

Commandant touts Marines' adaptability

By **DOUG G. WARE**

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps will have to keep adapting and possibly make unorthodox changes if it is going to remain a dominant military force in the world, the service's top general said Tuesday.

Gen. David Berger, the commandant of the Marine Corps, said adaptability is one of the service's most important attributes because it will come up against evolving enemies on future battlefields. Change is a driving force in the Marine Corps' budget request for hundreds of millions in additional funding in 2024 to speed up its modernization plan called Force Design 2030.

"We have an obligation to our country to win whatever conflict we're put in. Or, as we say in the Marine Corps, we have to adapt and overcome," Berger said during a speech at the National Press Club in Washington.

Force Design 2030 is the Marine Corps' plan to update and reshape its forces and shed outdated assets and strategies. The plan includes developing new equipment and restructuring on multiple levels so Marines can better respond to near-peer threats, such as

China and Russia.

"That is what Force Design is all about. It's an opportunity," Berger said.

In the Navy's \$255 billion budget request released Monday, the Marine Corps asks for \$705 million in additional funding for fiscal 2024 to accelerate Force Design. As part of the plan, Berger said the Marine Corps is already making many transformations, but he stressed it also must be more open-minded than it has been in the past, especially to new technology and new thinking. That includes, he said, getting rid of things that worked in the past but probably could be useless in the future.

"Basically, our laboratory, where we learn, is out there in the field," Berger said. "The experimentation, the trial and error are happening at such a fast rate."

Some of the technologies that Marines are working on include artificial intelligence, merging conventional and smart systems, and autonomous weapons and vehicles that will remove Marines from harm's way, he said.

Another important step, Berger said, is listening to younger Marines who are more

tuned in technologically than their older peers when it comes to things such as computers, tablets and smartphones.

"[They] would reprogram [the phone] and find like seven things it was not designed to do. Then by Friday they would tell me, 'Those rules you had for the phone, they are worthless. But we came up with these others and we kind of violated the warranty, but it really works great,'" he said. "We have to embrace that [type of thinking], not fight it."

The Marine Corps commandant since 2019, Berger also stressed how important amphibious warships will be. The Navy's budget request for 2024 didn't include money for new amphibious ships as the service aims to retire several. The long-term result could be fewer than 31 amphibious ships in the Navy's fleet, which is the minimum required for full force capabilities. Amphibious ships are critical in swiftly delivering Marines and equipment to conflict zones.

There's no funding in the request because the Navy has ordered a pause while it studies how many amphibious ships are needed and for what purpose. The Navy said its 30-year shipbuilding plan will be released soon.

Sub deal likely to add US and UK tours in Australia

By **SETH ROBSON**

Stars and Stripes

U.S. and British nuclear-powered submarines will maintain a continuous presence in Western Australia to train Australian sailors ahead of the country's purchase of its own fleet of eight nuclear subs, say defense researchers.

The leaders of the AUKUS allies — President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak — unveiled the submarine deal Monday, part of an effort to counter Chinese expansionism in the Indo-Pacific.

Under the deal, Australia aims to launch its nuclear-powered subs in the 2030s. A rotational force of U.S. and British subs will operate from Western Australia starting in 2027.

The agreement means a probable, rapid increase in U.S. submarine port calls Down Under, according to Ross Babbage, a former Australian assistant defense secretary.

"The tempo is likely to increase almost immediately," he said by email Wednesday.

U.S. submarines in recent years have made routine port calls in Australia to resupply and train with local forces, Paul Buchanan, a U.S. security expert based in New Zealand, said in an email the same day.

A stop by the USS Asheville, a Los Angeles-class fast attack submarine, at HMAS Stirling in Western Australia was announced March 1 by the U.S. Embassy in Canberra.

Australia needs to double and probably triple the number of submariners in its navy, Babbage said. A class of Australian submariners recently joined the U.S. Navy's Nuclear Power School in Goose Creek, S.C., with another class scheduled to join later in the year, Buchanan said.

"The first class will then join active U.S. subs as part of their ongoing training, as will the classes that follow them," he said.

Australian submariners will likely be at-

tached to Submarine Group 7, headquartered at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, with submarines homeported on Guam, Buchanan said.

"The Australian crews will need training in nuclear propulsion, maintenance and safety as well as operating cruise missiles from vertical launchers," he said.

Australia will need to train between 120 and 320 submarine specialists to crew its new vessels, Buchanan added.

One British and four U.S. subs have been designated for Submarine Rotational Force West, which will mean two-month training visits to the port by each vessel starting in 2027, Buchanan said.

"Australian sailors will deploy on UK and U.S. boats to develop at-sea experience with naval nuclear propulsion, while Australian maintenance personnel will support these submarines at shore," the Australian Defence Department states on its website about the new force.

US, Russia ratchet up rhetoric over drone

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia and the United States ratcheted up confrontational rhetoric Wednesday over a U.S. surveillance drone that encountered Russian warplanes and crashed near the Crimean Peninsula, while both countries pledged to try to avoid escalation.

The Kremlin said the incident proved again that Washington is directly involved in the fighting and added that Moscow would try to recover the wreckage of the drone from the Black Sea. U.S. officials said the incident showed Russia's aggressive and risky behavior and they pledged to continue their surveillance.

Russia has long voiced concern about U.S. surveillance flights near its borders, but Tuesday's incident signaled Moscow's increasing readiness to raise the ante amid soaring tensions be-

tween the two nuclear powers. It reflected the Kremlin's appetite for brinkmanship that could further destabilize the situation and lead to more direct confrontations.

Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's Security Council, said in televised remarks the drone incident was "another confirmation" of direct U.S. involvement in the Ukraine conflict. The Kremlin has repeatedly said the United States and other NATO members have become direct war participants by supplying weapons and intelligence to the Kyiv government and pressuring Ukraine not to negotiate peace.

Patrushev, a close confidant of President Vladimir Putin, also said Russia planned to search for the drone's debris. A U.S. official said it was unclear whether Washington would recover the fragments after securing the in-

formation it had gathered.

U.S. National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the drone was in international airspace when a Russian fighter jet struck the propeller of the MQ-Reaper drone. U.S. officials accused Russia of trying to intercept the unmanned aerial vehicle, although its presence over the Black Sea was not uncommon.

"It is also not uncommon for the Russians to try to intercept them," Kirby said, adding that such an encounter "does increase the risk of miscalculations, misunderstandings."

Kirby said the U.S. "took steps to protect the information and to protect, to minimize any effort by anybody else to exploit that drone for useful content."

Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, said Russia has the technological capability to recover the

drone's fragments.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov repeated the Defense Ministry's statement that Russian jets didn't use their weapons or impact the drone. He repeated his description of U.S.-Russia relations as at their lowest point but added that "Russia has never rejected a constructive dialogue, and it's not rejecting it now."

In Washington, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov expressed concern about "the unacceptable actions of the United States military in the close proximity to our borders."

"What do they do thousands of miles away from the United States?" he said in remarks the Russian Embassy released Wednesday. "The answer is obvious — they gather intelligence which is later used by the Kyiv regime to attack our armed forces and territory."

Group: UAE has Afghans in 'prison-like conditions'

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

A human rights group is calling on the U.S. to help more than 2,000 Afghan asylum seekers who fled during the withdrawal of American forces in 2021 and are being held in what it calls "prison-like conditions" in the United Arab Emirates.

Between 2,400 and 2,700 stranded Afghans are being kept under constant surveillance and denied mental health services, the New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a report Wednesday.

The Afghans have been "locked up for over 15 months in cramped, miserable conditions with no hope of progress on their cases," said Joey Shea, UAE researcher at Human Rights Watch.

The UAE has hosted 17,000 Afghan evacuees at the Emirates Humanitarian City, a former apartment complex in Abu Dhabi, a UAE official with knowledge of the situation who insisted on anonymity said in an emailed response Wednesday.

These Afghans were part of the U.S. airlift that flew 120,000 people out of the country's capital, Kabul, after the Taliban overthrew the U.S.-backed government in 2021. The flights brought them to the U.S. and more than a dozen other countries. About 87% of the refugees who went to the UAE, which was meant to be a temporary stop, have been resettled, the UAE official said.

The remaining evacuees await immigration reviews and have no guarantee of admission to the U.S., the report said.

S. Korea beefs up its defense, buys jets with North in mind

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — South Korea's military says it has finalized plans to purchase 20 additional F-35A Lightning II stealth fighters to defend itself against threats from North Korea. Seoul will spend nearly \$2.9 billion on the acquisition, which will bring its total number of fifth-generation jets to around 60 by 2028, the Defense Acquisition Program Administration said in a news release Monday.

The purchase strengthens South Korea's "three-axis" integrated defense strategy, according to the release. The term, coined by the Ministry of National Defense, refers to preemptive strikes on an imminent North Korean threat, an air and missile defense system and a retaliatory strike against Pyong-

yang.

The new fighters will provide "deterrence against omnidirectional threats and prompt incapacitation of North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in an emergency," the release said. The additional jets will fill the potential "power vacuum" caused by maintenance of existing aircraft.

South Korea's air force already has approximately 40 F-35As, the conventional take-off-and-landing variant of the stealth fighter. Seoul began receiving the A variant in 2019 in a \$7 billion deal with manufacturer Lockheed Martin.

Since then, South Korea's F-35s have conducted aerial drills with the United States and responded to potential threats from the North with airpower demonstrations.

Biden urging 'big' gun control actions

Associated Press

MONTEREY PARK, Calif. — The grief is still suffocating, the anger still visceral, President Joe Biden said Tuesday, in this suburban Los Angeles community where a gunman stormed a dance hall and killed 11 in January. He announced fresh federal measures to curb gun violence, but emotionally declared there must be more.

“Do something. Do something big,” he implored.

“I’m determined to ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines,” Biden told the families of some of the victims who were in the audience for his

remarks, along with the 26-year-old who wrestled the semiautomatic pistol away from the gunman.

Biden’s rhetoric has grown ever stronger about guns — he has routinely called for banning assault weapons — in pushing a gun-control platform even tougher than during the Obama administration when he was vice president. He has been emboldened by the midterm elections when his regular talk of gun control didn’t result in massive Democratic losses, and he’s expected to continue to argue for strong changes as he moves toward a 2024 reelection run, his

aides have said.

“We remember and mourn today,” Biden said in Monterey Park. “But I’m here with you today to act.”

The president told the crowd he’d signed an executive order aimed at stiffening background checks to buy guns, promoting more secure firearms storage and ensuring law enforcement agencies get more out of a bipartisan gun control law enacted last summer.

But Biden has only limited power to go past that legislation that was passed after the killings of 10 shoppers at a Buffalo, N.Y., grocery store and 19 students

and two teachers at a Uvalde, Texas, elementary school.

His action on Tuesday does not change government policy. Rather, it directs federal agencies to ensure compliance with existing laws and procedures — a typical feature of executive orders issued by presidents when they confront the limits of their own power to act without cooperation from Congress.

“Let’s be clear, none of this absolves Congress from the responsibility of acting to pass universal background checks, to eliminate gun manufacturers’ immunity to liability,” Biden said.

Northeast faces power outages from nor’easter

Associated Press

PITTSFIELD, Mass. — Parts of New England and New York were digging out of a nor’easter Wednesday that caused tens of thousands of power outages, numerous school cancellations and white-out conditions on the roads.

The storm began Monday night and lasted throughout Tuesday, dumping as much as 3 feet of snow and gusty winds. Others got just a few inches or a wintry mix. More high winds and below-normal temperatures were in Wednesday’s forecast before a warm-up later in the week.

“The storm is still centered off the New England coast and there’s still some snow showers wrapping around the backside of the system that is impacting portions of New England,” National Weather Service meteorologist Frank Pereira said. He added the system is expected to “gradually work its way off to the East.”

Some of the highest snow totals reported were 35 inches in

Peterborough, N.H., and in Ashby, Mass., about 15 miles away, the National Weather Service said. At least 2 feet of snow fell in parts of northern New York and the Catskill Mountains, with Indian Lake in New York’s Adirondack Mountains recording 31 inches.

About 185,000 customers in the region were without power by mid-morning Wednesday, according to the PowerOutage.us tracking site.

“We are still expecting this to be a multiday restoration effort,” Unifit spokesperson Alec O’Meara said. Crews from New York and Pennsylvania arrived to help bring back power in parts of Massachusetts and help assess damage from trees and downed lines.

There were concerns about roofs weighed down by the snow. An inflatable sports arena dome collapsed in Goffstown, N.H., which received about 15 inches of snow. It wasn’t immediately known whether anyone was inside at the time.

Fed blamed for missing red flags prior to bank’s collapse

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve is facing stinging criticism for missing what observers have said were clear signs that Silicon Valley Bank was at high risk of collapsing into the second-largest bank failure in U.S. history.

Critics have pointed to many red flags surrounding the bank, including its rapid growth since the pandemic, its unusually high level of uninsured deposits and its many investments in long-term government bonds and mortgage-backed securities, which tumbled in value as interest rates rose.

“It’s inexplicable how the Federal Reserve supervisors could not see this clear threat to the safety and soundness of banks and to financial stability,” said Dennis Kelleher, chief executive of Better Markets, an advocacy group.

Wall Street traders and industry analysts “have been publicly screaming about these very issues for many, many months going back to last fall,” Kelleher added.

The Fed was the primary fed-

eral supervisor of the bank based in Santa Clara, Calif., that failed last week. The bank was also overseen by the California Department of Financial Protection and Innovation.

Now the consequences of the fall of Silicon Valley Bank, along with New York-based Signature Bank, which failed over the weekend, are complicating the Fed’s upcoming decisions about how high to raise its benchmark interest rate in the fight against chronically high inflation.

Many economists have said the central bank would likely have raised rates by an aggressive half-point next week at its meeting, which would amount to a step up in its inflation fight, after the Fed implemented a quarter-point hike in February. Its rate currently stands at about 4.6%, the highest level in 15 years.

Last week, many economists suggested that Fed policymakers would raise their projection for future rates next week to 5.6%. Now it’s suddenly unclear how many additional rate increases the Fed will forecast.

Police try to arrest Pakistan leader as protests strengthen

Associated Press

LAHORE, Pakistan — Supporters of former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan threw bricks at police who fought back with clubs and tear gas for a second day Wednesday after officers tried to arrest the ousted premier for failing to appear in court on graft charges.

Police besieged the 70-year-old opposition leader's house in the eastern city of Lahore since Tuesday as his supporters hurled rocks and bricks, and swung batons snatched from the officers. Clashes went on into the afternoon Wednesday before subsiding.

Violence was also reported between Khan's supporters and police in other major cities, including Karachi, Islamabad, the garrison city of Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Quetta and elsewhere in Pakistan. The government sent additional police to Lahore's upscale area of Zaman Park, where Khan lives.

Early Wednesday, Khan had emerged from his house to meet with his supporters, who had faced tear gas and police batons through the night to save him from arrest. He said he was ready to travel to Islamabad on March 18 under his arrest warrant, but that police did not accept the offer.

Khan later posed for cameras seated at a long table, showing off piles of spent tear gas shells he said had been collected from around his home.

"What crime did I commit that my house has been attacked like this," he tweeted. Fawad Chaudhry, a senior party leader from Khan's party claimed hundreds of Khan's supporters were injured.

At the Islamabad High Court, Khan's lawyer Khawaja Haris and his team petitioned for the suspension of the arrest warrant for the former premier. The court was expected to issue a ruling

about the suspension later Wednesday.

By around 2 p.m., the situation calmed and police stepped back, apparently to ease tensions. This encouraged more Khan supporters to join those outside and inside his home as the situation calmed.

Many chanted Allahu akbar, the Arabic phrase for "God is great." Khan, still wearing a gas mask, greeted them at his home.

Officials said security forces were told to move back from Khan's house while the court in the capital, Islamabad, considered whether to suspend the warrant. Azhar Siddique, another lawyer for Khan, said the Lahore High Court ordered police to halt the operation outside Khan's home until Thursday, though they will remain deployed there.

The Punjab provincial government said Wednesday that more than 100 police officers were injured in clashes with Khan's supporters. They denied Khan's allegation that officers were using live ammunition.

Khan, who was ousted in a no-confidence vote in Parliament in April, was ordered to appear before a judge in Islamabad on Friday to answer charges of illegally selling state gifts he had received during his term as premier and concealing his assets.

The former premier has avoided appearances before the court since November, when he was wounded in a gun attack at a protest rally in eastern Punjab province, claiming he was not medically fit to travel from Lahore to Islamabad to face indictment.

Last week, he went to Islamabad to appear before three courts, but he failed to appear before the fourth court to face indictment in the graft case, which is a legal process for starting his trial.

EU eyes naval visits in South China Sea

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — The European Union wants to step up its naval visits and possibly engage in joint military training exercises to promote freedom of navigation and respect for international law in the disputed South China Sea, an EU official said Wednesday.

EU special envoy to the Indo-Pacific region Richard Tibbels said the 27-nation bloc is also ready to provide satellite surveillance to help countries like the Philippines respond to natural disasters and protect their interests, as tensions pitting China against its smaller neighbors escalate.

The outreach is part of an EU strategy, unveiled in 2021, to focus its actions in the Indo-Pacific to contribute to regional security amid more intense geopolitical competition. The long-term engagement would be grounded on shared values, including a commitment to respect democracy, human rights and the rule of law, Tibbels said.

"We really have a strong interest in making sure that freedom of navigation and overflight continues and that the global trading system is not affected by increasing tensions in the region," Tibbels told The Associated Press in an interview in Manila, where he met Philippine foreign, defense and coast guard officials.

About 40% of the EU's foreign trade transits through the South China Sea, making stability a key concern.

"We will be trying to step up our naval presence," Tibbels said, when asked what steps the EU was prepared to take to help uphold freedom of mobility and international law

Court: Ukraine may avoid repaying loan

Associated Press

LONDON — The U.K. Supreme Court ruled Wednesday that Ukraine can go to trial to try to avoid repaying \$3 billion in loans it said it took under pressure from Russia in 2013 to prevent it from trying to join the European Union.

The court rejected an attempt to avoid a trial by a British company acting on Russia's behalf

to collect the loans.

Ukraine said it borrowed the money while facing the threat of military force and massive illegal economic and political pressure nearly a decade before Russia invaded its neighbor.

"The Court has ruled that Ukraine's defense based on Russia's threats of aggression will have a full public trial," he tweeted. "Justice will be ours."

The case was argued in November 2021, and the court was not asked to consider Russia's invasion of Ukraine three months later. Ukrainian authorities allege that the corrupt government of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich borrowed the money from Moscow under pressure before he was ousted in protests in February 2014.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Zebra bites owner's arm before it's fatally shot

OH CIRCLEVILLE — A zebra attacked its owner at an Ohio home and bit the man's arm before it was fatally shot by a sheriff's deputy, authorities said.

The attack occurred around 5:30 p.m. Sunday in Circleville. Pickaway County Sheriff's deputies responded to the home and found the man in a fenced-in field, lying on the ground.

The large male zebra continued acting aggressively and charged at a deputy's cruiser that had been positioned to keep the animal away from the victim, the sheriff's office said. One deputy was able to briefly scare it away using their cruiser's horn and sirens, but the zebra continued to charge at deputies and other first responders and was eventually shot and killed.

It was not clear what caused the zebra's aggressive behavior, but officials said it may have been trying to protect some female zebras that were in the same field.

Court rules for Uber, Lyft on driver classification

CA SACRAMENTO — App-based ride hailing and delivery companies like Uber and Lyft can continue to treat their California drivers as independent contractors, a state appeals court ruled Monday, allowing the tech giants to bypass other state laws requiring worker protections and benefits.

The ruling mostly upholds a voter-approved law, called Proposition 22, that said drivers for companies like Uber and Lyft are independent contractors and

are not entitled to benefits like paid sick leave and unemployment insurance.

The ruling is a defeat for labor unions and their allies in the state Legislature, who passed a law in 2019 requiring companies like Uber and Lyft to treat their drivers as employees.

\$26K in stolen baby formula found in car

GA CARTERSVILLE — Two men caught shoplifting at a grocery store in Georgia had an estimated \$26,000 worth of baby formula in their car, according to police.

Police in Cartersville caught the men walking out of a Publix store north of Atlanta with backpacks filled with cans of formula, news outlets reported. Officers searching their car found 662 more cans of formula inside, police Lt. Greg Sparacio said.

The men were jailed in Bartow County on charges of shoplifting, felony theft by receiving and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. They had a 16-year-old girl with them when they were arrested last week. It was not immediately known if the men had attorneys representing them.

Aide to former governor fails to appear in court

MD ANNAPOLIS — A federal judge issued an arrest warrant on Monday for Roy McGrath, the one-time aide to former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, after McGrath failed to appear in court as his trial on federal fraud charges was set to begin.

U.S. District Judge Deborah Boardman issued the arrest war-

rant in U.S. District Court in Baltimore on Monday morning. McGrath had an arraignment scheduled for 9 a.m. in a superseding indictment in his federal case. Jury selection was scheduled to begin Monday morning. The judge ended up excusing the jurors and the case has been postponed, said McGrath's attorney, Joseph Murtha.

Murtha said he spoke to McGrath late Sunday afternoon or early evening, and they had "a substantively productive conversation." Murtha said he anticipated seeing his client at the courthouse at 8:45 a.m. Monday, but McGrath did not arrive.

McGrath, who had moved to Naples, Fla., faces an eight-count federal indictment. Charges include wire fraud, including securing a \$233,648 severance payment equal to one year of salary as the head of Maryland Environmental Service.

He also faces fraud and embezzlement charges connected to roughly \$170,000 in expenses. McGrath has pleaded not guilty.

School pulls test question equating politics to race

VA FALLS CHURCH — Virginia's largest school system is removing a test question given to a college-level social studies class that equated liberals and conservatives with specific racial and gender demographics.

The question appeared on a test given to students of an AP Government class at Fairfax County Public Schools' Online Campus.

The multiple-choice question asked students, "Which of the following is an accurate comparison of liberals versus conserva-

tives?"

The potential answers for "liberals" included "Young, white males;" "Middle aged, urban lesbian;" "College-educated black male professional" and "White, upper-middle class suburban male."

The potential answers for "conservatives" included "East Coast, Ivy League educated scientists;" "Southern male migrant laborer;" "Catholic, midwestern middle-aged male" and "West coast, Hispanic teacher."

Senate approves repeal of right-to-work law

MI LANSING — Hundreds of union supporters filled the halls of the Michigan Capitol on Tuesday as Senate Democrats voted along party lines in support of repealing the decade-old "right-to-work" law in a state long considered a pillar of organized labor.

Democrats have listed the repeal as one of their top legislative goals this session. The law, enacted in 2012 when Republicans fully controlled Michigan government, prohibits public and private unions from requiring that nonunion employees pay union dues even if the union bargains on their behalf.

Senators approved the repeal on a 20-17 vote, sending it back to the House, which passed its own version last week but must approve the final language. Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has said she'll sign it. The Senate also followed the House's actions last week in voting to restore the state's prevailing wage law, which requires contractors hired for state projects to pay union-level wages.

— From wire reports



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Oats leads Tide to top seed amid scrutiny

Associated Press

Nate Oats is steering Alabama through the best and most scrutinized season in Tide history.

The former high school coach and math teacher seems to have found the right equation for success on the court, twice cutting down nets to celebrate titles and leading the Crimson Tide to the No. 1 overall NCAA Tournament seed.

Oats' biggest challenges and most-questioned decisions have come off the court, where critics have piled on even as the wins piled up.

There's no coaching handbook on how to handle one of your players getting charged with capital murder in midseason while two others were involved, including one of college basketball's biggest stars in AP All-America freshman Brandon Miller.

Oats is not second-guessing his decision to keep playing Miller and Jaden Bradley.

"The fact never changed that

we were going by what the police told us, that they were cooperating witnesses," the 48-year-old Oats told The Associated Press in an interview this week. "So based on everything we know—and we're not investigators, we're going on what the professional investigators have told us — Brandon and Jaden never broke any laws. They never violated any school policies. They're fully cooperating witnesses and have been truthful from the minute they met with the police that day. So I'm not sure what they would have been suspended for."

It's a decision that has drawn criticism while the Tide marched to Southeastern Conference regular-season and tournament titles and the program's first No. 1 seed. It's become a major storyline even as Oats has taken the Tide to unprecedented heights.

Miller went to pick up Darius Miles, who had left his gun in the back seat of the Tide forward's vehicle and sent a text

asking him to bring him the weapon early on Jan. 15. Another man, Michael Davis, is accused of firing the shot that killed 23-year-old mother Jamea Harris.

Miller, whose vehicle was struck with bullets, received the text while en route and never touched the gun or knew that it was going to be used for criminal activity, his attorney said.

Oats said he has made it "crystal clear" to his team that the only victims were Harris and her family.

"That's it. That's where our prayers need to be. This is sad, awful," Oats, who described himself as "torn up," said he told the players.

He said he has been stung by criticism and apologized multiple times for a comment saying Miller was in the "wrong spot at the right time" shortly after police testimony tied Miller and Bradley to the scene. And again for not halting Miller's pregame patdown ritual with a teammate.

"Of course it bothers me," he said. "I'm human, and nobody likes to hear this stuff said about me knowing that it's not who I am."

Oats has climbed the ranks, from leading Romulus High School in suburban Detroit to its first state title in 27 years to a successful run at Buffalo to the top of the college basketball world. All in the span of a decade. Oats received a new six-year, \$30 million contract in February.

He has turned Alabama into a basketball powerhouse alongside Nick Saban's juggernaut football program, which has won six national titles since 2009. Never have the Tide had a team that appeared better equipped for hoops glory.

Miller is a projected top five NBA Draft pick. Fellow freshmen Noah Clowney and Bradley have complemented players like veteran guard Jahvon Quinerly, center Charles Bediako and transfer Mark Sears.

Pitt holds off Mississippi State in First Four playoff

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Jamarius Burton made a go-ahead jumper with 10 seconds left and Pitt edged Mississippi State 60-59 in a back-and-forth First Four game Tuesday night that featured 21 lead changes — the most in the NCAA Tournament in five years.

Mississippi State had a great chance to win at the end, but Shakeel Moore missed a wide-open three-pointer from the corner with two seconds remaining off an inbounds play. D.J. Jeffries' tip-in attempt was off target just before the buzzer.

Nelly Cummings led Pitt with 15 points. Greg Elliott scored 13 and Blake Hinson added 12 as the Panthers (23-11) won an NCAA Tournament game for

the first time since 2014.

They slotted into the Midwest Region bracket as the 11th seed and advanced to face No. 6 seed Iowa State on Friday in Greensboro, N.C.

"We showed toughness, resiliency," Pitt coach Jeff Capel said. "We were who we've been all year, and it wasn't pretty — but it was beautiful."

A layup by Tolu Smith gave Mississippi State a 59-58 advantage with 32 seconds left, but Pitt — after a three-minute scoring drought — grabbed the lead back on Burton's short jumper.

Guillermo Diaz Graham blocked Smith's driving layup attempt out of bounds with 2.7 seconds left, setting up the final sequence.

Dashawn Davis had 15 points

for the Bulldogs (21-13), and Moore scored 13.

Burton, who spent nearly seven minutes on the bench after picking up his fourth foul, said he knew his last shot was going in.

"When I had the ball in my hands the last 30 seconds or so, I just told myself I was built for it," said Burton, who finished with six points. "And I just got to a spot and let it go, and I had complete confidence in myself. That was pretty much everything that went down."

Texas A&M-Corpus Christi 75, Southeast Missouri State 71: At Dayton, Ohio, Isaac Mushila had 15 points and 12 rebounds as the Islanders held off the Redhawks to earn the first NCAA Tournament win in program history.

Texas A&M-Corpus Christi went 3-for-4 at the free-throw line in the final 15 seconds to ice the game and advance to play top-seeded Alabama in the South Region on Thursday in Birmingham, Ala.

The 16th-seeded Islanders (24-10), winners of the Southland Conference, returned to the First Four for a second straight season and led for all but 23 seconds in the opening game of the Tournament.

Southeast Missouri State (19-17) erased a 10-point deficit and tied it at 64 with 3:07 left.

Jalen Jackson led the Islanders with 22 points. Trevian Tennyson scooped in a slick layup off the glass to give Texas A&M-Corpus Christi a 72-69 lead with 22 seconds remaining.

Bucks clinch playoff berth with 50th win

Associated Press

PHOENIX — The Milwaukee Bucks walked into one of the toughest places to play in the NBA, snatched the lead from the Phoenix Suns midway through the fourth quarter and then closed with a flourish to earn a 116-104 victory.

That's not easy to do.

But the Bucks made it look easy. That's exactly why they became the first team to clinch a playoff berth this season Tuesday night, as well as becoming the first to 50 wins this season.

"We just have a good balance on our team," Bucks guard Jrue Holiday said. "At any given moment, somebody can explode."

Giannis Antetokounmpo provided his usual scoring with 36 points while Brook Lopez added 21. The Bucks have won 21 of their past 23 games in an impressive two-month run. The Suns have dropped three straight.

The Suns trailed by nine points at halftime but cut the

deficit to 85-84 heading to the fourth after Devin Booker hit a mid-range jumper at the third quarter buzzer.

Cam Payne hit back-to-back three-pointers to put the Suns up 90-87, which was their first lead of the second half. The game stayed tight for the next several minutes but the Bucks took the lead for good when Pat Connaughton hit a corner three for a 100-97 advantage with 6:30 remaining.

Antetokounmpo added 11 rebounds and eight assists. Lopez shot 10-for-14 from the field and added 10 rebounds. The Bucks closed the game on a 24-9 run.

Booker led the Suns with 30 points on 13-for-27 shooting. Deandre Ayton had 19 points and eight rebounds despite playing just 26 minutes because of foul trouble.

Raptors 125, Nuggets 110: Fred VanVleet scored 36 points, O.G. Anunoby had 24 and host Toronto used a franchise-record 49-point first quarter to hand Denver its season-high fourth straight loss.

Nikola Jokic scored 28 points, Michael Porter Jr. had 23 and Aaron Gordon had 18 for the Western Conference-leading Nuggets, who are winless since a March 6 home victory over the Raptors.

Lakers 123, Pelicans 108: Anthony Davis had 35 points and 17 rebounds, Malik Beasley hit seven three-pointers in the first half and visiting Los Angeles built a 36-point lead in the second quarter in its win over New Orleans.

Beasley finished with 24 points for the Lakers, who moved one game ahead of New Orleans in the Western Conference standings.

Knicks 123, Trail Blazers 107: Immanuel Quickley scored 26 points and visiting New York mounted a rally in the third quarter to beat Portland.

Julius Randle added 24 points for the Knicks, who were again without injured guard Jalen Brunson.

Damian Lillard was questionable before the game with a

calf injury, but he started for Portland and led all scorers with 38 points.

Spurs 132, Magic 114: Jeremy Sochan had 29 points and 10 rebounds, and host San Antonio had a franchise-high 22 three-pointers and season-high 39 assists in beating Orlando.

Orlando rookie Paolo Banchero had 27 points and Wendell Carter Jr. added 16 points. The Magic have lost five of their past seven games.

Thunder 121, Nets 107: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 35 points, Josh Giddey had 15 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists and host Oklahoma City beat Brooklyn for its sixth win in seven games.

Wizards 117, Pistons 97: Bradley Beal scored 36 points, and host Washington snapped its three-game losing streak with a victory over Detroit.

Cavaliers 120, Hornets 104: Evan Mobley had 26 points and visiting Cleveland scored 35 points off Charlotte turnovers and beat the Hornets for the second time in three days.

Gilmore, Waller moving; Bradberry staying in Philly

Associated Press

Stephon Gilmore is on the move again, Darren Waller is getting traded from the Raiders less than two weeks after marrying Las Vegas Aces star Kelsey Plum and James Bradberry is staying in Philadelphia.

Those were among the biggest moves on the eve of free agency Tuesday, the second day in which teams were allowed to negotiate with unrestricted free agents.

The deals couldn't be announced until the start of the league year on Wednesday and were therefore confirmed to The Associated Press by people speaking on condition of anonymity.

In other notable decisions, the Indianapolis Colts will release longtime NFL quarterback Matt Ryan in a cost-cutting move Wednesday and the Carolina Panthers, who own the top pick in the NFL Draft next month and are targeting a quarterback, found their stop-gap QB when they agreed to a two-year, \$10 million contract with un-

restricted free agent Andy Dalton.

The Las Vegas Raiders were busy again Tuesday, agreeing to a three-year, \$33 million deal with former Patriots wide receiver Jakobi Meyers, who reunites with Raiders coach Josh McDaniels, his former offensive coordinator in New England.

The Raiders' acquisition of Meyers helped make Waller expendable. They agreed to send Waller to the New York Giants for a 2023 third-round draft pick.

Waller, who made the Pro Bowl in 2020, gives Giants quarterback Daniel Jones a major playmaker and an upgrade at tight end. Last year's starter, Daniel Bellinger, caught 30 passes for 268 yards and two touchdowns.

Waller twice has surpassed 1,000 receiving yards, in 2019 and 2020, before injuries cut into his production the past two seasons. In 2022, Waller caught 28 passes for 388 yards and three TDs, missing eight games because of a pulled hamstring.

Elsewhere in the NFC, the Dallas Cowboys acquired Gilmore from the Indianapolis Colts for a fifth-round draft pick. The addition of the five-time Pro Bowler came on the same day Dallas re-signed safety Donovan Wilson.

The Cowboys will give up a compensatory fifth-round pick in this year's draft. It will be the third team in three seasons for Gilmore, the 2019 AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year when he was with New England.

The 32-year-old Gilmore played 16 games for the Colts last season, finishing with two interceptions and 11 pass breakups as a four-year Pro Bowl run ended.

The NFC champion Eagles agreed to a three-year, \$38 million contract to keep Bradberry, a second-team All-Pro cornerback, in Philadelphia.

Bradberry joined the Eagles last year after he was released by the Giants and played a key role in the secondary for the NFL's top-ranked pass defense.

Kotkaniemi scores 2, leads Hurricanes over Jets

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Jesperi Kotkaniemi had two goals and an assist, Jack Drury scored his first goal of the season and the Carolina Hurricanes beat the Winnipeg Jets 5-3 on Tuesday night.

Jacob Slavin and Brady Skjei also scored for the Hurricanes, who've endured sudden offensive woes and the loss of a star player during the past week. Kotkaniemi's second goal of the game was an empty-netter with four seconds left.

"That's the whole key to everything — how you respond," Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour said. "That's life."

Frederik Andersen made 21 saves just hours after the Hurricanes announced that All-Star forward Andrei Svechnikov will have surgery for a torn knee ligament and miss the rest of the season.

"The news about Svech is really tough," Skjei said. "You don't replace a guy like that. You have to step up now and do a little bit more. Not change their game,

but give a little extra."

Svechnikov was in the forefront of the Hurricanes' minds.

"I feel awful for Svech," Drury said. "He's such a hard worker. He's just such a great guy. It's tough for him. I think, as a team, everyone knows we have to step up and can't let it bring us down."

Dylan DeMelo, Nikolaj Ehlers and Nino Niederreiter scored for the Jets, whose two-game winning streak ended. David Rittich made 20 saves.

Blackhawks 6, Bruins 3: Taylor Raddysh scored three goals and host Chicago handed NHL-leading Boston a second straight regulation loss for the first time this season.

Boris Katchouk scored a tie-breaking goal and added two assists for his first three-point game. Joey Anderson had a goal and an assist, and MacKenzie Entwistle also scored for Chicago, which entered tied for last place in the Western Conference.

Hampus Lindholm had a goal and an assist after missing the

Bruins' game at Detroit on Sunday with a swollen foot. Trent Frederic and Pavel Zacha also scored for Boston. Linus Ullmark made 23 saves for Boston.

Oilers 6, Senators 3: Leon Draisaitl scored twice to reach 100 points for the season, NHL scoring leader Connor McDavid had a goal and an assist and host Edmonton beat Ottawa.

Derek Ryan, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Nick Bjugstad also scored for the Oilers. Stuart Skinner made 29 saves.

Blue Jackets 6, Sharks 5 (OT): Johnny Gaudreau scored his second goal of the game with 43 seconds left in overtime, giving him five points as visiting Columbus topped San Jose.

Lightning 4, Devils 1: Brandon Hagel had a goal and two assists, Andrei Vasilevskiy made 22 saves and visiting Tampa Bay won the opener of a two-game set in New Jersey.

Golden Knights 5, Flyers 3: Ivan Barbashev scored two goals, Pavel Dorofeyev, Teddy Blueger and Jonathan Marchessault also scored to lead visiting

Vegas to its fourth straight win.

Canucks 5, Stars 2: Anthony Beauvillier scored midway through the second period and host Vancouver beat Western Conference-leading Dallas for their season-high fifth straight victory.

Rangers 5, Capitals 3: Mika Zibanejad scored twice in the first period and host New York beat short-handed Washington.

Coyotes 4, Flames 3 (OT): Travis Boyd scored at 3:10 of overtime and host Arizona extended its points streak to six.

Canadiens 6, Penguins 4: Anthony Richard scored the winning goal in the third period and visiting Montreal snapped a seven-game losing streak.

Kings 5, Islanders 2: Drew Doughty and Alex Iafallo scored on the power play in a four-goal outburst in the second period in visiting Los Angeles' victory over New York.

Predators 2, Red Wings 1: Kiefer Sherwood had a goal and an assist, Juuse Saros made 28 saves and host Nashville won its third straight.

WBC pitching rules put limits on competitiveness

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Mark DeRosa said last week that one of his most important jobs as United States manager during the World Baseball Classic is making sure his players understand the tournament is a competition, not an exhibition.

Just three games in, he sort of undercut his own message.

"Obviously, I want nothing more (than) for these guys to repeat as champions and hold up the trophy," DeRosa said following Sunday's 11-5 loss to Mexico. "But I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize these guys' big league careers."

Those two sentences are a good encapsulation of what makes the WBC such an intriguing, but frustrating endeavor.

Sure, it's cool to have an Olympics-style tournament in baseball. But no matter how much players and coaches say they want to win, there are limits to that competitiveness.

Lots of limits, actually. Particularly when it comes to pitching.

DeRosa's comments came in the aftermath of a U.S. pitching meltdown against Mexico. Brady Singer and Daniel Bard both got hit hard and struggled with their command. In a normal, competitive setting, DeRosa probably would have pulled each pitcher before the damage could get worse.

But the U.S. manager's hands were tied. The tournament's rules — along with directives from MLB clubs — make pitching decisions the toughest part of the job for all skippers in the WBC.

Pitchers for all countries are limited to 65 pitches per outing in the first round. If a player throws more than 50 pitches in an outing, he can't pitch for the next four days. If he throws more than 30, he can't pitch the next day. Finally, if he throws on back-to-back days, he must sit out the next day.

And those are just the official rules of the tournament.

Major League Baseball teams — who are allowing their high-priced pitchers to play in the tournament while risking injury — often have even tighter requests of managers.

Some MLB teams don't want their pitchers throwing on back-to-back days. Others don't want them to come into the game in the middle of an inning. Still others don't want them to pitch multiple innings.

It's a big jigsaw puzzle for DeRosa and all the WBC managers. In some games, it goes smoothly. But in others — like against Mexico — it doesn't go well.

"There's a lot of guys that mean a lot to these big league ballclubs and their seasons," DeRosa said. "I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize them. I would have loved to have put Kendall (Graveman) back out there after five pitches. I would have loved to put Devin (Williams) back out there after one. But that's not what we're doing."