

US conducts airstrikes against Taliban

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. has conducted airstrikes against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan in the past 48 hours following multiple attacks by the insurgents on Afghan government forces, a military spokesman said Wednesday.

The airstrikes, the latest in Kandahar province, underscore the reliance of Afghanistan's military on U.S. airpower, even as the Biden administration mulls whether to pull all U.S. troops out of the country by May.

The strikes targeted Taliban fighters in the Zharay, Spin Boldak and Kandahar districts of the province as they were "actively attacking and maneuvering on" Afghan troops, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan spokesman Col. Sonny Leggett said on Twitter.

"The U.S. continues to defend [Afghan forces] in accordance w/ the US-TB agreement," Leggett tweeted, referring to a deal struck between Washington and the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, last year that paves the way for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces by May.

An undisclosed number of strikes were carried out, he said.

Leggett's tweet came after the Taliban earlier Wednesday accused the U.S. of unlawfully targeting Taliban fighters in Kandahar who were not involved in the fighting.

"We strongly condemn these bombardments and crimes by the American invaders," Taliban spokesman Qari Yousaf Ahmadi said in a statement. "This is clearly a violation of the Doha agreement."

If the attacks continue, the Taliban will "take the same steps" in defense, Ahmadi added.

The Taliban have refrained from attacking international forces as part of last year's deal, under which they also pledged to meet vague counterterrorism commitments. But attacks by the group on Afghans have intensified.

The deal does not explicitly bar the Taliban from attacking government forces but does include a clause that says the U.S. will defend Afghans against attacks.

The Taliban have encroached on key Afghan cities in recent months, including

Kandahar, which once functioned as the capital of their heartland. Fighting throughout Kandahar province has displaced some 10,000 families, according to government data.

If President Joe Biden chooses to end the war soon, analysts and Afghan officials say some key cities like Kandahar would likely fall to the insurgents.

It will be "tough" for the U.S. to meet the May deadline, Biden said in an interview with ABC News that aired Wednesday.

However, Biden added a full drawdown shouldn't take much longer to complete.

"That was not a very solidly negotiated deal that the president, the former president worked out," Biden said. "We're in consultation with our allies as well as the government, and that decision is in process now."

There are officially 2,500 American troops in Afghanistan after former President Donald Trump made steady reductions throughout last year, which started with roughly 13,000 American service members in the country. Trump campaigned on ending the war.

Lawmakers split on troop withdrawal in Afghanistan

By SARAH CAMMARATA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — House lawmakers on Tuesday debated whether American troops should stay in Afghanistan as a deadline for their withdrawal looms and a new report assessing the state of that country warned of the possible consequences if U.S. forces pulled out.

"I really don't see a viable long-term strategy for the United States in Afghanistan and I strongly support withdrawing troops," said Rep. James Comer, of Kentucky, the ranking Republican on the House Oversight and Reform Committee.

Comer's comments came during a hearing of the committee's national security subpanel to discuss the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's 2021 High-Risk List — a congressionally mandated re-

port that offers an assessment of risks that the White House and Congress face as they make decisions on the future of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan.

"I believe most would agree with our report that achieving our counterterrorism and reconstruction objectives depends on a strong, stable, democratic and self-reliant Afghanistan. Unfortunately, as our report discusses in great detail, Afghanistan is far from that reality and may be fighting for its very survival," John Sopko, the SIGAR chief, told House lawmakers.

Most lawmakers agreed Tuesday on a long-term goal of pulling all U.S. civilian and military personnel from Afghanistan, though some remained conflicted on whether to keep troops there.

Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., said she wants U.S. troops to leave Afghanistan, but without

"ears on the ground" to conduct oversight, terrorist groups will be able to grow and the U.S. will be "at grave risk."

"I've come to believe that we need some boots on the ground to just protect ourselves. If that requires committing some money to Afghanistan, I'm willing to do it," she said.

The SIGAR report does not make specific policy recommendations or take a position on keeping troops in Afghanistan and Sopko said Tuesday that "the new administration and Congress will need to decide whether and to what extent reconstruction will continue" with troops or not.

House lawmakers debated the need for keeping the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan as President Joe Biden's administration faces the May 1 deadline for their removal, which was agreed to in February 2020 as part of a peace agreement with the Taliban.

Ga. shooting suspect may have 'sex addiction'

Associated Press

ATLANTA — A white man accused of killing eight people, most of whom were of Asian descent, at massage parlors in the Atlanta area told police the attack was not racially motivated and that he potentially had a "sex addiction," officials said Wednesday.

Still, authorities said they were investigating whether the deaths were hate crimes amid concerns over a wave of attacks on Asian Americans. Six of the victims were identified as Asian and seven were women.

It was not clear if Robert Aaron Long, 21, ever went to the parlors where the shootings occurred; one official said he had while another indicated he may have only visited businesses

like them. Authorities also said he was planning to go to Florida in a plot to attack "some type of porn industry."

"He apparently has an issue, what he considers a sex addiction, and sees these locations as something that allows him to go to these places, and it's a temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate," Cherokee County Sheriff's spokesman Capt. Jay Baker told reporters.

When asked by a reporter whether the businesses were a place where somebody could have sexual encounters, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms did not answer, saying she did not want "to get into victim blaming, victim shaming here."

Sheriff Frank Reynolds said

it was too early to tell if the attack was racially motivated — "but the indicators right now are it may not be."

Georgia state Rep. Bee Nguyen said the shootings appear to be at the "intersection of gender-based violence, misogyny and xenophobia."

Bottoms, Atlanta's mayor, said that regardless of the shooter's motivation, "it is unacceptable, it is hateful and it has to stop."

The attacks began Tuesday evening, when five people were shot at Youngs Asian Massage Parlor near Woodstock, about 30 miles north of Atlanta, Baker, the sheriff's spokesman, said.

Two people died at the scene, and three were taken to a hos-

pital where two died, he said.

About an hour later, police responding to a call about a robbery found three women dead from apparent gunshot wounds at Gold Spa, along of strip of tattoo parlors and strip clubs in one of the last ungentrified holdouts in an upscale area of Atlanta.

Officers then learned of a call reporting shots fired across the street, at Aromatherapy Spa, and found another woman apparently shot dead.

Crisp County sheriff's spokeswoman Haley Wade said Wednesday morning that Long is no longer in their custody and that her office has turned over its information to the other Georgia agencies and the FBI.

Jurors face new questioning about \$27M Floyd settlement

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Jury selection for a former Minneapolis police officer's trial in George Floyd's death faced a possible setback Wednesday, as the judge prepared to recall seven jurors to see if they have been tainted by news of a \$27 million settlement for the Floyd family.

Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill was to question the jurors by video ahead of ordinary jury selection. The move came at the request of former officer Derek Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, who called the timing of last week's announcement by city leaders in the middle of jury selection "profoundly disturbing" and "not fair."

Nelson has also requested a delay in the trial, which Cahill is considering. Cahill has set opening statements for March 29 at the earliest, but dismissal of some of the jurors already

seated could imperil that date.

Nine jurors had been seated through Tuesday, including five who are white, one who is multi-racial, two who are Black and one who is Hispanic. The jurors include six men and three women and range in age from their 20s to their 50s.

Chauvin is charged with murder and manslaughter in the May 25 death of Floyd, a Black man who was declared dead after Chauvin pressed his knee against his neck for about nine minutes.

Floyd's death, captured on a widely seen bystander video, set off weeks of sometimes-violent protests across the country and led to a national reckoning on racial justice.

Three other former officers face trial in Floyd's death on charges of aiding and abetting second-degree murder and manslaughter.

4-stars: Boost US assets in Latin America, Arctic

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military needs more resources in Central and South America and the Arctic region to counter increasing Chinese and Russian activities in those areas, the U.S. military officers in charge of operations in the Western Hemisphere testified Tuesday.

The commanders of U.S. Northern Command and U.S. Southern Command told the Senate Armed Services Committee that China and Russia have increased efforts to assert influence in the Western Hemisphere and test American resolve amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Both of the primary power competitors for the U.S. have long sought to increase their global influence and have grown increasingly emboldened, Adm. Craig Faller, the SOUTHCOM

commander, said Tuesday.

Faller said the Chinese are using coronavirus pandemic aid as leverage to persuade countries — including those in Latin America — to partner with them on infrastructure projects such as updated wireless network capabilities. The admiral labeled it "mask and vaccine diplomacy."

"The conditions that the pandemic has caused in Latin America and the Caribbean rival those of the Great Depression here in the United States," Faller told senators in a hearing alongside NORTHCOM's commander, Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck. "China has moved in particularly heavy handed ... and they're using vaccines to leverage deals for their 5G, and they're using it to drive a wedge between some nations in the region."

Faller told senators that U.S. influence in his region was "eroding."

McConnell: 'Scorched earth' if filibuster axed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell warned ominously of a “scorched earth” landscape if Democrats use their new majority to bring an end to the Senate filibuster in hopes of muscling legislation supporting President Joe Biden’s agenda past GOP opposition.

McConnell unleashed the dire forecast of a Senate that would all but cease to function, implying that Republicans would grind business to a halt by refusing to give consent for routine operations — from the start time for sessions, to the reading of long legislative texts, to quorum call votes.

“Let me say this very clearly for all 99 of my colleagues: Nobody serving in this chamber

can even begin — can even begin to imagine — what a completely scorched earth Senate would look like,” McConnell said Tuesday in a Senate speech.

McConnell said the partisan gridlock of the Trump and Obama eras would look like “child’s play” compared to what’s to come.

The GOP leader’s stark remarks landed as the Biden administration is taking a victory lap over the just-passed \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, the COVID-19 relief package that was approved by Congress without a single Republican vote. Republicans acknowledged privately they are struggling to pry attention away from the bill, which appears to be popular among Americans ben-

efiting from \$1,400 cash payments, vaccine distribution and other aid, as the GOP focuses on future battles.

With the Senate evenly divided, 50-50, the rest of Biden’s priorities face a tougher climb in Congress. While the Democratic-controlled House is able to swiftly approve a long list of potentially popular bills — to expand voting rights, extend gun purchase background checks and other measures — the rules of the Senate are more cumbersome. It typically requires 60 votes to break a filibuster to advance most legislation.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer brushed off McConnell’s remarks as a “diversion” and said he hopes to work with Republicans on the upcoming bills, but said all op-

tions for filibuster changes are on the table.

Biden told ABC News’ George Stephanopoulos on Tuesday: “I don’t think that you have to eliminate the filibuster, you have to do it what it used to be when I first got to the Senate back in the old days. You had to stand up and command the floor, you had to keep talking.”

Supporters of the process say it protects the rights of the party not in power, but detractors argue it is being used to block popular bills.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said Tuesday that nearly 65 years after South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond’s record-setting 24-hour-plus filibuster over the 1957 Civil Rights Act, “the filibuster is still making a mockery of American democracy.”

Austin, Blinken in S. Korea for talks likely covering North’s nuclear goals

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin touted the importance of the U.S.-South Korea alliance Wednesday as he kicked off two days of talks in Seoul that are likely to focus on Pyongyang and its growing nuclear arsenal.

The Pentagon chief was greeted by the commander of U.S. Forces Korea, Army Gen. Robert Abrams, after touching down just after noon at Osan Air Base, south of the capital. Austin was later joined by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and the pair held separate discussions with their South Korean counterparts, Minister of Defense Suh Wook and Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong.

Given the unprecedented challenges posed by North Korea and China, the U.S. alliance with South Korea has never been more important, Austin said ahead of his meeting with Suh, according to the Yonhap news agency.

“I am here today to reaffirm the United States’ commitment to the defense of [South Korea],” he said, according to the report. “You and I can both agree that military readiness is a top priority, and that our combined readiness must ensure that we are

ready to fight tonight, if needed.”

Referring to a recent agreement that gives a 13.9% boost to the amount South Korea pays to support U.S. troops on the peninsula, Austin said the deal reflects President Joe Biden’s “commitment to reinvigorating and modernizing” alliances around the globe, according to Yonhap.

Describing the alliance as the “linchpin” of peace and stability on the peninsula and beyond, Suh said links between the two countries have developed “in a reciprocal manner from the start of the Biden administration,” the report said.

“Over the course of the development of the alliance, it is of utmost importance to maintain our combined defense posture and the formidable deterrence against North Korea,” Suh said, according to Yonhap. “Going forward, we will continue to further strengthen our bond as a military alliance.”

The four ministers will meet as a group Thursday during so-called 2+2 talks before Austin and Blinken visit South Korean President Moon Jae-in at the Blue House, his official residence in Seoul, that afternoon, according to the Chosun Ilbo newspaper.

USAF stops using firing range near Scottish monastery

By KYLE ALVAREZ

AND KARIN ZEITVOGEL

Stars and Stripes

RAF MILDENHALL, England — The Air Force has stopped using a firing range near a Buddhist retreat in southwest Scotland, it said Wednesday after residents raised concerns that it would shatter the tranquility of the Eskdalemuir valley.

The Air Force had used a range a mile from the 53-year-old Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist monastery for “multiple events within the past seven months” but was “unaware of concerns from the local community,” Capt. Kevyn Kaler, spokeswoman for the 352nd Special Operations Wing, told Stars and Stripes.

The decision was announced after nearly 20,000 people had signed an online petition against a move to establish two permanent training areas for long-range shooting in the valley. The abbot of Samye Ling monastery has also spoken out against the project.

“Our precious haven of peace and harmony is under threat of being caught in the noise of gunfire,” Lama Yeshe Rinpoche told the Scotsman newspaper earlier this month.

US Iraq War veteran fighting spy claims

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After Amir Hekmati was released from Iranian custody in a 2016 deal trumpeted as a diplomatic breakthrough, he was declared eligible for \$20 million from a special U.S. government fund as compensation for years of imprisonment that included brutal torture.

But his payday never arrived, leaving Hekmati to wonder why.

The answer has finally arrived: Newly filed court documents reviewed by The Associated Press reveal decade-old FBI suspicions that he traveled to Iran with the goal of selling classified secrets to the government. Hekmati vigorously disputes the allegations, has never faced criminal charges and is challenging a special master's conclusion that he lied about his visit to Iran and is therefore not entitled to the money.

The FBI suspicions help explain the government's ongoing refusal to pay Hekmati for his ordeal and muddy the narrative around a U.S. citizen, Marine and Iraq War veteran whose release was championed at

the U.S. government's highest levels, including by Joe Biden, then the vice president, and John Kerry, then the secretary of state. The documents offer radically conflicting accounts of Hekmati's purpose in visiting Iran and detail the simmering behind-the-scenes dispute over whether he is entitled to access a fund that compensates victims of international terrorism.

Hekmati said in a sworn statement that allegations he sought to sell out to Iran are ridiculous and offensive. His lawyers say the government's suspicions, detailed in FBI documents and letters from the fund's special master denying payments, are groundless and based on hearsay.

"In this case, the U.S. government should put up or shut up," said Scott Gilbert, a lawyer hired to recover damages. "If the government believes they have a case, indict Amir. Try Amir. But you, the U.S. government, won't do that because you can't do that. You don't have sufficient factual evidence to do that."

FBI records show an investigation was opened 10 years ago and that Hekmati was interviewed by agents after his release

from Iran. Yet prosecutors have brought no case. Years after the FBI scrutiny had begun, Hekmati was awarded payment from the fund — money he expected to receive until the fund's special master revoked his eligibility in January 2020.

Gilbert declined to make Hekmati available for an interview while the lawsuit seeking payment is pending.

The FBI and the Justice Department declined to comment, but details from the investigation emerge in hundreds of pages of documents filed in the case.

The documents show the FBI opened an espionage investigation into Hekmati as far back as 2011, the year he was detained in Iran on suspicion he was spying for the CIA.

Hekmati, who was raised in Michigan and served as an infantryman and interpreter in Iraq before being honorably discharged from the Marines in 2005, says he went to Iran to visit an ailing grandmother.

But the FBI concluded that he went there intent on selling Iran classified information, according to an unsigned five-page summary of its investigation.

Biden says Cuomo should resign if claims confirmed

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The pressure against New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo over sexual harassment allegations reached the White House on Tuesday, with President Joe Biden saying Cuomo should resign if the state attorney general's investigation confirms the claims against him.

Biden made the remarks in an interview with ABC News that was scheduled to air Wednesday. When asked by anchor George Stephanopoulos whether Cuomo should resign if the investigation confirms the women's claims, Biden said "yes" and added, "I think he'd probably end up being prosecuted, too."

"It takes a lot of courage to come forward so the presumption is it should be taken seriously," Biden said. "And it

should be investigated, and that's what's underway now."

Cuomo is facing allegations that he sexually harassed or behaved inappropriately toward multiple women, including several former staffers.

The former staffers have accused Cuomo of workplace harassment, including demeaning them with pet nicknames or making objectifying remarks about their appearance, subjecting them to unwanted kisses and touches or asking them about their sex lives.

The three-term governor has rejected calls for his resignation from fellow Democrats, including New York's two U.S. senators, Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, and has asked New Yorkers to await the results of an investigation headed by state Attorney General Letitia James.

Biden defends lack of punishment for Saudi crown prince in killing

Associated Press

President Joe Biden defended his decision to waive any punishment for Saudi Arabia's crown prince in the killing of a U.S.-based journalist, claiming that acting against the Saudi royal would have been diplomatically unprecedented for the United States.

Biden, in an ABC News interview that aired Wednesday, discussed his administration's decision to exempt Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman from any penalties for the Oct. 2, 2018, killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. U.S. intelligence, in a report released Feb. 26, concluded that the crown prince authorized the team of Saudi security and intelligence officials that killed Khashoggi.

"We held accountable all the people in that organization — but not the crown prince, be-

cause we have never that I'm aware of, when we have an alliance with a country, gone to the acting head of state and punished that person and ostracized him," Biden said in his first extended public comments on his administration's decision.

Biden was overstating the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, however.

The United States has no treaty binding itself with Saudi Arabia, and the kingdom is not one of the Arab countries designated as a major non-NATO ally. The U.S. often refers to the kingdom as a strategic partner because of its oil production, its status as a regional counterbalance to Iran and its counterterrorism cooperation.

The U.S. has imposed visa restrictions and penalties on the Saudi agents who killed and dismembered Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Girl, 12, headed to ASU, hopes to work for NASA

AZ TEMPE — Alena Wicker has been thinking big since she was small.

At age 4, she told her mother that she wanted to work for NASA someday.

Now, the 12-year-old has been accepted to Arizona State University and she hopes to become a NASA engineer by the time she turns 16.

Daphne McQuarter said her daughter will be double-majoring in astronomical and planetary science and chemistry at ASU.

"Her goal is to, by the age of 16, be working for NASA," McQuarter said.

Alcatraz Island reopens for limited indoor tours

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Alcatraz, the historic island prison off San Francisco, opened up for a limited number of indoor tours, which had been off-limits for more than a year due to the pandemic.

Face masks and social distancing are still required at the island, and ferries to Alcatraz are operating at 25% capacity, carrying about 150 passengers instead of the usual 600.

Access to the infamous cell house will also be limited only to visitors who sign up for the audio tour in advance.

Safety modifications have been made throughout the island including social distancing markers, increased cleanings and hand sanitizing stations.

Alcatraz usually hosts up to 5,000 tourists a day. For now, that number will be reduced to

approximately 1,000.

Police block street race in retail lot, arrest 88

GA MORROW — Authorities in Clayton County responding to a call of street racers laying drag in a retail parking lot arrested dozens of people.

Clayton County sheriff's deputies and county police officers responding to the call blocked all entrances and exits to a Sam's Club parking lot, according to a statement from the sheriff's office. They used spike strips to keep drivers from leaving the parking lot and then went from car to car to arrest people, the statement says.

The sheriff's office said 88 people were arrested. The parents of 16 minors who were present were issued tickets when they came to pick up their children, the statement said. Four guns were seized and about four dozen vehicles were towed.

Ice cream truck safety measures proposed

CT CHESHIRE — The parents of a Connecticut child who was struck and killed by a vehicle after buying an ice pop from an ice cream truck are leading the push for the implementation of safety measures for ice cream trucks.

The state Transportation Committee and the Committee on Children passed nearly identical bills that would require trucks to be outfitted with stop signs — similar to those on a school bus — and a mirror to allow the driver to see anyone in front of the truck, the Record-Journal reported.

The bills would allow drivers to pass at 5 mph after coming to a complete stop if there are no pedestrians present.

Police charge 13 in Feb. melee at house

VA ROANOKE — Thirteen people were charged in connection with a fight at a house in February in which students from Radford University were said to be involved, authorities said.

Radford police said of the 13, 10 were arrested and three are still wanted on warrants, The Roanoke Times reported. According to police, all 13 face charges including breaking and entering, assault by mob and felony destruction of property.

Radford University confirmed that the fight involved nine students enrolled in the current spring semester before they were placed on interim suspension.

Police chief sorry for ticket quotas memo

HI HONOLULU — Honolulu Police Chief Susan Ballard apologized after a memo asking officers to fill weekly ticket quotas was made public by a local television station.

KHON-TV reported that the memo set for officers a weekly minimum of five moving citations, five parking citations and two DUI stops. The police officers union, the State of Hawaii Organization of Police Officers said the policy is not allowed under the current contract.

"When the union found out it was being implemented, we immediately sent a letter to the chief and she responded saying

basically it was not supposed to be starting," said Malcolm Lutu, who heads the union.

Man gets 2 years for trying to burn police car

NC RALEIGH — A North Carolina man was sentenced to over two years in federal prison for trying to set fire to a marked police car in Raleigh after a protest against the death of George Floyd.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of North Carolina said in a news release that Jabari Devon Davis got a prison sentence of 30 months.

Federal authorities said that he was charged in June with one count of attempting to damage or destroy by fire a vehicle owned or possessed by an institution receiving federal financial assistance. He entered a guilty plea in October.

Rabbit tests positive for contagious infection

RI PROVIDENCE — A cottontail rabbit trapped by authorities tested positive for a contagious bacterial infection that can sicken humans and other animals.

The rabbit with Tularemia, or rabbit fever, was trapped on Patience Island in Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay, the state Department of Environmental Management said.

Authorities urged visitors to Patience Island to avoid contact with wildlife, including biting insects, and to cover their face and eyes. Tularemia can be spread through insect bites or the inhalation of bacteria particles, authorities said.

— From wire reports

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Host of teams end NCAA tourney droughts

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The last time Drexel basketball made more than local headlines, TMZ was on the scene because Philadelphia 76ers star Ben Simmons and model Kendall Jenner were in the bleachers for a game on the West Philadelphia campus.

Maybe real basketball junkies remember when Zach Spiker's 2018 team rallied from a 34-point, first-half deficit to stun Delaware in the biggest comeback in Division I men's basketball history.

The rest of Drexel's tradition doesn't have a whole lot of March Madness in it. Spiker, though, had to cut off a suggestion that he took over a program in 2016 devoid of much hoops history, noting the Dragons did represent the North Atlantic Conference in the NCAA Tournament three straight years.

"Timeout. Timeout," Spiker said by phone. "We won three straight titles from '94 to '96. I mean, we beat Memphis in the tournament, you know?"

Long the outsider in Philadelphia's rich basketball scene, the

Dragons snapped that 25-year streak with a Colonial Athletic Association Tournament championship that earned them the No. 16 seed and a game against No. 1 Illinois on Friday.

Drexel is back in the bracket — and some long-forgotten teams have tagged along.

Remember Appalachian State? The Mountaineers have only two previous NCAA appearances — under coaches Bobby Cremins (1979) and Buzz Peterson (2000) — and ended a 21-year skid.

Oral Roberts is part of March Madness for the first time since 2008, Cleveland State returned for the first time since 2009, and Morehead State snapped a drought that dates to 2011. UC Santa Barbara made consecutive NCAA tournaments as a No. 15 seed in 2010 and 2011 and is back as a 12 seed. Georgia Tech is back for the first time since 2010.

Those are drops in the three-point basket compared to Rutgers making the field for the first time in 30 years.

One piece of advice seems uni-

versal: Enjoy the moment, and that applies as well to the two tourney newcomers (Grand Canyon and Hartford).

"At the high-major level, guys just want to get to the NBA. At our level, guys just want to play in the NCAA Tournament," Appalachian State coach Dustin Kerns said. "And there is an element now of, 'Hey, how can I get to the NBA?' But we told them when we got here, 'Hey listen, App State has been to the NCAA Tournament. This program has been twice. So if we can go before, we can do it again.'"

For every mid-major dreaming of blossoming into the next Gonzaga — or pulling off a UMBC — the reality is most of these one-bracket wonder programs fall back into obscurity and won't pop up on Selection Sunday for years or decades to come.

That won't stop the fun this weekend.

Look at Drexel. The Dragons aren't part of Philadelphia's famed Big 5 — Villanova, Penn, La Salle, Temple and Saint Jo-

seph's comprise the city's 65-year-old rivalry series — and let former coach Bruiser Flint stick around for a 15-year run without an NCAA Tournament appearance.

So when the Dragons clinched a berth in the face of the pandemic, the school partied like it was 2019. The Dragons returned to campus with a police escort and students lined sidewalks cheering them on. Drexel put up a big screen outdoors and threw a watch party with music, giveaways, and fire pits for the selection show.

"Even though it's a pandemic, we want our guys to have an experience, and have a moment," Spiker said. "By doing little things like that, we're able to do that."

Most of these teams weren't in the NCAA mix last season when the tournament was canceled because of the pandemic. Rutgers, though, went 20-11 and seemed a safe bet to make the 2020 field before it was waved off the court moments before its Big Ten Tournament opener.

Gonzaga, Baylor gobble up AP All-America slots

Associated Press

Gonzaga and Baylor spent almost the entire season holding down the top two spots in the Top 25.

Makes sense they'd hold down a bunch of spots on The Associated Press All-America teams.

The Bulldogs' Corey Kispert and the Bears' Jared Butler led the way with first-team nods Tuesday from the national panel of 63 media members that vote each week in the AP Top 25 poll. They were joined by unanimous pick Luka Garza of Iowa, a two-time selection, along with Ayo Dosunmu of Illinois and Cade Cunningham of Oklahoma State.

Kispert and Butler had plenty of company, though.

The Bulldogs also landed big man Drew Timme and freshman sensation Jalen Suggs on the second team while Joel Ayayi was an honorable mention pick. The Bears had Davion Mitchell on the

third team and MaCio Teague as an honorable mention.

"Thinking about me as a freshman coming to Baylor and not knowing what I'm getting myself into, having no expectations for how well I'm going to be or how good I'm going to be — it means a lot to come full circle," said Butler, the Big 12 player of the year and a third-team All-American last season.

It is the first time Baylor, which earned a No. 1 seed for the NCAA Tournament, has had a first-team All-American.

"These awards are just team awards," said Butler, who withdrew from the NBA Draft to return for his junior year. "I wouldn't be here without my teammates just playing with me and giving me confidence. It's been nice."

Kispert also withdrew from the draft and also led his team to a No. 1 overall seed, along with helping the Bulldogs finish a perfect regular season. He joined

Dan Dickau, Adam Morrison and Kelly Olynyk as first-team All-Americans from Gonzaga.

Garza, the brilliant big man from Iowa, came up two votes shy of being a unanimous choice last season. In fact, he's been so dominant that the school's career scoring leader will have his No. 55 jersey retired at the end of the season.

Like the Hawkeyes, the Fighting Illini had never had a first-team pick until Dosunmu came along. The two-time All-Big Ten guard led them to the conference tournament title last weekend and a No. 1 seed in the NCAA tourney.

Joining those veterans — seniors Garza and Kispert, juniors Butler and Dosunmu — is Cunningham, the favorite to be chosen first overall in the NBA Draft. The calm freshman forward helped engineer an upset of Baylor in the Big 12 tourney and will lead the fourth-seeded Cowboys into the NCAA Tournament.

Ovechkin scores 718th; Caps top Isles

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin scored his 718th goal to pass Phil Esposito for sole possession of sixth on the NHL's career list and became the second active player with 1,300 points, helping the Washington Capitals beat the New York Islanders 3-1 on Tuesday night.

"A goal is a goal — it's always a nice feeling to get it," Ovechkin said. "It was very good match, big points and obviously big numbers."

Washington snapped New York's winning streak at nine and point streak at 12. The Capitals have won six in a row and 10 of 11 to move ahead of the Islanders into first place in the East Division.

Ovechkin is a big reason for that. The captain has goals in four consecutive games and five of six. He is tied with longtime teammate Nicklas Backstrom, who also scored, for the team lead with 12 goals this season.

"We've seen him do it year after year," Backstrom said of Ovechkin. "It's just so impressive. I think the way he shoots the puck, the way he scores, the way he plays the game is just fun to see. As a teammate, you're just enjoying every moment."

Goal No. 718 also came against former Capitals teammate and countryman Semion Varlamov, his supporting actor in the classic Russian spy "This is SportsCenter" ESPN commercial. Ovechkin hadn't been able to get his timing quite right on his trademark one-timer but didn't miss this time.

"I just have to hit the net," he said. "Finally."

Ovechkin is 13 goals shy of tying Marcel Dionne for fifth and needs 177 more to break Wayne Gretzky's record.

"You are a fantastic hockey player," Esposito said in a video message congratulating Ovechkin for passing him. "I don't know how you score all those goals with the way these guys block shots with the great equipment that they wear. Good luck."

T.J. Oshie also scored for the Capitals, and Ilya Samsonov stopped 21 shots. Oliver Wahlstrom scored on the power play for New York.

Lightning 4, Stars 3 (SO): Brayden Point had a goal, an assist and the shootout winner, helping Tampa Bay recover from a late meltdown to win at Dallas for a third win in three games this season between last year's Stanley Cup Final participants.

Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 24 shots in his ninth straight victory. Mathieu Joseph and Steven Stamkos scored in regulation and Ross Colton also converted in the shootout for the defending champion Lightning, who vaulted from third place to first in the Central Division.

Bruins 2, Penguins 1: Trent Frederic scored the lone goal of the third period and Boston won at Pittsburgh.

Frederic beat goaltender Casey DeSmith with a wrist shot from the top of the left circle through traffic 7:07 into the third. David Pastrnak scored his 13th on the power play for the Bruins, who had lost nine of their previous 13 games. It was Boston's second

win in its last seven road games following a 5-0-1 stretch away from home.

Wild 3, Coyotes 0: Kaapo Kahkonen made 31 saves in his second shutout of the season as Minnesota blanked visiting Arizona.

Ryan Hartman, Mats Zuccarello and Jared Spurgeon scored for the Wild. Kahkonen won his ninth straight start during a standout rookie season.

Red Wings 4, Hurricanes 2: Adam Erne scored twice, Jonathan Bernier made 35 saves and host Detroit snapped Carolina's eight-game win streak.

Robby Fabbri broke a tie midway through the second period, sending the rebuilding Red Wings to just their ninth win in 30 games. The Hurricanes entered one point shy of the NHL leaders.

Avalanche 8, Ducks 4: Nathan MacKinnon and Samuel Girard scored 2:23 apart early in the third period, and host Colorado rallied for six unanswered goals to beat Anaheim.

Nazem Kadri had two goals and two assists for the Avalanche, who trailed 4-2 after the first period. They tied it in the second and scored four times in the third.

Devils 3, Sabres 2: Miles Wood scored the tiebreaking goal on a power play early in the third period and New Jersey beat visiting Buffalo in a matchup of skidding teams.

Yegor Sharangovich and Sami Vatanen also had goals as the Devils ended an 11-game losing streak (0-10-1) on home ice.

Sabres, mired in a 12-game skid, fire coach Krueger

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Buffalo Sabres fired coach Ralph Krueger on Wednesday, less than two months into his second season, and with the freefalling team in the midst of an 0-10-2 skid.

The Sabres made the move the morning following a 3-2 loss at New Jersey, against a Devils team that snapped an 11-game home winless skid.

The team did not say who would take over for Krueger, except to say first-year general manager Kevyn Adams would speak later in the morning.

Krueger's firing comes two weeks after Adams said he was evaluating the entire operation, including the coach, with the team

in jeopardy of extending its playoff drought to an NHL record-matching 10th season. Buffalo's winless streak matches the third-worst in team history, and longest since losing a team-record 14 straight midway through the 2014-15 season. At 6-18-4, the Sabres rank last in the NHL in victories and points, and have been shut out as many times as they've won this season.

Krueger is the third NHL coach to be fired during this shortened, 56-game season with all divisional play. He's the first outside the North Division, which has seen Montreal let go of Claude Julien and Calgary replace Geoff Ward with two-time Stanley Cup-winning coach Darryl Sutter.

Adams considered taking over behind the bench, but had previously elected not to do

so because it would take away from his managerial duties leading up to the NHL's trade deadline next month.

Krueger's firing continues to spin a revolving door of coaching and general manager changes in Buffalo. He became the team's fifth coach since Lindy Ruff was fired a month into the lockout-shortened 2013 season. And his firing comes nine months after Adams became the team's third GM in six years after Jason Botterill was abruptly dismissed following a three-year tenure.

It's a season in which the Sabres have lurched from one crisis to another. Captain Jack Eichel hasn't been healthy all season and is out indefinitely with an upper body injury — and a two-week COVID-19-forced pause to their schedule.

Lillard's 50 points lead Blazers to win

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Damian Lillard has led some memorable comebacks and made some clutch game-winners, but to him, this win was noteworthy.

Lillard had 50 points and 10 assists, and the Portland Trail Blazers came from behind to beat the New Orleans Pelicans 125-124 on Tuesday night.

Lillard, who finished with six three-pointers, made a pair of free throws with 1.2 seconds left for Portland, which rallied from a 17-point deficit with some six minutes remaining. He scored 20 of his points in the final quarter.

"I think with how it happened and the position we were in down the stretch, this will be one I remember," Lillard said.

Brandon Ingram scored 30 points and Zion Williamson added 28 for New Orleans. Lonzo Ball had 11 points and a season-high 17 assists.

Nickeil Alexander-Walker had 20 points, including six three-pointers, off the bench for the Pelicans. His three midway through the final quarter stretched the lead to 112-96.

But Gary Trent Jr.'s three-pointer pulled the Blazers to within 117-113 with 3:30 left. Lillard added a three to make it a one-point game.

Eric Bledsoe answered with a three for New Orleans, but Carmelo Anthony's jumper kept it close. Williamson's layup made it

122-118 with just over a minute to go. After Lillard and Williamson traded layups, Lillard was fouled and made both his shots. With 4.2 seconds left, Portland got the ball with the Pelicans hanging on to a 124-123 lead.

Bledsoe fouled Lillard, who made both his shots to put the Blazers up 125-124 with 1.2 seconds left. Williamson's turnaround hook at the other end at the buzzer missed the mark.

"I got to my spot and drew a foul and that was game," Lillard said.

New Orleans was stunned.

"I mean, we just didn't play the way we played the whole game, like we were trying to run the clock out," Pelicans coach Stan Van Gundy said. "We talked about that before: We've got to get the ball down the floor and play the game. And we did not do it."

Jazz 117, Celtics 109: Donovan Mitchell had eight of his 21 points in the fourth quarter and Utah hit 19 three-pointers to beat Boston.

Jordan Clarkson added 20 points off the bench. Mike Conley scored 17 points and Rudy Gobert finished with 16 points and 12 rebounds to help the Jazz sweep the season series between the teams.

The Celtics led by as many as 11 in the first half before fading down the stretch.

Jayson Tatum led the Celtics with 29 points and Jaylen Brown added 28. But it wasn't enough to overcome a hot-shooting

night by Utah, which also got 45 points from its bench.

Lakers 137, Timberwolves 121: LeBron James had 25 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists in his 99th career triple-double, leading host Los Angeles.

Montrezl Harrell scored 25 points as the defending NBA champions picked up their third straight victory on the second night of a back-to-back set. Dennis Schröder had 16 points and seven assists, while Kyle Kuzma and Talen Horton-Tucker scored 16 points apiece.

Karl-Anthony Towns and Anthony Edwards scored 29 points apiece for Minnesota.

Bulls 123, Thunder 102: Zach LaVine scored 40 points on 15-for-20 shooting, and host Chicago beat Oklahoma City for its second straight win.

Hawks 119, Rockets 107: Danilo Gallinari scored 20 of his 29 points in the first half and visiting Atlanta dealt Houston a franchise record-tying 17th straight loss.

Heat 113, Cavaliers 98: Jimmy Butler had 28 points and 12 rebounds, Bam Adebayo returned from a knee issue and finished with 14 points, nine rebounds and six assists, and host Miami eased past Cleveland.

76ers 99, Knicks 96: Tobias Harris scored 30 points, Seth Curry had 20 and host Philadelphia beat New York for its sixth straight win.

Woods returns home to Florida to heal from crash

Associated Press

Tiger Woods is back at home in Florida to resume his recovery from career-threatening leg injuries he suffered when his SUV ran off a road and down a hill in the Los Angeles suburbs last month.

"Happy to report that I am back home and continuing my recovery," Woods said in a tweet posted Tuesday night. "I am so grateful for the outpouring of support and encouragement that I have received over the past few weeks."

Woods was injured Feb. 23, two days after the Genesis Invitational at Riviera. He was on

his way to a television shoot for GolfTV a little after 7 a.m. when his SUV crashed into a median, rolled over and ended up on its side near a steep road known for wrecks, authorities said. He had to be pulled out through the windshield.

He had a lengthy surgery that day at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center for shattered tibia and fibula bones of his lower right leg in multiple locations. Those were stabilized with a rod in his tibia. Additional injuries to the bones in his foot and ankle required screws and pins.

He was transferred to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center for follow-up procedures.

Woods thanked the medical staff at both hospitals for taking care of him.

"I will be recovering at home and working on getting stronger every day," Woods said in the statement.

A dozen or so players at the Workday Championship in Florida wore black trousers and red shirts — the Sunday colors of Woods for his record-tying 82 victories on the PGA Tour — in the final round.

Woods has stayed in touch through text messages, sending them to Bryson DeChambeau ahead of his Bay Hill victory and to Justin Thomas, one of his closest friends in golf, ahead of

his victory in The Players Championship on Sunday.

Rory McIlroy suggested in an interview with Jimmy Fallon that Woods might be headed home to Florida.

"He's doing better," Rory McIlroy said. "I think all the guys have reached out to him. Hopefully if things go well over the next week or so, he might be able to get home and start recovery at home, which would be great for him. See his kids, see his family. But yeah, he's doing better. And I think all of us are wishing him a speedy recovery."

McIlroy and Thomas live near Woods in Jupiter, Fla.