

Russian onslaught hits Ukraine civilians

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Rescuers searched for survivors Thursday in the ruins of a theater blown apart by a Russian airstrike in the besieged city of Mariupol, while scores of Ukrainians across the country were killed in ferocious urban attacks on a school, a hostel and other sites.

Hundreds of civilians had been taking shelter in the grand, columned theater in central Mariupol after their homes were destroyed in three weeks of fighting in the southern port city of 430,000.

More than a day after the airstrike, there were no reports of deaths. With communications disrupted across the city, there were also conflicting reports on whether anyone had emerged from the rubble.

“We hope and we think that some people who stayed in the shelter under the theater could survive,” Petro Andrushchenko, an official with the mayor’s office, told The Associated Press. He said the building had a relatively modern basement bomb shelter designed to withstand airstrikes.

Other officials had said earlier that some people had gotten out. Ukraine’s ombuds-woman, Ludmyla Denisova, said on the Telegram messaging app that the shelter had held up.

Satellite imagery on Monday from Maxar technology showed huge white letters on the pavement in front of and behind the theater spelling out “CHILDREN” in Russian — “DETI” — to alert warplanes to those inside.

Russia’s military denied bombing the theater or anyplace else in Mariupol on Wednesday.

The strike against the theater was part of a furious bombardment of civilian sites in multiple cities over the past few days.

In the northern city of Chernihiv, at least 53 people had been brought to morgues over the past 24 hours, killed amid heavy Russian air attacks and ground fire, the local governor, Viacheslav Chaus, told Ukrainian TV on Thursday.

Ukraine’s emergency services said a mother, father and three of their children, including 3-year-old twins, were killed when a Chernihiv hostel was shelled.

Civilians were hiding in basements and shelters across the embattled city of 280,000.

“The city has never known such nightmarish, colossal losses and destruction,” Chaus said.

At least 21 people were killed when Russian artillery destroyed a school and a community center before dawn in Merefa, near the northeast city of Kharkiv, according to

Mayor Veniamin Sitov. The region has seen heavy bombardment in a bid by stalled Russian forces to advance.

In eastern Ukraine, a municipal pool complex where pregnant women and women with children were taking shelter was also hit Wednesday, according to Pavlo Kyrylenko, head of the Donetsk regional administration. There was no word on casualties in that strike.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for more help for his country in a video address to German lawmakers, saying thousands of people have been killed, including 108 children. He also referred to the dire situation in Mariupol, saying: “Everything is a target for them.”

The address began with a delay because of a technical problem caused by an attack close to where Zelenskyy was speaking, Bundestag deputy speaker Katrin Goering-Eckardt said.

Zelenskyy’s office said Russian airstrikes hit the Kalynivka and Brovary suburbs of the capital, Kyiv. Emergency authorities in Kyiv said a fire broke out in a 16-story apartment building hit by remnants of a downed Russian rocket, and one person was killed.

The U.N. Security Council planned to meet Thursday on the crisis.

Pentagon ups size, scope of aid to Ukrainian military

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will expand the size and scope of weaponry being rushed to Ukraine, the Biden administration said Wednesday, including for the first time armed drones capable of inflicting significant damage to Russian ground units while U.S. officials continue to search for sophisticated anti-aircraft systems owned by European allies.

The disclosure coincided with President Joe Biden’s pledge of an additional \$800 million in security assistance for Ukraine, and after his Ukrainian counterpart, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, made an emotional appeal to Congress for the United States either to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine or to provide fighter jets and powerful surface-to-air weapons

that would enable Zelenskyy’s military to shoot down Russian aircraft themselves.

“I need to protect our sky,” Zelenskyy said, calling on the U.S. “to do more” in “the darkest time for our country.” He asked for the “S-300 and other similar systems” that can take out aircraft flying at high altitudes.

Hours later, in an address of his own, Biden thanked Zelenskyy for his “passionate message” and said that it had been “convincing” and “significant.”

“This new package on its own is going to provide unprecedented assistance to Ukraine,” Biden said, adding that the inclusion of drones “demonstrates our commitment to sending our most cutting-edge systems to Ukraine for its defense.”

Biden has declined to provide Ukraine

with fighter jets, even after Poland floated a proposal that would have transferred their Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter jets, which Ukraine already operates, to U.S. custody so that Washington — not Warsaw — could send them on to Ukraine. The president declined to discuss the jets Wednesday.

“I’m not going to comment on that right now,” Biden said. “I’m not going to comment on anything other than what I told you.”

The new aid package approved Wednesday includes 100 Switchblade drones, small unmanned aircraft packed with explosives that crash into targets in “kamikaze” fashion, said a U.S. official, who, like some others, spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the subject’s sensitivity.

DOD cuts requests for F-35s by 35%

Bloomberg News

The Pentagon will request 61 F-35s in its next budget, 33 fewer of the stealth jets from Lockheed Martin than previously planned, according to people familiar with the spending blueprint.

The Defense Department had planned to fund 94 of the fighters in fiscal 2023, up from the 85 in this year's budget, according to the most recent "Selected Acquisition Report" on its costliest program.

The proposed reduction for the F-35 may be the most controversial procurement item in a national security budget request that's expected to top \$770 billion for the year that begins Oct. 1.

The F-35 is currently being deployed to Eastern Europe in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Six F-35s from the Air Force's 34th Fighter Squadron are flying "air policing" missions from Estonia and Romania. German Defense Minister Chris-

tine Lambrecht announced Monday that Germany would buy 35 of the warplanes.

But the proposed slowdown in purchases may raise questions among lawmakers, Lockheed investors and overseas customers about a lessening of the U.S. commitment to a program projected to cost \$398 billion in development and acquisition plus an additional \$1.2 trillion to operate and maintain the fleet over 66 years. The people familiar with the budget plan asked not to be identified in advance of the budget release in coming weeks.

The rationale for the reduction won't be officially explained until the proposed Pentagon budget is made public.

But the request comes as negotiations with Bethesda, Md.-based Lockheed over the next F-35 contract — for about 400 planes — are going slower than anticipated. And F-35s remain hobbled by flawed execution of a crucial upgrade of their software

and hardware capabilities that's estimated to cost \$14 billion.

Along with the proposed F-35 reduction, the Air Force will request 24 non-stealthy F-15EX jets built by Boeing Co., up from 14 planned in the fiscal 2021 budget. The EX model carries more ordnance than the F-35 and is estimated to be cheaper to fly. Still, the service plans to purchase many more F-35s than EX jets.

Asked about the cutback in planned F-35 purchases, Laura Seal, spokeswoman for the Defense Department's F-35 program office, said the budget request can be discussed "once it is delivered and released, but not before." Spokespersons for the Air Force, the largest customer for F-35s, and the Navy made similar comments.

The Air Force will request 33 F-35As instead of the 48 planned, the Navy will seek 13 of its version instead of 26 and the Marine Corps will seek 15 rather than 20.

Biden's 'pivot' toward China entangled by Russia

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden set out to finally complete the "pivot to Asia," a long sought adjustment of U.S. foreign policy to better reflect the rise of America's most significant military and economic competitor: China.

But Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has made that vexing move even more complicated. China's government has vacillated between full embrace and more measured responses as Russian President Vladimir Putin prosecutes his war, making the decisions for Biden far more layered.

That leaves the Biden administration needing to focus East and West at the same time, balancing not simply economic imperatives but military ones as well.

"It's difficult. It's expensive," Kurt Campbell, the coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs on the

White House National Security Council, said during a recent forum of maintaining a high-level U.S. focus in two regions. "But it's also essential, and I believe we're entering a period where that's what will be required of the United States and of this generation of Americans."

The president has been deeply invested in rallying NATO and Western allies to respond to Russia with crippling sanctions, supplying an overmatched Ukraine military with \$2 billion in military assistance — including \$800 million in new aid announced Wednesday — and addressing a growing humanitarian crisis.

Eastern flank NATO allies, including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania, have made clear to the Biden administration that they want the U.S. to increase its military presence in the region and do more to address the worst humanitarian

crisis in Europe since World War II. More than 3 million Ukrainian refugees have fled their country in recent weeks.

Though the war in Ukraine has dominated Biden's focus of late, White House officials insist they haven't lost sight of China — and are watching intently to see how Xi Jinping decides to play his hand.

In recent months, Biden has announced the sale of nuclear submarines to Australia and raised the profile of the Indo-Pacific security dialogue known as the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the United States). He's also called out China for military provocations against Taiwan, human rights abuses against ethnic minorities and efforts to squelch pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong.

Biden's national security team was somewhat surprised that Pacific partners — Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Singa-

pore and South Korea — moved so quickly to hit Russia with sanctions following the invasion, according to a U.S. official familiar with the administration's thinking.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to talk about private discussions, said there was a recognition among the Pacific allies that Beijing is watching how the world responds to Russia as China calculates how aggressive it can be with its smaller neighbors in the region. In backing sanctions, the Pacific nations were trying to send a message to Xi as well as Putin, the official added.

From the first days of his presidency, Biden has said the aims of his China policy are to find ways to cooperate with Beijing on issues of mutual interest — such as stopping North Korea from developing nuclear weapons — and to avoid confrontation.

Fewer in US file for jobless claims last week

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Fewer Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week as layoffs continue to fall amid a strong job market rebound.

Jobless claims fell by 15,000 to 214,000 for the week ending March 12, down from the previous week's 229,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. First-time applications for jobless aid generally track the pace of layoffs.

The four-week average for

claims, which compensates for weekly volatility, fell to 223,000 from the previous week's 231,750.

In total, 1,419,000 Americans — a 50-year low — were collecting jobless aid the week that ended March 5, down 71,000 from the week before that.

Earlier this month, the government reported that employers added a robust 678,000 jobs in February, the largest monthly total since July. The unemployment rate dropped to 3.8%,

from 4% in January, extending a sharp decline in joblessness to its lowest level since before the pandemic erupted two years ago.

U.S. businesses posted a near-record level of open jobs in January — 11.3 million — a trend that has helped pad workers' pay and added to inflationary pressures.

The Federal Reserve launched a high-risk effort Wednesday to tame the worst inflation since the early 1980s,

raising its benchmark short-term interest rate and signaling up to six additional rate hikes this year.

The Fed's quarter-point hike in its key rate, which it had pinned near zero since the pandemic recession struck two years ago, marks the start of its effort to curb the high inflation that followed the recovery from the recession. The rate hikes will eventually mean higher loan rates for many consumers and businesses.

US Olympian Liu and dad targeted in China spy case

Associated Press

U.S. Olympic figure skater Alysa Liu and her father Arthur Liu — a former political refugee — were among those targeted in a spying operation that the Justice Department alleges was ordered by the Chinese government, the elder Liu said late Wednesday.

Arthur Liu told The Associated Press he had been contacted by the FBI last October, and warned about the scheme just as his 16-year-old daughter was preparing for the Winter Olympics that took place in Beijing in February. The father said he did not tell his daughter about the issue so as not to scare her or distract her from the competition.

"We believed Alysa had a very good chance of making the Olympic Team and truly were very scared," Arthur Liu said.

The Justice Department earlier Wednesday announced charges against five men accused of acting on behalf of the Chinese government for a series of brazen and wide-ranging schemes to stalk and harass Chinese dissidents in the United States. Arthur Liu said he and his daughter were included in the criminal complaint as "Dissident 3" and "family member," respectively.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said he was

"not aware of the specifics" surrounding the allegations, but said China is "firmly opposed to the U.S. slandering by making an issue of this out of thin air."

"China always asks Chinese citizens to abide by the laws and regulations of host countries, and we would never ask our citizens to engage in activities that violate local laws," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing Thursday. "The so-called transnational harassment schemes are just trumped up."

Liu said he took a stand against China's bullying by allowing his daughter to compete at the recent Olympic Winter Games, where she placed 7th in the women's event.

"This is her moment. This is her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to compete at the Olympic Games. I'm not going to let them stop her from going and I'll do whatever I can to make sure she's safe and I'm willing to make sacrifices so she can enjoy the moment," Arthur Liu said.

The father said he agreed to let his daughter compete with assurances from the State Department and U.S. Olympic Committee that Alysa Liu would be closely protected and kept safe while competing in China. They said she would have at least two people escorting her at all times.

Oz vows to give up dual Turkish citizenship if elected US senator

Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Mehmet Oz, warding off criticism from a key rival in Pennsylvania's heated Republican primary race for U.S. Senate, said Wednesday that he will renounce his dual citizenship in Turkey if he is elected, as the expensive campaign took on a harder and more personal edge.

Oz — the celebrity heart surgeon best known as daytime TV's host of "The Dr. Oz Show" — made the statement hours after disputing a media report that claimed he said he planned to forgo security clearances in the Senate to maintain his dual citizenship.

Until Wednesday, Oz said he'd keep his dual citizenship so he has legal power in Turkey to make health care decisions for his Alzheimer's-stricken mother. He now says it's become a campaign distraction and, if he wins, he will renounce Turkish citizenship before being sworn in to the Senate.

Senate historians have been unable to find a U.S. senator who knowingly maintained dual citizenship. The only comparable situation they found is Texas Sen. Ted Cruz renouncing his Canadian citizenship in 2014 after learning that he had received it by virtue of being born in Canada.

Oz was born in the U.S. to Turk-

ish parents and, if elected, would be the first Muslim U.S. senator.

Oz said there would be no reason for him to give up security clearances anyway, speaking on Philadelphia's WPHT-AM radio.

"I was born in America, I'm a proud participant in American society, I've given up everything to run because I love this country so much," Oz said. "I have no intention of doing anything that would harm this country."

Still, the scrutiny of Oz's dual citizenship gave the campaign a harder and more personal edge, and Oz accused one primary opponent, former hedge fund CEO David McCormick, of "bigoted attacks."

McCormick's campaign on Wednesday brought out a sitting senator to criticize Oz's purported willingness to waive security clearances in the Senate to keep his dual citizenship. On a conference call with reporters organized by McCormick's campaign, Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan, of Alaska, said senators routinely receive briefings from intelligence agencies involving material that is not shared with America's closest allies.

"To me, it's inconceivable that you would make a decision that would somehow limit your access to this kind of intelligence that you need to do the job," he said.

SUVs, trucks likelier than cars to hit walkers

Associated Press

DETROIT — Drivers of bigger vehicles such as pickup trucks and SUVs are more likely to hit pedestrians while making turns than drivers of cars, according to a new study.

The research released Thursday by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety points to the increasing popularity of larger vehicles as a possible factor in rising pedestrian deaths on U.S. roads. The authors also questioned whether wider pillars holding up roofs of the larger vehicles make it harder for drivers to spot people walking near the corners of vehicles.

“The link between these vehicle types and certain common pedestrian crashes points to another way that the increase in SUVs on the roads might be

changing the crash picture,” said Jessica Cicchino, a study author and vice president of research for the institute.

Although the study mentioned previous research showing blind spots caused by the “A-pillars” between the windshield and the cabin, the authors said more study is needed to link the blind spots to the increased deaths.

In 2020, the last year for which complete statistics are available, 6,519 pedestrians were killed in the United States, according to government data. That’s up 59% since 2009, and a 4% increase from 2019, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said.

Over the same time period, SUV and pickup truck sales have skyrocketed. In 2009, pickup trucks, SUVs and vans account-

ed for 47% of all U.S. new vehicle sales, according to Motorintelligence.com. Last year, light trucks were more than three-quarters of new vehicle sales.

Not all SUVs and pickup trucks have the blind spots, though. Compact SUVs, for instance, are now the largest part of the U.S. market.

The study also found that the larger vehicles were more likely than cars to be involved in crashes where pedestrians were standing, walking or running near the edge of the road and away from intersections.

Researchers studied federal crash statistics in which pedestrians were killed, as well as all pedestrian crashes reported to police in North Carolina from 2010 through 2018.

The North Carolina statistics

showed that pickups were 42% more likely than cars to hit pedestrians while making left turns. SUVs were 23% more likely to hit people than cars. There was no significant difference in the odds of a right turn crash for the different types of vehicles, the study showed.

Outside of intersections, pickups were 80% more likely than cars to hit a pedestrian along the road. SUVs were 61% more likely and minivans were 45% more likely to hit people than cars, IIHS said.

Ford, General Motors and Stellantis, which sell the bulk of the large SUVs and pickups in the U.S., all declined comment on the study. Messages were left seeking comment from Auto Innovators, an industry trade group.

Diplomats nearing new Iran nuclear agreement

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As the war in Ukraine rages on, diplomats trying to salvage the languishing 2015 Iran nuclear deal have been forging ahead with negotiations despite distractions caused by the conflict. They now appear to be near the cusp of a deal that would bring the United States back into the accord and bring Iran back into compliance with limits on its nuclear program.

After 11 months of on-and-off talks in Vienna, U.S. officials and others have said only a very small number of issues remain to be resolved. Meanwhile, Russia appears to have backed down on a threat to crater an agreement over Ukraine-related sanctions that had dampened prospects for a quick deal.

That leaves an agreement — or at least an agreement in principle — up to political leaders in Washington and Tehran.

But, as has been frequently the case, both Iran and the U.S. have said those decisions must be made by the other side, leaving a resolution in limbo even as all involved have said the matter is urgent and must be resolved as soon as possible.

“We are close to a possible deal, but we’re not there yet,” State Department spokesman Ned Price said Wednesday. “We are going to find out in the near term whether we’re able to get there.”

Also Wednesday in Berlin, German Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger said work “on drafting a final text has been completed” and “the necessary political decisions now need to be taken in capitals.”

Reentering the 2015 deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, has been a priority for the Biden administration since it took office.

Fla. massacre families to get millions in settlement

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Federal officials confirmed Wednesday that the U.S. Department of Justice has reached a multimillion-dollar settlement with the families of most of those killed or wounded in a 2018 Florida high school massacre over the FBI’s failure to stop the gunman, even though it had received information he intended to attack.

Attorneys for 16 of the 17 killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland and some of those wounded previously announced in November that they had reached a monetary settlement with the government over the FBI’s failure to investigate a tip it received about a month before the massacre. The 17th family chose not to sue.

The government’s announcement Wednesday said the settlement resolves 40 cases connected to the shooting for \$127.5

million. The settlement does not amount to an admission of fault by the United States, according to a Justice Department news release.

About five weeks before the Feb. 14, 2018, shooting, an FBI tip line received a call saying a former Stoneman Douglas student, Nikolas Cruz, had bought guns and planned to “slip into a school and start shooting the place up.”

“I know he’s going to explode,” the caller told the FBI.

But that information was never forwarded to the FBI’s South Florida office and Cruz was never contacted. He had been expelled from the school a year earlier and had a long history of emotional and behavioral problems.

Cruz, 23, pleaded guilty last October to 17 counts of first-degree murder. He will receive either a death sentence or life in prison after a penalty trial that is scheduled to start in April.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Water district says fired worker locked accounts

ME MADISON — A Maine water district said its former superintendent locked its board of trustees out of key systems when he was on his way out.

The Anson-Madison Water District in Madison said the former superintendent changed email and Amazon account passwords as well as locking trustees out of financial, mapping and billing applications. The Bangor Daily News reported that the trustees filed a lawsuit via their attorney in U.S. District Court in Bangor.

The trustees fired the superintendent in November. His attorney told the Daily News that “there are disputed facts on how this all took place.” The attorney said he and the former superintendent planned to meet with the district.

‘Little Miss Nobody’ ID’d 60 years later with DNA

AZ PRESCOTT — “Little Miss Nobody” finally has a name.

The Yavapai County Sheriff’s office said Tuesday the previously unidentified little girl whose burned remains were found over 60 years ago in the Arizona desert was 4-year-old Sharon Lee Gallegos, of New Mexico. The child’s remains were found on July 31, 1960, partially buried in a wash in Congress, Ariz. Her age was then estimated at between 3 and 6 years old.

Sharon Lee Gallegos was reportedly abducted from behind her home in Alamogordo, N.M., on July 21, 1960, a little over a

week before her body was found. Authorities have said they do not know who took and killed the child.

The remains were exhumed to get DNA samples.

Bills to allow betting on horse races with apps

SC COLUMBIA — A group of lawmakers considering how to support the horse industry in South Carolina is suggesting the state should allow legalized betting on horse races.

Bills filed in the House and Senate would limit betting to only horse races through online apps where bettors would have to already have money deposited into their accounts. The money made on the app could create horse therapy programs for veterans, public equestrian trails and horse care programs for inmates or troubled teens, supporters said.

Drug task force leader accused of stealing cash

PA HARRISBURG — The fired head of Lancaster County’s drug task force was charged Tuesday with stealing more than \$200,000 in money seized or forfeited by court orders during drug investigations.

State prosecutors filed charges against John E. Burkhart, 56, of theft and tampering with evidence and government records, as a grand jury alleged he had been “secretly pocketing money and diverting it to his own use.”

Burkhart was hired as the officer in charge of the drug task force in 2011. He was fired by

Lancaster District Attorney Heather Adams in March 2020, allegedly for poor management skills and falsifying a report. Three months later, Adams made public that some \$150,000 in cash seized in drug cases was not accounted for and that she had brought in the attorney general’s office to investigate.

Animal rescue founder faces federal charges

OR PORTLAND — One of the founders of a Northeast Portland-based pet rescue and adoption organization is now facing federal fraud conspiracy charges months after Multnomah County animal authorities seized over 100 animals from the organization.

Court documents obtained by KOIN-TV say Tori Lynn Head is accused of charging Woofin Palooza customers “fake appointment fees,” failing to reimburse payment for spay and neuter services, mislabeling animal drugs and improperly charging customers to treat sick animals.

“From at least December 2019 through January 2021, on more than 280 occasions, defendant Tori Lynn Head and others made material misrepresentations about the health and behavior of animals to customers,” according to the federal court document filed March 10.

Official apologizes after mock ‘slave auction’

NC PITTSBORO — A North Carolina schools superintendent has apologized for a mock “slave auction” in which white middle-schoolers pretended to sell their Black classmates.

“Actions such as these, they just do not reflect who we are as a school system,” Chatham County Schools Superintendent Anthony Jackson said after parents raised an outcry. “And I say, unapologetically, will not be tolerated in the school system.”

The school board adopted some policy changes and will also review the student code of conduct and discipline policies involving acts of racism, Jackson said.

A coalition of local groups called on the board Monday to address the situation at the J.S. Waters School in Goldston and require the instigators to apologize, news outlets reported.

Museum receives gift worth nearly \$60M

VA RICHMOND — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts announced Tuesday that it received a gift worth nearly \$60 million, including a significant contribution to the museum’s expansion campaign and 15 paintings by prominent American artists.

The gift from longtime patrons James W. McGlothlin and Frances Gibson McGlothlin is the largest private gift in the museum’s expansion campaign, which will culminate in a second major wing at the museum named after the couple.

Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s director and chief executive officer, said in a news release that the gift “will help the museum tell a more nuanced and complete story of the nation’s artistic contributions and ensure that these works will continue to be accessible to all Virginians.”

— From wire reports

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Irish, Wright St. advance to field of 64

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Paul Atkinson Jr. was in the right place at the right time for Notre Dame as the clock wound down in the second overtime period against relentless Rutgers.

Atkinson rebounded a missed shot by Blake Wesley and put back a layup with 1.4 seconds left to give the Irish an 89-87 win in a wild First Four game and put them into a first-round West Region contest on Friday in San Diego.

"Well, let me start by saying Happy St. Patrick's Day to everyone here," Notre Dame coach Mike Brey said. "And you notice that Paul's shot went in at 12:02 (EDT) on St. Patrick's Day, so maybe there was a little bit of karma there."

Atkinson, a graduate transfer from Yale and former Ivy League Player of the Year, capped his finest game of the season, leading the Irish with 26

points and six rebounds.

"Blake, I saw him driving to the rim," Atkinson said. "I knew he was going to go hard, either get a foul or make a bucket. I just wanted to follow up if it was a miss and no call. I just wanted to chase after the ball. Got it up and got a good bucket."

Ron Harper Jr. had tied it with a long three-pointer for Rutgers with 22 seconds left in the second OT before Atkinson won the scrum under the basket and put up the winner.

"They were one possession better," Rutgers coach Steve Pikiell said.

Nate Laszewski had 18 and Cormac Ryan 16 for the Irish (23-10).

"I haven't felt like this in a long time," Atkinson said. "It's amazing. Bunch of cameras on you. Big spotlight, last game of the night. Definitely got my teammates to cheer with. It's just awesome. Got family up in

the stands. Couldn't ask for anything better."

Caleb McConnell, the Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year, had a career-high 23 points and Harper had 22 for the Scarlet Knights (18-11), who had knocked off five ranked teams on their conference schedule.

Both teams shot a respectable 51% for the game.

McConnell scored 18 points on 8-for-9 shooting from the floor as Rutgers built a 41-36 lead at the half. He put the finishing touches on the scoring before intermission, going the length of the court and putting up a fast-break layup at the buzzer.

Rutgers went up by eight to open the second half on Harper's three-pointer, but Notre Dame chipped away. The Irish got up by as many as five late before the game got tight again.

Geo Baker's three-pointer

tied it at 69 for Rutgers with 1:24 left. Rutgers got the ball back, but Harper and Baker both missed shots that would have given the Scarlet Knights the win in regulation.

Wright State 93, Bryant 82:

At Dayton, Ohio, Tanner Holden had 37 points and 11 rebounds and the Raiders beat the Bulldogs for their first NCAA Tournament victory.

Playing inside the University of Dayton Arena just 12 miles from its home court, Wright State (22-13) advanced to play top-seeded Arizona in San Diego on Friday in the West Region.

Holden was 11-for-15 from the field. Tyler Calvin added 21 points, and Grant Basile had 14.

Peter Kiss, the NCAA's leading scorer, led Bryant (22-10) with 28 points.

The Raiders led 44-42 at half-time behind 20 points from Holden.

Both teams were seeded 16th.

Dayton, Howard win first women's First Four games

Associated Press

AMES, Iowa — Erin Whalen scored a career-high 28 points, hitting seven of Dayton's 13 three-pointers and the 11th-seeded Flyers eased past DePaul 88-57 on Wednesday night in the inaugural women's First Four.

Dayton (26-5), making its 10th NCAA Tournament appearance, advanced to play No. 6 seed Georgia on Friday in the Greensboro Region.

Jenna Giaccone scored 19 of her 21 points in a dominant first half for the Flyers.

Dayton made 11 of 13 three-pointers in the first half while holding DePaul, the nation's scoring leader at 88.3 points a game, to just 11-for-37 from the field. Whalen made Dayton's eighth straight three-pointer of the first half for a 46-27 lead. The Flyers entered averaging 5.9 three-pointers per game.

Whalen and Giaccone combined for three three-pointers during a 9-0 run in the first quarter and they added five three-pointers in the opening seven minutes of the second quarter. Whalen and Giaccone scored 19 straight Dayton points in the second quarter before a Makira Cook basket gave the Flyers a 19-point lead with 1:41 left.

Giaccone made all four of her three-point attempts in the first half and 6 of 8 shots overall. Whalen added 17 points and Cook had 14 to help Dayton build a 55-32 lead at the break.

Cook finished with 16 points and Tenin Magassa had eight points, 14 rebounds and seven of Dayton's season-high 15 blocks. Giaccone added five blocks. The Flyers, the Atlantic 10 regular-season champs, held opponents to 54.7 points a game this season.

DePaul shot just 27.1%.

Star freshman Aneesah Morrow had 28 points and 17 rebounds for her nation-leading 27th double-double of the season in 33 games for DePaul (22-11).

Howard 55, Incarnate Word 51: At Columbia, S.C., Brooklyn Fort-Davis had 15 points and 10 rebounds, Krislyn Marsh added 14 points and 17 rebounds and the visiting Bison beat the Cardinals in the first women's First Four game.

Howard (21-9), in its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2001, advanced to play overall No. 1 seed South Carolina (29-2) in the Greensboro Region.

Iyanna Warren made a floater in the lane and followed with a long jumper on Howard's next possession to extend the lead to 47-42 with 4:53 left.

Fort-Davis ended Howard's three-minute scoreless stretch with a shot under the basket for a 49-46 lead with 1:20 remaining. She added a basket at 43 seconds and a free throw with 35.8 left for a four-point lead. Kaniyah Harris gave Howard a seven-point lead in the closing seconds before Destiny Jenkins beat the final buzzer with a long three-pointer.

Destiny Howell, the MEAC tournament most outstanding player, picked up two fouls in the first quarter and played just nine minutes in the first half before finishing the game with 11 points for Howard. The Bison shot just 30.9% from the field, but held a 53-34 advantage on the glass.

Tiana Gardner scored 16 points for Incarnate Word (13-17) in the program's first NCAA Tournament appearance.

LB Miller leaving champs for Bills

Associated Press

Russell Wilson to Denver, Carson Wentz to Washington, Amari Cooper to Cleveland.

Chandler Jones to Las Vegas, Khalil Mack and J.C. Jackson to the LA Chargers, Brandon Scherff to Jacksonville.

So what if it's old news? Here's some brand new news: Super Bowl champion linebacker Von Miller is leaving Los Angeles for Buffalo.

And star receiver Julio Jones is looking for work.

On Wednesday, teams could come clean after all the recent leaks made those moves — and dozens of others — common knowledge throughout the NFL.

Yes, the business year has begun, and with it come the official announcements of who is going where for what and how much.

Miller's move across the country was the headline grabber Wednesday. He is getting a six-year deal from the Bills and will pursue winning a third NFL title with a third franchise. He got a ring with Denver in 2015 and last season with the Rams.

The biggest star released Wednesday was wideout Julio Jones by Tennessee. He lasted only one injury-filled year with the Titans. The 33-year-old Jones will be designated as a post-June 1 release with the Titans carrying the cap hit until then.

The Titans traded for Jones last June but he started only 11 games, counting the postseason. Jones finished with a career-low 31 catches for 434 yards and one touchdown.

By far the biggest blockbuster — at least until Houston finds a team for quarterback Deshaun Watson — is Wilson moving from the Seahawks to the Broncos. Seattle gets two first-round draft picks, two second-round-

ers, a fifth-rounder and three players: quarterback Drew Lock, tight end Noah Fant and defensive tackle Shelby Harris. All could be starters, although the Seahawks likely prefer a different No. 1 QB.

"Russell has been a tremendous player, leader, and member of our organization since the day we drafted him in the third round in 2012," said Seattle general manager John Schneider. "His tireless work ethic has helped make him one of the most successful QBs in NFL history and we thank him for his many contributions on the field and in the community."

"When it became evident that Russell was interested in playing elsewhere, we used that opportunity to explore the market, allowing us to acquire three quality players, tremendous draft capital and create salary cap flexibility."

As for Wilson's new home: "I want to win three to four more Super Bowls. That's the plan, that's the goal, that's the mission, that's the vision," he said.

While Denver filled its need behind center, as did Tampa Bay when Tom Brady ended his 40-day retirement and Aaron Rodgers stayed put in Green Bay with a three-year megadeal, several other teams are scrambling to find their passer. Some of those, including Carolina, New Orleans and Cleveland, have been in discussions with Watson, who will not be criminally charged after 22 women accused him of sexual assault or harassment. Watson sat out last season.

Pittsburgh, which hasn't had a QB opening since Ben Roethlisberger was drafted in 2004, signed Mitchell Trubisky away from Buffalo, where he backed up Josh Allen, to compete for that spot.

Booker scores 36 points, leads Suns past Rockets

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Devin Booker scored 36 points, Mikal Bridges added 26 and the NBA-leading Phoenix Suns beat the Houston Rockets 129-112 on Wednesday night for their third straight victory.

Booker shot 15-for-24 from the field and scored at least 30 points for the second time in the last three games.

"Just getting open shots," Booker said. "We have a lot of guys who are selfless that make plays for each other. You see what everybody did today looking at the stat sheet. That's hard for defenses. That wears teams down when everybody is a threat out there. You don't know who to guard, so I get a free open look. After that, I was just in rhythm."

Deandre Ayton added 23 points and 11 rebounds, and Torrey Craig — starting in place of the injured Jae Crowder for the short-handed Suns — had 21 points on 8-for-8 shooting and a season-high 14 rebounds.

Mavericks 113, Nets 111:

Spencer Dinwiddie made a three-pointer at the buzzer against his former team, lifting visiting Dallas past Brooklyn.

Dinwiddie hit the winning basket with nine seconds left Sunday in Boston, and came through again after Kevin Durant had given the Nets a one-point lead with a three-pointer with 10 seconds to play.

Luka Doncic finished with 37 points, nine rebounds and nine assists in the Mavericks' eighth win in nine games.

Durant had 23 points, 10 assists and six rebounds.

Jazz 125, Bulls 110: Donovan Mitchell scored a team-record 25 of his 37 points in the third quarter, Jordan Clarkson added 26 and host Utah beat Chicago.

Mitchell made a franchise-record seven three-pointers in the third period on nine attempts. He broke Karl Malone's team

mark of 22 points in a quarter.

Chicago's Zach LaVine, who has been affected by a sore left knee, made five threes and had 33 points in tying his highest scoring output in four months.

Timberwolves 124, Lakers

104: Karl-Anthony Towns scored 16 of his 30 points in the fourth quarter to help host Minnesota beat Los Angeles.

LeBron James, playing through knee soreness, had just 19 points to lead the Lakers.

76ers 118, Cavaliers 114:

Joel Embiid had 35 points and 17 rebounds, James Harden added 21 points and added 11 assists and visiting Philadelphia beat Cleveland.

Nuggets 127, Wizards 109:

Nikola Jokic had 29 points and 13 rebounds in an efficient 26-minute performance to help visiting Denver cruise past Washington.

Jokic reached 10,001 career NBA points — all with Denver — and added eight assists while falling two shy of his 19th triple-double of the season.

Bucks 135, Kings 126:

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 36 points and 10 rebounds, Wesley Matthews made a clutch three-pointer with 1:32 remaining and visiting Milwaukee held off Sacramento.

Knicks 128, Trail Blazers

98: RJ Barrett scored 31 points, Julius Randle added 20 points and nine rebounds and host New York beat Portland.

Hornets 115, Hawks 106:

LaMelo Ball had 22 points, 11 assists and eight rebounds, P.J. Washington scored 13 of his 16 points in the fourth quarter and host Charlotte beat Atlanta.

Raptors 103, Clippers 100:

Pascal Siakam had 31 points and streaking Toronto held off a fourth-quarter comeback by host Los Angeles.

Spurs 122, Thunder 120:

Dejounte Murray had 26 points and 12 assists, and host San Antonio held on to beat Oklahoma City.

Source: Freeman signing with Dodgers

Associated Press

Freddie Freeman is headed home to Southern California and the Los Angeles Dodgers.

The first-time free agent and the Dodgers have agreed to a \$162 million, six-year contract, according to a person familiar with the deal. The person spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity late Wednesday night because the move had not yet been announced by the team.

Freeman was the 2020 National League MVP. The first baseman helped the Atlanta Braves to their fourth straight NL East title last season and their first World Series championship since 1995.

It was assumed that Atlanta would try to lock up Freeman, who had never played for another club. But a deal didn't get done before the labor lockout began in early December and then the Braves traded for All-Star first baseman Matt Olson from Oakland and signed him to a \$168 million, eight-year deal this week, signaling the end of Freeman's long tenure in Atlanta.

Now the 32-year-old five-time All-Star will be playing not far from where he grew up in Orange County. He already lives in the area in the offseason.

Freeman is from Fountain Valley, where he rooted for the Los Angeles Angels as a kid.

Adding Freeman gives the Dodgers an even more imposing lineup. He'll join former MVPs Mookie Betts and Cody Bellinger, along with Trea Turner, Max Muncy and Justin Turner. The lineup already was among the

National League's best last year with 237 home runs and 5.12 runs per game to go with 612 walks and an OPS of .759.

Freeman gives the Dodgers a left-handed bat in the middle of the order to replace Corey Seager, who signed with the Texas Rangers as a free agent.

Muncy, a left-handed-hitting first baseman, can move to second base or serve as the designated hitter, which becomes permanent in the NL this season.

A career .295 hitter, Freeman has surpassed 20 homers eight times with a career-high 38 in 2019. He has a pair of 100-RBI seasons on his résumé, and three other years when he drove in more than 90 runs. He has three Silver Slugger awards and a Gold Glove for his defensive work.

Freeman was a second-round draft pick by Atlanta in 2007 and quickly worked his way through the farm system. He was a September call-up in 2010, making his big league debut less than two weeks before his 21st birthday.

Freeman took over as the starter at first base the following year, finishing second in NL Rookie of the Year balloting to Braves teammate Craig Kimbrel after hitting .282 with 21 homers and 76 RBIs.

Freeman endured four straight losing seasons while Atlanta rebuilt its depleted farm system, but the team made clear he was the centerpiece of its overhaul by signing him to a \$135 million, eight-year contract that was the longest and largest in franchise history.

In 2018, with Freeman surrounded by a new

group of budding young stars, the Braves climbed back to the top of the NL East to begin a new run of divisional dominance.

Freeman won his MVP award in the pandemic-shortened 2020 season, hitting .341 with 13 homers and 53 RBIs in 60 games — a remarkable performance after he endured a bout with COVID-19 that left him worrying whether he would survive.

Atlanta won a postseason series for the first time since 2001 — two of them, in fact — before squandering a 3-1 lead and losing to the Dodgers in the NL Championship Series.

Bouncing back from that disappointment, the Braves won their fourth straight division title in 2021 and went on to capture their first World Series championship in 26 years by beating the Houston Astros.

Freeman had another stellar season, leading the league in plate appearances (695) and runs (120) while batting .300 with 31 homers and 83 RBIs. Appropriately enough, he caught the final out of the World Series on a throw from shortstop Dansby Swanson.

As the Braves celebrated their championship at Minute Maid Park, Freeman made it clear he wanted to stay in Atlanta.

"This is a crazy game, a crazy business," he said. "But everyone knows this is where my heart is."

"I've been here since I was 17 years old, almost half my life I've been in this organization," he went on. "It means everything to put that Braves uniform on every day."

Now, he'll be putting on Dodger blue.

Kaprizov scores twice as Wild top Bruins

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Kirill Kaprizov scored twice and Jordan Greenway broke a third-period tie as the Minnesota Wild beat the Boston Bruins 4-2 on Wednesday night.

Ryan Hartman added an empty-netter, his 24th goal of the season, with 4.9 seconds remaining to seal it.

Greenway beat a sprawling Jeremy Swayman from the slot at 7:56 of the third for his sixth goal of the season and second in two games.

It came after Boston climbed back from a 2-0 deficit following a pair of goals by Kaprizov.

Craig Smith put the Bruins on the board late in the first period, and Brad Marchand's power-play goal evened the score in the second.

Cam Talbot made 24 saves to get the win. Swayman stopped 30 shots in the loss.

Lightning 4, Kraken 1: Victor Hedman scored twice to lead visiting Tampa Bay over Seattle.

Steven Stamkos had three assists in his 900th NHL game. Nikita Kucherov and Anthony Cirelli also scored for the Lightning, who won their second straight to finish a six-game road trip — their longest of the season.

Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 24 shots for his 32nd win, most in the league.

Yanni Gourde scored his 14th goal for the Kraken, who have lost 12 of 14. Gourde, who played six seasons for Tampa Bay before being selected by Seattle in the expansion draft, also took over the Kraken team lead with 36 points.

Blue Jackets 4, Senators 1: Jack Roslovic scored twice, Elvis Merzlikins stopped 30 shots and visiting Columbus topped Ottawa to extend its winning streak to three games.

Eric Robinson and Sean Kuraly, with an empty-net goal, al-

so scored for the Blue Jackets.

Tyler Ennis scored for the Senators, and Anton Forsberg made 32 saves. Ottawa has lost three straight.

Flames 6, Devils 3: Matthew Tkachuk had a goal and two assists to lead host Calgary past New Jersey.

Dillon Dube added a goal and an assist, and Brett Ritchie, Andrew Mangiapane, Milan Lucic and Johnny Gaudreau also scored for the Flames, who have won three of four.

Dawson Mercer, P.K. Subban and Yegor Sharangovich scored for the Devils, who have lost three of four.