

US admiral: China fully militarized 3 islands

Associated Press

OVER THE SOUTH CHINA SEA — China has fully militarized at least three of the islands it built in the disputed South China Sea, arming them with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, laser and jamming equipment, and fighter jets in an increasingly aggressive move that threatens all nations operating nearby, a top U.S. military commander said Sunday.

U.S. Indo-Pacific commander Adm. John C. Aquilino said the hostile actions were in stark contrast to Chinese President Xi Jinping's past assurances that Beijing would not transform the artificial islands in contested waters into military bases. The efforts were part of China's flexing its military muscle, he said.

"I think over the past 20 years, we've witnessed the largest military buildup since World War II by the PRC," Aquilino told The Associated Press in an interview, using the initials of China's formal name. "They have ad-

vanced all their capabilities, and that buildup of weaponization is destabilizing to the region."

China on Tuesday said it has the right to develop South China Sea islands as it sees fit. Beijing maintains its military profile is purely defensive, arranged to protect what it has said are its sovereign rights. But after years of increased military spending, China now boasts the world's second-largest defense budget after the United States and is rapidly modernizing its force with weapons systems, including the J-20 stealth fighter, hypersonic missiles and two aircraft carriers, with a third under construction.

Aquilino spoke with the AP onboard a U.S. Navy reconnaissance aircraft that flew near Chinese-held outposts in the South China Sea's Spratly archipelago, one of the most hotly contested regions in the world. During the patrol, the P-8A Poseidon plane was repeatedly warned by Chinese callers that it

illegally entered what they said was China's territory and ordered the plane to move away.

"China has sovereignty over the Spratly islands, as well as surrounding maritime areas. Stay away immediately to avoid misjudgment," one of the stern radio messages said in a veiled threat.

But the U.S. Navy plane dismissed the multiple warnings and pressed on defiantly with its reconnaissance in brief but tense moments witnessed by two AP journalists invited onboard.

"I am a sovereign immune United States naval aircraft conducting lawful military activities beyond the national airspace of any coastal state," a U.S. pilot radioed back to the Chinese. "Exercising these rights is guaranteed by international law, and I am operating with due regard to the rights and duties of all states."

Navy commanding officer Joel Martinez, who led the P-8A

Poseidon's crew, said there has been an incident when a Chinese jet flew close to a U.S. aircraft in a dangerous maneuver in the disputed region. The U.S. flight crew calmly reminded the Chinese to comply with aviation safety regulations, he said.

As the P-8A Poseidon flew as low as 15,000 feet near the Chinese-occupied reefs, some appeared to be like small cities on screen monitors, with multistory buildings, warehouses, hangars, seaports, runways and white round structures Aquilino said were radars. Near Fiery Cross, more than 40 unspecified vessels could be seen apparently anchored.

Aquilino said the construction of missile arsenals, aircraft hangars, radar systems and other military facilities on Mischief Reef, Subi Reef and Fiery Cross appeared to have been completed, but it remains to be seen if China will pursue the construction of military infrastructure in other areas.

Ukraine retakes key Kyiv suburb; battle for Mariupol rages

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine said it retook a strategically important suburb of Kyiv on Tuesday, while its forces battled Russian attempts to occupy the encircled southern port city of Mariupol.

Civilians fleeing Mariupol said the city was under relentless bombardment, with block after block of destroyed buildings and corpses in the streets. But the Kremlin's ground offensive in other parts of the country advanced slowly or not at all, knocked back by lethal Ukrainian hit-and-run attacks.

The hands of one exhausted Mariupol survivor were shaking as she arrived by train in the western city of Lviv.

"There's no connection with the world. We couldn't ask for help," said Julia Kryt-

ska, who made it out with her husband and son with the help of volunteers. "People don't even have water there."

Explosions and bursts of gunfire shook Kyiv, and heavy artillery fire could be heard from the northwest, where Russia has sought to encircle and capture several suburban areas of the capital, a crucial target.

Early Tuesday, Ukrainian troops drove Russian forces from the Kyiv suburb of Makariv after a fierce battle, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said. The regained territory allowed Ukrainian forces to retake control of a key highway and block Russian troops from surrounding Kyiv from the northwest.

Still, the Defense Ministry said Russian forces partially took other northwest suburbs, Bucha, Hostomel and Irpin, some of which had been under attack almost since

Russia's military invaded nearly a month ago.

Russia's invasion has driven more than 10 million people from their homes, almost a quarter of the population, according to the United Nations.

Thousands of civilians are believed to have died, though the total remains unclear. Estimates of Russian military casualties vary widely, but even conservative figures by Western officials are in the low thousands.

On Monday, Russia's pro-Kremlin *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper, citing the Defense Ministry, reported that almost 10,000 Russian soldiers had been killed. The report was quickly removed, and the newspaper blamed hackers. The Kremlin refused to comment.

Warmer weather impedes Marines' Arctic drills

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

SETERMOEN MILITARY CAMP, Norway — The weather along Norway's Arctic coast, which is being investigated as a factor in the Osprey crash that killed four U.S. Marines last week, is becoming increasingly hard to predict as warming trends change the terrain and storms become more frequent.

The weather has been a main focus of training for the U.S. Marines and sailors in Norway for the Cold Response exercise, which includes about 30,000 service members from 27 nations.

But this isn't the subzero weather many of them expected. A slushy mix of rain and snow was blowing in storm winds on Friday evening at the site of the crash in Beiarn, a rural area about 725 miles north of Oslo. In Bodo, the town about 25 miles north of the crash where the Osprey crew was supposed to land, the temperature was slightly above freezing.

And at this austere base more than 230 miles north of Bodo, well into the Arctic Circle, the temperature has reached up to 50 degrees recently.

The changing conditions mean that U.S. forces will have to adapt how they operate, both for the safety of their forces and the success of any potential future combat operations in the High North.

"Our whole plan of using traditional Arctic assets is kind of getting turned on its head," 1st

Lt. Benjamin Artime, commander of Combat Logistics Detachment, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, said Saturday.

The service members who spoke with Stars and Stripes at Setermoen did so before the four Marines involved in the Osprey crash were confirmed dead by the service, and they generally declined to discuss the matter. But they did talk about adapting to operating in such a challenging environment at a time when the Arctic is increasingly becoming a region of competition. Russia has built up its Arctic military assets in recent years, and tested a stealth torpedo designed to bypass coastal defenses last year at one of its northern bases, according to a CNN report.

Meanwhile, sea ice is expected to continue to melt, opening up new shipping routes.

In the air, pilots must account for more extreme rainfall and storms. The number of days with associated severe weather is expected to rise in northern Europe and fall in southern Europe by 2050, according to a September study by Eurocontrol, a civil-military group financed by European Union member states.

On land, permafrost melt could mean anything from swampy conditions to collapses and debris flows.

While warmer, wetter days are likely to force various units participating in Cold Response to make adjustments, Artime said weather especially affects logistics.

"We don't have the luxury of sucking it up, putting our backpacks and snowshoes on and walking," he said. "We always have to think about how we can use different routes, whether it's going over snow or staying on trails, and think about how to use our assets to get what we need to the people on the front lines."

The importance of combat logistics support has been highlighted in Ukraine, where the Russian military's logistics operations are widely blamed for the halting advances since the start of the Kremlin's invasion on Feb. 24.

When the Marines arrived in Norway earlier in the winter to prepare for frigid conditions, they determined they needed snow chains for their wheeled vehicles, including the 7-ton wreckers, and that an all-terrain, tracked vehicle known as a Bandvagn would be used for many off-road deliveries.

As rain fell and ice eventually replaced snow, however, the BVs became ineffective in many places because their tracks had nothing to grip, the Marines said. Avalanches are also a greater risk now. In a warehouse where the Marines in the detachment were preparing for their next training exercise, 1st Lt. Katie Hass, the motor transportation platoon commander, pulled out an avalanche map with areas to avoid marked in red.

"The area that we're going to go be in, the mountainous terrain is a lot more at risk," Hass said of the forthcoming exercise. "There is a lot more red down south."

Austin to join Biden's trip to NATO headquarters, Poland

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will return to Europe for a second consecutive week, joining President Joe Biden's trip Wednesday to NATO headquarters in Brussels and visit Polish leaders later in the week, the Pentagon announced Monday.

The U.S. leaders' trip this week comes as Russia's invasion of Ukraine nears its one-month anniversary and just days after Austin returned to Washington from a meeting March 15 with NATO defense ministers in Brussels. Austin met with leaders in Slovakia and Bulgaria late last week, as those NATO eastern flank nations seek to bolster their own security amid Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Biden and Austin are expected to meet with

other NATO leaders Thursday before traveling to Poland on Friday, officials said. Biden will also meet with the European Council and G-7 leaders to "discuss international efforts to support Ukraine and impose severe and unprecedented costs on Russia for its invasion," according to a White House statement.

The meetings also come as Poland pitches a NATO peacekeeping mission in Ukraine, according to a Reuters news report on Friday. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby declined to discuss the Polish proposal, but he confirmed the Pentagon expected it would be formally submitted Monday.

"It kind of goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway — there shouldn't be a need for a peacekeeping force because there shouldn't have been a war of choice by [Russian President Vladimir] Putin," Kirby told reporters. "And

he can end it today by negotiating in good faith and getting his troops out of Ukraine and stopping the killing and the death and destruction that he and his forces are responsible for. But again, I'm not going to get ahead of international discussions here in this particular proposal."

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, told CNN on Sunday that American troops would not participate in such a peacekeeping force, reiterating Biden's position that U.S. troops would not enter Ukraine to fight the Russian military.

"American troops will not be on the ground in Ukraine at this moment," she said. "The president has been clear on that. And other NATO countries may decide that they want to put troops inside of Ukraine. That will be a decision that they have to make."

High court nominee defends her record

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Facing senators' questions for the first time, Supreme Court nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson forcefully defended her record as a federal judge Tuesday, declaring she will rule "from a position of neutrality" if she is confirmed as the first Black woman on the high court.

Jackson started the hearing by responding to Republicans who have questioned whether she is too liberal in her judicial philosophy. She said she tries to "understand what the people who created this law intended," relying on the words of a statute but also looking to history and practice when the meaning may not be clear.

Responding to Sen. Dick Durbin, the Judiciary Committee chairman, she also pushed back on Republican suggestions that she has given out light sentences to

child pornographers.

Could her rulings have endangered children? "As a mother and a judge," she said, "nothing could be further from the truth."

Those are some of the toughest cases a judge has to deal with, she said. She described looking into the eyes of defendants and explaining the lifelong effects on victims.

It is "important to me to represent that the children's voices are represented," she said.

In what Durbin described as "a trial by ordeal," Jackson answered questions right off the bat that attempted to deflect GOP concerns and also highlight the empathetic style that she has frequently described. Republicans planned to use their questioning to brand Jackson — and Democrats in general — as soft on crime, an emerging theme

in GOP midterm election campaigns.

Tuesday's hearing was the first of two days of questioning after Jackson and the 22 members of the committee gave opening statements on Monday. On Thursday, the committee will hear from legal experts before an eventual vote to move her nomination to the Senate floor.

Barring unexpected developments, Democrats who control the Senate by the slimmest of margins hope to wrap up Jackson's confirmation before Easter, though Justice Stephen Breyer is not leaving the court until after the current session ends this summer.

In her own 12-minute statement, Jackson didn't mention specific cases but told the committee that she would "apply the laws to the facts of the case before me, without fear or favor, consistent with my judicial oath," if she were to be confirmed.

Storms rake Texas, Okla.; tornado watch in effect

Associated Press

DALLAS — One person was killed and more than a dozen were injured when tornadoes tore through parts of Texas and Oklahoma, damaging a school, homes and businesses, officials said. The same storm system was poised to move into Louisiana and Mississippi on Tuesday, carrying the risk of dangerous tornadoes and powerful winds.

In Texas, several tornadoes were reported Monday along the Interstate 35 corridor, particularly in the Austin suburbs of Round Rock and Elgin, and close to Dallas-Fort Worth. Two unconfirmed tornadoes caused damage in the Lake Texoma area of northern Texas and southern Oklahoma.

More than a dozen injuries have been reported in Texas, including 10 in Grayson County, about 60 miles north of Dallas, the county's emergency management office said. A 73-year-old woman who lived in the community of Sherwood Shores died in the storm, but officials have not provided any further details.

By Tuesday morning, the system was bringing heavy rainfall and thunderstorms to parts of Texas and Arkansas, said Jeremy Grams, lead forecaster with the Storm Prediction Center, in Norman, Okla. A tornado watch was in effect for parts of Texas and Louisiana.

In Louisiana, high water early Tuesday

posed a threat to motorists on several roads, including a stretch of Interstate 20 and several state highways after rains overnight, authorities said. Deputies in Caddo Parish, which includes Shreveport, rescued three drivers from high water during the night, the sheriff's office tweeted before dawn.

The storms were expected to intensify throughout the day as temperatures rise, increasing the threat of tornadoes, hail and strong winds. Much of Louisiana and Mississippi were at a moderate risk of severe weather Tuesday, the second-highest risk category issued by the Storm Prediction Center. Baton Rouge, La., and Jackson, Miss., were among the cities at risk for bad weather Tuesday.

Mo. Republican Senate candidate accused of abuse

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Former Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens, now a leading Republican Senate candidate, was physically abusive and demonstrated such "unstable and coercive behavior" that steps were taken to limit his access to firearms, according to new allegations from his ex-wife revealed in court records.

A sworn affidavit from Sheena Greitens and filed Monday is part of an ongoing child custody dispute in Missouri. A public affairs professor at the University of Texas, she sought divorce from Eric Greitens after a sex scandal which led to his resignation as

governor in June 2018. She's now asking the court to move the custody case to the Austin area, in part to spare her children from renewed public attention as Eric Greitens tries to mount a political comeback.

Eric Greitens, a former Navy SEAL officer and Rhodes Scholar, called the allegations "completely fabricated" and "baseless."

"I am seeking full custody of my sons, and for their sake, I will continue to pray for their mother and hope that she gets the help that she needs," he said in a statement issued from his Twitter account.

His attorney on Monday asked a judge to

block the affidavit from public view, saying open access could cause "irreparable harm to his reputation and his candidacy."

An attorney for Sheena Greitens did not respond to a message seeking comment.

The allegations could complicate his bid to emerge from Missouri's Aug. 2 primary as the GOP nominee and potentially jeopardize his party's chance to hold onto a key Senate seat in the general election.

In the affidavit, Sheena Greitens casts her ex-husband as someone who threatened to use his political connections and influence to destroy her reputation to win custody of the children.

Miami Beach declares emergency, curfew

Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — City of Miami Beach officials declared a state of emergency on Monday and an upcoming curfew, bidding to curb violent incidents at spring break that saw five people wounded in two separate shootings.

Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber and City Manager Alina Hudak announced the emergency order at an afternoon news conference. It includes a curfew for the South Beach area that starts early Thursday after midnight and runs through the weekend.

The city commission will hold an emergency meeting Tuesday to discuss the declaration, and Hudak said she plans to recom-

mend the curfew be extended through the next weekend.

Thousands of college students and other young people gather annually in Miami Beach for spring break, and this is the second year in a row that officials for the South Florida city have declared a state of emergency in this famed partying spot.

The mayor said about 100 guns have been seized over the past four weeks, and several police officers have been injured while controlling the crowds.

"We can't endure this anymore. We just simply can't," Gelber said. "This isn't your father or your mother's spring break. This is something wholly

different."

Gelber noted that the five people were shot over the weekend despite 371 police officers being deployed.

Three people were wounded early Sunday on a street crowded with spring breakers in the city's South Beach neighborhood, police said. Two victims wounded at the scene were taken to a hospital, while doctors at another hospital reported a third person arrived there with a gunshot wound. All were expected to survive.

Early Monday, officers were patrolling about a block from the Sunday morning shooting site when they heard gunshots, police said. The officers found

two women with gunshot wounds. Police said their wounds weren't life-threatening.

At the urging of some residents, city officials have been working in recent years to crack down on unruly behavior in South Beach. But efforts to curb the excessive drinking and violence have raised complaints about racism, classism and business practices.

More than 1,000 people were arrested last March, when the city imposed an 8 p.m. curfew. Authorities at the time sent military style vehicles to disperse predominantly Black crowds with rubber bullets, prompting criticism from Black activists.

Disney in balancing act amid threat of a worker walkout

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — With some workers across the U.S. threatening a walkout Tuesday, The Walt Disney Co. finds itself in a balancing act between the expectations of a diverse workforce and demands from an increasingly polarized, politicized marketplace.

On one side are LGBTQ advocates and Disney employees calling for a walkout in protest of CEO Bob Chapek's slow response in publicly criticizing Florida legislation that critics have dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill. The legislation bars instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through third grade. On the other are politicians like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who accuse the entertainment conglomerate of bending to cancel culture after a Disney decision to temporarily suspend political contributions in the state. According to Disney's conservative critics, the company should be in the business of making profits, not pushing an agenda.

It was unclear how many employees would walk out or what might happen to those who do.

Union leaders for the tens of thousands of unionized workers at Disney theme parks in Florida and California said they saw no momentum among their members for a walkout, and advised them not to do so because it would defy contractual obligations. Organizers said they expected some participation from production, marketing, IT and other non-unionized jobs.

Evan Power, chairman of the Leon County Republican Party, said he believes a strident minority of Disney employees are pushing the issue and DeSantis has more to gain by taking the side of parents who want more control over education and "sexual conversations" in early grades at school. DeSantis is viewed as a likely Republican presidential candidate in 2024.

Romualdas Dulskis, a Teamsters official in Orlando whose local represents costumed characters at Walt Disney World, plus bus drivers and other Disney workers, said his union did not support the walkout.

"That's just not the way we are going to go about this," he said.

Judge finds NM official guilty of illegally entering Capitol

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal judge on Tuesday convicted an elected official from New Mexico of illegally entering restricted U.S. Capitol grounds but acquitted him of engaging in disorderly conduct during the riot that disrupted Congress from certifying Joe Biden's presidential election victory.

U.S. District Court Judge Trevor McFadden heard one day of testimony without a jury on Monday before handing down a verdict in the misdemeanor case against Otero County Commissioner Couy Griffin, 48, a former rodeo rider who helped found a group called Cowboys for Trump.

Griffin's trial in Washington, D.C., was the second among the hundreds of federal cases from the Jan. 6, 2021, siege. Earlier this month, in the first trial, a jury convicted a Texas man, Guy Wesley Reffitt, of storming the Capitol with a holstered handgun, interfering with police and obstructing Congress' joint session to certify the Electoral College vote.

The outcome of Griffin's trial

could have a ripple effect, helping other Capitol riot defendants decide whether to let a judge or a jury decide their case. But the case against Griffin is unlike most Jan. 6 cases and may not be a bellwether for defendants who are charged with storming the Capitol.

Griffin is one of the few riot defendants who wasn't accused of entering the Capitol building or engaging in any violent or destructive behavior. His lawyers argued that he was selectively prosecuted for his political views.

His sentencing is scheduled for June 17.

A key question in Griffin's case was whether he entered a restricted area while Vice President Mike Pence was still present on Capitol grounds, a prerequisite for the U.S. Secret Service to invoke access restrictions. Griffin's attorneys said in a court filing that Pence had departed the restricted area before the earliest that Griffin could have entered it, but Secret Service inspector Lanelle Hawa testified that Pence never left the restricted area during the riot.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

After decades in the air, pilot aims to hit the road

GA BAINBRIDGE — A Georgia man has returned to school so that he can start a new career at age 77.

William Nichols enrolled at Southern Regional Technical College in Bainbridge a few years after retiring from his job as a pilot.

Nichols worked for more than three decades as a pilot flying corporate jets, and he's a licensed flight instructor. He decided on a new career path after seeing recent news about supply chain struggles in the United States that include a national shortage of truck drivers.

Now Nichols is working to earn his commercial driver's license in order to hit the road driving tractor-trailers.

Nichols may be the oldest student in his class, but he said he doesn't see his age as a limiting factor.

Authorities search for man after dog is found

OR TRAIL — Authorities and volunteers searched for a missing Northern California man whose dog was found walking alone near a road in southern Oregon.

Tyler Evans' dog Ali was spotted near Trail, Ore., a town about an hour north of the California border, SFGate reported.

Evans, of California's Siskiyou County, went missing in early March and had been accompanied by the black-and-white dog, his mother, Donelle Hansen-Evans, said on Facebook.

Sheriff's officials in Jackson County, Ore., asked for the pub-

lic's help in determining how the dog ended up in the remote area.

Bird flu case forces killing of 5.3M chickens

IA DES MOINES — The confirmation of bird flu at another Iowa egg-laying farm will force the killing of more than 5 million chickens, state officials said.

It's the second confirmed case of avian influenza in Buena Vista County, about 160 miles northwest of Des Moines, but the latest outbreak is at an operation with 5.3 million chickens. The earlier case was at a farm with about 50,000 turkeys.

The latest case confirmed by the state Department of Agriculture means nearly 12.6 million chicken and turkeys in at least eight states have been killed or will be destroyed soon.

Man accused of stealing \$1.4K worth of liquor

WI EAU CLAIRE — An Eau Claire man has been charged with stealing \$1,400 worth of liquor from a grocery store over three days.

The Leader-Telegram reported that Michael White, 50, was charged with two counts of retail theft.

According to a criminal complaint, White walked out of Festival Foods on Feb. 18 with 10 bottles of cognac and four bottles of vodka in his cart without paying for them.

He returned to the store on Feb. 21 and walked out with seven bottles of cognac and five bottles of tequila in his cart, again without paying, according to the complaint. This time a se-

curity guard stopped him in the parking lot. White gave the guard the cart and drove off. Police arrested him at an Eau Claire hotel later that day.

Prison rodeo returns after pandemic hiatus

LA ANGOLA — A popular rodeo held each year at the Louisiana State Penitentiary will be held again after a two-year hiatus prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Angola Prison Rodeo is set for April 23-24.

The state corrections department said all seats will be reserved. The department said rodeo proceeds go toward programs to help freed inmates re-enter society.

In addition to rodeo events featuring inmates, the event includes bands, food and arts and crafts made by the incarcerated. Jewelry, lawn and garden furniture, leather crafts, paintings, woodwork and toys are among the items to be offered for sale.

5-year-old boy riding ATV dies in crash

AZ LAKE HAVASU CITY — A 5-year-old boy has died in an all-terrain vehicle accident in HAVASU Heights, Mohave County Sheriff's officials said.

They said the ATV crashed and the child later died at a hospital from his injuries.

Sheriff's officials said it appears the throttle may have stuck open on the ATV and the child was unable to stop it.

A member of the boy's family was riding another ATV and attempted to pull alongside the

vehicle to pull the victim off, but was unable to do so.

Sheriff's officials said the ATV crashed into a residential fence, then struck a block wall. The child was wearing a helmet at the time of the accident.

Black store owner sues cop who punched him

AL DECATUR — An Alabama liquor store owner has sued after a police officer responding to a robbery call at his store punched him in the face and broke his jaw in March 2020.

The Decatur Daily reported that Kevin Penn sued the city of Decatur and police officer Justin Rippen in federal court. Penn is Black and Rippen is white.

Penn had trapped a shoplifter with an electronic lock and the suspect was lying on the ground, with Penn holding him at gunpoint. Surveillance video showed Penn unloading his gun as police arrive. The video appeared to show Penn setting the gun magazine down as the officers approach.

An officer walked past the suspect and told Penn to put down his weapon. Penn refused, saying, "I have a right to have my gun," according to body camera video.

But police said in 2020 they believed Penn was reloading the gun. An officer, who has been identified as Rippen, then appears to punch Penn. Rippen and two other officers wrestled Penn to the ground and handcuffed him, the video showed. Penn was arrested and charged with obstructing a robbery investigation.

— From wire reports

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Atlanta trades QB Ryan to Indianapolis

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — The Indianapolis Colts may have found another short-term answer at quarterback by trading for Matt Ryan.

How much longer the soon-to-be 37-year-old, four-time Pro Bowler sticks around isn't clear.

On Monday, Indy acquired the 2016 NFL MVP from Atlanta for a third-round pick in this year's draft (No. 82 overall).

The Falcons wasted no time finding Ryan's possible replacement — announcing they'd signed free agent Marcus Mariota to a two-year contract.

For Indy, the deal completes a two-week search for a successor to Carson Wentz, who was traded to the Washington Commanders after just one season with the Colts.

For Indianapolis general manager Chris Ballard, it's also the latest attempt to plug a hole created by Andrew Luck's surprise retirement at age 29 just before the start of the 2018 season.

"Matt's leadership and skill

set will complement our roster's growth and success," Ballard said. "He's long been a great ambassador for the NFL and the Atlanta Falcons, and we're excited he can continue his accomplished career in Indianapolis."

For the Falcons, it was the end of an era.

Ryan had started all but three games for the team since he was drafted No. 3 overall in 2008, leading Atlanta to only the second Super Bowl appearance in franchise history.

His fate was effectively sealed when the Falcons made an ill-fated bid for Deshaun Watson as their new quarterback.

"Matt Ryan has been the epitome of a franchise quarterback," team owner Arthur Blank said. "It is difficult to overstate what he has meant to me personally, our organization, his teammates and our fans."

But the Falcons decided to move on with a major rebuilding job that was only made more difficult by Ryan's onerous contract, which was restructured

multiple times in recent years as the team kept pushing a difficult decision down the road without drafting a possible successor.

The Falcons will carry a roughly \$40 million cap charge in dead money this season, while Ryan's salary cap hit for the Colts is a reported \$23.75 million in 2022, rising to \$28 million if he's still on the team next year.

"This business is not without its difficult decisions," Blank said in a statement. "While this is one of the most difficult decisions we have faced as a club, we feel it is in the best long-term interests of both the Atlanta Falcons and Matt Ryan."

Ryan will become the sixth quarterback to start in Week 1 for the Colts in six years, adding his name to a list that already is composed of Scott Tolzien, Luck, Jacoby Brissett, Philip Rivers and Wentz.

He joins a franchise in which vice chairman Bill Polian once said he considered Ryan the most similar player in the league to Peyton Manning.

The Falcons put themselves

in quite a bind with their pursuit of Watson, surrendering the long-time face of the franchise for a single, second-day draft pick.

As soon as they made a pitch to acquire the embattled Houston quarterback, it became clear Ryan would not want to return to a team where he had played his entire NFL career that then openly tried to replace him.

Watson supposedly narrowed his potential choices for a trade to New Orleans and Atlanta — with speculation the Falcons were the favorite because Watson is a Georgia native. But he changed his mind and accepted a \$230 million, fully guaranteed deal with the Cleveland Browns, who sent three first-round picks to the Texans in the deal. Ryan is undoubtedly the greatest quarterback in Falcons history, arriving from Boston College at a pivotal moment to replace Michael Vick.

He steadied a franchise rocked by coach Bobby Petrino's departure after 13 games and Vick's imprisonment for running a dogfighting ring.

Source: Winston returning to Saints on 2-year deal

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Free agent quarterback Jameis Winston has agreed to return to the New Orleans Saints, a person familiar with the situation said Monday.

Winston, who started seven games for New Orleans in 2021 before a season-ending knee injury, has agreed to a two-year contract, the person told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the move has not been announced.

NFL Network first reported Winston's deal, which is reportedly worth about \$28 million.

The Saints went 5-2 in the games Winston started in 2021,

although he played just two series in his seventh game before tearing knee ligaments when he was brought down by Tampa Bay linebacker Devin White during a scramble.

While the 28-year-old Winston's rehabilitation from reconstructive surgery appears to be on schedule for him to play next season, his return to New Orleans had been uncertain while the Saints explored options at the all-important position.

New Orleans was among the leading suitors for Deshaun Watson before he approved a trade from Houston to Cleveland. The Browns' Baker Mayfield and San Francisco's Jim-

my Garoppolo also could wind up with new teams via trades.

The 28-year-old Winston did not post particularly high passing numbers in his first season starting for the Saints as the successor to franchise all-time passer Drew Brees.

Winston completed 59% of his passes for 1,170 yards. But his 14 touchdown passes and just three interceptions represented a considerable improvement in his ability to minimize risk compared to his final season with Tampa Bay in 2019, when he was intercepted an NFL-high 30 times.

Winston also did not have a chance to throw to Saints top receiver Michael Thomas, who

missed all of last season because of a setback related to offseason ankle surgery. Thomas is expected to return healthy in 2022.

The Buccaneers chose not to bring back Winston, whom they drafted first overall out of Florida State in 2015, when they had an opportunity to sign former Patriots quarterback Tom Brady in the spring of 2020.

Winston was a mercurial performer through his first five NFL seasons with Tampa Bay.

While he was prone to throwing interceptions in 2019, he also led the NFL with 5,109 yards passing to go with 33 touchdown passes.

Wolfpack top Wildcats to reach Sweet 16

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Kayla Jones scored 18 points to help top-seeded North Carolina State beat Kansas State 89-57 in Monday's second round of the NCAA Tournament, earning a fourth straight trip to the Sweet 16.

Raina Perez and Diamond Johnson each added 15 points for the Wolfpack, who won their 12th straight game behind a dominating second-quarter performance. N.C. State shot 55% and made 9 of 19 three-pointers, romping to a lopsided victory in front of a loud Reynolds Coliseum crowd for the final time this season.

N.C. State (31-3) advanced to the Bridgeport Region semifinal against Notre Dame on Saturday.

The matchup of Associated Press second-team All-Americans Elissa Cunane of the Wolfpack and Ayoka Lee of the Wildcats never truly materialized due to foul issues. But the Bridgeport Region's headliner instead showed off its deep roster by getting production off the bench and continuing to roll anyway.

Notre Dame 108, Oklahoma 64: Dara Mabrey scored a season-high 29 points as the No. 5-seeded Fighting Irish rolled past the No. 4 Sooners in Norman, Okla.

Mabrey made 11 of 19 field goals, including seven three-pointers. Sonia Citron scored 25 points and Maya Dodson added 20 for Notre Dame (24-8). According to Stats by STATS, the Fighting Irish became the first team, men's or women's, to beat a higher-seeded team by at least 40 points.

The win sends Notre Dame into the Bridgeport Region semifinal against top seed N.C. State on Saturday.

UConn 52, UCF 47: Freshman Azzi Fudd scored 16 points and hit two key free throws late as the No. 2-seed Huskies, playing at home, outfought the No. 7-seeded Knights in a defensive slugfest to advance to an NCAA-record 28th straight Sweet 16.

Christyn Williams added 12 points and Paige Bueckers had nine for Connecticut (27-5), which have not allowed an opponent to score more than 51 points in its last 10 games.

Indiana 56, Princeton 55: Grace Berger scored the last of her 15 points on a spinning, tiebreaking layup with 28.2 seconds left and Nicole Cardano-Hillary added 12 points to help the third-seeded Hoosiers, playing on their home court, beat the 11th-seeded Tigers.

Ali Patberg sealed the win in her home finale with a steal with 3.8 seconds left and Aleksa Gulbe closed it out with two free throws.

Wichita Region

Michigan 64, Villanova 49: Naz Hillmon had 27 points, 11 rebounds and five steals to help the third-seeded Wolverines pull away with a win at home over the 11th-seeded Wildcats.

Michigan (24-6) earned a second straight trip to the Sweet 16 and will face 10th-seeded South Dakota on Saturday.

Tennessee 70, Belmont 67: Sara

Puckett hit a three-pointer with 17.5 seconds left to put the fourth-seeded Vols ahead to stay as they won at home to advance to their first Sweet 16 since 2016.

Tennessee (25-8) improved to 23-1 on its home floor in the second round of a women's NCAA Tournament. It has played in all 40. It earned the program's 29th Sweet 16 berth and will meet top-seeded Louisville on Saturday in the regional semifinal in Wichita, Kan.

Spokane Region

Ohio State 79 LSU 64: Jacy Sheldon had 23 points, eight assists and three steals, and the sixth-seeded Buckeyes beat the No. 3-seed Tigers in Baton Rouge.

Taylor Mikesell scored 18 and Rebeka Mikulasikova had 12 points for Ohio State (25-6), which responded to a large, loud and hostile crowd in LSU's home arena by seizing momentum in the opening quarter and putting the Tigers in the deepest deficit they had faced all season at 24 points late in the third quarter.

Greensboro Region

North Carolina 63, Arizona 45: Kennedy Todd-Williams scored 19 points, Deja Kelly added 15 and the Tar Heels overwhelmed the host Wildcats to reach the Sweet 16 for the first time in seven years.

Fifth-seeded North Carolina (25-6) held Arizona (22-7) to 29% shooting, including 7-for-27 from three, to earn a spot in the Greensboro Region semifinals Friday against No. 1 overall seed South Carolina.

Three-time Masters champ Mickelson will skip event

Associated Press

Three-time Masters champion Phil Mickelson, out of public view since his inflammatory remarks about the Saudi-funded rival league and the PGA Tour, has decided not to play at Augusta National this year.

Mickelson's name was moved from the list of players expected to compete in the Masters to a section at the bottom titled, "past champions not playing."

The club confirmed that Mickelson has notified Augusta National he will not be playing. The Masters is April 7-10.

It will be the first time Mick-

elson is not at the Masters since 1994, when he was recovering from a broken leg suffered while skiing.

Mickelson, who last year became golf's oldest major champion when he won the PGA Championship at age 50, was at the Saudi International when he accused the PGA Tour in a Golf Digest interview of "obnoxious greed."

Two weeks later, golf writer and author Alan Shipnuck published part of his upcoming biography on Mickelson that shed further insight into his involvement with Greg Norman

and the Saudi-funded "Super Golf League."

Mickelson told Shipnuck the Saudis behind a proposed breakaway rival league were "scary mother (expletive)s to get involved with."

He also said it was worth getting in bed with the Saudis, despite their history of human rights abuses, if it meant a chance to change the PGA Tour.

"We know they killed (Washington Post columnist Jamal) Khashoggi and have a horrible record on human rights. They execute people over there for

being gay," he said. "Knowing all of this, why would I even consider it? Because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape how the PGA Tour operates."

The interview took place last November. Mickelson apologized for the comments that he described as "reckless." He also said they were off the record. Shipnuck says they were not.

Mickelson has not played since the Saudi International on Feb. 6. He said in his statement that he "desperately needed" time away to sort out his priorities.

LeBron, Lakers roll over Cavaliers

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — LeBron James scored 38 points, notched another triple-double and sparked memories of his time in Cleveland, leading the Los Angeles Lakers to a 131-120 win Monday over the Cavaliers, who had a horrid defensive night.

It was James' only visit back home this season — other than the All-Star Game last month — and the star from nearby Akron thrilled fans who warmly welcomed him back. James played 11 seasons in two stints with the Cavs, and is trying to get back to the playoffs for the first time since he left in 2018.

James added 10 rebounds and 12 assists for his 105th career triple-double and sixth this season. He's trying to keep the Lakers in the postseason picture in what has been a disappointing season to this point.

"He legit wants to be out there every night," Los Angeles coach Frank Vogel said. "For him to be that way in his 19th year is something this league needs."

Russell Westbrook and D.J. Augustin added 20 points apiece for the Lakers, who came into the game tied for ninth in

the Western Conference.

76ers 113, Heat 106: Tyrese Maxey scored 13 of his 28 points in the fourth quarter, including nine in a row during a crucial stretch, and short-handed Philadelphia — without stars Joel Embiid and James Harden — beat Eastern Conference-leading Miami.

Shake Milton had 20 points and Furkan Korkmaz added 18 for the 76ers, who pulled within 2½ games of the Heat in the standings. Embiid sat out with back soreness and Harden with left hamstring tightness.

Nets 114, Jazz 106: Kevin Durant had 37 points, nine rebounds and eight assists, and host Brooklyn beat Utah for its sixth win in seven games.

Bruce Brown added 22 points for the Nets, who stayed in sole possession of eighth place in the Eastern Conference. Nic Claxton, starting for ailing center Andre Drummond, made all five shots and scored 11 in the Nets' 38-point third quarter that broke open the game.

Bulls 113, Raptors 99: DeMar DeRozan and Zach LaVine each scored 26 points and Nikola Vucevic had 19 points and 13

rebounds as host Chicago beat Toronto.

DeRozan shot 11 for 14 as the Bulls snapped a three-game losing streak and remained in fifth place in the Eastern Conference.

Mavericks 110, Timberwolves 108: Reggie Bullock scored 18 points with a clutch 3-pointer late after missing four games for personal reasons, and Dallas defeated Minnesota in a game delayed briefly because of a leaky roof in Dallas.

Luka Doncic had 15 points and 10 assists, the final one setting up a three by Dorian Finney-Smith from the same right corner where Bullock connected moments later. Dwight Powell scored 22 points on 8-of-8 shooting for the Mavericks.

Hornets 106, Pelicans 103: LaMelo Ball and Terry Rozier each scored 17 points, and host Charlotte came back to beat New Orleans for its fifth straight win.

Miles Bridges added 15 points and Mason Plumlee had 11 points and 10 rebounds for the Hornets, who trailed most of the second half and overcame 17 turnovers.

Trail Blazers 119, Pistons 115: Brandon Williams scored 23 points and Ben McLemore added 21 as patchwork Portland ended a four-game losing streak with a win in Detroit.

The Pistons, who trailed by 23 in the third period, took a 106-105 lead on Luka Garza's free throw with 5:02 to play before the Trail Blazers responded with a 7-2 run.

Celtics 132, Thunder 123: Jayson Tatum had 36 points in Boston's victory at Oklahoma City.

Tatum has scored 30 or more in his last three games, extending the streak on 11-of-19 shooting against the Thunder. Jaylen Brown added 25 points and Grant Williams scored 20.

Rockets 115, Wizards 97: Christian Wood set career highs with eight three-pointers and 39 points as Houston used a huge late run to rally past visiting Washington.

The Rockets trailed by 23 in the first half, but slowly trimmed the deficit before going on a 16-0 spurt over the last minute of the third quarter and the first four minutes of the fourth to take the lead.

Marchand's 2nd goal lifts Bruins over Canadiens in OT

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Brad Marchand scored his second goal of the game 34 seconds into overtime to give the Boston Bruins a 3-2 win over the Montreal Canadiens on Monday night.

Connor Clifton had a goal and an assist, and Erik Haula had two assists for Boston.

Jeremy Swayman stopped 26 shots.

Joel Armia and Denis Savard scored for Montreal. Jake Allen finished with 43 saves.

In the extra period, the Bruins brought the puck up the ice and Haula sent a pass in

the middle to Marchand. Marchand skated in, faked to his left, went to his right and backhanded it past Allen for his 27th of the season.

Avalanche 3, Oilers 2 (OT): Nathan MacKinnon scored 52 seconds into overtime to lift host Colorado over Edmonton.

MacKinnon, who also had an assist, came into the zone on a 2-on-1 with Cale Makar. Makar fed MacKinnon, whose shot beat Mike Smith for his 22nd of the season to win it.

Mikko Rantanen had two goals, Makar finished with two assists and Darcy Kuemper stopped 23 shots in the fourth

straight win for the Avalanche.

Kailer Yamamoto had a goal and an assist and Evander Kane also scored for the Oilers. Smith finished with 28 saves.

Wild 3, Golden Knights 0: Nicolas Deslauriers scored in his Minnesota debut and Cam Talbot stopped 28 shots for the shutout against visiting Vegas.

Matt Dumba also had a goal and Ryan Hartman added an empty-netter for the Wild, who won their third consecutive game and climbed into second place in the Central Division.

Rookie Logan Thompson stopped 33 shots for the Golden Knights.

Predators 6, Ducks 3: Filip Forsberg scored two goals in the third period of a five-point performance, and Matt Duchene added two power-play goals in the final minutes to lead visiting Nashville.

Roman Josi and Ryan Johansen also scored for the Predators, who pulled even with Minnesota on points for second place in the Central Division with their sixth victory in nine games.

Derek Grant had two goals and Troy Terry also scored for the Ducks, who have lost seven straight (0-5-2). John Gibson stopped 25 shots.