

Kyiv under fire; Biden set to visit Europe

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia stepped up its bombardment of Kyiv on Tuesday, smashing apartments and a subway station, while civilians in 2,000 cars fled Mariupol along a humanitarian corridor in what was believed to be the biggest evacuation yet from the desperately besieged seaport.

On the diplomatic front, another round of talks began between Russia and Ukraine via video, and the leaders of three European Union countries — including Poland, a NATO member on Ukraine's doorstep — planned a visit to the embattled capital in a bold show of support.

In addition, the White House announced President Joe Biden will travel to Europe next week for face-to-face talks with European leaders about the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden will meet with NATO and European leaders at a summit in Brussels on March 24. He will also attend a scheduled Eu-

ropean Council summit, where efforts to impose sanctions and further humanitarian efforts are underway.

With the number of people driven from the country by the war eclipsing 3 million, large explosions thundered across Kyiv before dawn from what Ukrainian authorities said were artillery strikes, as Russia's assault on the capital appeared to become more systematic and edged closer to the city center.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said barrages hit four multistory buildings in the city and killed dozens of people. The shelling ignited a huge fire in a 15-story apartment building and spurred a frantic rescue effort.

The strikes, carried out on the 20th day of Russia's invasion, targeted a western district of Kyiv, disrupting a relative calm that returned after an initial advance by Moscow's forces was stopped in the early days of the war.

The United Nations said close to 700 civilians in Ukraine have been confirmed

killed, with the true figure probably much higher.

The leaders of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia set out for Kyiv by train despite the security risks, in a visit EU officials said was not sanctioned by other members of the 27-nation bloc.

"The aim of the visit is to express the European Union's unequivocal support for Ukraine and its freedom and independence," Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said in a tweet. He was joined by fellow Prime Ministers Janez Jansa of Slovenia and Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland, as well as Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Poland's de facto leader.

New efforts to bring civilians to safety and deliver aid were underway around the country. The Red Cross said it was working to evacuate people from the northeastern town of Sumy near the Russian border in about 70 buses.

One of the most desperate situations is in Mariupol, the southern city of 430,000 where officials say a weeklong siege has killed more than 2,300

people and left residents struggling for food, water, heat and medicine.

The Mariupol city council reported that 2,000 civilian cars had managed to leave along a humanitarian corridor that runs for more than 160 miles west to the city of Zaporizhzhia. Another 2,000 cars were waiting to leave along the route, the council said.

As for the latest round of talks, Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak said they were discussing a ceasefire and Russian troop withdrawal. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Moscow would press its demands that Ukraine drop its bid to join NATO, adopt a neutral status and "demilitarize."

Zelenskyy told European leaders gathered in London that his country realizes it can't join NATO.

"We have heard for many years about the open doors, but we also heard that we can't enter those doors," he said. "This is the truth, and we have simply to accept it as it is."

NATO prepares to boost defenses of nations near Russia

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

NATO will map out ideas for adding substantially more military force to member countries on the alliance's eastern flank, top officials said Tuesday on the eve of a meeting of defense chiefs.

Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg delivered his remarks as U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was en route to NATO headquarters in Brussels for talks Wednesday. Participants will focus on Russia's war on Ukraine and the implications on the trans-Atlantic secu-

rity pact.

Stoltenberg said allies must prepare for "major increases" in spending to facilitate more robust defense.

"On land, this could include substantially more forces on the eastern part of the alliance," Stoltenberg told reporters, adding that more air and missile defenses will also be required.

NATO defense ministers are expected to direct military commanders to draft force plans to be adopted when heads of state meet in Madrid in June, he said.

During the past month, the United

States and other NATO states have deployed forces to the east, sending thousands of extra troops to Romania, Poland and the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Discussions in Brussels will center on what medium- and longer-term force posture changes could be required next to guard against potential Russian aggression, Julianne Smith, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, told reporters.

"This is an evolving story," Smith said of NATO's planning. "This is not over by any means."

Large drills, THAAD back on table in S. Korea

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — Large-scale military drills with American troops and a U.S.-made missile defense system will be back on the table when South Korea's new president is inaugurated in May.

President-elect Yoon Suk Yeol and the conservative People Power Party released a statement of their goals for his five-year presidency on Feb. 25. In the document, Yoon and the party called for a "strong national security and defense" bolstered by an ironclad South Korea-U.S. alliance.

Yoon's policy plans specifically call for the restoration of "broken trust" in the alliance. South Korea President Moon Jae-in's tenure has been marked by some unease during Donald Trump's presidency, some of which was predicated on Trump's claims of trade

inequities between the United States and South Korea.

Trump, in private talks with advisers and closed-door speeches, threatened to withdraw some of the 28,500 U.S. troops from South Korea, citing an unequal cost-sharing agreement to station those forces in the country, according to multiple news reports and a White House memoir written by former national security adviser John Bolton.

Under the Trump and Moon administrations in 2018, the U.S. and South Korean militaries began conducting smaller computer simulations in lieu of large field exercises. The two leaders suspended the joint drills and described them as costly and detrimental to lowering tensions with North Korea.

North Korea has continually denounced the U.S.-South Korean military exercises and de-

scribes them as "hostile" behavior in articles published in its state-run newspaper.

Previous field exercises included around 11,500 U.S. troops and 290,000 South Korean troops operating from land, air and sea.

Yoon's policy plan assures that his administration will "rebuild" the military partnership that would "normally conduct theater-level command post exercises and field training exercises."

Yoon's plans also appear to undercut Moon's unwillingness to deploy an additional U.S.-manufactured missile defense system in the country. The \$800 million Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, or THAAD, was deployed to South Korea in 2017 as a defensive measure against North Korean missiles.

The THAAD battery's deployment prompted China to retaliate financially against South Korea,

which resulted in an estimated \$7 billion loss to the economy, according to South Korean lawmakers.

The president-elect's plans call for "deploying additional THAAD units" to supplement South Korea's missile defense system and to "normalize" those units' readiness.

"Securing deterrence against the North Korean threat is a matter of sovereignty, and Seoul should remain open to additional deployments of THAAD in proportion to North Korea's growing missile threat," Yoon wrote in an opinion column published Feb. 8 in *Foreign Affairs* magazine.

Yoon, a former chief prosecutor, defeated ruling Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung by 0.73 percentage points, or about 247,000 votes, in South Korea's presidential election March 9. Yoon takes office May 10.

100K US troops in Europe for the 1st time since 2005

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The United States has 100,000 service members operating in Europe, the largest number in nearly two decades, as the Pentagon shifts forces in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine.

The last time troop levels were this high in Europe was in 2005, according to U.S. European Command records.

EUCOM now has about 65,000 troops permanently based in Europe, with additional rotational units that have supplemented the mission for several years. In January, there were roughly 80,000 total U.S. troops in Europe.

But Russia's new invasion of Ukraine last month sparked a dramatic increase in the number of deployments for temporary missions on the Continent.

"In the face of Russian aggression, the United States has recently deployed additional forces and now has approximately 100,000 U.S. service members in Europe," EUCOM said in a statement Tuesday.

A big difference between now and the U.S. military's Cold War footprint is that American forces are spread out far and wide in 19 countries, including in former Warsaw Pact states that are now part of NATO. Germany still has the most U.S. troops, with 38,500, according to EUCOM. After that comes Italy with 12,000. Poland and the United Kingdom have 10,000 each. Romania has 2,400 U.S. troops, while Spain has 2,500.

As of Tuesday, the U.S. had 2,500 troops in the Baltics and 1,500 in Slovakia, which borders Ukraine, according to EUCOM.

Japan complains to Russia as warships traverse strait

By HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Six Russian warships passed through Soya Strait, which separates Japan's northern island of Hokkaido and Russia's Sakhalin Island, early Monday, according to the Japanese government.

The Russian surface vessels and submarines were about 80 miles southeast of Soya Cape heading northwest, Japan's Joint Staff said in a statement that day.

The vessels included an Udaloy-class destroyer, three Kilo-class submarines, a Marshal Nedelin-class tracking ship and a Goryn-class tugboat, the statement said.

The flotilla moved from the Pacific Ocean to the Sea of Japan/East Sea while monitored by the JS Makinami, a Japan Maritime

Self-Defense Force destroyer, according to the statement. The strait at its narrowest is about 30 miles wide.

Ten Russian vessels were spotted at around 2 a.m. Thursday about 112 miles east-northeast of Cape Erimo on Hokkaido's southern coast, the Joint Staff said in a statement Friday. That flotilla traveled westward through Tsugaru Strait.

The Russian military has been conducting large-scale exercises in the Sea of Okhotsk since February that correspond to its invasion of Ukraine, and the vessels may have been participating, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters Tuesday.

Japan has complained to Russia about the ship movements and exercises through diplomatic channels, Matsuno said.

Biden acts to narrow federal worker pay gap

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House is marking Equal Pay Day by taking new steps aimed at ending the gender pay gap for federal workers and contractors.

President Joe Biden on Tuesday was to sign an executive order that encourages the government to consider banning federal contractors from seeking information about job applicants' prior salary history. And a new Labor Department directive is aimed at strengthening federal contractors' obligations to audit payrolls to help guard against pay disparities based on gender, race or ethnicity.

The Office of Personnel Management is also considering a regulation to address the use of prior salary history in hiring and setting compensation for federal workers.

Equal Pay Day is designed to

call attention to how much longer women must work to earn what men earned in the previous year.

Data shows that while the pay gap is at its smallest ever, the coronavirus pandemic has altered women's labor force participation so that "what we're seeing is an artificial narrowing," said Jasmine Tucker, director of research at the National Women's Law Center.

For instance, women who remained in the labor force during the pandemic and worked full time often had higher earnings than their counterparts who lost low-paying jobs, indicating that 2020 figures cannot be compared with wage gap data from prior years, Tucker said.

Among other issues, the Biden administration wants to combat occupational segregation to get women better access to well-

paying jobs, which tend to be male-dominated, according to a senior administration official who previewed the administration's efforts on Monday, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Last October, the administration issued a national gender strategy to advance women's and girls' full participation in society.

This year, the administration is looking for new ways to combat pay disparities and drawing attention to high-profile efforts to combat the wage gap, such as the U.S. women's national soccer team's \$24 million February settlement with U.S. Soccer in a discrimination dispute.

The settlement includes a commitment to equalize pay and bonuses to match the men's team.

"I think we're going to look

back on this moment and just think, 'Wow, what an incredible turning point in the history of U.S. Soccer that changed the game and changed the world, really, forever,'" star midfielder Megan Rapinoe said at the time.

Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and other administration officials planned to mark Equal Pay Day with a Tuesday afternoon event attended by members of the women's soccer team.

Tucker said there is a long way to go to achieve equal pay — especially after the pandemic. There were in excess of 1.1 million fewer women in the labor force in February 2022 than in February 2020.

"There was a particular shedding among low-paid workers, and what was left was middle- and higher-paid workers who were insulated from the pandemic," Tucker said.

Texas-style abortion ban on Idaho governor's desk

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Legislation aimed at banning abortions in Idaho after six weeks of pregnancy by allowing potential family members to sue a doctor who performs one headed to the governor Monday.

The House voted 51-14 to approve the legislation modeled after a Texas law that the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed to remain in place until a court challenge is decided on its merits.

"This bill makes sure that the people of Idaho can stand up for our values and do everything in our power to prevent the wanton destruction of innocent human life," Republican Rep. Steven Harris, the bill's sponsor, said in a statement after the vote.

The measure has already passed the Senate and now heads to Republican Gov. Brad Little. Marissa Morrison, Little's spokeswoman, said Monday that the

governor doesn't comment on pending legislation.

Jennifer M. Allen, CEO of Planned Parenthood Alliance Advocates, urged him to reject it.

"Gov. Little must do the right thing, listen to the medical community and veto this legislation before it forces Idaho patients to leave the state for critical, time-sensitive care or remain pregnant against their will," she said in a statement.

But Little last year signed a similar so-called "fetal heart-beat" measure into law. That one included a trigger provision requiring a favorable federal court ruling somewhere in the country, and that hasn't happened.

The latest Idaho measure allows the father, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles of a "preborn child" to each sue an abortion provider for a minimum of \$20,000 in damages within four years of the abortion.

Law to prevent court-ordered enrollment dip at UC Berkeley

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a new law Monday that stops one of the nation's most prestigious universities from having to turn away thousands of students from its incoming freshman class.

Just 11 days ago, the state Supreme Court ordered the University of California, Berkeley, to reduce its enrollment. The court sided with a neighborhood group that had sued the school, arguing university officials did not consider how adding more students would affect the environment, as a state law requires.

On Monday, the California Legislature voted unanimously to change the law, sending a bill to Newsom, who quickly signed it. The new law gives schools more time to comply before a judge can order them to reduce enrollment. It's retroactive, meaning it reverses the prior court's ruling.

The law makes changes to the California Environmental Quality Act. Passed in 1970, the law requires state and local agencies to evaluate and disclose significant environmental effects of projects and to find ways to lessen those effects. But in the decades since its passage, critics have said the law has often been used to block unwanted development.

In this case, the nonprofit group Save Berkeley's Neighborhoods had sued the university, arguing that adding more students would only worsen the housing shortage and increase rents for everyone in the San Francisco Bay Area city.

UC Berkeley, like much of the state, has an affordable housing problem resulting from decades of under-building. On-campus housing is limited, and many students live off campus. Rents are expensive while residents grumble over the added traffic, noise and housing costs brought by an increased student body.

Virus cases in China could disrupt trade

Associated Press

BEIJING — Chinese authorities on Tuesday tightened anti-virus controls at ports, raising the risk of trade disruptions after some auto and electronics factories shut down as the government fights coronavirus outbreaks.

Stock prices in China and Hong Kong sank for a second day following the shutdown on Monday of Shenzhen, a tech and finance hub adjacent to Hong Kong in the south, and Changchun, an auto center in the northeast. Bus service to Shanghai, China's business capital and biggest city, was suspended.

China's case numbers are low compared with other major countries or Hong Kong. But authorities are enforcing a "ze-

ro tolerance" strategy that aims to keep the virus out of the country. It has temporarily shut down major cities to find every infected person.

The restrictions come at a time when the global economy is under pressure from Russia's war on Ukraine, surging oil prices and weak consumer demand.

"We can think of no risk to the global economy, excluding nuclear warfare, that is greater than the risk of a COVID outbreak in China that shuts industrial production," said Carl B. Weinberg of High-Frequency Economics in a report. "Uncountable manufacturing supply chains pass through China."

Economists say for now, smartphone makers and other industries can use fac-

tories and suppliers in other parts of China. But a bigger threat looms if business is disrupted at ports in Shenzhen, Shanghai or nearby Ningbo.

They link Chinese factories that assemble most of the world's smartphones and computers, as well as medical devices, appliances and other goods, with foreign components suppliers and customers. A one-month slowdown at Shenzhen's Yantian Port last year caused a backlog of thousands of shipping containers and sent shockwaves through global supply chains.

"If [Yantian Port] has to be suspended, it will affect a lot of electronic imports and exports," said Iris Pang, chief China economist for ING.

Woman faces fraud charges for posing as wounded vet

Associated Press

A Rhode Island woman was charged in federal court Monday with fraudulently claiming to be a U.S. Marine Corps veteran with lung cancer in a scheme to collect hundreds of thousands of dollars in veterans benefits and charitable contributions.

Rhode Island U.S. Attorney Zachary Cunha said Sarah Jane Cavanaugh, 31, of Warwick, is charged with using forged or counterfeited military discharge certificates, wire fraud, fraudulently holding herself out to be a medal recipient with intent to obtain money, property or other tangible benefit, and aggravated identity theft.

There is no record of Cavanaugh ever serving in the U.S. military, Cunha said.

Cavanaugh appeared in U.S. District Court in Providence and was released on a \$50,000 unsecured bond. Her attorney did

not immediately respond to an email request for comment and the firm, Marin and Barrett Inc., told a reporter who called that they were busy Monday dealing with current client issues that need undivided attention.

Cavanaugh worked at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Providence. She's accused of accessing the records for a Marine who utilizes VA services and using them to falsify military discharge documents, and also using her work email to purchase and later display on a Marine uniform a Purple Heart and Bronze Star, according to court documents.

Cavanaugh did so to request financial assistance and falsely claim that she was being treated for lung cancer from exposure to burn pits in war zones and inhaling particulate matter from a bomb explosion, Cunha said.

Posing as a combat veteran, Cavanaugh collected \$207,000 from the Wounded Warrior program to pay for groceries and physical therapy, collected about \$18,500 in financial assistance from "Code of Support" in Virginia for mortgage payments, repairs to her home furnace, a gym membership and other bills, and \$4,700 from a fundraising website, Cunha said.

Claiming to be a Purple Heart and Bronze Star recipient, Cavanaugh collected \$16,000 from another charity that provides therapy for veterans through art programs, CreatiVets, according to court documents.

An investigation was launched after the Providence nonprofit HunterSeven contacted the Providence VA because they were suspicious of Cavanaugh's appeal to them. The organization helps veterans with cancer.

Poodles pop in popularity, but Labradors still No. 1 in US

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Labrador retrievers are still tugging hardest on U.S. dog lovers' heartstrings, but poodles just strutted back into the American Kennel Club's top five most popular dog breeds for the first time in nearly a quarter-century.

The club's annual popularity rankings come out Tuesday, drawn from more than 800,000 purebred puppies and older pooches that joined the nation's oldest canine registry last year.

With 197 recognized breeds, the list rang-

es from such familiar furry faces as Labs — No. 1 for an unprecedented 31 straight years — to the newly added Biewer terrier (making a strong debut at #82) and unusual pups like the hairless Xoloitzcuintli (#119).

There's plenty to dig into (like a dachshund, #10) and point out (like a pointer, #120). So we've rounded up (like a border collie, #31) some highlights:

■ After Labs, the top 10 are: French bulldogs, golden retrievers, German shepherds, poodles, bulldogs, beagles, Rottweilers, German shorthaired pointers and dach-

shunds.

■ Poodles reigned as top dog from 1960 to 1982 before falling off somewhat in popularity. But in the new statistics, they reclaimed the fifth spot for the first time since 1997. (The standard, miniature and toy sizes are all counted as one breed.)

■ The rarest breed last year was the Norwegian lundehund, consistently sparse in the U.S. The smallish dogs boast extra toes and unusual flexibility that once helped them climb Norwegian cliffs to hunt puffins nesting in narrow crevices.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Trooper SUV stops car from hitting runners

FL ST. PETERSBURG — A Florida state trooper said she was the last obstacle as a presumed drunken driver sped past barriers and toward runners preparing for a race across a major bridge.

The Florida Highway Patrol said Trooper Toni Schuck may have saved dozens of runners getting ready for an annual 6.2-mile race across the Sunshine Skyway Bridge.

Schuck used her Highway Patrol SUV to block the 52-year-old woman from continuing on the bridge. The woman had weaved the BMW around barriers meant to block traffic for the race and eluded other officers.

The BMW was moving fast and slammed into Schuck's vehicle in nearly a head-on collision. The woman faces driving under the influence and other charges.

Teacher's little library holds challenged books

GA SAVANNAH — A Georgia teacher has created his own library for sharing books that others have tried to ban.

Richard Clifton, an English teacher at the Savannah Arts Academy, started the "little free library" in his front yard during the pandemic to share books with his neighbors.

Clifton told WTOG-TV that he recently decided to focus on titles that some parents have sought to remove from school libraries in the United States. He chooses them from books the American Library Association

lists as having been challenged over the past five years.

Now the cupboard-sized library in his front yard holds about two dozen titles including Alice Walker's "The Color Purple," John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," books from J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" series and Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

Authorities think fires in Central Park were arson

NY NEW YORK — Plumes of white smoke from multiple small brush fires went spiraling up from the northern end of New York City's Central Park, and authorities said they were opening an arson investigation.

"We're going to take the approach that they were intentionally set," Fire Department spokesman Jim Long said.

Video posted to social media showed smoke drifting above the trees over a broad area in the park's Northern Woods section. Multiple pockets of fire were extinguished and there were no injuries, the fire department said.

County uses cameras to catch litterbugs

SC GREENWOOD — A South Carolina county is setting up cameras to catch people who litter.

Greenwood County is using trail cameras that take pictures when they detect movement and cameras that can detect trash or something else coming out of a moving vehicle and scan its license plate, The Index-Journal of Greenwood reported.

The trail cameras are set up

in places where illegal dumping frequently takes place.

Recently a camera captured a truck loaded with mattresses passing by and then a short time later, going past again empty, Greenwood County Public Works Director Rob Russian said.

Investigators checked a nearby illegal dump site and found the mattresses, Russian said.

Shops scramble as UPS misses ferry booking

MA NANTUCKET — Shops on Nantucket that rely on UPS to bring their goods to the tiny island are bracing for trouble after the shipping company failed to make ferry reservations for its trucks this summer.

The company missed the priority window to make reservations this year, and by the time it came to light, ferries were close to full capacity for large trucks, The Boston Globe reported.

A spokesperson for UPS said it's working to find other transportation to ensure packages are delivered on time. But some stores fear the error could end up slowing their business during the busiest time of the year.

It was not immediately clear what led to the error, which was first reported by Nantucket Magazine.

Circus rail cars set for refurbishment catch fire

NC SPRING HOPE — Nine railroad cars once owned by Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus that had been slated to be refurbished for passenger train service caught fire in North Caroli-

na, officials said.

The Nash County Sheriff's Office said in a news release that the decommissioned cars were just outside the town of Spring Hope.

The sheriff's office said the rail cars were inaccessible because they are located in a wooded area. A locomotive was sent to move the affected cars to make sure any remaining fires are properly extinguished, the news release said.

WITN reported four of the nine cars were destroyed.

City to appeal ruling on Columbus statue

NY SYRACUSE — A judge has ruled a statue of explorer Christopher Columbus must stay in downtown Syracuse, dealing a defeat to Mayor Ben Walsh's efforts to have it removed.

State Supreme Court Judge Gerard Neri relied partly on a 1990 covenant under which the city accepted private donations to pay for renovating the memorial. The covenant bound the city to maintain the statue for 23 years or for its "useful life," which still is in effect, Neri said, according to Syracuse.com.

After deliberations with a commission he had formed to study the issue, Walsh announced in October 2020 that he planned to remove the statue and replace it with a heritage site that honored Italian Americans as well as the contributions of Native Americans and other groups.

Walsh said he will appeal the judge's ruling to the state Supreme Court, Appellate Division, Syracuse.com reported.

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NCAA transformation may change tourney

Associated Press

College sports leaders are working to transform the top tier of NCAA athletics, from how Division I should be governed to what should be required of schools to compete at the highest level.

Changing the NCAA could lead to changes in its crown jewel event — the Division I men's college basketball tournament, the lucrative three-week, 68-team joyride that has become an American sports institution.

What's that mean?

How about an expanded bracket? Or more play-in games — just don't call them play-in games — and fewer opportunities for the small schools to upset the traditional powers?

"Well, it used to be a 32-team tournament, and it was a 48-team tournament, and it was 64. And then it was 65. And now it's 68," Atlantic Sun Commissioner Ted Gumbart said. "So I don't think there's any magic number to say, hey, you can't be 72 or 80. I think it's healthy."

How does an NCAA Tourna-

ment with all 351 D-I schools sound?

"You could have an all-comers tournament with just one more weekend," Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby said. "I think it's an idea that might have the nuggets of compromise that could be satisfactory."

The men's field of 68 for March Madness was set Sunday night. The games began with a First Four appetizer on Tuesday and Wednesday before the basketball bonanza commences Thursday across the country.

To be clear: The NCAA's Division I transformation committee, a group of 21 administrators and university presidents co-chaired by Southeastern Conference commissioner Greg Sankey and Ohio athletic director Julie Cromer, has not been tasked with remodeling March Madness.

The committee's charge is far broader, tackling issues such as membership requirements, governance and what the NCAA calls the "student-athlete experience." They are expected to return a report to the Division I

Board of Directors in August.

"At this point, I think it's more likely the committee would identify a minimum standard to be in Division I and within that, a minimum standard, to have full access to Division I benefits," Cromer said. "And from there, the sport-by-sport review could emanate."

Buried beneath the bureaucracy are a few essential questions that will determine the not-so-distant future of March Madness: What schools should be in Division I? Can schools with massive disparities in athletic budgets and resources continue to compete against each other for national championships? If so, what type of access to championship events should schools from conferences that have no realistic chance to win them receive?

And, of course, there is a question of money. The Division I men's basketball tournament accounts for most of the NCAA's more than \$1 billion in revenue, with the payout projected to be about \$870 million in 2022. That revenue funds

NCAA operations and championship events in dozens of other sports and about \$670 million is set to be distributed to the schools through conferences.

How that pie should be divided in the future will no doubt be a point of contention. For basketball fans, the most obvious changes would be the size of the bracket and who gets in.

Currently, each of 32 Division I conferences receives an automatic bid for its champion. The majority of those conferences, from the American East to Western Athletic, usually get just their automatic qualifier into the field, access that also comes with several million in revenue. Last year, one unit earned for making the NCAA men's tournament was worth \$2.02 million paid out over six years.

That's not a much for a Power Five league such as Bowlsby's Big 12, the SEC or Big Ten, which have media rights deals worth billions based mostly on their strong football programs. For smaller conferences, that money is significant.

Big Ten has 3 players on AP All-America first team

Associated Press

Keegan Murray has given Iowa a first-team Associated Press All-American for the third straight year, and Kofi Cockburn has made it two in a row for Illinois — not bad for a couple of programs that haven't had a whole lot of them.

The Fighting Illini never had a first-team pick until Ayo Dosunmu made it last season when Cockburn was voted to the second team. And the Hawkeyes had not had a first-team selection since the 1952 season until Luka Garza, last year's AP player of the year, made his second consecutive appearance on the five-man team.

Throw in Wisconsin's Johnny Davis and the Big Ten was well represented Tuesday on the AP's first team, which also included Kentucky big man Oscar Tshiebwe — this year's player of the year favorite — and Kansas guard Ochai Agbaji.

"I've had to learn from a lot of guys last year just what it takes to be great at this level," said Murray, a sophomore guard from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who is fourth nationally in scoring at 23.6 points per game heading into the NCAA Tournament.

"I mean, it's kind of like everything just got put together for me," Murray added, "just all the hard work that we put in."

The fifth-seeded Hawkeyes, who won the Big Ten Tournament title on Sunday, will open their NCAA tourney on Thursday against Richmond.

"We struggled earlier on this year a little bit and now we're doing really well," Murray said, "and it's just a great feeling."

All the first-team picks have their teams positioned to make a postseason run.

Cockburn, the bruising forward from Kingston, Jamaica, and the fourth-seeded Fighting Illini play Chattanooga on Friday,

the same day Davis and the third-seeded Badgers open against Colgate. Tshiebwe has Kentucky seeded second going into Thursday's game against Saint Peter's. Agbaji and the top-seeded Jayhawks open against one of the play-in teams.

Davis is the Badgers' third first-team All-American, joining Alando Tucker in 2007 and Frank Kaminsky in 2015, while Tshiebwe is the first for Kentucky since Tyler Ulis in 2016. Agbaji gives the Jayhawks a first-team pick for the third time in six years after Frank Mason in 2017 and Devonte Graham in 2018.

Just like Murray with the Hawkeyes, Agbaji already has some experience cutting down nets this season.

The Big 12 player of the year led Kansas past Texas Tech in the conference title game, adding tournament MVP honors to a growing collection of hardware that Agbaji has earned during his senior season.

NFL dealing begins with unofficial flurry

Associated Press

The NFL's "legal tampering period" in free agency began Monday with a slew of deals even as many teams released veterans to clear salary cap space before the league's business year begins Wednesday.

The Jacksonville Jaguars, who have the first overall selection in the draft next month for the second straight year, got busy early.

The Jaguars agreed to sign Arizona receiver Christian Kirk, Washington guard Brandon Scherff, Atlanta linebacker Foyesade Oluokun, New York Jets defensive tackle Folorunso "Foley" Fatukasi, New York Giants tight end Evan Engram and Las Vegas receiver Zay Jones, according to a person familiar with the negotiations.

Also agreeing to move on were New England cornerback J.C. Jackson, Los Angeles Rams defensive tackle Sebastian Joseph-Day and New York Giants defensive tackle Austin Johnson, all to the Los Angeles Chargers; linebacker Haason Reddick from Carolina to Philadelphia; guard Laken Tomlinson from San Francisco to the New York Jets; tight end

C.J. Uzomah from Cincinnati to the Jets; running back Chase Edmonds from Arizona to Miami; offensive lineman Ted Karras from New England to Cincinnati and offensive lineman Alex Cappa from Tampa Bay to Cincinnati; offensive lineman Rodger Saffold from Tennessee to Buffalo; quarterback Mitchell Trubisky from Buffalo to Pittsburgh; safety Xavier Woods from Minnesota to Carolina; guard Austin Corbett from the Rams to Carolina; and defensive tackle D.J. Jones from San Francisco to Denver — with many more switches to come.

Staying put are Tampa Bay center Ryan Jensen, a key protector of the no-longer-retired Tom Brady; RB James Conner and QB Colt McCoy with the Cardinals; safeties Devin McCourty with the Patriots and Quandre Diggs with the Seahawks, who also retained tight end Will Dissly; All-Pro kick returner Braxton Berrios with the Jets; defensive end Emmanuel Ogbah with the Dolphins; linebacker Preston Smith with the Packers; center Brian Allen and tackle Joseph Noteboom with the Rams; center Mitch

Morse with the Bills; linebacker Alex Anzalone with the Lions; center Ben Jones and tight end Geoff Swaim with the Titans; and offensive tackle Chuks Okorafor with the Steelers.

Noteboom is nearly certain to be the Rams' starting left tackle because NFL Man of the Year Andrew Whitworth has retired.

Set free and able to sign with another team even before Wednesday were Browns receiver Jarvis Landry; Packers linebacker Za'Darius Smith and versatile offensive lineman Billy Turner; Bears nose tackle Eddie Goldman; and Panthers cornerback A.J. Bouye and defensive end Morgan Fox.

Yes, 32 teams are in scramble mode, for a variety of reasons. Some desperately need to get under the \$208.2 million cap, which is up by nearly \$26 million after two pandemic-impacted seasons. The Packers, Saints, Rams, 49ers and Chiefs are among those.

Others are clearing out players with large cap hits to add more spending room or because they plan to bring in replacements. Such is the case in

Cleveland with Amari Cooper about to become the No. 1 wide-out, so Landry is gone despite the many positives he brought to the Browns.

The biggest scramble, of course, centers on adding players for positions of need. Trubisky in Pittsburgh makes some sense with Ben Roethlisberger retired. Reddick, from the Philly area and a sack force in recent years, should boost a defense in need of exactly what he brings. Miami badly needs a reliable running back and gets one in Edmonds, who would have been a backup to Conner in Arizona.

Trubisky, 27, joins the Steelers after spending 2021 backing up Josh Allen in Buffalo following a flame-out in Chicago. The second overall pick in the 2017 draft spent four uneven seasons with the Bears, going 29-21 as a starter while passing for 10,652 yards with 64 TDs and 38 interceptions.

Trubisky joins a quarterbacks room that includes longtime Pittsburgh backup Mason Rudolph. The team is also expected to bring back Dwayne Haskins, their third quarterback last season.

Australian Smith wins Players with big putts, gutsy shot

Associated Press

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — Cameron Smith was unflappable as ever on a TPC Sawgrass stage that causes so much anxiety.

Through 13 holes in the final round of The Players Championship, Smith had only one par. With a two-stroke lead on the par-3 17th hole and staring at an island, he delivered the boldest shot of his career. When he punched out from under the trees into the water on the closing hole, he never panicked.

Only after the 28-year-old Australian capped off a long week with the biggest win of his career did he lose control of his emotions.

This was more about family than his \$3.6 million prize, his three-year ex-

emption to the majors and his five-year exemption on the PGA Tour.

Waiting for him off the 18th green were his mother Sharon and his sister Melanie, whom he had not seen in more than two years because of travel restrictions Down Under from the pandemic. They arrived a week before The Players Championship to see Smith in his adopted hometown of Ponte Vedra Beach.

Then he gave them the best treat of all. "I haven't seen them in two years. It's really cool to have them here," Smith said, his voice choking slightly. "My main priority really was just to hang out with them and golf was second for these few weeks. It's nice to see them and nice to get a win for them."

It was quite the joy ride, a dynamic

conclusion to the longest week at The Players Championship filled with five days of bad weather and, ultimately, the high drama the Stadium Course typically delivers.

Smith one-putted eight of his last nine holes, including a birdie on the par-3 17th and a 3-foot bogey putt after hitting into the water on the 18th. That gave him a 6-under 66 for a one-shot victory over Anirban Lahiri of India.

Leading by two on the 17th, 135 yards to the hole on an island green, Smith split the difference in the 12 feet that separated the flag from the water. The ball ended up 4 feet away and he made his record-tying 10th birdie of the round.

Turns out he needed that final birdie.

Towns scores NBA-best 60 points in win

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Karl-Anthony Towns had a team-record 60 points — the most scored in the NBA this season — and the Minnesota Timberwolves outlasted the San Antonio Spurs 149-139 on Monday night.

Towns shot 19-for-31 and grabbed 17 rebounds in topping his previous best of 56 points against Atlanta on March 28, 2018. Lakers star LeBron James and Hawks point guard Trae Young previously shared league-high honors this season with 56 points.

Minnesota's 7-foot All-Star capped his dazzling performance by draining a three-pointer with 1:39 remaining, shortly after making one of two free throws to reach 57 points.

"I told Coach before the game, 'Hey listen, we need this win. I'll do whatever it takes,'" Towns said.

He became the first NBA player with 60 points and 17 rebounds in a game since Shaquille O'Neal had 61 and 23 for the Los Angeles Lakers on March 6, 2000.

San Antonio has lost two straight since Gregg Popovich earned his 1,336th career victory to become the winningest coach in NBA history. The Spurs have dropped seven of nine and are 2-3 during a seven-game homestand, their longest of the season.

Spurs forward Keldon Johnson had 34 points, Dejounte Murray added 30 points and 12 assists, and Lonnie Walker IV scored

22.

Warriors 126, Wizards 112: Stephen Curry scored 47 points on his 34th birthday, Draymond Green returned from a 29-game absence to ignite the defense and host Golden State beat Washington.

Curry shot 16-for-25 and made seven three-pointers.

Green, who had been sidelined with a disk injury in his lower back, finished with six points, seven rebounds and six assists in 20 minutes.

Kristaps Porzingis scored 25 points and Kenatavious Caldwell-Pope had 19 in the Wizards' fourth straight loss, fifth of six and sixth in a row on the road.

Nuggets 114, 76ers 110: Nikola Jokic had 22 points and 13 rebounds to lead Denver past Joel Embiid and visiting Philadelphia in a battle of MVP contenders. Embiid finished with 34 points and took a scary fall. Jeff Green clobbered Embiid on a drive to the basket with 3:13 left and the All-Star center landed on his tailbone.

Denver rookie Bones Hyland then stole the show from the All-Star big men, burying his fourth three of the fourth quarter for a 110-108 lead that the Nuggets held onto.

Bucks 117, Jazz 111: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 30 points and 14 rebounds to help Milwaukee rally and then fend off host Utah in the final seconds.

Jrue Holiday had 29 points and seven assists, and Khris Middleton scored 23 for the

Bucks.

Brook Lopez and George Hill both returned to the Milwaukee lineup. Lopez had been sidelined with a back injury since the season opener and missed 67 games. Hill sat out 16 with neck soreness.

Cavaliers 120, Clippers 111 (OT): Rookie Evan Mobley scored a season-high 30 points and Darius Garland had 24 points and 13 assists as host Cleveland beat Los Angeles.

Isaac Okoro added 20 points, including two free throws to open the extra period. The Cavs never trailed after that.

Ivica Zubac had 24 points, 14 rebounds and four assists, and Amir Coffey scored 19 for the Clippers, who had only nine players in uniform.

Raptors 114, Lakers 103: Scottie Barnes scored 15 of his 21 points in the first quarter and Toronto held off a late rally to win at Los Angeles.

The Raptors led by 24 in the first as the Lakers were soundly defeated for the second consecutive night.

Kings 112, Bulls 103: De'Aaron Fox had 34 points, six assists and six rebounds as host Sacramento beat stumbling Chicago.

Hawks 122, Trail Blazers 113: Trae Young scored 21 of his 46 points in the third period and host Atlanta rallied from a 15-point second-half deficit to beat Portland.

Hornets 134, Thunder 116: Terry Rozier scored 30 points and Charlotte won at Oklahoma City.

Crouse's hat trick carries Coyotes past Senators

Associated Press

OTTAWA, Ontario — Lawson Crouse had a hat trick, Nick Schmaltz extended his point streak with a goal, and the Arizona Coyotes beat the Ottawa Senators 5-3 on Monday night.

Schmaltz has 15 points in his last six games (six goals, nine assists) and Crouse's goals came three different ways: one at even strength, one on the power play and shorthanded.

"It's a special feeling," Crouse said. "I've said it in a few interviews now: You always want to be out there and try to make the biggest difference you can make. And to get my first hat trick tonight in front of some friends and family, it's a really good feeling. To cap it off with a

win makes it that much more special."

Barrett Hayton added an empty-net goal for the Coyotes and Scott Wedgewood made 40 saves to pick up his 10th win of the season.

Arizona takes the season series, having beaten the Senators 8-5 in Phoenix.

"I think there was a stretch over 20-some minutes that they didn't have a shot and we've got to find ways to score and our power play can't give up a shorthanded goal," Ottawa coach D.J. Smith said. "We tie it in the third after having the puck the whole time and we make a real careless play and you lose the game."

Josh Norris had two goals for the Senators, Connor Brown al-

so scored and Filip Gustavsson stopped 12 shots in his first NHL start since Feb. 20.

"I thought we deserved a lot better," Norris said. "We did a lot of really good things and we've just got to take care of the puck, not give up a shorty and probably win the game so it's frustrating."

Ottawa trailed 3-2 to start the third, but tied things up at the seven-minute mark when Brown buried a Brady Tkachuk rebound. The Coyotes regained the lead 16 seconds later as Schmaltz took a pass in front and beat a sprawled Gustavsson.

An eventful first period ended with the teams tied at 2. In the opening minutes, Tkachuk went hard to the net and Norris was

there to jam home the rebound.

"In that kind of a game, you can look at it two ways," Arizona coach Andre Tourigny said. "You can look at our performance, and really, it was not very good. Let's not kid ourselves. But you can look at it as ... even though it was not as good as we wanted, we found a way to stay with it. We knew we could win the game even if we did not play the way we wanted to."

Crouse then scored back-to-back goals for the Coyotes. The first was a great shot high glove side and the second was on the power play as he tipped a Shayne Gostisbehere point shot.

Norris tied the game on the power play with his second of the night.