

US soldiers safeguarding Ukraine aid

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

SOUTHEAST POLAND — The soldiers of Delta Battery are hypervigilant for a potential attack that could plunge 30 nations into conflict with Russia, and they've been that way ever since arriving last year with their Patriot missiles at little more than a muddy field.

Hypervigilance means no alcohol, ever. Passes to leave the small outpost of dirt-filled Hesco walls topped with razor wire come rarely, and no one goes far in case of an emergency.

Delta Battery's task is to make sure that if the Russians ever fire at the billions of dollars' worth of aid making its way from NATO territory to Ukraine, their Patriot missiles will keep the cargo moving and the people nearby it safe.

Stars and Stripes has agreed to withhold the exact location of the battery for security reasons.

Early on, Moscow warned that it consi-

dered weapons shipments to Ukraine legitimate military targets. Most analysts have agreed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to launch an attack on a NATO member because it would invoke the alliance's Article 5, which calls for all members to defend each other.

But Putin's reluctance can't be counted upon to continue. And so, the soldiers continue to be ready.

"The threat level has been pretty steady throughout this deployment," said Sgt. Chase Hanel, who oversees a group of soldiers tasked with preparing the Patriot launchers when they need to be fired.

Delta was one of three batteries from 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, part of 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command in Germany, that deployed to NATO's eastern flank just days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

All three specialize in the Patriot long-range surface-to-air missile defense sys-

tem. Bravo Battery was sent to Slovakia and Charlie Battery set up near Delta, a few dozen miles from the Ukrainian border.

The other units have already been replaced, as were many of the thousands of NATO troops initially sent east in response to the war.

But the 60-some Delta soldiers, most of whom have been there since the beginning, remain. Their departure is thought to be imminent, but they still don't know when.

Part of the reason is NATO leaders have said Patriot protection in the area is crucial, and they don't want any gaps in coverage.

The speed that went into Delta's deployment meant there was no initial blueprint for handing over the reins to another unit, said Capt. Nathan Lebaron, the battery's commander.

"This is the first time we have been deployed to Europe to do anything like this," said Lebaron, who has completed multiple air defense deployments in the Middle East. "It's very unique and it's a big deal."

DOD budget focuses on China threat and Ukraine

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon on Monday unveiled an \$842 billion funding proposal for fiscal 2024, asking Congress for a budget that emphasizes buying new technology to counter China's advancing military and increasing production of existing munitions depleted in part by the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The latest budget request was shaped by the Pentagon's 2022 National Defense Strategy, which defined China as the Defense Department's primary national security challenge and labeled Russia as a lesser threat, said Kathleen Hicks, the deputy defense secretary. Hicks noted the 2024 budget proposal was influenced by Russia's year-old

war in Ukraine, though it focused more on deterring Chinese capabilities, describing the plan as the "most strategy-aligned budget in history."

"Our goal is to deter because competition does not mean conflict. Still, we must have the combat credibility to win if we must fight," Hicks said Monday at the Pentagon. "This budget ... puts its thumb on the scale in favor of game-changing capabilities that will deliver not just in the out years but in the near-term too."

The Pentagon's request would add \$26 billion to the record defense budget that Congress provided the military for 2023. The 2024 request, which provides details within Biden's \$6.8 trillion overall federal budget proposal outlined Friday,

was met with mixed reactions from lawmakers, some of whom decried the Pentagon budget plan as too much and others who said it was not enough to deter China.

Pentagon officials said the 2024 budget proposal largely built from the 2023 request, with few major changes. The key difference in the 2024 budget, Hicks said, was a change brought on by observations of the war in Ukraine, which has stressed the U.S. defense industrial base as the Pentagon has shipped weapons and ammunition to aid Ukrainian defenses against invading Russian forces.

In the Pentagon's 2024 budget submission, defense officials are asking Congress for about \$30.6 billion to buy munitions

now in its arsenal and a roughly \$5.8 billion hike in its munitions procurement budget from 2023. Hicks said some of that funding would help boost production of munitions shipped to Ukraine, such as 155mm artillery shells, though much of it is focused on boosting production of key long-range arms that would be critical in a war in the Pacific.

"This will help us lock in critical investments getting the most bang for the taxpayers' buck, send industry a clear demand signal and be even better prepared to respond quickly in future contingencies," Hicks said. "When it comes to munitions, make no mistake, we are buying to the limits of the industrial base, even as we are expanding those limits."

US, South Korea hold biggest joint drills

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The South Korean and U.S. militaries launched their biggest joint exercises in years Monday while North Korea said it tested submarine-fired cruise missiles in an apparent protest of the drills it views as an invasion rehearsal.

North Korea's launches Sunday signal the country will likely conduct provocative weapons testing during the U.S.-South Korean drills that are expected to run for 11 days. Last week, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered his troops to be ready to repel rivals' "frantic war preparation moves."

North Korea's increasing nuclear threats, along with concerns about China's ambitions, is pushing the United States to beef up its Asian alliances. In the past year, North Korea has been steadily expanding its nuclear arsenal, as China and Russia repeatedly blocked U.S.-led efforts to toughen sanctions on the North despite its barrage of banned missile tests.

The South Korean-U.S. drills include a computer simulation and several combined field training exercises. South Korean offi-

cialists said the field exercises would return to the scale of the allies' earlier largest field training that was last held in 2018.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency said the launches of two cruise missiles from a submarine off its east coast showed a resolve to respond with "overwhelming powerful" force to the intensifying military maneuvers by "the U.S. imperialists and the South Korean puppet forces."

KCNA called the missiles "strategic" weapons and said their firings verified the posture of the country's "nuclear war deterrence." This implies North Korea intends to arm the cruise missiles with nuclear warheads, though it's still unknown if it has overcome the last remaining technological barriers to acquire functioning nuclear-tipped missiles.

It said the missiles flew more than two hours, drawing figure-eight-shaped patterns and demonstrating an ability to hit targets 930 miles away. The missiles were fired from the 8.24 Yongung ship, KCNA said, referencing a submarine that North Korea used to conduct its first submarine-

launched ballistic missile test in 2016.

The reported launch details show Japan, including U.S. military bases in Okinawa, is within striking distance of the cruise missiles if they are fired from the North's eastern waters, said Kim Dong-yub, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul. He added the weapons could reach even the U.S. Pacific territory of Guam if a North Korean submarine can operate farther from its shore.

Sunday's actions were the North's first underwater missile launches since it test-fired a weapon from a silo under an inland reservoir last October. Last May, the country test-launched a short-range ballistic missile from the 8.24 Yongung submarine.

North Korea's command of submarine-launched missile systems would make it harder for adversaries to detect launches in advance and would provide the North with retaliatory attack capability. Experts have said it would take years, extensive resources and major technological improvements for the heavily sanctioned nation to build a fleet of several submarines that could travel quietly in seas and reliably execute strikes.

Russia: 60-day extension of grain deal is acceptable

Associated Press

GENEVA — A Russian delegation at talks with senior U.N. officials said Monday that Moscow is ready to accept an extension to a grain export deal that has helped bring down global food prices amid the war with Ukraine — but only for 60 days as the Kremlin holds out for changes to how the arrangement is working.

The United Nations and Turkey brokered a deal between the two warring countries in July that allows Ukraine — one of the world's key breadbaskets — to ship food and fertilizer from three of its Black Sea ports.

The 120-day agreement, which helped take some of the sting out of rising global food prices, was renewed last November. That extension expires on Saturday, and another 120-

day extension was on the table.

Moscow has been frustrated that a parallel deal to allow exports of Russian food and fertilizer, which is used across the globe, has resulted in a trickle of Russian fertilizer getting out and no Russian grain at all.

"The comprehensive and frank conversation has once again confirmed that while the commercial export of Ukrainian products is carried out at a steady pace, bringing considerable profits to Kyiv, restrictions on the Russian agricultural exporters are still in place," the Russian delegation said in a statement.

"The sanctions exemptions for food and fertilizers announced by Washington, Brussels and London are essentially inactive," it claimed.

As part of the arrangement,

Moscow wants Russian ammonia to be fed through a pipeline across Ukraine to reach Black Sea ports for possible export. Russian officials have also said banking restrictions and high insurance costs have hurt their hopes of exporting fertilizer.

Rebeca Grynspan, secretary-general of the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development, and Martin Griffiths, the head of the U.N. humanitarian agency, hosted a team led by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin at U.N. offices in Geneva.

A lot is at stake: Ukraine and Russia are key global suppliers of wheat, barley, sunflower oil and other food to countries in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia where millions of people don't have enough to eat. Russia was also the world's top

exporter of fertilizer before the war.

The loss of those supplies, after Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022, drove global food prices higher and fueled concerns of a hunger crisis in poorer countries.

On the front lines in Ukraine, the eastern city of Bakhmut remained the site of fierce fighting, with Ukrainian forces denying Russian forces the prize of its capture after six months of attrition.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian millionaire with ties to President Vladimir Putin who owns the Wagner private military company, has repeatedly claimed that only the Wagner fighters, not the regular army, are involved in battles for Bakhmut. His claims could not be independently verified.

Biden tells Americans systems are safe after 2 banks collapse

Associated Press

NEW YORK — President Joe Biden on Monday told Americans the nation's financial systems were safe, seeking to project calm following the swift and stunning collapse of two banks that prompted fears of a broader upheaval.

"Your deposits will be there when you need them," he said.

U.S. regulators closed the Silicon Valley Bank on Friday after it experienced a traditional bank run, where depositors rushed to withdraw their funds all at once. It is the second largest bank failure in U.S. history, behind only the 2008 failure of Washington Mutual. But the financial bloodletting was swift; New York-based Signature Bank also failed.

The president, speaking from the White House shortly before a West Coast trip, said he'd seek to hold those responsible accountable, and pressed for better oversight and regulation of larger banks. And he promised no losses would be borne by taxpayers.

"We must get the full accounting of what happened," he said. "Americans can have confidence that the banking system is safe."

Biden also said management of the banks should be fired. "If the bank is taken over by the FDIC, the people running the bank should not work there anymore," he said, referring to the Federal Deposit In-

urance Corp., the agency responsible for ensuring the stability of the banking system.

At more than \$110 billion in assets, Signature Bank is the third-largest bank failure in U.S. history. Another beleaguered bank, First Republic Bank, announced Sunday that it had bolstered its financial health by gaining access to funding from the Federal Reserve and JPMorgan Chase.

The developments left markets jittery as trading began Monday. The Asian and European markets fell and while U.S. markets traded higher, shares in mid-sized commercial banks were hammered despite assurances from Biden.

In an effort to shore up confidence in the banking system, the Treasury Department, the Fed and FDIC said Sunday that all Silicon Valley Bank clients would be protected and able to access their money.

"This step will ensure that the U.S. banking system continues to perform its vital roles of protecting deposits and providing access to credit to households and businesses in a manner that promotes strong and sustainable economic growth," the agencies said in a joint statement.

Under the plan, depositors at Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, including those whose holdings exceed the \$250,000 insurance limit, will be able to access their money on Monday.

As river exits, storm threatens California

Associated Press

WATSONVILLE, Calif. — Wet, miserable weather continued across huge swaths of California on Sunday as an atmospheric river that caused major flooding flowed eastward, while a new storm threatened another onslaught of rain, snow and gusting winds as soon as Monday.

The National Weather Service said the next system could exacerbate severe flooding that overwhelmed the area in recent days, prompting a levee failure and widespread evacuations Saturday in farming communities near the state's central coast.

The new storm is not expected to bring as much rain, but forecasters warned that "considerable flooding" could occur at lower elevations from additional rain and creeks and streams swollen with snowmelt.

"Definitely prepare for some more flooding impacts. The ground is very saturated. We're already seeing some impacts from some light amounts," National Weather Service forecaster Eleanor Dhuyvetter said.

A tornado briefly touched down in Tuolumne County during severe thunderstorms Saturday that also dumped an inch of hail, the weather service office in Sacramento said. Tornadoes were possible again Sunday afternoon, forecasters warned.

Monday's incoming rain and snow is expected to extend from central California to Oregon and northern Nevada. Wind gusts of up to 50 mph are expected in some places and could damage power lines and snap tree branches.

Biden OKs controversial, huge Willow oil drilling in Alaska

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration said Monday it is approving the controversial major Willow oil project on Alaska's petroleum-rich North Slope, one of President Joe Biden's most consequential climate choices that is likely to draw condemnation from environmentalists who say it flies in the face of the Democratic president's pledges.

The announcement comes a day after the administration, in a big conservation move, said it would bar or limit drilling in some other areas of Alaska and the Arctic Ocean.

Biden's Willow plan would allow three drill sites initially, which project developer ConocoPhillips has said would include about 219 total wells. A fourth drill site proposed for the project would be denied.

The company has said it considers the three-site option workable.

Houston-based ConocoPhillips will relinquish rights to about 68,000 acres of existing leases in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.

Climate activists have been outraged that Biden appeared open to greenlighting the project, which they said put Biden's climate legacy at risk. Allowing oil company ConocoPhillips to move forward with the drilling plan also would break Biden's campaign promise to stop new oil drilling on public lands, they say.

The administration's decision is not likely to be the last word, with litigation expected from environmental groups.

ConocoPhillips Alaska's Willow project could produce up to 180,000 barrels of oil a day, create up to 2,500 jobs during construction and 300 long-term jobs, and generate billions of dollars in royalties and tax revenues for the federal, state and local governments, the company says.

Vegas seeks to limit residents' water use

Associated Press

CARSON CITY, Nev. — Ornamental lawns are banned in Las Vegas, the size of new swimming pools is capped and much of the water used in homes is sent down a wash to be recycled, but Nevada is looking at another significant step to ensure the water supply for one of the driest major metropolitan areas in the United States.

State lawmakers on Monday were scheduled to discuss granting the power to limit what comes out of residents' taps to the Southern Nevada Water Authority, the agency managing the Colorado River supply to the city.

If lawmakers approve the bill, Nevada would be the first state to give a water agency permanent jurisdiction over the amount of

residential use.

The sweeping omnibus bill is one of the most significant to go before lawmakers this year in Nevada, one of seven states that rely on the Colorado River. Deepening drought, climate change and demand have sunk key Colorado River reservoirs that depend on melting snow to their lowest levels on record.

"It's a worst case scenario plan," said the bill's sponsor, Democratic Assemblyman Howard Watts, of Las Vegas. "It makes sure that we prioritize the must-haves for a home. Your drinking water, your basic health and safety needs."

The bill would give the water authority leeway to limit water usage in single-family homes to 160,000 gallons annually, incor-

porate homes with septic systems into the city's sewer system and provide funding for the effort.

The average home uses about 130,000 gallons of water per year, meaning the largest water users would feel the pinch, according to the agency.

The authority hasn't yet decided how it would implement or enforce the proposed limits, spokesperson Bronson Mack said.

Water from the Colorado River largely is used for agriculture in other basin states.

Las Vegas relies on the Colorado River for 90% of its water supply. Already, Nevada has lost about 8% of that supply because of mandatory cuts implemented as the river dwindles further.

Most residents haven't felt the effects because Southern Nevada Water Authority recycles a majority of water used indoors and doesn't use the full allocation.

Nevada lawmakers banned ornamental grass at office parks, in street medians and entrances to housing developments two years ago. This past summer, Clark County, which includes Las Vegas, capped the size of new swimming pools at single-family residential homes to about the size of a three-car garage.

Watts said he is hopeful other municipalities that have been hesitant to clamp down on residential water use will follow suit as "good stewards of the river" with even deeper cuts to the Colorado River supply looming.

'Cocaine cat' escaped owner, will now live at Cincinnati Zoo

Associated Press

An African serval cat that was found with cocaine in its system after an escape at a traffic stop now calls the Cincinnati Zoo home, much to the delight of social media users still amused by the recent release of the movie "Cocaine Bear."

The wild cat's story has trended online, where users relished in the absurdity of the horror comedy, which riffs off the true story of a 175-pound black bear that was found dead near a duffel bag and some \$2 million worth of cocaine. Social media users have predictably dubbed the serval "cocaine cat."

The slender feline made its escape after its owner was pulled over by police on Jan. 28, according to local animal control officials. It leaped from the car into a tree.

Ray Anderson of Cincinnati Animal CARE said that local animal control, Hamilton County Dog Wardens, were called around 2 a.m. in the residential Oakley neighborhood.

In Ohio, it is illegal to own the animals, which can weigh up to 40 pounds. During the rescue mission, the cat named Amiry broke its leg and became more agitated.

Once Amiry was taken in for medical care by Cincinnati Animal CARE, the team ran a drug test in which they determined that Amiry had cocaine in his system.

It's not the first time that Cincinnati Animal CARE, which has been operating as the county animal shelter, has had a wild animal test positive for drugs. In 2022, the group took in a capuchin monkey, named Neo, that had methamphetamine in its system.

Since that case, it has become standard procedure for the shelter to test exotic animals that arrive at the shelter for drugs, Anderson said.

Anderson confirmed that the owner of Amiry relinquished custody of the cat to Cincinnati Animal CARE before it was taken into the care of the Cincinnati Zoo.

Harris plans to visit Africa as part of US outreach push

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Vice President Kamala Harris will spend a week in Africa at the end of March as the United States deepens its outreach to the continent amid global competition, notably with China.

"The trip will strengthen the United States' partnerships throughout Africa and advance our shared efforts on security and economic prosperity," said a statement from the vice president's spokesperson, Kirsten Allen.

Harris' plans follow visits by first lady Jill Biden and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is going this week, and President Joe Biden is expected to travel to Africa later this year.

Harris will be closely watched, however, as the first Black vice president in U.S. history and the first woman to hold the position.

She plans to be in Ghana from March 26 to 29, then in Tanzania from March 29 to 31. Her final

stop is Zambia, on March 31 to April 1. Harris has a personal connection to the third country on her itinerary. Her maternal grandfather worked in Zambia years ago, and she visited him there as a young girl.

Allen said the vice president's agenda will include promoting democracy, climate adaptation, women's economic empowerment and food security. Besides meeting the presidents of each of the three countries she's visiting, Harris plans to talk with "young leaders, business representatives, entrepreneurs and members of the African Diaspora."

The White House's concerted outreach began with the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, which it hosted in December. China has invested heavily in Africa, but Washington is pitching itself as a better partner than Beijing.

"Our administration will be guided not by what we can do for Africa, but what we can do with Africa," Harris said during the summit.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dems to bolster haven against abortion bans

CO DENVER — Colorado lawmakers are looking to strengthen the state's role as a safe haven for abortion rights in a region largely dominated by conservative states that have restricted the practice since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

Democratic lawmakers announced at a Thursday news conference that three bills will be introduced to expand abortion access. The measures have a strong chance with the Legislature and governor's office, both under Democratic control, and reflect how states like Colorado and California are proactively trying to enshrine abortion rights protections as several neighboring red states go the opposite direction.

One bill would crack down on anti-abortion centers — which are known to market themselves as abortion clinics but instead attempt to steer people away from terminating a pregnancy — by outlawing “deceptive practices.”

Another proposal would legally shield people who seek out abortions, and those who provide them, from investigations and prosecution in other states. The third bill would ensure that health insurance in Colorado offers accessible coverage for abortions.

Man gets 42 months in prison for cross burning

MS JACKSON — A Mississippi man who burned a cross in his front yard to intimidate his Black neighbors was sentenced

Thursday to 42 months in prison.

U.S. Southern District of Mississippi Judge Sul Ozerden handed down the sentence after Axel Cox, 24, pleaded guilty to a federal hate crime in December.

Cox, of Gulfport, was charged with violating the Fair Housing Act over a December 2020 incident in which he put together a wooden cross in his front yard and propped it up so his Black neighbors could see it. He then doused it with motor oil and lit it on fire. He also addressed the family with racially derogatory language, records say.

Cox's attorney, Jim Davis, told the Biloxi Sun Herald that Cox was reacting to his neighbors allegedly shooting and killing his dog. He added that his client acted “totally inappropriately.”

State looks at allowing people in prison to vote

OR SALEM — A bill that would allow inmates of prisons and jails in Oregon to vote in elections moved on Thursday toward a Senate floor vote with the approval of the judiciary committee, with Republican members voting against.

The action on the bill in the Democratic-dominated Oregon Legislature underscores how blue states are taking steps to expand voter access while red states are moving in the opposite direction.

Only two other states — Maine and Vermont — and Washington, D.C., allow convicted people to vote while still incarcerated, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The five members of the Oregon Senate's judiciary committee — three Democrats and two Republicans — argued for and against the measure and then voted along party lines.

The bill goes to the ways and means committee before a vote on the Senate floor. If the Senate passes it, it would go to the House for consideration.

Visa halts plan to track purchases at gun shops

NY NEW YORK — Visa is pausing their decision to start categorizing purchases at gun shops, a significant win for conservative groups and Second Amendment advocates who felt that tracking gun shop purchases would inadvertently discriminate against legal firearms purchases.

The decision is, at the same time, also a defeat for gun control groups. There had been hope that categorizing credit and debit card purchases would allow authorities to potentially see red flags — like significant ammunition purchases — before a mass shooting could happen.

Bloomberg News reported Thursday that Mastercard is also pausing its plans, but a spokesperson for the company did not immediately respond for a request for comment.

After Visa and Mastercard announced their plans to implement a separate merchant category code for gun shop purchases, the payment networks got significant pushback from the gun lobby as well as conservative politicians. A group of GOP state attorneys general wrote a letter to the payment networks threatening legal action against

Visa and Mastercard if they moved forward with their plan.

Sheriff's deputy fired for shooting fleeing car

SC AIKEN — A sheriff's deputy in South Carolina has been fired after he shot at a car trying to drive away from a traffic stop, the Aiken County Sheriff's Office said.

Deputy Christopher Williams violated the agency's use of force policy, the sheriff's office said Thursday in a statement.

The shot hit the back of the fleeing car and no one was injured, state agents said.

The woman who drove away from the stop faces drug and failing to stop for a blue light charges, authorities said.

Council delays plan to rebuild Civil War obelisk

NM SANTA FE — The Santa Fe City Council has decided to delay a decision on a controversial plan to rebuild a Civil War obelisk.

The Santa Fe New Mexican reported that dozens of community members opposed to having the Soldiers' Monument reconstructed voiced their concerns for hours at a public meeting Wednesday.

The council had been set to discuss and potentially adopt the contentious plan opposed by the Santa Fe Indigenous Center and Southwestern Association for Indian Arts and other groups.

Initially built as a tribute to Civil War Union Soldiers, an engraving dedicated the monument to the “heroes” who died in battle with “savage Indians.”

— From wire reports

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Tide roll to NCAA's No. 1 overall seed

Associated Press

The top overall seed, Alabama, has been on a roll despite being entangled in a murder case. Another No. 1 seed, defending national champion Kansas, is coming off a blowout loss and has a coach coming out of the hospital. Yet another, Houston, just watched its best player go down in a heap with a scary injury.

This year's March Madness frontrunners are anything but perfect, but the presence of these teams and all their questions at the top of the bracket could make for precisely what the NCAA wants its tournament to be — a perfectly unpredictable mess.

Most of the drama in picking this year's bracket was resolved far before Selection Sunday.

Arizona State and Nevada made it off the bubble and into

the 68-team field. Rutgers and Oklahoma State did not. Purdue, with 7-foot-4 Zach Edey leading the way, edged out UCLA for the fourth and final No. 1 seed.

And in a decision most everyone saw coming, the selection committee left North Carolina, last year's national runner-up, out of the tournament. It made the Tar Heels the first team since the bracket expanded to 64 teams in 1985 to start the season ranked No. 1 in the Associated Press poll and finish it by not making the Big Dance.

The team they lost to, Kansas, is trying to become the first back-to-back NCAA champion since Florida in 2007.

The Jayhawks earned the top seed in the West Region, but only the third overall, behind the Crimson Tide and the Cougars. The Jayhawks are awaiting the

return of coach Bill Self, who went to the hospital last week complaining of chest tightness and concerns with his balance. He has been discharged and is expected back this week.

The head of the selection committee, Chris Reynolds, said it took every injury, and every absence, into account.

"It's certainly something the committee talked about during the course of the year, and certainly played a factor in seeding and selection," said Reynolds, the athletic director at Bradley.

He said the committee also did not ignore lopsided losses: Two of Kansas' seven Ls came in March to Texas, a No. 2 seed, by 16 and 20 points.

"They mark it how they feel and we're just going to do what we need to do to get where we need to be," Kansas forward KJ Adams said.

The tournament begins Tuesday with two First Four games. The full madness starts Thursday with 16 first-round games, then 16 more the next day.

Kansas' loss to Texas in the Big 12 final Saturday likely played into FanDuel Sportsbook setting the Jayhawks at 10-1 to win the title, behind both Alabama of the South Region (8-1 odds) and the overall favorite, Houston (5-1 odds), which would be playing the Final Four in its hometown if it wins the Midwest Region. The semifinals and finals are set for NRG Stadium on April 1 and 3.

The Cougars lost their conference title game Sunday, in large part because they were without Marcus Sasser, the leading scorer who left the previous day's game early after sliding awkwardly and hurting his groin.

Top-ranked South Carolina women eye perfect season

Associated Press

Dawn Staley has South Carolina six wins away from finishing off a historic season.

The Gamecocks are looking to become the 10th women's basketball team to go undefeated for an entire season as they enter the NCAA Tournament as the No. 1 overall seed.

Staley's squad has been challenged a few times this year but has always pulled through. The defending national champions will play Norfolk State in the first round, the NCAA selection committee revealed Sunday night.

"It didn't take a loss for us to learn from the lessons of a close game," Staley said. "Now we found ourselves in a position where we can't afford to lose."

While the Gamecocks, led by star Aliyah Boston, have been a lock to be the top seed for most of the season, several schools

were vying for the other No. 1's, including Iowa, Indiana, Virginia Tech, Stanford and Utah. The Hawkeyes, led by electrifying guard Caitlin Clark, have been a top seed twice before, in 1988 and 1992.

The committee ultimately chose the Hoosiers, Hokies and Cardinal. Indiana and Virginia Tech are first-time No. 1 seeds. Stanford has been a top seed 13 times now, including in the last three tournaments.

"We spent a lot of time on a variety of things, certainly the number one line and the right teams hosting," selection committee chair Lisa Peterson said.

The tournament begins Wednesday with two First Four games. The full madness starts with 16 games Friday and 16 more the next day.

South Carolina may have the easiest path to the Final Four in Dallas as it won't have to go far from home. The Gamecocks,

who are the 18th team to reach the NCAA tourney unbeaten, will play their first two games on campus before potentially heading 90 minutes away to Greenville, S.C., for one of the two regionals. The Gamecocks just won the Southeastern Conference Tournament at that site.

"It's great. When we got shipped out to Stockton (Calif., in 2017), we thought it was a drag, but we end up winning the national championship. So there are blessings in all types of situations," Staley said. "We're blessed that Greenville was a region. We're blessed that we did enough to get to sent to this region and we have to make it work for us. We know it won't be easy."

The NCAA changed its format this season and is having two regional sites for the Sweet 16 and Elite Eight rounds. Greenville hosts one and Seat-

tle the other. Once again the top four teams in each region will host the opening two rounds.

The other top teams in South Carolina's bracket are No. 2 seed Maryland, No. 3 Notre Dame and No. 4 UCLA. The Gamecocks beat both Maryland and UCLA this season.

"I like it. Some familiarity. Take care of Norfolk State, then see where that takes us," Staley said. "I don't want to put the cart before the horse. Sometimes when you're in a tournament setting like this it's always a good thing to have played someone."

Indiana is the other top seed in Greenville. Utah is the 2 seed with LSU third and Villanova fourth.

Four teams will be making their first appearance in the tournament: Southern Utah, Southeastern Louisiana, Sacramento State and Saint Louis.

Bridges helps Nets hold off Nuggets

Associated Press

DENVER — Mikal Bridges scored 25 points and the Brooklyn Nets withstood a late rally and another triple-double by Nikola Jokic to beat the Denver Nuggets 122-120 on Sunday.

Nic Claxton had 20 points and Dorian Finney-Smith and Spencer Dinwiddie added 15 points each for Brooklyn, which has won five of its last six games.

Bridges and Dinwiddie, acquired in trades last month that sent Kevin Durant to Phoenix and Kyrie Irving to Dallas, have played a key part in Brooklyn's resurgence even as they're still adjusting to their new team and teammates.

"Even if we don't know what we're doing sometimes, just scrambling, all five guys help each other," Bridges said. "Sometimes, it's not going to be perfect, but I think just the next guy stepping up is the biggest thing."

Jokic had 35 points, 20 rebounds and 11 assists for his league-leading 27th triple-double of the season but missed a contested 14-foot jumper with 5 seconds left that would have given the Nuggets the lead.

Michael Porter Jr. added 23

points for Denver, which matched a season high with its third consecutive loss.

Nets coach Jacque Vaughn described his team's third quarter, in which it outscored the Nuggets 37-18 and shot 63%, as one of the most impressive quarters he's seen in his time with the team.

"We started to fly around, 15 turnovers we produced tonight, our ability to be disruptive," Vaughn said. "We stayed together for an impressive win on the road."

76ers 112, Wizards 93: Joel Embiid scored 34 points, James Harden had 18 points and 14 assists and host Philadelphia cruised to a wire-to-wire win over fading Washington.

Tobias Harris added 11 points and De'Anthony Melton 10 for the 76ers (45-22), who have won five in a row to keep pressure on Milwaukee and Boston for the top two seeds in a crowded Eastern Conference.

Washington (31-37) got a career-high 25 points from Corey Kispert but dropped its fifth game in its past six. The Wizards also fell out of a tie for the 10th and final spot in the Eastern Conference's play-in tour-

namment.

Cavaliers 114, Hornets 108: Darius Garland had 28 points, Donovan Mitchell added 23 and visiting Cleveland overcame a 16-point second-half deficit for its fourth win in the past five games.

Garland shot 8-for-20 from the field and 10-for-13 from the foul line, including one with 10.7 seconds left to seal the win.

Terry Rozier had 27 points to lead the Hornets.

Knicks 112, Lakers 108: Julius Randle scored 33 points in a bounce-back performance, RJ Barrett got 20 of his 30 in the second half, and visiting New York snapped a three-game losing streak.

Immanuel Quickley had 15 points as the Knicks survived a ferocious late rally by the Lakers to salvage a weekend split in Los Angeles without second-leading scorer Jalen Brunson, who has a bruised left foot.

D'Angelo Russell had a season-high 33 points and eight assists despite managing just two points in the fourth quarter for the Lakers, whose three-game winning streak ended with only their fourth loss in 12 games since the trade deadline.

Pelicans 127, Trail Blazers 110: Trey Murphy III hit a career-best nine three-pointers to highlight his career-high 41 points, and host New Orleans won its second straight as it tries to stay in contention for a Western Conference postseason berth.

CJ McCollum had 22 points and 11 assists for New Orleans, which made 18 of its first 30 three-point attempts as a team before finishing 19-for-40 (47.5%) from deep.

Anfernee Simons scored 17 for Portland, while Shaedon Sharpe and Kevin Knox each scored 14 points and Cam Reddish added 11.

Thunder 102, Spurs 90: Jalen Williams scored 21 points and visiting Oklahoma City used a balanced effort on offense without Shai Gilgeous-Alexander to beat San Antonio.

Ousmane Dieng had 17 points and Josh Giddey added 17 for the Thunder, who won their fifth in six games and tied Utah for 10th place in the West.

San Antonio's Zach Collins had 23 points and 11 rebounds for his ninth career double-double. Devonte' Graham added 20 points.

Sources: Rams trading All-Pro CB Ramsey to Dolphins

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — The Miami Dolphins are acquiring All-Pro cornerback Jalen Ramsey in a trade with the Los Angeles Rams, two people with knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press on Sunday.

The Rams will get Miami's third-round pick in the 2023 NFL Draft and tight end Hunter Long, according to the people, who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because neither team had announced the deal.

The Rams went 5-12 last sea-

son and missed the playoffs just one year after winning the Super Bowl, and they have been making changes to their roster this offseason. Los Angeles parted ways with veteran linebacker Bobby Wagner last month after one season.

The Rams traded for Ramsey in the middle of the 2019 season after he spent the first four years of his career in Jacksonville. Ramsey, a six-time Pro Bowl selection, had 77 tackles and four interceptions during the Rams' Super Bowl-winning 2021 season. Last season, he had a career-high 88 tackles and

four interceptions.

Adding Ramsey is another step for Miami in rebuilding a defense that had a down year in 2022, by its standards.

Miami finished last year ranked 18th in total defense, 24th in scoring defense and 27th against the pass.

Ramsey is expected to play alongside Miami's Pro Bowl cornerback Xavien Howard, who had 45 tackles and an interception in 2022.

Commanders, DT Payne agree on \$90M deal

The Washington Command-

ers are keeping Daron Payne around, thanks to the second-biggest contract for a defensive tackle behind only seven-time All-Pro Aaron Donald.

The Commanders agreed to terms with Payne on a four-year contract worth \$90 million, with \$60 million guaranteed, according to a person with knowledge of the deal.

Payne led Washington with a career-high 11½ sacks last season. The Commanders put the franchise tag worth \$18.9 million on him last month in the hopes of working out a long-term agreement.

Letang scores in OT, Penguins beat Rangers

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH—Kris Letang knows the Pittsburgh Penguins have the NHL's oldest team. The 35-year-old defenseman is one of the reasons why.

The Penguins have never missed the playoffs during Letang's 17-year career. They know what it takes to get there, even if this time around it may have taken a little longer than usual for that postseason push to begin.

It's well underway now, and Letang is right in the middle of it.

Letang's blast from the point 1:38 into overtime lifted Pittsburgh to a 3-2 victory over the New York Rangers on Sunday, strengthening his team's grasp on the first wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

Not bad for a team that looked lost after getting blown out at home by Edmonton on Feb. 23. The Penguins are 7-1-1 since.

"I think if you look at our age average, a lot of guys have the ex-

perience and they know what to do to turn it on and make sure we get in the postseason and we start getting confident," Letang said after his third overtime winner of the season. "Everybody has a role and they have to do it the best they can and I think that's what we're doing right now."

Red Wings 5, Bruins 3: Dylan Larkin had a goal and two assists to help host Detroit beat Boston.

Moritz Seider had a goal and an assist, and Alex Chiasson, Adam Erne and Andrew Copp also scored for the Red Wings, who built a 4-0 lead in the second period, before holding on to beat the league-best Bruins.

Lucas Raymond had two assists for Detroit, and Ville Husso finished with 31 saves. The Red Wings won for just the second time in nine games.

Predators 5, Ducks 4 (OT): Tommy Novak had two goals, including the game-winner at 1:12 of overtime, to lift up visiting

Nashville.

Novak, who also had an assist, beat John Gibson on an odd-man rush and scored his 12th goal of the season and third in two nights.

Philip Tomasino, Kiefer Sherwood and Yakov Trenin also scored for Nashville in the finale of a six-game trip. Roman Josi and Colton Sissons both had two assists and Juuse Saros made 33 saves.

Coyotes 5, Wild 4 (OT): Clayton Keller's second goal of the night at 4:09 of overtime lifted host Arizona past Minnesota.

Barrett Hayton had two goals and an assist for Arizona. Keller's pair gave him 29 for the season and Brett Ritchie scored his eighth — and second in three games since being acquired from Calgary in a trade involving his brother Nick. Ritchie also had two assists. Karel Vejmelka had 30 saves.

Devils 3, Hurricanes 0: Jack

Hughes scored one goal and set up two by Jesper Bratt as host New Jersey tied Carolina atop the Metropolitan Division.

Vitek Vanecek had 32 saves for his third shutout of the season for the Devils.

Flames 5, Senators 1: Elias Lindholm, Jonathan Huberdeau and Rasmus Andersson each had a goal and an assist to lead host Calgary.

Trevor Lewis and Noah Hanafin also scored, and Nazem Kadri and Mikael Backlund each had two assists as the Flames won for the third time in four games. Jacob Markstrom stopped 30 shots.

Golden Knights 5, Blues 3: Pavel Dorofeyev scored his first NHL goal and Jiri Patera made 30 saves in his debut to lead visiting Vegas.

Jets 3, Lightning 2: Nino Niederreiter and Morgan Barron scored second-period goals, and visiting Winnipeg held on to beat Tampa Bay.

Meneses homers twice as Mexico clobbers US in WBC

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Joey Meneses hit two homers, including a crucial three-run shot in the fourth inning, to lead Mexico to an 11-5 win over the United States in the World Baseball Classic on Sunday at Chase Field.

Meneses got the sellout crowd of 47,534 — mostly cheering for Mexico — on its feet in the first inning with his first homer, which gave Mexico a 2-0 lead. Those cheers got even louder in the fourth for his encore, which was a blast deep into the left-center seats that brought home Randy Arozarena and Alex Verdugo and made it 7-1.

Meneses hit his first homer off starter Nick Martinez, who took the loss, and the second off Brady Singer. Mexico starter Patrick Sandoval gave up one run over three innings, earning the win.

Mexico kept piling onto the lead in the eighth, sending nine players to the plate and scoring four runs off Daniel Bard to make it 11-2.

Australia 8, Czech Republic 3: Logan Wade's two-run double in the seventh put Australia up as they defeated the Czech Republic 6-3 on Monday in Tokyo.

Alex Hall also had 4 RBIs, including a solo home run, as they advanced to the quarterfinals for the first time after appearing in all four previous tournaments.

Australia will face Cuba, the top team in Group A, in one quarterfinal. Japan will play Italy, which finished second in Group A in Taichung, Taiwan. Both quarterfinals are at the Tokyo Dome.

Venezuela 9, Puerto Rico 6: Salvador Pérez homered, doubled twice, singled and had five RBIs as Venezuela improved to 2-0 in Group D on Sunday in Miami.

Venezuela struck quickly with a four-run first against Puerto Rico starter José Berrios. Pérez hit an RBI single and Anthony Santander followed with his second homer of the tournament, a three-run drive that cleared the wall in right. Pérez made it 7-0 with a three-run shot off reliever Fernando Cruz in the second.

Venezuela starter Pablo López was the beneficiary of the early run support. López struck out six, while limiting Puerto Rico to one run and two hits in 4½ innings.

Canada 18, Britain 8 (7 innings): Tyler O'Neill had four hits and four RBIs, Freddie

Freeman added two hits and Canada beat Britain 18-8 on Sunday in Phoenix.

The game lasted just seven innings because the WBC has a mercy rule during group play. If one team is leading by 10 or more runs after an inning following the seventh, the game is over.

Israel 3, Nicaragua 1: Garrett Stubbs hit a two-run double in a three-run eighth inning, helping Israel rally for the win in its WBC opener Sunday in Miami.

Stubbs had two of Israel's seven hits. His bases-loaded double off New York Yankees reliever Jonathan Loáisiga drove in Spencer Horwitz and Noah Mendlinger with two out in the eighth. Horwitz tied it earlier in the inning with an RBI single.

South Korea 22, China 2: At Tokyo, Kunwoo Park and Ha-Seong Kim hit grand slams in consecutive innings, and South Korea set a World Baseball Classic scoring record on Monday night in a game between already eliminated teams.

Cuba 7, Taiwan 1: Yoán Moncada and Erisbel Arruebarrena homered, leading Cuba to the win Sunday in Taichung, Taiwan.