

Ukraine hospital attack draws outrage

Associated Press

MARIUPOL, Ukraine — A Russian airstrike on a Mariupol maternity hospital that killed three people brought condemnation down on Moscow on Thursday, with Ukrainian and Western officials branding it a war crime, while the highest-level talks yet yielded no progress toward stopping the fighting.

Emergency workers renewed efforts to get food and medical supplies into besieged cities and get traumatized civilians out.

Ukrainian authorities said a child was among the dead in Wednesday's airstrike in the vital southern port of Mariupol. Seventeen people were also wounded, including women waiting to give birth, doctors, and children buried in the rubble.

Images of pregnant women covered in dust and blood dominated news reports in many countries and brought a new wave of horror over the 2-week-old war sparked by Russia's invasion, which has killed thousands of soldiers and civilians, shaken the foundations of European security and driven more than 2.3 million people from Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told Russian leaders that the invasion will backfire on them as their economy is strangled. Western sanctions have already dealt a severe blow to the economy, causing the ruble to plunge, foreign businesses to flee — including, on Thursday, investment

bank Goldman Sachs — and prices to rise sharply.

“You will definitely be prosecuted for complicity in war crimes,” Zelenskyy said in a video address. “And then, it will definitely happen, you will be hated by Russian citizens — everyone whom you have been deceiving constantly, daily, for many years in a row, when they feel the consequences of your lies in their wallets, in their shrinking possibilities, in the stolen future of Russian children.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed such talk, saying the country has endured sanctions before.

“Just as we overcame these difficulties in the previous years, we will overcome them now,” he said at a televised meeting of government officials. He did, however, acknowledge the sanctions create “certain challenges.”

Millions more have been displaced inside Ukraine. Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said about 2 million people — half the population of the metropolitan area — have left the capital, which has become practically a fortress.

“Every street, every house ... is being fortified,” he said. “Even people who in their lives never intended to change their clothes, now they are in uniform with machine guns in their hands.”

Bombs fell on two hospitals in a city west of Kyiv on Wednesday, its mayor said. The World Health Organization said it has con-

firmed 18 attacks on medical facilities since the invasion began.

Western officials said Russian forces have made little progress on the ground in recent days. But they have intensified the bombardment of Mariupol and other cities, trapping hundreds of thousands of people, with food and water running short.

Staff at one hospital on the outskirts of Kyiv say they've never seen anything like the flood of often-badly injured patients streaming through their doors. Many are civilians.

Temporary cease-fires to allow evacuations and humanitarian aid have repeatedly faltered, with Ukraine accusing Russia of continuing its bombardments. But Zelenskyy said 35,000 people managed to get out on Wednesday from several besieged towns, and more efforts were underway on Thursday in eastern and southern Ukraine — including Mariupol — as well as in the Kyiv suburbs.

The Mariupol city council posted a video showing buses driving down a highway. It said a convoy bringing food and medicine was on the way despite several days of thwarted efforts to reach the city.

“Everyone is working to get help to the people of Mariupol. And it will come,” said Mayor Vadym Boychenko.

Images from the city, where hundreds have died and workers hurried to bury bodies in a mass grave, have drawn condemnation from around the world.

White House says Russia might use chemical weapons

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration publicly warned Wednesday that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine as the White House rejected Russian claims of illegal chemical weapons development in the country it has invaded.

This week, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova — without evidence — accused Ukraine of running chemical and biological weapons labs with U.S. support. White House press secretary Jen Psaki called Russia's claim “preposterous” and said it could be part of an attempt by

Russia to lay the groundwork for its own use of such weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine.

“This is all an obvious ploy by Russia to try to justify its further premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine,” Psaki tweeted Wednesday. “Now that Russia has made these false claims, and China has seemingly endorsed this propaganda, we should all be on the lookout for Russia to possibly use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine, or to create a false flag operation using them.”

The U.S. for months has warned about Russian “false flag” operations to create a

pretext for the invasion. Wednesday's warning suggested Russia might seek to create a pretense for further escalating the two-week-old conflict that has seen the Russian offensive slowed by stronger-than-expected Ukrainian defenders, but not stopped.

Dmitry Chumakov, a Russian deputy U.N. ambassador, repeated the accusation Wednesday, urging Western media to cover “the news about secret biological laboratories in Ukraine.”

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby on Wednesday called the Russian claim “a bunch of malarkey.”

DOD rejects Poland plan to donate jets to Ukraine

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon on Wednesday rejected a plan offered by Poland to donate its fleet of MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine to help beat back the Russian invasion because the risks of such a venture outweigh the benefits.

“The intelligence community has assessed the transfer of MiG-29s to Ukraine may be mistaken as escalatory and could result in significant Russian reaction that might increase the prospects of a military escalation with NATO,” chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

The assessment follows Poland’s offer Tuesday to donate all of its MiG-29 fighter jets to Ramstein Air Base in Germany “and place them at the disposal of the government of the United States” and its urging of “other NATO allies — owners of MiG-29 jets — to act in the same vein.”

The Polish Defense Ministry on Tuesday released the public announcement of its offer without coordinating first with the Defense Department, a senior defense official

said Wednesday.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday called Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczak in part to explain why the U.S. rejected his ministry’s offer.

“Secretary Austin thanked the minister for Poland’s willingness to continue to look for ways to assist Ukraine but expressed that we do not support the transfer of additional fighter aircraft to the Ukrainian Air Force at this time, and therefore have no desire to see them in our custody, either,” Kirby said.

Aside from the “high-risk” nature of the jet transfer, the U.S. believes fighter jets are not among “the systems that [Ukrainian forces] need most to defeat Russian aggression,” Kirby said, noting the Ukrainian Air Force still has “several squadrons of fully mission-capable aircraft.”

Instead, the U.S., whose European Command is at the center of coordinating international weapons donations to Ukraine and assessing what’s needed to help them fight Russian forces, believes the most-needed weapons involves “anti-armor and air-defense” capabilities, Kirby said.

Navy announces end to separation for skin condition from shaving

Stars and Stripes

Some sailors diagnosed with a skin condition that causes bumps, infections and other ailments from shaving will no longer potentially face being kicked out of the Navy because they can’t meet grooming standards, the Navy announced Wednesday.

Sailors diagnosed with pseudofolliculitis barbae who are allowed to have facial hair also are no longer required to carry a copy of their shaving waiver with them, the Navy said in an administrative memo released by Vice Adm. John B. Nowell Jr., chief of naval personnel.

The policy decision only applies to each sailor whose condition isn’t responding to treatment, the Navy said.

“Sailors found to be willfully non-compliant or that refuse to comply with prescribed

PFB medical treatments or commanding officers’ shaving requirements may be subject to administrative separation,” the memo said.

PFB is an inflammatory disorder of the skin follicles caused by beard hairs, sharpened by shaving or plucking, that curve downward and penetrate the skin. The condition is more commonly found in men of African or Asian descent, according to the Bethesda, Md.-based National Center for Biotechnology Information.

In January, the U.S. Marine Corps announced similar changes related to PFB, including halting reprimands and separations.

Under the new guidelines, sailors diagnosed with PFB who have facial hair may optionally edge or outline their beards.

\$11.6M given to Okinawans over US aircraft noise

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

OKINAWA CITY, Okinawa — A Japanese court on Thursday awarded \$11.6 million to people living with military aircraft noise from Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, the latest in a series of lawsuits seeking compensation for U.S. air operations over Okinawa.

A three-judge panel from the Okinawa city branch of Naha District Court found the 3,139 plaintiffs — divided into two tiers of exposure — suffered impermissible levels of noise.

One group will receive about \$5,816.25 per resident, or \$77.55 per month, starting three years before the filing date, July 2, 2018, to the end of oral arguments on Sept. 30. The second group will receive \$38.78 per month for 75 months, or \$2,908.50 per resident.

The Japanese government is responsible for paying damages from noise cases involving U.S. military aircraft.

The plaintiffs had sought \$9,693 and \$5,816 per resident, respectively.

“We are unsatisfied,” the plaintiffs’ leader, Kenei Yamashiro, 83, said after the verdict. “The noise itself is increasing, however, the compensation amount is lower than what we expected.”

Yamashiro said the group will consider appealing the decision. The Okinawa Defense Bureau, which represents Japan’s Ministry of Defense on the island, could not be reached for comment after court Thursday to see if the Japanese government will appeal.

The lawsuit was one of two legal challenges to noise from MCAS Futenma aircraft, which includes MV-22 Osprey tiltrotors. The other suit seeks compensation but for flights to cease from the air station.

Yamashiro said his group wanted to stop the flights as well, but left that claim out because it could drag out proceedings. Many of the plaintiffs are elderly, he said.

Chief Judge Kenta Adachi admonished the Japanese government for the noise at the conclusion of the trial, calling it “illegal” due to its impact on residents’ daily lives.

House passes spending bill with Ukraine aid

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House of Representatives approved a massive spending bill Wednesday night that would rush \$13.6 billion in U.S. aid to battered Ukraine and its European allies, after top Democrats were forced to abruptly drop their plan to include fresh funds to battle COVID-19.

Passage of the Ukraine aid and the \$1.5 trillion government-wide legislation carrying it let both parties lay claim to election-year victories for their priorities. Democrats won treasured domestic initiatives, Republicans achieved defense boosts and both got their imprint on funds to counter Russia's brutal invasion of its western neighbor.

Hours earlier, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had to scrap the bill's \$15.6 billion for combating the pandemic, a decision she

called "heartbreaking" and that spelled defeat for a top priority of President Joe Biden and party leaders. The money was mostly to bolster U.S. supplies of vaccines, treatments and tests and battle the disease around the world, but a Democratic revolt over GOP-demanded state aid cuts to cover the new initiatives' costs forced her to scrap it.

"We've got a war going on in Ukraine," Pelosi, D-Calif., told reporters, explaining the urgency Democrats felt in making concessions with Republicans. "We have important work that we're doing here." She said with her party in the 50-50 Senate needing at least 10 GOP votes to pass legislation, Democrats "are going to have to know there has to be compromise."

The House approved the overall bill in two separate votes. The measure's security programs

were overwhelmingly approved by 361-69, the rest by 260-171, with most Republicans opposed.

The Ukraine aid included \$6.5 billion for the U.S. costs of sending troops and weapons to Eastern Europe and equipping allied forces there in response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion. There was another \$6.8 billion to care for refugees and provide economic aid to allies, and more to help federal agencies enforce economic sanctions against Russia and protect against cyber threats at home.

Pelosi said she talked to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for 45 minutes Wednesday. She said they discussed weapons and other assistance his country needs and "the crimes against humanity that Putin is committing," including an airstrike that destroyed a maternity hospital. "This is the beast that Putin is,"

Pelosi said.

While enmity toward Putin and a desire to send assistance to the region is virtually universal in Congress, lawmakers have had a harder time finding unity on other steps. In a remarkable and widespread rank-and-file rebellion, Democratic lawmakers froze the House into inactivity for most of Wednesday. Their demand: a refusal to accept Republicans' insistence that the new COVID-19 spending be paid for with cuts in previously enacted pandemic aid to 30 states. Pelosi eventually relented and removed all pandemic spending from the government-wide, \$1.5 trillion package.

The House planned to vote next week on a separate measure for the full \$15.6 billion for pandemic programs, without cutting state aid. It was expected to pass but to likely face fatal GOP opposition in the Senate.

Support growing on Hill for larger defense budget

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Congressional support for increasing the defense budget is gaining steam amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine as Democrats and Republicans rally to meet Russian aggression with long-term military might.

The changing security landscape in Eastern Europe will "no doubt" increase next year's defense budget, Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said at an event last week. Other Capitol Hill lawmakers say they are also prepared to funnel more money to the Pentagon as the U.S. rethinks its national security and defense posture.

"President [Joe] Biden needs to put a serious budget proposal forward to confront the real threats we face," Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., said in a state-

ment. "Russia is just one reason why defense spending needs to be higher. China and other nations are watching the seriousness and resolve of freedom-loving nations."

Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine has prompted other NATO countries to pledge additional funding for their armed services.

In a reversal of decades of post-Cold War policy, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz said last month that his country would embark on a \$110 billion rearming effort. Poland announced last week that it will raise its defense spending from 2% to 3% of the country's gross domestic product.

U.S. lawmakers authorized nearly \$778 billion for defense spending for the 2022 fiscal year — \$25 billion more than requested by the White House. The Biden administration has yet to submit its budget request for fiscal year 2023, which starts Oct. 1.

US inflation rate over past year a historic high of 7.9%

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Propelled by surging costs for gas, food and housing, consumer inflation jumped 7.9% over the past year, the sharpest spike since 1982 and likely only a harbinger of even higher prices to come.

The increase reported Thursday by the Labor Department reflected the 12 months ending in February and didn't include most of the oil and gas price increases that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24. Since then, average gas prices nationally have jumped about 62 cents a gallon to \$4.32, according to AAA.

Even before the war further accelerated price increases, robust consumer spending, solid pay raises and persistent supply shortages had sent U.S. consumer inflation to its highest level in four decades. What's more, housing costs, which make up about a third of the government's con-

sumer price index, have risen sharply, a trend that's unlikely to reverse anytime soon.

The government's report Thursday also showed that inflation rose 0.8% from January to February, up from the 0.6% increase from December to January. For most Americans, inflation is running far ahead of the pay raises that many have received in the past year, making it harder for them to afford necessities like food, gas and rent. Small-business owners and employees have said in surveys that it's their primary economic concern.

Seeking to stem the inflation surge, the Federal Reserve is set to raise interest rates several times this year beginning with a modest hike next week. The Fed faces a delicate challenge, though: If it tightens credit too aggressively this year, it risks undercutting the economy and possibly triggering a recession.

S. Korea to solidify US ties, boost military

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's president-elect Yoon Suk Yeol said Thursday that he would solidify an alliance with the United States, build up a powerful military and sternly cope with North Korean provocations, hours after he won the country's hard-fought election to become its next leader.

Yoon, whose single five-year term is to begin in May, said during his campaigning he would make a boosted alliance with the U.S. the center of his foreign policy. He's accused outgoing liberal President Moon Jae-in of tilting toward Pyongyang and Beijing and away from Washington. He's also stressed the need to recognize the strategic importance of repairing ties with Tokyo de-

spite recent bilateral historical disputes.

Some experts have said a Yoon government will likely be able to reinforce ties with Washington and improve relations with Tokyo, but can't really avoid frictions with Pyongyang and Beijing.

"I'll rebuild the South Korea-U.S. alliance. I'll (make) it a strategic comprehensive alliance while sharing key values like a liberal democracy, a market economy and human rights," Yoon told a televised news conference.

"I'll establish a strong military capacity to deter any provocation completely," Yoon said. "I'll firmly deal with illicit, unreasonable behavior by North Korea in a principled manner, though I'll always leave the door for South-North talks open."

After his election win, he spoke with U.S. President Joe Biden on the phone. According to a White House statement, Biden congratulated Yoon on the election and emphasized the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea. The statement said the two also committed to maintain close coordination on addressing the threats posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

North Korea hasn't made any comments on Yoon's election. In recent weeks, it's launched a spate of sophisticated, nuclear-capable ballistic missiles in what experts have called an attempt to modernize its weapons arsenal and pressure the Biden administration to making concessions like sanctions relief amid stalled diplomacy.

On Japan, Yoon said that Se-

oul and Tokyo should focus on building future-oriented ties.

"The focus in South Korea-Japan relations should be finding future paths that would benefit the people of both countries," he said.

The two countries are both key U.S. allies and closely linked to each other economically and culturally, but their relations sank to postwar lows during Moon's presidency over disputes related to Japan's 1910-45 colonization of the Korean Peninsula.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Thursday expressed a desire to communicate with Yoon to bring back good ties. But he still said Tokyo will stick to its position that all compensation issues have been settled by a 1965 bilateral treaty.

Testimony starts in Whitmer kidnapping conspiracy trial

Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — Prosecutors in the trial of four men charged with planning to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer opened the first full day of testimony Thursday by showing jurors profanity-filled messages and social media posts from two of the defendants, some made months before the FBI got involved in the case.

"I want to bring formal charges against our governor and tyrants in our state. ... Let's do something ... bold," Adam Fox said in a December 2019 Facebook video. In it, Fox is seen intermittently laughing and cursing the government while waving two AR-style assault rifles at a camera.

In another, Barry Croft Jr. said Whitmer needs to be "hung."

"Michigan's government is a target of opportunity. If opportunity presents we'll engage," Croft said.

Prosecutors said the men, angry about pandemic restrictions the Democratic governor imposed, planned to snatch Whitmer from her Michigan vacation home and blow up a nearby bridge to slow the police response. They also said the men were communicating with each other and making inflammatory comments on their own before the FBI got involved or without prodding by informants.

FBI agent Todd Reineck testified Thursday that some of the social media posts were made prior to any FBI agents or informants were in contact with the men. He also said the men were arrested in fall 2020 because there was a "real concern they might obtain real live explosives."

Jurors will hear from two critical insiders, Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks, who pleaded guilty to the conspiracy and will testify for the government.

Pressure up on US to repay Venezuela's goodwill moves

Associated Press

MIAMI — Pressure is building on the Biden administration to begin unwinding sanctions on Venezuela after President Nicolas Maduro freed two American prisoners and promised to resume negotiations with his opponents.

Maduro's goodwill gesture came during a weekend trip to Caracas by senior White House and State Department officials that caught Maduro's friends and foes alike off guard.

While the Biden administration is saying little about what was discussed behind closed doors, a smug Maduro — who has sought face-to-face talks with the United States for years — bragged that careful protocol was followed, with the flags of the two nations "beautifully united, as they should be."

For the past five years, the U.S. has, with little success, tried everything from punishing oil sanctions to criminal indictments and

support for clandestine coups in its campaign to remove Maduro and restore what it sees as Venezuela's stolen democracy.

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine has upended the world order, forcing the U.S. to rethink its national security priorities.

Hostile petrostates under U.S. sanctions like Iran and Venezuela are seen as the most likely to benefit as President Joe Biden seeks to mitigate the impact from a ban on Russian oil imports that may aggravate the highest inflation in four decades.

U.S. officials have not detailed any other specific outcomes of the talks, which were led by Juan González, who is responsible for Latin America on the National Security Council. It was the first Venezuela visit by a White House official since Hugo Chávez led the country in the late 1990s, and a rare opportunity to discuss policy issues with the Maduro government.

Marine finds new purpose in snowboarding

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

A medically retired Marine who lost an arm to an improvised bomb in Afghanistan will race for gold in Paralympic snowboarding on Friday.

The explosion in December 2010 that wounded Michael Spivey — a young combat engineer with 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment in Helmand province, Afghanistan — wasn't his first.

Spivey emerged unscathed from a roadside bombing that damaged his truck in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2008, he said.

The Afghan blast was another story. Spivey lost his left arm below the elbow and had shrapnel in his legs and back. Another Marine lost his legs and an arm, Spivey said.

A year later, Spivey tried snow-

boarding for the first time after a therapist suggested he attend an adaptive sports event in Breckenridge, Colo.

His passion for the sport took a few years to ignite, the San Diego native, 41, told Stars and Stripes by phone Wednesday from Beijing, where he is representing his country as a member of Team USA.

A few years after he was wounded, Spivey found himself in a dark place. He said he'd lost several friends and loved ones, including Marines who took their own lives or died in accidents.

At his lowest point, in 2014, Spivey woke up next to a shotgun and two empty bottles of rum, he said.

"I was like: I have to do something to change what is going on," he said. "I grabbed my backpack and snowboard and started driv-

ing to Colorado."

When he got there, he linked up with fellow Marines and slept on a couch for a while. It turned out the group was competing in adaptive sports and Spivey ended up following them to Europe and racing for the first time in 2015, he said.

The excitement he felt on the track was addictive and he decided to aim for the Paralympics, Spivey said.

"That became the plan," he said. "Now I have a goal. Now I have a purpose. Now I have to figure out how to train and get better and compete," he said.

At the 2018 Paralympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, Spivey competed in snowboardcross, also called boardercross, and banked slalom, finishing 18th in both events. Snowboardcross involves competitors racing

head-to-head down a track that includes banks, jumps and slalom turns. Banked slalom is raced over the same course with riders' best times out of several runs counting toward medals.

In Beijing, Spivey improved to 17th place in boardercross but failed to reach the top 16 who raced for gold on Monday. China took all three medals in his event, for upper limb impaired athletes.

He will race again in the banked slalom on Friday morning, Beijing time.

Some of the features on Paralympic snowboard racecourse aren't as extreme as those in the Olympics, but racing down an icy track carries risks, Spivey said.

He broke his hand competing in Finland in December but recovered in time for the Beijing Games, he said.

Reports find failures after al-Shabab attacked US forces in '20

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Military investigations have found poor leadership, inadequate training and a "culture of complacency" among U.S. forces undermined efforts to fend off a 2020 attack by militants in Kenya that killed three Americans, U.S. officials familiar with the probes told The Associated Press ahead of the Thursday release of the findings.

Two military reviews of the attack by al-Shabab militants are scathing in their conclusions that there were failures across the board at the Manda Bay air base, where senior military leaders said there was a "deeply rooted culture of a false sense of security." The attack also wounded three people and destroyed six aircraft.

Army Gen. Stephen Townsend,

head of U.S. Africa Command, which did the first review, told the AP that while the actions of no one person caused the attack or the casualties, the reviews concluded that security, intelligence, training and command failures contributed to the losses.

And Air Force Maj. Gen. Tom Wilcox, who was part of the team that did the second review, said that "none of the negligence that we found contributed to the primary cause of the loss of life or damage. However, we did find that they potentially contributed to the outcome, to vulnerabilities on the airfield."

Defense officials said that a number of Air Force personnel were reviewed for possible disciplinary action and, as a result, eight have received some form of administrative punishment, in-

cluding written reprimands and loss of certification. The eight range from junior enlisted airmen to officers below the general ranks. A written reprimand can be career-ending for an officer. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe personnel discipline.

The Manda Bay base, in the Kenyan seaside resort, was overrun by 30 to 40 of the al-Qaida-linked insurgents on Jan. 5, 2020, marking al-Shabab's first attack against U.S. forces in the East African country. The pre-dawn assault triggered a lengthy firefight and daylong struggle for U.S. and Kenyan forces to search and secure the base.

The initial investigation was completed a year ago by U.S. Africa Command, but last April, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin or-

dered a new, independent review led by Gen. Paul Funk, commander of Army Training and Doctrine Command. The new report largely mirrors the findings in the initial probe but expands its scope. Both are sharply critical of the security, training and oversight at the base. Austin has accepted the reports and their findings.

The base at Manda Bay has been used for years by the U.S. military, but it only became a full-time airfield in 2016, with increased personnel, aircraft and operations. According to the reviews, the military there never adjusted security to account for the expanded use and was lulled by the fact the base hadn't been attacked in 16 years. The complacency, said the AFRICOM review, permeated every echelon and existed for several years.

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Lakers' superstar roster not delivering

Associated Press

The Los Angeles Lakers just can't get it together, and now they're nearly out of time.

From Anthony Davis' injuries and Russell Westbrook's subpar play to LeBron James' inability to carry them all, practically nothing has gone well this season for the franchise that momentarily assembled a veteran-laden roster last fall to chase another ring.

After their 136-130 loss to the Rockets on Wednesday night, the Lakers are 28-37 and in ninth place in the Western Conference, just three games out of 11th. A group expected to contend for a title is much closer to missing the 10-team playoffs.

They haven't given up hope in Hollywood: James and coach Frank Vogel both insist there's still time for Davis to get healthy, for Westbrook to find his game and for Los Angeles' supporting cast to recapture its collective prime.

"We still have games to play," James said last week after the Lakers blew a late lead and lost to Dallas at home. "Until you stomp me out, cut my head off, bury me 12 feet under, then I got a chance. So that's my confidence."

But every dispiriting loss and injury setback underscores the likelihood that Los

Angeles' dreams of an 18th title are profoundly unrealistic. A roster with four members of the NBA's 75th Anniversary Team has gone 7-17 since Jan. 7.

Nobody knows exactly where to assign the blame for this mélange of mediocrity — not even the Lakers' front office, which hasn't yet scapegoated Vogel for the struggles by firing him.

But past Los Angeles greats are embarrassed by the current state of the franchise with glory days worthy of an HBO series. "Winning Time," the dramatization of LA's vibrant championship teams of the 1980s, began airing last weekend.

James Worthy, a star on those Showtime Lakers, recently referred to the current team as "the walking dead" on its own television network. Shaquille O'Neal castigated the team last week for its lack of visible passion during another defeat — and boasted he wouldn't have accepted the current situation.

"I'm losing to the Clippers, somebody is getting beat up that night in the locker room," Shaq said.

The past two games encapsulate the frustration and inconsistency that have defined LA's season. James carried the Lakers to a 124-116 victory over powerhouse Golden

State last Saturday with a massive 56-point performance, tied for the third-biggest in his 19-year NBA career — but then he sat out a 117-110 loss Monday at 12th-place San Antonio with knee soreness.

The team lost to the Spurs without their two most important players on the court, and they did it on the two-month anniversary of the last time they won consecutive games.

"I feel like every time we get some momentum, something happens," Westbrook said, shaking his head. "It's been like that. When we play a good game, something always happens (shortly afterward). But that's just how it's been for us. We've got to keep plugging away, keep finding ways to pick each other up, because some of that stuff is out of our hands, and health is the most important thing for all of us."

Westbrook is correct: Of all the Lakers' risky personnel decisions over the past 16 months, relying on Davis to stay healthy has been the biggest bust.

The star forward's gangly body and awkward movement have never allowed him to be durable, but Davis has been sidelined by several woes for much of the past two seasons.

Booker returns, NBA-leading Suns rout Heat

Associated Press

MIAMI — Devin Booker scored 23 points, Mikal Bridges added 21 and the Phoenix Suns shook off a slow start to beat the Miami Heat 111-90 on Wednesday night in a matchup of the NBA's conference leaders.

Booker, returning from a four-game absence for virus-related issues, flirted with a triple-double, finishing with nine assists and eight rebounds to help Phoenix clinch a playoff spot.

The Suns improved the NBA's best record to 53-13, and the reigning Western Conference champions have beaten all other 29 teams this season — the first time they've done that since 2006-07.

Coming off a victory Tuesday night at Orlando, Phoenix improved its NBA-best road mark to 25-6.

Deandre Ayton had 19 points on 9-for-10 shooting and 10 rebounds for the Suns, who got 11 points and 15 rebounds from Javale McGee, and 11 points apiece from Jae Crowder and Cameron Payne.

Raptors 119, Spurs 104: Fred VanVleet had 26 points and Toronto won at San Antonio, delaying Gregg Popovich's coronation as the winningest coach in NBA history.

Popovich is tied with his friend and mentor, Don Nelson, with 1,335 regular-season victories. The Spurs' next opportunity to get the record for its 73-year-old coach is Friday night at home against Utah.

Bucks 124, Hawks 115: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 43 points and 12 rebounds and host Milwaukee beat Atlanta for its sixth straight victory.

Timberwolves 132, Thunder 102: Malik Beasley made 11 three-pointers to set a franchise-record and finished with 33 points to help lift host Minnesota past Oklahoma City for its sixth win in a row.

Clippers 115, Wizards 109: Nicolas Batum hit the go-ahead three-pointer with 31.2 seconds remaining, Reggie Jackson scored 31 points and host Los Angeles scored the final 11 points in a win over Washington.

Rockets 139, Lakers 130 (OT): Rookie Jalen Green scored a career-high 32 points, including 10 in overtime, and host Houston outlasted Los Angeles.

Celtics 115, Hornets 101: Jayson Tatum scored 16 of his 44 points in the fourth quarter, helping Boston win at Charlotte for its fourth straight victory.

Knicks 107, Mavericks 77: Julius Randle scored 26 points against his hometown team and New York won for the fifth consecutive time in Dallas.

Jazz 123, Trail Blazers 85: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 27 points, hitting six three-pointers, to lead host Utah past Portland.

Nuggets 106, Kings 100: Nikola Jokic had 38 points, 18 rebounds and seven assists and Denver won at Sacramento after blowing an 18-point lead.

Bulls 114, Pistons 108: DeMar DeRozan scored 16 of his 36 points in the fourth quarter and Chicago won at Detroit to snap a five-game losing streak.

Magic 108, Pelicans 102: Cole Anthony scored 19 points, Gary Harris added 16 in a reserve role and Orlando won at New Orleans.

MLB, union working on international draft

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Major League Baseball and its locked-out players agreed Thursday to negotiate on an international amateur draft, paving the way for renewed economic talks.

Under an agreement reached on the 99th day of a lockout that has delayed the season, the sides agreed to a July 25 deadline to establish an international draft that would start in 2024.

Talks aimed at ending the lockout bogged down on the draft issue Wednesday, and baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred canceled 93 more games, raising the total to 184. He said opening day, originally scheduled for March 31, would be no earlier than April 14.

The sides narrowed many economic differences to a small margin, when the international draft obstacle caused MLB to refuse to counter the union's latest proposal.

Under the deal reached Thursday, if a

negotiated agreement on a draft is reached by July 25, direct amateur draft-pick compensation would be removed for free agents starting with the 2022-23 offseason.

If the sides do not reach an agreement by July 25, direct amateur-draft pick compensation would remain in place.

"The PA awaits a counter from the league to its global proposals made at 1 p.m. yesterday," the union said in a statement.

The agreement does not impact the current offseason's qualified agents who remain subject to compensation: Carlos Correa, Freddie Freeman, Michael Conforto, Nicholas Castellanos and Trevor Story.

While Manfred did not use the word "canceled" to describe the games wiped off the calendar, he left the appearance 162 games no longer could be played due to baseball's ninth work stoppage, its first since 1995.

"We were talking these last few days

about taking those first two series and finding a way to get them back in the schedule," Arizona Diamondbacks President Derrick Hall said.

Players dropped their threshold for the luxury tax to \$232 million this year, with increases to \$235 million in 2023, \$240 million in 2024, \$245 million in 2025 and \$250 million in 2026.

Players had been at \$238 million to \$263 million in their previous proposal of a week earlier. They were within 2.5% of management's starting figure of \$230 million in Tuesday's proposal. Players were within 3.2% of MLB's \$242 million 2026 proposal.

Management's desire for an additional fourth tax threshold \$60 million above the first is among the remaining squabbles.

Players dropped to \$65 million from \$80 million for their proposed pre-arbitration-eligible players bonus pool, a day after MLB raised its offer from \$30 million to \$40 million.

Flores wants his lawsuit against the NFL to be heard in open court

Associated Press

Brian Flores wants the NFL to reject the Miami Dolphins' request for an arbitration hearing regarding his class-action lawsuit against the team and the league alleging racist hiring practices.

Flores' lawyer sent a letter to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell on Wednesday, urging him to turn down Miami's request and have the case settled in court.

"Arbitration is not transparent," attorney Douglas H. Wigdor wrote in his letter. "Indeed, arbitration is by its very nature a secretive process that takes place behind closed doors and outside of the public eye. The lack of transparency in arbitration only serves to continue the status quo — which in this case, is one that you have conceded must be fairly evaluated and potentially overhauled. That cannot happen in arbitration. In addition to being secret and confidential, it is a well-accepted fact that arbitration presents a barrier to justice for victims of discrimination and other misconduct."

Flores, hired as a senior defensive assistant for the Pittsburgh Steelers last month, filed suit against the NFL, Dolphins, New York Giants and Denver Broncos following his dismissal by Miami.

Flores led the Dolphins to consecutive winning seasons before he was fired in January.

"The claims that we filed involve important issues of systemic race discrimination and the integrity of NFL football games," Flores said in a statement provided by his lawyer. "Unfortunately, the Dolphins and their attorneys, Quinn Emanuel and Paul Weiss, are trying to push the claims against the Dolphins into secret arbitration proceedings that lack transparency. There are currently ongoing legislative efforts to end forced arbitration for claims of race discrimination, which I fully support. I would hope that the NFL and Dolphins would also support those efforts. Commissioner Goodell now has a choice to make. Will he allow this case and future race discrimination claims to play out in a transparent and public legal process, or continue along the same unacceptable path?"

Flores' suit alleges the league has discriminated against him and other Black coaches for racial reasons, denying them positions as head coaches, coordinators, quarterbacks coaches and general managers. Flores also claims Miami offered him \$100,000 per loss in 2019 in an effort to receive a top draft pick.

Commanders acquiring Wentz from the Colts

Associated Press

The Indianapolis Colts are moving on from Carson Wentz after one season, sending him to a team he's familiar with from his days in the NFC East.

The Colts agreed to trade Wentz to the Washington Commanders, according to a person with direct knowledge of the situation. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity Wednesday because the deal cannot be finalized until the start of the new league year next week.

Washington is getting the 47th pick in the draft along with Wentz and sending Indianapolis Nos. 42 and 73 this year and a 2023 conditional third-rounder that can become a second based on Wentz's playing time, according to another person with knowledge of the move.

Wentz, 29, has three years left on his contract with salary cap hits of \$28.3, \$26.2 and \$27.2 million consecutively. The 2016 second overall pick of the Philadelphia Eagles spent just the 2021 season with Indianapolis, with the team going 9-8 and missing the playoffs.

This will be the sixth consecutive year the Colts will have a different opening day starter.

Woods inducted into Hall, credits work and passion

Associated Press

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — The greatest of his generation, Tiger Woods took his place among the best of all time Wednesday night when he was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame, sharing a life story of a passion to play and a work ethic that made him feel like he earned it.

Woods didn't touch on any of his 82 victories on the PGA Tour or his 15 majors, or the eight surgeries he endured along the way.

He spoke of his parents taking out a second mortgage that allowed him to play the junior circuit in California, choking up when he mentioned his late father who told him he would have to earn everything he wanted.

"If you don't go out there and put in the work, you don't go out and put in the effort, one, you're not going to get the results," Woods said. "But two, and more importantly, you don't deserve it. You need to earn it. So that defined my upbringing. That defined my career."

He was introduced by Sam, his 14-year-old daughter who said her father preaches to her and 13-year-old brother Charlie the same message he learned from his late father.

"Train hard, fight easy."

Woods was the headliner in an induction class that included retired PGA Tour Commissioner Tim Finchem, three-time U.S. Women's Open champion Susie Maxwell Berning and the late Marion Hollins, a visionary who became the first woman to develop prominent golf courses.

The show was so geared around Woods that it featured three short video presentations that were titled "GOAT," the popular acronym for "greatest of all time."

The Players Championship prize fund this week is \$20 million, and that's not lost on the players in the field. The entire purse was \$3.5 million in 1997 when Woods made his debut. The winner this week gets \$3.6 million.

"I think every pro out here owes a debt of gratitude to Tiger because this sport wouldn't be where it is today without his impact," Patrick Cantlay, who won the \$15 million prize last year as FedEx Cup champion, said earlier this week.

Woods was the first player of Black and Asian heritage to win a major at the 1997 Masters when he was 21.

McDavid's goal puts Oilers past Capitals in OT

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Connor McDavid scored in overtime to give the Edmonton Oilers an important victory in the Western Conference playoff race, 4-3 over the Washington Capitals on Wednesday night.

McDavid scored on a 2-on-1 with Leon Draisaitl 3:27 into the 3-on-3 OT. He also assisted on Kailer Yamamoto's goal to help snap the Oilers' losing streak at three.

"These are big points," McDavid said. "They all are from here on out. We need to start piling them up."

Journeyman Brad Malone had a goal and an assist for his first NHL points in more than six years. Malone picked up his first assist since Feb. 28, 2016, when he assisted on Cody Ceci's goal in the second period. When he scored to put Edmonton ahead midway through the third period, it was the 32-year-old's first goal since Dec. 3, 2015. The Oilers won for just the third time in nine games to move within one point of the final playoff spot in the West.

"It feels pretty awesome, to be honest," Malone said. "I was just really happy that at the end of the game there we got the two points. It's tough to have an individual game like that and feel good about yourself when you don't get the two points."

Despite a stellar 37-save performance by Ilya Samsonov and a goal and an assist from Nicklas Backstrom, the Capitals' winning streak ended at three. T.J. Oshie scored twice, including the tying goal with 1.8 seconds left in regulation.

Alex Ovechkin was kept off the board with the chance to pass Jaromir Jagr and move into third place on the NHL career goals list. Ovechkin was booed by a small faction of fans in one of the biggest Ukrainian centers in North America.

Canucks 5, Canadiens 3: J.T. Miller scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period and had three assists to lead host Vancouver over Montreal.

Miller extended his points streak to 10 games, getting 21 points on seven goals and 14 assists during that span.

Elias Pettersson and Brock Boese scored power-play goals, Travis Hamonic also scored and Bo Horvat added an empty-net goal for the Canucks, who have won three straight and is 8-2-0 in its last 10. Thatcher Demko made 22 saves.

Artturi Lehkonen scored twice and had an assist, and Rem Pitlick had a goal and two assists for the Canadiens.

Colgate tops Navy for Patriot title

Associated Press

HAMILTON, N.Y. — Tournament MVP Jack Ferguson scored 17 points, Nelly Cummings added 15 and Colgate turned away a late Navy push to win the Patriot League championship game 74-58 on Wednesday and return to the NCAA Tournament for the second straight year.

Tucker Richardson scored 12 points as did Jeff Woodward, who grabbed eight rebounds. Oliver Lynch-Daniels added 10 points, all in the first half, for the Raiders (23-11), who won their 15th straight game, the third-longest active win streak in the nation.

Greg Summers had 18 points and eight rebounds, Tyler Nelson added 11 points and John Carter Jr. 10 for the Midshipmen (21-11), who were playing in their first league championship game since 2001.

Colgate led 40-22 at halftime and seemed to have the game well in hand, leading by 22 midway through the second half when Navy went on a 16-0 run led by seven points from

Sean Yoder to get within six with six minutes remaining. While the Midshipmen were shooting 5-for-7, the Raiders missed five straight shots and had three turnovers.

Colgate responded by outscoring Navy — which then had its own spate of turnovers plus five straight misses — 14-4 over the final six minutes.

Up next is a return trip to the NCAA tournament

"It's what kids grow up dreaming about myself included," said Raiders coach Matt Langel. "So these guys work tirelessly for that opportunity. They've had a little bit of a taste of it before. It's part of why, you know, a couple of them came back for another run at it and so it'll be another tremendous experience."

The teams exchanged baskets to open the game before Colgate went ahead for good. The Midshipmen stayed within single digits before the Raiders finished the half on a 17-5 run in which five Colgate players scored.