golden State's Draymond Green was on that Olympic team. So was Boston's Jayson Tatum. They celebrated winning gold together, and now they'll try to go through one another to get their fingerprints on the gold trophy that goes to the NBA champions — the Larry O'Brien.

"This is an opportunity that players dream of," the Warriors' Andrew Wiggins said. "To be put in a position to win it all."

Avalanche hold off Oilers for wild Game 1 victory

Associated Press

DENVER — In a frenetic game that featured 14 goals, Colorado and Edmonton players came away with the same thought — defense can't be so optional.

J.T. Compher scored twice, Cale Makar had a goal and two assists and the Avalanche held off the Oilers 8-6 on Tuesday night in a fast-paced, no-lead-felt-safe Game 1 of the Western Conference finals.

The goal-after-goal-after-goal routine had Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky — the greatest scorer of all time — pleading on the TV broadcast for a little

more "D." The game is tied for 10th highest-scoring playoff game in NHL history, according to the league.

"There's lots to clean up," said Compher, whose team matched a franchise record for most goals in a playoff game. "We don't want to play the game that we played tonight. We want to be tighter defensively."

Even Colorado's four-goal lead in the second period hardly felt secure in a matchup between the two highest-scoring teams in the postseason — and the win wasn't in hand until Gabriel Landeskog's empty-net goal with 21.4 seconds remain-

ing.

Not only were there goals galore, but both teams needed to use backup goaltenders in a frenzied second period: Mike Smith was pulled after giving up six goals and Darcy Kuemper left with an upper-body injury (coach Jared Bednar didn't have an update after the game).

This was a matchup billed as a showdown between stars Nathan MacKinnon and Connor McDavid and they delivered. MacKinnon had a goal and an assist for the Avalanche, and McDavid a goal and two assists for Edmonton.

But it was the supporting

casts that produced big time.

Nazem Kadri, Mikko Rantanen and Andrew Cogliano also scored for Colorado, which has a 19-6 series record when taking the first game of a best-of-seven since relocating to Denver. Twelve Avs recorded at least a point and six had multipoint games.

Evander Kane, Zach Hyman, Ryan McLeod, Derek Ryan and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins added goals for the Oilers. Hyman has scored in six straight postseason games to tie the team mark set by Esa Tikkanen in the 1990 playoffs. Thirteen Edmonton players had at least a point.

Nadal tops Djokovic in quarterfinal gem

Associated Press

PARIS—Rafael Nadal insists he can't know for sure whether any match at Roland Garros might be his very last at a place he loves, a place he is loved.

For now, if he keeps winning and keeps performing the way he did during his monumental quarterfinal victory over long-time rival Novak Djokovic that began in May and ended in June, Nadal will have more chances to play.

With a mix of brilliant shot-making and his trademark resilience, Nadal got past the top-seeded defending French Open champion Djokovic 6-2, 4-6, 6-2, 7-6 (4) to move a step closer to his 14th championship at the clay-court Grand Slam tournament and what would be a 22nd major trophy overall, adding to records that he already owns.

"One of those magic nights for me," Nadal said.

For anyone lucky enough to be there, too — provided they were able to stay awake — or even anyone watching from afar. The match began a little

past 9 p.m. Tuesday and concluded more than four hours later, after 1 a.m. Wednesday.

"TV decides," Djokovic said about the late start. "That's the world we are living in."

The bracket said this was a quarterfinal, yes, but it felt like a final, from the quality of play to the quality of effort, from the anticipation that preceded it to the atmosphere that enveloped it.

The only missing ingredient: There was no trophy handed to the winner.

Nadal turns 36 on Friday, when he will face third-seeded Alexander Zverev in the semifinals. When the subject of Nadal's future was brought up during his on-court interview, he smiled.

"See you, by the way, in two days," Nadal said. "That's the only thing that I can say."

It'll be difficult for any match the rest of the way to live up to this one.

Nary a game, a point, a stroke or, indeed, a step came with a hint of insouciance. Both men

gave their all. Nothing came easily.

Nadal's 3-0 lead in the second set did him no good; Djokovic ended up taking it and would say later, "I thought, 'OK, I'm back in the game.'"

But Djokovic's 3-0 lead in the fourth did him no good, even though he served for it at 5-3, even standing one point from forcing a fifth twice. Nadal saved those set points and broke there, then ran away with the closing tiebreaker, seizing a 6-1 edge and never losing focus after his first three match points went awry.

"I lost to a better player today," said Djokovic, who had won 22 sets in a row until the 49-minute opener against Nadal. "Had my chances. Didn't use them. That's it."

This showdown was their 59th, more than any other two men have played each other in the Open era. Nadal narrowed Djokovic's series lead to 30-29 while improving to 8-2 against his rival at Roland Garros.

Nadal is now 110-3 for his ca-

reer at the place. Two of those losses came against Djokovic, including in last year's semifinals. This time, Nadal made sure Djokovic remains behind him in the Slam count with 20. Nadal broke their three-way tie with Roger Federer at that number by capturing the Australian Open in January, when Djokovic was not able to play because he had not been vaccinated against COVID-19.

Before Nadal advanced to his 15th semifinal in Paris, Zverev reached his second in a row by holding off 19-year-old rising star Carlos Alcaraz 6-4, 6-4, 4-6, 7-6 (7).

"Not really getting easier from here," Zverev said after putting an end to Alcaraz's 14-match winning streak.

"I told him at the net, 'You're going to win this tournament a lot of times, not just once,'" said Zverev, the runner-up at the U.S. Open in 2020 and the gold medalist at the Tokyo Olympics last summer. "I hope I can win it before he starts ... beating us all."

Swiatek benefits from double-bounce to reach semis

Associated Press

PARIS—Iga Swiatek benefited from the chair umpire's no-call on a double bounce that gave her a key first-set service break during a match-altering five-game run and the French Open's No. 1 seed moved into the semifinals with a 6-3, 6-2 victory over Jessica Pegula on Wednesday.

Swiatek extended her winning streak to 33 matches, the longest on tour since Serena Williams won 34 in a row in 2013.

Swiatek will face No. 20 Daria Kasatkina in one women's semifinal Thursday, when the other will be No. 18 Coco Gauff, an 18-year-old American, against unseeded Martina Trevisan, a 28-year-old from Italy.

Only Swiatek, who won the

2020 French Open, has previously participated in the final four at a major tournament.

Kasatkina made it that far by beating No. 29 Veronika Kudermetova 6-4, 7-6 (5) in a match between two Russian players who will not be allowed to compete at Wimbledon later this month because of that country's invasion of Ukraine.

Theirs was a mistake-filled quarterfinal, with the players combining for 75 unforced errors, 50 by Kudermetova. That allowed Kasatkina to win despite coming up with just 16 winners over the course of 165 points.

The men's quarterfinals scheduled for later Wednesday were No. 7 Andrey Rublev against 2014 U.S. Open cham-

pion Marin Cilic, and No. 8 Casper Ruud against 19-year-old Holger Rune.

A day after her 21st birthday, Swiatek was not at her dominant best against the 11th-seeded Pegula, a 28-year-old from New York whose parents own the NFL's Buffalo Bills and NHL's Buffalo Sabres.

"Getting old, but still fresh," Swiatek wrote with a silver marker on the lens of a courtside TV camera.

As usual for most of this season, Swiatek was good enough to end up on the right side of the scoreline. She has not lost a match since February and claimed the title at each of her past five tournaments.

Swiatek rose atop the WTA rankings in March after the

woman who was No. 1, Ash Barty, retired at age 25. Rather than being derailed by the sudden switch in status, Swiatek has flourished, going 16-0 since rising from No. 2.

On a sunny afternoon at Court Philippe Chatrier, with the temperature above 70 degrees Fahrenheit (20 Celsius), Swiatek's start was so-so for the second match in a row, although she did wind up with nearly twice as many winners as Pegula, 30 to 16.

"Today is warmer, so I feel like the ball is flying a little bit faster," Swiatek said, "so I had to adjust to that, for sure."

She trailed 3-2 in the opening set, and it was 3-all when she held a break point while Pegula served.

Yankees hand Angels 6th straight loss

Associated Press

Noah Syndergaard walked slowly off the mound just one out into the third inning, his head bowed and expression blank, blond hair brushing his shoulders. Thor never imagined getting hammered in his return to New York.

He knew after falling behind leadoff batter DJ LeMahieu 3-0 that it might be a long night.

“Something wasn’t adding up,” Syndergaard said Tuesday night after the Yankees routed the reeling Los Angeles Angels 9-1. “I just kind of noticed how tense my upper body was, and it’s kind of hard to deliver a [good] quality pitch when you’re really tight out there.”

Mets 10, Nationals 0: Mark Canha led off with the first of his four hits, Starling Marte followed with a homer against Patrick Corbin and host New York rolled from there, totaling 17 hits in a blowout of Washington.

The NL East-leading Mets have won a season-best five straight, all during this six-game homestand, which ends Wednesday against the Nats. New York has at least 16 hits in consecutive games for the second time in a week.

Reds 2, Red Sox 1: Luis Castillo struck out 10 while pitching six innings of one-hit ball, and Cincinnati got its first victory at Fenway Park since Game 7 of the 1975 World Series.

Joey Votto twice doubled off the top of the outfield wall — once to left, once to right and each perhaps an inch from a home run — and the Reds scored both runs on Boston throwing errors.

Rangers 3, Rays 0: Martín Pérez retired all 16 batters after taking a 97 mph liner off

his right leg, lowering his majors-leading ERA with seven scoreless innings in host Texas’ victory over Tampa Bay.

Corey Seager homered for the Rangers’ first hit in the fourth inning, with Adolis García adding a two-run shot two batters later as the Rangers won for the sixth time in seven games and reached .500 (24-24) for the first time this season.

Giants 7, Phillies 4 (11): Joc Pederson’s two-run homer in the 11th inning helped power visiting San Francisco past struggling Philadelphia.

A fielding error by Jeurys Familia allowed Wilmer Flores to score in the 10th to give the Giants a 4-3 lead. The Phillies tied it when Alec Bohm’s two-out grounder up the middle hit the second base bag, bouncing over Thairo Estrada and allowing pinch-runner Roman Quinn to score. San Francisco scored three times in the 11th and sent Philadelphia to its fifth straight loss.

The Phillies have lost three straight games in extra innings and 12 out of their last 16 games overall.

Cardinals 3, Padres 2 (10): Albert Pujols hit a sacrifice fly in the 10th inning and host St. Louis beat San Diego.

Tommy Edman began the 10th as the Cardinals’ automatic runner at second. After Paul Goldschmidt was intentionally walked by Taylor Rogers (0-2) and Nolan Arenado fouled out, Edman stole third. Pujols followed with his second sacrifice fly of the game, lifting a ball to left that easily scored Edman.

Twins 8-0, Tigers 2-4: Jonathan Schoop homered and drove in four runs as host Detroit, with Kody Clemens making his major league debut while his famous father

watched from a suite, beat Minnesota to split a doubleheader.

Max Kepler had three hits and drove in three runs and Gary Sanchez hit a three-run homer to help the Twins win the first game.

Blue Jays 6, White Sox 5: Alejandro Kirk hit a pair of two-run homers and host Toronto extended its winning streak to six with a victory over Chicago.

Mariners 10, Orioles 0: George Kirby allowed four hits in six innings for his first big-league win, and Taylor Trammell had three hits and four RBIs to help visiting Seattle rout Baltimore.

Guardians 8, Royals 3: Austin Hedges hit a three-run homer and rookie Oscar Gonzalez doubled in two runs, sending host Cleveland past Kansas City.

Cubs 8, Brewers 7: Patrick Wisdom hit a tiebreaking solo homer in the eighth inning, Willson Contreras and P.J. Higgins also went deep, and host Chicago beat Milwaukee.

Diamondbacks 8, Braves 7: Cooper Hummel’s game-winning double landed just fair down the right-field line in the 10th inning and host Arizona kept rallying to beat Atlanta.

Pirates 5, Dodgers 3: Michael Chavis and Tucupita Marcano each hit two-run homers and visiting Pittsburgh took its second straight series from NL West-leading Los Angeles.

The Pirates rapped out 11 hits in their first series win at Dodger Stadium since 2016.

Astros 3, Athletics 1: Chas McCormick hit a tiebreaking home run off Frankie Montas leading off the eighth inning and visiting Houston got a scoreless effort from its bullpen to beat Oakland.

Johnson defies Tour, will play in Saudi-backed event

Associated Press

DUBLIN, Ohio — Three months after declaring he was “fully committed” to the PGA Tour, Dustin Johnson is among 42 players in the field for next week’s LIV Golf Invitational, which offers a \$25 million in prize money that’s backed by Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund.

Phil Mickelson was missing from the list that was released Tuesday night. It was his da-

maging remarks in February that led to Johnson and other top players to say they would stay on the PGA Tour.

The LIV Golf Invitational is scheduled for June 9-11 at Centurion Club outside of London. The PGA Tour and European tour denied releases for players, meaning they risk punishment — possibly a loss of tour membership — by competing.

“Dustin has been contemplating the opportunity off and on

for the past couple of years. Ultimately, he decided it was in his and his family’s best interest to pursue it,” David Winkler, Johnson’s manager at Hambric Sports, told The Associated Press in a text message.

“Dustin has never had any issue with the PGA Tour and is grateful for all it has given him but in the end felt this was too compelling to pass up.”

That was a turnaround from his comments in February

when Johnson issued a statement that he was committed to the PGA Tour and that he was “grateful for the opportunity to play on the best tour in the world and for all it has provided me and my family.”

Johnson, whose last victory was the Saudi International in 2021, is No. 13 in the world, the highest-ranked player in the field. He had held the No. 1 spot in the world longer than any player since Tiger Woods.