

China moves to modernize nuclear force

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — China appears to be moving faster toward a capability to launch its newer nuclear missiles from underground silos, possibly to improve its ability to respond promptly to a nuclear attack, according to an American expert who analyzed satellite images of recent construction at a missile training area.

Hans Kristensen, a longtime watcher of U.S., Russian and Chinese nuclear forces, said the imagery suggests that China is seeking to counter what it may view as a growing threat from the United States. The U.S. in recent years has pointed to China's nuclear modernization as a key justification for investing hundreds of billions of dollars in the coming two decades to build an all-new U.S. nuclear arsenal.

There's no indication the United States and China are headed toward armed conflict, let alone a nuclear one. But the Kristensen report comes at a time of heightened U.S.-China tensions across a broad spectrum, from trade to national security. A stronger Chinese nuclear force could factor into U.S. calculations for a military response to aggressive Chinese actions, such as in Taiwan or the South China Sea.

The Pentagon declined to comment on Kristensen's analysis of the satellite imagery, but it said last summer in its annual re-

port on Chinese military developments that Beijing intends to increase the peacetime readiness of its nuclear forces by putting more of them in underground silos and operating on a higher level of alert in which it could launch missiles upon warning of being under attack.

"The PRC's nuclear weapons policy prioritizes the maintenance of a nuclear force able to survive a first strike and respond with sufficient strength to inflict unacceptable damage on an enemy," the Pentagon report said.

More broadly, the Pentagon asserts that China is modernizing its nuclear forces as part of a wider effort to build a military by mid-century that is equal to, and in some respects superior to, the U.S. military.

China's nuclear arsenal, estimated by the U.S. government to number in the low 200s, is dwarfed by those of the United States and Russia, which have thousands. The Pentagon predicts that the People's Liberation Army Rocket Forces will at least double the size of its nuclear arsenal over the next 10 years, still leaving it with far fewer than the United States.

China does not publicly discuss the size or preparedness of its nuclear force beyond saying it would be used only in response to an attack. The United States, by contrast, does not rule out striking first, although

President Joe Biden in the past has embraced removing that ambiguity by adopting a "no first use" policy.

Kristensen, an analyst with the Federation of American Scientists, said the commercial satellite photos he acquired appear to show China late last year began construction of 11 underground silos at a vast missile training range near Jilantai in north-central China. Construction of five other silos began there earlier. In its public reports the Pentagon has not cited any specific number of missile silos at that training range.

These 16 silos identified by Kristensen would be in addition to the 18-20 that China now operates with an older intercontinental ballistic missile, the DF-5.

"It should be pointed out that even if China doubles or triples the number of ICBM silos, it would only constitute a fraction of the number of ICBM silos operated by the United States and Russia," Kristensen wrote on his Federation of American Scientists' blog. "The U.S. Air Force has 450 silos, of which 400 are loaded. Russia has about 130 operational silos."

Nearly all of the new silos detected by Kristensen appear designed to accommodate China's newer-generation DF-41 ICBM, which is built with a solid-fuel component that allows the operator to more quickly prepare the missile for launch.

Navy leader in Japan expects more vaccines soon

By JOSEPH DITZLER

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — The commander of a Navy base near Tokyo said Monday that he expects an end to a "temporary setback" and more doses of the coronavirus vaccine to arrive soon as infection numbers fall in Japan and South Korea.

Meanwhile, the U.S. military in Japan and South Korea reported nine new coronavirus patients between 6 p.m. Friday and 6 p.m. Monday.

Naval Air Facility Atsugi

outside Tokyo had three people come up positive on a test required to exit quarantine, according to a Facebook post Monday. They are the only coronavirus patients on the base.

On Okinawa, five people connected to the Marine Corps have tested positive since Saturday, according to a Facebook post Monday by Marine Corps Installations Pacific. One patient was assigned to Camp Schwab; two each were assigned to camps Hansen and

Courtney.

The Marines provided no further information. They reported no new cases in February and made no coronavirus reports at all between Jan. 31 and Feb. 22. The service last reported two new patients on Jan. 31.

Also Monday, the commander of Yokosuka Naval Base, Capt. Rich Jarrett, said in a Facebook video that he expected an "improved outlook" for delivery of more Moderna vaccine.

"Due to weather delays and some logistics factors in the United States, there's been some slow down in vaccine delivery," he said, "but this is just a temporary setback and we should see an improved outlook this week."

People in his command may visit nearby Yokohama and dine there, but are still prohibited from visiting amusement parks, zoos, aquariums and similar attractions and may not ride trains or other forms of mass transit, Jarrett said.

Netanyahu accuses Iran of attacking ship

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday accused Iran of attacking an Israeli-owned ship in the Gulf of Oman last week, a mysterious explosion that further spiked security concerns in the region.

Without offering any evidence to his claim, Netanyahu told Israeli public broadcaster Kan that “it was indeed an act by Iran, that’s clear.”

“Iran is the greatest enemy of Israel, I am determined to halt it. We are hitting it in the entire region,” Netanyahu said. Iran promptly dismissed the charges.

The blast struck the Israeli-owned MV Helios Ray, a Bahamian-flagged roll-on, roll-off vehicle cargo ship, as it was sailing out of the Middle East on its way to Singapore on Friday. The crew was unharmed, but the vessel sustained two holes on its port side and two on its starboard side just above the waterline, according to American defense officials.

The ship came to Dubai’s port for repairs on Sunday, days after the blast that revived security concerns in Mideast waterways amid heightened tensions with Iran.

Iran has sought to pressure the United

States to lift sanctions on Tehran as President Joe Biden’s administration considers options for returning to negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. Biden has said repeatedly the U.S. would return to the nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers that his predecessor, Donald Trump, withdrew from in 2018 only after Iran restores its full compliance with the accord.

The explosion on the Israeli-owned ship last week recalled the tense summer of 2019, when the U.S. military accused Iran of attacking several oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman with limpet mines, designed to be attached magnetically to a ship’s hull. The Gulf of Oman leads through the narrow Strait of Hormuz, a vital passage for the world’s oil supplies. Tehran has denied the accusations that it was behind the limpet mine attacks.

It remains unclear what caused Friday’s blast on the Helios Ray. The vessel had discharged cars at various ports in the Persian Gulf before the explosion forced it to reverse course. Over the weekend, Israel’s defense minister and army chief had both indicated they held Iran responsible for what they said was an attack on the vessel.

Iran responded to Netanyahu’s statement

saying it “strongly rejected” the claim that it was behind the attack. In a press briefing, Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said Netanyahu was “suffering from an obsession with Iran” and described his charges as “fear-mongering.”

Khatibzadeh also accused Israel of taking “suspicious actions in the region” against Iran in recent months to undermine the 2015 nuclear deal, without elaborating, and vowed Iran would respond.

“Israel knows very well that our response in the field of national security has always been fierce and accurate,” he said.

Overnight, Syrian state media reported a series of alleged Israeli airstrikes near Damascus, saying air defense systems had intercepted most of the missiles. Israeli media reports said the alleged airstrikes were on Iranian targets in response to the ship attack.

Israel has struck hundreds of Iranian targets in neighboring Syria in recent years, and Netanyahu has repeatedly said Israel will not accept a permanent Iranian military presence there. Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah have provided military support to Syrian President Bashar Assad in the more than decade-long Syrian civil war.

The Israeli military declined comment.

NY governor apologizes for remarks aide ‘misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation’

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo acknowledged for the first time Sunday that some of his behavior with women “may have been insensitive or too personal,” and said he would cooperate with a sexual harassment investigation led by the state’s attorney general.

In a statement released amid mounting criticism from within his own party, the Democrat maintained he had never inappropriately touched or propositioned anyone. But he said he had teased people about their personal lives in an attempt to be “playful.”

“I now understand that my interactions may have been insensitive or too personal and that some of my comments, given my position, made others feel in ways I never intended. I acknowledge some of the things I have said have been misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation. To the extent anyone felt that way, I am truly sorry about that,” he said.

Cuomo, one of America’s most prominent governors, is facing the most serious challenge of his decade in office following claims he sexually harassed at least two women who worked for him. Democrats in New York and around the nation aren’t rallying to his side, leaving him increasingly isolated from traditional allies.

His partial admission of wrongdoing came after a day of wrangling over who should investigate his behavior. By day’s end, Cuomo acquiesced to demands that Attorney General Letitia James control the inquiry.

James said she expected a formal referral that would give her office subpoena power and allow her to deputize an outside law firm for “a rigorous and independent investigation.”

“This is not a responsibility we take lightly,” said James, a Democrat who has been, at times, allied with Cuomo but is independently elected and had emerged as a consensus choice to lead a probe.

Naval Academy returns solely to remote learning

Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — The Naval Academy says it’s returning classes to remote learning because there’s been an uptick in coronavirus cases.

The Capital Gazette reported that the change took effect Sunday and will be in place for at least 10 days. New restrictions also include students eating all meals in dorm rooms. Midshipmen will be permitted up to two hours a day of outdoor physical activity daily, and they can only have one roommate.

All sports practices and events are suspended except varsity women’s and men’s basketball.

“While our midshipman population is young and healthy, and likely able to rebound from COVID-19, there are still too many unknowns with COVID-19 to take this situation lightly,” Superintendent Vice Adm. Sean Buck said.

Trump urges GOP unity, rehashes lies

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Taking the stage for the first time since leaving office, former President Donald Trump called for GOP unity, even as he exacerbated intraparty divisions by attacking fellow Republicans and promoting lies about the election in a speech that made clear he intends to remain a dominant political force.

Speaking Sunday at the Conservative Political Action Conference, where he was hailed as a returning hero, Trump blasted his successor, President Joe Biden, and tried to lay out a vision for the future of the GOP that revolves firmly around him, despite his loss in November.

“Do you miss me yet?” Trump said after taking the stage to his old rally soundtrack and cheers from the supportive crowd.

Trump, in his speech, tried to downplay the civil war gripping the party over the extent to

which Republicans should embrace him, even as he unfurled an enemies list, calling out by name the 10 House Republicans and seven GOP senators who voted to impeach or convict him for inciting the U.S. Capitol riot. He ended by singling out Rep. Liz Cheney, the No. 3 House Republican, who has faced tremendous backlash in Wyoming for saying Trump should no longer play a role in the party or headline the event.

While he insisted the division was merely a spat “between a handful of Washington, D.C., establishment political hacks and everybody else, all over the country,” Trump had a message for the incumbents who had dared to cross him: “Get rid of ‘em all.”

The conference, held this year in Orlando instead of the Washington suburbs to evade COVID-19 restrictions, served as a tribute to Trump and Trum-

pism, complete with a golden statue in his likeness on display. Speakers, including many potential 2024 hopefuls, argued that the party must embrace the former president and his followers, even after the deadly insurrection at the Capitol on Jan. 6.

They also repeated in panel after panel his unfounded claims that he lost reelection only because of mass voter fraud, even though such claims have been rejected by judges, Republican state officials and Trump’s own administration.

Trump, too, continued to repeat what Democrats have dubbed the “big lie,” calling the election “rigged” and insisting that he won in November, even though he lost by more than 7 million votes.

“As you know, they just lost the White House,” he said of Biden, rewriting history.

It is highly unusual for past American presidents to publicly

criticize their successors in the months after leaving office. Ex-presidents typically step out of the spotlight for at least a while: Barack Obama was famously seen kitesurfing on vacation after he departed, while George W. Bush said he believed Obama “deserves my silence” and took up painting.

Not Trump.

He delivered a sharp rebuke of what he framed as the new administration’s first month of failures, especially Biden’s approach to immigration and the border.

“Joe Biden has had the most disastrous first month of any president in modern history,” Trump said.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki had brushed off the expected criticism last week. “We’ll see what he says, but our focus is certainly not on what President Trump is saying at CPAC,” she told reporters.

Democrats’ electoral process bill may be biggest overhaul in years

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As Congress begins debate this week on sweeping voting and ethics legislation, Democrats and Republicans can agree on one thing: If signed into law, it would usher in the biggest overhaul of U.S. elections law in at least a generation.

House Resolution 1, the Democrats’ 791-page bill, would touch virtually every aspect of the electoral process — striking down hurdles to voting erected in the name of election security, curbing partisan gerrymandering and curtailing the influence of big money in politics. Republicans see those measures as threats that would both limit the power of states to conduct elections and ultimately benefit Democrats, notably with higher turnout among minority voters.

The stakes are prodigious, with control of Congress and the fate of President Joe Biden’s legislative agenda in the balance. But at its core, a more foundational principle of American democracy is at play: access to the ballot.

“This goes above partisan interests. The vote is at the heart of our democratic system of government,” said Fred Wertheimer, president of the nonpartisan good government organization Democracy 21. “That’s the battleground. And everyone knows it.”

Barriers to voting are as old as the country, but in more recent history they have come in the form of voter ID laws and other restrictions that are up for debate in statehouses across the country.

Rep. John Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat who sponsored

the bill, said that outside of Congress “these aren’t controversial reforms.” Much of it, he noted, was derived from recommendations of a bipartisan commission.

Yet to many Republicans, it amounts to an unwarranted federal intrusion into a process that states should control.

Rep. Rodney Davis, R-Ill., excoriated the measure during a House hearing last week as “800 pages of election mandates and free speech regulations” that poses a “threat to democracy” and would “weaken voter confidence” in elections.

Citing Congress’ constitutional authority over federal elections, Democrats say national rules are needed to make voting more uniform, accessible and fair. The bill would mandate early voting and same-day registration.

Prince Philip moved to specialized heart hospital

Associated Press

LONDON — Prince Philip was transferred Monday to a specialized London heart hospital to undergo testing and observation for a pre-existing heart condition as he continues to be treated for an unspecified infection, Buckingham Palace said.

The 99-year-old husband of Queen Elizabeth II was moved from King Edward VII’s Hospital, where he has been treated since Feb. 17, to St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, which specializes in cardiac care.

The palace says Philip “remains comfortable and is responding to treatment but is expected to remain in hospital until at least the end of the week.”

Farmworkers get vaccine at Calif. clinic

Associated Press

MORGAN HILL — California farmworkers lined up for the coronavirus vaccine at a mobile clinic that organizers hope will be a model for outreach to a community that's been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

About 1,000 workers from several farms were expected to receive shots Sunday and Wednesday at the Monterey Mushrooms facility in Morgan Hill, Santa Clara County health officials said.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported the county's first mobile vaccine clinic targeted farmworkers to comply with newly expanded state eligibility that includes workers in the education sector, emergency services, and in food and agriculture. County officials expect to move next to a location in agricultural Gilroy, the newspaper said.

The United Farm Workers union joined the county and Monterey Mushrooms, a long-time agricultural producer, in partnering to organize Sunday's event.

Farmworkers have been one of the hardest hit communities since the start of the pandemic. A University of California, Berkeley study found that 13% of Salinas Valley farmworkers tested positive for the coronavirus between mid-July and November. In comparison, only 5% of Californians overall tested positive between the start of the pandemic in March and November, according to the Chronicle.

At least 35 of the state's 58 counties have begun vaccinating education workers, the governor's office said last week.

Alaska

JUNEAU — Scientists in Alaska have discovered 10 cases of a new coronavirus strain that researchers have said is more contagious and potentially more effective at evad-

ing vaccines.

The B.1.429 variant, first discovered in California, was identified in Alaska in early January and has since been detected nine more times, according to a report released Wednesday by scientists assembled by the state to investigate new strains.

At least six groups of B.1.429 cases have been detected statewide this year, the report said.

Scientists and public health officials have expressed concerns about multiple new strains of the coronavirus, which they say could prolong the pandemic even as governments scale up their vaccination efforts, KTOO-FM reported.

Minnesota

MINNEAPOLIS — Minnesota health officials on Sunday reported a daily record for COVID-19 vaccinations, with nearly 70,000 new doses administered in the last day.

It was the second straight day that a new high of vaccinations was recorded, after about 56,000 doses were given out on Saturday. The state has been working to catch up on doses after delays in supply caused by bad weather around the country.

More than 47,000 of the newly reported vaccinations were initial doses.

Minnesota averaged more than 34,000 vaccinations a day over the past week, the highest numbers since immunizations began in December. At that pace, about 80% of state residents would be able to get a shot by August, Minnesota Public Radio News reported.

Missouri

ST. LOUIS — Health officials and community groups in Missouri are working together to help vaccinate seniors and other people who might have difficulty getting to a clinic for the coronavirus.

As part of the vaccination

campaign, the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis is holding one-day vaccination events at senior apartments with the state and the Missouri National Guard. Health departments and hospitals have set up telephone hotlines to help people who don't have internet access. Local health centers have sent staff to seniors' homes to get residents signed up and organized buses to bring them to vaccine clinics.

Officials have said the elderly are far more likely to die or have severe cases of COVID-19. In Missouri, about 17% of the state's population is 65 or older, but that group accounts for 85% of the deaths attributed to the virus.

St. Louis's health director, Dr. Fredrick Echols, said that eventually vaccination events could be held in churches and other places that are easy for area residents to access. Officials will evaluate different sites in the city, to ensure they have enough parking, and are spacious enough to hold a socially distanced event. And FEMA is planning to provide a mobile unit to the city, to help vaccinate residents who are homebound.

South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS — South Dakota is expected to receive 7,000 doses this week of the recently-approved Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine.

It brings the state's allotment to just over 25,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine per week.

South Dakota Department of Health Secretary Kim Malsam-Rysdon said the one-shot J&J vaccine is a great option for people that have trouble being able to schedule a second dose.

The Food and Drug Administration on Saturday cleared the J&J vaccine. One dose is 85% protective against the most severe COVID-19 illness, according to a massive study that spanned three continents.

Texas

DALLAS — Texas reported 197 more deaths from COVID-19 on Sunday following a steady decline in the number of people hospitalized with the disease caused by the coronavirus.

The Texas Department of State Health Services also reported 2,921 new confirmed cases of the virus Sunday and another 715 probable cases. The state has reported more than 2.28 million confirmed cases since the start of the pandemic and 42,936 total fatalities.

There were 5,696 people hospitalized with COVID-19 in Texas on Saturday, the most recent day for which state data was available. That's a decline of more than 1,400 from a week earlier.

Over the last week, more than 15% of COVID-19 tests in Texas have come back positive, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Researchers at the university said Texas has fully vaccinated more than 6% of its population.

Washington

OLYMPIA — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee has signed into law a bill that waives certain annual liquor license fees for restaurants, breweries, wineries and other venues hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic.

Inslee tweeted that he signed the bill on Sunday, saying the one-time waivers "will provide some financial relief while we work to get them back to capacity."

KXLY-TV reported that the licenses can cost from just over \$100 for beer and wine specialty shops to more than \$2,200 for restaurants serving beer, wine and spirits. License fee waivers go into effect in April.

Restaurants and retailers are able to operate at 25% capacity under Washington's current restrictions designed to stem the spread of the virus.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police arrest 3 for drunk driving in highway crash

WI MOUNT PLEASANT — Authorities said three drunken drivers were involved in a crash early Sunday morning in a south Milwaukee suburb.

The incident happened shortly before 3 a.m. when a man driving a Ford F-250 pickup truck the wrong way on a four-lane highway in Mount Pleasant collided head-on with a motorist in a GMC Yukon. Shortly thereafter, a man in a Chevrolet Equinox crashed into the pickup, Mount Pleasant police said in a release.

Police said the man in the Yukon, which burst into flames after the collision, was located at a nearby hospital and arrested. The drivers of the pickup and the Equinox were arrested on scene. The extent of any injuries from the crash were not noted in the release.

Police said Kraig Herbrecht-smier, 56, of Racine, was charged with first offense operating while intoxicated and driving the wrong way on a divided highway. Christopher Sanchez, 33, of Racine, was charged with first offense OWI. Herber Aguirre-Lopez, 45, of Kenosha, was charged with third offense OWI.

About 30 cars involved in pileup crash on icy bridge

MT BILLINGS — Dozens of vehicles crashed into each other Saturday on an icy interstate highway bridge over the Yellowstone River outside Billings, Mont., making the span appear like a wrecking yard with

mashed cars and trucks.

The pileup involved about 30 vehicles, the Montana Highway Patrol said on Twitter. No fatalities were reported but two people were injured, the highway patrol said. It blamed ice on the bridge as a cause for the wreck, which closed Interstate 90 for a time.

First responders found the two injured people under the bridge, the Billings Gazette reported.

The Montana Highway Patrol said on Twitter that the two injured people “jumped from the bridge during the incident to avoid being struck by a vehicle. They suffered serious injuries but are expected to recover.”

19th-century home OK'd for move to new location

MA AMHERST — Authorities have cleared the way for a 19th-century home in Amherst, Mass., to be moved intact to a new site about a mile away.

The two-story building owned by Amherst College will be brought to a vacant lot after the Historical Commission gave unanimous approval last month to lift a yearlong demolition delay put in place last May, The Daily Hampshire Gazette reported.

Mark Andrews, capital projects manager at the college, said the move is being coordinated by Amherst developer Barry Roberts, who owns the new lot and the neighboring property on which a mixed-use building with apartments and a medical office on the ground floor is being developed.

Roberts said he is working

with the state Department of Transportation to schedule the day and time the home will be moved down the Route 9 hill and past Amherst College's athletic fields.

Teen helped rescue 100s of rabbits, guinea pigs

FL POMPANNO BEACH — A South Florida high school student helped rescue 260 rabbits and guinea pigs when she heard about their plight.

The Sun-Sentinel reported that Dylan Warfel, a Pompano Beach senior, began a massive coordination effort to rescue dozens of the animals and find them new homes.

It unfolded across the state from Warfel, in the town of Alva near Fort Myers. Animals that were found also included horses and ducks, all living in squalor, uncared for and many with horrifying injuries.

Warfel, who has been rescuing animals for five years, called animal rescue groups she'd worked with in the past and others that could offer help. In a matter of days, she'd found homes for the majority of the 260 rabbits and guinea pigs.

Police say man attacked 4 ambulance facilities

CT OLD SAYBROOK — A Torrington man who authorities said targeted at least four Connecticut EMS agencies with Molotov cocktails has been arrested in Pennsylvania, police said.

Richard White, 37, was arrested shortly after 10 p.m. Saturday after police obtained a warrant on third-degree arson and burglary charges, NBC

Connecticut reported.

Old Saybrook Police Chief Michael Spera said White threw a Molotov cocktail on the ground at an ambulance facility in Meriden on Saturday, then drove to Old Saybrook and threw a Molotov cocktail at an ambulance facility there. Police said White also set two fires at ambulance facilities in Roxbury.

There were no reports of injuries from the attacks.

Man accused of robbing postal service workers

PA PHILADELPHIA — A Philadelphia man has been charged with robbing postal service workers and kidnapping after police said he forced a postal worker into a mail truck and made her drive him around at gunpoint before he fled with several packages.

James Chandler, 54, was ordered to be detained until trial during a federal court appearance on Friday. A phone message left with attorneys at the Defender Association of Philadelphia was not returned.

The indictment alleges that Chandler robbed two uniformed postal workers in separate incidents on Jan. 11 and Feb. 4. During both incidents, he used a replica handgun to force the employees into their postal trucks and stole packages.

The kidnapping charge stems from the February incident, when authorities allege Chandler forced the postal worker at gunpoint to drive him for several blocks in her mail truck before stealing packages.

— From wire reports

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MLB Fans, players enjoy return to parks

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Brian Delaney checked his ticket, found his seats and then sat down for a minute in the sunshine. It wasn't a typical late February day in Arizona — a little cool, a little breezy — but Delaney didn't complain a bit.

"You ever been through a Colorado winter?" the Colorado Rockies fan said.

The good humor and smiles were easy to find as baseball fans streamed into Sunday afternoon's spring training opener between the Rockies and Arizona Diamondbacks. A downward trend in COVID-19 cases throughout most of the country has meant that a limited amount of fans are allowed back in spring training facilities throughout Arizona and Florida.

At Salt River Fields at Talking Stick, the crowd was capped at about 2,200 fans, which is 16% of the usual capacity. Delaney said he never hesitated to get tickets for himself and Debra Mierzwa once they went on sale a few weeks ago.

"Oh yeah," Delaney said. "We were never worried. This is great."

The happy and halfway-normal scene on Sunday was a far cry from 353 days ago, when incredulous fans stood outside Salt River Fields and digested the news that baseball — and pretty much the rest of the world — was being shut down because of the spreading coronavirus pandemic.

Nearly a year later, things are different.

"It seemed like forever," said Brandon Ramsey, who lives in the Phoenix area and went to the Reds-Indians game in Goodyear

on Sunday. "Last year got cut a little short. To come out here for opening day is just fantastic. They did a great job in socially distancing. They made sure we were safe."

Aside from the World Series and NL Championship Series held last October at a neutral-site park in Arlington, Texas, this marked the first time fans were allowed at big league baseball games since March 12.

By now the safety protocols for sports events have become familiar. Fans in Scottsdale are spread out in small pods of two, four or six people. Masks are worn except when eating and drinking. People sitting on blankets in the grass beyond the outfield wall were given spray-painted squares to stay separate. Cleaning crews are ubiquitous.

But spring baseball appears to have a considerable safety advantage over its NBA, NHL and college basketball counterparts: It's played outdoors where studies have shown the virus is less effective at spreading.

"We feel really good about our ability to host spring training in the safest possible way," Cactus League executive director Bridget Binsbacher said.

All 30 teams in Major League Baseball are allowing fans at their spring training facilities in Arizona and Florida, though capacity will be severely limited. The Chicago Cubs are welcoming the most fans (3,630 per game) while the San Francisco Giants will have the fewest (1,000 per game).

The Yankees and Twins have the largest percentage of seats available, with the potential to reach 28% of capacity.

Fans certainly seem excited about getting

back to the park. The players have missed them, too.

Oakland right-hander Daulton Jefferies got a thrill from facing the loaded Los Angeles Dodgers lineup with fans in the seats at last. The limited crowd of 1,998 was a sellout at Hohokam Stadium in Mesa, Ariz.

"Even though it's 20-percent capacity it didn't feel like it," Jefferies said. "Everyone was very loud. It was just a lot of fun. I think we truly underestimated how much we missed it."

The outlook for spring training has changed drastically just in the past month. Back in January, the Cactus League sent a letter to MLB suggesting that the spring schedule be delayed because of high COVID-19 case counts in Maricopa County, which is home to all 15 teams in Arizona.

But then cases plummeted in Arizona and Binsbacher and others became much more optimistic.

Delaney said he and Mierzwa were coming to Arizona regardless of the baseball situation. They enjoy trail running and Arizona in February is a fine time for that sport. Businesses in Arizona hope there more Delaneys and Mierzwas out there to make 2021 a little less painful.

"It's all part of moving the right direction," Binsbacher said. "I can't stress enough — health and safety was at the forefront of everything we did. But the financial numbers are real. It definitely impacts our businesses and the numbers speak for themselves. It's a tremendous impact."

J.J. Watt agrees to 2-year deal with Cardinals

Associated Press

J.J. Watt has agreed to a two-year contract with the Arizona Cardinals.

The team announced the deal with the free-agent edge rusher on Monday. Watt was released last month by the Houston Texans, for whom he won three NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards.

A person familiar with the contract told The Associated Press that the total package is worth \$31 million. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the team did not reveal any terms.

A five-time All-Pro, Watt — who turns 32 in three weeks — has been one of the NFL's best players for a decade, but asked out in Houston, which is undergoing a roster upheaval. Watt joins another former Texans star, wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins, in

Arizona. Hopkins was acquired by the Cardinals in a one-sided trade a year ago.

Watt had one year remaining on a six-year, \$100 million contract with the Texans.

Though he has been plagued by injuries in recent years, Watt started all 128 games in which he appeared in the past 10 years after entering the league as Houston's first-round selection, 11th overall, in the 2011 draft out of Wisconsin. In 2017, he was selected as the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year for his work in helping Houston recover from Hurricane Harvey. Watt, who long has been lauded for his humanitarian efforts, helped raise more than \$40 million in hurricane relief in 2017.

He was the league's top defensive player in 2012, 2014 and 2015. Then injuries began to slow him. He appeared in only three

games in 2016 and five the next season, sidelined by back problems and then a broken leg. In 2019, Watt missed half of the schedule with a torn pectoral muscle.

He returned to play the entire 2020 season and was effective, though not dominant.

So the Cardinals likely are not getting a vintage Watt, the only player in NFL history with 20 or more sacks and 10 or more passes defended in a single season, doing it in both 2012 and 2014. He's tied for fifth among defensive lineman in league history with six touchdowns in the regular season, including three TD catches. He has 101 career sacks, and over the past decade leads the league in tackles for losses (172), quarterback hits (281), multi-sack games (26) and sack yards (713 1/2).

Ovechkin sends streaking Caps past Devils

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Alex Ovechkin broke a second-period tie and the streaking Washington Capitals welcomed back top goaltender Ilya Samsonov from an extended absence because of COVID-19 with a 3-2 victory over the skidding New Jersey Devils on Sunday.

Samsonov made 19 saves and looked shaky at times in helping Washington win its third straight game and sixth of eight (6-1-1). Nicklas Backstrom and Jakub Vrana also scored as the Caps swept a weekend series at the Prudential Center.

"It was great to see him back there and it was great to get him a win in the first game he is back to," Backstrom said of Samsonov.

"I thought they had some really good chances there in the third and he really played solid back there. I mean I think when the season has been a little bit like his so far, it's good with confidence."

Washington coach Peter Laviolette said Samsonov, who had played in four recent games with Hershey of the AHL, started slowly.

"I thought he got stronger as the game went on, and then when it's 3-2 and the game's hanging in the balance, I actually thought that was when he was at his best," Laviolette said.

Rookies Mikhail Maltsev and Yegor Sharangovich scored for New Jersey, which has lost five of six. Mackenzie Blackwood had 20 saves.

Ovechkin, who had only one goal in his past eight games, snapped a 2-all tie at 13:37, beating Blackwood with a wrist shot from between the circles on a quick counter. It was his seventh of the season and 362nd on the road, tying him for second all time in the NHL with Steve Yzerman. Wayne Gretzky is No. 1 with 402.

Blackhawks 7, Red Wings 2: Patrick Kane scored his 400th career goal, Kevin Lankinen made a career-high 44 saves and host Chicago split a two-game set with Detroit.

Kane became the 100th NHL player to reach 400 goals. He is the fourth player in franchise history to reach the milestone, joining Hall of Famers Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita and longtime star Steve Larmer.

Islanders 2, Penguins 0: Oliver Wahlstrom and Jean-Gabriel Pageau each scored power-play goals and rookie Ilya Sorokin made 20 saves as host New York beat Pittsburgh to finish a strong February.

The Islanders went 8-2-2 in the month, with all four losses coming against the Penguins — who they were playing for the sixth time in February. New York remains the only team in the league without a regulation loss

at home, with a 7-0-2 mark at Nassau Coliseum.

Flyers 3, Sabres 0: Carter Hart stopped 28 shots and visiting Philadelphia shut out Buffalo for the second consecutive day.

Sean Couturier and Michael Raffl broke the game open by scoring 75 seconds apart early in the second period. James van Riemsdyk also scored in the second by creatively tipping in Joel Farabee's pass from the blue line, and the Flyers won their third straight following a 1-2-2 skid.

Bruins 4, Rangers 1: Charlie McAvoy had a goal and an assist to lead Boston to a win at New York.

Tuukka Rask made 20 saves and earned his 299th NHL victory. Charlie Coyle scored twice and David Pastrnak added two assists as the Bruins snapped a two-game skid. Trent Frederic also scored for Boston.

Alexandar Georgiev made 31 saves, but the Rangers fell for the second time in three games. Colin Blackwell scored for New York.

Predators 3, Blue Jackets 1: Nick Cousins, Eeli Tolvanen and Erik Haula scored, and Juuse Saros made 28 saves to lead host Nashville past Columbus. Roman Josi had two assists for the Predators, who have won four of five.

Kevin Stenlund scored and Joonas Korpi-salo made 26 saves for the sliding Blue Jackets, who have lost five straight.

Garza, Weiskamp lift Iowa over Ohio State

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Luka Garza rushed through a national TV interview after No. 9 Iowa routed No. 4 Ohio State on Sunday because he couldn't wait to start celebrating with teammates in the locker room.

"They waited on me, and we had a little celebration," Garza said after scoring 24 points and pulling down 10 rebounds in the Hawkeyes' 73-57 win over the Buckeyes. "It's a huge win for our group, to be able to beat a team like that on their home floor. It's impressive for us, and it's huge going forward, especially with seeding in the Big Ten tournament and the NCAA Tournament."

Joe Weiskamp added 19 points — including 5-for-9

shooting from three-point range — for Iowa (18-7, 12-6 Big Ten), which has won five of six with two games remaining in its regular season.

E.J. Liddell had 15 points and Justice Sueing scored 10 for Ohio State (18-7, 12-7). Recently projected as a No. 1 NCAA Tournament seed, the team has lost three games in eight days.

After Liddell hit a jumper to open the game, the Buckeyes never led again.

A 10-3 Hawkeyes run made it 42-28 at the break. Ohio State mounted a 14-2 run to open the second half and got back within two with 16:49 left. But a three-pointer from Weiskamp and a couple of baskets in the paint by Garza got Iowa out of the danger zone and the Buckeyes couldn't

chip away.

"They clearly outplayed us, outperformed us, outcoached us," Ohio State coach Chris Holtmann said. "We've got to get back to work."

Butler 73, No. 8 Villanova 61: Chuck Harris scored 20 points and Jair Bolden added 15 on Sunday to lead the host Bulldogs past the Wildcats.

Butler (9-13, 8-11 Big East) has won two straight since snapping a three-game losing streak.

Jeremiah Robinson-Earl finished with 16 points and 16 rebounds to lead Villanova (15-4, 10-3).

No. 12 Houston 98, South Florida 52: Quentin Grimes scored 22 points, all in the first half, to lead the host Cougars to a rout.

Grimes scored 16 straight points at one point for Houston (20-3, 13-3 American Athletic Conference).

Navy 66, Loyola (Md.) 58: John Carter Jr. came off the bench to tally 16 points to help the host Mids clinch the No. 1 seed into the Patriot League tournament.

Daniel Deaver had 15 points for Navy (15-2, 12-1), which earned its fifth straight victory.

Army 57, Boston University 55: Alex King scored 19 points and his 16-foot fadeaway jump shot with 1.1 seconds left lifted the host Black Knights (11-8, 7-7 Patriot League) to the win.

Nick Finke and Lonnie Grayson combined to grab 17 of Army's 28 rebounds.

Antetokounmpo, Bucks rally past Clippers

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo and the Milwaukee Bucks showed they can still rally in the fourth quarter to win games with their defense.

Antetokounmpo scored 36 points and sparked a game-closing 9-0 run as the Bucks rallied to beat the Los Angeles Clippers 105-100 on Sunday for their fifth consecutive victory.

Milwaukee led the NBA in defensive efficiency while posting the league's best regular-season record each of the last two years. The Bucks generally haven't performed quite as well on defense this season but stifled Los Angeles down the stretch.

Milwaukee held the Clippers scoreless over the final four minutes of the game and won for the first time in 11 games this season when trailing after three quarters.

"It's great when you go against the best in the world down the stretch," said Ante-

tokounmpo, who also had 14 rebounds and five assists. "You're trying to get a stop, and they're trying to score on you to win the game. ... I love just taking that individual pride in guarding the best players."

Kawhi Leonard's potential tying three-point attempt bounced off the front rim in the closing seconds. Khris Middleton got the rebound and sealed it by making two free throws with 2.1 seconds remaining.

"It's a step in the right direction," said Middleton, who had 19 points, eight assists and six rebounds. "We have to prove it by doing it over and over again, not just one game or two games. But I think tonight was a great sign that we're headed in the right direction as far as defensively."

After trailing by seven points in the fourth quarter, the Bucks regained the lead 101-100 when Antetokounmpo made two free throws with 1:57 left.

The Clippers had the ball with a chance to take the lead on three separate occasions after that but couldn't convert. Paul

George missed a contested layup with 1:35 remaining. Leonard missed a three-point attempt with 1:05 left. George missed a three-point try with about 35 seconds left.

Middleton found Antetokounmpo for a dunk to make it 103-100 with 10.3 seconds left. Antetokounmpo high-stepped up the court in celebration as the Clippers called a timeout.

George said after the game that the Clippers should have picked up the pace on offense down the stretch. Leonard agreed.

"I thought we came down too slow," Leonard said. "As a team, I don't feel like we're there yet. We're looking to the sideline a lot for plays. I feel like our pace has pretty much slowed down. You've got to give them credit, though. They locked in."

George had 16 points, seven rebounds and seven assists for the Clippers. Serge Ibaka had 15 points and 11 rebounds.

Donte DiVincenzo had 11 and Brook Lopez added 10 for the Bucks.

Lakers don't let up in rout of Warriors

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles Lakers blew a 14-point, fourth-quarter lead in their first meeting against the Golden State Warriors. They were determined not to let that happen Sunday night.

LeBron James scored 19 points in his 1,300th regular-season appearance as the Lakers routed the Warriors 117-91. He was one of six Los Angeles players to score in double figures in a game that was never in doubt.

The Lakers were up 20 at the end of the first quarter and had a 73-44 lead at halftime.

"Our starters played terrific," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "They had a mindset to make sure they took care of business against a team that stole one from us the last time."

Forward Markieff Morris was a little more direct about the revenge factor.

"We remember getting up big

last time and then coming back," he said. "We wanted to make our mark early and just keep our foot on their neck throughout the game."

Suns 118, Timberwolves 99: Devin Booker scored 21 of his season-high 43 points in the third quarter to carry Phoenix to a win at Minnesota for its 14th win in last 17 games.

Booker hit 15 of 26 shots from the floor, repeatedly blowing by his defenders for smooth pullup jumpers and traffic-beating, twisting layups for the 13th 40-point game of his six-year career.

The two-time All-Star Game pick — each as an injury replacement — went 12 for 13 from the free-throw line to help the surging Suns improve to 22-11.

Celtics 111, Wizards 110: Jayson Tatum made two twisting, driving baskets in the final 15 seconds and finished with 31 points, helping host Boston overcome Bradley Beal's 46-

point night for Washington.

Kemba Walker scored 21 points for the Celtics, and Daniel Theis had 20 points and nine rebounds. Boston, which beat Indiana on Friday, has won consecutive games for the first time since late January.

Grizzlies 133, Rockets 84: Justise Winslow scored 20 points and Memphis won at Houston for the Rockets' 11th straight loss.

In just his fourth game back after missing more than a year because of a hip injury, Winslow — playing in his hometown — had his best scoring night since October 2019.

Knicks 109, Pistons 90: Julius Randle scored 17 of his 25 points in the second half and New York won at Detroit to move above .500.

At 18-17, the Knicks have the fourth-best record in the Eastern Conference and have won seven of their last nine games. They haven't been above .500 this far into the season since

they were 54-28 at the end of 2012-13, according to SportRadar.

Heat 109, Hawks 99: Kendrick Nunn scored 24 points and host Miami extended the NBA's longest current winning streak to six games, beating Atlanta to get back to .500.

Bam Adebayo had 16 points and 13 rebounds to help the Heat improve to 17-17. They were without Jimmy Butler because of inflammation in his right knee.

Hornets 127, Kings 126: PJ Washington scored a career-high 42 points, Malik Monk converted a three-point play with 1.4 seconds remaining and visiting Charlotte stunned Sacramento with a late rally.

Monk finished with 21 points to help the Hornets come back despite playing without leading scorer Gordon Hayward, who sat out with a hand injury.