

US-S. Korea drills meant to deter North

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — An American bomber escorted by South Korean fighters flew west of the Korean Peninsula on Monday, the latest in a series of airpower drills that North Korea deemed “muscle flexing.”

The B-52H Stratofortress out of Barksdale Air Force Base, La., flew alongside South Korean F-15K Slam Eagles and KF-16s over the Yellow Sea to display the two countries’ “critical and overwhelming capabilities ... to deter and respond to North Korea’s advancing nuclear and missile threats,” the Ministry of National Defense said in a statement Monday.

The flights demonstrated “a combined defense capability and providing extended deterrence in the defense of the Korean Peninsula,” U.S. Forces Korea said in its own statement that day.

The United States and South Korea have routinely launched bomber escort missions around the peninsula to answer North Korea’s roughly 75 missile tests, a one-year record, in 2022.

The communist regime has conducted three ballistic missile tests so far this year; it most recently fired two short-range ballistic missiles off of its eastern coast Feb. 20.

North Korea’s Foreign Ministry called Monday’s bomber escort mission “a reckless military provocation” and “worrying muscle-flexing,” according to a statement Tuesday in the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

And Kim Yo Jong — sister of leader Kim Jong Un and a senior government official — said her country is ready to take “quick, overwhelming action” against the U.S. and South Korea.

Kim Yo Jong didn’t elaborate on any planned actions in her statement, but North Korea has often test-launched missiles in response to U.S.-South Korean military drills because it views them as an invasion rehearsal.

“We keep our eye on the restless military moves by the U.S. forces and the South Korean puppet military and are always on standby to take appropriate, quick and overwhelming action at any time according to our judgment,” Kim Yo Jong said in the

statement carried by state media.

“The demonstrative military moves and all sorts of rhetoric by the U.S. and South Korea, which go so extremely frantic as not to be overlooked, undoubtedly provide (North Korea) with conditions for being forced to do something to cope with them,” she said.

The South Korean and U.S. militaries together are monitoring North Korea and have reported no unusual troop movements, a spokesman for South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said at a news conference Tuesday in Seoul. South Korean officials customarily speak to the media on the condition of anonymity.

The bomber drills were held as the U.S. and South Korea prepare to begin Freedom Shield, a large-scale joint exercise that runs March 13-23.

Although troop figures were not disclosed by the two countries, the South’s defense ministry said it will be the largest exercise in years and include personnel from U.N. Command and the Combined Forces Command.

Navy reduces child care waitlist, needs workers

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Navy waitlist for child care has been reduced by more than 3,200 kids across the service in the last two years, but officials said they need more workers to keep making progress in providing adequate facilities and services for all families.

The service has approached the problem in several ways, including an increase in the fee assistance for off-base day cares and in-home nannies, revitalizing unused space to be child-safe and beefing up employee incentives to get more workers on board, according to the Commander, Navy Installa-

tions Command, or CNIC, the headquarters responsible for managing bases and quality-of-life programs.

“It’s something that’s improving, but we continue to try to look for solutions to make it even better,” said Command Master Chief Jason Dunn of CNIC.

The coronavirus pandemic strained child care facilities across the U.S., and the Navy and other military service branches felt that pinch, said Leslie Gould, director of Fleet and Family Readiness Programs for CNIC. Temporary closures in the early months of the pandemic caused many civilian child care businesses to

permanently shut down and many of those workers to leave the field, she said.

Now, the Navy is struggling to attract enough workers to operate its facilities at capacity in some places and finding it difficult to locate space for kids off base in day cares that meet the Defense Department’s standards. However, the immediate solutions put in place are making a difference, Gould said.

In December 2020, the Navy had its nationwide child care waitlist reach nearly 9,000 children in need of immediate care. That waitlist now stands at about 5,576, Gould said. Meanwhile, construction is ongoing to complete new facilities ap-

proved by Congress in the regions where the Navy has a high density of sailors, such as San Diego and Norfolk, Va.

“Getting that waitlist down and getting those children in care is the No. 1 priority,” Gould said. “It all has to happen at the same time to mitigate this waitlist. It’s an aggressive strategy.”

The number of kids in on-base facilities has stayed relatively the same, she said, because families have been able to utilize some other off-base and in-home care options that have helped reduce the waitlist as well. That includes raising the monthly fee assistance for approved civilian day cares from \$1,500 to \$1,700.

Austin vows to continue fight against ISIS

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin made an unannounced visit Tuesday to the Iraqi capital, where he vowed to continue the fight against Islamic State until the extremists are defeated.

Austin, whose visit came just days before the 20th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein, said in a statement later that he held talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani and Defense Minister Thabet Muhammad Al-Abbasi.

Al-Sudani's office said he and Austin discussed cooperation between their countries in the fight against ISIS. The Iraqi premier reaffirmed his government's "keenness to strengthen and consolidate relations with the United States of America at various levels and fields."

Austin was greeted on touchdown in

Baghdad by Maj. Gen. Matthew McFarlane, the U.S. commander in Iraq, which is home to hundreds of American troops helping in the fight against the militant Islamic State group.

"We'll continue working to accomplish this mission together. Through the global coalition to defeat Daesh, we liberated more than 50,000 square kilometers from Daesh and freed more than 4.5 million Iraqis from their cruel grip," Austin said, using an Arabic name for ISIS. "The United States remains committed to this fight in support of Iraq's security and the security of the entire region."

Austin also said U.S. forces are ready to remain in Iraq at the invitation of its government, adding that these forces are operating in a noncombat and advisory role in support of the "Iraqi-led fight against terrorism."

"This is a critical mission and we're proud

to support our Iraqi partners," said Austin, one of the most senior Biden administration officials to visit Iraq in recent years.

Since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 that removed longtime dictator Saddam from power, Iraq has been a point of friction between the U.S. and Iran. Tehran has widely expanded its influence in Iraq over the course of the last 20 years.

"I'm here to reaffirm the U.S.-Iraq strategic partnership as we move toward a more secure, stable, and sovereign Iraq," Austin tweeted upon arrival.

"We continue to believe that Iraq's greater integration with its Arab partners in the region will deliver increased stability, security and prosperity, and it will pay dividends not only for Iraqi citizens, but for all people of the region," Austin said, referring to Iraq's improving its relations with Arab countries.

Russia advances in Bakhmut with mercenaries first

The Washington Post

DNIPRO, Ukraine — It takes Ukrainian troops little more than a glance to tell if Russian fighters advancing on their positions near the fiercely embattled city of Bakhmut are seasoned soldiers or recent recruits.

The men enlisted to fight for Russia's Wagner mercenary force — composed of many convicted criminals recruited behind bars and sent to fight in Ukraine in exchange for their freedom — are "dirtier and they don't have the same military uniforms or flak jackets like regular Russian soldiers," said Dmytro Vatagin, 48, a Ukrainian soldier stationed in the neighboring village of Ivanivske with the volunteer 24th Battalion.

The mercenary fighters typically move on Ukrainian positions early in the morning, he said, attempting attacks in irregular and unpredictable patterns, seemingly without any clear strategy, which makes them seem "unprepared" for battle.

It is only later in the day that better-trained Russian forces often enter the fray, seeking to make a real advance.

"Wagner and the mobilized are being just thrown like meat" toward the front line, Vatagin said.

Still, their fighting style poses a challenge to Ukrainian troops. And the waves and waves of them sent forward have proved ex-

hausting, resulting in staggering casualties on both sides.

"It's easier to fight the Russian army because you understand what they're going to do and how you're going to work against them," Vatagin said in an interview Monday away from the front.

With the Russians still pushing hard from the north, east and south to encircle Bakhmut, in the eastern Donetsk region, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with his top defense and security officials Monday and proclaimed that Kyiv had no intention of surrendering the city, which is nearly destroyed.

Despite reports of complaints from Ukrainian soldiers that they are fighting under desperate and untenable conditions, and military experts insisting that Bakhmut is of little long-term strategic value to Russia, Zelenskyy's office issued a statement saying that Valery Zaluzhny, the Ukrainian military commander in chief, and Oleksandr Syrsky, the commander of ground forces, who is directing operations in the east, had each endorsed reinforcing and continuing the city's defense.

"Assessing the course of the defense operation, the President asked Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valery Zaluzhny and Commander of the [eastern

group of] troops Oleksandr Syrsky about further actions in the Bakhmut direction," the statement said. "They spoke in favor of continuing the defense operation and further strengthening our positions in Bakhmut."

That Zelenskyy's office felt compelled to issue the statement highlighted the second-guessing now underway in Ukraine and abroad. Western military analysts have warned that battling to deny Russia a largely symbolic victory may be costing Ukraine too much.

Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, reported that the meeting expressed support for the continued defense of the city, without ruling out a withdrawal, after Russian claims Sunday that Russia's Wagner mercenary fighters had captured territory in the eastern and northern parts of the city.

But responding to a follow-up query about Zelenskyy's meeting with his top generals and advisers, called the Staff of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, Danilov said: "In order to avoid various insinuations that affect public sentiment, the opinion of the members of the [staff] regarding the defense operation was made public. We continue to defend our land, regardless of all sides of the assessment of the situation."

Biden will seek Medicare, tax rate changes in budget

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden wants to increase taxes to boost funding for Medicare and expand the program’s ability to negotiate lower costs for prescription drugs, according to advance details of his budget proposal being released later this week.

The Democratic president outlined his plan in a guest essay in *The New York Times* on Tuesday, writing that “Medicare is more than a government program. It’s the rock-solid guarantee that Americans have counted on to be there for them when they retire.”

Biden is scheduled to release his budget proposal on Thursday in Philadelphia. Pushing the proposal through Congress will likely be difficult, with Republicans in control of the House and Democrats with only a slim majority in the Senate.

The Medicare tax rate would rise from 3.8% to 5% on income exceeding \$400,000 per year, including salaries and capital gains.

“This modest increase in Medicare contributions from those with the highest incomes will

help keep the Medicare program strong for decades to come,” Biden writes in the *Times*.

The plan is also intended to close what the White House has described as loopholes that allow some income to avoid Medicare taxes.

Besides the taxes, Biden wants to expand Medicare’s ability to negotiate drug costs, which began with the Inflation Reduction Act. He signed the sweeping legislation last year.

The changes would help shore up a key trust fund that pays for Medicare, which provides health care for older adults.

According to the White House, the changes would keep the fund solvent until the 2050s, about 25 years longer than currently expected.

More changes would be made to Medicare benefits. Biden wants to limit cost sharing for some generic drugs to only \$2.

The idea would lower out-of-pocket costs for treating hypertension, high cholesterol and other ailments.

In addition, the budget would end cost sharing for up to three mental health or behavioral health visits per year.

GOP delivers subpoenas to former school board officials

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans issued another series of subpoenas Monday as part of an investigation into what they have contended is the mistreatment of parents who protested “woke” school board policies.

Rep. Jim Jordan, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, demanded documents and testimony from three individuals, including the former heads of the National School Boards Association, for “requesting federal law enforcement assistance to target parents voicing concerns at local school board meetings.”

The Ohio Republican is flexing his newly appointed subpoena power to probe a 2021 letter that the nonprofit representing U.S. school boards sent to the Biden administration. The letter warned of threats against school board members over coronavirus restrictions and teaching around race.

The letter to the Justice Department, signed by Chip Slaven, then the interim executive director of the NSBA, and Viola Garcia, then the president of the NSBA, outlined more than 20 instances of threats, harassment, disruption and acts of intimidation in California, Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, Ohio and other states.

Jordan, who also chairs a new subcommittee dedicated to what Republicans assert is the “weaponization” of government, has said that as a result of the letter, the Justice Department designated “a specific threat tag” for school board-related threats and opened investigations “into parents simply for speaking out on behalf of their children.”

Californians still dealing with snow

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Residents of Southern California mountain towns have continued to struggle to dig out and get necessities in the aftermath of a record-setting blizzard last month that dumped so much snow that roads became impassable and roofs collapsed.

Here’s a closer look at the situation:

■ **Survival:** Free food distribution centers have been set up at five locations, including the community of Crestline, which sits at an elevation of about 4,600 feet.

A line of people waited there Monday to pick up food and necessities, such as toilet paper stacked in a parking lot.

“Imagine not having any food in your house after being trapped for 13 days,” resident

Michelle Calkins told KTLA-TV.

■ **The blizzard:** Rare blizzard warnings went into effect in late February in the mountain ranges of Southern California as an arctic air mass plunged down the West Coast, plastering California’s coast ranges and the Sierra Nevada.

In an extremely unusual event, staggering amounts of snow fell east of Los Angeles in the San Bernardino Mountains and the adjacent San Gabriel Mountains, where thousands of people live or visit communities at high elevations reached by windy, steep highways.

Both mountain ranges routinely have winter snowfalls, but what looked like the foundation for epic downhill ski days instead became a nightmare.

Gov. Gavin Newsom declared

emergencies in 13 of California’s 58 counties beginning March 1.

■ **Snowed in:** Residents found themselves unable to leave their homes or vacation rentals, much less free their vehicles.

San Bernardino County authorities said the snowfall was so great it exceeded the capability of plows to clear roads, requiring earth-moving equipment and dump trucks to pick up and move snow.

Highways were closed to all but emergency vehicles, frustrating residents who had been away when the storm hit and were forbidden to head back up to their homes.

Sections of key mountain roads in the Big Bear area were finally reopened Monday afternoon to residents only.

US details airline family seating rules

Associated Press

The Transportation Department is rolling out a “dashboard” to let travelers see at a glance which airlines help families with young children sit together at no extra cost.

The announcement Monday comes as the department works on regulations to prevent families from being separated on planes.

It’s the latest salvo in the Biden administration’s efforts to clamp down on what it calls “junk fees” and to put pressure on airlines to improve service.

The dashboard rewards airlines with a green check if they guarantee that an adult family member can sit next to their

young children if seats are available. On Monday, only three of the 10 U.S. airlines listed on the website received a green check: Alaska, American and Frontier.

The site also includes links to each airline’s customer policies.

“Parents traveling with young kids should be able to sit together without an airline forcing them to pay junk fees,” Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in a release announcing the dashboard. He gave his department credit for pressuring airlines, “and now we’re seeing some airlines start to make this common-sense change.”

Airlines “already work to accommodate customers who are traveling together, especially

those traveling with children, and will continue to do so,” said Hannah Walden, a spokeswoman at Airlines for America, a trade group whose members include the six largest U.S. carriers. “Each carrier has established individual policies, but all make every effort to ensure families sit together.”

This year, several carriers have pledged to make changes in their seating policies.

Last month, Frontier Airlines said it would automatically seat at least one parent next to any child under 14.

Last week, American Airlines updated its customer-service plan with a guarantee that children 14 and under would be

seated next to an accompanying adult at no extra cost.

United Airlines said it would let families with children under 12 pick adjoining seats at no extra cost starting in early March in certain fare classes. The announcement seemed to fall short of Transportation standards however, because the department issued a notice last July that it intends to ban extra charges to have an adult family member sit next to children up to age 13.

The new dashboard builds on a site the Transportation Department started last year to detail compensation for passengers with canceled or delayed flights.

23 face terrorism charges in Ga. ‘Cop City’ protest

Associated Press

ATLANTA — More than 20 people from around the country faced domestic terrorism charges Monday after dozens in black masks attacked the site of a police training center under construction in a wooded area outside Atlanta where one protester was killed in January.

The site has become the flashpoint of ongoing conflict between authorities and left-leaning protesters who have been drawn together, joining forces to protest a variety of causes. Among them: People against the militarization of police; others who aim to protect the environment; and some who oppose corporations who they see as helping to fund the project through donations to a police foundation.

Flaming bottles and rocks were thrown at officers during a protest Sunday at “Cop City,” where 26-year-old environmental activist Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, or “Tortuguita,” was shot to death by officers during a raid at a protest camp in January. Police have

said that Tortuguita attacked them, a version that other activists have questioned.

Almost all of the 23 people arrested are from states across the U.S., while one is from Canada and another is from France, police said Monday.

Like many protesters, Tortuguita was dedicated to preserving the environment, friends and family said, ideals that clashed with Atlanta’s hopes of building a \$90 million Atlanta Public Safety Training Center meant to boost preparedness and morale after George Floyd’s death in 2020.

Protesters who oppose what detractors call “Cop City” run the gamut from more traditional environmentalists to young, self-styled anarchists seeking clashes with what they see as an unjust society.

Defend the Atlanta Forest, a social media site used by members of the movement, said Monday on Twitter that those arrested were not violent agitators “but peaceful concert-goers who were nowhere near the demonstration.”

Death toll rises in NY concert stampede

Associated Press

The death toll rose to two on Monday following a stampede at a rap concert in Rochester, N.Y., that authorities said may have been triggered by unfounded fears of gunfire.

The Memphis, Tenn., rap stars GloRilla and Finesse2tymes had finished performing Sunday night at Rochester’s Main Street Armory when something prompted people to surge dangerously toward the exits just after 11 p.m., Police Chief David M. Smith said at a news briefing Monday.

“We do not have any evidence of gunshots being fired or of anyone being shot or stabbed at the scene,” Smith said.

Police found three badly injured women in the auditorium. One, Rhondesia Belton, of Buffalo, N.Y., died at a hospital. Belton, 33, worked for Buffalo’s Traffic Violations Agency, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown tweeted Monday.

Rochester Police announced the death of a 35-year-old woman late Monday. Her name was not released. Another woman remained in critical condition, police said. Seven additional people were treated at area hospitals for injuries that were not life-threatening.

Security guard Anthony Rouse told WHEC he signed up to work when he learned his daughter was going to the concert. She was hurt in the rush to the exits and spent part of Monday in the hospital, he said.

“The whole reason I signed on was to protect her,” he said. “And I failed.”

Rouse said he was near the stage when his daughter went down near the entrance of the crowded hall.

While there is no evidence of gunfire, Smith said, police are investigating several possible causes of the fatal surge, including “possibly crowd size, shots fired, pepper spray and other contributing factors.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Plane turns back after birds cause engine fire

FL FORT LAUDERDALE — A flight to Florida from Cuba was forced to turn back after it struck birds that caused an engine to catch fire and filled the cabin with smoke, a news report said.

Southwest Airlines flight 2923 headed to Fort Lauderdale returned to Havana after striking the birds, WSVN-TV reported.

No injuries were reported.

The plane departed José Martí International Airport in Havana enroute to Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. The aircraft was gaining altitude and “experienced bird strikes to an engine and the aircraft’s nose,” the airline said in a statement to the television station.

A passenger told WSVN that the impact sent fumes through the airplane and caused emergency oxygen masks to deploy.

Death row inmate seeks new trial

TN NASHVILLE — A Tennessee man on death row who was forced to act as his own lawyer is seeking a new trial, claiming multiple violations of his constitutional rights.

Howard Willis was sentenced to death in 2010 for the murders of teenage newlyweds, Adam Chrismer, 17, and Samantha Leming Chrismer, 16, both of Chickamauga, Ga.

Willis had nine lawyers before the judge ruled that he would have to represent himself, accusing him of sowing conflict with his attorneys in an effort to avoid a trial.

In his bid for a new trial, Willis claims the original was unfair because he was forced to act as his own attorney and because he wasn’t afforded sufficient resources to defend himself, among other claims.

Many of the attorneys left the case for reasons that had nothing to do with Willis, such as conflicts of interest or the need to care for a seriously ill relative.

Man charged in PG&E transformer explosions

CA SAN JOSE — A 36-year-old man has been charged with blowing up two Pacific Gas & Electric transformers, causing blasts that knocked out power to thousands of utility customers in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Peter Karasev was arrested after investigators used surveillance camera footage and cellphone tracking to link him to the explosions in December and January, according to the San Jose Police Department.

Authorities searched Karasev’s home and turned up explosive materials along with an “inactive” meth lab, police said.

Karasev faces multiple charges including arson, exploding a destructive device, destroying an electrical line and possessing materials with the intent to create a destructive device, the Santa Clara County District Attorney’s Office said.

Hunter who killed dogs thought they were coyotes

CT DANBURY — A hunter who told authorities he killed and skinned what he thought were two coyotes, but later discovered they were a Connecticut family’s pet Ger-

man shepherds, has been criminally charged.

During a hearing in Danbury Superior Court that drew dozens of people including the dogs’ owners and animal rights advocates, Michael Konschak, 61, of Carmel, N.Y., said he was ashamed of what he did.

“Please know that it was never my intent that morning to harm the victims’ pets,” he said.

Police with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection arrested Konschak on charges including tampering with evidence, forgery, interfering with a law enforcement officer and hunting-related violations.

Danbury State’s Attorney David Applegate said the case is still being investigated and that more charges are possible.

Exxon Mobil sued as 5 nooses found at facility

LA BATON ROUGE — Exxon Mobil Corp. violated federal law for failing to take sufficient action as five hangman’s nooses were displayed at its facility in Baton Rouge, La., the U.S. government said in a lawsuit.

According to the government, in January 2020, a Black employee found a hangman’s noose at his worksite at the Baton Rouge complex run by Exxon Mobil and reported it. At the time, the company knew of three other nooses that had been found at the complex, but it failed to investigate all the complaints and take action to prevent such harassment, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission said in its lawsuit.

Then, in December 2020, a fifth noose was found at the

complex, which includes a chemical plant and nearby refinery. Exxon Mobil’s lack of action created a racially hostile work environment, the EEOC said.

Todd Spittler, a spokesperson for Exxon Mobil, said in a statement that the company disagrees with the EEOC’s allegations and that it “encourage(s) employees to report claims like this, and we thoroughly investigated.”

State’s marijuana shop licenses doubling to 300

NY NEW YORK — New York is doubling the number of licenses it’s awarding for a first round of legal marijuana shops, regulators announced, though only a fraction of the dispensaries already authorized have opened so far and a court ruling has put licensing on hold in some areas.

Nearly two years after legalizing recreational marijuana for adult use, New York continues working to get its potentially large legal market into high gear. So far, 66 dispensary licenses have been awarded, and four shops have opened, three of them in New York City. The first legal sales were in late December.

The state initially planned to award 150 dispensary licenses in a first batch reserved for non-profits or for people with both business experience and a personal or family history of marijuana convictions. After getting over 900 applications, the state cannabis office now intends to give out 300 such licenses, Executive Director Chris Alexander told the state Cannabis Control Board.

— From wire reports

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Mitchell's 40 rally Cavs past Celtics

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Donovan Mitchell scored 40 points and Lamar Stevens fueled Cleveland's fourth-quarter comeback with his hustle, leading the Cavaliers to a 118-114 win on Monday night over the Boston Celtics, who lost their second overtime game in less than 24 hours.

Evan Mobley added 25 points and 16 rebounds for the Cavs, who improved to 7-0 in OT while avenging a loss in Boston five days ago.

Jaylen Brown scored 32 points and Malcolm Brogdon 24 for the Celtics, who didn't arrive at their hotel in Cleveland until 2:30 a.m. after losing to the New York Knicks in double overtime on Sunday.

The Celtics, who were without All-Star Game MVP Jayson Tatum, blew a 14-point lead in

the fourth and had a chance to win it in regulation. But Grant Williams missed two free throws with 0.8 seconds left and Boston's Marcus Smart barely missed a tip-in at the horn.

76ers 147, Pacers 143: Joel Embiid scored 42 points, James Harden added 14 points, 20 assists and nine rebounds, and visiting Philadelphia pulled away late for a victory over Indiana in an entertaining game virtually devoid of defense.

Embiid made 11 of 16 field goals and all 19 free-throw attempts. Tyrese Maxey scored 24 points and Jalen McDaniels added 20 for the 76ers, who have won two straight.

Tyrese Haliburton led the Pacers with 40 points and 16 assists in just their second home game since Feb. 16.

Heat 130, Hawks 128: Jimmy Butler had 26 points, Victor

Oladipo and Caleb Martin combined to score 43 off the bench and host Miami held off Atlanta.

Butler also had nine rebounds and nine assists for the Heat, who moved 2½ games ahead of the Hawks in the race for the No. 7 spot in the Eastern Conference.

Trae Young scored 25 for Atlanta.

Nuggets 118, Raptors 113: Jamal Murray scored 24 points, Michael Porter Jr. had 20 and Denver scored the last six points of the game to beat Toronto.

Aaron Gordon added 19 points for the Nuggets, who won their ninth in a row at home. Nikola Jokic finished an assist shy of another triple-double. He had 17 points and 13 rebounds.

Fred VanVleet had 21 points for the Raptors. Pascal Siakam added 19.

Kings 123, Pelicans 108: Kevin Huerter scored 25 points, Domantas Sabonis had his eighth triple-double of the season and host Sacramento beat New Orleans.

Sabonis finished with 19 points, 11 rebounds and 11 assists.

Brandon Ingram scored 24 points for the Pelicans, who have lost six of their past seven games.

Trail Blazers 110, Pistons 104: Damian Lillard had 31 points, 13 rebounds and 12 assists, securing his second triple-double of the season before the end of the third quarter for visiting Portland.

The dynamic guard scored 16 points in the first quarter to give the Trail Blazers a 31-18 lead.

Isaiah Livers scored 17 for Detroit, which has lost a season-high eight straight games.

Furman secures its first NCAA bid since 1980

Associated Press

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Jalen Slawson scored 20 points and Furman beat Chattanooga 88-79 on Monday night to win the Southern Conference Tournament and advance to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 1980.

The NCAA field contained 48 teams the last time the top-seeded Paladins made the Big Dance. Furman coach Bob Richey had the Paladins on their way last season as the No. 2 seed until David Jean-Baptiste buried a 35-foot three-pointer at the buzzer to rally top-seeded Chattanooga to a 64-63 victory.

Furman (27-7) took care of business this time around, although adding to the program's record win total didn't come easy.

Slawson had three baskets in an 18-0 run to give the Paladins a 23-7 lead nine minutes into the game. Chattanooga (18-17) was

trailing 30-11 when A.J. Caldwell scored the final five points in a 13-0 spurt to pull within 30-26. Chattanooga twice cut its deficit to three, but a layup by JP Pegues gave Furman a 38-33 lead at halftime.

Chattanooga made a late run at the Paladins, using back-to-back three-pointers from Jamal Johnson and Caldwell's layup to close to within 69-65 at the 5:02 mark — but the Mocs would get no closer.

Slawson made 8 of 12 shots from the floor with two three-pointers for Furman. Pegues pitched in with 17 points despite missing all seven of his 3-point attempts and Mike Bothwell finished with 16 points, leaving him 10 shy of 2,000 for his career. Bothwell is trying to become the fifth Paladin to reach the 2,000-point plateau.

Jake Stephens paced Chattanooga with 25 points, eight rebounds and two blocks. Johnson

totaled 17 points and Caldwell posted his first double-double of the season with 14 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists.

Furman made all six of its previous NCAA Tournament appearances between 1971-80. Its lone win was a 75-67 victory over South Carolina in 1974. They lost to Pittsburgh 81-78 in the Sweet 16.

Chattanooga and former So-Con member Davidson have made the most NCAA Tournament appearances in conference history with 12.

Louisiana 71, South Alabama 66: Themus Fulks scored a career-high 23 points, Jordan Brown had 13 points and 16 rebounds and second-seeded Louisiana beat No. 8 seed South Alabama to claim the Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship in Pensacola, Fla.

The fifth NCAA Tournament berth for Louisiana (26-7) will be its first since 2014.

Louisiana's first lead of two points or more came with 12:06 remaining in the second half on a put-back by Terence Lewis II for a 49-46 advantage.

After South Alabama went 1-for-2 from the line, Jalen Dalcourt made a jumper in the lane with 27.7 seconds left to extend Louisiana's lead to 67-64. The Jaguars struggled all game from the stripe, going 17-for-28.

Isaiah Moore made two free throws with 17.1 seconds left to get South Alabama within 67-66, but Lewis answered with two makes at the other end to regain a three-point advantage. South Alabama guard Owen White had a long three-pointer rattle out in the closing seconds and Kentrell Garnett sealed it with two free throws at 1.4.

Dalcourt finished with 13 points and Lewis added 12 for the Ragin' Cajuns. Dalcourt and Fulks each made three of Louisiana's eight three-pointers.

Sharks rally, beat Jets in OT to end 5-game skid

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Tomas Hertl scored the tying goal with 10.2 seconds left in regulation and Logan Couture got the winner 1:21 into overtime as the San Jose Sharks rallied to beat the Winnipeg Jets 3-2 Monday night to snap a five-game losing streak.

Steven Lorentz also scored and Erik Karlsson had two assists for San Jose, which was 0-4-1 during its skid. James Reimer had 36 saves.

Reimer, a Manitoba native, picked a great time to have a big game in front of family and friends.

"You don't get to the NHL by yourself," said Reimer, who was born in the small town of Morweena. "You get there by so much love and support and encouragement, and even that practice time when you're 12 years old on the outdoor [rink]."

"So it's special to play in front of your friends and family and

it's even more special when things go your way."

Sharks coach David Quinn was happy for his veteran goalie, who turns 35 this month, and his cheering section.

"We're going to bring them on the charter and wherever we go they're going to go when he plays," Quinn joked. "Reims has had a really good year for us. He was huge tonight, and it's always nice to perform in front of family and friends, so I'm happy for him."

Oilers 3, Sabres 2: Connor McDavid scored twice, giving him an NHL-leading 54 goals this season, to lead visiting Edmonton.

In continuing to make his case for his third Hart MVP Trophy in eight NHL seasons, McDavid upped his league-leading points total to a career-best 124 — one more than he finished with last year — and enjoyed his 12th multi-goal game of the season. McDavid

also extended his points streak to 11 games, in which the Oilers' captain has 12 goals and 15 assists.

Derek Ryan also scored and Stuart Skinner stopped 36 shots for the Oilers.

Flames 5, Stars 4: Nick Ritchie scored a goal in his Calgary debut after being part of the NHL's first brother-for-brother trade and Tyler Toffoli scored on a breakaway with 4.7 seconds left as the visiting Flames snapped a five-game skid.

Nikita Zadorov, Elias Lindholm and Rasmus Andersson also scored goals for wild card-chasing Calgary, who were 0-3-2 in their previous five games. Jacob Markstrom had 29 saves.

Blackhawks 5, Senators 0: Seth Jones scored two of Chicago's three second-period goals, and the host Blackhawks stopped Ottawa's five-game win streak.

Anders Bjork had three pri-

mary assists, and Alex Stalock made 35 saves in his 11th career shutout. Lukas Reichel, Philipp Kurashev and Jason Dickinson also scored as last-place Chicago snapped a four-game losing streak.

Kings 4, Capitals 2: Mikey Anderson scored in the third period and host Los Angeles got its fourth straight win.

Adrian Kempe, Phillip Danault and Vladislav Gavrikov also scored, and Pheonix Copley made 20 saves as the Kings won their sixth straight game on home ice.

Canucks 4, Predators 3 (SO): Elias Pettersson scored the only goal in the shootout and host Vancouver recovered after giving up a two-goal lead in the third period to pick up its third win in four games.

Pettersson, Vasily Podkolzin and Dakota Joshua had goals in regulation for the Canucks, and Arturs Silovs stopped 29 shots through overtime.

Seahawks, QB Smith reach agreement on 3-year deal

Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — The Seattle Seahawks agreed to terms with quarterback Geno Smith on a three-year contract Monday that keeps the AP comeback player of the year in the Pacific Northwest.

The deal will keep Smith as the presumptive starter with the Seahawks and gives him the first big payday of his career. NFL Network and The Score reported the deal could be worth up to \$105 million.

The agreement came a day before the league's deadline for using the franchise tag. Smith would have been an unrestricted free agent when the new league year begins next week.

Smith was one of the feel-good stories in the league, getting an opportunity to start after nearly a decade as a backup and reshaping the trajectory of his career. Smith led the Seahawks to a 9-8 record and a playoff berth as the last wild card in the NFC.

He threw for 4,282 yards, a career high and a franchise record. He threw 30 touchdown passes and just 11 interceptions, com-

pleted 399 passes and led the NFL in completion percentage at 69.8%.

Smith was named to the Pro Bowl and even picked up an MVP vote.

Smith struggled at times during the second half of the year as Seattle slid from its early perch atop of the NFC West. But his season was still good enough to answer one of Seattle's biggest questions for the next couple of years.

Smith and Seattle's leaders made it clear after the season ended with a 41-23 loss to San Francisco in the opening round of the playoffs that they all wanted the relationship to continue.

"We have our guy, we need to, hopefully, work things out so he is with us. There is business to be done there of course, but there is no lid on what we can do. The sky is the limit," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said after the season. "That along with returning him with his leadership factor that he had, he's a big deal to us. I just couldn't be more tickled by the way the whole thing turned out and how he handled it. Really, as we look to the future, he is a big part of why

we are looking to the future so promisingly."

Last season was the first time Smith had been a full-time starter since 2014 with the New York Jets. He was benched after struggling in New York and later found work as a backup with the Giants and Chargers before coming to Seattle to serve as the backup to Russell Wilson.

After Wilson was traded to Denver last offseason, Smith beat out Drew Lock for the starting job and seized the opportunity.

Seattle has two first-round selections in next month's draft, including the No. 5 overall pick. While a developmental quarterback for the future could be on the agenda, it becomes less of a need for Seattle now that Smith's immediate future is settled.

"I want to finish my career in Seattle. I want to. I want to be here," Smith said after the playoff loss. "The town, the city, the team, coach Carroll, the organization, they all embraced me. I was a guy who probably could have been out of the league. They embraced me and I want to repay them for that."

Shift limits raise batter spirits, averages so far

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — When Yankees switch-hitter Aaron Hicks batted from the left side last season, he was almost always greeted by an infield shift — a wall of defenders camped in shallow right field.

So it was a striking moment in New York's dugout when Hicks — facing a traditional infield alignment — hit his first clean single to right field early this spring training.

"He probably hasn't seen that hit in about eight years," manager Aaron Boone said.

Hicks and the rest of baseball's most frequently shifted batters are getting used to a new reality — or rather, adjusting back to an old one — after Major League Baseball passed rules limiting infield shifts ahead of this season.

So far, those limits seem to be raising batter spirits — and they

might be bolstering batting averages, too.

"I really hope this isn't the year I start hitting the ball to the shortstop on the ground," Yankees left-handed slugger Anthony Rizzo said with a smile. "Especially young left-handed hitters will be introduced to the 3-4 hole that's been gone for about seven to eight years."

Teams must now keep two infielders on each side of second base, all with their feet in the dirt when a pitch is delivered. The aim is to open up space for a few more singles in each game after data-driven teams spent the past decade carefully crafting defensive formations that targeted each hitter's tendencies.

It's too early in spring training to draw conclusions from the numbers, but key statistics are trending in a promising direction for hitters. Batting averages through the first 10 days of

spring training are up to .263 in 2023 from .259 last season.

Crucially, left-handed hitters — the most frequent targets of the modern infield shift — are hitting .274 this spring, up from .255, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. Righty averages have dropped from .262 to .255. Overall scoring is at 11.3 runs per game, up from 10.6.

There has been disagreement in the sport's analytics community about how much impact the shift limits will have, but it does seem to be affecting hitters' psyches, at least.

"Not getting thrown out from shallow right field on a line drive will be nice," said Rizzo, shifted in 82.6% of his plate appearances last season.

Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash said he has noticed some difference already this spring, but expects more offense to come later as big league regu-

lars play deeper into games.

"I think there's been so many balls already this spring that if you look to if that happened last year, they were out. We had a defender there," Cash said.

Umpires have broad discretion to enforce the league's new guidelines, but some clubs are already testing how strict those rules are.

When lefty slugger Joey Gallo — shifted in 90% of his plate appearances last year — of the Minnesota Twins came to the plate in a game against the Boston Red Sox last week, Boston experimented with a loophole in the new rules, moving center fielder Adam Duvall to shallow right field and left fielder Raimel Tapia to center field.

That shift didn't matter much as Gallo drew a walk, but such is the new reality in baseball as teams start searching for advantages to the rules in 2023.

7 MVPs a sign of growth in World Baseball Classic

Associated Press

Nolan Arenado wants the World Baseball Classic to grow into a global event with stature approaching soccer's World Cup.

"I feel like the hype is a little bit higher this time around than it was in 2017. There's more guys that want to do it," the St. Louis third baseman said ahead of this year's tournament. "I know it's not the World Cup, but just watching the World Cup and how awesome that was just to represent your country ... I don't know if it will get quite there, but get it close at least."

Baseball's top international championship opens Wednesday at Taichung, Taiwan, when the Netherlands plays Cuba and Panama faces Taiwan in a Group A that also includes Italy.

Group B of the expanded 20-nation field starts the following day in Tokyo, with Australia, China, the Czech Republic, Japan and South Korea competing for two quarterfinal berths. Group C begins Saturday in Phoenix, featuring the defending champion United States, Canada, Colombia and Mexico. Group D starts the same day in Miami, where the Dominican Republic, Israel, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico and Venezuela compete.

"Last WBC, I was kind of on the fence of doing it and not doing it, and when I decided not to do it, watching the games, I kind of regretted I didn't do it," said Los Angeles Angels outfielder Mike Trout, a three-time MVP who leads the U.S. roster. "It looked like they were having so much fun."

Mookie Betts, Shohei Ohtani of Japan, and Miguel Cabrera and Jose Altuve, both from Venezuela, are among seven Major League Baseball MVPs on 30-man rosters. There are 63 All-Stars, after Nestor Cortes, Nathan Eovaldi, Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Clayton Kershaw, Alejandro Kirk and German Márquez dropped out and Alex Colomé and Gregory Soto were added.

First- and second-place teams in each group advance to the knockout stage, with quarterfinals to be played in Tokyo on March 15 and 16, and in Miami on March 17 and 18. The semifinals will be in Miami on March 19 and 20, and the championship is at Marlins Park on March 21 — nine days before opening day of the MLB season.

Nations play up to seven games.

"A lot of players, not every single one, but a lot of players place tremendous value on an opportunity to play with their country's

name on their chest," Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said. "I think that the change this year is we have seen less resistance from clubs in terms of making players available and actually meaning it in terms of their availability to play. And I think a big piece of that is a credit to the professionalism of the staffs of the various countries and you can actually work with the WBC staff in a way that allows the player to get ready."

Japan won the first two WBCs in 2006 and 2009, followed by the Dominican Republic in 2013. America's 8-0 win over Puerto Rico in the 2017 championship game was seen by 2.3 million on MLB Network plus an additional 800,000 on ESPN Deportes and a Spanish-language simulcast on ESPN2.

Fox and its related networks have U.S. television rights this year, a tournament delayed two years because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Trout is looking forward to a possible matchup against LA teammate Ohtani in the semifinals or final. The Angels' two-way player could pitch against Trout.

"Every person I talk to that faces him says they don't want to be in the box," Trout said.