

Iran's leader rejects calls to surrender

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran's supreme leader on Wednesday rejected U.S. calls for surrender in the face of more Israeli strikes and warned that any military involvement by the Americans would cause "irreparable damage to them."

The second public appearance by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since the Israeli strikes began six days ago came as Israel lifted some restrictions on daily life, suggesting that the missile threat from Iran was easing.

Khamenei spoke a day after U.S. President Donald Trump demanded in a social media post that Iran surrender without conditions and warned Khamenei that the U.S. knows where he is but has no plans to kill him, "at least not for now."

Trump initially distanced himself from Israel's surprise attack on Friday that triggered the conflict, but in recent days he has

hinted at greater American involvement, saying he wants something "much bigger" than a ceasefire. The U.S. has also sent more military aircraft and warships to the region.

Khamenei dismissed the "threatening and absurd statements" by Trump.

"Wise individuals who know Iran, its people and its history never speak to this nation with the language of threats, because the Iranian nation is not one to surrender," he said in a low-resolution video, his voice echoing. "Americans should know that any military involvement by the U.S. will undoubtedly result in irreparable damage to them."

Iran released Khamenei's statement before the video was aired, perhaps as a security measure. His location is not known, and it was impossible to discern from the tight shot, which showed only beige curtains, an Iranian flag and a portrait of Grand Aya-

tollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Khamenei's immediate predecessor, who died in 1989.

An Iranian diplomat had warned earlier Wednesday that U.S. intervention would risk "all-out war."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei did not elaborate, but thousands of American troops are based in nearby countries within range of Iran's weapons. The U.S. has threatened a massive response to any attack.

Another Iranian official said the country would keep enriching uranium for peaceful purposes, apparently ruling out Trump's demands that Iran give up its disputed nuclear program.

The latest Israeli strikes hit one facility used to make uranium centrifuges and another that made missile components, the Israeli military said. Military officials said their defenses intercepted 10 missiles overnight as Iran's retaliatory barrages dimin-

ished. The U.N. nuclear watchdog agency said Israel struck two centrifuge production facilities in and near Tehran.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said the military also struck the headquarters of Iran's internal security forces on Wednesday, without specifying the agency or location. The strike marks a shift toward targeting Iran's domestic security apparatus, which has long cracked down on dissent and suppressed protests.

Israel's air campaign has struck several nuclear and military sites, killing top generals and nuclear scientists. A Washington-based Iranian human rights group said at least 585 people, including 239 civilians, have been killed and more than 1,300 wounded.

Iran has fired some 400 missiles and hundreds of drones in retaliatory strikes, killing at least 24 people in Israel and wounding hundreds.

Fleet Forces commander tapped to be the next CNO

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Adm. Daryl Caudle, the commander of U.S. Fleet Forces, was nominated to be the next chief of naval operations for the Navy, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told senators Wednesday.

Caudle's nomination comes more than four months after President Donald Trump abruptly fired Lisa Franchetti as the sea service's top admiral.

The admiral is a career submarine sailor. He assumed command of U.S. Fleet Forces in December 2021. Fleet Forces Command is responsible for training and certifying naval personnel and assets to provide combat-

ready forces to combatant commanders.

In the role of Fleet Force commander, Caudle championed quality-of-life initiatives for East Coast-based sailors following a cluster of suicides in the Virginia area. Caudle oversaw pilot programs that outfitted barracks with Wi-Fi and put emotional support dogs aboard aircraft carriers for deployed sailors.

A native of North Carolina, Caudle is a 1985 graduate of North Carolina State University with a degree in chemical engineering. He was then commissioned after attending Officer Candidate School in Newport, R.I. Caudle holds advanced degrees from the Naval Postgradu-

ate School and Old Dominion University. Caudle also holds a doctorate in management in organizational leadership with a specialization in information systems and technology.

Caudle's early sea tours included assignments as a division officer aboard the submarine USS George Washington Carver, an engineer on submarines USS Stonewall Jackson and USS Sand Lance, and an executive officer for submarine USS Montpelier.

Caudle's first command assignment was leading submarine USS Jefferson City. He also stepped in to be the commanding officer of submarines USS Topeka and USS Helena due to

"emergent losses of the normally assigned commanding officers," according to his biography.

Caudle also served as the assistant deputy director for information and cyberspace policy on the Joint Staff in Washington and as chief of staff to the commander of the Pacific-based Submarine Force.

His decorations include the Navy Distinguished Service Medal, four Defense Superior Service medals, four Legion of Merit awards, three Meritorious Service medals, five Navy and Marine Corps Commendation medals, and four Navy and Marine Corps Achievement medals.

DOD offering options over Iran response

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Wednesday declined to say whether the U.S. is considering joining Israel's bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear program but acknowledged the Pentagon was providing possible military options to President Donald Trump.

Hegseth said Trump will decide whether the U.S. will provide a 30,000-pound "bunker buster" bomb that is capable of reaching Fordo, Iran's most heavily fortified nuclear site. The Defense Department is prepared to execute the president's decision once it is made, Hegseth said.

"My job — our job, the chairman and I — at all times is to make sure the president has options and is informed of what

those options might be and what the ramifications of those options might be," he told the Senate Armed Services Committee, testifying alongside Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Trump indicated to reporters on Wednesday that his mind is not made up.

"I may do it. I may not do it. I mean, nobody knows what I'm going to do," he said.

Only the American B-2 stealth bomber can carry the bunker buster, meaning the pilot will be a U.S. service member.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has warned any U.S. military intervention will "undoubtedly be accompanied by irreparable damage." Other Iranian officials have said Iran would attack U.S. bases in the Middle East, beginning with Iraq, if the U.S. joined Israel's

fight.

About 40,000 U.S. troops are deployed to the Middle East. Commanders have put troops on high alert throughout the region, including in the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and Hegseth said Wednesday that "maximum force protection" is being provided for them.

The Defense Department has so far sent dozens of refueling aircraft to Europe to position them to respond to the conflict and the Navy has dispatched the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier to the Middle East from the Pacific.

Hegseth said deterrence is being reestablished after it was "lost" under the administration of former President Joe Biden.

The escalating hostilities in the Middle East have prompted some lawmakers in recent days to reassert Congress' power to

declare war.

A Democrat in the Senate and a Democrat — Rep. Ro Khanna of California — and a Republican — Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky — in the House introduced resolutions on Monday and Tuesday that would require congressional approval before U.S. troops could engage in offensive attacks against Iran.

Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia, the sponsor of the Senate resolution, on Tuesday said the American public was owed a public discussion and vote by Congress on whether the U.S. should be in another war in the Middle East.

Some Republican senators on Wednesday voiced support for Israel's actions against Iran.

A small group of protesters, however, implored Hegseth to keep the U.S. out of a war with Iran as he walked into the Senate hearing. He did not respond.

Pentagon moves control of Greenland operations

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Northern Command will now oversee American military troops and operations in Greenland, which has long been the responsibility of U.S. European Command, the Pentagon announced Tuesday.

The move comes as President Donald Trump has long mused about taking control of the island, which he has argued is critical to U.S. national security and protecting its Arctic interests. Trump ordered the change under a biennial review of the Unified Command Plan, which organizes the responsibilities for each of the Pentagon's geographic combatant commands, Sean Parnell, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, said in a statement.

"This change will strengthen the joint force's ability to defend the U.S. homeland, contributing to a more robust defense of the Western Hemisphere and deepening relationships with Arctic allies and partners," Parnell said.

While largely symbolic, the change appears to signal the Trump administration's intentions of portraying control of Greenland as critical to the defense of the U.S. homeland, which is NORTHCOM's primary mission.

Last month, Trump declined to rule out taking Greenland by force if Denmark declines to part with the island.

"I don't say I'm going to do it, but I don't rule out anything," Trump told NBC News. "We need Greenland very badly."

DOD engineer sentenced to 18 months for data breach

The Washington Post

A Defense Department engineer who held a sensitive job pinpointing adversaries' technological weak spots was sentenced to a year and a half in prison Tuesday after admitting he removed classified documents from his agency and stored them at his Northern Virginia home.

Gokhan Gun, a dual citizen of Turkey and the United States, was a wireless communications specialist at the Joint Warfare Analysis Center, where he held a top-secret security clearance and devised "system characterizations and mathematical models to identify critical adversary vulnerabilities," according to the center's director.

Federal prosecutors in the

Eastern District of Virginia said Gun began exploiting a security gap at his workplace shortly after being hired, removing printouts of classified documents in plastic bags over several months, typically after most of his colleagues had left for the day.

Gun, 51, was arrested outside his home in Falls Church last year as he prepared to depart for a trip to Mexico. Agents found a backpack outside the residence containing a classified document and a printout of Gun's intelligence community credentials, along with a notebook in which another classified record had been transcribed. When the FBI searched the home, agents found four more classified documents, court records state.

Justices OK state ban on kids gender care

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Wednesday upheld Tennessee's ban on gender treatments for transgender minors, a stunning setback to transgender rights.

The justices' 6-3 decision effectively protects from legal challenges many efforts by President Donald Trump's Republican administration and state governments to roll back protections for transgender people. Another 26 states have laws similar to the one in Tennessee.

Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for a conservative majority that the law does not violate the Constitution's equal protection clause, which requires the government to treat similarly situated people the same.

"This case carries with it the weight of fierce scientific and policy debates about the safety,

efficacy, and propriety of medical treatments in an evolving field. The voices in these debates raise sincere concerns; the implications for all are profound," Roberts wrote. "The Equal Protection Clause does not resolve these disagreements. Nor does it afford us license to decide them as we see best."

In a dissent joined by her liberal colleagues, Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote that the majority "abandons transgender children and their families to political whims."

The decision comes amid a range of other federal and state efforts to regulate the lives of transgender people, including which sports competitions they can join and which bathrooms they can use.

In April, President Donald Trump's administration sued Maine for not complying with

the government's push to ban transgender athletes in girls sports.

The Republican president also has sought to block federal spending on gender treatments for those under age 19 — instead promoting talk therapy only to treat young transgender people. In addition, the Supreme Court has allowed him to kick transgender service members out of the military, even as court battles continue. The president also signed another order to define the sexes as only male and female.

Trump's administration has also called for using only therapy, not broader health measures, to treat transgender youths.

The justices acted a month after the United Kingdom's top court delivered a setback to transgender rights, ruling unan-

imously that the U.K. Equality Act means trans women can be excluded from some groups and single-sex spaces, such as changing rooms, homeless shelters, swimming areas and medical or counseling services provided only to women.

Five years ago, the Supreme Court ruled that transgender people, as well as gay and lesbian people, are protected by a landmark federal civil rights law that prohibits sex discrimination in the workplace. That decision is not affected by Wednesday's ruling.

But the justices on Wednesday declined to apply the same sort of analysis the court used in 2020 when it found that "sex plays an unmistakable role" in employers' decisions to punish transgender people for traits and behavior they otherwise tolerate.

3 judges likely to let Trump keep National Guard control

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A federal appeals court on Tuesday seemed ready to keep President Donald Trump in control of California National Guard troops after they were deployed following protests in Los Angeles over immigration raids.

Last week, a district court ordered Trump to return control of the guard to Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, who had opposed their deployment. U.S. District Judge Charles Breyer said Trump had deployed the Guard illegally and exceeded his authority. But the administration appealed and a three-judge appellate panel temporarily paused that order. Tuesday's hearing was about whether the order could take effect while the case makes its way through the courts, including possibly the Supreme Court.

It's the first time the president has activated a state Guard with-

out the governor's permission since 1965, and the outcome of the case could have sweeping implications for Trump's power to send soldiers into other U.S. cities. Trump announced June 7 that he was deploying the Guard to LA to protect federal property following a protest at a detention center after immigration agents arrested dozens of immigrants. Newsom said Trump was inflaming the situation and troops weren't necessary.

In San Francisco, all three judges, two appointed by Trump and one by President Joe Biden, suggested that presidents have wide latitude under federal law and courts should be reluctant to step in. Even so, the judges did not appear to embrace arguments made by a Justice Department lawyer that courts could not even review Trump's decision.

It wasn't clear how quickly the panel would rule.

LA's mayor lifts downtown curfew set during protests

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Downtown Los Angeles businesses hoped customers would return quickly on Tuesday after Mayor Karen Bass lifted a curfew she had imposed last week to prevent vandalism and break-ins during nighttime protests against President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown.

The protests, which have been concentrated in a few blocks of downtown where federal and local government buildings are, were in response to President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown in the city and subsequent deployment of the National Guard and Marines.

The curfew set in place June 10 provided "successful crime prevention and suppression efforts" and protected stores, restaurants, businesses and residents, the Democratic mayor said. It covered a relatively small

area.

On Tuesday afternoon, the impact of days of protests could be seen in the boarded-up windows lining the streets of Little Tokyo, a historical Japanese American district right next to a federal detention building still heavily guarded by military troops.

On June 8, thousands of protesters took to the streets in response to Trump's deployment of the Guard, blocking off a major freeway as law enforcement used tear gas, rubber bullets and flash bangs to control the crowd. Photos captured several Waymo robotaxis set on fire.

A day later, police officers used flash bangs and shot projectiles as they pushed protesters through Little Tokyo, where bystanders and restaurant workers rushed to get out of their way. Some protesters set off fireworks and threw water bottles at the officers, yelling, "Shame!"

'Abolishing FEMA' memo details elimination

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to prepare a memo on how to abolish itself and create a re-branded, radically smaller disaster response organization, according to a copy of the document reviewed by Bloomberg News.

As recently as last week, President Donald Trump and Noem said they wanted to wind down FEMA but offered few details publicly. The March 25 memo offers insight into how the administration has weighed which of its current functions to cut. Technically, only Congress can eliminate the agency.

Titled "Abolishing FEMA," the memo was addressed from then-acting FEMA head Cameron Hamilton to his bosses at the

Department of Homeland Security and outlines a number of functions that "should be drastically reformed, transferred to another agency, or abolished in their entirety," possibly as soon as late 2025.

Potential changes included eliminating long-term housing assistance for disaster survivors, halting enrollments in the National Flood Insurance Program and providing smaller amounts of aid for fewer incidents — moves that by design would dramatically limit the federal government's role in disaster response.

The existence of the seven-page memo has not been previously reported. While Trump and other officials have continued to press for abolishing FEMA in its current form since the memo was created, it's unclear which specific recommenda-

tions from the document are still on the table.

"This just means you should not expect to see FEMA on the ground unless it's 9/11, Katrina, Superstorm Sandy," said Carrie Speranza, who used to advise the agency and is now president of the US council of the International Association of Emergency Managers.

DHS, FEMA and the White House did not respond directly to questions about the memo's creation, contents or how it has been used since. Instead, DHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Tricia McLaughlin wrote in an email: "It's not a secret that under Secretary Noem and Acting Administrator Richardson, FEMA, as it is today, will no longer exist. Federal Emergency Management will shift from bloated, DC-centric dead weight to a lean, deploya-

ble disaster force that empowers state actors to provide relief for their citizens. The old processes are being replaced because they failed Americans in real emergencies for decades."

The memo, meanwhile, outlines numerous ways to drive down federal disaster spending, largely by canceling long-running initiatives, revoking financial assistance altogether in some cases and pushing more disaster oversight and funding onto state and local governments. Many of these proposals appeared in the Heritage Foundation-led Project 2025 report — though its authors recommended keeping FEMA intact. Disaster experts, including ex-FEMA officials, say the plans would overwhelm state budgets and lead to longer recoveries, especially if carried out on a fast timeline.

Jobless claims dipped to 245K last week, historic low

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits dipped to 245,000 last week, hovering at historically low levels, the Labor Department said Wednesday.

U.S. jobless claims ticked down from 250,000 the week before. Economists had expected last week's claims to match that at 250,000.

The four-week average of claims, which smooths out week-to-week volatility, rose to 245,500, the highest since August 2023.

The number of Americans collecting unemployment benefits the week of June 7 slid to 1.95 million.

Unemployment claims are a proxy for layoffs and have mostly stayed within a healthy band of 200,000 to 250,000 since the economy recovered from a brief

but painful COVID-19 recession in 2020, which wiped out millions of jobs.

In recent weeks, however, claims have stayed at the high end of range, adding to evidence that U.S. job market is decelerating after years of strong hiring. So far this year, employers are adding a decent but far from spectacular 124,000 jobs a month, down from an average 168,000 last year and an average of nearly 400,000 from 2021 through 2023.

The hiring slowdown is partly the drawn-out result of 11 interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve in 2022 and 2023. But Trump's aggressive and often-erratic trade policies — including 10% taxes on imports from almost every country on earth — are also weighing on the economy, paralyzing businesses and worrying consumers who fear they'll mean higher prices.

G7 leaders fail to reach joint agreement on issues

Associated Press

KANANASKIS, Alberta — Six of the Group of Seven leaders discussed Russia's war in Ukraine and the Israel-Iran conflict but failed to reach major agreements on those and many other top issues — closing a summit that was forced to try and show how the wealthy nations' club might still shape global policy despite the early departure of President Donald Trump.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and his counterparts from the U.K., France, Germany, Italy and Japan were joined during Tuesday's final sessions by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and NATO chief Mark Rutte.

"We need support from allies," Zelenskyy said, adding, "We are ready for the peace negotiations, unconditional ceasefire. I think it's very important.

But for this, we need pressure."

The remaining leaders agreed to jointly attempt to combat what they called non-market policies that could jeopardize global access to critical minerals. They also pledged to limit the downsides of artificial intelligence on jobs and the environment, while still embracing the potential of the "technological revolution."

There was consensus on other issues, but though the summit was meant to showcase unity on top global concerns, no joint statement on the conflict in Ukraine was released.

Zelenskyy had been set to meet with Trump while world leaders were gathering in the Canadian Rocky Mountain resort of Kananaskis. The U.S. also previously signed an agreement granting American access to Ukraine's vast mineral resources.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Chestnut to return to hot dog eating contest

NY NEW YORK — The champ is coming back to chomp.

Competitive eater Joey “Jaws” Chestnut announced Monday he will return to compete in this year’s Nathan’s Famous Fourth of July hot dog eating contest after skipping last year’s gastronomic battle for the coveted Mustard Belt.

“This event means the world to me,” Chestnut, 41, said in a message posted on X. “It’s a cherished tradition, a celebration of American culture, and a huge part of my life.”

It will mark the 20th appearance for the Indiana eater at the Coney Island contest.

Last year, Major League Eating event organizer George Shea said Chestnut, who has won the 10-minute eat-a-thon 16 times, would not be participating due to a contract dispute. Chestnut had struck a deal with a competing brand, the plant-based meat company Impossible Foods.

In a phone interview Monday, the competitive eater made it clear he never appeared in any commercials for the company’s vegan hot dogs and that Nathan’s is the only hot dog company he has worked with. But Chestnut acknowledged he “should have made that more clear with Nathan’s.”

Jury finds Lindell defamed voting equipment worker

CO DENVER — A federal jury in Colorado on Monday found that one of the nation’s most prominent election conspiracy theorists, My-

Pillow founder Mike Lindell, defamed a former employee for a leading voting equipment company after the 2020 presidential election.

The jury found that two of Lindell’s statements about Eric Coomer, the former security and product strategy director at Denver-based Dominion Voting Systems, including calling him a traitor, were defamatory. It ordered Lindell and his online media platform, formerly known as Frankspeech, to pay Coomer \$2.3 million in damages, far less than the \$62.7 million Coomer had asked for to help send a message to discourage attacks on election workers.

Lindell stuck by his false claims that the 2020 presidential election was stolen during the trial, but did not call any experts to present evidence of his claims.

Man charged with threats against 2 GOP senators

GA ATLANTA — A Georgia man accused of leaving threatening voicemails for two Republican U.S. senators appeared in federal court to face charges Monday.

Robert Davis Forney, 25, of Duluth, was arraigned in Atlanta on two federal counts of communicating threats in interstate commerce, according to court records. A grand jury indicted him last week.

“Threatening our elected officials and their families is an act of violence that undermines our entire democracy,” U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia Theodore S. Hertzberg said in a statement. “Political discourse and disagreements never justify resorting to vile at-

tacks against our nation’s leaders.”

According to prosecutors, Forney called the office of Texas Sen. Ted Cruz in January and left voicemails that threatened sexual violence against Cruz and his family. Forney left a similar voicemail threatening sexual violence against Nebraska Sen. Deb Fischer the next day, authorities said.

Fearing new push, school districts yank more books

FL ORLANDO — Battling on a new front in Florida’s ongoing school book disputes, Orange and Osceola school districts have each pulled more than a dozen books that the state’s education board called “pornographic” on a list sent to another school district last month.

The latest removals follow the mounting state pressure on Hillsborough County Public Schools, where its superintendent faced a barrage of questions from the state’s education board last week about materials in schools that Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier had decried.

Hillsborough in recent weeks received two letters, one from Uthmeier and the other from Education Commissioner Manny Diaz Jr., ordering the removal of “inappropriate” books from its schools.

The state included a list of more than 50 books it deemed pornographic, which appeared to have been copied from an advocacy group called Citizens Defending Freedom. Other district superintendents then asked for those lists in order to check with their own libraries.

Orange in a school board

meeting last week chose to remove 13 of the books that appeared on the new list, including six that had previously been reviewed by the district and retained.

US seeks to protect highly trafficked mammal

DC WASHINGTON — U.S. officials proposed Monday to protect the pangolin, a small, nocturnal mammal covered in scales, under the Endangered Species Act.

The pangolin is “the most trafficked mammal in the world” in large part for its scales, used in traditional Chinese medicine, and meat, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is looking to add protections for four species of the pangolin native to Asia — including the Chinese, Indian, Sunda and Philippine pangolin — and three species native to Africa, including the white-bellied, black-bellied and giant pangolin. Seven species are in danger of extinction, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

An eighth species from Africa, the Temminck’s ground pangolin, is already protected by the law. Scientists also say two more species of the mammal may exist.

The protections were signed into law in 1973 with bipartisan support and are key for preserving global biodiversity and keeping iconic types of plants and animals, such as the bald eagle, from dying out. The Endangered Species Act protects over 2,000 U.S. and foreign species.

— From wire reports

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Panthers beat Oilers to repeat as champs

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Stanley's stay in South Florida is getting extended.

The Florida Panthers repeated as Stanley Cup champions by beating the Edmonton Oilers 5-1 in Game 6 of the final on Tuesday night, becoming the NHL's first back-to-back winners since the Tampa Bay Lightning in 2020 and '21 and the third team to do it this century.

Sam Reinhart scored four goals, becoming just the sixth player in league history and first since Maurice Richard in 1957 to get that many in a game in the final. His third to complete the hat trick sent rats, along with hats, flying onto the ice. Matthew Tkachuk, one of the faces of the franchise, fittingly scored the Cup clincher.

More rats were part of the victory celebration when the clock hit zeroes. Panthers players mobbed in the corner,

while the Oilers watched in dismay.

"Good evening, South Florida," Commissioner Gary Bettman said before presenting the trophy to captain Aleksander Barkov. "It feels like we just did this."

Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 28 of the 29 shots he faced, closing the door on a rematch with the same end result. The only goal came from fellow Russian Vasily Podkolzin in garbage time, long after the outcome was decided and the NHL put a bow on a remarkable season that included Alex Ovechkin's milestone as the all-time leading goal scorer and Olympics-like buzz around the 4 Nations tournament in February.

There were chants of "We want the Cup!" as the final moments ticked away. The Panthers already had it.

Now they get to keep it.

"This is as good as the first one," Reinhart said. "We

learned some lessons. We stayed on the gas, foot on the pedal, and obviously the result speaks for itself."

Not long after Tampa Bay made three trips to the final in a row, Florida has done the same and now has the makings of a dynasty. The Panthers have won 11 of 12 playoff series since Tkachuk arrived by trade and Paul Maurice took over as coach in the summer of 2022.

"We've got to be a dynasty now," Tkachuk said. "Three years in a row finals, two championships. This is a special group."

The only time they have been on the wrong side of a handshake line was the final in Vegas in 2023, only after several key players were banged up and gutting through significant injuries.

From the core of Tkachuk, Reinhart, Barkov and Sam Bennett on down the roster, they were much healthier this time

around and were boosted by key trade deadline additions Brad Marchand and Seth Jones. Bennett led all goal-scorers this postseason with 15, and Marchand had six in the final alone.

Bennett won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP. Barkov handed the Cup to first-time champion Nate Schmidt, and all the others winning it for the first time got it soon after.

"It's amazing to be able to be here," Schmidt said. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

Connor McDavid tried to take over for Edmonton, but was again stymied by Barkov, Jones and Bobrovsky. McDavid finished with seven points in his second career trip to the Final, again denied his first title.

"We lost to a really good team," McDavid said. "Nobody quit, nobody threw the towel in, but they're a heck of a team. They're back-to-back Stanley Cup champions for a reason."

Florida star Bennett named NHL playoff MVP

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Sam Bennett won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP on Tuesday night after leading all players in goals scored to help the Florida Panthers win a second consecutive Stanley Cup championship.

Bennett scored 15 goals during a postseason run that culminated with a victory in Game 6 of the final against the Edmonton Oilers. He finished ahead of teammate Brad Marchand in the voting.

"The amount of guys that stepped up this year and had incredible years, incredible playoff runs, it truly could have went to anyone," Bennett said. "I'm so grateful. It's such a huge honor, but I truly mean that: It could've went to anyone, and I couldn't have done it without my teammates."

Bennett was a factor throughout the playoffs making big hits, crowding the crease and knocking opponents off their game. He drew anger from the Toronto Maple Leafs after he elbowed goaltender Anthony Stolarz during Game 1 in the second round and he was a frequent presence

in front of Edmonton goalies Stuart Skinner and Calvin Pickard.

"Everyone looks at the goals and rightfully so, but it's everything he does, even away from the puck," teammate Seth Jones said. "His physical presence out there, his 200-foot game, the way he plays away from the puck defensively, how he is on face-offs, I think it's the complete package we're lucky to have. It's been a big part of our success. He puts a lot of teams, a lot of defensemen on their heels out there."

Bennett's game traveled, too. In Game 2 against the Oilers, he scored his 12th road goal of 2025 to set an NHL record.

Bennett could parlay his massive postseason success into a lucrative contract as a free agent whether he re-signs with Florida or goes elsewhere. The 28-year-old said it has "actually been pretty easy" to set aside his pending free agency and uncertain future.

"Competing for a Stanley Cup has always been my goal and my passion, and what I've wanted to do," Bennett said before Game 6. "That's just my focus. That's

all I want, and it's been quite easy to just not even think about what's to come. I mean, yeah, it's really just a singular focus and that's how I've tried to handle it."

Bennett contributed to back-to-back goals in Game 1 by standing in front of and falling onto Skinner, and he made a big hit on Vasily Podkolzin and scored seconds later in the Panthers' Game 3 victory. All series, Bennett was in the middle of the action.

"Physical player, incredible speed and then the hands to finish," coach Paul Maurice said.

In a lot of ways, Bennett embodies Florida hockey: hard-nosed, tough, willing to mix it up and also skilled enough to take advantage of mistakes.

"He does it all — it's fun to watch," fourth-liner Jonah Gadjovich said. "He's throwing huge hits, he's playing hard defensively, working pucks in the corners, getting to the net, and obviously scoring a ton of goals. ... He's one of the leaders on the team, someone that we can all get behind."

Haliburton uncertain to play in Game 6

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — The Indiana Pacers are preparing for the possibility of not having Tyrese Haliburton available to play in Game 6 of the NBA Finals, coach Rick Carlisle said in a radio interview on Wednesday morning.

Haliburton has been dealing with a lower right leg injury throughout the series and it worsened during Monday's Game 5 loss in Indianapolis.

Haliburton played through it for most of his 34 minutes, but failed to make a field goal in the game and Indiana lost to Oklahoma City 120-109 — falling behind 3-2 in the title series.

Now facing a win-or-else scenario, there is a chance Haliburton does not play in Game 6 on Thursday.

"He is going to be carefully evaluated over the next 36 hours and will likely be listed as questionable on the injury report and probably will be a game-time decision for Game

6," Carlisle said on Indianapolis radio station 107.5 The Fan.

Haliburton, part of the team that won Olympic gold in Paris for USA Basketball last year, was undergoing evaluation Tuesday to determine the extent of the injury.

Part of that evaluation was an MRI exam, according to a person with knowledge of the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press because neither Haliburton nor the team revealed that publicly. ESPN first reported that an MRI was scheduled.

After Game 5, Carlisle did not specifically say that the MRI would be part of the team's next moves in figuring out how best to proceed with Haliburton, though made clear that the Eastern Conference champions would be taking a close look at the injury.

Given that it is evidently a muscular injury, an MRI is part of the typical evaluation process.

"We have to prepare for two scenarios — one where he plays and one where he does not," Carlisle said in the radio interview.

If Haliburton cannot play, it would seem likely that the Pacers would promote guard TJ McConnell to a starting role.

McConnell has been brilliant throughout these playoffs and sparked a rally where Indiana closed an 18-point deficit to a two-point difference in the second half of Game 5, before Oklahoma City pulled away again and for good.

"Depending on the situation tomorrow, we may need him for significantly more minutes," Carlisle said of McConnell.

Haliburton left Game 5 late in the first quarter and returned to the bench area with a wrap on his lower leg.

He not only returned to the game, he played 34 minutes — but did so while missing all six of his shots and with him barely looking to shoot at all in the sec-

ond half.

He finished the game with seven rebounds and six assists but only four points.

It was the first time in Haliburton's career that he logged at least 34 minutes and failed to make a single field goal.

The Pacers, Carlisle said, discussed not letting Haliburton play in the second half.

Haliburton vetoed those plans and played 17 minutes in the second half, leading the Pacers in rebounds and assists after intermission.

"I mean, it's the NBA Finals. It's the finals, man," Haliburton said after Game 5.

"I've worked my whole life to be here, and I want to be out there to compete. Help my teammates any way I can. I was not great tonight by any means, but it's not really a thought of mine to not play here. If I can walk, then I want to play. They understand that. And it is what it is. Got to be ready to go for Game 6."

Russians banned from competing in luge in 2026

Associated Press

Russian luge athletes will be banned from competing at the 2026 Milan-Cortina Olympics even as individuals with neutral status, the sliding sport's governing body decided Wednesday.

The International Luge Federation has kept Russian athletes from competing in major international events — such as World Cups and world championships — since the 2021-22 season in response to the country's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war.

At a meeting of the FIL congress in Tampere, Finland, officials voted 24-7, with one invalid ballot, to extend that ban which was first put in place in 2022 and extended again in 2024. A second vote then took place on the notion of letting Russian sliders try to compete under a neutral flag at the upcoming Olympics; that was defeated 24-8.

"The Congress has made its position clear," FIL president Einars Fogelis said. "This outcome reflects our collective responsibility to uphold fair and safe competition. We fully respect the diversity of views

within our community, especially from our athletes."

"The vote today by the FIL to exclude Russian athletes from competing this season, including the Olympic Games, was not made arbitrarily or without deep discussion — information and input from the athletes, FIL members, as well as event organizers was collected and considered," USA Luge CEO Scott Riewald said Wednesday. "Ultimately, the decision was made in the name of athlete safety and ensuring fairness of competition."

It's not clear if the International Bobsled and Skeleton Federation will follow luge's lead. Russian sliders have also not competed in those sports at the top international levels since the end of the 2021-22 season.

Without being on the circuits in more than three years, it's impossible to assess which athletes would be competitive enough to secure Olympic bids.

There were 28 sliders from Russia — 10 in luge, six in skeleton and 12 in bobsled — at the 2022 Beijing Games, though they com-

peted under the Russian Olympic Committee flag and not the Russian flag. That was part of the sanctions levied against Russia for the state-sponsored doping scandal that overshadowed the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

The Beijing Games closed four days before the attack on Ukraine started, and Russian athlete Tatyana Ivanova won a bronze medal in women's singles luge.

At the 2024 Paris Olympics, Russia and military ally Belarus were excluded from team sports, but athletes in individual sports could apply for neutral status to compete. A total of 32 accepted invitations from the International Olympic Committee after passing eligibility tests that included not publicly supporting the war and not having ties to military and state security agencies.

The FIL reviewed the results of an anonymous polling of luge athletes who were surveyed about the prospect of letting Russian athletes resume sliding. It said the survey "revealed a broad range of concerns and opinions regarding safety, Olympic quotas, anti-doping compliance and fairness."

Báez's two homers put Detroit on top

Associated Press

DETROIT — Javier Báez hit two of the Detroit Tigers' four home runs in a 7-3 victory over the Pittsburgh Pirates on Tuesday night.

Báez hit solo homers in the fifth and seventh innings on the day he reached 10 years of major league service. Wenceel Pérez and Riley Greene also homered for Detroit.

Casey Mize (7-2) got the win, allowing three runs — two earned — on five hits in six innings. Mize struck out four without walking a batter.

Pittsburgh took a 1-0 lead in the second when Spencer Horwitz singled and scored on Adam Frazier's groundout, but the Tigers scored twice in the bottom of the inning on Pérez's homer.

Alexander Canario's two-run single put the Pirates back in front 3-2 in the third, but Báez tied the game with a homer in the fifth. Canario replaced Bryan Reynolds in right field in the second inning after his wife went into labor.

Pérez gave Detroit a 4-3 lead with an RBI triple in the sixth and Báez made it a two-run game with a leadoff homer in the seventh. Greene hit a 436-foot home run to right later in the inning, making it 7-3.

Carmen Mlodzinski (1-5) allowed four runs in two innings of relief.

Rockies 10, Nationals 6: Colorado hit a franchise record-tying seven home runs, including two from Michael Toglia, and Antonio Senzatela (2-10) won his second game of the season, as the visiting Rockies held off Washington.

Colorado hit seven homers in a game for the third time in franchise history, matching April 1997 at Montreal and against Cincinnati in May 2016. The Rockies have won three in a row for the second time this season.

Braves 5, Mets 4, (10): Austin Riley hit a bases-loaded sac-

rifice fly to deep center field in the 10th inning, lifting host Atlanta to a comeback win over New York.

Marcell Ozuna tied the score with a three-run double in the eighth, and the Braves rebounded from a 10-1 loss at home Sunday to lowly Colorado.

The Mets, who lead the NL East, have dropped four in a row for the first time this season.

Astros 13, Athletics 3: Cam Smith hit two of visiting Houston's five home runs and finished with four hits as the Astros routed the Athletics to halt their four-game winning streak.

Smith connected for leadoff shots in the second and fourth. He drove in three runs and scored three times. The 22-year-old rookie has five major league homers — and two multihomer games.

Smith finished off his first four-hit game with an RBI double in the eighth.

Dodgers 8, Padres 6: Will Smith hit a tiebreaking two-run homer to cap a 12-pitch at-bat in the sixth inning, and host Los Angeles defeated rival San Diego.

Andy Pages went 4-for-4, hitting a pair of two-out homers and driving in another run during a five-run sixth when the Dodgers batted around in taking an 8-3 lead.

Tatis was hit by a pitch from LA reliever Lou Trivino in the third, and Randy Vásquez plunked Ohtani in the bottom half.

Cardinals 12, White Sox 2: Brendan Donovan had four hits and Iván Herrera drove in four runs to back a strong start by Matthew Liberatore as visiting St. Louis handed Chicago its sixth straight loss.

Donovan drove in a run, hit his 21st double and scored twice in his third four-hit game this season and fifth of his career.

Herrera had a two-run single in a five-run second inning.

Marlins 8, Phillies 3: Eric

Wagaman and Jesús Sánchez homered as Miami snapped a five-game home skid with a win over Philadelphia.

Xavier Edwards had three hits and Javier Sanoja tripled and singled for the Marlins. Nick Castellanos was benched by Phillies manager Rob Thomson on Tuesday for "an inappropriate comment" the outfielder made after he was pulled for a defensive replacement in the series opener Monday.

Angels 4, Yankees 0: Kyle Hendricks and three relievers combined on a four-hitter as visiting Los Angeles beat New York to hand the Yankees their third straight shutout.

New York, which hasn't scored in 29 innings since the ninth inning of a 4-3 loss at Boston on Saturday, was last blanked in three consecutive games from Sept. 22-24, 2016. It has never been shut out in four straight games.

Blue Jays 5, Diamondbacks 4: Bo Bichette and Addison Barger hit back-to-back home runs off Shelby Miller in the ninth inning and host Toronto rallied to beat Arizona.

The Blue Jays trailed 4-3 heading to the final frame before Bichette tied it with a one-out drive to left, his ninth of the season. Barger followed with a game-winning shot to right, his eighth.

Reds 6, Twins 5: TJ Friedl hit a decisive two-out, two-run double in the sixth inning and host Cincinnati rallied for a win over Minnesota.

The Reds have won eight of their last 11 games to climb within two games of the third wildcard spot.

Royals 6, Rangers 1: Salvador Perez homered twice, Bobby Witt Jr. went deep in his hometown team's ballpark for the first time and visiting Kansas City stopped a six-game losing streak with a victory over Texas.

With the Royals coming off an

0-6 homestand that matched their longest losing streak of the season, Perez hit a two-run shot for a 3-0 lead in the first inning. After adding an RBI double in the fourth, he connected for his eighth homer of the year, a solo shot that made it 6-1 in the sixth.

Orioles 5, Rays 1: Colton Cowser hit a go-ahead homer and visiting Baltimore beat Tampa Bay.

Jordan Westburg and Dylan Carlson each had three hits for the Orioles, who have won 12 of 17. Ramón Laureano drove in two runs.

Cubs 5, Brewers 3: Seiya Suzuki and Pete Crow-Armstrong homered, and host Chicago beat Milwaukee in a matchup of NL Central contenders.

The Cubs upped their division lead to 6½ games over the second-place Brewers, who won the division in each of the past two years.

Mariners 8, Red Sox 0: Cal Raleigh hit a grand slam for his major league best 27th home run and drove in six to tie a career high, Bryan Woo gave up one hit over seven innings, and host Seattle snapped Boston's six-game winning streak.

Raleigh cleared the bases in the second inning, turning on an elevated changeup from Red Sox starter Walker Buehler (5-5). It capped off a five-run frame for the Mariners in which rookie Cole Young also drove in a run with an RBI double.

Guardians 3, Giants 2: Gabriel Arias hit a go-ahead homer in the sixth inning and doubled in the ninth on a night when San Francisco celebrated new slugger Rafael Devers at every chance, and visiting Cleveland spoiled the fun by beating the Giants.

Arias connected for his fifth homer off lefty Robbie Ray (8-2), who struck out five and walked two, allowing three runs on five hits over six innings. Austin Hedges had a sacrifice fly in the third for the Guardians.