

## Heavy fighting rages on Kyiv outskirts

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian troops began leaving the Chernobyl nuclear plant after soldiers got “significant doses” of radiation from digging trenches at the highly contaminated site, Ukraine’s state power company said Thursday as heavy fighting raged on the outskirts of Kyiv and other fronts.

Energatom, the operator, gave no immediate details on the condition of the troops or how many were affected. But it said the Russians had dug in the forest inside the exclusion zone around the now-closed plant, the site of the world’s worst nuclear disaster in 1986.

The troops “panicked at the first sign of illness,” which “showed up very quickly,” and began to prepare to leave, Energatom said.

The Russians seized the Chernobyl site in the opening stages of the Feb. 24 invasion, raising fears that they would cause damage or disruption that could spread radiation. The workforce at the site oversees the safe storage of spent fuel rods and the concrete-entombed ruins of the exploded reactor.

The pullout came amid continued fighting and indications that the Kremlin is using talk of de-escalation as cover while regrouping and resupplying its forces and redeploying them for a stepped-up offensive in eastern Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy

said Ukraine is seeing “a buildup of Russian forces for new strikes on the Donbas, and we are preparing for that.”

Meanwhile, a convoy of buses headed to Mariupol in another bid to evacuate people from the besieged port city after the Russian military agreed to a limited cease-fire in the area. And a new round of talks aimed at stopping the fighting was scheduled for Friday.

The Red Cross said its teams were headed for Mariupol with medical supplies and other relief and hoped to take civilians out of the beleaguered city. Tens of thousands have managed to get out in the past few weeks by way of humanitarian corridors, reducing the city’s population from a prewar 430,000 to an estimated 100,000 as of last week, but other efforts have been thwarted by continued Russian attacks.

At the same time, Russian forces shelled Kyiv suburbs, two days after the Kremlin announced it would scale back operations near both the capital and the northern city of Chernihiv to “increase mutual trust and create conditions for further negotiations.”

Britain’s Defense Ministry also reported “significant Russian shelling and missile strikes” around Chernihiv. The area’s governor, Viacheslav Chaus, said Russian troops were on the move but may not be withdrawing.

Russia’s Defense Ministry also reported new strikes on Ukrainian fuel stores late Wednesday, and Ukrainian officials said there were artillery barrages in and around the northeastern city of Kharkiv over the past day.

Despite the fighting raging in those areas, the Russian military said it committed to a cease-fire along the route from Mariupol to the Ukraine-held city of Zaporizhzhia.

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said 45 buses would be sent to collect civilians who have suffered some of the worst privations of the war.

Food, water and medical supplies have all run low during a weeklong blockade and bombardment of the city. Civilians who have managed to leave have typically done so using private cars, but the number of drivable vehicles left in the city has dwindled and fuel is low.

“It’s desperately important that this operation takes place,” the Red Cross said in a statement. “The lives of tens of thousands of people in Mariupol depend on it.”

Talks between Ukraine and Russia were set to resume Friday by video, according to the head of the Ukrainian delegation, David Arakhamia, six weeks into a bloody war that has seen thousands die and a staggering 4 million Ukrainians flee the country.

## New hotness: Powdered hot sauce coming to MREs

**By J.P. LAWRENCE**

*Stars and Stripes*

Troops will soon have a new way to spice up their rations in the field.

The batch of Meals, Ready to Eat in production this year will include powdered hot sauce for the first time, military officials told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday.

The iconic tiny bottles of Tabasco sauce will be phased out by 2024, said Julie Smith, senior food technologist for the Army’s Combat Feeding Division.

The hot sauce shift is one of several changes to MREs approved in February. The 2022 batch will introduce fruit pouches, a coconut almond bar and a Mexican-rice-and-bean-bowl meal, an Army docu-

ment summarizing the changes said.

The military also approved 10 new items for MREs in the coming years. Chicken stir-fry meals with carrots, bamboo shoots and ginger soy sauce are slated to arrive by 2024. A new recipe for spaghetti with beef and sauce, granola, lemon cheesecake, an apple dessert spread and larger portions of jalapeno cashews and smoked almonds are also on the way within the next two years.

Subtractions from this year’s menu include the creamy spinach fettuccine meal, wheat snack bread and flavored cappuccino powder, the document said.

The changes were the result of troop feedback and an emphasis on reducing

weight in MREs, Smith said.

Military rations have featured mini bottles of Tabasco for decades. Generations of troops have used the iconic red pepper sauce to liven up field rations.

But the glass bottles add up in weight and cost when produced by the millions, Smith said.

The military tried to wean itself off the bottles in 2011 by sealing the hot sauce in plastic packets. But the company that produced these pouches stopped making them, Smith said, so the military reverted to the glass bottles in 2019.

The powdered hot sauce received higher ratings by troops during testing, and it is lighter and cheaper, Smith said.

# Pentagon links leadership to base violence

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Military bases with a high risk for sexual assault, harassment and other harmful behaviors often have leaders who don't understand violence prevention, don't make it a priority and focus more on their mission than on their people, a Pentagon review has concluded.

The review studied 20 bases in the United States and Europe, including 18 with some of the more severe problems identified in command climate surveys. It found that the failures were worse in a number of bases in Germany and Spain where key leaders and resources weren't on site. Senior defense officials described the report to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the findings before the review was publicly released.

At Naval Station Rota in Spain, for example, officials said the military mission requirements "were prioritized above and at the expense of the sailors' well-being." They said sailors reported bullying, mental health issues, sexual harassment and relationship problems, but often could not seek help due to their mission requirements. In one location, officials said, they found that young enlisted men were taking steps to help their female peers stay safe by keeping them away from more senior leaders who were harassing them.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered the report as part of his effort to strengthen sexual assault and harassment prevention across the forces, identify what programs work and ensure high-risk bases get attention quickly. Austin approved the report, and

in a memo obtained by the AP, said it will help the department tailor improvements for bases where needs may vary.

An independent panel appointed by Austin last year made more than 80 recommendations, including specific changes to improve accountability of leadership, command climate and culture, and victim care and support.

According to officials, 16 of the bases were selected because a command climate survey of nearly a million personnel identified problems there. Two other bases were chosen because the survey showed good results, such as high morale, inclusion and good leadership. Two others had a mix of both high-performing and problem units.

In the U.S., the bases surveyed were: Fort Custer, Mich.; Naval Support Activity Sarasota

Springs, N.Y.; Fort Polk, La.; Fort Bliss, Texas; Naval Station Norfolk, Va.; Marine Corps Base Hawaii; Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska; Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Calif.; Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas; Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif.; Dyess Air Force Base, Texas; Vandenberg Space Force Base, Calif.; the Kentucky National Guard; and the Army Reserve base in Fraser, Mich. The last two were the ones chosen because they had less risk and more positive climates.

The overseas bases were: Army Garrison Ansbach, Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz Smith Baracks; Army Garrison Bavaria; Naval Station Rota; Army Garrison Stuttgart; and the Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz, Kaiserslautern. All but Rota are in Germany.

## Navy E2-D Hawkeye crash in Atlantic kills 1, injures 2

Associated Press

OCEAN CITY, Md. — A U.S. Navy aircraft with three people aboard crashed in waters near the Eastern Shore boundary of Virginia and Maryland on Wednesday evening, killing one, authorities said.

Lt. Cmdr. Rob Myers, a public affairs officer with Naval Air Force Atlantic, said the plane was conducting routine flight operations in the vicinity of Wallops Island, Va., when it went down around 7:30 p.m. Two injured people were rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard and one was found dead in the aircraft, U.S. Navy E2-D Hawkeye, he said.

The plane, an advanced tactical airborne early warning aircraft, is based out of Naval Station Norfolk, Va., and assigned to an East Coast Airborne Command and Control Squadron.

Ryan Whittington, a spokesman for Maryland's Ocean City Fire Department, said that it and other agencies were on the scene after the plane went down in Chincoteague Bay.

Whittington said a volunteer fire department in Stockton was the first to respond after getting a call around 7:30 p.m., adding other agencies were assisting. He said waters in the bay were relatively calm as divers from his fire department and one other helped rescue two people from the plane.

The identities of the three were not immediately released.

A statement released by Myers at Naval Air Force Atlantic in Virginia said the two crewmembers have injuries that aren't considered life-threatening. The name of the deceased crew member will be released once next of kin is notified, WAVY-TV reported.

## Navy, Coast Guard, Guam Fire save 4 in rough seas

BY ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

A sailing boat off the coast of Guam capsized amid strong winds and rough seas Saturday, but a joint effort by the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard and Guam first responders led to the safe rescue of the boat's crew.

A crew of four boaters called the Guam Fire Department at 12:55 p.m. by cellphone to report their catamaran had capsized in the open ocean, department spokesman Kevin Reilly said by email Thursday to Stars and Stripes. The National Weather Service earlier Saturday issued a small craft advisory for Guam, due to high winds.

Working with Coast Guard Sector Guam, a Navy MH-60R Seahawk helicopter crew and a fire department rescue boat responded, the U.S. 7th Fleet said in

a Wednesday news release.

The Seahawk crew included Lt. Kristopher Appel, from Knoxville, Tenn.; Lt. Quoc Duong, from King George, Va.; Petty Officer Second Class Baldwin Switzer, of Ocala, Fla.; and Petty Officer Second Class Kaimana Rodriguez, from San Dimas, Calif.

The Seahawk crew, part of Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 51 attached to the guided-missile destroyer USS Dewey, was already in flight when they received the call from Sector Guam, taking part in a surface warfare training drill, 7th Fleet said.

After about 30 minutes, the Seahawk crew located the boaters 1.5 nautical miles from their catamaran. The Seahawk then radioed the fire department crew, who pulled the boaters from the water and carried them to Hagatna Marina, Reilly said.

# NATO defense spending up for 7th straight year

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — Defense spending increased for the seventh consecutive year within the NATO alliance, with the United States picking up much of the tab, according to figures in NATO's annual report released Thursday.

In 2021, the U.S. accounted for 69% of defense expenditures within the NATO alliance while only accounting for 51% of allied gross domestic product. By contrast, Germany — the second-largest economy within NATO — represented 5% of allied defense spending while accounting for 10% of NATO GDP.

Still, defense spending has risen across the alliance and larger increases are anticipated in the year ahead as European countries react to Russia's war on Ukraine, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said.

"Allies agreed that we must redouble our efforts to invest more, and more quickly, in our defense," Stoltenberg told reporters following the release of the NATO report. "We face a new security reality and there is a new sense of urgency."

After Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in late February, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that his country would move quickly to hit a NATO defense

spending benchmark that calls for 2% of GDP to be dedicated to military matters. Germany's failure to invest more on defense has long been a point of tension between Washington and Berlin, and was a focal point for criticism during the Trump administration.

In 2021, German spending stood at 1.49% of GDP, up from about 1.2% in 2014 when allies made a pledge to hit the 2% target by 2024, according to NATO figures.

Eight allies — the U.S., the United Kingdom, Greece, Poland, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — met the 2% mark in 2021, up from just three in 2014.

NATO's annual report also indicated that public support among member states for the alliance held steady in 2021, with 62% of allied citizens polled across 30 countries saying they would vote to remain in the pact, while 11% said they would leave.

Support for NATO was strongest among eastern flank states, such as Poland, the Baltic countries and Romania, where concerns about Russian aggression have traditionally been stronger. Support was strongest in Poland, with 84% saying they would vote to remain in NATO.

Slovakia had the least support, with 46% voting to stay, 28% to go and 26% unsure. In the U.S., 55% would vote to stay, 11% to leave and 34% weren't sure.

## China and Solomon Islands sign draft of controversial security deal

*Associated Press*

BEIJING — China and the Solomon Islands have signed a draft version of a security pact that could see Chinese police and other forces take up duties in the Pacific Island nation, drawing concerns from traditional partners New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

The Solomon Islands government on Thursday said the draft agreement had been initialed by representatives of the two sides and will now "be cleaned up and await signatures of the two countries' foreign ministers."

The agreement aims to "respond to Solomon Islands' soft and hard domestic

threats. Solomon Islands will continue to roll out the implementation of its national security strategy and uphold its foreign policy of 'Friends to all and enemies to none,'" a news release said.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare on Tuesday rejected concerns that regional safety would be jeopardized by the treaty.

Sogavare called such concerns "utter nonsense."

China has likewise dismissed questions.

In its statement, the Solomon Islands said it would continue to "work with all partners in providing a safe and secure nation where all people are able to co-exist peacefully."

## Army aeromedical officer killed in Ga. helo crash is ID'd

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Army identified Capt. James Bellew, 26, as the aeromedical evacuation officer killed in a helicopter crash at Wright Army Airfield at Fort Stewart, Ga., early Wednesday, according to a 3rd Infantry Division news release.

Bellew was found dead at the site where two UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters crashed around 2 a.m., according to 3rd ID.

The Army's Criminal Investigation Division and Combat Readiness Center are investigating the incident.

The airfield was closed Wednesday morning following the crash. The Army release said nothing about possible injuries to other soldiers.

Bellew, a native of Charlottesville, Va., began his career in the Army as a medical service officer in 2017 and had been attached to the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Aviation Regiment, 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade since March 2020, according to the release.

His duties included providing medical evacuation support for the Fort Stewart community, including airlifting critically ill COVID-19 patients to higher levels of care across the country, brigade commander Col. Eric Vanek said in the release.

"The loss of James is an immeasurable tragedy to his family, friends, crew and fellow soldiers," Vanek said.

## 4 siblings salute ship with brother's name

BATH, Maine — Four siblings traveled from Ireland to bear witness Wednesday to a milestone in construction of a Navy destroyer that'll bear the name of their brother, an Irish-born Marine killed in Vietnam.

Lance Cpl. Patrick Gallagher survived falling on a grenade to save his comrades in July 1966 — it didn't explode until he tossed it into a nearby river — only to be killed months later on patrol in January 1967. He was awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism.

A brother and three sisters were on hand to celebrate his legacy during a keel-laying ceremony at Navy shipbuilder Bath Iron Works. Also present were members of Gallagher's unit in Vietnam.

— From The Associated Press

# Biden tapping oil reserve to ease gas prices

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is ordering the release of 1 million barrels of oil per day from the nation's strategic petroleum reserve for six months, the White House said Thursday, in a bid to control energy prices that have spiked as the U.S. and allies imposed steep sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

Biden was to formally announce the release in remarks on his administration's plans to combat rising gas prices.

The White House said Biden would also call on Congress to impose financial penalties on oil and gas companies that lease public lands but aren't producing. He also intends to invoke the Defense Production Act to encourage the mining of critical

minerals for batteries in electric vehicles.

The White House characterized the release as a bridge until output increases from domestic producers. Administration officials estimate that average production will grow by 1 million barrels daily this year and an additional 700,000 barrels daily in 2023.

The move by Biden shows that oil remains a key vulnerability for the U.S. at home and abroad. Higher prices have hurt Biden's approval domestically, while also adding billions of oil-export dollars to the Russian war chest as it wages war on Ukraine.

The release of reserves in the U.S. would create pressures that could reduce oil prices, though Biden has already twice

ordered releases from the strategic reserves without causing a meaningful shift in oil markets.

Part of Biden's concern is that high prices have not — so far — coaxed a meaningful jump in oil production. The planned release is a way to increase supplies.

The markets reacted quickly with crude oil prices dropping more than 3% on Thursday morning to roughly \$104 a barrel. Still, oil is up from roughly \$60 a year ago, with supplies failing to keep up with demand as the world economy has begun to rebound from the coronavirus pandemic.

Americans on average use about 21 million barrels of oil daily, with about 40% of the consumption devoted to gaso-

line, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Domestic oil production is equal to more than half of the country's usage, but high prices have not led companies to return to their pre-pandemic levels of output. The U.S. is producing on average 11.7 million barrels daily, down from 13 million barrels in early 2020.

Republican lawmakers have said the problem rests with the Biden administration being hostile to oil permits and the construction of new pipelines such as the Keystone XL. Democrats have countered that the country needs to move to renewable energy such as wind and solar that could reduce the dependence on fossil fuels and Russian President Vladimir Putin's leverage.

## Bruce Willis' aphasia diagnosis halts career

*Los Angeles Times*

Legendary "Die Hard" and "Pulp Fiction" actor Bruce Willis has ended his more than four-decade acting career after being diagnosed with a cognitive disorder, his family said.

The 67-year-old actor's family announced the news Wednesday morning in an Instagram post from his daughter Rumer Willis.

"To Bruce's amazing supporters, as a family we wanted to share that our beloved Bruce has been experiencing some health issues and has recently been diagnosed with aphasia, which is impacting his cognitive abilities," Rumer Willis said in the post. "As a result of this and with much consideration, Bruce is stepping away from the career that has meant so much to him."

Questions about Willis'

short-term memory have been circulating in recent weeks, and the actor was not present at Sunday's 94th Academy Awards during a celebration of the Quentin Tarantino film "Pulp Fiction." Instead, stars Samuel L. Jackson, Uma Thurman and John Travolta took the Dolby Theatre stage.

"This is a really challenging time for our family and we are so appreciative of your continued love, compassion and support. We are moving through this as a strong family unit, and wanted to bring his fans in because we know how much he means to you, as you do to him," said the note that was signed by Bruce's wife, Emma, and his ex-wife Demi Moore. It was also signed by his other children Scout, Tallulah, Mabel and Evelyn.

"As Bruce always says, 'Live it up' and together we plan to do just that."

## Asylum limits at US-Mexico border likely to end May 23

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration is expected to end the asylum limits at the U.S.-Mexico border by May 23 that were put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, according to people familiar with the matter.

The decision, not yet final, would halt use of public health powers to absolve the United States of obligations under American law and international treaty to provide haven to people fleeing persecution, and would apply to all asylum-seekers.

Ending the limitations in May would allow for time to prepare at the border, the people said. But the delay runs against the wishes of top Democrats and others who have said COVID-19 has long been used as an excuse for the U.S. to get out of asylum obligations.

It also raises the possibility

that more asylum-seeking migrants will come to the border at a time when flows are already high. The Department of Homeland Security said Tuesday that about 7,100 migrants were coming daily, compared with an average of about 5,900 a day in February and on pace to match or exceed highs from last year, 2019 and other peak periods.

President Joe Biden declined to discuss his administration's plans, telling reporters Wednesday at the White House, "We'll have a decision on that soon."

Whenever the limits are lifted, his communications director said "there will be an influx of people to the border. We are doing a lot of work to plan for that contingency." Speaking broadly, Kate Bedingfield said the administration is trying to "build up our migration system and ensure that we are restoring order at the border."

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Alleged thief caught for writing herself a check**

**SD** SIOUX FALLS— Authorities said a South Dakota woman accused of stealing a checkbook was caught after writing out a check to herself and cashing it.

Sioux Falls police said a man went to the bank to close out the account after the checkbook was taken from an unlocked vehicle over the weekend. He discovered that someone forged his wife's signature on a \$1,600 check. The check was made out to the 49-year-old suspect.

After reviewing surveillance video, officers tracked down the woman. She was arrested for possession of stolen property, forgery and identity theft, KELO-TV reported. The \$1,600 has been recovered.

**Former prosecutor, wife plead guilty to wire fraud**

**KY** FRANKFORT — A former Kentucky prosecutor and his wife have pleaded guilty to federal wire fraud charges.

Michael T. Hogan was the county attorney in Lawrence County when he conspired with his wife to pocket delinquent tax funds collected by the office, according to the U.S. Attorney in Lexington. Hogan agreed to resign as county attorney as part of a plea agreement announced Tuesday.

Federal prosecutors said Hogan paid his wife, Joy M. Hogan, his legal secretary, more than \$365,000 from the tax account between 2013 and 2020. Hogan would write checks to his wife from the account, according to a news release from the U.S. Attor-

ney's office.

Hogan also admitted to over-billing for work with Lawrence County's child support enforcement office.

**Retired judges to help divorce case backlog**

**ME** AUGUSTA — The Maine court system will assign retired judges to divorce proceedings to clear a growing backlog of more than 6,000 cases that have been delayed since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

The program began last week and will assign the former judges as referees to divorce cases where both sides involved have lawyers. The referees would work to resolve the cases without a trial, The Bangor Daily News reported Tuesday.

"The goal is to add capacity in the short term to allow us to address the backlog without adding work to existing personnel," Chief Justice Valerie Stanfill said.

**Woman walking dog splashed with acid**

**OR** EUGENE — Authorities said a woman and her dog walking in Eugene, Ore., were injured after a person "splashed and burned" them with "an unknown acid substance."

KOIN reported the attack happened around 11:30 a.m. Monday. The woman was taken to the hospital for treatment. The dog was taken to a veterinarian's office to be checked out. Their conditions have not been released.

The suspect, who fled the scene, was described as a white male between the age of 17 and 20, with dirty blond hair.

Police said that based on the in-

vestigation, thus far, "it is believed this assault could be related to the victim's ethnicity" and is being investigated as a bias crime.

**10-inch knife found in baby car seat at airport**

**MA** BOSTON — Transportation Security Administration officers found a 10-inch long butcher knife wedged into the side of a baby's car seat at a security checkpoint at Boston's Logan International Airport, officials said.

"We love babies ... but not butcher knives!" TSA New England said in a post on its official Twitter account Tuesday.

State police were informed after the knife was found Monday and it was confiscated. No one was arrested, a TSA New England spokesperson said.

After the knife was confiscated, the car seat was rescanned and the woman and her baby were allowed to continue on their flight to Atlanta, he said.

**Man stole guns, ammo from shipping firm**

**MN** ST. PAUL — A man is accused of stealing numerous boxes of guns and ammunition while working at a national shipping company in Minnesota, prosecutors said Monday.

Jason Cikotte, of Isanti, Minn., is charged in federal court with possession of stolen firearms. Authorities said the thefts occurred over the course of almost a year at the XPO Logistics facility in Fridley.

An affidavit said Cikotte, 31, worked overnight as a weight inspector and had "little to no" su-

pervision while at work, according to the company's security manager. He would also have no reason to open the pallets of firearms as part of his job, the manager said.

The manager provided video evidence allegedly showing Cikotte removing boxes of firearms from shrink-wrapped pallets, removing the firearms from the boxes and carrying the firearms to his vehicle.

A search of Cikotte's house turned up about 40 guns, tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition and firearm parts and accessories, authorities said.

**Arrest made in gunfight that killed bystander**

**CA** OAKLAND — A 23-year-old man has been arrested in connection with a January gunbattle between rival gang members that killed a bystander, police said.

John Avalos was shot in the head when at least 14 people fired 200 rounds during the gunfight on Jan. 21, according to investigators.

Avalos, 38, had no known connection to the gangs and was simply dropping off food for a friend who was quarantined with COVID-19, officials said.

Billy Deon Williams was arrested on suspicion of murder earlier this month in Fresno, the Bay Area News Group reported. Williams was identified from surveillance video that showed him pulling a suspected firearm at the beginning of the gun battle, according to a sworn statement by a police investigator.

Williams himself was also struck by gunfire, along with two others.

— From wire reports



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# UNC, Duke take rivalry to tourney stage

Associated Press

Duke and North Carolina are taking their much talked about and often debated men's basketball rivalry on the road to a place its never been.

The neighboring schools are preparing for another first in a series filled with big-name players and intense finishes: playing each other in the NCAA Tournament. It seems fitting the matchup comes in the Final Four, with a berth in the championship game on the line.

It's an intriguing script for Saturday night's showdown in New Orleans.

The Blue Devils ran the Tar Heels off their own court in the teams' first meeting this season. North Carolina exacted revenge by spoiling retiring Hall of Famer Mike Krzyzewski's final home game in what appeared to be their last battle with Coach K.

A third meeting wasn't something either wanted to talk about to start the week, not when Krzyzewski's Blue Devils were first to earn their spot to the Big Easy and not when Hubert Davis' Tar Heels followed a day later.

They have to now.

"To me, the thing is, I think we're going to have two really good teams play against one another," Krzyzewski said Tuesday, three days after beating Arkansas to claim the West Region title. "Whereas the last two games, we were better than them at that point and they were better than us at the other point. Now we'll see what happens."

North Carolina continued its second-half surge by beating underdog Saint Peter's on Sunday to win the East Region crown and reach an NCAA-record 21st Final Four despite being a No. 8 seed.

While Davis is surprised the teams have somehow never run into each other in the NAAs, he shrugged off questions about the

significance of the meeting beyond the chance to play for a national title.

"Duke-Carolina, the significance, Coach K's last season — those things, even though that it is a story, and that's relevant, it doesn't help us on the floor," Davis said. "So our focus is on what helps us on the floor, and it's our preparation, our practice and our play."

"I've told the guys, 'You've got to turn down or turn off the noise from the phone, the family, the friends and the fans, and focus on what's ahead of us.'"

The fierce rivalry between programs with a combined 11 NCAA championships has long been an annual must-watch event. It's a series featuring names like Jordan, Laettner, Hill and Jamison, among them. It has also had star power on the sideline, with Krzyzewski battling Hall of Famers like Roy Williams and the late Dean Smith before now facing a first-year coach in former UNC and NBA player Davis.

The teams had come close to this moment only once before, in 1991. That's when both the Blue Devils and Tar Heels reached the Final Four in Indianapolis.

But North Carolina, with Davis as a player and Smith the coach, lost the first semifinal to a Kansas team coached by Williams. Then Duke stunned undefeated and reigning national champion UNLV in the second game, creating a what-could've-been scenario as the Blue Devils went on to beat Williams' Jayhawks for Krzyzewski's first of five NCAA championships.

Now it's finally happening, but the script for Round 3 is unclear considering how wildly different the teams' two regular-season meetings ended.

Duke won the first by 20 points in February, dominating behind a star-level performance from freshman A.J. Griffin in partic-

ular. The Blue Devils looked sharp from the outset, rolling to a 31-8 lead while looking completely unbothered by a crowd booing relentlessly in its own farewell to Krzyzewski in his final trip to Chapel Hill.

By the end, they were celebrating three-pointers and dunks in a preening performance on the Tar Heels' homecourt, sending fans fleeing for the exits with five minutes left.

The performance only further heightened questions about North Carolina's toughness and its lack of a competitive response in lopsided losses to Tennessee, Kentucky, Miami and Wake Forest earlier in the season.

Yet its trajectory changed in the rematch to close the regular season, turning an improving team into one determined to prove its mettle in one of the game's toughest environments. And it came amid the pomp and heightened emotion with Krzyzewski's final game at Cameron Indoor Stadium that made it feel more like a spectacle than ever, starting with a pregame ceremony and photo with more than 90 of his former players. The Tar Heels ignored all of it, playing with confidence lacking in the first meeting.

And by the end, they were celebrating a double-digit victory on "Coach K Court" and had Krzyzewski apologizing to the crowd at an awkward postgame ceremony in his honor.

"And I'll tell you," he said, "this season isn't over, all right?"

It seems he was talking about this year's rivalry, too.

"Just us meeting at this time, especially after beating them in Cameron, it just makes for the perfect story," UNC junior big man Armando Bacot said. "And I think it'll definitely be one of the biggest college games of all time."

# US shut out at Costa Rica but locks up World Cup spot

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — Christian Pulisic walked across the field with a towel draped around his head, angry after another U.S. defeat.

"We're competitors, man. We hate to lose. In the moment I was frustrated," he said. "It took me a little bit for it to sink in, that the qualification hit."

Nearly 4½ years after Pulisic buried his head in his hands to hide tears of failure, the United States rebounded to qualify for this year's World Cup. A 2-0 loss to Costa

Rica on Wednesday left the Americans in third place after the final night of qualifying, the final guaranteed berth from North and Central America and the Caribbean.

For Pulisic, DeAndre Yedlin, Kellyn Acosta and Paul Arriola, smiles of relief broke out after an unrelenting burden was lifted.

"This is whatever I've always wanted to be, and right now emotions are a bit crazy," Pulisic said, his voice quavering.

On the 1,267th day after a 2-1 loss at Trinidad and Tobago ended the Americans'

streak of seven straight World Cup appearances, Yedlin addressed the team before the kickoff.

"I just thanked each and every one of them for giving me a second opportunity to redeem myself, and the country a second opportunity to redeem itself," said the 28-year-old defender, the only American left from the 2014 tournament.

Canada finished first in the group with 28 points, ahead of Mexico on goal difference, while the U.S. (25 points) finished third.

# Butler, Lowry lead Heat over Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jimmy Butler scored 24 points, Kyle Lowry added 23 and the Miami Heat rallied in the fourth quarter to hold off the Boston Celtics 106-98 on Wednesday night to stay atop a tight race for the Eastern Conference's top seed.

Bam Adebayo finished with 17 points and 12 rebounds to help Miami post its second straight win since a season-worst four-game losing streak.

Since briefly taking over the East's top spot, Boston has lost two in a row for the first time since late January.

Jaylen Brown led the Celtics with 28 points and 10 rebounds. Jayson Tatum added 23 points and six assists.

**Grizzlies 112, Spurs 111:** Tyus Jones scored 25 points and Memphis edged host San Antonio to capture the Southwest Division title and clinch the No. 2 seed in the Western Conference.

The Grizzlies never trailed, even as Ja Morant missed his sixth straight game with a knee injury. They improved to 19-2 without Morant this season.

The Spurs closed within a point, at 112-111, on a tip-in by Keldon Johnson with 27.8 seconds remaining. Following a miss by Memphis' Desmond Bane, Johnson missed a contested layup with 2.7 seconds remaining.

**Pelicans 117, Trail Blazers 107:** CJ McCollum received a 90-second standing ovation in his first visit to Portland since a February trade to New Orleans, then scored

25 points in a win.

The Pelicans lead the Los Angeles Lakers by 1½ games for the ninth spot in the Western Conference, which would put them into a play-in postseason game.

Fans hailed McCollum during lineup intros, and he received several more ovations and cheers throughout the night.

He egged on fans by scoring 14 points in the first quarter, drawing roars with each basket just like he did for the better part of nine seasons in Portland.

**Suns 107, Warriors 103:** Devin Booker's two free throws with 34.2 seconds left put his team Phoenix ahead, Draymond Green traveled to turn it over before Chris Paul made a short jumper, and NBA-best Phoenix held off host Golden State.

Jordan Poole scored a season-best 38 points to match his career high and also contributed nine rebounds and seven assists. He had five free throws over the final 1:20.

**Mavericks 120, Cavaliers 112:** Luka Doncic scored 35 points, added 13 assists and just missed another triple-double, leading Dallas to a win at Cleveland, which was without star forward Evan Mobley.

Dorian Finney-Smith added a career-high 28 points for the Mavs, who entered the game fourth in the Western Conference. With the win and Minnesota's loss to Toronto, Dallas locked up one of the top six playoff spots.

**Raptors 125, Timberwolves 102:** Pascal Siakam had 12 points, 10 rebounds and a ca-

reer-high 13 assists for his second career triple-double, Gary Trent Jr. scored 29 points and host Toronto strengthened its hold on sixth place in the Eastern Conference.

The Raptors (44-32) moved two games ahead of Cleveland for sixth after the Cavaliers lost to Dallas. OG Anunoby scored 22 points, Scottie Barnes had 17 and Precious Achiuwa 13.

**Kings 121, Rockets 118:** Davion Mitchell, Damian Jones and Trey Lyles scored 24 points each, and Sacramento won at Houston.

It was a wild back-and-forth game where both teams had double-digit leads before staying close in the fourth quarter.

**Nuggets 125, Pacers 118:** Nikola Jokic flirted with another triple-double with 37 points, 13 rebounds and nine assists, helping Denver win at Indiana.

The Nuggets led by 31 points during the second quarter before the Pacers stormed back.

**Hornets 125, Knicks 114:** Miles Bridges scored 31 points and LaMelo Ball had 20 points and 15 rebounds to help lead Charlotte to a win at New York.

**Wizards 127, Magic 110:** Kristaps Porzingis scored 35 points, and Tomas Satoransky had an unusual double-double — no points, 13 assists and 10 rebounds — as host Washington beat Orlando.

**Hawks 136, Thunder 118:** Trae Young had 41 points and eight assists, and Atlanta rolled to a win at Oklahoma City.

## Tampa Bay's Arians unexpectedly retires as coach

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Bruce Arians unexpectedly retired as coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a stunning move Wednesday night that the 69-year-old who guided the team to its second Super Bowl title says is not related to health.

It's the second major retirement announcement for the Bucs this offseason, following Tom Brady's announcement in February that he was ending his career. Brady, a seven-time Super Bowl champion quarterback, returned 40 days later, saying he would return for a 23rd season and noting he had "unfinished business."

But instead of Arians, Brady will be playing for Todd Bowles after the defensive coordinator was promoted as the coach's successor.

Arians, a two-time cancer survivor, stepped down as coach of the Arizona Cardinals due to medical concerns in 2017, only to be lured back to the sideline by the then-struggling Bucs two years later. This time, he said, he exits feeling the best he has in "many years" and is looking forward to transitioning into a front-office position working with general manager Jason Licht.

"This team is in a much better place than it was three years ago

due to Jason's great work and the Glazer family's commitment to winning," Arians said in a lengthy statement issued by the team.

"I want to focus on what I can give back to this incredible game that has provided so much for me and my family," Arians added. "I really began thinking about my personal transition plan earlier this offseason. I wanted to ensure when I walked away that Todd Bowles would have the best opportunity to succeed."

Arians, who will turn 70 this coming season, coached the Bucs to the Super Bowl title in the 2020 season — Brady's first with Tampa Bay. The Bucs were 31-18 in

Arians' three seasons there and he was 80-48-1 in eight years as a head coach overall when adding in five seasons with the Cardinals from 2013 to 2017.

NBC Sports and the Los Angeles Times first reported Arians' decision and that Bowles would replace him.

"I have spent most of the last 50 years of my life on the sidelines as a football coach in one form or another," Arians said. "I love football. I love the relationships, the strategy, the competition — everything. It has been one hell of a ride, but I know this is the right time for me to make this transition."

# Rangers extend winning streak to four

Associated Press

DETROIT — Andrew Copp scored 1:34 into overtime and the New York Rangers extended their winning streak to four games by beating the Detroit Red Wings 5-4 on Wednesday night.

Artemi Panarin had a goal and assisted on two others, including Copp's winner, as New York swept back-to-back road games beginning with Tuesday night's big victory over division rival Pittsburgh.

Chris Kreider scored his 46th goal overall and NHL-high 24th on the power play. Ryan Reaves and Filip Chytil also scored for the Rangers, while Alexandar Georgiev made 22 saves.

Michael Rasmussen, Jakub Vrana, Tyler Bertuzzi and Adam Erne scored for the Red Wings and Moritz Seider added two assists. Alex Nedeljkovic stopped 29 shots, but Detroit lost its fourth straight.

**Jets 3, Sabres 2 (SO):** Blake Wheeler had a goal in regulation and scored the shootout winner, Connor Hellebuyck made 35 saves, including six in overtime, and visiting Winnipeg beat Buffalo for its third consecutive victory.

Mason Appleton had the tying

goal in regulation and the Jets got shootout goals from Pierre-Luc Dubois and Mark Scheifele to win their fifth in six games as they push for the final wild-card spot in the Western Conference.

Zemgus Girgensons scored twice and Kyle Okposo had two assists for the Sabres, who have a point in seven straight games, their longest streak over the past three seasons.

Winnipeg opened a back-to-back road trip without leading scorer Kyle Connor and defenseman Nate Schmidt, who were both placed in the NHL's COVID-19 protocols earlier Wednesday.

**Oilers 4, Kings 3 (SO):** Leon Draisaitl and Connor McDavid both scored in regulation and then again in the shootout, lifting host Edmonton over Los Angeles.

McDavid added an assist to get to 100 points for the fifth time in his career. Cody Ceci also scored and Mikko Koskinen had 38 saves for the Oilers, who have won eight straight at home.

The victory was Edmonton's second in a row and moved the Oilers within a point of Los Angeles for second place in the Pacific Division.

Alexander Edler, Quinton

Byfield and Carl Grundstrom scored in regulation for the Kings, who have lost three of their last four games.

**Golden Knights 3, Kraken 0:** Shea Theodore scored in the second period just moments after stepping out of the penalty box, and Logan Thompson made 23 saves for his first shutout of the season, leading visiting Vegas past Seattle.

Michael Amadio also scored for the Golden Knights, who are trying to stay in the chase for one of the last Western Conference playoff spots. Jonathan Marchessault added an empty-net goal with 26 seconds left, his team-high 26th goal of the season.

Seattle's Chris Driedger had 27 stops.

**Coyotes 5, Sharks 2:** Jan Jenik scored twice, including the tiebreaker in a three-goal third period, and host Arizona snapped a six-game losing streak.

Late in the game, Coyotes star Clayton Keller crashed legs-first into the boards and was taken off the ice on a stretcher with a significant lower-body injury.

The game was delayed about 10 minutes with 5:15 remaining

after Keller, the Coyotes' leading scorer, went down behind San Jose's net. He remained prone on the ice for about five minutes before being wheeled off. He gave a thumbs-up sign as he left, and was brought to a hospital for further evaluation.

Barrett Hayton and Nick Schmaltz scored in the final three minutes for Arizona. Nick Ritchie had a goal in the first period and Karel Vejmelka stopped 39 shots in his sixth consecutive start.

Scott Reedy and Brent Burns scored, and James Reimer made 18 saves for the Sharks, who had won three of four.

**Blues 4, Canucks 3:** Ryan O'Reilly had a goal and an assist and visiting St. Louis beat Vancouver.

Nick Leddy, Robert Thomas and Nathan Walker also scored for the Blues. David Perron added two assists.

Elias Pettersson scored twice for the Canucks, who were playing their fifth game in eight nights. Alex Chiasson also had a goal.

A 22-save performance earned St. Louis goalie Ville Husso his 18th win of the season. Thatcher Demko stopped 20 shots for Vancouver.

## WNBA players finally break silence on Griner situation

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Two of Brittney Griner's USA Basketball teammates have broken their silence on the star player's imprisonment in Russia.

Most WNBA players have been hesitant to talk about Griner's detention on apparent drug charges in Russia, hoping to avoid potentially hurting her case.

"People are saying she's 6-foot-9, she's different. It's really not about that," said USA Basketball player Angel McCoughtry on Wednesday at the team's training camp in Minneapolis. "It could have been any of us."

Players have been keeping discussions about how to best help Griner within their community. WNBA players have been very

cohesive in the past when rallying behind issues such as voter registration or the Black Lives Matter movement.

For the first few weeks following Griner's detention, it was decided that it was clearly better for them to say less.

The Phoenix Mercury star was detained after arriving at a Moscow airport in mid-February. Russian authorities said a search of her luggage revealed vape cartridges that allegedly contained oil derived from cannabis, which could carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

"The big thing is the fact that we have to go over there. It was BG, but it could have been anybody," said Breanna Stewart, who earns over \$1 million to play in Russia. "WNBA

players need to be valued in their country and they won't have to play overseas."

Russia has been a popular destination for WNBA players such as Stewart, McCoughtry and Griner over the past two decades because of the money they can make playing there in the winter.

Of the thousands of U.S. citizens arrested and jailed in prisons abroad, a small subset are designated by the U.S. government as wrongfully detained — a category that affords their cases an extra level of government attention and places them under the auspices of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the State Department. The U.S. government has not yet put Griner's case in that category.