

US and Iran in tense sea encounter

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A U.S. Navy warship fired a warning flare to wave off an Iranian Revolutionary Guard speedboat coming straight at it during a tense encounter in the strategic Strait of Hormuz, officials said Tuesday.

The incident on Monday involving the Guard and the Navy comes as tensions remain high over stalled negotiations over Iran's tattered nuclear deal with world powers, and as Tehran enriches uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels under decreasing international oversight.

Meanwhile, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog said Iran now plans to enrich uranium through a second set of advanced centrifuges at its underground Fordo facility amid the standoff.

The Cyclone-class patrol ship USS Sirocco and Spearhead-class expeditionary fast transport USNS Choctaw County found themselves

in the close encounter with three Iranian fast boats while coming through the Strait of Hormuz to enter the Persian Gulf, the Navy said.

In a video released by the Navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, a high-speed Guard Boghammar is seen turning head-on toward the Sirocco. The Sirocco repeatedly blows its horn at the Boghammar, which turns away as it closes in. The flare shot can be heard, but not seen, as the Boghammar passes the Sirocco with the Iranian flag flying above it.

The Navy said the Boghammar came within 45 meters of the Sirocco, raising the risk of the vessels running into each other. The overall encounter lasted about an hour, the Navy said.

The Guard's "actions did not meet international standards of professional or safe maritime behavior, increasing the risk of miscalculation and collision," the Navy said.

Iran did not immediately acknowledge the incident in the strategic waterway — a fifth of

all traded oil passes through the strait. The Navy separately told The Associated Press that this marked the second so-called "unsafe and unprofessional" incident it had with Iran in recent months.

On March 4, three Guard ships had a tense encounter for over two hours with Navy and U.S. Coast Guard vessels as they traveled out of the Persian Gulf through the strait, the Navy said. In that incident, the Guard's catamaran Shahid Nazeri came within 25 yards of the USCGC Robert Goldman, the Navy said.

"The two U.S. Coast Guard cutters issued multiple warnings via bridge-to-bridge radio and deployed warning flares," the Navy said.

The Navy did not elaborate on why it did not announce the previous incident, particularly since a larger vessel came even closer to an American warship. That was just as a deal in Vienna between Iran and world powers on restoring the nuclear deal looked possible, however, before the talks broke down.

Lithuania threats put spotlight on US troops in Poland

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Kremlin threats of retaliation against NATO ally Lithuania for instituting a transit ban over the weekend that affects Russia's exclave of Kaliningrad could have serious implications for several hundred U.S. soldiers positioned in nearby northeastern Poland.

For years, security analysts have feared that in the event of a crisis with Russia, Moscow could seal off the Baltic states from the rest of NATO by seizing the Suwalki Gap, a vulnerable choke point that connects Poland to Lithuania.

In response to such concerns, NATO established multinational quick-reaction battlegroups. One of them, based about 50 miles from Kaliningrad, is manned by roughly 800 U.S. soldiers and a few hundred troops from other countries.

On Monday, the Kremlin lashed out at Lithuania for imposing a ban on rail transit across its territory of certain goods that are subject to European Union sanctions, calling the decision unlawful. Items such as

steel, coal and alcoholic beverages are affected.

"We pointed out in this regard that if the transit of goods between the Kaliningrad region and the rest of Russia through Lithuania is not fully restored, Russia reserves the right to take action to protect its national interests," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Russia did not specify what retaliatory measures it was considering, but the threats have put a new spotlight on the Suwalki Gap.

NATO did not immediately respond Tuesday to a question about if steps are being taken to add to the unit's ability to mobilize.

But at a summit of alliance heads of state next week in Madrid, NATO is expected to approve plans that will bolster the alliance's eastern flank.

Lithuanian officials have downplayed concerns of a looming Russian attack over the ban, saying Russian forces already have their hands full fighting in Ukraine.

"We are not particularly worried about Russian threats," Laurynas Kasciunas, chairman of the Lithuanian parliament's

national security and defense committee, said as quoted by The New York Times. "The Kremlin has very few options for how to retaliate."

Kasciunas added that an attack is "highly unlikely because Lithuania is a member of NATO. If this were not the case, they probably would consider it."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described the situation as "more than serious."

"This decision is really unprecedented," he said. "It's a violation of everything."

Lithuania said the transit ban was imposed in conjunction with EU sanctions.

On Monday, the EU's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, confirmed the ban was not a unilateral action, saying "the accusation against Lithuania that it is implementing Lithuanian sanctions is false, pure propaganda," according to news reports.

Isolated from mainland Russia, Kaliningrad uses trains to get goods into the territory by crossing Belarus and Lithuania. In recent years, Russia has built up its defenses in the exclave, where nuclear capable missiles are based.

Kremlin: No protections for 2 Americans

The Washington Post

Two Americans who fought for Ukraine before being captured by Russia will not be granted the protections afforded to prisoners of war by the Geneva Conventions, the Kremlin's top spokesman said Monday.

Alexander Druke and Andy Tai Huynh were "involved in firing and shelling" of Russian troops and "should be held responsible for those crimes that they have committed," Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, claimed in a Monday interview with NBC News.

The Geneva Conventions protect prisoners of war from torture, summary execution and prosecution for fighting in a war. But Peskov said the Americans "are not the Uk-

rainian army" and "are not subject to the Geneva Conventions."

Responding to Peskov, the State Department said in a statement: "We call on the Russian government — as well as its proxies — to live up to their international obligations in their treatment of any individual, including those captured fighting in Ukraine."

Peskov accused Druke, 39, and Huynh, 27 — both U.S. military veterans from Alabama — of being "soldiers of fortune," or mercenaries, and said that Russian or Russia-aligned authorities will investigate their cases. Although Peskov told NBC that their fate "depends on the investigation," he also said Druke and Huynh would "face the

same fate" as two British citizens and a Moroccan man sentenced to death earlier this month by Kremlin-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

"Those guys on the battlefield were firing at our military guys. They were endangering their lives," Peskov said. "There will be a court, and there will be a court decision."

Before his capture, Druke told relatives he was teaching Ukrainian troops how to use U.S. weaponry. "He went over there not to fight, but to train," his mother, Lois Druke, told *The Washington Post*.

Huynh, meanwhile, volunteered to fight alongside Ukrainian troops, according to Joy Black, who identified herself as Huynh's fiancée.

'Everything is on fire': Luhansk bombarded

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian attacks laid down a curtain of fire Tuesday across areas of eastern Ukraine where pockets of resistance are denying Moscow full military control of the region, almost four months after the Kremlin unleashed an invasion.

"Today everything that can burn is on fire," Serhiy Haidai, the governor of Ukraine's eastern Luhansk region, told *The Associated Press*.

Russia's war has caused alarm over food supplies from Ukraine to the rest of the world and gas supplies from Russia, as well as raising questions about security in Western Europe.

The Russian military currently controls about 95% of the Luhansk region.

But Moscow has struggled for weeks to overrun it completely, despite deploying additional troops and possessing a massive

advantage in military assets.

In the city of Sievierodonetsk, the hot spot of the fighting, Ukrainian defenders held on to the Azot chemical plant in the industrial outskirts. About 500 civilians are sheltering at the plant, and Haidai said the Russian forces are turning the area "into ruins."

"It is a sheer catastrophe," Haidai told the AP in written comments about the plant. "Our positions are being fired at from

howitzers, multiple rocket launchers, large-caliber artillery, missile strikes."

The defense of the chemical plant recalled the besieged Azovstal steel mill in the brutalized city of Mariupol, where Ukrainian troops were pinned down for weeks.

Neighboring Lysychansk, the only city in the Luhansk region that is still fully under Ukrainian control, is also the target of multiple airstrikes.

Second American reported killed in Ukraine war

The Washington Post

A U.S. citizen has been killed in combat in Ukraine, according to an obituary published by his family and affirmed by the State Department, making him at least the second American to die as a result of the war.

Stephen D. Zabielski, 52, died May 15 while fighting in the conflict, said the obituary, published in the *Recorder*, a newspaper serving Montgomery County in Upstate New York.

He left behind a wife, five stepchildren and seven siblings, among other family.

The State Department is in touch with the

family and has provided "all possible consular assistance," a U.S. official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because the issue is considered sensitive. The official declined to offer more details about the case "out of respect to the family during this difficult time."

News of the death circulated widely after *Rolling Stone* magazine, citing multiple people familiar with the circumstances of Zabielski's death, reported Monday that he was a U.S. Army veteran and had been killed by a land mine. The *Washington Post* was unable to immediately verify his mili-

tary records. Attempts to reach Zabielski's family were unsuccessful.

He was from New York and lived there for the majority of his life before moving to Florida in the past few years, his obituary said. He worked in construction.

Zabielski's death occurred about two weeks after the family of U.S. Marine Corps veteran Willy Joseph Cancel, 22, disclosed that he was killed while fighting in Ukraine.

The government in Kyiv has aggressively recruited Westerners with previous military experience to join its International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine.

US allies considering nuclear options

Associated Press

The headlines on the newsstands in Seoul blared fresh warnings of a possible nuclear test by North Korea.

Out on the sidewalks, 28-year-old office worker Lee Jae Sang already had an opinion about how to respond to North Korea's fast-growing capacity to lob nuclear bombs across borders and oceans.

"Our country should also develop a nuclear program. And prepare for a possible nuclear war," said Lee, voicing a desire that a February poll showed was shared by 3 out of 4 South Koreans.

It's a point that people and politicians of non-nuclear powers globally are raising more often, at what has become a destabilizing moment in more than a half-century of global nuclear nonproliferation efforts, one aggravated by the daily example of nuclear Russia tearing apart non-nuclear Ukraine.

That reconsideration by non-nuclear states is playing out in Asia. The region is home to an ever-more assertive North Korea, China, Russia and Iran — three nuclear powers and one near-nuclear power — but is unprotected by the kind of nuclear umbrella and broad defense alliance that for decades has shielded NATO countries.

Vulnerable countries will look to the lessons from Ukraine — especially whether Russia succeeds in swallowing big pieces of Ukraine while brandishing its nuclear arsenal to hold other nations at bay — as they consider keeping or pursuing nuclear weapons, security experts say.

As important, they say, is how well the U.S. and its allies are persuading other partners in Europe, the Persian Gulf and Asia to trust in the shield of U.S.-led nuclear and conventional arsenals and not pursue their own nuclear bombs.

For leaders worried about unfriendly, nuclear-armed neighbors, "they will say to their domestic audiences, 'Please support our nuclear armament because look what happened to Ukraine, right?'" said Mariana Budjeryn, a researcher with the Project on Managing the Atom at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

As a schoolgirl in 1980s Soviet-era Ukraine, Budjeryn drilled on how to dress radiation burns and other potential injuries of nuclear war, at a time that country housed some 5,000 of the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons. Her country renounced nuclear weapons development after the Soviet Union shattered, opting for economic assistance and integration with the West and se-

curity assurances.

"Ultimately, I think a lot is riding on the outcome of this war in terms of how we understand the value of nuclear weapons," Budjeryn said.

Around the world, the U.S. military is reassuring strategic partners who are facing nuclear-backed rivals.

Near the North Korea border this month, white-hot ballistic missiles arched through the night sky as the U.S. joined South Korea in their first joint ballistic test launches in five years. It was a pointed response to North Korea's launch of at least 18 ballistic missiles this year.

In Europe and in the Persian Gulf, President Joe Biden and U.S. generals, diplomats and troops are shuttling to countries neighboring Russia and to oil-producing countries neighboring Iran. Biden and his top lieutenants pledge the U.S. is committed to blocking nuclear threats from Iran, North Korea and others. In China, President Xi Jinping is matching an aggressive foreign policy with one of his country's biggest pushes on nuclear arms.

Some top former Asian officials have cited Ukraine in saying it's time for more non-nuclear countries to think about getting nuclear weapons, or hosting U.S. ones.

"I don't think either Japan or South Korea are eager to become nuclear weapon states. It will be immensely politically painful and internally divisive. But what are the alternatives?" ex-Singapore Foreign Minister Bilahari Kausikan told the audience at a March defense forum.

For those hoping North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons, the example provided by Russia's invasion of Ukraine is "another nail in that coffin," Terence Roehrig, a professor of national security at the U.S. Naval War College, said at another defense forum in April.

"Ukraine is going to be another example to North Korea of states like Iraq and like Libya, that gave up their nuclear capability — and look at what happened to them," Roehrig said.

Ukraine never had detonation-ready nuclear bombs — at least, none it could fire on its own.

The Soviet Union's collapse left Ukraine with the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal. But Ukraine didn't have operational control. That left it with a weak hand in the 1990s when it negotiated with the U.S., Russia and others on its place in the post-Soviet world, and the fate of the Soviet arsenal. Uk-

raine got assurances but no guarantees regarding its security, Budjeryn said.

"A piece of paper," is how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy referred to one such assurance, signed in 1994.

The U.S. itself has given nuclear and nuclear-curious countries plenty of reasons to worry about forgoing the world's deadliest weapons.

The West compelled Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi to give up his country's rudimentary nuclear weapons program in 2003. Later, Gadhafi's son Saif al-Islam shared with researcher Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer his father's biggest worry about that: that Western nations would support an uprising against him.

"And lo and behold, a few years later, get to 2011, you saw what happened," said Braut-Hegghammer, a University of Oslo nuclear and security strategy professor.

What happened was NATO, at U.S. urging, intervened in a 2011 internal uprising against Gadhafi. A NATO warplane bombed his convoy. Rebels captured the Libyan leader, tortured him and killed him.

In Iraq, the U.S. played a central role in forcing Saddam Hussein to give up his nuclear development program. Then the U.S. overthrew Saddam in 2003 on a spurious claim he was reassembling a nuclear weapons effort. Three years later, with Iraq still under U.S. occupation, Saddam plunged through a gallows.

The Middle East leaders' fall and brutal deaths have clouded denuclearization efforts with North Korea. Rare U.S.-North Korea talks in 2018 collapsed after the Trump administration repeatedly raised the "Libya model" and Vice President Mike Pence threatened Kim Jong-un with Gadhafi's fate. "Ignorant and stupid," North Korea's government responded.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine now "only highlights to some countries, at least, that if you have a nuclear weapons program, and you're sort of far along with that, giving it up is a terrible idea," Braut-Hegghammer said.

The world's nine nuclear powers — the United States, Russia, France, China, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, India, Israel and North Korea — hold some 13,000 nuclear weapons. Israel does not acknowledge its nuclear program.

The biggest nuclear powers historically have sought to control which countries can licitly join the club. Countries that proceed regardless, including Iran and North Korea, are isolated and sanctioned.

1/6 panel hears from officials Trump pushed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House 1/6 committee outlined on Tuesday Donald Trump's relentless pressure to overturn the 2020 presidential election, aiming to show it led to widespread personal threats on the stewards of American democracy — election workers and local officials — who fended off the defeated president's efforts.

The panel investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, attack at the U.S. Capitol resumed with a focus on Trump's efforts to undo Joe Biden's victory in the most local way — by leaning on officials in key battleground states to reject

ballots outright or to submit alternative electors for the final tally in Congress. The pressure was fueled by the defeated president's false claims of voter fraud which, the panel has said, led directly to the riot at the Capitol.

Chairman Bennie Thompson said Tuesday: "A handful of election officials in several key states stood between Donald Trump and the upending of American democracy."

The hearing opened with chilling accounts of the barrage of attacks facing local elected officials, mostly Republicans, including one lawmaker in Michi-

gan whose personal cell phone number was tweeted by Trump to his millions of followers and another in Pennsylvania who had to disconnect the family's home line that was getting calls at all hours of the night.

"It has to stop," pleaded Gabriel Sterling, the chief operations officer at the Georgia Secretary of State's office, in a 2020 video clip shown at the hearing.

Republican Rep. Liz Cheney, the panel's vice chair, implored Americans to pay attention to the evidence being presented at the 1/6 hearings.

"Donald Trump didn't care about the threats of violence. He

did not condemn them, he made no effort to stop them," Cheney said. "This is serious. We cannot let America become a nation of conspiracy theories and thug violence."

Tuesday's focus reviewed how Trump was repeatedly told his pressure campaign could potentially cause violence against the local officials and their families but pursued it anyway, according to a committee aide. It also underscored that fallout from Trump's lies continues, with election officers facing ongoing public harassment and political challengers trying to take over their jobs.

High court: Maine religious schools can get tuition aid

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court ruled Tuesday that religious schools can't be excluded from a Maine program that offers tuition aid for private education, a decision that could ease religious organizations' access to taxpayer money.

The most immediate effect of the court's 6-3 decision beyond Maine will be next door in Vermont, which has a similar program.

But the outcome also could fuel a renewed push for school choice programs in some of the 18 states that have so far not directed taxpayer money to private, religious education.

Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for a conservative majority that the program violates the Constitution's protections for religious freedoms.

"Maine's 'nonsectarian' requirement for its otherwise generally available tuition assistance payments violates the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. Regardless of how the benefit and restriction are described, the program

operates to identify and exclude otherwise eligible schools on the basis of their religious exercise," Roberts wrote.

The court's three liberal justices dissented. "This Court continues to dismantle the wall of separation between church and state that the Framers fought to build," Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote.

In largely rural Maine, the state allows families who live in towns that don't have public schools to receive public tuition dollars to send their children to the public or private school of their choosing. The program has excluded religious schools.

Students who live in a district with public schools or in a district that contracts with another public system are ineligible for the tuition program.

Parents who challenged the program argued that the exclusion of religious schools violates their religious rights under the Constitution. Teacher unions and school boards said states can impose limits on public money for private education without running afoul of religious freedoms.

Safety chief: Uvalde police response an 'abject failure'

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Law enforcement authorities had enough officers on the scene of the Uvalde school massacre to have stopped the gunman three minutes after he entered the building, the Texas public safety chief testified Tuesday, pronouncing the police response an "abject failure."

Police officers with rifles instead stood and waited for over an hour while the gunman carried out the May 24 attack that left 19 children and two teachers dead.

Col. Steve McCraw, director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, testified at a state Senate hearing on the police handling of the tragedy.

Delays in the law enforcement response have become the focus of federal, state and local investigations.

"Obviously, not enough training was done in this situation, plain and simple. Because terrible decisions were made by the on-site commander," McCraw said of Pete Arredondo, the Uvalde school district police chief.

Eight minutes after the shooter entered the building, an officer reported that police had a "hooligan" crowbar they could use to break down the classroom door, McCraw said.

Nineteen minutes after the gunman entered, the first ballistic shield was brought into the building by police, the witness testified.

McCraw told the Senate committee that Arredondo decided to put the lives of officers ahead of the lives of children.

The public safety chief began outlining for the committee a series of missed opportunities, communication breakdowns and other mistakes:

- Arredondo did not have a radio with him.

- Police and sheriff's radios did not work within the school; only the radios of Border Patrol agents on the scene worked inside the school, and even they did not work perfectly.

- Some diagrams of the school that police were using to coordinate their response were wrong.

- The classroom door could not be locked from the inside.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

3 teens save 6 people, 4 animals from fire

IN KOKOMO — Three teenagers who discovered a house on fire helped six people and four animals escape the flames in Kokomo, authorities said.

Max Campbell and brothers Alex and Julian Lindley, all students at Taylor High School, were dropping off a friend when they saw the fire. They immediately knocked on the door.

Kokomo Fire Chief Chris Frazier praised the teens.

“Houses can be fully involved, and because of trees and things like that, you may not even notice it,” Frazier said. “So the fact that those boys were able to pick out that it was on fire, stop, initiate 911 and get us on our way and also try to go get those people out of the house — that says a lot about them.”

3 people, 2 dogs jump from burning yacht

NH NEW CASTLE — A 70-foot yacht burned and sank in New Hampshire, sending three people to the hospital, authorities said.

The vessel, the Elusive, was on the Piscataqua River heading toward a marina in New Castle when a passenger noticed black smoke below deck, the New Hampshire Department of Safety said in a statement.

Three passengers, as well as two dogs, jumped overboard as the boat became engulfed in flames.

The passengers, identified as Arthur Watson, 67, and Diane Watson, 57, both of New Canaan, Conn., and Jarrod Tubbs,

33, of Jupiter, Fla., were taken to a hospital, treated and released.

Despite efforts to save the yacht, it drifted into Maine waters and eventually sank about two hours after the 911 initial call, authorities said.

Bear euthanized after injuring mother, child

TN GATLINBURG — Great Smoky Mountains National Park officials said a bear has been euthanized after ripping into a family’s tent and injuring a mother and her 3-year-old daughter.

Park officials said the incident happened at Elkmont Campground. The 350-pound bear was euthanized after likely being attracted to campsite food smells and having previous access to non-natural foods.

Officials said the black bear tore through the sleeping family’s tent at 5:20 a.m. and scratched the mother and daughter, causing superficial head lacerations. The father scared off the bear after several attempts.

Customers sell burgers to help eatery owner

TN CHARLOTTE — Heidi Thayer and her mother opened The Court-side Cafe inside a former service station in Charlotte, Tenn., more than two decades ago. But on Friday, it was her customers that were doing the cooking.

Friends and supporters were selling hamburgers, chips, drinks and desserts to raise money to help Thayer after her husband suffered an aneurysm, The Tennessean reported.

“Courtside is a big part of

Charlotte and we love it,” said co-organizer Willie Speight. “They have the best hamburgers so that’s one reason why we thought we would do hamburgers.”

The restaurant just off the historic town square has been closed about two months and the medical bills are piling up. But Thayer said her husband is making progress.

“The outpouring of love and generosity from our community has been so overwhelming,” Thayer said. “There just aren’t any words to fully express our gratitude.”

Arrest made in drag race crash that killed 2

NV LAS VEGAS — A Las Vegas driver suspected of being involved in a drag race that led to two deaths in a crash has been arrested.

Detectives said their investigation led them to believe Jovani Monarrez and his Dodge Charger were involved in the crash.

Authorities said Jason Quhaaar, 34, was driving a Corvette owned by Priscila Velasquez, who was in the passenger seat.

Quhaaar was drag racing, going as fast as 140 miles before losing control. The car crashed in a church parking lot.

Police said Monarrez was driving 88 miles. He left the scene.

Quhaaar and Velasquez, who was also 34, were pronounced dead.

Owner flees after his 4 pit bulls maul woman

SD SIOUX FALLS — A woman required

stitches after she was mauled by four pit bulls in a southeast South Dakota town and police believe the dogs’ owner fled with the animals to escape punishment.

Authorities said the 55-year-old victim suffered 17 bite wounds when the dogs attacked her as she walked in Freeman, about 50 miles west of Sioux Falls.

The dogs were inside the owner’s house when police arrived. The man refused to “surrender the animals,” said Jay Slevin, a Freeman police officer.

Slevin said that while he was waiting for backup, the owner escaped out the back door with the dogs. Police believe he took them to a friend’s house in Sioux Falls.

2 charged in fireworks explosion that killed 4

MO BLACK JACK — Two men were charged with murder in a house explosion near St. Louis that authorities said killed four people who were assembling fireworks in a garage.

St. Louis County prosecutors said Terrell Cooks, 37, and Seneca Mahan, 43, made fireworks and directed younger people on how to load the canisters and attach a fuse for lighting. They would then sell the fireworks to others. Neither Cooks nor Mahan had a license to make or sell fireworks.

Cooks and Mahan are each charged with three counts of second-degree murder and several other charges in the explosion near the town of Black Jack.

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Lightning get back in Stanley Cup Final

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — The Tampa Bay Lightning's bid for a three-peat is alive and well.

With Steven Stamkos, Nikita Kucherov, Victor Hedman and Andrei Vasilevskiy leading the way, the star-laden, two-time defending champions beat the Colorado Avalanche 6-2 Monday night in Game 3 of the Stanley Cup Final.

The victory two nights after suffering the most lopsided loss in the team's playoff history trimmed Tampa Bay's series deficit to 2-1 and breathed hope in the team's quest to become the first franchise in nearly 40 years to win three consecutive NHL titles.

"There's a reason why we're here and there's a reason why we won tonight. There's a reason why this has gone on for the last couple of years," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said.

"The guys you need to lead you have been doing that, and then everybody falls in line," Cooper added. "You watch Stamkos's growth and Hedman's growth through the years, and it's probably not a coincidence that winning has followed us."

Stamkos, Pat Maroon and Ondrej Palat each had a goal and an assist, and the Lightning scored four times in the second period to bounce back from an embarrassing 7-0 loss in Game 2 of the best-of-seven match-up.

Anthony Cirelli, Nicholas Paul and Corey Perry also scored to help Tampa Bay storm back after playing poorly while losing the first two games on the road. Kucherov and Hedman had two assists, and Vasilevskiy stopped 37 shots.

"I don't know why we started the series the way we did. ... But any way you slice it, it's 2-1 now," Stamkos said.

"A big part, too, is our goaltender," Cooper added. "For him to go through what he went through two nights ago and then perform like he did tonight ... not only that, but to have them score first and then have the team to respond and back him up, I guess that's how you get to the places that we've been."

Stamkos, Paul, Maroon and Perry scored in the second period, when the Lightning chased Colorado goalie Darcy Kuemper

while pulling away.

Gabriel Landeskog had two goals and Mikko Rantanen and Cale Maker each had two assists for the Avalanche. Kuemper gave up five goals on 22 shots before he was replaced by Pavel Francouz, who finished with nine saves.

Game 4 is Wednesday night at Amalie Arena, where the Lightning have won a franchise-record eight straight playoff games and Colorado lost on the road for the first time this postseason.

"Right now I feel like we're still in the driver's seat up 2-1," Avalanche star Nathan MacKinnon said. "We've got to really show up for Game 4, regroup, be better and stay even-keeled."

Two nights after being limited to just 16 shots in the seven-goal loss in Denver, the Lightning found a way to neutralize Colorado's speed and solve Kuemper to avoid falling to the brink of elimination.

The defending champs became the first team since 1919 to win a Stanley Cup Final game after losing by seven-plus goals the previous game.

Ole Miss rolling at CWS; Auburn ousts Stanford

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Tim Elko and Calvin Harris homered, Hunter Elliott pitched effectively into the seventh inning, and Mississippi defeated Arkansas 13-5 on Monday night to move within one win of the College World Series finals.

The Rebels (39-22) have won seven straight in the NCAA Tournament after being the final team awarded an at-large bid.

"Getting hot is real," coach Mike Bianco said. "As a coach, you just let them go."

Ole Miss will play Wednesday against the winner of Tuesday's elimination game between Arkansas (44-20) and Auburn. All three remaining teams in Bracket 2 are from the Southeastern Conference West Division.

The Rebels, in the CWS for the sixth time, would have to lose Wednesday and again Thursday to not reach their

first finals.

"We're a great team and we knew that from the start," leadoff batter Justin Bench said. "We had a rough patch in middle of the season where we were 7-14. I don't know how many games in a row we've won now, but with the leadership of Tim Elko we stuck together and won games."

Elko put Ole Miss up 4-1 in the second inning when he launched Evan Taylor's high fastball 416 feet into the left-field seats for his 23rd homer.

Harris, the Rebels' No. 9 batter, hit a two-run double in the third and his two-run homer in a four-run fifth. It was Harris' second homer of the season and first since March 29. Harris went 3-for-4 and is hitting .476 (10-for-21) in the tournament.

Bench was 4-for-6 with two RBIs as the Rebels finished with 13 hits against seven pitchers. The Hogs issued 10

walks overall.

"They played better than us and we need to move on," Arkansas coach Dave Van Horn said. "You can't look at the big picture right now. You have to figure out how to play well tomorrow. Get a win tomorrow and have a chance to get to the next day."

Auburn 6, Stanford 2: At Omaha, Neb., Cole Foster's three-run double in the sixth inning gave his team the lead, and the Tigers beat the No. 2 national seed Cardinal in an elimination game for their first win in Omaha in 25 years.

Auburn (44-21) played Tuesday against Arkansas in an another elimination game.

Stanford (47-18) concluded a short, disappointing stay in Omaha. The Cardinal lost their opener against Arkansas 17-2 — the most lopsided game there in 34 years — and then did next to nothing after taking an early lead against Auburn.

Stanford, which staved off elimination five times in its regional and super regional, went 0-2 in a CWS for the first time in 18 appearances.

Trace Bright (5-4) went five innings for the win and Blake Burkhalter, the Tigers' star closer, struck out six of the eight batters he faced for his 16th save.

Auburn had been 0-3 in the CWS since beating Rice 10-1 in 1997.

The Tigers, who lost 5-1 to Mississippi on Saturday, had managed one run and seven hits in 14 innings before breaking out in the sixth against the Cardinal.

Foster, who doubled twice, was back in the lineup after leaving in the middle of Saturday's game because of illness and dehydration. Auburn coach Butch Thompson said before Monday's game that seven or eight of his players have had a stomach virus.

Browns' Watson settles 20 of 24 lawsuits

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson has reached an agreement to settle 20 of the 24 civil lawsuits that had been filed by women who accused him of sexual assault and harassment, an attorney for the women said Tuesday.

Watson, who has been accused by massage therapists of harassing, assaulting or touching them during appointments when he was playing for the Houston Texans, could still be suspended if the NFL determines he violated the league's personal conduct policy.

"Today I announce that all cases against Deshaun Watson, with the exception of four, have settled. We are working through the paperwork related to those settlements," Houston attorney Tony Buzbee said in a statement. "Once we have done so, those particular cases will be dismissed."

Buzbee, who represents all 24 women, said the terms of the settlements are "confidential" and that his legal team "won't comment further on the settlements or those cases."

The first 22 lawsuits were filed in March and April 2021. The last two lawsuits were filed after HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel" aired an interview last month with two of the women who detailed their encounters with Watson.

The settlement comes after The New York Times reported earlier this month that Watson had booked massage appointments with at least 66 different women over 17 months while he played for the Texans. The report also said that a Texans representative had provided Watson with a nondisclosure agreement that he gave to some of the women to sign.

Rusty Hardin, Watson's lead attorney, did not immediately return an email or a text seeking comment.

Last week, Watson said he intended to clear his name and sidestepped any questions about whether he would settle with any of the women.

"I never assaulted anyone," Watson said June 14 in his first public comments since being introduced by the Browns in March. "I never harassed anyone or I never disrespected anyone. I never forced anyone to do anything."

In March, two separate Texas grand juries declined to indict Watson on criminal complaints stemming from the allegations.

Cleveland then signed Watson to a fully guaranteed, five-year, \$230 million contract in March, convincing the three-time Pro Bowler to waive his no-trade clause and join a team with solid

roster.

The Browns had no immediate comment on the settlements.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said the settlements have "no impact on the collectively bargained disciplinary process."

And a league official told The Associated Press "settling doesn't give someone a pass" and indicated a lengthy suspension remains in order. The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the investigation hasn't concluded.

Buzbee said he plans on taking the four unsettled lawsuits to trial, including the first one that was filed by Ashley Solis, who has previously made her name public.

Cleveland is eager to know how long they might be without Watson. The Browns signed veteran backup Jacoby Brissett, who will move into the starting job if Watson is suspended.

Orlando considering options for top pick in NBA Draft

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — College basketball season ended almost three months ago, the NBA Draft lottery was more than a month ago and the draft itself is later this week.

Seems like the process should be winding down.

Orlando Magic President Jeff Weltman sees it differently.

"I tell you, it's still early in the process," Weltman said Monday.

Translated: The Magic haven't decided yet what they'll do on Thursday night, when the draft rolls around and they have the No. 1 pick. Other teams have called to gauge what the asking price would be if they want to trade for that selection, and the Magic have evaluated all the top candidates.

But Weltman sees no reason to decide anything before it's

absolutely necessary, especially given the opportunity Orlando has by holding this No. 1 pick.

"Dialogue is always ongoing," Weltman said. "But, most importantly, we get to do what we want. That's the real benefit of having the No. 1 pick."

The top candidates for the pick are well-known: Auburn's Jabari Smith Jr. worked out for Orlando earlier this month, Gonzaga's Chet Holmgren met with the Magic for multiple days last week and Duke's Paolo Banchero has been working out with former Magic guard Mike Miller.

Holmgren said he came away convinced that "great people" are leading the Magic.

"They've got a vision for what they're trying to put together in Orlando," Holmgren said.

Weltman wouldn't say that those are the only three candidates Orlando would consider

at No. 1.

"It's confirmed that there are a lot of talented players at the top of this draft, that's for sure," Weltman said.

This is the fourth time that Orlando will be making the No. 1 pick. The Magic took Shaquille O'Neal with the top selection in 1992. Chris Webber was the No. 1 pick by Orlando in 1993, and he got traded that same night for Penny Hardaway and a package of future picks that were eventually turned into Vince Carter and, later, Miller. And in 2004, the Magic selected Dwight Howard with the first pick.

The No. 1 pick on Thursday will join a young core in Orlando that already includes 2017 top pick Markelle Fultz, a pair of top-eight picks from the 2021 draft in Franz Wagner and Jalen Suggs, and Cole Anthony — the No. 15 pick in 2020.

Orlando also has the No. 6

picks from the 2017 and 2018 draft, Jonathan Isaac and Mo Bamba. It's possible that when next season starts Orlando could have as many as six lottery picks, nine top-16 selections and 12 first-rounders on its roster.

This is all part of the challenge for the Magic — who also have the No. 32 and No. 35 picks this year — going into Thursday: Finding more youth that fits with the current core, finding ways to be better next season and sustainably better for years to come.

"We do want to get better but not at the expense of rushing back to mediocrity," Weltman said. "And we do want to have something sustainable. But you have to elevate the standard to do that. You can't just stay at the basement level, you know, interminably. So those are conversations that we're having, which players do that for us."

Yanks' Cole takes no-hit bid into eighth

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Gerrit Cole took a no-hit bid into the eighth inning, Aaron Hicks hit a tiebreaking triple as Manuel Margot slammed into the right-field wall in the ninth and the New York Yankees beat the Tampa Bay Rays 4-2 on Monday night for their 50th win.

New York has won 17 of its past 19 games, and its 50-17 start is the best in the major leagues since the 2001 Seattle Mariners. The Yankees opened a 12-game lead over second-place Toronto and Tampa Bay dropped into fourth, 14 games back in the AL East.

"For us to answer back like that just shows what this team's

about," said Aaron Judge, who went 0-for-3 with a walk. "We don't just live or die by the long ball. We're just a good all-around team."

Margot sprained a knee, and Rays manager Kevin Cash expects him to miss significant time.

Cole struck out 12 and walked three, allowing one run and one hit in 7½ innings. Cole struck out six in a row at one point and led 2-0 when Isaac Paredes led off the eighth by grounding a slider on Cole's 105th pitch off the mound and into center field.

"Any time you get to the eighth inning, you're starting to smell it and it gets close. But once (the no-

hitter) goes by the wayside and it's a tie game, it's right back to: 'Let's go find a way to get this thing done,'" Yankees manager Aaron Boone said. "Just a good, resilient victory and a lot of good things that helped us get there."

Judge didn't realize Cole was flirting with a no-hitter until the sixth inning.

"He was just cruising. I guess it was just a normal Cole day," Judge said. "He had all his pitches working tonight. Just to be able to use all those pitches in any count, in any situation, is pretty impressive."

Clay Holmes (5-0) blew a 2-0 lead and allowed his first run since opening day, ending a

31½-inning scoreless streak.

Anthony Rizzo hit a first-inning home run off Shane McCannahan, and the Yankees got a run in the seventh on an error by first baseman Ji-Man Choi, the major league-high 45th unearned run allowed by the Rays.

With the score 2-2, Josh Donaldson singled off Jason Adam (0-2) with one out in the ninth and Hicks, batting .321 in June, drove a hanging changeup high off the right-field wall. Margot fell to the field as center fielder Brett Phillips retrieved the ball and Donaldson scored. Cash and an athletic trainer went out to Margot, who had a sprained knee and left the field on a cart.

Arcia's single in ninth lifts streaking Braves

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Orlando Arcia could sense a big moment coming. All he had to do was look at the support he was getting from the Braves' dugout to know he was about to deliver a walkoff hit.

"I took those first two fastballs for balls," he said. "Honestly all I was trying to do was put the ball in play. Everybody in the dugout was giving me encouragement. I saw (Marcell) Ozuna at first base doing the same thing. All the other guys were rallying around me."

Arcia drove in pinch-runner Phil Gosselin from second base with a tiebreaking single in the ninth inning, lifting the Atlanta Braves to a 2-1 victory over the San Francisco Giants on Monday night.

Camilo Doval began the ninth by walking Matt Olson on four pitches, the first free pass issued by the Giants in the game. After Gosselin replaced Olson, Doval retired Travis d'Arnaud on a popup before Ozuna singled to left. Doval (2-3) struck out Adam Duvall before Arcia drove the ball to left field.

The defending World Series champion Braves have won 16 of 18 and moved 10 games over .500 for the second time this season.

San Francisco, at 37-29 and in third place in the NL West, has dropped two straight. The Giants loaded the bases with no outs in the eighth and had runners on second and third with one out in the ninth. They finished 1-for-8 with runners in scoring position.

Mets 6, Marlins 0: David Peterson pitched into the sixth inning with wife Alex expected to go into labor soon, and host New York beat Miami.

Peterson (4-1) allowed six hits and two walks in 5½ innings with a season-high seven strikeouts.

New York, which lost Jeff McNeil to right hamstring tightness, took three of four from the Marlins and tied the Yankees for the lead with 11 shutouts.

White Sox 8, Blue Jays 7: Andrew Vaughn matched a career high with four hits, including a solo homer, and Luis Robert and Josh Harrison homered as host Chicago won for the fifth

time in seven games.

Tim Anderson had two hits in his first big league game since May 29. He was activated from the 10-day injured list after being sidelined by a strained right groin.

Red Sox 5, Tigers 2: Jarren Duran had two hits, two stolen bases and two runs, and Josh Winckowski (2-1) allowed two runs and seven hits in 6½ innings in host Boston's win over Detroit.

Franchy Cordero had three hits, including a two-run single, and Boston won for the sixth time in eight games to climb a season-high six games above .500.

Pirates 12, Cubs 1: Newly promoted Oneil Cruz drove in four runs and Blich Madris got three hits in his major league debut as host Pittsburgh set a season high for runs.

Madris became the first Pirates player to have a three-hit game in his debut since Jason Kendall in 1996.

Brewers 2, Cardinals 0: Corbin Burnes (5-4) struck out 10 in seven innings and allowed two hits in host Milwaukee's win over St. Louis.

Tyrone Taylor hit a two-run homer off Miles Mikolas (5-5), and the Brewers regained sole possession of first place in the NL Central. Milwaukee followed an eight-game skid by winning six of eight. Josh Hader worked the ninth for his 20th save in 21 chances.

Padres 4, Diamondbacks 1: Yu Darvish pitched seven strong innings and Jake Cronenworth and Trent Grisham homered to lead host San Diego over Arizona.

Kim Ha-seong hit a go-ahead, two-run single in the second for the Padres, who were without All-Star slugger Manny Machado, who sprained his left ankle Sunday in a loss at Colorado.

Royals 6, Angels 2: Andrew Benintendi, Salvador Perez and Hunter Dozier homered, Nicky Lopez drove in the go-ahead run in the seventh inning and visiting Kansas City defeated Los Angeles.

Kris Bubic, who came into the game as one of four pitchers in the majors to have at least eight starts and no wins this season, struck out a season-high seven in six innings for his first victory.