

Rocket attack raises escalation concerns

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The rocket attack on an air base in Iraq where American troops are stationed is a “troubling development” following the recent U.S. airstrike meant to deter attacks by Iranian-backed militia groups, the Pentagon’s chief spokesman said Wednesday.

“Nobody wants to see the situation escalate,” John Kirby told reporters at the Pentagon. “That is why when we conducted the strike last weekend in Syria, we said we believed it was measured and proportionate.”

Al Asad Air Base in Iraq was hit Wednesday morning by 10 rockets fired from multiple locations east of the base, according to Kirby. No injuries of U.S. service members have been reported, but an American civilian contractor suffered a “cardiac episode” while taking shelter and

later died.

The rocket attack comes after the U.S. airstrike last Thursday on a compound in Syria manned by Iranian-back militia groups that included Kataeb Hezbollah and Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada, which U.S. officials believe were behind other recent attacks against American and Iraqi forces.

Al Asad Air Base was also the site of the Jan. 8, 2020, ballistic missile attack by Iran in retaliation for the death of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s elite Quds Force. More than 100 American service members suffered traumatic brain injuries from the attack.

On Wednesday, Iraqi security forces were at al Asad investigating and U.S. officials have yet to determine who is responsible for the attack or the extent of the damage, Kirby said. He did say,

however, that the use of rockets is similar to previous attacks by Shiite militias backed by Iran.

The base’s Counter-Rocket, Artillery, Mortar, or C-RAM systems, were engaged, but it is unclear how effective it was during the rocket attack. The C-RAM might have shot down other rockets or some of the impacts were from the rockets that were first hit by the system, Kirby said, but that is still being determined.

Last week, Kirby said the U.S. airstrike in Syria was meant to eliminate the compound’s use and send a “deterrence message” about any future attacks against American and Iraqis.

“And I said back then that we hope it will have a deterrent effect. We still do. So, nobody wants to see this escalate into as you described it, a tit for tat. That is not in our interest, it’s not in the Iraqi people’s interest,” Kirby

said.

If the United States does decide to respond against those responsible for the al Asad attack, however, it will do so “in a manner of our own choosing,” Kirby said.

The activities of Iranian-backed militia groups in the region has been a concern for the U.S. for a long time, Kirby said, and he called out the previous administration’s actions regarding Iran as counterproductive, including its “maximum pressure campaign.”

“[The campaign] only emboldened Iran further to pull back its commitments under the [Iran nuclear deal] and certainly has done nothing to limit, constrain or curtail their other malign activities,” he said. “Because the previous administration pulled out of the Iran deal, now there’s no direct method of communicating as there was before.”

Navy says J&J’s single-shot vaccine is coming to Japan

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Hang in there, more coronavirus vaccines, including a new one-dose version, are bound for U.S. bases in Japan, a pair of Navy medical officers said this week.

The U.S. military in coming weeks expects further shipments of the Moderna vaccine, the two-shot series that first arrived Dec. 26 at bases in the country. It also expects shipments of a new vaccine developed by Johnson & Johnson, also called the Janssen vaccine after the pharmaceutical division of the company that developed it.

The Johnson & Johnson dose is 85% effective in preventing

severe or critical cases of COVID-19 at least 28 days after vaccination, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The FDA approved the drug for emergency use on Saturday.

Medical officers at Yokosuka Naval Base south of Tokyo and Sasebo Naval Base on the southern island of Kyushu bolstered their audiences with encouraging news Wednesday and Thursday during Facebook Live sessions, but they were short on details of when and how much vaccine they expect to arrive.

“I know it is frustrating. It is frustrating waiting, and I am frustrated with you, and for you,” said Capt. Carolyn Rice, a

physician and commander of Yokosuka Naval Hospital, on Thursday.

Ninety percent of those offered the vaccine at Yokosuka have accepted it, she said. That’s higher than the 70% of all military personnel offered the shots, so far, the Defense Department said recently.

The Moderna vaccine is one of three approved by the FDA for emergency use, which means the military cannot mandate its use. It must be taken voluntarily. The other is the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

More than a third, 33%, of the base population has received the first dose of Moderna and 6% has received the second, Rice said.

Her counterpart at Sasebo’s Branch Health Clinic, Cmdr. Kyle Dohm, said he expects further vaccine deliveries within two to three weeks. He appeared in a Facebook Live session Wednesday.

Everyone at Sasebo waiting on a second Moderna shot should have it by the end of March, Dohm said.

The clinic is inoculating everyone in phase 1a and 1b on the Defense Department priority list, or schema, he said. Phase 1a consists of health care workers, as well as emergency services and public safety personnel. Phase 1b are service members deployed or preparing to deploy, essential workers and some people 75 and older.

Report: AFRICOM needs approval for strikes

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. Africa Command now needs White House approval to launch airstrikes against militants in Somalia as the Biden administration weighs whether to put limits on commanders for authorizing attacks, The New York Times reported this week.

The restrictions were applied while the White House examines former President Donald Trump's policy, which delegated decision-making on strikes to combatant commanders, un-

named U.S. officials said in the report.

The White House wants to develop its own rules for conducting strikes and commando raids in countries such as Somalia and Yemen, in order to reduce civilian casualties, the newspaper reported. White House approval is also being required for the CIA, the report added.

The order, issued by national security adviser Jake Sullivan on Jan. 20, was never announced publicly. AFRICOM did not immediately respond to

a Stars and Stripes request for comment Thursday.

Since the Jan. 20 order, there have been no reported airstrikes in Somalia by AFRICOM, which conducted its last strikes there Jan. 19. Those came days after the U.S. military finished moving about 700 troops from the country following a Trump administration order to reposition forces.

In recent years, the number of strikes has increased in Somalia, where the al-Qaida-aligned militant group al-Shabab has waged a guerrilla war

for more than a decade.

AFRICOM has come under criticism by advocacy groups, which have argued that airstrikes over the years have killed more civilians than publicly acknowledged.

The command has disputed those claims and defended the attacks, which they say have helped blunt al-Shabab's momentum. AFRICOM has substantiated five civilian deaths in recent years.

In 2020, AFRICOM launched 52 airstrikes in Somalia, down from 63 in 2019.

Pentagon probe slams ex-WH doctor's behavior

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Department of Defense inspector general released a scathing report Wednesday on the conduct of Ronny Jackson, now a congressman from Texas, when he worked as a top White House physician.

The internal investigation concluded that Jackson made "sexual and denigrating" comments about a female subordinate, violated the policy on drinking alcohol on a presidential trip and took prescription-strength sleeping medication that prompted worries from his

colleagues about his ability to provide proper medical care.

The yearslong investigation into Jackson, who was elected to the House in November, examined allegations into his conduct during his time serving the administrations of both Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

Jackson, who gained notoriety for his over-the-top pronouncements about Trump's health, denied the allegations, and declared that he was the victim of a "political hit job" because of his close ties to the former Republican president.

Sailor who died in military convoy collision in Calif. ID'd

Stars and Stripes

Authorities in California have identified the sailor who died Tuesday in a freeway accident that injured five others, according to The Associated Press.

Aaron Michael Fish, 26, died in the pileup on southbound Interstate 5 near San Onofre State Beach, just north of Oceanside, the AP reported Wednesday, citing the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office.

Stars and Stripes could not confirm Fish's rank and job title.

Four sailors in the crash were hospitalized for minor injuries and one, in his 20s, was hospitalized with severe injuries, ac-

cording to the report.

The accident happened while the sailors, assigned to the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 5, were driving in a convoy en route to Camp Pendleton to pick up equipment, according to a Facebook post from the unit's official page.

The accident happened at 6:50 a.m., according to the California Highway Patrol.

"For reasons that are still under investigation, the convoy began to slow, causing a chain reaction collision," CHP said in a news release. "One of the truck trailers was pushed forward into a cab, causing fatal injuries to the driver."

Police request 60-day stay of National Guard at Capitol

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Capitol Police have requested that members of the National Guard continue to provide security at the U.S. Capitol for another two months, The Associated Press has learned. Defense officials

said the new proposal is being reviewed by the Pentagon.

The request underscores the continuing concerns about security and the potential for violence at the Capitol, two months after rioters breached the building in violence that left five peo-

ple dead. And it comes as law enforcement was on high alert Thursday after intelligence uncovered a "possible plot" by a militia group to storm the building. The potential plot is tied to the conspiracy theory promoted by QAnon supporters that for-

mer President Donald Trump will rise again to power March 4, the original presidential inauguration day.

Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., said she learned that the request for a 60-day extension was made in the last 36 hours.

House passes GOP-opposed voting reforms

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Democrats passed sweeping voting and ethics legislation over unanimous Republican opposition, advancing to the Senate what would be the largest overhaul of the U.S. election law in at least a generation.

House Resolution 1, which touches on virtually every aspect of the electoral process, was approved Wednesday night on a near party-line 220-210 vote. It would restrict partisan gerrymandering of congressional districts, strike down hurdles to voting and bring transparency to a murky campaign finance system that allows wealthy donors to anonymously bankroll political causes.

The bill is a powerful counterweight to vot-

ing rights restrictions advancing in Republican-controlled statehouses across the country in the wake of Donald Trump's repeated false claims of a stolen 2020 election. Yet it faces an uncertain fate in the Democratic-controlled Senate, where it has little chance of passing without changes to procedural rules that currently allow Republicans to block it.

The stakes in the outcome are monumental, cutting to the foundational idea that one person equals one vote, and carrying with it the potential to shape election outcomes for years to come. It also offers a test of how hard President Joe Biden and his party are willing to fight for their priorities, as well as those of their voters.

This bill "will put a stop at the voter sup-

pression that we're seeing debated right now," said Rep. Nikema Williams, a new congresswoman who represents the Georgia district that deceased voting rights champion John Lewis held for years. "This bill is the 'Good Trouble' he fought for his entire life."

To Republicans, however, it would give license to unwanted federal interference in states' authority to conduct their own elections — ultimately benefiting Democrats through higher turnout, most notably among minorities.

"Democrats want to use their razor-thin majority not to pass bills to earn voters' trust, but to ensure they don't lose more seats in the next election," House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said from the House floor Tuesday.

Cuomo addresses claims, vows to remain in office

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Wednesday said he intends to remain in office in the face of sexual harassment allegations that have weakened his support and led to calls for his resignation.

The Democratic governor, speaking somberly in his first public appearance since three women accused him of inappropriate touching and offensive remarks, apologized and said that he "learned an important lesson" about his behavior around women.

"I now understand that I acted in a way that made people feel uncomfortable," Cuomo said. "It was unintentional and I truly and deeply apologize for it."

Asked about calls for him to step aside,

the third-term governor said: "I wasn't elected by politicians, I was elected by the people of the state of New York. I'm not going to resign."

Cuomo acknowledged "sensitivities have changed and behavior has changed" and that what he considers his "customary greeting" — an old-world approach that often involving kisses and hugs — is no longer acceptable.

But the allegations against the governor go beyond aggressive greetings.

Former aide Lindsey Boylan, 36, accuses Cuomo of having harassed her throughout her employment and said he once suggesting a game of strip poker aboard his state-owned jet. Another former aide, Charlotte Bennett, 25, said Cuomo once asked her if

she ever had sex with older men.

Both women rejected Cuomo's latest apology, doubling down on their disgust after he issued a statement Sunday attempting to excuse his behavior as his way of being "playful."

"How can New Yorkers trust you @NYGovCuomo to lead our state if you 'don't know' when you've been inappropriate with your own staff?" Boylan tweeted.

Cuomo said he will "fully cooperate" with an investigation into the allegations being overseen by the state's independently elected attorney general. Attorney General Letitia James, also a Democrat, is in the process of selecting an outside law firm to conduct the probe and document its findings in a public report.

Dems tighten virus relief benefits, firm up support for bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden and Democrats agreed to tighten eligibility limits for stimulus checks, bowing to party moderates as leaders prepared to move their \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill through the Senate.

At the same time, the White House and top Democrats stood by progressives and agreed that the Senate package would retain the \$400 weekly emergency unemployment benefits included in the House-passed pandemic legislation. Moderates have wanted to trim those payments to \$300 after Republicans have called the bill so heed-

lessly generous that it would prompt some people to not return to work.

The dealmaking Wednesday underscored the balancing act Democrats face as they try squeezing the massive relief measure through the evenly divided, 50-50 Senate. The package, Biden's signature legislative priority, is his attempt to stomp out the year-old pandemic, revive an economy that's shed 10 million jobs and bring some semblance of normality to countless upended lives.

Democrats have no choice but to broker compromises among themselves, thanks to their 10-vote House margin and a Senate

they control only with Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote.

So far, Republicans have presented a unified front against the bill. But Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, didn't rule out breaking ranks and supporting the measure. She told reporters her state's tourism industry has been walloped by the pandemic and said she's talked to administration officials about "how this helps a state like Alaska."

The Senate could begin debating the bill Thursday, but Democrats faced mountains of GOP amendments and other delays that could take days to plow through.

Vet finds camaraderie in competitive esports

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

Jody Farmer spent the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic with little to do as she struggled with injuries from her military career, until an opportunity to coach college esports came along and restored some of the camaraderie she missed from her service.

Farmer, a 38-year-old Navy and Army veteran with a spinal cord injury, never thought of herself as a gamer. But she now spends up to 20 hours a week preparing two teams for collegiate video game tournaments.

"It wasn't something I was looking for, that's for sure," Farmer said. "But [esports] opened my mind to new possibilities of how I can be productive."

She is one of several veterans leading competitive gaming at the University of Oklahoma, which has announced \$100,000 in scholarships for students who want to work in the esports industry. The university's esports department opened last year after beginning as a club founded by Mike Aguilar, another veteran.

Millions of people watch gamers compete against each other in organized events, complete with live commentary like a basketball or football game. Revenues for es-

ports are projected to surpass \$1 billion this year, Business Insider reported in January.

Esports is more than just the people playing the video games, said Aguilar, director of the university's esports department.

Each competition also has organizers, coaches, commentators, reporters and technicians working behind the scenes. He hopes his program can prepare students for these jobs in the future.

Aguilar recalled life as a military dependent in Germany in the 1980s, playing video games on an Atari 2600. The whole family would watch as he and his siblings took turns playing.

"Gaming was another method for us to stay connected," said Aguilar, who served in the military like his father and grandfather. "It was gaming that my dad and I would bond over."

He recruited Farmer, a fellow veteran, to become a coach for the game Call of Duty.

Farmer had initially been drawn to gaming because she missed the team spirit of the military. She began playing the game when the pandemic hit, and felt less alone playing with other veterans in the Wounded Warrior Project.

Without this community, "I don't know how I would have made it through the summer," Farmer said in a Facebook post.

Space Force chief wants laws made for space

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Just like the rules of the road and laws of the sea, Space Force commander Gen. John Raymond wants to see guidelines established for operating in space as more countries increase their involvement commercially and militarily.

"There are really no norms of behavior in space. It's the Wild, Wild West," Raymond, the chief of space operations for the force, said Wednesday.

Space Force is now in its second year of existence. The service has grown from one person — Raymond — to enlisting and commissioning about 600 new members each year. The newest U.S. service branch also has been working with American allies, including the United Kingdom and France, that are establishing their own versions of a Space Force.

Space is becoming more competitive as commerce increases as well as military activity, Raymond said. The United States and its allies also face a number of threats, especially from China, which is developing space capabilities and threats including jammers that affect communication and global positioning satellites, lasers that can damage satellites and missiles that can destroy satellites in low orbit, he said.

"So they'll enjoy the same benefits that we've enjoyed by integrating space into our way of war and our way of life. But most concerning is that they're developing a spectrum of threats to negate our access to space and to keep our nation and our allied partners from being able to realize the benefits that we derive from those space capabilities," Raymond said.

He would not say Wednesday whether an attack on a satellite would constitute an act of war, but it would depend on the larger picture of what is happening in the world.

"In my opinion, there's no such thing as a space war. It's war," Raymond said. "And nations might choose to conduct operations in that war ... either on the sea, or in the air, or on the ground, or now in space. And so, I think just like every other traditional domain of warfare, this is just integrated into that larger strategic conflict."

The first U.N. treaty to address space was the Outer Space Treaty from 1967, and it includes principles such as not placing nuclear weapons in space and celestial bodies such as the moon could not be militarized.

Protesters march again despite previous killings in Myanmar

Associated Press

Demonstrators in Myanmar protesting last month's military coup returned to the streets Thursday, undaunted by the killing of at least 38 people the previous day by security forces.

New protests were held in at least three areas of Yangon, the country's largest city, that have been scenes of violence for the past few days. Police again used force to try to disperse the crowds, according to social media accounts.

Protests also continued in Mandalay, the second-biggest city. A formation of five fighter planes flew over the city Thursday morning in what appeared to be a threatening show of force.

The U.N. special envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, said 38 people were killed Wednesday, a figure consistent with other reports.

The death toll was the highest since the Feb. 1 takeover, when the military ousted the elected government of leader Aung San Suu Kyi. More than 50 civilians, mostly peaceful protesters, are confirmed to have been killed by police and soldiers since then.

The U.N. Security Council has scheduled closed-door consultations on Friday on calls to reverse the coup — including from U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres — and stop the escalating military crackdown.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

First prison, now lawsuits for fake psychologist

VA FREDERICKSBURG — A Virginia woman serving an 11-year prison sentence for treating patients while pretending to be a psychologist is now facing multiple civil lawsuits seeking millions of dollars, according to court records.

Sharonda L. Avery, 44, treated more than 100 patients while posing as a doctor at the former Pediatric Partners for Attention and Learning in Stafford, The Free Lance-Star of Fredericksburg reported Tuesday. Avery was sentenced in October to 46 years in prison with all but 11 years suspended after being convicted of nine offenses.

The victims of those offenses, or their parents, have filed four civil lawsuits in Stafford Circuit Court. The lawsuits say numerous patients, most of them children, suffered as the result of faulty diagnoses and medications that were prescribed for conditions that didn't exist.

No sign of arson found at Newman's camp

CT ASHFORD — A police investigation into the fire that tore through the Hole in the Wall Gang camp for seriously ill children in Connecticut could not determine the cause but found no indication it was set intentionally, officials said Monday.

The Feb. 12 fire at the Ashford camp, which was founded by the late actor Paul Newman, destroyed buildings including a large wood-frame structure

that was made to look like the center of an old western town. The investigation was closed with the cause of the blaze listed as undetermined.

The camp plans to replace the lost structures with a larger, single-level complex.

The camp was built in 1988. The charity now serves about 20,000 kids a year.

Pipe bomb, 'zip gun' found near school

CA SACRAMENTO — A pipe bomb and a handmade gun were found Tuesday near a Sacramento elementary school and authorities were trying to determine who left them and why.

An employee at Ethel Baker Elementary School found the devices sitting on the sidewalk in front of the school and called authorities shortly before 8:30 a.m., the Sacramento County Sheriff's Office said.

One device was a steel pipe "sealed at both ends with an improvised fuse" that contained metal shrapnel, clay putty, firecrackers and gasoline, according to a Sheriff's Office statement.

Also found was a "zip gun" made of a steel pipe with a spring-loaded cap and containing a 12-gauge shotgun shell, the office said.

"They were both loaded and ready to go," Sgt. Rodney Grassmann told the Sacramento Bee.

A sheriff's bomb disposal team made the devices safe, the statement said.

Grassmann said nearly 50 students go to the campus to take part in distance learning, aided by staffers from the Boys and

Girls Club. A staffer spotted the bomb and gun, and the school principal called authorities and turned away students before they could enter the school, Tara Gallegos, a Sacramento City Unified School District spokeswoman, told the Bee.

Lawmakers OK concealed guns at more churches

NC RALEIGH — Churches that meet on private school campuses in North Carolina could allow members or visitors to carry concealed handguns if they're otherwise permitted in legislation approved Monday night by the state Senate.

The measure is essentially a portion of a 2020 concealed weapons bill that Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper vetoed. An override failed.

Supporters of this year's legislation say they're trying to treat churches that operate a school the same as standalone houses of worship in the name of safety and security of attendees. Current law allows a standalone church to let its parishioners and others wear concealed weapons if they have a permit or otherwise exempt. But that's prohibited at churches that hold services at the same site where the school operates.

2nd Sumatran orangutan baby in 2 years at zoo

LA NEW ORLEANS — It's cute, cuddly, red-haired, and critically endangered — and the second Sumatran orangutan born in two years at the zoo in New Orleans.

Veterinarians haven't yet been able to weigh, measure

and determine the sex of the baby born early Sunday to 12-year-old Reese, Audubon Zoo spokeswoman Annie Kinler Matherne said Monday.

Sumatran orangutans are one of three species of the long-haired great apes. Fewer than 14,000 are believed to live in the wild, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

The baby is Reese's first, but she has seen two different orangutans giving birth and raising babies — her own mother at Albuquerque BioPark Zoo in New Mexico, and Audubon's orangutan matriarch, Feliz, in 2019, the statement noted.

Hunter banned from 48 states after poaching

CO COLORADO SPRINGS — A hunter from Colorado Springs has been permanently banned from hunting in 48 states, including Colorado, after he pleaded guilty to several poaching charges across the state.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife said hearing examiner Steven Cooley decided last week to permanently suspend hunting privileges for Iniki Vike Kapu, 28, after he pleaded guilty, KMGH-TV reported. Colorado is a member of the Interstate Wildlife Violator Compact, meaning the lifetime hunting ban also extends to the other 47 member states, not including Hawaii and Massachusetts.

Kapu was accused of killing 12 deer, 2 turkeys and a bighorn sheep ram across three Colorado counties.

— From wire reports

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Tough times for Houston fans

Associated Press

Five-year-old Sawyer Brown was inconsolable. Her father, Chris Brown, had told her James Harden wouldn't be with the Houston Rockets anymore after being traded to Brooklyn.

"I want James Harden to be on the Texas team," she said, tears filling her eyes, in a video he shared on Facebook. Her dad went on to list other players on the team she could root for instead, but she was not having it. She just shook her head, her blonde hair bouncing across her face.

"James Harden... I just want him," she said.

Sawyer, who has performed twice at Rockets games with her youth basketball program, hasn't cared much about the team since.

"It's been hard because James Harden's very big to her," said her mother, Ellie Brown. "He's bigger than life ... he packs a lot of punch and she was especially fond of his beard. So, I think looking on the court now, she can just see ... how different everything is, and I think that it doesn't have the pizzazz. You can just see that she's not interested."

These are uncertain and depressing times for Houston sports fans. Harden's messy departure was just another headline of bad news and the nine-time All-Star joined what has seemed like a mass exodus of superstar athletes from the fifth-largest metropolitan area in the nation.

Standout receiver DeAndre Hopkins was first to go when former Houston Texans coach Bill O'Brien shipped him to Arizona for very little in return. Harden then forced a trade from the Rockets in January and Astros outfielder and 2017 World Series MVP George Springer signed with the Blue Jays about a week later, another blow after the team was embroiled in a cheating scandal.

The biggest blow came when defensive end J.J. Watt asked for and was granted his release from the Texans before joining Hopkins in Arizona this week.

And after dealing with all that, fans are now bracing for the possibility they could soon lose Deshaun Watson, too, after the quarterback requested a trade amid turmoil within the Texans. O'Brien was fired after an 0-4 start last season and Houston sank to 4-12 after winning the AFC South the previous two years.

John P. Lopez was a columnist for the Houston Chronicle for 17 years and has hosted a daily show on Sports Radio 610 in

Houston since 2007. He said most callers believe the departures of Harden and Springer were inevitable but they are disconsolate about their NFL team — and he can relate: "I legitimately cannot understand how a team that had that much going for it can become this dysfunctional almost overnight."

"Sports are so emotional and personal, and I think people that have identified with the Texans just feel deceived and let down," Lopez said. "People are legitimately, genuinely just crushed emotionally. They're an emotional wreck that this is happening."

Lopez, like many fans who call in to his show, blames the problems on executive vice president of football operations Jack Easterby, a former chaplain for the Patriots with no personnel experience who gained power in the wake of O'Brien's dismissal. Anger has shifted to owner Cal McNair, who took charge after his father Bob McNair died in 2018.

"McNair, I think, right now is as despised and resented as Bud Adams ever was in this city," Lopez said, referring to the late owner of the Houston Oilers who moved that team to Tennessee.

Watt leaves as one of the most beloved figures in Houston sports history, a three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year who did as much off the field as he did on it. His community efforts were unmatched, highlighted by raising more than \$40 million for Hurricane Harvey relief.

Sports Radio 610, which is the flagship station of the Texans, set up the J.J. Watt Goodbye Hotline that received hundreds of messages. Perhaps the most emotional call came from a 62-year-old man, who said he'd been a Houston sports fan for more than half his life.

"It hurts me," he said between sobs. "Man, you did everything for us and I'm going to miss you. It's gut-wrenching and mind blowing but I'll quit my crying and just tell you how much I love you."

The day after Harden's trade, the owners of a local car wash offered a free wash to anyone willing to toss his jersey into a trash can when they arrived. Zishan Quresham, the owner of the ICarWash, said he was "heartbroken" over the trade and wanted to give his customers a way to vent.

As for Sawyer, her parents have decided to use a different tack with the news that Springer and Watt are also gone.

"We haven't even told her," Chris Brown said. "So, it's been tough."

Detectives look at 'black box' from Woods accident

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Detectives are looking at data from the "black box" of Tiger Woods' SUV to get a clearer picture of what occurred during the Southern California crash that seriously injured the golf star, authorities said Wednesday.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said traffic investigators executed a search warrant Monday to retrieve data from the device from the Genesis SUV that Woods was driving.

There was no immediate information regarding what was found in the black box, Deputy Trina Schrader said in a statement.

The 2021 GV80, made by the Hyundai luxury brand, is likely to have a newer version of event data recorders nicknamed "black boxes" after more sophisticated recorders in airplanes. The devices store a treasure trove of data for authorities to review.

Woods suffered a serious leg injury when the SUV he was driving went off a Los Angeles County road and rolled over on a downhill stretch known for crashes. Sheriff Alex Villanueva said Woods was not drunk and was driving alone in good weather when the SUV hit a raised median, went across oncoming lanes and rolled several times. The crash injured his right leg, requiring surgery.

Deputies will review data from the black box to "see if they can find out what was the performance of the vehicle, what was happening at the time of impact," said Villanueva, who previously faced criticism for almost immediately calling the crash "purely an accident."

During a live social media event on Wednesday, the sheriff said the new data could provide more information on the cause of the accident.

"And that's all it is, and we'll leave it at that," he said.

California law allows law enforcement to seek search warrants for data recorders that were involved in motor vehicle crashes that result in death or serious bodily injury. Law enforcement must show that the recorders could have evidence of a felony or misdemeanor in the crash, and detectives must limit their review of the data to information directly related to the offense.

A black box is a computer that stores data from a vehicle's sensors, which can be downloaded. The boxes usually are below the center of the dashboard or beneath seats to be protected from damage.

Harden lifts Nets in rout of Rockets

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The No. 13 on his jersey, James Harden won so many games for the Houston Rockets.

On Wednesday night in the first meeting with his former team, No. 13 had a triple-double for the Brooklyn Nets to send the reeling Rockets to their 13th straight loss.

"A lot of mixed emotions from the fans but I knew that was going to happen," Harden said. "I just wanted to come out here and give them a show."

He did that with 29 points, 10 rebounds and 14 assists in the 132-114 victory. The Nets set a franchise record with their seventh straight road victory. They've won 10 of their last 11 overall.

Harden has meshed well with his new team and the Nets are 17-7 since the trade.

"So far, so good," he said. "It's everything that I signed up for. Top to bottom it's been great."

It's the longest skid for the Rockets, who had just eight players available because of injuries, since they dropped 15 in a row in 2001. They've had a tough time since Harden was traded Jan. 14 and haven't won since Feb. 4.

It's the eighth triple-double for Harden this season and his second straight after he had 30 points, 14 rebounds and 15 assists without a turnover in an overtime victory at San Antonio on Monday night.

Embiid lifts 76ers past Jazz

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Joel Embiid isn't content with being one of the NBA's best players. He wants more for himself and the 76ers — and it showed.

Embiid had 40 points and 19 rebounds and hit a tying three-pointer late in regulation, Tobias Harris scored 11 of his 22 points in overtime, and Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia beat the West-leading Utah Jazz 131-123 on Wednesday night.

Kings 123, Lakers 120: Buddy Hield shook off a sore ankle to score 29 points and host Sacramento beat short-handed Los Angeles.

Pacers 114, Cavaliers 111: T.J. McConnell set an NBA record with nine steals in the first half and had his second career triple-double with 16 points, 13 assists and a franchise-best 10 steals, leading Indiana to a win at Cleveland.

Mavericks 87, Thunder 78: Kristaps Porzingis had 19 points and 13 rebounds with European sidekick Luka Doncic sidelined by a back issue going into his second

All-Star appearance, and host Dallas beat Oklahoma City.

Trail Blazers 108, Warriors 106: Damian Lillard hit a deep three-pointer with 13.7 seconds left and Portland held off visiting Golden State.

Pistons 129, Raptors 105: Wayne Ellington scored 25 points and visiting Detroit beat virus-depleted Toronto to snap a three-game losing streak.

Hawks 115, Magic 112: Trae Young scored 32 points and hit the go-ahead free throws with eight seconds remaining as Atlanta rallied from 19 down in the second half to win at Orlando.

Bulls 128, Pelicans 124: Zach LaVine capped a 36-point performance with a driving layup and four free throws during the final minute, and Chicago won at New Orleans.

Hornets 135, Timberwolves 102: Terry Rozier scored 31 points, Gordon Hayward added 23 and Charlotte headed into the All-Star break with an easy victory at Minnesota.

Villanova beats Creighton to wrap up Big East title

Associated Press

VILLANOVA, Pa. — Creighton coach Greg McDermott said he made an "awful mistake" for using language that caused pain for the players "that look to me as a mentor and as a leader." He was on the bench for the Bluejays for the first time since he apologized on social media for urging his players over the weekend to "stay on the plantation."

"We need to get back to Omaha and regroup a little and have some more conversations which we need to have so that I can help them and they can help me," McDermott said.

McDermott's use of a phrase evoking slavery overshadowed what was expected to be fantastic showdown between the top two teams in the Big East.

Justin Moore scored 24 points and helped No. 10 Villanova capture the Big East title with a 72-60 win over 14th-ranked Creighton.

"The pain I saw in their eyes was immense," McDermott said after the game. "That's a cross that I'm going to have to bear

for a while. I'm going to come out of this on the other end a better person because of it. But it's going to be a process."

McDermott did not answer any questions about his remarks and stood by an apology he issued on social media.

McDermott said on Creighton's pregame radio show that he offered to resign. The coach said he had a long meeting with players on Sunday night and said he saw "pain in their face(s)" and hoped "one mistake doesn't define you."

McDermott said he wanted to make sure the Bluejays (17-7, 13-6 Big East) wanted him to remain as coach and apologized for the "distraction that I brought to this team for the choice that I made."

McDermott said the Bluejays — whose players wear "equality" on the back of their jerseys — did not ask for him to resign.

"Our guys wanted me to coach and that's my job," McDermott said on the radio.

McDermott has been Creighton's coach since 2010. McDermott, who is white, acknowledged saying: "Guys, we got to stick together. We need both feet in. I need every-

body to stay on the plantation. I can't have anybody leave the plantation."

No. 11 Florida State 93, Boston College 64: M.J. Walker scored 18 points, hitting six three-pointers, and RaiQuan Gray added 16 points to help the host Seminoles beat the Eagles for their 25th straight ACC home win.

Gray scored in double figures for an 11th straight game for FSU (15-4, 11-3 Atlantic Coast Conference), which is in position to win the league's regular-season title with a win at Notre Dame on Saturday.

Jay Heath scored a career-high 28 points and Makai Ashton-Langford added 14 points for BC (4-14, 2-10). Heath shot 8 of 14 from three-point range.

No. 19 San Diego State 71, UNLV 62: Matt Mitchell scored 19 points and Jordan Schakel added 16 for the Aztecs, who beat the Runnin' Rebels to clinch the Mountain West Conference regular-season title for the second straight year.

Nathan Mensah scored 14 points for San Diego State (20-4, 14-3 MWC), which used a 14-0 run spanning halftime to take control.

Vrana's SO goal lifts Caps over Bruins

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jakub Vrana scored the only goal in the shootout and the Washington Capitals beat the Bruins 2-1 on Wednesday night in Zdeno Chara's return to Boston.

Lars Eller scored in regulation, and Vitek Vanecsek made 18 saves to help the Capitals improve to 7-1-1 in their last nine games.

The 43-year-old Chara, the Bruins' captain for his 14 seasons with the club, signed a one-year contract as a free agent with Washington in the offseason. He helped Boston win the 2011 Stanley Cup, and was a key part of its runner-up teams in 2013 and 2019.

David Pastrnak scored for the Bruins and Tuukka Rask stopped 27 shots.

Maple Leafs 6, Oilers 1: Jimmy Vesey scored twice, Frederik Andersen made 26 saves in his return from an injury and NHL-leading Toronto complet-

ed a three-game sweep of host Edmonton.

John Tavares and Zach Hyman each had a goal and an assist, and William Nylander and Ilya Mikheyev also scored to help the Maple Leafs improve to 18-4-2.

Andersen returned after missing four games with a lower-body injury. Auston Matthews, the NHL goals leader with 18, also was back after missing the last two games with a sore wrist/hand.

Toronto outscored the Oilers 13-1 in the three games, winning 4-0 on Saturday night and 3-0 on Monday night.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored for Edmonton.

Golden Knights 5, Wild 1: Marc-Andre Fleury made 36 saves and host Vegas beat Minnesota to sweep the two-game set and remain atop the West Division, one point ahead of the St. Louis Blues.

Jonathan Marchessault, Alex

Tuch, Mark Stone, Chandler Stephenson and William Karlsson scored.

Fleury improved to 11-3-0. He has limited teams to two goals or fewer in 10 of his 14 appearances.

Marcus Foligno scored for Minnesota.

Blues 3, Ducks 2: Jordan Binnington made 27 saves and visiting St. Louis scored on all three of its power plays to beat skidding Anaheim.

Oskar Sundqvist, Brayden Schenn and Zach Sanford scored for the Blues, who are 6-for-10 with the man advantage against the Ducks this season. Overall, St. Louis has converted 17.1% of its power plays.

The Blues have won all four meetings against Anaheim this year and six of its last seven.

Max Comtois and Rickard Rakell scored for the Ducks, who are 0-6-2 in their last eight.

Coyotes 3, Kings 2: Clayton Keller and Nick Schmaltz scored power-play goals in the second

period and Antti Raanta made 40 saves in visiting Arizona's victory over Los Angeles.

Johan Larsson scored 13 seconds after Schmaltz's goal, and the Coyotes snapped a two-game skid by hanging on in the final minute of their only road game in a 27-day span.

Drew Doughty and Gabriel Vilardi scored for the Kings.

Avalanche 4, Sharks 0: Mikko Rantanen scored twice and had two assists as visiting Colorado blanked San Jose.

Philipp Grubauer made 26 saves for his 14th career shutout and the Avalanche got payback for a 6-2 loss Monday night in San Jose.

Gabriel Landeskog added a goal and three assists for Colorado, which went 3-1 on its road trip and pulled into a three-way tie for third place in the West Division with Arizona and Minnesota.

Martin Jones stopped 34 shots for the Sharks.

GM says Jets may be open to trading QB Darnold

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sam Darnold's time as the face of the New York Jets franchise might be nearing a disappointing end.

The 23-year-old quarterback was considered an untouchable player on the roster only a year ago. General manager Joe Douglas has backed off that stance, though, and it could signal a major change at the position as free agency and the NFL Draft approach.

"I will answer the call if it's made," Douglas said Wednesday when asked if he'd listen to offers for Darnold. "As it pertains to Sam, Sam's, we think, a dynamic player in this league with unbelievable talent and who really, really has a chance to really hit his outstanding potential moving forward."

"But, you know, like I said

earlier, if calls are made, I will answer."

Douglas' comments during a video call that included new coach Robert Saleh marked the first time the GM directly acknowledged being willing to trade Darnold. And that has the quarterback's future with the Jets murky — just three years after being hailed as a potential long-term solution at a position that has long lacked consistent production.

"Our stance on Sam hasn't changed," Douglas insisted. "He's an extremely talented player and he's very smart, very tough. And we have no doubt that Sam is going to achieve his outstanding potential. Obviously, we're in the process of getting as much information as we can leading up through free agency and the draft."

Then-GM Mike Maccagnan traded up in the draft to select Darnold with the No. 3 overall pick in 2018, but the quarterback has not lived up to those lofty expectations because of inconsistency and injuries. Former coach Adam Gase acknowledged he didn't help Darnold enough to thrive, and the Jets lacked playmaking talent to help him take the next step in his development.

While Darnold has shown flashes during his three NFL seasons, there remain serious doubts as to whether he can lift the franchise. His contract also makes his status uncertain.

Darnold is entering the fourth year of his rookie deal and is scheduled to count \$9.8 million against the Jets' salary cap. While that's a manageable cost, New York has until May 3 to de-

cide whether to exercise Darnold's fifth-year option — which would cost the Jets between \$15 million and \$20 million, fully guaranteed.

New York currently holds the No. 2 overall pick in the draft next month, and BYU's Zach Wilson and Ohio State's Justin Fields are among the names being mentioned as options for the Jets.

But they are also being mentioned as potential suitors for Houston's Deshaun Watson, who wants out — although the Texans have, for now, insisted they have no intention of dealing the star quarterback. If the Texans do change their stance, any deal would likely have to include lots of draft capital. And that's something it doesn't appear Douglas is willing to part with.