

Zelenskyy seeks peace ‘without delay’

Associated Press

LVIV, Ukraine — Ukraine is prepared to declare its neutrality and consider a compromise on contested areas in the country’s east, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said ahead of another round of talks set for Tuesday on stopping the fighting. But he said only a face-to-face meeting with Russia’s leader can end the war.

While hinting at possible concessions, Zelenskyy also stressed that Ukraine’s priority is ensuring its sovereignty and its “territorial integrity” — preventing Russia from carving up the country, something Ukraine and the West say could now be Moscow’s goal.

Russia has long demanded that Ukraine drop any hope of joining the Western NATO alliance, which Moscow sees as a threat. Zelenskyy has also repeatedly stressed that Ukraine needs security guarantees of its own as part of any deal.

“Security guarantees and neutrality, non-nuclear status of our state — we are ready to go for it,” Zelenskyy said in an interview Sunday with independent Russian media outlets.

The Ukrainian leader has suggested as much before, but rarely so forcefully, and the latest remarks could create momentum for the talks scheduled to take place in Istanbul.

“We must come to an agreement with the president of the Russian Federation, and in order to reach an agreement, he needs to get out of there on his own feet ... and come to meet me,” Zelenskyy said in the interview, which Russia barred its media from publishing.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Monday that the two presidents could meet, but only after the key elements of a potential deal are negotiated.

“The meeting is necessary once we have clarity regarding solutions on all key issues,” Lavrov said in an interview with Serbian media. He accused Ukraine of only wanting to “imitate talks,” and said Russia needs concrete results.

In an overnight video address to his nation, Zelenskyy said Ukraine is seeking peace “without delay.”

While saying “Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity are beyond doubt,” Ze-

lenskyy also suggested compromise might be possible over the Donbas, the predominantly Russian-speaking eastern region of Ukraine where Moscow-backed rebels have been fighting a separatist war for the past eight years.

With its forces bogged down elsewhere, Russia said days ago that its focus is now on securing the Donbas.

Zelenskyy also said that a peace agreement would have to be put to a referendum of Ukrainian voters, but that Russian troops would have to withdraw from the country first.

“A referendum is impossible in the presence of troops. No one will consider the referendum results legitimate if there are foreign troops on the country’s territory,” he said.

Zelenskyy said that a possible compromise could see Russia pull back its troops to areas where they had been before the invasion started on Feb. 24.

It was not clear how a compromise on the Donbas would square with maintaining Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and Russia and Ukraine remain far apart on other issues.

Evidence shows N. Korea revamping nuke test site

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea’s leader on Monday pledged to continue the “sacred cause” of developing its nuclear arms as reports suggested the regime was renovating its nuclear test site.

Kim Jong Un made the remarks at a photo session with workers who purportedly test-fired the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile on Thursday, according to North Korea’s state-run news outlet.

At the photo session, Kim “expressed ... our Party’s will for building the strong defense capabilities to defend the security

and future of our country and people by more reliable and perfect and stronger, overwhelming strategic force,” the Korean Central News Agency reported.

Analysts have downplayed North Korea’s claim of success by pointing to discrepancies in the weather patterns during the ICBM launch on Thursday and photographs taken by the regime on that day. Intelligence agencies from South Korea and the United States believe the North likely launched a smaller Hwasong-15 ICBM, rather than the farther-reaching Hwasong-17, according to South Korean news reports.

Despite the contested claims, North Korea’s latest missile launch, its 11th test so far this year, renewed concerns from the South and U.S. Military officials from both countries in recent weeks assessed North Korea was planning on firing a Hwasong-17 “at full range.”

“The United States strongly condemns these launches, which are a brazen violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions, needlessly raise tensions and risk destabilizing the security situation in the region,” Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in a statement March 10.

The ICBM launch represent-

ed the first such test since 2017, when North Korea self-imposed a moratorium on testing missiles and nuclear weapons as negotiations were underway.

Regardless of North Korea’s missile variant, the recent test results surpassed the altitude and flight distance of the previous Hwasong-15 in 2017, once again putting the continental U.S. within striking distance.

South Korea’s Yonhap News Agency reported Sunday that North Korea, according to government sources, was working on developing a pathway to an underground tunnel at the test site that was supposedly demolished by North Korea in 2018.

I Corps reevaluates role in Indo-Pacific

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army's I Corps flew 20 soldiers and four Stryker armored vehicles from Washington state to Guam in February on two Air Force C-17 Globemaster IIIs to try out a new concept in warfare.

The object was to send a smaller, independent force, what the Army calls a "nodal command structure," to do the job of a force five times larger while taking advantage of all available transportation, communication and logistics networks, the I Corps chief of staff told Stars and Stripes recently.

I Corps, the Army's command responsible for 44,000 troops stationed across the Indo-Pacific region, from the U.S. Pacific Northwest to South Korea and Japan, views the smaller force model as a way to stay in the game in a new

era of global competition.

"We did a bunch of work on how the Corps can contribute in the theater," chief of staff Brig. Gen. Patrick Ellis said in a Feb. 28 interview. "It's not just efficiency, necessarily, it's also survivability and it's agility."

I Corps is also reevaluating its role in the Indo-Pacific, a move that coincides with a similar, broader realignment by U.S. armed forces in the region.

In the past, the I Corps traditionally deployed much larger forces — either for training or real-life missions — 600 or more personnel and accompanying equipment, Ellis said. With a much smaller team, the time required to get an operation underway can be shortened to days or even hours, depending on the situation, he said.

The concept relies on small, interconnected teams that can

serve multifunctional roles, including communications, logistics and command. To accomplish this, I Corps took a new approach to transportation by using any means to move personnel, equipment and data.

"Transport agnosticism" is a new concept for us. We used to use an Army system to run our communications, but this time we also were able to use a Navy system," Ellis said. "We also did some experimentation with Starlink systems, which is a commercial system."

The Army has also used Starlink, a satellite-based internet service operated by American aerospace manufacturer SpaceX, closer to home. The 50th Expeditionary Signal Battalion out of Fort Bragg, N.C., recently started using Starlink to achieve faster data transfer, according to a Feb. 28 Army news release.

This new approach relies to a greater extent on cloud computing, for which the Army spent the past two decades developing new applications, Col. Elizabeth Casely, communications director for I Corps, told Stars and Stripes.

The "nodal command" concept is similar to ideas that other U.S. service branches are employing in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. Marine Corps, for example, rebranded the 3rd Marine Regiment in Hawaii as a littoral regiment on March 4, one of three regiments expected to be redesignated by 2030.

The move is part of the Marine Corps' strategy to be leaner and more mobile, and the littoral regiments are "specialized to deal with the rising threat of China," Gen. Eric Smith, assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, said during a news conference on March 1.

US, Philippines to highlight 'mutual defense' in Balikatan

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — Thousands of American and Filipino forces began on Monday one of their largest combat exercises in years that will include live-fire maneuvers, aircraft assaults, urban warfare and beach landings in a showcase of U.S. firepower in the northern Philippines near its sea border with Taiwan.

The annual exercises, called Balikatan, will run up to April 8 with nearly 9,000 navy, marines, air force and army troops, including 5,100 American military personnel, to strengthen the longtime treaty allies' "capabilities and readiness for real-world challenges," U.S. and Philippine military officials said.

China will likely frown on the war drills given their relative proximity to Taiwan, which it claims as Chinese territory, but

organizers said the exercises don't regard any particular country as a target.

"The U.S. military and Armed Forces of the Philippines will train together to expand and advance shared tactics, techniques, and procedures that strengthen our response capabilities and readiness for real-world challenges," said Maj. Gen. Jay Barger, the U.S. 3rd Marine division's commanding general. "Our alliance remains a key source of strength and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."

The exercises are anchored on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, which commits the U.S. and the Philippines to come to the aid of the other in case of an attack.

"It's for mutual defense, never for offense," Philippine military spokesman Col. Ramon Zagala said.

Pentagon releases \$773B budget request for FY '23

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon on Monday released a \$773 billion budget request for fiscal year 2023, asking Congress for a big spending boost to build new weapons to curb an emergent Chinese military, check Russia's aggression in Europe and boost pay for troops.

President Joe Biden's second Pentagon budget request dwarfs his 2022 request of \$715 billion, adding money to account for spikes this year in inflation and an increased emphasis on the modern arms needed to counter the No. 1 national security issue for the United States — China, officials said Monday.

If adopted by Congress, Biden's 2023 proposal would mark the largest-ever Defense Department budget, surpassing the fis-

cal year 2022 budget that Capitol Hill lawmakers passed this month, some six months after the start of the fiscal year on Oct. 1.

While the budget request focuses heavily on ensuring U.S. troops are prepared and armed with the capabilities to counter their Chinese and Russian counterparts, Pentagon officials said Friday that the request was largely finished before Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his troops into Ukraine on Feb. 24, a senior defense official said Friday, speaking on the condition of anonymity to preview the Pentagon's budget plans.

American service members and DOD civilians would receive a 4.6% pay boost under Biden's proposal, the largest such raise in two decades, according to the Pentagon.

Biden's remark on Putin adds to policy woes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With the last nine, unscripted words of an impassioned speech about Russia's aggression in Ukraine, President Joe Biden created a troubling distraction, undermining his effectiveness as he returned home to face restive Americans who strongly disapprove of his performance on issues that matter most to them.

His comment that Russia's Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power" — an assertion that his aides were forced to quickly clean up — overshadowed his larger message of solidifying the Western coalition that's confronting Moscow. It punctuated another frustrating moment for an administration that's struggled to regain its footing — and the American electorate's support — in the face of an ongoing pandemic, escalating inflation and an increasingly

complicated foreign policy crisis that raises the specter of nuclear conflict.

Although he's forged a united front to punish Russia with sanctions for the invasion of Ukraine, polls show Americans feel no better about his leadership as the bloody war continues. Meanwhile, Democrats are in danger of losing control of Congress in November's midterm elections, leaving Biden with limited opportunities to advance a progressive domestic agenda that remains stalled.

The president is on the verge of securing the confirmation of the first Black woman, Ketanji Brown Jackson, on the U.S. Supreme Court, yet there's no clear path forward for him to fulfill other campaign promises around voting rights, criminal justice reform and fighting climate change.

Biden's case isn't helped by his

approval ratings. Just 34% of Americans think he is doing a good job handling the economy, usually the top issue for voters in an election year, according to a poll released Thursday by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

His contentious assertion about Putin in his Warsaw speech did little to help things. The White House rushed to clarify that Biden wasn't actually calling for "regime change," but by the next day it became clear that the dramatic statement had produced some of the first overt cracks in unity among NATO nations that had just convened in Brussels for an emergency meeting.

Some leading Western European allies, including France and Germany, tend to be more cautious than the United States about how to confront Russia. Until Saturday night, Biden had calibrated

his words carefully.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Biden's remarks could make it harder to resolve the war.

"I wouldn't use those terms, because I continue to speak to President Putin, because what do we want to do collectively?" he said. "We want to stop the war that Russia launched in Ukraine, without waging war and without escalation."

In Berlin, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Sunday that neither NATO nor Biden seek regime change in Russia. Asked about Biden's remarks during an appearance on ARD television, Scholz also said Biden had not made a dangerous mistake.

"We both agree completely that regime change is not an object and aim of policy that we pursue together," the chancellor said.

240 more sailors, 6 Navy jets deploying to Germany

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — About 240 sailors and six Navy EA-18G Growlers will arrive in Germany on Monday as Russia's war in nearby Ukraine drags on, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

The troops and electronic attack aircraft will deploy from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Wash., to Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany, Kirby said.

"This is in order to bolster readiness, enhance NATO's collective defense posture and further increase air integration capabilities with our allied and partner nations," he said Monday.

The 240 troops, who belong to Electronic Attack Squadron 134 in Washington state, will join the more than 100,000 U.S. service members in Europe, Kirby said. About 14,000 of the 100,000 troops deployed to the region in

the past two months in response to Russia's continued attack on Ukraine.

The Growlers are fighter aircraft specially equipped with radar-jamming and other electronic-attack capabilities to disrupt enemy communications and more, according to the Navy.

The aircraft will not be used on Russian forces in Ukraine, in accordance with President Joe Biden's commitment not to send U.S. troops to fight Russia directly in the besieged country. Instead, they will fly missions to act as a deterrent to keep Russia from attacking NATO countries, Kirby said.

"They are not being sent because of some sort of acute threat that was perceived or some specific incident that happened. They are being deployed as we have said all along, the [Defense] Secretary [Lloyd Austin] wants to keep options open," he said.

Ukraine refugees nearing 4M amid border slowdown

Associated Press

MEDYKA, Poland — A slowdown for good or a temporary lull during the storm of war?

While the number of refugees who have flooded out of Ukraine nears 4 million, fewer people have crossed the border in recent days. Border guards, aid agencies and refugees themselves say Russia's unpredictable war on Ukraine offers few signs on whether it's just a pause or a permanent drop-off.

Some Ukrainians are sticking it out to fight or help defend their country. Others have left their homes, but are staying elsewhere in Ukraine to see how the winds of war will blow. Still others are elderly or ill and need extra help moving anywhere. And some remain, as one refugee put it, because "homeland is homeland."

In the first two weeks after Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, about 2.5 million people in Ukraine's pre-

war population of 44 million left the country. In the second two weeks, the number of refugees was roughly half that.

The total exodus now stands at 3.87 million, according to the latest tally announced Monday from UNHCR, the U.N. refugee agency, which includes figures up through Sunday. But in the previous 24 hours, only 45,000 people crossed Ukraine's borders to seek safety, the slowest one-day count yet, and for four of the last five days, the numbers have not surpassed 50,000 a day. In contrast, on March 6 and March 7, over 200,000 people a day left Ukraine.

UNHCR says the war has triggered Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II, and the speed and breadth of refugees fleeing is unprecedented in recent times. Poland alone has taken in 2.3 million refugees and Romania nearly 600,000. The U.S. has vowed to take in 100,000.

Panel seeks contempt vote for ex-Trump aides

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol is pushing ahead with contempt charges against former Donald Trump advisers Peter Navarro and Dan Scavino in response to their monthslong refusal to comply with subpoenas.

Navarro, Trump's trade adviser, and Scavino, a White House communications aide under Trump, have been uncooperative in the congressional probe into the deadly 2021 insurrection, according to a com-

mittee report released Sunday night.

The nine-member panel will meet Monday night to discuss whether to hold the two allies of the Republican former president in contempt of Congress. It is likely to be approved by the Democratic-majority committee.

The recommendation of criminal charges would then go to the full House. Approval there would send the charges to the Justice Department, which has the final say on prosecution.

The committee subpoenaed

Navarro, 72, for his testimony in early February, seeking to question the Trump ally who promoted false claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election that the committee believes contributed to the attack.

"He hasn't been shy about his role in efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election, and has even discussed the former President's support for those plans," Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, the committee's Democratic chairman, said in a statement at the time.

Though Navarro sought to

use executive privilege to avoid cooperation, the Biden administration this month denied claims from him and another Trump aide, former national security adviser Michael Flynn, saying an assertion of executive privilege was not justified or in the national interest.

On Thursday, Navarro called the committee vote "an unprecedented partisan assault on executive privilege," and said, "The committee knows full well that President Trump has invoked executive privilege and it is not my privilege to waive."

Thousands of Calif. grocery workers vote to OK strike

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Thousands of central and Southern California grocery workers have voted to authorize their union to call a strike against several major supermarket chains as contract negotiations are set to resume this week.

About 47,000 workers at hundreds of Ralphs, Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions voted starting last week, and the results were announced Sunday.

The possible walkout would involve grocery clerks, meat cutters, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians represented by seven locals of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union.

No strike was immediately set. The union said talks would resume Wednesday and if bargaining breaks down again, it would decide what steps to take next.

Negotiations with Ralphs, owned by Kroger, and Albertsons, owner of Albertsons, Vons and Pavilions stores, ended without agreement before the latest three-year contracts expired March 6.

The union said the next day that the companies' wage proposal amounted to a 60-cent in-

crease that was "shockingly low" and well below workers' cost-of-living needs. Employees were asking for a \$5-an-hour raise, among other proposals.

"Both companies have refused to agree to expand safety committees in the stores, and have yet to negotiate meaningful health and welfare benefits," a United Food and Commercial Workers statement said.

The union said during the final day of negotiations, it emphasized the essential role grocery workers played during the coronavirus pandemic.

The union said bargaining committee member Erlene Molina, a Ralphs employee, told company negotiators: "We saw how people were acting like the world was ending, but we could not stay home. We knew that we had an obligation to our community, so we showed up every day."

"The outcome of the strike authorization vote does not change anything related to this process," Albertsons Cos. said in a statement Sunday. "We remain committed to negotiating a contract that is fair to all parties, including our employees, and will continue to work to achieve that."

Shanghai starts China's most sweeping lockdown in 2 years

Associated Press

BEIJING — China began its most extensive coronavirus lockdown in two years Monday to conduct mass testing and control a growing outbreak in Shanghai as questions are raised about the economic toll of the nation's "zero-COVID" strategy.

Shanghai, China's financial capital and largest city with 26 million people, had managed its smaller previous outbreaks with limited lockdowns of housing compounds and workplaces where the virus was spreading.

But the citywide lockdown that will be conducted in two phases will be China's most extensive since the central city of Wuhan, where the virus was first detected in late 2019, confined its 11 million people to their homes for 76 days in early 2020. Millions more have been kept in lockdown since then.

Shanghai's Pudong financial district and nearby areas will be locked down from Monday to Friday as mass testing gets underway, the local government said. In the second phase of the lockdown, the vast downtown area west of the Huangpu River that divides the city will

start its own five-day lockdown Friday.

Residents will be required to stay home and deliveries will be left at checkpoints to ensure there is no contact with the outside world. Offices and all businesses not considered essential will be closed and public transport suspended.

Already, many communities within Shanghai have been locked down for the past week, with their housing compounds blocked off with blue and yellow plastic barriers and residents required to submit to multiple tests for COVID-19. Shanghai's Disneyland theme park is among the businesses that closed earlier. Automaker Tesla is also suspending production at its Shanghai plant, according to media reports.

Panic-buying was reported on Sunday, with supermarket shelves cleared of food, beverages and household items. Additional barriers were being erected in neighborhoods Monday, with workers in hazmat suits staffing checkpoints.

In-person observations of the April 5 Tomb Sweeping Festival have been canceled, and memorials will instead be held online.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

School donates missile, launcher to vet museum

AL ATHENS — People donate items to classrooms and teachers all the time, but an Alabama school is turning around the theme by donating a missile and a tank-like carrier painted red, white and blue to a veterans museum.

An MGM-52 Lance Missile, once capable of delivering nuclear or conventional weapons before it was deactivated at the end of the Cold War, and an M752 launcher have sat outside the old Athens High School for decades. They were donated to the school's ROTC program in the 1970s, The News Courier reported.

The building now houses Athens Middle School, and the equipment is being given to the Alabama Veterans Museum and Archives for restoration in coordination with Collin Daly, chairman of the Limestone County Commission, said museum director Sandra Thompson.

With the help of a towing company, a crew loaded the vehicle on a tractor-trailer and hauled it to the museum recently. Thompson hopes the Career and Technical School can begin restoration work immediately.

New bird flu case forces killing of 250K chickens

IA DES MOINES — Iowa agriculture officials said Saturday that they have confirmed another case of bird flu in a flock of commercial pullet chickens.

The outbreak in Franklin County is the seventh such outbreak found in Iowa this month,

according to a news release from the Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship. The department said the latest case affects about 250,000 birds.

An outbreak in Buena Vista County that was found Wednesday will require the killing of nearly 54,000 turkeys. It's the third case of avian influenza in the county, following a March 6 case that led to the killing of nearly 50,000 turkeys and an infection found March 17 that resulted in the killing of 5.3 million egg-laying hens.

Farms found with the virus must kill and dispose of their flocks because the virus is highly contagious and fatal to domestic birds.

DA, others to look into fatal collapse of garage

MA BOSTON — A host of authorities including the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office will investigate a Boston parking garage collapse that killed a construction worker.

The downtown garage was in the process of being demolished when a portion of it collapsed on Saturday evening. Boston Emergency Medical Services said the collapse killed one person and caused another to be transported to a hospital.

Local, state and federal authorities will be involved in the investigation, James Borghesani, a spokesperson for the district attorney's office, said late Saturday. The office is located close to the site of the collapse.

Boston Fire Commissioner Jack Dempsey said the worker was completing demolition work in a construction vehicle

when the structure collapsed, and the worker fell over the side of garage. The district attorney's office had only identified the person as a young man Saturday evening.

Fire destroys ancient redwood tree in park

CA LAGUNITAS — A small fire has destroyed an ancient coastal redwood tree at a Northern California park.

The roughly 200-foot-tall redwood known as the Pioneer Tree fell after being engulfed in flames midday Thursday, California State Parks said in a statement. It was one of the few remaining old-growth coastal redwood tree at Samuel P. Taylor State Park, 23 miles north of San Francisco.

The Marin County Fire Department contained the fire after it spread to a half-acre, the statement said. The cause of the blaze remains under investigation.

The fire shuttered a trail that leads to the tree, but the rest of the park remains open.

State makes registry for elder abuse convictions

AL MONTGOMERY — A new state database, created by legislation called "Shirley's Law" after a woman who survived elder abuse, will include the names of anyone convicted of mistreating seniors.

Gov. Kay Ivey signed the law Thursday to create the nation's first elder abuse registry, WSFA-TV reported. The law was named for Shirley Holcombe, who died in 2018 after

becoming a victim of forgery by a caretaker, after a campaign by daughter Jo Holcombe.

Following her mother's death, Holcombe brought the idea for an elder abuse registry to Rep. Victor Gaston, R-Mobile. Seeing it through to becoming a law was an emotional process, she said.

The law will allow family members to see whether someone being considered for a job involving older adults has ever been convicted of elder abuse, Gaston said. It will also provide information about people who have come under protection orders for elder abuse, said Sam Smith, the director of Adult Protective Services with the Alabama Department of Human Resources.

Century-old school to be rebuilt for apartments

GA SAVANNAH — An abandoned Savannah school built more than a century ago is being rehabilitated as an apartment building.

The school building on 38th Street has sat vacant for years. The St. Paul Academy for Boys closed in 2014, WTOG-TV reported. Developers recently purchased the building from the Savannah College of Art and Design with plans to convert its classrooms into 27 apartments.

Built in 1900, the school building features a striking white-columned entrance. Project developers said they expect to spend about \$3 million restoring and updating the property. They hope to finish the job by fall.

— From wire reports

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North Carolina rolls past Saint Peter's

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — America's favorite underdog, Saint Peter's, shouldn't feel all that bad. North Carolina has crushed lots of dreams over the decades.

The Tar Heels ended all hope of a March Madness miracle in the early going Sunday, getting 20 points and 22 rebounds from Armando Bacot in a wire-to-wire 69-49 run-away over 15th-seeded Saint Peter's.

No. 8 seed Carolina (28-9) made its record 21st Final Four, and this one will be a scene like no other. Next Saturday in New Orleans, it's North Carolina vs. archrival Duke and its soon-to-be-retiring coach, Mike Krzyzewski. Three short weeks ago, the Tar Heels fractured a different sort of fairy tale — Coach K's final home game — in a 94-81 beatdown of the Blue Devils at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

"We want Duke! We want Duke! We want Duke!" the North Carolina fans shouted as the team cut down the nets in Philly, the same city where it won the East region back in 2016.

"I don't think anything can be as crazy as the buildup to that game over in Cameron," coach Hubert Davis said. "We just keep our eyes straight ahead and we ignore all the noise."

While Coach K's winding road to retirement has been a beauty to watch this March,

nothing has captured more imaginations during this NCAA Tournament than the run put on by the Peacocks.

The entire basketball budget for this scrappy group from Jersey City, N.J., is \$1.6 million — or around \$400,000 less than what Davis makes in a year. The first-year coach was sobbing as his players enveloped him.

"It was something that I just desperately wanted for them," Davis said. "This is probably the most nervous I was before a game, because I just really wanted them to go to the Final Four."

Two nights earlier, Saint Peter's (21-12) looked like Final Four material. It beat Purdue to become the first 15 seed to advance to an Elite Eight. It is hardly the first team to see grand plans undone by one of the country's top-line power programs.

"I didn't really recognize my team for the first 10 minutes of the game," Peacocks coach Shaheen Holloway said.

After Carolina's Leaky Black missed a free throw 2½ minutes in, Bacot edged in for the offensive rebound and an easy putback. It gave the Tar Heels a 7-0 lead. In its three tournament wins over Kentucky, Murray State and Purdue, the Peacocks hadn't trailed by more than six.

St. Peter's, whose 10-game win streak ended, moved the ball well and did get some

looks over the first 10 minutes. Some shots went halfway down and rimmed out. Others rattled around the iron but wouldn't fall. It trailed 21-7 after missing their first six shots, and 16 of its first 19.

Late in the first half, Daryl Banks III swooped in for what looked like a windmill jam. It got rejected — by the front of the rim. It made the Peacocks 5-for-27 on the night, and when Bacot dunked on the next possession, North Carolina led 36-15.

Fousseyni Drame led Saint Peter's with 12 points and KC Ndefo had 10.

The weekend before, the Tar Heels had taken a 25-point lead against Baylor only to see it all melt away before pulling the game out in overtime. The turning point there came when Brady Manek got ejected for throwing an inadvertent elbow. No such drama this time, though Manek finished this game on the sideline, too — watching garbage time from the bench after scoring 19 points.

Davis had replaced Roy Williams, who took the Tar Heels to five Final Fours over 18 years and was cheering from the stands for this one. Now the 51-year-old Davis joins the likes of Ray Meyer, Steve Fisher, Denny Crum and another Tar Heel, Bill Guthridge, as coaches who have reached the sport's biggest stage in their rookie year.

Kansas runs past Miami, reaches a 16th Final Four

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Ochai Agbaji was all over the court. David McCormack dominated inside, and Christian Braun connected from deep.

With one dazzling finish, Kansas roared into the Final Four.

Agbaji, McCormack and Braun led the top-seeded Jayhawks to a brilliant second half in a 76-50 victory over Miami on Sunday, sending one of college basketball's top programs to the national semifinals for the 16th time.

"That was about as well as we can play, the second half," coach Bill Self said. "These guys earned it."

After trailing by six at halftime, Kansas outscored Miami 47-15. The Jayhawks shot 59.3% (16 for

27) after the break, compared to 21.4% (6 for 28) for the Hurricanes. They also outrebounded Miami 25-11 in the final 20 minutes.

Once Kansas started flashing its superior speed and athleticism, the Hurricanes couldn't keep up.

"We started to play the score, not the game," Miami forward Sam Waardenburg said.

Agbaji scored 12 of his 18 points in the second half. McCormack opened the half with his own 5-0 run and finished with 15 points on 6-for-7 shooting. Braun made the Jayhawks' first three-pointer with 15:27 left to snap a 40-40 tie.

"We just needed some energy," said Braun, who finished with 12 points. "I thought we were flat in the first half."

Kansas (32-6), the only No. 1 seed left in the NCAA Tournament, won the Midwest Region for the 13th time with its ninth consecutive victory overall. Next up is a Final Four matchup with Villanova on Saturday in New Orleans.

Remy Martin, the region's most outstanding player, had nine points and six rebounds for the Jayhawks. Jalen Wilson grabbed 11 boards, making up for a tough shooting day.

It's the fourth Final Four for Self in his 19 seasons at Kansas. He also had one of the best teams in the country when the tournament was canceled in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The last time the Jayhawks made it to the semis, they lost 95-79 to coach Jay Wright and the

Wildcats in 2018.

"I've thought all along that this was a possibility," Self said. "But I've also thought all along that the margin for error wasn't such where we could get loose and have it be a probability."

Kameron McGusty scored 18 points and Isaiah Wong had 15 for the No. 10-seeded Hurricanes in the program's first appearance in the Elite Eight. Miami (26-11) was bidding to get coach Jim Larranaga back to the Final Four for the first time since he led 11th-seeded George Mason on a memorable run in 2006.

"Just being able to accomplish what we accomplished this year, now teams coming in or new teams, two, three years down the line, that Elite Eight is going to be the goal," McGusty said.

No. 1 Gamecocks dominate Bluejays, back in Final Four

Associated Press

GREENSBORO, N.C. — South Carolina and Aliyah Boston gained what they'd pointed toward all season — a shot at redemption at the Final Four.

Boston scored 19 points to lead the top-seeded Gamecocks to their second straight Final Four with an 80-50 win over Creighton, ending the Bluejays' surprise run through the NCAA Tournament on Sunday night.

The Gamecocks (33-2) took control early and rarely gave Creighton a chance to get back into the game, which ended with South Carolina getting its fourth Final Four appearance in the past seven tournaments.

Boston lost her streak of 27 double-doubles in a row, as she had seven rebounds in the blowout. She's happy, though, to have another chance to compete for a national crown and wipe away the disappointment from last season.

That's when Boston missed a short put-back in the closing moments of the Gamecocks' 66-65 loss to eventual NCAA champion Stanford in the national semifinals. She collapsed in tears on the court and has been almost single-minded in wanting to finish what the team missed out on then.

"It's exciting," Boston said of the Final Four return. "We said in the locker room,

we've got unfinished business."

South Carolina will face either Louisville or Michigan on Friday in the Final Four. The top-seeded Cardinals play the No. 3 seed Wolverines for the Wichita Region title on Monday night.

The Gamecocks danced and celebrated the win on Sunday as Boston held up two fingers for their back-to-back Final Fours. Boston was named the Greensboro Region MVP for her dominance through four games with 67 points and 57 boards combined.

Her signature moment, though, came Friday night against North Carolina when Boston posted 28 points, 22 rebounds and scored all 13 of South Carolina's fourth-quarter points in the 69-61 victory.

"It was pressure-packed the entire season, and it's a relief to know that we're back" in the Final Four, South Carolina coach Dawn Staley said.

It was a disheartening end for the feel-good Bluejays (23-10), who had burst through the Greensboro Region to reach the Elite Eight. Lauren Jensen had 12 points to lead Creighton.

"Really frustrated and angry that we lost," the Bluejays' Tatum Rembao said. "But really joyful for all we got to experience these last 10 days."

Defending champ Stanford advances

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Standing at the top of the ladder, Lexie Hull got the final snip with the scissors, drawing one of the loudest cheers of the night as she draped the net around her neck.

Hull did all she could to get defending national champion Stanford back to her hometown for the Spokane Regional. She then became the catalyst for getting the Cardinal back to the women's Final Four.

"I'm just super proud of our team for staying with it, sticking with each other and being gritty," Hull said. "I think it really comes down to who was the grittier team."

Hull scored 20 points, including a key three-point play inside the final three minutes, and Haley Jones hit four free throws in the closing moments to finish with 18 points in top-seeded Stanford's win over No. 2 seed Texas 59-50 on Sunday night.

The Cardinal will play in the national semifinal for the 15th time in program history, facing either North Carolina State or Connecticut in Minneapolis.

"It's crazy to say this but you're always happy to go to the Final Four, but sometimes you're like really happy. And I'm like really happy," coach Tara VanDerweir said.

This Elite Eight matchup was tightly contested throughout and reinforced the resolve that Stanford was missing earlier in the season when it lost to the Longhorns at home on the night it received its rings from the 2021 championship.

The Cardinal (32-3) was the tougher team this time around, especially in the second half.

Hull made a key three-pointer early in the fourth quarter, and the three-point play gave Stanford a 53-48 lead with 2:29 remaining.

Pulisic leads US to brink of Cup

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — American players unfurled a red-and-blue banner with "QUALIFIED" in bold, white letters, when Christian Pulisic realized what was going on.

"The guys didn't know at all what it said. It was just hand handed to them," the U.S. star said. "Once we realized — there's no need to show that off because we still have a job to do."

Pulisic's first international hat trick led the United States over Panama 5-1 on Sunday night and moved the Americans to the brink of qualifying for the World Cup for the first time since 2014.

Only a loss of six or more goals in Wednesday night's finale at Costa Rica would cause the Americans not to get one of three automatic berths from North and Central America and the Caribbean. They can finish no worse than fourth, which earns a June playoff, likely against New Zealand.

"We honestly approach it like any other game," Pulisic said. "We're going to prepare exactly the same as we would if we needed a win."

Pulisic converted two penalty kicks during a four-goal burst in the first half that also saw Paul Arriola and Jesús Ferreira score, then boosted the lead to 5-0 on a memorable goal with two brilliant touches that evaded a pair of defenders.

Canada (28 points) secured its first berth since 1986 with a 4-0 win over Jamaica. The U.S. (25) is second ahead of Mexico on goal difference and Costa Rica (22) is fourth.

While the U.S. has never won at Costa Rica, goal difference is the first tiebreaker, and the Americans are plus-13 to the Ticos' plus-three. The U.S. also has the second tiebreaker of total goals, 21 to 11.

In October 2017, the U.S. defeated Panama 4-0 in Orlando and needed only a draw at Trinidad four days later, but flopped to a 2-1 loss. Pulisic and Arriola are the only holdovers from that night.

"I'm not celebrating anything," Arriola said. "I was in this exact position or very similar position four years ago, and we know how that qualification ended."

Pulisic's 21 international goals include 12 in World Cup qualifying. Wearing the captain's armband, he scored in the 17th minute and fourth minute of first-half stoppage time, both after fouls by Aníbal Godoy. Pulisic is 6-for-6 on penalty kicks in his U.S. career.

"I just really want to play in a World Cup and so does this team," Pulisic said.

NBA-leading Suns roll past 76ers

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Jae Crowder's wide-open three-pointer late in the fourth quarter Sunday sealed yet another win for the Phoenix Suns, who continue to pile up victories even though they've accomplished just about everything possible in an NBA regular season.

Devin Booker scored 35 points, Chris Paul had 19 points and 14 assists and the NBA-leading Suns won their eighth straight game, beating the Philadelphia 76ers 114-104 on Sunday.

Crowder isn't lacking for motivation.

"The motivation comes from last year," said Crowder, who was part of the team last season when it lost to Milwaukee in the NBA Finals. "Making it all the way to the Finals and not achieving the main goal — that's the ultimate motivation. That's all you need. You want to get back there, you want a different story."

"You can't skip any steps."

The 76ers had their three-game winning streak snapped despite another big game from Joel Embiid, who had 37 points and 15 rebounds.

James Harden had a tough game, shooting 2-for-11 from the field. He had 14 points, nine assists and seven rebounds.

Hornets 119, Nets 110: LaMelo Ball had 33 points, nine assists and seven rebounds and Charlotte beat Brooklyn to spoil Kyrie

Irving's first home game of the season and tie the Nets for eighth place in the Eastern Conference.

Irving finished with 16 points and tied his season high with 11 assists but shot 6-for-22 from the field. He hadn't been able to play at home this season until Mayor Eric Adams last week exempted athletes and performers from the New York City's coronavirus vaccine mandate.

Miles Bridges scored 24 points and PJ Washington had 18 points and 11 rebounds for the Hornets. They won for the seventh time in eight games.

Kevin Durant had 27 points, eight rebounds and seven assists for Brooklyn.

Wizards 123, Warriors 115: Corey Kispert scored 16 of his career-high 25 points in the first half and host Washington beat struggling Golden State.

The Warriors have lost five of their last six, and never led in this game. Golden State was without Stephen Curry (left foot sprain) for a fifth straight contest, and Andre Igoudala (low back injury) also was out.

Jordan Poole scored 26 for the Warriors. Klay Thompson had 25.

Pelicans 116, Lakers 108: Brandon Ingram scored 26 in his return from a 10-game absence and host New Orleans overcame a 23-point deficit to beat Los Angeles in a game with postseason implications for both clubs.

The Pelicans moved a half-game ahead of the Lakers for the ninth seed — and the first of two play-in spots — in the Western Conference.

New Orleans got an enormous boost from rookies Trey Murphy III and Herb Jones. Murphy, drafted 17th overall, scored all of his 21 points in the second half. Jones, a second-round draft choice, had 16 points and a career-high six steals.

Celtics 134, Timberwolves 112: Jayson Tatum scored 34 points, Jaylen Brown had 31 points and 10 rebounds and host Boston beat Minnesota for its sixth straight victory.

The Celtics won for the 24th time in their last 28 games. The Timberwolves are 12-5 since the All-Star break, winning 10 of 11 before back-to-back losses to Phoenix and Dallas this week.

Mavericks 114, Jazz 100: Luka Doncic scored 32 points and host Dallas beat Utah for the inside track to home-court advantage in what could be a first-round playoff matchup.

The Mavericks moved a game ahead of the Jazz for the fourth seed in the Western Conference and earned a split of the season series, with the home team winning all four games.

Knicks 104, Pistons 102: Alec Burks hit a three-pointer for New York's final points and finished off host Detroit with a last-second steal.

Malkin powers Penguins' blowout of Red Wings

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Mike Sullivan has spent the last five months praising his team's resilience, so the longtime Pittsburgh Penguins head coach expected a "spirited" response after watching his club get pushed around by the New York Rangers on Friday night.

What Sullivan got Sunday against Detroit wasn't resilience so much as dominance. The kind that provided a reminder that when healthy and in full flight, the Penguins remain as dangerous as ever.

Evgeni Malkin scored three goals to boost his career hat-trick total to 13 — second-most among active players — as Pitts-

burgh overwhelmed the reeling Red Wings in an 11-2 blowout.

Sidney Crosby, Kasper Kapalanen, Jeff Carter, Teddy Blueger, Danton Heinen, Brian Boyle, Bryan Rust and recently acquired Rickard Rakell also scored for the Penguins, who needed less than 30 minutes to take a 6-0 lead on their way to their first 11-goal game in nearly 30 years.

"Tonight was substantially more fun than the other night," said Rust, who added two assists to go with his 22nd goal of the season.

Wild 3, Avalanche 2 (OT): Kevin Fiala scored 15 seconds into overtime to send host Minnesota to its sixth straight victory.

Kirill Kaprizov and Ryan Hartman also scored for the Wild, which is the only NHL team this season with at least three six-game winning streaks. Hartman's tying goal with 5:27 left in regulation sent the game into overtime. Cam Talbot made 40 saves for Minnesota, extending his own personal win streak to six games.

Rangers 5, Sabres 4 (OT): K'Andre Miller scored 2:02 into overtime and host New York beat Buffalo.

Lightning 4, Islanders 1: Andrei Vasilevskiy made 23 saves and Victor Hedman and Alex Killorn scored second-period goals to lead visiting Tampa Bay past New York.

Predators 5, Flyers 4: Tanner Jeannot scored with 1:19 remaining to lead host Nashville to a victory over Philadelphia.

Devils 3, Canadiens 2 (SO): Jack Hughes had two goals and was one of four New Jersey players to score in a seven-round shootout as the hosts came back after blowing a two-goal lead and beat Montreal.

Maple Leafs 5, Panthers 2: John Tavares scored two power-play goals in the second period, helping host Toronto beat Florida.

Jets 2, Coyotes 1 (OT): Mark Scheifele scored his second goal of the game with 9.7 seconds left in overtime, giving host Winnipeg the victory over Arizona.