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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Rockets fired at US compound in Syria

By **DOUG G. WARE**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Rocket fire that targeted U.S. and coalition forces in Syria on Friday was the latest in a series of retaliations that included U.S. airstrikes a day earlier on Iran-linked sites and a drone attack that killed an American contractor and wounded other U.S. personnel, defense officials said.

The strike on Friday included 10 rockets that were aimed at Mission Support Site Green Village, a compound in northeastern Syria that houses U.S. and allied forces. The attack was a response to two U.S. airstrikes on other facilities in Syria used by forces linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, according to defense officials.

"The attack resulted in no injuries to U.S. or coalition per-

sonnel and no damage to equipment or facilities," Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's top spokesperson, told reporters Friday. "Our focus in Syria is on the 'defeat ISIS mission' and that will remain our focus."

U.S. Central Command said one of the rockets missed its target and hit a civilian house nearby, slightly injuring two women and two children there.

"This kind of indiscriminate rocket attack places not only our forces and coalition forces at risk, but also jeopardizes the local civilian population as well as the security and stability of Syria and the entire region," Army Col. Joe Buccino, a CENTCOM spokesman, said Friday. "As President [Joe] Biden has made clear, we will take all necessary measures to defend our people and will always respond at a time and

place of our choosing."

The series of attacks began Thursday when a drone crashed into a U.S. and coalition base in Al-Hasakah, Syria. Ryder said U.S. officials are confident the drone was made by Iran and supplied to proxy forces in Syria who crashed it into the base. An American contractor was killed in the attack and five U.S. troops and another contractor were hurt. Al-Hasakah is about 95 miles northeast of Green Village.

A few hours later, the United States sent two F-15 fighter jets to blow up two facilities in east-central Syria in the Deir el-Zour area that the Pentagon said had been frequented by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The rocket attack came afterward on Friday.

Press TV, a state-run Iranian news agency, claimed in a report Friday that the U.S. air-

strikes hit a "rural development center and grain center" — not a military post aligned with the IRGC.

U.S. officials have not detailed the extent of the troops' injuries in the drone attack, but CNN reported they were all in stable condition. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights — a British-based group that monitors human rights abuses in Syria — said the U.S. airstrikes killed several "Iranian-backed militiamen."

Ryder said Friday that the U.S. does not seek confrontation with Iran, which has had adversarial relations with the U.S. and Israel for decades. The Islamic republic often uses proxy fighters to strike targets across the Middle East and Africa. Ryder declined to say whether U.S. officials might respond with another retaliatory strike.

Ukraine urges UN meeting on Putin nuke plan

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's government on Sunday called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council to "counter the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail" after Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed plans to station tactical atomic weapons in Belarus.

One Ukrainian official said Russia "took Belarus as a nuclear hostage."

Moscow, however, said it was making the move in response to the West's increasing military support for Ukraine. Putin announced the plan in a television interview that aired Saturday, saying it was triggered by a U.K. decision this past week to provide Ukraine with armor-piercing rounds containing depleted uranium.

Putin argued that by deploying its tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Russia was following the lead of the United States. He not-

ed that Washington has nuclear weapons based in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.

"We are doing what they have been doing for decades, stationing them in certain allied countries, preparing the launch platforms and training their crews," he said.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry condemned the move in a statement Sunday and demanded an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council.

"Ukraine expects effective action to counter the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail by the U.K., China, the U.S. and France, including as permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, which have a special responsibility to prevent threats of aggression using nuclear weapons," the statement read. "The world must be united against someone who endangers the future of human civilization."

Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, tweeted Sunday that Putin's announcement was "a step toward internal destabilization" of Belarus that maximized "the level of negative perception and public rejection" of Russia and Putin in Belarusian society. The Kremlin, Danilov added, "took Belarus as a nuclear hostage."

On Saturday, Putin argued that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has long asked to have nuclear weapons in his country again to counter NATO. Belarus shares borders with three NATO members — Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

The U.S. said it would "monitor the implications" of Putin's announcement. So far, Washington hasn't seen "any indications Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon," National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said.

Honduras establishes ties with China

Associated Press

BEIJING — Honduras established diplomatic ties with China on Sunday after breaking off relations with Taiwan, which is increasingly isolated and now recognized by only 13 sovereign states.

Foreign ministers from China and Honduras signed a joint communique in Beijing — a decision the Chinese Foreign Ministry hailed as “the right choice.”

The diplomatic victory for China comes as tensions rise between Beijing and the U.S., including over China’s increasing assertiveness toward self-ruled Taiwan, and signals growing Chinese influence in Latin America. The China-Honduras relationship was announced after the Honduran and Taiwanese governments made separate announcements that they were se-

vering ties.

China and Taiwan have been locked in a battle for diplomatic recognition since they split amid civil war in 1949, with Beijing spending billions to win recognition for its “one China” policy.

China claims Taiwan is part of its territory, to be brought under its control by force if necessary, and refuses most contacts with countries that maintain formal ties with the island democracy. It threatens retaliation against countries merely for increasing contacts.

China’s Foreign Minister Qin Gang said the establishment of ties proved that adhering to “one China” policy is winning people’s hearts and is “the general trend.”

“We inform sternly the Taiwan authorities that engaging in separatist activities for Taiwan independence is against the will and

interests of the Chinese nation and against the trend of history, and is doomed to a dead end,” he said.

The Honduran Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Twitter that its government recognizes “only one China in the world” and that Beijing “is the only legitimate government that represents all of China.” It added that “Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory, and as of today, the Honduran government has informed Taiwan of the severance of diplomatic relations, pledging not to have any official relationship or contact with Taiwan.”

Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu told a news conference Sunday that Taiwan had ended its relations with Honduras to “safeguard its sovereignty and dignity.” Wu said that Honduran President Xiomara Castro and her

team always had a “fantasy” about China and had raised the issue of switching ties before the presidential election in Honduras in 2021. Relations between Taiwan and Honduras were once stable, he said, but China had not stopped luring Honduras.

Honduras had asked Taiwan for billions of dollars of aid and compared its proposals with China’s, Wu said.

“The Castro government dismissed our nation’s longstanding assistance and relations and carried out talks to form diplomatic ties with China. Our government feels pained and regretful,” he said.

For decades China has funneled billions of dollars into investment and infrastructure projects across Latin America. That investment has translated to rising power for China and a grow-

US tests remote control for THAAD during S. Korea drill

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — U.S. troops in South Korea remotely fired their top-shelf missile-defense system for the first time during a large-scale military exercise, according to U.S. Forces Korea.

U.S. troops in “deployment training” employed the remote launcher for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system, the command said in a news release Friday.

“In the face of [North Korea’s] advanced missile threats, the training of our THAAD forces enhanced the units’ combat readiness, combined defense posture within the alliance, demonstrates the ironclad commitment to support and defend [South Korea] and further strengthens the security and stability on the Korean

Peninsula,” the release said.

The THAAD remote kit allows the missile interceptor more siting options and increases the area it can defend, according to a 2019 Lockheed Martin news release.

USFK did not respond to repeated requests for comment about whether THAAD interceptors were actually launched during the drill, and the dates and location of the training.

The THAAD drill happened in conjunction with the Freedom Shield exercise by U.S. and South Korean forces, according to the release. The 11-day exercise that ended Thursday focused on simulations and included personnel from U.N. Command and the Combined Forces Command.

U.S. and South Korean troops have been conducting their largest exercises in years across the country this month.

China threatens ‘consequences’ after Navy’s Paracels operation

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. Navy carried out a freedom-of-navigation operation Friday near islands in the South China Sea, a day after denying Chinese claims that its military had driven an American guided-missile destroyer from the area.

The USS Milius conducted the FONOP around the Paracels before leaving the area and “continued operations in the South China Sea,” 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. j.g. Luka Bakic told Stars and Stripes in an email Friday.

“Unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea pose a serious threat to the freedom of the seas, including the freedoms of navigation and overflight, free trade and unimpeded commerce, and freedom of eco-

nomic opportunity for South China Sea littoral nations,” he wrote.

Beijing said actions by the Milius undermined “peace and stability in the South China Sea,” according to a Friday statement from China’s Ministry of National Defense.

“We solemnly request the U.S. side to immediately stop such provocative actions, otherwise it will bear the serious consequences of the accident caused by it,” ministry spokesman Tan Kefei said in the statement.

The operation came less than a day after China claimed it had forced the Milius away from waters around the island chain, which is claimed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam. The Milius was “conducting routine operations” Thursday before it entered the waters near the Paracels on Friday, Bakic told Stars and Stripes.

Air Force doctor sentenced for sexual assault

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — An Air Force doctor found guilty of sexually assaulting the daughter of a colleague and several separate crimes was sentenced Friday at a court-martial to 40 months in prison.

A jury of field grade officers also found Lt. Col. William “Marty” Hilton, a urologist with the 48th Surgical Operations Squadron at RAF Lakenheath, guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer for his actions during the assault, which occurred at

his off-base home in England in August 2021.

Hilton was 53 at the time and the victim was 20. She was dog-sitting and ended up staying over after Hilton and his wife returned late from a night out drinking in London. The assault occurred in the morning on the living room couch in the couple’s home.

The jury also acquitted Hilton of two counts of assaulting a family member under the age of 16, assault of an Air Force spouse, five counts of abusive sexual contact, one instance of unlawful entry and of procuring

prostitution.

At the outset of the nearly two-week trial, Hilton pleaded guilty to being drunk on duty, a separate count of unlawful entry and parts of three counts of conduct unbecoming an officer.

Col. Sterling Pendleton, the chief circuit military judge for Europe, gave Hilton credit for a little more than 15 months served in pre-trial confinement at RAF Lakenheath.

Hilton faced up to 35 years in prison for the convictions. The government asked for seven years confinement while Hilton’s defense team said 11 to 14

months was warranted.

Pendleton also gave Hilton a reprimand and dismissed him from the service. He will also lose his military pension.

Hilton will have to register as a sex offender and is expected to lose his medical credentialing.

Four different women, two of whom were Hilton’s subordinates, testified that he touched them inappropriately in social settings. He was accused of cupping the sexual assault victim’s buttocks on a prior occasion, and doing the same to the victim’s mother three separate times, while giving them hugs.

Army starts removal of Confederate base names

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — The Army on Friday began hosting a series of formal ceremonies to change the names of nine southern bases that honor Confederate generals from the Civil War.

Fort Pickett, a Virginia National Guard base, transitioned to Fort Barfoot in a ceremony Friday. The post first named to honor Confederate Gen. George Pickett, who is widely known for the Battle of Gettysburg, is now named for Col. Van T. Barfoot, a World War II veteran who received the Medal of Honor for his actions as a technical sergeant during the 1944 Battle of Anzio in Italy.

The Army also announced Friday that Fort Hood will soon transition from its Confederate-linked name to Fort Cavazos in honor of Gen. Richard Cavazos, a veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars. That ceremony is scheduled for May 9, officials at the Texas post said.

Cavazos, a Texas native, was the first Hispanic man to reach the rank of four-star general. He was awarded the Silver Star and a Distinguished Service Cross

for his service in the Korean War. He received a second Distinguished Service Cross during the Vietnam War.

“Gen. Cavazos’ combat proven leadership, his moral character and his loyalty to his soldiers and their families, made him the fearless yet respected and influential leader that he was during the time he served, and beyond,” said Lt. Gen. Sean Bernabe, commander of the III Armored Corps and Fort Hood.

Fort Hood is one of nine Army installations to have their names changed under a 2021 federal law seeking to strip the Defense Department of names honoring the Confederacy. The Texas base is named for John Bell Hood, who resigned his U.S. Army commission and became the Confederate general to lead Texas forces in the Civil War.

Fort Lee, Va., has also scheduled its name-change ceremony, which will take place April 27. The base will be called Fort Gregg-Adams. Fort Benning, Ga., is scheduled to become Fort Moore on May 11, and Fort Bragg, N.C., will become Fort Liberty on June 2.

Court blocks COVID vaccine mandate for federal workers

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — President Joe Biden’s order that federal employees get vaccinated against COVID-19 has been blocked by a federal appeals court.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, in a decision Thursday, rejected arguments that Biden, as the nation’s chief executive, has the same authority as the CEO of a private corporation to require that employees be vaccinated.

The ruling from the full appeals court, 16 full-time judges at the time the case was argued, reversed an earlier ruling by a three-judge 5th Circuit panel that had upheld the vaccination requirement. Judge Andrew Oldham, nominated to the court by then-President Donald Trump, wrote the opinion for a 10-member majority.

The ruling maintains the status quo for federal employee vaccines. It upholds a preliminary injunction blocking the mandate issued by a federal judge in January 2022. At that point, the administration said nearly 98% of covered employees had been vaccinated.

With the preliminary injunc-

tion arguments done, Oldham noted, the case will return to that court for further arguments, when “both sides will have to grapple with the White House’s announcement that the COVID emergency will finally end on May 11, 2023.”

The White House defended the order, citing the high compliance rate among the federal workforce and saying in a statement Friday that “vaccination remains one of the most important tools to protect people from serious illness and hospitalizations” against COVID.

Opponents of the policy said it was an encroachment on federal workers’ lives that neither the Constitution nor federal statutes authorize.

Biden issued an executive order in September 2021 requiring vaccinations for all executive branch agency employees, with exceptions for medical and religious reasons. The requirement kicked in the following November. U.S. District Judge Jeffrey Brown, who was appointed to the District Court for the Southern District of Texas by Trump, issued a nationwide injunction against the requirement the following January.

Aid on way to tornado-wrecked Mississippi

Associated Press

President Joe Biden issued an emergency declaration for Mississippi early Sunday, making federal funding available to the areas hardest hit Friday night by a deadly tornado that ripped through the Mississippi Delta, one of the poorest regions of the U.S.

At least 25 people were killed and dozens of others were injured in Mississippi as the massive storm ripped through several towns on its hourlong path. One man was killed after his trailer home flipped several times in Alabama.

Search and recovery crews on Sunday resumed the daunting task of digging through the debris of flattened and battered homes, commercial buildings and municipal offices after hundreds of people were displaced, even as the National Weather Service warned of a risk of more

severe weather Sunday — including high winds, large hail and possible tornadoes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia.

A tornado reportedly touched down early Sunday in Troup County, Ga., near the Alabama border, according to the Georgia Mutual Aid Group. Affected areas included the county seat of LaGrange, about 67 miles southwest of Atlanta.

“Many buildings damaged, people trapped,” GMAG said on Facebook. In nearby West Point, roads, including Interstate Highway 85, were blocked by debris.

The Troup County Sheriff’s Office said it was responding to reports of downed trees and power lines and damaged homes. A tiger was reported missing at the Wild Animal Safari in Pine Mountain. Calls there were not answered early Sunday.

“If you do not have to get on the

roads this morning please do not travel,” the agency said on Facebook.

Some outages in cell service were reported after a suspected tornado struck the area around dawn Sunday, the Troup County Sheriff’s Office said.

Following Biden’s declaration, federal funding can be used for recovery efforts in Mississippi’s Carroll, Humphreys, Monroe and Sharkey counties, including temporary housing, home repairs, loans covering uninsured property losses and other individual and business programs, the White House said.

The twister flattened entire blocks, obliterated houses, ripped a steeple off a church and toppled a municipal water tower.

Based on early data, the tornado received a preliminary EF-4 rating, the National Weather Service office in Jackson said late Saturday in a tweet. An EF-4 tor-

nado has top wind gusts between 166 mph and 200 mph, according to the service. The Jackson office cautioned it was still gathering information on the tornado.

The tornado devastated a swath of the 2,000-person town of Rolling Fork, reducing homes to piles of rubble and flipping cars on their sides. Other parts of the Deep South were digging out from damage caused by other suspected twisters. One man died in Morgan County, Ala., the sheriff’s department there said in a tweet.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency said in a briefing that 25 people were confirmed killed, 55 people were injured and 2,000 homes were damaged or destroyed.

High winds, hail and strong storms were expected for parts of Alabama and Georgia on Sunday, the National Weather Service said.

Search on in Pa. for missing in chocolate factory blast

Associated Press

WEST READING, Pa. — An explosion at a chocolate factory in Pennsylvania on Friday killed three people and left four people missing, authorities said. One person was pulled alive from the rubble overnight.

Rescue crews using dogs and imaging equipment continued to search through the rubble Saturday — hours after the blast that erupted just before 5 p.m. Friday at the R.M. Palmer Co. plant in the borough of West Reading, about 60 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

West Reading Borough Chief of Police Wayne Holben said the death toll rose on Saturday with the discovery of a third body at the site. The Berks County Medical Examiner and Coroner on Saturday night also confirmed three fatalities.

Borough Fire Chief Chad

Moyer said four people remained missing as emergency personnel continue searching for victims and state and local fire investigators examine the scene to determine a cause.

Holben earlier said the rescue of one person from the rubble “provides hope that others still may be found.” Rescue workers were continuing a thorough search using specialized equipment and techniques. Officials said dogs and imaging equipment were being used to look for signs of life during the careful removal of debris.

The blast destroyed one building and damaged a neighboring building, Holben said.

R.M. Palmer said in a statement late Saturday that everyone at the company was “devastated by the tragic events” and “focused on supporting our employees and their families.”

Daylight saving dispute leaves Lebanon with two time zones

Associated Press

BEIRUT — The Lebanese government’s last-minute decision to delay the start of daylight saving time by a month until the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan resulted in mass confusion Sunday.

With some institutions implementing the change while others refused, many Lebanese have found themselves in the position of juggling work and school schedules in different time zones — in a country that is 55 miles at its widest point. In some cases, the debate took on a sectarian nature, with many Christian politicians and institutions, including the nation’s largest church, the Maronite Church, rejecting the move.

The small Mediterranean country normally sets its clocks forward an hour on the last Sunday in March, which aligns with most European countries. However, on Thursday Lebanon’s

government announced a decision by caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati to push the start of daylight saving to April 21.

No reason was given for the decision, but a video of a meeting between Mikati and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri leaked to local media showed Berri asking Mikati to postpone the implementation of daylight saving time to allow Muslims to break their Ramadan fast an hour earlier. Mikati responds that he had made a similar proposal but goes on to say that implementing the change would be difficult as it would cause problems in airline flight schedules, to which Berri interjects, “What flights?”

After the postponement of daylight saving was announced, Lebanon’s state airline said departure times of all flights scheduled to leave from Beirut’s airport between Sunday and April 21 would be advanced by an hour.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Hyundai, Kia recall vehicles due to fire risk

MI DETROIT — Hyundai and Kia are telling the owners of more than 571,000 SUVs and minivans in the U.S. to park them outdoors because their tow hitch harnesses can catch fire while they are parked or being driven.

The affiliated Korean automakers are recalling the vehicles and warning people to park them away from structures until repairs are made.

Affected Hyundai vehicles include the 2019 to 2023 Santa Fe, the 2021 to 2023 Santa Fe Hybrid, the 2022 and 2023 Santa Fe Plug-in hybrid and the 2022 and 2023 Santa Cruz. The only Kia affected is the Carnival minivan from 2022 and 2023. All have Hyundai or Kia tow hitch harnesses that came as original equipment or were installed by dealers.

The Korean automakers say in documents posted by U.S. safety regulators that water can get into a circuit board on the hitches and cause a short circuit even if the ignitions are off.

Police: Driver veered into work zone, killing 6

MD BALTIMORE — A crash along the Baltimore beltway left six construction workers dead after a driver lost control of her car and it careened into a work zone, according to Maryland State Police.

Lisa Adrienna Lea, 54, was alone in an Acura sedan driving north on Interstate 695 when she went to change lanes and struck the front passenger side of a Volkswagen, state police

said.

The impact caused her to lose control, and her car entered the work zone through an opening in temporary concrete barriers separating the construction area from interstate traffic. The crew was working on the highway's left shoulder.

After the crash, Lea was taken to the University of Maryland Medical Center's Shock Trauma Center for injuries she received.

Social media law means kids need parents' OK

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Children and teens in Utah would lose access to social media apps such as TikTok if they don't have parental consent and face other restrictions under a first-in-the-nation law designed to shield young people from the addictive platforms.

Two laws signed by Republican Gov. Spencer Cox prohibit kids under 18 from using social media between the hours of 10:30 p.m. and 6:30 a.m., require age verification for anyone who wants to use social media in the state and open the door to lawsuits on behalf of children claiming social media harmed them. Collectively, they seek to prevent children from being lured to apps by addictive features and from having ads promoted to them.

The companies are expected to sue before the laws take effect in March 2024.

School to stay closed after contamination scare

MO FLORISSANT — A Missouri grade school that was shut down last year amid concerns of possible

radioactive contamination will not reopen, the school district said

Jana Elementary School, in the St. Louis County town of Florissant, closed in October after a private study indicated the presence of contamination in classrooms, the playground and elsewhere. The study was funded by lawyers whose clients were suing over radioactive waste in Coldwater Creek, which runs near the school.

Though a follow-up study by the Army Corps of Engineers and a third study by SCI Engineering found no signs of contamination, the school never reopened.

A statement from the Hazelwood School District said the board and administration recognize the school's closure and relocation of children and staff to other schools hasn't been easy.

Owner of pizza shop said to abuse workers

MA BOSTON — A Boston pizza shop owner accused by federal authorities of abusing employees who were not legally in the U.S. has been ordered held without bail by a magistrate judge who cited the defendant's "history of violence and threats."

Stavros Papaniadiadis, 47, who also goes by Steve, faces one charge of forced labor but allegedly victimized at least seven employees, according to court documents.

Prosecutors allege he hired people in the U.S. illegally, made them work long hours, underpaid them, verbally and physically abused them, and threatened to inform immigra-

tion authorities or police if they complained. He hit one worker in the mouth, breaking some teeth, and on another occasion kicked that worker in the genitals so hard that the man needed surgery, prosecutors said.

Hospital to stop delivering babies

ID SANDPOINT — A rural hospital in northern Idaho will stop delivering babies or providing other obstetrical care, citing a shifting legal climate in which recently enacted state laws could subject physicians to prosecution for providing abortions, among other reasons.

Bonner General Health in Sandpoint will discontinue obstetrical services in mid-May. It also cited a decreasing number of deliveries and a loss of doctors among other factors in its decision.

Those pregnant in the city of about 9,000 — with an average annual snowfall of about 60 inches — will most likely have to travel about 45 miles to Coeur d'Alene for care, or to hospitals farther away in Idaho, Washington and Montana.

The decision to discontinue providing obstetrical services was emotional and difficult, hospital officials said in a news release.

The numbers of deliveries had been declining for years with 265 births recorded at the hospital in 2022, the statement said. Births also have been decreasing nationally and older people have been moving into the Sandpoint area, officials said.

— From wire reports

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Florida Atlantic reaches first Final Four

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Alijah Martin sent a message early for upstart Florida Atlantic, soaring to the basket for a one-handed jam and chirping with the Kansas State players about his poster moment at Madison Square Garden.

“They’re going to label us whatever, but we’re some pit pills and Rottweilers,” Martin said.

Now they can call the ninth-seeded Owls a Final Four team.

Martin and FAU withstood another huge game by Kansas State’s Markquis Nowell and brushed off a deficit in the final eight minutes to beat the Wildcats 79-76 on Saturday night.

FAU (35-3), making its second appearance in the NCAA Tournament and first since 2002, won the East Region and will play the winner of Sunday’s South Region final between Creighton and San Diego State.

“I expect the prognosticators to pick us fifth in the Final

Four,” fifth-year FAU coach Dusty May said.

In one of the most unpredictable NCAA Tournaments ever — all four No. 1 seeds were out by the Elite Eight — the Owls from Conference USA typify the madness.

The winningest team in Division I this season had never won an NCAA Tournament game before ripping off four straight, all by single digits, to become the first No. 9 seed to reach the Final Four since Wichita State in 2013. The Owls are the third No. 9 to get that far since seeding began in 1979.

“Honestly, all the things people say just fuels us to go out there and play even harder,” said Bryan Greenlee, who scored 16 points before fouling out. “They can say whatever they want, say we’re a Cinderella team, say we don’t belong, but we’ve constantly proven people wrong all season.”

Nowell, the 5-foot-8 native New Yorker — @MrNewYork-

City on Twitter — was incredible again at Madison Square Garden, with 30 points, 12 assists and five steals. In the Sweet 16, Nowell set the NCAA Tournament record with 19 assists in an overtime win against Michigan State. He didn’t get enough help this time.

Nae’Qwan Tomlin was the only other player in double figures for Kansas State (26-10) with 14 points. Keyontae Johnson, the Wildcats’ leading scorer, fouled out with nine points.

“Keyontae played 18 minutes, and that’s why he was neutralized,” said first-year Kansas State coach Jerome Tang, who took over a team that went 14-17 last season.

Martin scored 17 points, including a huge three-pointer down the stretch, the 7-foot-1 Vladislav Goldin had 14 points and 13 rebounds, and Michael Forrest made four clutch free throws in the final 20 seconds for the Owls, who held steady as the Wildcats made one last

push.

Cam Carter made a three from the wing with 22.8 seconds left to cut FAU’s lead to 75-74 and Kansas State sent Forrest to the line with 17.9 seconds left. The senior made both to make it a three-point game.

Nowell found Tomlin inside for a layup with 8.6 seconds left to cut the lead to one again, and again K-State sent Forrest to the line. With 6.9 remaining, he made them both.

With no timeouts left, Nowell rushed down the court, gave up the ball to Ismael Massoud outside the three-point line — and never got it back. FAU’s Johnell Davis swiped it away and time ran out.

“I was trying to get Ish a shot,” Nowell said. “Coach wanted Ish to set the screen, and I waved it off because I felt like on the right side of the court, that’s where Ish hits most of his shots. And they closed out hard to him, and he didn’t get his shot off.”

UConn wallops Gonzaga to earn trip to Houston

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The critique of UConn under coach Dan Hurley had been the program’s inability to win in March.

Consecutive first-round NCAA Tournament exits meant the Huskies were good, not great — certainly not anywhere in league with the UConn women’s program.

In perhaps the maddest March of all, the Huskies proved they are elite again, putting in another dominating performance a few hours after the UConn women had a rare misstep.

Jordan Hawkins scored 20 points and UConn overwhelmed its fourth straight NCAA Tournament opponent, earning its first trip to the Final Four in nine years with an 82-54 blowout of Gonzaga on Saturday night.

“I think it becomes a little bit of a mental hurdle, especially like early rounds of the NCAA Tournament where you feel like maybe the burden of the history and tradition and first-round games, maybe even second-round games,” Hurley said. “The climb to get to this point has been real and it’s been more challenging than I thought.”

The Huskies (29-8) have felt right at home in their first extended March Madness run since winning the 2014 national championship, playing their best basketball of what had been an up-and-down season.

UConn controlled the usually efficient Bulldogs at both ends in the West Region final, building a 23-point lead early in the second half to waltz right into the final section of the bracket.

Those first-round exits are

now well in the rearview mirror. So is that midseason funk.

These elite Huskies did what the UConn women couldn’t for once and are headed to Houston, where they will play either Texas or Miami.

UConn has a pretty good track record once it gets this far, too: The Huskies are 8-1 all-time in Final Four games.

“We’ve got a lot to prove,” said Andre Jackson Jr., who had eight points, 10 assists and nine rebounds. “We still have a chip on our shoulder.”

The Bulldogs (31-6) didn’t have the same second-half magic they had in a last-second win over UCLA in the Elite Eight.

Gonzaga allowed UConn to go on a late run to lead by seven at halftime and fell completely apart after All-American Drew Timme went to the bench with

his fourth foul early in the second half.

The Zags shot 33% from the field — 7-for-29 in the second half — and went 2-for-20 from three-point range to stumble in their bid for a third Final Four since 2017.

“UConn was just terrific tonight and we didn’t have any answers, especially when kind of everything really didn’t bounce our way,” Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. “And we can’t absorb a game like that when our offense is as bad as it was tonight.”

Alex Karaban scored 12 points and Adama Sanogo had 10 points and 10 rebounds for UConn.

Timme had 12 points and 10 rebounds, receiving a warm ovation after being taken out of his final collegiate game with 1:50 left.

Ohio State halts UConn's record streak

Associated Press

SEATTLE — UConn's record Final Four run is over, thanks to a monumental performance by Ohio State.

The Buckeyes ended UConn's unprecedented streak of reaching 14 consecutive Final Fours, beating the Huskies 73-61 on Saturday in the Sweet 16 of the women's NCAA Tournament.

"The problem with streaks is the longer they go, you're closer to it ending than you are to the beginning of it," UConn coach Geno Auriemma said. "It's just a matter of time. I mean, it's not if it's going to happen. It's just a matter of time when it's going to happen. And it was going to happen sooner rather than later."

Cotie McMahon scored 23 points for the Buckeyes, who snapped their three-decade Elite Eight drought. The Buckeyes hadn't made a regional final since 1993, when they even-

tually lost in the title game to Texas Tech.

"When I had the opportunity to come to Ohio State, this was certainly the goal and the vision to go farther than they have been going," said coach Kevin McGuff, who had never beaten UConn. "It's not easy to get here, obviously. But I'm really proud of our team and our program of how we've evolved to be able to get to this point.

"Like I said, I mean, I have so much respect for Geno and his staff and all that they have accomplished. So for us to be able to win this game in the Sweet 16 is obviously extremely significant. They're just hard to beat. They're so well-coached. So this is a great win for us."

The third-seeded Buckeyes (28-7) forced No. 2 seed UConn (31-6) into 25 turnovers, ending the Huskies' season before the national semifinals for the first

time in 14 seasons. UConn hadn't been eliminated this early since 2006.

"It's an impossibility to do what we have done already," Auriemma said. "What's the next highest streak? ... And you take that in stride and you say, yeah, it was great while it lasted and it's a credit to all the players that we had and all the times that you have to perform really, really well at this level."

Ohio State will play Virginia Tech on Monday night in the Seattle 3 Region final with a trip to Dallas at stake. The Hokies beat Tennessee 73-64.

Ohio State, which had to rally from a double-digit deficit in the first round against James Madison, used full-court pressure to disrupt the Huskies' offense.

"Our press is what we rely on, and sticking together and talking through it," said Ohio State's Jacy Sheldon, who had 17 points

and went 10-for-10 from the foul line. "We knew UConn was going to be ready for us, so we knew we were going to have to stay consistent throughout the game."

This has been the most trying year of Auriemma's Hall of Fame career. UConn was beset by injuries and illnesses to both players and coaches, including a torn ACL that sidelined star Paige Bueckers all season. It got so bad the Huskies had to postpone a game when they didn't have enough scholarship players.

"We picked the worst day to actually be doing the things that we've been struggling with all year long," Auriemma said in a sideline interview during the game.

Lou Lopez Senechal scored 25 points for the Huskies, Azzi Fudd had 14, and Ohio State transfer Dorka Juhasz finished with 13 points and 10 rebounds.

Amoore, Virginia Tech keep rolling, top Tennessee

Associated Press

Throughout this historic season for Virginia Tech, coach Kenny Brooks has repeated the belief that Elizabeth Kitley is the best player for the Hokies, but Georgia Amoore is the most important.

It was proven again Saturday with Amoore carrying Virginia Tech to a level it's never reached in program history.

Amoore scored a career-high 29 points and the top-seeded Hokies advanced to the Elite Eight for the first time in school history with a 73-64 win over No. 4 seed Tennessee.

"I just want to win. All we have to do is keep winning to get people to talk about us, so we'll keep trying to win," Amoore said.

The Hokies (30-4) won their 14th straight game overall and advanced to a matchup with No. 3 seed Ohio State in the Seattle 3 Regional final on Monday night.

Amoore and the Hokies used a dominant stretch spanning the end of the second quarter and beginning of the third that built enough of a cushion to hold off Tennessee's valiant rally over the final 12 minutes.

Amoore attempted 19 three-pointers in the Hokies' second-round win, but shot only 14 this time around.

"She's only doing now what we see all the time. When the kids have to go out and guard her, they really tighten up their shoestrings because they know that there's something that can happen," Brooks said. "But she's phenomenal. She's as good as anybody in the country, in my opinion. She's playing with the utmost confidence and she's been playing like this ever since we really started this stretch."

Kayana Traylor added 14 points and Kitley scored 12 points despite sitting a big chunk of the first half with foul

trouble.

"I'm just so happy that I landed at such an amazing spot where we did exactly what we wanted to," Kitley said. "And it hasn't been easy and it's taken coach Brooks a few years, but what he's done with the program and the amount of time is incredible."

Jordan Horston led Tennessee (25-12) with 17 points. Ricksea Jackson scored 15 and Jordan Walker added 12.

Greenville 1 Region

South Carolina 59, UCLA 43: The reigning national champion Gamecocks turned in their latest overwhelming defense-and-rebounding-first performance to beat the Bruins.

Aaliyah Boston had eight points, 14 rebounds and two blocks, and Kamilla Cardoso had 10 points for the Gamecocks (35-0), the top overall tournament seed. It was South Caroli-

na's 41st consecutive victory and it secured the program's sixth trip to the Elite Eight under Dawn Staley.

The Gamecocks will play for their fifth trip to the Final Four in Monday's Greenville 1 Region final against No. 2 seed Maryland.

Charisma Osborne scored 14 points to lead the Bruins (27-10), who were in the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2019.

Maryland 76, Notre Dame 59: Diamond Miller scored 14 of her 18 points in the final two quarters to lead the second-seeded Terrapins over the depleted Irish and into the Elite Eight for the first time in eight years.

Shyanne Sellers also had 18 points for Maryland (28-6), which used a third-quarter burst to put away Notre Dame (27-6).

Sonia Citron led the Fighting Irish with 14 points.

Jokic, Murray lead Nuggets past Bucks

Associated Press

DENVER — Nikola Jokic had 31 points and 11 assists, Jamal Murray finished with 26 points and nine assists, and the Denver Nuggets beat the Milwaukee Bucks 129-106 on Saturday night in a late-season showdown of the NBA's conference leaders.

Michael Porter Jr. scored 19 points for West-leading Denver (50-24), which outscored East-leading Milwaukee 68-40 in the second half.

Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 31 points — just seven in the second half — and grabbed nine rebounds for the Bucks (53-20).

The battle of the top teams in each conference — and two strong MVP candidates — was more competitive than the teams' first meeting, won by the Bucks 107-99. Then, the Nuggets held out four starters — Jokic, Murray, Porter and

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope — in the game in Milwaukee on Jan. 25. Denver had played the night before in New Orleans and opted to rest its stars.

The circumstances were reversed, with the Bucks having played in Utah on Friday night.

"We still play, still got to be better, there's no excuses about that," Khris Middleton said. "But I'm sure for a lot of fans, a lot of people out there, they'd love to see healthy teams, or not coming off back to backs."

Antetokounmpo scored 24 points on 11-for-14 shooting in the first half, with all but one of those field goals coming at the rim. Murray (20 points) and Jokic (17 points) kept Denver within three at the break, and then the Nuggets outscored Milwaukee 34-19 in the third quarter to take a 97-85 lead.

Suns 125, 76ers 105: Devin Booker scored 29 points, Bismack Biyombo added 17 points, 13 rebounds and five blocks, and host Phoenix snapped a three-game losing streak.

The Suns won despite a huge game from Sixers guard Tyrese Maxey, who finished with 37 points on 14-for-19 shooting, including 7-for-11 from three-point range. Joel Embiid added 28 points and 10 rebounds.

Kings 121, Jazz 113: Kevin Huerter scored 27 points, had seven rebounds and four assists and host Sacramento beat Utah.

Jazz rookie Walker Kessler scored a career-high 31 points. He added 11 rebounds and finished 14-for-16 from the floor.

Nets 129, Heat 100: Mikal Bridges scored 27 points, and visiting Brooklyn opened the third quarter on a 31-6 run on the way to leapfrogging Miami

into the No. 6 spot in the Eastern Conference.

Max Strus scored 23 for the Heat, all of them in the first half.

Hawks 143, Pacers 130: John Collins led seven teammates in double figures with 21 points and host Atlanta overcame Jordan Nwora's season-high 33 points and protected its shaky hold on the No. 8 spot in the Eastern Conference playoff standings.

Tyrese Haliburton scored 19 points and Buddy Hield had 16 for Indiana.

Pelicans 131, Clippers 110: Trey Murphy III scored 32 points, Brandon Ingram had 32 points and 13 assists, and visiting New Orleans never trailed against Los Angeles.

Bones Hyland scored 18 points and Kawhi Leonard added 12 points and six rebounds for the Clippers, who have lost three of four.

Bruins edge Lightning, clinch Atlantic Division title

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Boston Bruins are winning so much that clinching their division didn't merit any celebration. Captain Patrice Bergeron didn't even realize it had happened.

Garnet Hathaway scored the tiebreaking goal late in the second period and the NHL-best Boston Bruins wrapped up first place in the Atlantic Division with their sixth straight victory, 2-1 over the Tampa Bay Lightning, on Saturday.

The win was the Bruins' 56th and moves them one behind the club record set in 1970-71. It also keeps them on pace to set the NHL record for victories in a regular season with 10 games left. The Detroit Red Wings won 62 in 1995-96 and Tampa Bay matched it in its final regular-season game (at TD Garden in Boston) in 2018-19.

Bergeron added a power-play

goal for the Bruins and Linus Ullmark made 26 saves, raising his record to 36-5-1.

"Last game, you mean?" Bergeron said when asked about winning the division. Informed it had happened Saturday, he said: "Oh really."

Kings 4, Jets 1: Viktor Arvidsson had two goals and host Los Angeles matched its longest point streak in franchise history.

Devils 5, Senators 3: Jack Hughes had a goal and an assist, Mackenzie Blackwood had 25 saves and host New Jersey defeated Ottawa to clinch a playoff berth.

Penguins 4, Capitals 3: Evgeni Malkin beat Darcy Kuemper on a breakaway with 1:20 left in regulation to lift host Pittsburgh over Washington.

Rangers 4, Panthers 3: Patrick Kane scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third period as visiting New York rallied

from two goals down to beat Florida.

Kraken 7, Predators 2: Eeli Tolvanen scored twice and Philipp Grubauer made 14 saves in visiting Seattle's win over Nashville.

Flyers 3, Red Wings 0: Carter Hart made 29 saves, Scott Laughton scored and host Philadelphia won its third straight with a shutout of Detroit.

Sabres 2, Islanders 0: Kyle Okposo scored with 6½ minutes remaining, Eric Comrie stopped 27 shots for his second career shutout and visiting Buffalo beat New York.

Flames 5, Sharks 3: Tyler Toffoli scored two goals and host Calgary kept its playoff hopes alive by beating San Jose.

Wild 3, Blackhawks 1: Ryan Hartman scored with 1:11 remaining in the third period and host Minnesota topped Chicago.

Canadiens 8, Blue Jackets 2:

Rafael Harvey-Pinard scored three goals for his first career hat trick and host Montreal beat Columbus.

Hurricanes 5, Maple Leafs 3: Sebastian Aho scored his team-leading 32nd goal of the season with 2:26 remaining to lift host Carolina past Toronto.

Canucks 3, Stars 1: Brock Boeser scored the go-ahead goal in the second period and visiting Vancouver held Dallas scoreless on four power plays, including one late in the third period.

Golden Knights 4, Oilers 3 (OT): Nicolas Roy scored the winning goal 2:26 in overtime, Jack Eichel had a goal and two assists and visiting Vegas topped Edmonton for its fourth straight victory.

Blues 6, Ducks 3: Brayden Schenn and Kasperii Kapanen had two goals and an assist apiece in visiting St. Louis' win over Anaheim.