

Cease-fire attempt in Ukraine collapses

Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine — Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Saturday that Ukrainian statehood is in jeopardy and likened the West's sanctions on Russia to "declaring war," while a promised cease-fire in the port city of Mariupol collapsed amid scenes of terror in the besieged town.

With the Kremlin's rhetoric growing fiercer and a reprieve from fighting dissolving, Russian troops continued to shell encircled cities and the number of Ukrainians forced from their country grew to 1.4 million.

Bereft mothers mourned slain children, wounded soldiers were fitted with tourniquets and doctors worked by the light of their cellphones as bleakness and desperation pervaded. Putin continued to pin the blame for all of it squarely on the Ukrainian leadership and slammed their resistance to the invasion.

"If they continue to do what they are doing, they are calling into question the future of Ukrainian statehood," he said. "And if this happens, it will be entirely on their conscience."

He also hit out at Western sanctions that have crippled the Russia's economy and sent the value of its currency tumbling.

"These sanctions that are being imposed, they are akin to declaring war," he said during a televised meeting with flight attendants from Russian airline Aeroflot. "But thank God, we haven't got there yet."

Ten days after Russian forces invaded, the struggle to enforce the temporary cease-fire in Mariupol and the eastern city of Volnovakha showed the fragility of efforts to stop the fighting across Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials said Russian artillery fire and airstrikes had prevented residents from leaving before the agreed-to evacuations got underway. Putin accused Ukraine accused Ukraine of sabotaging the effort.

Earlier, the Russian defense ministry said it had agreed with Ukraine on evacuation routes out of the two cities. Before the announcement, Russia's days-long assault had caused growing misery in Mariupol, where AP journalists witnessed doctors make unsuccessful attempts to save the lives of wounded children, pharmacies ran

bare and hundreds of thousands of people faced food and water shortages in freezing weather.

In comments carried on Ukrainian television, Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boychenko said thousands of residents had gathered for safe passage out of the city when shelling began Saturday.

"We value the life of every inhabitant of Mariupol and we cannot risk it, so we stopped the evacuation," he said.

In recent days, Ukraine had urged Moscow to create humanitarian corridors to allow children, women and the older adults to flee the fighting, calling them "question No. 1."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy held out the possibility that talks with Russia could result in a sustained, if limited ceasefire Saturday.

Elsewhere in the country, Ukrainian forces were holding key cities in central and southeastern Ukraine, while the Russians were trying to keep Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv and Sumy encircled, he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Saturday said Russia was ready for a third round of talks on that and other issues, but he asserted that "the Ukrainian side, the most interested side here, it would seem, is constantly making up various pretexts to delay the beginning of another meeting."

Diplomatic efforts continued as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in Poland to meet with the prime minister and foreign minister, a day after attending a NATO meeting in Brussels in which the alliance pledged to step up support for eastern flank members.

In Moscow, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was meeting with Putin at the Kremlin.

Israel maintains good relations with both Russia and Ukraine, and Bennett has offered to act as an intermediary in the conflict. No details of Saturday's meeting have yet emerged.

In the wake of Western sanctions, Aeroflot, Russia's flagship state-owned airline, announced that it plans to halt all international flights, except to Belarus, starting Tuesday.

At least 351 civilians have been con-

firmed killed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, but the true number is probably much higher, the U.N. human rights office has said.

Zelenskyy said Saturday that that 10,000 Russian troops had died in the war, a claim that could not be independently verified. "We're inflicting losses on the occupants they could not see in their worst nightmare," the Ukrainian leader said.

The Russian military, which doesn't offer regular updates on casualties, said Wednesday that 498 of its troops had been killed.

Ukraine's military might is vastly outmatched by Russia's, but its military and volunteer forces have fought back with fierce tenacity since the invasion. Even in cities that have fallen to the Russians, there were signs of resistance.

Onlookers in Chernihiv cheered as they watched a Russian military plane fall from the sky and crash, according to video released Saturday by the Ukrainian government.

In Kherson, hundreds of people protested the invasion, shouting, "Go home."

A vast Russian armored column threatening Ukraine's capital remained stalled outside Kyiv.

Ukrainian presidential adviser Oleksiy Arestovich said the military situation was more quiet overall Saturday and Russian forces "have not taken active actions since the morning."

While the shelling in Mariupol showed Russia's determination to cut Ukraine off from access to the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, further damaging the country's economy, it was Putin who was most on the offensive with his comments warning that a no fly zone would be considered a hostile act.

NATO has said it has no plans to implement such a no fly zone, which would bar all unauthorized aircraft from flying over Ukraine. Western officials have said a main reason is a desire to not widen the war beyond Ukraine.

Zelenskyy has pleaded for a no-fly zone over his country and lashed out at NATO for refusing to impose one, warning that "all the people who die from this day forward will also die because of you."

North Korea launches a 'possible ballistic missile'

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea launched a suspected ballistic missile off its eastern coast Saturday morning, according to South Korean and Japanese officials.

The projectile was fired around 8:48 a.m., South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a media alert. The Japanese prime minister's office called it a "possible ballistic missile" in a tweet after the launch.

South Korea's military estimated the projectile flew nearly 168 miles at a peak altitude of about 348 miles.

The joint chiefs' said it was monitoring the incident and that "our military is maintaining preparedness."

The military also urged North Korea to "immediately" halt its ballistic missile tests "due to a significant threat to peace and safety on the Korean Peninsula as well as the international community."

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said it was closely consulting with Seoul and Tokyo about the launch.

"The United States condemns this launch and calls on [North Korea] to refrain from further destabilizing acts," it said in a statement Saturday.

South Korea's Ministry of Unification, a department tasked with coordinating inter-Korean projects as well as supporting North Korean defectors, in a statement asked Pyongyang to stop tensions as the Winter Paralympics ramp up in Beijing.

The games began Friday and end March 13. North Korea did not conduct any missile tests as the Winter Olympics were underway Feb. 4-20. North Korea analysts theorized this was intentional to refrain from angering China.

The Unification Ministry also noted that Saturday's launch was held five days before South Korea's presidential election on March 9.

The launch comes nearly a week after North Korea carried out what it claimed to be an "important test" of a reconnaissance satellite.

"The test is of great significance in developing the reconnaissance satellite," the state-run Korean Central News Agency reported a day after the launch of Feb. 28.

South Korea's military asserted that the North had fired a ballistic missile that flew about 186 miles at a peak altitude of 385 miles.

North Korea has conducted eight other rounds of missile tests so far this year.

Marine Hornet crashes in SC as pilots eject safely

The State (Columbia, S.C.)

An F/A-18D Hornet military jet crashed on former South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford's family property in Beaufort County on Thursday afternoon, according to the U.S. Marine Corps and witnesses.

The combat jet went down at about 3:15 p.m., according to a Marine Corps news release. The plane crashed on Coosaw Plantation near Halfmoon Island, said Sarah Sanford Rauch, the former governor's sister.

Two Marine aviators were able to safely eject from the jet and are in stable condition, the Marine Corps said. They were "conducting a routine flight."

Rauch, who saw the jet take off from U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, said one pilot had a "really bloody lip" after the crash, but otherwise was fine.

Sanford, the former governor, said the jet crashed near where his late father is buried on Coosaw Plantation, which is the family's property. Sanford and his siblings grew up there, said the former governor, who was not at the scene Thursday afternoon.

The Sheldon Fire District and Beaufort County Sheriff's Office came to the scene, officials from both agencies said. The Burton Fire District also sent several firefighters to help support the Sheldon Fire District while they worked at the scene, said Capt. Dan Byrne of the Burton Fire District.

The area is under "controlled access," meaning only people who live in the area are able to get in or out, said Maj. Bob Bromage with the Beaufort County Sheriff's Office.

Halfmoon Island is in the northern part of Beaufort County, near Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort and multiple unincorporated communities like Dale, Lobeco and Seabrook.

The federal government will investigate the cause of the crash, an alert from the sheriff's office said.

Marine Corps police officers and the sheriff's office were at a checkpoint on Witsell Road late Thursday, preventing traffic from reaching the area. Fire crews remained on the scene Thursday evening to control the brush fire, according to air station spokesperson Capt. Thomas Jones.

Pentagon to utilize world's largest 3D-printed boat as logistics vessel

Associated Press

ORONO, Maine — The world's largest 3D-printed boat will serve as a logistics vessel for the U.S. Department of Defense.

The boat was created by a 3D printer at the University of Maine's Advanced Structures and Composites Center. It is one of two 3D-printed prototypes made for the Defense Department and simulates ship-to-shore movement of 20-foot containers that represent equipment and supplies, the university said.

The smaller of the two vessels can transport a Marine rifle squad and three days of supplies, UMaine officials said.

Sens. Susan Collins, a Republican, and Angus King, an independent, joined members of the UMaine system and the Defense Department on Friday to celebrate the production of the vessel. The university said the composites center 3D-printed and assembled one of the vessels in a month when using traditional materials could have taken more than a year.

The senators and university said in a statement that the vessel is "a significant milestone towards demonstrating advanced manufacturing techniques to rapidly constitute critical DOD assets closer to the point of need."

NY, LA ease more COVID-19 mandates

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York City and Los Angeles are lifting some of their strictest COVID-19 prevention measures as officials in big cities around the U.S. push for a return to normalcy after two grueling years of the pandemic.

New York City, which has long prided itself as having the nation's toughest COVID-19 safety protocols, will do away with several of its mandates this week, including required masking in public schools and vaccination requirements at restaurants, entertainment and cultural venues, the mayor announced Friday.

On the other side of the country, residents in Los Angeles County were no longer re-

quired as of Friday to wear masks at restaurants, bars, gyms, shops and other businesses, though the city of Los Angeles is still requiring many indoor businesses to verify that their patrons are fully vaccinated.

The moves to ease the mandates comes as government officials around the U.S. have been easing COVID-19 guidelines and signaling that the risk of virus spread is retreating — at least for now.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams, declaring it was time to “celebrate” as he stood in Times Square on Friday, said the city needed to recover and that “we are not going to allow COVID to define us.” “We’re far from out of the woods. COVID is still here. But we are beating it back,” Adams

said.

He implored New Yorkers to “go out this weekend and go dine.”

The Democratic mayor said he was confident that it would be safe, starting Monday, to send children and teachers to school unmasked and no longer require some businesses to check guests’ vaccine cards.

The decision to ease rules in Los Angeles County aligns with new California guidelines allowing vaccinated or unvaccinated people to choose to go without face coverings in most places. Masks are still required in all K-12 school districts until March 12. After that, districts may maintain their own mask requirements. Business owners also can choose to require masks.

Boston Marathon bomber’s death penalty reinstated

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court has reinstated the death sentence for Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

The justices, by a 6-3 vote Friday, agreed with the Biden administration’s arguments that a federal appeals court was wrong to throw out the sentence of death a jury imposed on Tsarnaev for his role in the bombing that killed three people near the finish line of the marathon in 2013.

“Dzhokhar Tsarnaev com-

mitted heinous crimes. The Sixth Amendment nonetheless guaranteed him a fair trial before an impartial jury. He received one,” Justice Clarence Thomas wrote for the majority, made up of the court’s six conservative justices.

The court reversed the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston, which ruled in 2020 that the trial judge improperly excluded evidence that could have shown Tsarnaev was deeply influenced by his older brother, Tamerlan, and was somehow less responsible for

the carnage. The appeals court also faulted the judge for not sufficiently questioning jurors about their exposure to extensive news coverage of the bombing.

In dissent for the court’s three liberal justices, Justice Stephen Breyer wrote, “In my view, the Court of Appeals acted lawfully in holding that the District Court should have allowed Dzhokhar to introduce this evidence.”

The prospect that Tsarnaev, now 28, will be executed anytime soon is remote. The Jus-

tice Department halted federal executions last summer after the Trump administration carried out 13 executions in its final six months.

President Joe Biden has said he opposes the death penalty, but his administration was put in the position of defending Tsarnaev’s sentence at the Supreme Court.

The appeal was initially filed during the Trump administration, but Biden’s team did not signal a change of position before the court agreed nearly a year ago to hear the case.

Courts give conflicting orders on border asylum limits

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — A federal appeals court on Friday upheld sweeping asylum restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 but restored protections to keep migrant families from being expelled to their home countries without a chance to plead their cases.

Almost simultaneously, a federal judge in another case ruled that the Biden administration wrongly exempted unaccompanied children from the restrictions and ordered that they be subject to them in a week, allowing time for an emergency appeal.

The conflicting decisions injected legal uncertainty into the future of rules that deny

migrants a chance to seek asylum on grounds that it risks spreading COVID-19.

U.S. authorities have expelled migrants more than 1.6 million times at the Mexican border without a chance to seek humanitarian protections since March 2020. The Biden administration has extended use of Title 42 authority, named for a 1944 public health law.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia said COVID-19 concerns could stop migrant families from getting asylum to remain in the United States. But, the judges said, migrants can seek other forms of humanitarian protection that would spare them

being sent home if they are likely to be tortured or persecuted. Under a benefit called “withholding of removal” and the United Nations Convention Against Torture, migrants may be sent to third countries deemed safe alternatives if their homelands are too dangerous.

In the other ruling, U.S. District Judge Mark Pittman, a Trump appointee, sided with the state of Texas, which argued that President Joe Biden wrongly broke with Trump by exempting children traveling alone for humanitarian reasons. He noted the increase in unaccompanied children at the border after the change.

US officials sorry Afghans stuck in UAE

Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — A senior U.S. diplomat has apologized to thousands of Afghans stranded in the United Arab Emirates months after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban.

The diplomat spoke to the stranded Afghans on Friday, promising to speed repatriation for some to America while acknowledging that may not be possible as authorities work to confirm their identities and backgrounds.

The visit comes as America still struggles with how to handle the tens of thousands who piled into planes in the hectic final days of Afghanistan's U.S.-backed government, the end of a 20-year experiment in replacing hard-line Taliban rule with a nascent democracy.

After meeting with the Afghans, the diplomat and other officials spoke to journalists

on the condition they not be identified, citing the "sensitive and ongoing natures of the issues discussed."

The diplomat apologized about the delays and expressed personal frustration about them. But the official also acknowledged that some of the Afghans — including journalists and prosecutors — might never get U.S. visas.

Thousands of Afghans have held protests over their uncertain situation.

"The problem is nobody knows what's going on," said Ahmad Shah Mohibi, the founder of a group called Rise to Peace, which has been trying to help Afghans there. "The U.S. has a moral obligation" to help them.

Around 12,000 Afghans remain in Abu Dhabi, with some 10,000 at Emirates Humaneer City and another 2,000 at Tasameem Workers City in the capital, Mohibi said. They represent a cross-section of those

who fled the Taliban's lightning advance in August, including journalists, judges, prosecutors, LGBT rights activists and religious and ethnic minorities, he said.

Eight American citizens, as well as three permanent residents, also remain in the housing as they don't want to leave their family members who do not have U.S. visas, Mohibi said. The U.S. officials did not dispute the figures or the descriptions offered by Mohibi.

The senior U.S. official also said that two measles outbreaks among the refugees, concerns over coronavirus vaccinations and later, CDC demands for full medical examinations had slowed down the process of getting Afghans to the U.S.

The official also stressed the UAE controls the two sites in Abu Dhabi and that a full survey of those there still has not been finished.

Pence: No room in GOP for Putin 'apologists'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former Vice President Mike Pence urged Republicans to move on from the 2020 election and declared that "there is no room in this party for apologists for Putin" as he further cemented his break from former President Donald Trump.

Pence, in a speech Friday evening to the party's top donors in New Orleans, took on those in his party who have failed to forcefully condemn Russian President Vladimir Putin for his unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

"Where would Russian tanks be today if NATO had not expanded the borders of freedom? There is no room in this party for apologists for Putin," Pence said, according to excerpts from the speech, which was closed to reporters. "There is only room for champions of freedom."

Pence did not directly reference the former president. But Trump has repeatedly used language that has been criticized as deferential to Putin, including calling the Russian leader "smart" while insisting the attack never would have happened on his watch.

Still, he joined the oft-stated view of Trump and others in the Republican Party Friday evening in blaming President Joe Biden for Putin's actions, accusing the current president of having "squandered the deterrence that our administration put in place to keep Putin and Russia from even trying to redraw international boundaries by force."

"It's no coincidence that Russia waited until 2022 to invade Ukraine," Pence said, according to excerpts. "Weakness arouses evil, and the magnitude of evil sweeping across Ukraine speaks volumes about this president."

Gunman who killed his 3 kids was in US illegally

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The gunman who killed his three daughters, a chaperone who was supervising his visit with the children and himself in a Northern California church last week was in the United States illegally, immigration officials said Friday.

David Mora, 39, was armed with what is often called a "ghost gun," an unregistered, homemade semi-automatic rifle-style weapon.

He had an illegal 30-round ammunition magazine and 17 bullets were fired, the Sacramento County Sheriff's Office said.

Mora was under a restraining order that barred him from possessing a firearm and authorities do not know how or when he obtained it.

"The person who knows these answers is dead. I think I can safely say, he obtained it illegally," sheriff's spokesman Sgt. Rodney Grassmann said.

Mora had been living at the Sacramento church where the killings occurred since he was released from an involuntary mental health hold in April 2021 after threatening to harm himself and his estranged girlfriend, investigators said.

The violence erupted Monday during a weekly supervised visitation Mora had with his daughters, ages 13, 10 and 9. Investigators have revealed no motive. At the time, Mora was out on bail after being ar-

rested five days earlier on charges of resisting arrest, battery on a police officer and driving under the influence.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokeswoman Alethea Smock told The Associated Press that Mora was in the country illegally. He overstayed his visa after entering California from his native Mexico on Dec. 17, 2018.

She didn't say when his visa expired.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Officials: Woman hoarded animals

CA DIAMOND BAR — Hundreds of animals, some of them dead, were found inside a Southern California home in what authorities called a case of hoarding.

Deputies responding to a call discovered the animals at the residence in Diamond Bar, Los Angeles County sheriff's officials said.

Officials said a woman at the home was placed on a psychiatric hold, CBS LA reported.

The Inland Valley Humane Society and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were at the scene the next day, rescuing as many animals as possible.

Officials didn't say what animals were inside, but ABC 7 reported a number of cats were seen.

Former postal worker convicted of mail theft

FL OCALA — A former Florida postal worker whose mail delivery route included the prominent retirement community of The Villages was convicted of stealing mail for cash and gift cards to support her heroin addiction.

Miranda Delee Farleigh, 25, of Ocklawaha, pleaded guilty in Ocala federal court to a count of possessing stolen mail, according to court records. She faces up to five years in prison.

According to court records, Farleigh worked as a contract employee of the U.S. Postal Service delivering mail for the Lady Lake Post Office. Farleigh's route included mail delivery services to postal stations in The

Villages, a large retirement community northwest of Orlando.

Officials said Farleigh rifled through approximately 4,000 pieces of mail.

Sheriff's deputy OK after being shot 5 times

NC CHARLOTTE — A North Carolina sheriff's deputy was shot five times during a traffic stop, but officials say he has been released from the hospital. The suspect who shot him is also hospitalized and warrants have been issued.

According to a news release, Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Deputy Dijon Whyms, 45, was shot twice in the lower body and three times in the upper body during a traffic stop in the northern portion of the county just outside of Charlotte, The Charlotte Observer reported.

The deputy shot back and injured the driver, who ran away and was located at an urgent care center.

Aidan Bryant, 23 remains in police custody as he recovers at a hospital. Warrants for his arrest charge him with multiple offenses, including attempted first-degree murder, according to the sheriff's office.

Man faces charges in home invasion

ND GRAND FORKS — A Grand Forks man who was held at bay by two residents during a rural home invasion was charged with more than a dozen counts, including simple assault, reckless endangerment and terrorizing.

Joseph Espinoza, 37, is ac-

cused of breaking into a home between Grand Forks and Thompson after he had earlier stolen a vehicle and crashed it. He scuffled with a man and woman in the home before he was shot in the driveway by two Grand Forks County deputies.

Espinoza was treated for his injuries and transferred to a Grand Forks jail. He is also charged with criminal mischief, robbery, breaking and entering, theft of a firearm, attempted theft of a motor vehicle, reckless driving, driving with a suspended license and leaving the scene of an accident.

The two homeowners suffered minor injuries during the scuffle.

Group focusing on stray cats roaming city

MI MOUNT PLEASANT — Some residents in Mount Pleasant are banding together to tackle the number of stray cats roaming the mid-Michigan city.

The group plans to establish a program where cats are trapped, spayed or neutered and then released, the Mount Pleasant Morning Sun reported.

Traps would be set near colonies of community cats to catch those still capable of breeding. The idea is to cut down on the number of feline pregnancies.

Police: Man killed by runaway bulldozer

NE KEARNEY — A Kearney business owner died after being run over by a runaway bulldozer at a Kearney auto engine manufacturing business, police reported.

Police were called to Blue-Print Engines on the eastern edge of Kearney for reports of an accident, the Kearney Hub reported. Arriving first responders found Ron Blessing injured and learned he had been run over by the bulldozer he had been operating. Blessing was taken by ambulance to a Kearney hospital, where he died.

Blessing was the owner of Blessing Construction of Kearney, a concrete construction business.

The bulldozer continued on unmanned through an adjacent field and was found a quarter-mile from the accident site in a ditch, police said. No one else was injured.

Police: Pilot removed from jet was drunk

NY CHEEKTOWAGA — A pilot who appeared to be drunk was removed from the cockpit of a Jet-Blue flight as it was about to take off from Buffalo, police said.

Tests confirmed the pilot had a blood alcohol level of 0.17%, transit police said. Federal rules set a 0.04 limit for flying.

The flight was temporarily delayed. Passengers on their way to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., said they watched from the plane as the pilot — one of two scheduled for the flight — was placed in a patrol car.

The pilot was identified as James Clifton, 52, of Orlando, Fla.

JetBlue Airways Corp., in a statement, said "the crewmember involved has been removed from his duties" and an internal investigation was planned.

— From Associated Press

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WNBA star Griner arrested in Russia

Associated Press

WNBA All-Star Brittney Griner was arrested last month at a Moscow airport after Russian authorities said a search of her luggage revealed vape cartridges.

The Russian Customs Service said Saturday that the cartridges were identified as containing oil derived from cannabis, which could carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. The customs service identified the person arrested as a player for the U.S. women's team and did not specify the date of her arrest. Russian media reported the player was Griner, and her agent, Lindsay Kagawa Colas, did not dispute those reports.

"We are aware of the situation with Brittney Griner in Russia and are in close contact with her, her legal representation in Russia, her family, her teams, and the WNBA and NBA," Kagawa Colas said Sat-

urday. "As this is an ongoing legal matter, we are not able to comment further on the specifics of her case but can confirm that as we work to get her home, her mental and physical health remain our primary concern."

On Saturday, the State Department issued a "do not travel" advisory for Russia because of its invasion of Ukraine and urged all U.S. citizens to depart immediately, citing factors including "the potential for harassment against U.S. citizens by Russian government security officials" and "the Embassy's limited ability to assist" Americans in Russia.

Griner, who plays for the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury, has played in Russia for the last seven years in the winter, earning over \$1 million per season — more than quadruple her WNBA salary. She last played for her Russian team UMMC Ekaterinburg on

Jan. 29 before the league took a two-week break in February for FIBA World Cup qualifying tournaments.

More than a dozen WNBA players were playing in Russia and Ukraine this winter, including league MVP Jonquel Jones and Courtney Vandersloot and Allie Quigley of the champion Chicago Sky. The WNBA confirmed Saturday that all players besides Griner had left both countries.

The 31-year-old Griner has won two Olympic gold medals with the U.S., a WNBA championship with the Mercury and a national championship at Baylor. She is a seven-time All-Star.

"Brittney Griner has the WNBA's full support and our main priority is her swift and safe return to the United States," the league said in a statement.

RCR heads into Las Vegas confident of victory

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Tyler Reddick led 51 laps in NASCAR's season-opening exhibition, and when a mechanical problem knocked him out of the race he climbed into the stands to high-five fans.

Austin Dillon, meanwhile, went on to finish third and salvage the day for Richard Childress Racing. But the race didn't mean anything, so nothing to see here, right?

Not so fast, said reigning NASCAR champion Kyle Larson, who before the Daytona 500 listed Reddick as a driver to watch this season.

"I think Tyler Reddick is going to have an amazing season," said Larson, who praised Reddick for leading the pack during off-season testing.

"I feel when I watch him, I am watching myself just because we are both really aggressive and he seems to be even a little more aggressive and keeps things in control better than I could," Larson added. "He's the guy that I look at this year that I feel like is going to have the breakout season and win a lot of races."

Dillon and Reddick didn't show much in the Daytona 500, but when NASCAR shifted last week to Auto Club Speedway in California, RCR was again very good. Reddick led a race-high 90 laps last Sunday — a career high for Reddick — and won the first two stages of the race before he was doomed by a flat tire; Dillon was runner-up to winner Lar-

son.

Now as NASCAR rolls into its third race of the season Sunday at Las Vegas Motor Speedway, the RCR cars really do seem much improved. So much so that Richard Childress expects to be making multiple trips to victory lane this season.

"I know we can win," Childress said. "We are going to win."

Childress is a NASCAR Hall of Famer who has fielded Cup Series cars for 49 years, tallying six championships with the late Dale Earnhardt and 109 victories. But the last decade has been lean with only four wins over the last eight seasons.

Dillon, his grandson, scored the last RCR victory at Texas in 2020 and RCR has not been a credible championship contender for years. But the organization has high hopes for NASCAR's new Next Gen race car and the early commitment to that effort from Chevrolet and ECR Engines.

"We definitely tried to be the guys to embrace this new car the earliest in the process. I think some of the teams probably didn't embrace it as much as we did," Dillon said. "This new car is going to level the playing field. That's what it was kind of built for. Everyone has pretty much the same stuff, it's just how you assemble it and the set-up choices you make going into the race."

"There's a lot being learned at a high rate right now, so we're trying to take in all that data the best we can — as our company can

— and make the best decisions going into the race so that we can adjust and make our car a little bit better than the other guys."

Back-to-back?

It took reigning NASCAR champion Kyle Larson only two races to get back into victory lane with his win last weekend in California. He'll try to make it two-in-a-row at Las Vegas, where he's the defending race winner.

"Hopefully we get on a little streak," said Larson.

Larson used streaks a year ago to win his first NASCAR championship and was the fourth different driver in Cup history to win three or more consecutive races multiple times in a single season. The others? Dale Earnhardt (1987) Richard Petty (1967, 1971) and David Pearson (1968) — a trio of NASCAR Hall of Famers.

Larson has eight top-10 finishes in 11 career starts at Las Vegas and FanDuel lists him as the 9-2 favorite Sunday.

New face on top

Austin Cindric opened the season with a big win in the Daytona 500 and has turned it into a historical moment: After a 12th-place finish at California, Cindric maintained the points lead to become the first rookie in NASCAR history to lead the Cup standings for more than one race. Cindric was the first rookie to win the season-opening Daytona 500.

Kings' Arvidsson caps hat trick in OT

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Viktor Arvidsson scored four minutes into overtime to complete a hat trick and give the Los Angeles Kings a 4-3 victory over the quick-strike Columbus Blue Jackets on Friday night.

"I think I've been creating shots and chances the whole season and just haven't been able to put them in, and tonight they went in," Arvidsson said. "That was a good feeling."

Dustin Brown also scored and Jonathan Quick stopped 24 shots for the Kings to help the Kings end a two-game losing streak and win for the eighth time in 11 games.

"I thought the guys stuck with it," Kings interim coach Trent Yawney said. "Brownie's goal was a big goal. I think it kind was a relief on the bench, and they could feel that maybe there was an opportunity."

Patrik Laine, Oliver Bjorkstrand and Justin Danforth scored for Columbus in a franchise-record, 46-second span in the second, and Elvis Merlikins stopped 39 shots. The Blue Jackets had won two in a row.

Hurricanes 3, Penguins 2 (OT): Andrei Svechnikov scored on a power play at 3:14 of overtime to cap host Carolina's rally from two goals down.

Jordan Staal scored two goals for the Hurricanes, who snapped a two-game skid and won for the fourth time in 16 chances (4-10-2) when trailing after two periods. Antti Raanta stopped 22 shots.

Jake Guentzel and Sidney Crosby each had a goal and an assist for the Penguins, who fell to 23-1-2 when leading through two periods. Casey DeSmith made 38 saves.

Lightning 3, Red Wings 1: Mikhail Sergachev scored the tiebreaking goal midway through the third period on a power play to lead host Tampa Bay.

Brayden Point and Steven Stamkos also scored for Tampa Bay, Victor Hedman had three assists, and backup Brian Elliott made 22 saves. The Lightning, coming off a 5-1 loss to Pittsburgh on Thursday night at home, have not lost consecutive games in regulation this season.

Robby Fabbri scored and Alex Nedeljkovic stopped 35 shots for the Red Wings, who have lost 18 of their last 19 games at Tampa Bay. Detroit's NHL-worst road penalty kill allowed three goals on four Tampa Bay power plays.

Rangers 3, Devils 1: Chris Kreider and Mika Zibanejad each had a goal and assist, and host New York won for the sixth time in its last eight games at home.

Filip Chytil also scored for the Rangers, who won the final two games of their three-game homestand. Igor Shesterkin made 32 saves to earn his 27th win of the season.

Nico Hischier scored for the Devils and Nico Daws made 29 saves. New Jersey has lost five of its last seven games.

Sabres 5, Wild 4: Jeff Skinner scored twice 4:20 apart in the third period to help

host Buffalo rally for the win.

Kyle Okposo and Casey Mittlestadt each had a goal and assist, and Victor Olofsson sealed the win with an empty-net goal with 1:06 remaining. The Sabres have won consecutive games for just the fifth time this season, and rallied to beat Minnesota after squandering a 2-1 third-period lead.

Golden Knights 5, Ducks 4: Nicolas Roy ended his 15-game goal drought with his first career two-goal game in the regular season, and Michael Amadio had a goal and two assists to lead visiting Vegas.

Roy, Amadio and Jonathan Marchessault scored in a four-goal second period for the Golden Knights, who then survived a strong third period from the Ducks to win for just the third time in nine games. Ben Hutton also scored and Laurent Brossoit made 20 saves.

Jakob Silfverberg, Nicolas Deslauriers and Trevor Zegras scored for the Ducks, whose mid-game defensive lapses doomed them to their seventh loss in 10 games.

Stars 4, Jets 3 (OT): Jason Robertson scored his third goal of the game with 30 seconds left in overtime, lifting visiting Dallas past Winnipeg.

Denis Gurianov scored the tying goal late in the third period for the Stars, and Braden Holtby made 39 saves.

Paul Stastny had two goals for the Jets, Kyle Connor also scored, and Connor Hellebuyck stopped 30 shots.

NCAA rules committee recommends targeting appeal

Associated Press

Players ejected for targeting in the second half of a college football game could be eligible to play the following game after an appeal through the conference office, if a recommendation handed down Friday by the NCAA rules committee is approved.

After four days of meetings in Indianapolis, the committee also recommended penalizing all open-field blocks below the waist and creating an investigation process for allegations of a team faking injuries that could lead to conferences penalizing schools and coaches.

Recommendations need approval from the playing rules oversight panel in April and would go into effect next season.

The committee discussed changing how the game clock is managed to shorten games by both time and number of plays,

but decided not to act.

The average FBS game was 3 hours, 28 minutes last season and included about 137 offensive plays.

Shaving time and plays out of college football games has become a discussion point recently as conference commissioners considered possibly expanding the playoff, a move that could increase the maximum length of a season to 16 or even 17 games for a few teams.

Attempts to expand the College Football Playoff to 12 teams by the 2024 season failed and the soonest a new format would be implemented now is 2026.

National coordinator of officials Steve Shaw said the number of players per game has plateaued over the last six seasons after a slight decrease.

"But we have talked about at some point

do we need to address this if the season does get longer because it is a longer playoff," said Stanford coach David Shaw, the rules committee chairman.

The rules committee has been looking at ways to discourage the faking of injuries, mostly by defensive players to slow down up-tempo offenses, for several years.

Steve Shaw said the committee remains apprehensive to implement in-game alterations.

The concern is a rule requiring players who are treated on the field to miss the remainder of an offensive possession would incentivize players who are actually hurt to play through an injury.

"So now for questionable game action, the institution or the conference can consult the national coordinator of officials to facilitate a video review," Steve Shaw said.

Johnson banks in three, Suns stun Knicks

Associated Press

PHOENIX — New York's Julius Randle yelled at Phoenix's Cam Johnson, bumped chests with him and then shoved him again for good measure.

That turned out to be a huge mistake.

Johnson responded with a brilliant fourth quarter after Randle was ejected, banking in a three-pointer at the buzzer to finish with a career-high 38 points and give the Suns a wild 115-114 victory over the Knicks on Friday night.

"Just thankful that it went down," Johnson said. "I love my guys."

Johnson's ninth three-pointer in 12 tries came from 31 feet at the top of the key, capping a 21-point fourth quarter that included six threes. The NBA-leading Suns, playing without All-Star guards Chris Paul and Devin Booker, improved to 51-12.

The Knicks looked like they were headed for an impressive road win before Randle's ill-timed outburst late in the third quarter sent him to the locker room.

Randle and Johnson were called for technicals after bumping chests and exchanging words. A referee separated the two, but then Randle barreled through the ref to shove Johnson again, which earned the ejection.

"I had the opportunity to continue playing," Johnson said. "And he didn't."

Said Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau: "You've got to know where to stop. None of us are perfect and we are going to make mistakes, but you've got to be disciplined."

Johnson said the feud with Randle had been brewing over the course of multiple games between the teams. Johnson took a hard shoulder to the chest from Randle on Friday in the first quarter, which knocked the wind out of him and sent him to the locker room briefly. Johnson said he thought the move "felt cheap" and set the stage for the later confrontation.

New York blew a 14-point lead in Randle's absence, but Mitchell Robinson's lay-up with 15 seconds left gave the Knicks a 113-112 lead. Alec Burks added a free throw to give the Knicks a 114-112 advantage — but missed his second attempt — giving the Suns an opportunity in the final seconds.

That's when Johnson capped his huge night with his biggest shot, sinking the long three-pointer after Cam Payne's drove the court and flipped the ball back to Johnson. The sharpshooter's aim was long, but smacked off the glass and through the hoop to set off a wild celebration.

"I just couldn't stop saying, 'I'm proud of you, bro,'" Suns forward Jae Crowder said.

The Knicks — up 86-76 when Randle was tossed — have lost seven straight.

"I told our guys after the interaction that happened — 'OK, we're going to win this game,'" Williams said. "We just had to have the mental fortitude to take it one possession at a time. It was amazing to see our group, the huddles, every time out, it never felt like we were out of it."

Randle scored 25 points, and Robinson added 17 points and 15 rebounds.

76ers 125, Cavaliers 119: Tyrese Maxey made five three-pointers and scored 33 points to lead Philadelphia past visiting Cleveland for its fifth straight victory.

The 76ers improved to 4-0 with James Harden in the lineup. Harden had 25 points and 11 assists. Joel Embiid added 22 points and nine rebounds.

Bucks 118, Bulls 112: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 34 points and 16 rebounds, Jrue Holiday came on strong down the stretch to finish with 26 points and help Milwaukee beat host Chicago.

Holiday scored 10 points over the final five minutes as the defending champion Bucks tied the Bulls for the Central Division lead with their third straight victory.

Timberwolves 139, Thunder 101: Karl-Anthony Towns and Naz Reid each scored 20 points and Minnesota routed host Oklahoma City for its third straight victory.

Taurean Prince scored 18 points, D'Angelo Russell had 17 and Jaden McDaniels added 16 for the Timberwolves. They have averaged 131.3 points during the winning streak and have won six of eight overall.

Magic 103, Raptors 97: Cole Anthony had 15 points and 12 rebounds, Chuma Okeke had 10 points and 11 rebounds and visiting Orlando snapped a nine-game losing streak against Toronto.

Mo Bamba scored 14 points, and Jalen Suggs and Gary Harris each had 13 for the Magic. Orlando hadn't beaten the Raptors since a 113-98 victory in Toronto on Feb. 24, 2019.

Pistons 111, Pacers 106: Saddiq Bey scored 25 points, Cade Cunningham had 20 points and nine rebounds and host Detroit rallied to beat Indiana.

Marvin Bagley III added 18 points for Detroit. The Pistons have won five of seven, winning at Toronto on Thursday night.

Malcolm Brogdon scored 26 points for Indiana. The Pacers lost for the 10th time in 13 games.

Nuggets 116, Rockets 101: DeMarcus Cousins, starting in place of ailing Nikola Jokic, scored a season-high 31 points and Denver bounced back from a loss to beat visiting Houston.

Jokic, the reigning MVP, was held out because of a non-COVID-19 illness.

Hawks 117, Wizards 114: De'Andre Hunter scored 26 points and Trae Young added 25 to help Atlanta beat host Washington.

Pelicans 124, Jazz 90: Brandon Ingram scored 29 points and C.J. McCollum added 24 in New Orleans' victory over visiting Utah.

Murray St. wins 19th straight, advances to OVC final

Associated Press

EVANSVILLE, Ind. — KJ Williams had 29 points and 10 rebounds and No. 22 Murray State advanced to the Ohio Valley Conference Tournament championship, beating Southeast Missouri State 88-74 on Friday night for its 19th straight victory.

Murray State (29-2) will play

the Morehead State in the title game Saturday night. Morehead State beat Belmont 53-51 in the second semifinal.

The Racers sped to a 17-1 lead, with Nana Akenten hitting a three-pointer 4:32 into the game for Southeast Missouri State's first basket.

"It was huge, huge," Racers coach Matt McMahon said

about the fast start. "Our guys were locked in. KJ got us started, and then Tevin started rolling. I think the two of them had 38 in the first half. They were incredible. You could tell they've played in this game before, and in big games."

Tevin Brown added 26 points for Murray State.

"I mean, I feel like the way we

prepared this week — getting up game shots, and just going through everything game speed throughout the week — really helped with that," Brown said.

DQ Nicholas led the Redhawks (14-18) with 20 points.

Murray State shot 65.5% from the field in the first half, with Brown going 8 of 10 in the half.