

## Sanctions won't sway Russia on Belarus nukes

*The Washington Post*

Western sanctions will not deter Moscow from carrying out plans of moving tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus, the Kremlin said Monday. The European Union threatened to impose sanctions on Belarus after Russia announced it would store the weapons in the Kremlin-aligned country, which shares a long border with northern Ukraine.

In Zaporizhzhia on Monday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with Rafael Mariano Grossi, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

In a nightly address, Zelenskyy said Russia has held the power plant hostage for more than a year and continues to use it for "radiation blackmail of the world." The longer the

Russian occupation of the plant continues, "the greater will be the threat to the security of Ukraine, the whole of Europe and the world," he said.

"Russia's plans certainly cannot be affected by such a reaction," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Monday when asked about the Western reaction to Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement over the weekend on moving nuclear weapons to Belarus.

Nikolai Patrushev, head of the Russian Security Council, said Monday that Russia has "advanced unique weapons to eliminate any adversary," and he accused NATO nations of providing Kyiv with weapons and intelligence.

Patrushev said in an inter-

view with state-run Rossiyskaya Gazeta that it was "dangerous" and "shortsighted foolishness" for American officials to believe that, in case of direct conflict with Russia, the United States "can deliver a preemptive missile strike" and that "Russia won't be able to retaliate."

The European Union's foreign policy chief said the bloc "stands ready to respond with further sanctions" if Belarus hosts Russian tactical nuclear arms. Josep Borrell called the plan a "threat to European security," though European and U.S. officials played down any immediate risk. "Belarus can still stop it; it is their choice," Borrell said.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry called for an urgent meeting of the U.N. Security Council to

counter what it described as "the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail."

NATO called Russia's nuclear rhetoric "dangerous and irresponsible" and said it was "closely monitoring the situation."

Mao Ning, a spokeswoman for China's Foreign Ministry, said Monday that all sides of the "Ukraine crisis" should focus on "diplomatic" efforts to reach a peaceful settlement." During a news conference, Mao also noted that the leaders of five nuclear-armed states — China, France, Russia, Britain and the United States — stressed in a joint statement last year the importance of avoiding a war between nuclear-weapon states and reducing "strategic risks."

## Kim seeks to make more nuclear material for bombs

*Associated Press*

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has called for his nuclear scientists to increase production of weapons-grade material to make bombs to put on his increasing range of weapons.

North Korean photos of the meeting also showed what appeared to be a small new tactical warhead that was possibly designed to fit on a variety of delivery systems developed in recent years to overwhelm South Korean defenses.

The report in state media Tuesday followed a series of missile launches — seven launch events in this month alone — and rising threats to use the weapons against his enemies. North Korea's weapons tests and U.S.-South Korea military exercises have intensified in a tit-for-tat cycle, underscoring heightened tensions in the region.

Officials have said North Korea could further up the ante in coming weeks or months with more provocative displays of its mili-

tary nuclear program, possibly including its first test detonation of a nuclear device since September 2017.

The Korean Central News Agency said Kim, during a meeting on Monday with officials and scientists at a state nuclear weapons institute, stressed the need to ramp up bomb fuel production to meet his goals to expand his nuclear arsenal "exponentially," and issued unspecified "important tasks" for his nuclear industry.

Kim also examined the country's established plans for nuclear counterattacks as scientists briefed him on the North's latest nuclear-capable weapons systems and progress in technologies for mounting nuclear warheads on missiles, the agency said.

The agency's photos showed Kim talking with officials inside a hall that displayed what appeared to be various types of warheads, including around 10 khaki-green capsules with red tips. Other weapons included devices that looked like a black-and-

white cone with fins or a large torpedo.

A wall poster near one of the green devices described a warhead called "Hwasan-31," based on the Korean word for volcano. The poster's graphics implied that the weapon could fit on some of North Korea's short-range ballistic systems, cruise missiles and a purported nuclear-capable underwater drone the country first unveiled last week. State media didn't identify any of the devices in the photos.

The size and shape of the Hwasan-31, which some experts estimated was around 19 inches wide and 35 inches long, suggested progress in North Korean efforts to create a miniaturized warhead that could fit on its delivery systems, said Kim Dong-yub, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul.

Cheong Seong-Chang, an analyst at South Korea's Sejong Institute, said the reports suggest North Korea is moving closer to its next nuclear test.

# Nimitz arrives in Busan day after missiles fired

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

BUSAN, South Korea — A Navy carrier strike group steamed into South Korea's largest port Tuesday for a joint exercise a day after North Korea fired two ballistic missiles.

Roughly 7,000 U.S. sailors and Marines from Carrier Strike Group 11 and its flagship, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, docked at Busan for an ongoing, large-scale drill by U.S. and South Korean naval forces. The two-week Ssangyong Exercise in and around the Korean Peninsula is the largest U.S.-South Korean maritime drill in five years. Over 30 ships and 70 aircraft, and roughly 50 amphibious assault vessels, are scheduled to participate in the exercise until Monday, according to South Korea's Ministry of National Defense.

The scheduled exercise is taking place in international waters in a "professionally safe" manner, the strike group commander, Rear Adm. Christopher Sweeney, told reporters on the Nimitz flight deck.

Two weeks ago, spokesman Wang Wenbin of China's Foreign Affairs Ministry said Beijing was "gravely concerned" about the exercise.

"The current situation on the Korean Peninsula is highly complex and sensitive," Wang said at a March 14 news conference in Beijing. "All parties concerned should remain restrained and do more things that are conducive to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, not otherwise."

Tensions on the peninsula are at a "critical point," North Korea's state-run newspaper Rodong Sinmun said Tuesday. It said the U.S. is "undisguised in their attempt of

aggression" against North Korea.

"All the demonstrative military exercises of the enemy clearly show that they are military actions of preemptive attack, which can no longer be overlooked as they are conducted," Rodong Sinmun reported.

North Korea launched two short-range ballistic missiles Monday, its eighth day of testing this year.

The U.S. does "not seek to contain China" nor a conflict with North Korea, but is "not going to be bullied," Sweeney said.

"We are not going to be coerced and we are going to stay here, fly and operate under international norms to [assure] all our allies and partners," Sweeney said. "We're not going anywhere."

The Nimitz's arrival in Busan, its first in 10 years, comes six months after a visit by the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

Two days before arriving, the Nimitz and destroyers USS Wayne E. Meyer and USS Decatur conducted anti-submarine and air defense drills with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, according to a Navy news release.

On Monday, the Nimitz, Meyer and Decatur joined two South Korean destroyers off the southern South Korean island of Jeju, according to a Ministry of National Defense news release.

Large-scale joint drills like Ssangyong by U.S. and South Korean forces returned this year after a long absence on the Korean Peninsula. Earlier this month, soldiers from South Korea and the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division held their largest Warrior Shield field exercise in six years, while U.S. Forces Korea and the U.N. Command conducted the tabletop Freedom Shield exercise.

## Russia: Anti-ship missiles test-fired in Sea of Japan

*Associated Press*

MOSCOW — Moscow test-fired anti-ship missiles in the Sea of Japan, Russia's Defense Ministry said Tuesday, with two boats launching a simulated missile attack on a mock enemy warship about 60 miles away.

The ministry said the target was successfully hit by two Moskit cruise missiles.

The Moskit, whose NATO reporting name is the SS-N-22 Sunburn, is a supersonic anti-ship cruise missile that has conventional and nuclear warhead capacity. The Soviet-built cruise missile is capable of flying at a speed three times the speed of sound and has a range of up to 155 miles.

The ministry said the exercise, which included other warships and naval aircraft, took place in

the Peter the Great Gulf in the Sea of Japan but did not give more precise coordinates. The gulf borders the Russian Pacific Fleet headquarters at Fokino and is about 430 miles from Japan's northern Hokkaido island.

The Russian military has conducted regular drills across the country and Russian warships have continued maneuvers as the fighting in Ukraine has entered a second year — exercises that were intended to train the troops and showcase the country's military capability.

The U.S. Navy's 7th Fleet did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Japan reacted calmly to the missile exercise, which was conducted near Vladivostok, rather than directly into the waters between the two countries.

## Ukraine's president extends tour of war's front-line areas

*Associated Press*

OKHTYRKA, Ukraine — Ukraine's president visited the Sumy region in northern Ukraine on Tuesday, continuing his tour over recent days of areas of the country that have felt the brunt of Russia's full-scale invasion and as the stage increasingly looks set for a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with officials and local people in two cities in the region, which borders Russia. It was partially occupied by Russian forces after war started more than a year ago. The Russians withdrew from the region by early April. The Associated Press was granted exclusive access as Zelenskyy visited the Sumy region cities of Okhtyrka, which saw fierce battles last year but was never occupied, and Trostianets, which was held by the Russians for a month after the

invasion but liberated by Ukrainian forces on March 26, 2022.

Zelenskyy's trip followed his visits over the past seven days to the Kherson and Kharkiv regions, parts of which were retaken last year from the Kremlin's forces, to the intensely contested area near Bakhmut in the eastern Donetsk region, and to Zaporizhzhia in the south.

Also Tuesday, at least three civilians were killed and 43 others were wounded by the latest Russian attacks, Ukraine's presidential office said. In the eastern Donetsk region, Russian shelling hit 12 towns and villages, killing two and wounding 34. The Russian shelling also targeted the southern city of Kherson, where five people were wounded. In Bilopilnia in the Sumy region, a Russian strike damaged a school building and an apartment building.

# Tenn. shooter was former student with detailed plan

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The former student who shot through the doors of a Christian elementary school in Nashville and killed three children and three adults had drawn a detailed map of the school, including potential entry points, and conducted surveillance of the building before carrying out the massacre.

Metropolitan Nashville Police Chief John Drake did not say exactly what drove the shooter to open fire Monday morning at The Covenant School before being killed by police. But he provided chilling examples of the shooter's elaborate planning for the targeted attack, the latest in a series of mass shootings in a country that has grown increasingly unnerved by bloodshed in schools.

"We have a manifesto, we have some writings that we're going over that pertain to this date, the actual incident," he told reporters. "We have a map drawn out of how this was all going to take place."

Police gave unclear information on the gender of the shooter. For hours, police identified the shooter as a 28-year-old woman and eventually as Audrey Elizabeth Hale. At a late afternoon press conference, the police chief said Hale was transgender. After the news conference, police spokesperson Don Aaron declined to elaborate on

how Hale identified.

In an email Tuesday, police spokesperson Kristin Mumford said Hale "was assigned female at birth. Hale did use male pronouns on a social media profile."

Nashville police Tuesday released video from a body-worn camera that shows a team of officers entering and searching the school.

Drake said in an interview with NBC News that investigators believe the shooter had "some resentment for having to go to that school."

Police also said Tuesday that Hale legally bought seven firearms in recent years and hid the guns from their parents before the attack.

The shooting led President Joe Biden to call again on lawmakers for stronger gun safety laws.

The victims were identified as Evelyn Dieckhaus, Hallie Scruggs and William Kinney, all 9-years-old; and adults Cynthia Peak, 61, Katherine Koonce, 60, and Mike Hill, 61.

The website of The Covenant School, a Presbyterian school founded in 2001, lists a Katherine Koonce as the head of the school. Her LinkedIn profile says she has led the school since July 2016. Peak was a substitute teacher and Hill was a custodian, according to investigators.

# Miss. towns mourn 'family' killed in storm

Associated Press

ROLLING FORK, Miss. — Lonnie and Melissa Pierce lived a quiet, peaceful life in the Mississippi Delta before a powerful tornado swept up a neighbor's semi-truck and dropped it onto their brick home like a bomb, killing the married couple.

A retired welder, Lonnie Pierce was fond of hunting and bass fishing, friends and neighbors said. Melissa Pierce volunteered for a local Christian charity that operates a small thrift store.

"They were good. About the best, I can tell you that," said neighbor Harvey Cockrell, 76, a fellow welder who worked with Lonnie Pierce for decades.

A mound of broken rubble was all that remained of the couple's home after a devastating twister packing winds of up to 200 mph tore through the rural town of Rolling Fork late Friday. The 18-wheeler that had been parked next door before the storm hit remained perched atop the debris Monday, and deer antlers that had been among Lonnie Pierce's hunting trophies covered the couple's yard.

At least 21 people in Mississippi and a man in Alabama perished as menacing storms trekked across the Deep South over the weekend. The toll was especially steep in Sharkey County, in western Mississippi, where the Pierces were among 13 people who died in a county of 4,200 residents.

"I had to identify family, that's what it felt like," said Sharkey County Coroner Angelia Eason. "We're a close-knit community; we're small. And when something like this happens, we tend to come together even closer. We didn't just lose 13 people, we lost 13 family members."

The others Eason identified as having died in the storm included a woman and her elderly mother, as well as a man from Yazoo City, who had traveled more than 30 miles west to Rolling Fork for an auction.

April Johnson was working at her job as a discount store cashier in Rolling Fork when the storm struck and destroyed the business. The mother of five children was also among those the coroner confirmed had lost their lives.

"She was a hardworking, loving kind who would go out of her way to help people," said Dianne Berry, a cousin to Johnson's mother. "She always had a smile."

# Renewable electricity surpassed coal in 2022 in the US for 1st time

Associated Press

Electricity generated from renewables surpassed coal in the United States for the first time in 2022, the U.S. Energy Information Administration announced Monday.

Renewables also surpassed nuclear generation in 2022 after first doing so last year.

Growth in wind and solar significantly drove the increase in renewable energy and contributed 14% of the electricity produced domestically in 2022.

"I'm happy to see we've crossed that threshold, but that is only a step in what has to be a very rapid and much cheaper journey," said Stephen Porder, a professor of ecology and assistant provost for sustainability at Brown University.

California produced 26% of the national utility-scale solar electricity followed by Texas with 16% and North Carolina with 8%.

The most wind generation occurred in Texas, which accounted for 26% of the U.S. total followed by Iowa (10%) and Oklahoma (9%).

"This booming growth is driven largely by economics," said Gregory Wetstone, president and CEO of the American Council on Renewable Energy. "Over the past decade, the levelized cost of wind energy declined by 70%, while the levelized cost of solar power has declined by an even more impressive 90%."

"Renewable energy is now the most affordable source of new electricity in much of the country," added Wetstone.

# House GOP set to subpoena Blinken

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans plan to deliver a subpoena to Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday for classified cables related to the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, marking an unprecedented effort to force the release of sensitive documents to Congress.

Rep. Mike McCaul, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, told The Associated Press on Monday that he had spoken with Blinken earlier in the day when he was notified the agency would not be turning over a so-called dissent cable written by diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul shortly before the August 2021 withdrawal.

“We have made multiple good faith attempts to find common ground so we could see this critical piece of information,” McCaul, R-Texas, said in a statement. “Unfortunately, Secretary Blinken has refused to provide the Dissent Cable and his response to the cable, forcing me to issue my

first subpoena as chairman of this committee.”

The July 2021 communication warned Blinken about the potential fall of Kabul via a special “dissent channel,” which allows State Department officials to issue warnings or express contrarian views directly to senior agency officials, according to a report from The Wall Street Journal.

The State Department made a direct offer last week — before McCaul made his subpoena threat about the dissent cable in particular — to share the substance of the cable via a briefing, according to a March 22 letter obtained by the AP.

“The Department is prepared to discuss a path that would communicate to you the circumstances and substance of the requested cable exchange, as an extraordinary accommodation,” the letter read. “The Department trusts that this accommodation will address the Committee’s request for information while preserving the confidential nature of the Dissent Channel.”

The effort to force the release of the cable is the latest in a series by McCaul and other House Republicans to hold the Biden administration accountable for what they have called a “stunning failure of leadership” after Taliban forces seized the Afghan capital, Kabul, far more rapidly than U.S. intelligence had foreseen as American forces pulled out.

Kabul’s fall turned the West’s withdrawal into a rout, with Kabul’s airport the center of a desperate air evacuation guarded by U.S. forces temporarily deployed for the task.

As U.S. troops were helping Afghans leave the country, a blast killed at least 170 Afghan civilians and 13 American service members on Aug. 26, 2021.

McCaul made the Afghanistan-related document requests in January, upon becoming chairman of the committee, but has said he faced pushback from the department as he pursued his investigation into the withdrawal.

## Migrants set mattresses on fire at Mexico center

Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — Migrants fearing deportation set mattresses ablaze at an immigration detention center in Mexico, starting a fire that killed at least 40 people, the president said Tuesday. It was one of the deadliest incidents ever at an immigration lockup in the country.

Hours after the fire broke out late Monday, rows of bodies were laid out under shimmering silver sheets outside the facility in Ciudad Juarez, which is across from El Paso, Texas, and a major crossing point for migrants. Ambulances, firefighters and vans from the morgue swarmed the scene.

In addition to the deaths, almost 30 others were in “delicate-serious” condition, according to the National Immigration Institute. There were 68 men from Central and South America held in the facility at the

time of the fire, the agency said.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador called the incident unfortunate and said the director of country’s immigration agency was on the scene.

“They never imagined that this would cause this terrible misfortune,” López Obrador said.

Tensions between authorities and migrants had apparently been running high in recent weeks in Ciudad Juarez, where shelters are full of people waiting for opportunities to cross into the U.S. or who have requested asylum there and are waiting out the process.

More than 30 migrant shelters and other advocacy organizations published an open letter March 9 that complained of a criminalization of migrants and asylum seekers in the city.

It accused authorities of abuse and using excessive force in rounding up migrants.

## ‘Hotel Rwanda’ hero freed, will reunite with family

Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya — The man who inspired the film “Hotel Rwanda” and was freed by Rwanda last week from a terrorism sentence has arrived in Qatar on his way to reuniting with family in the United States.

Paul Rusesabagina is currently in Doha, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told journalists on Monday.

“He will soon be making his way back to the United States. And his family is, as I’m sure no one is surprised, they’re eager to welcome him back here, home,” Kirby said.

The 68-year-old Rusesabagina, a U.S. legal resident and Belgian citizen who had left Rwanda after saving hundreds of countrymen in the country’s 1994 genocide, was convicted in 2021 of terrorism offenses and sentenced to 25 years in prison in a widely criticized trial.

Rusesabagina disappeared in 2020 during a visit to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates and appeared days later in Rwanda in handcuffs.

His family alleged he was kidnapped. He was convicted on eight charges including membership in a terrorist group, murder and abduction.

Rusesabagina has asserted that his arrest was in response to his criticism of longtime President Paul Kagame over alleged human rights abuses. Kagame’s government has repeatedly denied targeting dissenting voices with arrests and extrajudicial killings.

In a signed letter to Kagame dated Oct. 14, the ailing Rusesabagina expressed regret for any violence and wrote that “if I am granted a pardon and released, I understand fully that I will spend the remainder of my days in the United States in quiet reflection.”

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Fire burns complex with Wright Brothers factory**

**OH** DAYTON — An early morning fire damaged a commercial building complex housing a former airplane factory founded by the Wright Brothers in Ohio, authorities said.

Dayton fire crews were sent to the site and found heavy fire throughout the complex.

The Dayton Daily News reported that crews were still on the scene nearly 12 hours after the fire was reported. Black smoke continued to stream from a collection of multiple hangar buildings, including historic Wright Brothers airplane factory hangars, and flames could be seen on the backside of the hangars, the paper reported.

Capt. Brad French with the Dayton Fire Department said in a news release that the structure involved is listed on the National Historic Register as the first aircraft manufacturing facility founded by the Wright Brothers.

**5 at campground get Legionnaire's disease**

**NH** CONCORD — Five people who stayed at a New Hampshire campground came down with Legionnaire's disease, a bacterial pneumonia spread by inhaling droplets of water contaminated with the bacteria, the state health department said.

The five, who had stayed at the Meredith Woods and Clearwater Campground in Meredith, came down with their illness between early fall 2021 and January 2023, the Department of Health and Human Services said in a news release.

All were hospitalized and later recovered. No deaths were reported.

In addition to the health department, the state Department of Environmental Services is investigating the outbreak to identify contamination and implement corrective actions.

**Missing lawyer likely dead, doctor charged**

**FL** TAMPA — A Tampa-area plastic surgeon has been charged with murder, accused of killing a lawyer missing from a firm that represents former co-workers the doctor has been suing in a business dispute.

Largo police arrested Dr. Tomasz Kosowski on a first-degree murder charge in the disappearance of Steven Cozzi, who was last seen at Blanchard Law, the firm where he worked.

Police said that while Cozzi's body has not been found, they have evidence that he was killed by Kosowski.

They said Cozzi's wallet, phone and keys were found in the law office along with a significant amount of blood in the bathroom. They said a suspicious person and car were seen at the office, leading them to Kosowski. A search of the doctor's Tarpon Springs home found evidence that led to his arrest, police said. They did not elaborate.

**At least 12 injured in apartment floor collapse**

**PA** INDIANA — A dozen people were injured in the collapse of a second-story floor inside an apartment complex near a western Pennsylvania college, authorities said.

Seven people were taken to hospitals and five others were treated at the scene after the collapse at Elm by Traverse Commons about a mile from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, state police told the Tribune-Review.

Trooper Cliff Greenfield said the victims had injuries ranging from serious to minor. He said responding troopers found one person lying in the road and others grouped outside the three-story building reported that a floor inside had collapsed.

"It is unknown exactly how many people were inside the apartment at the time of the floor collapse," he said. Those still inside were helped out through a broken first-floor window, which caused many of the injuries. Fire rescuers searched the building, which has been secured by the management.

Greenfield said it's unclear how many of those involved were university students or guests visiting during what has been dubbed "IUPatty's weekend," a delayed St. Patrick's Day celebration.

**2 officers killed in police helicopter crash**

**LA** BATON ROUGE — Two Baton Rouge police officers died when their helicopter crashed into a sugarcane field, Louisiana authorities said.

Sgt. David Poirrier, 47, and Cpl. Scotty Canezaro, 38, died in the Sunday morning crash, the Baton Rouge Police Department said. Poirrier had served for 17 years; Canezaro for 16 years. Both men were assigned to the department's Air Support Unit.

The Robinson R-44 helicopter went out to help with a pursuit at 2 a.m. and never returned, local

media reported. The aircraft's disappearance wasn't noticed for several hours because the air traffic control tower at the Baton Rouge airport was unmanned at that time. The wreckage was found before 11 a.m.

The National Transportation Safety Board said it is investigating the crash.

**Officials: Tap water OK after chemical spill**

**PA** PHILADELPHIA — Philadelphia water officials said they have seen no sign of contamination following a chemical spill into the Delaware River in a neighboring county upriver. They plan to continue testing and said they will notify the public immediately if a change is noted.

Health officials in Bucks County, just north of Philadelphia, said Sunday that a leak late Friday evening at the Trinseo Altuglas chemical facility in Bristol Township spilled between 8,100 and 12,000 gallons of a water-based latex finishing solution. Officials said it is nontoxic to humans, and no known adverse health effects have been reported in the county.

U.S. Coast Guard tests of Delaware River water and city tests of water in the river near the treatment plant intake have shown no sign of contamination, a Philadelphia official said. Officials said there has also been no evidence of fish kills or other indications of harm.

Alerts Sunday led to a run on bottled water that left many shelves bare. If bottled water was unavailable, officials said, people could fill empty bottles with tap water.

— From wire reports



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# Boston, South Carolina top Maryland

Associated Press

GREENVILLE, S.C. — Dawn Staley knows what's next for unbeaten South Carolina — a matchup the whole women's college basketball world is eager to see.

But for now, the coach wants to revel in her extraordinary Gamecocks and their amazing achievements.

Aliyah Boston had 22 points and 10 rebounds and top-seeded South Carolina used its smothering defense to stop Maryland 86-75 Monday night and reach its third straight Final Four.

Do-it-all star Caitlin Clark and the Iowa Hawkeyes await in the national semifinals in Dallas on Friday, a game featuring two of the biggest stars in the sport. That can wait a bit. Her players deserve that, Staley said.

"I just want to enjoy this and just give our players an opportunity to be talked about," Staley said. "The joy that I feel for this team to be able to be where they are, I'm just really happy."

Staley's team improved to 36-0 this season with its 42nd straight victory dating to last year's NCAA title run. The Gamecocks are now two games

away from repeating as champions and completing the 10th undefeated season in the women's game.

The Gamecocks hugged and jumped when it was over. It's the fifth Final Four since 2015, all under Staley, who's looking for her third national title.

"Not a lot of teams can say they're able to do this," Boston said. "So for us to be able to do it feels really good, and it's such a blessing we won't ever take for granted."

Zia Cooke finished with 18 points and Brea Beal 16 for the Gamecocks.

Boston, the 6-foot-5 senior, made 10 of 14 shots. The three-time All-American added five assists, two blocked shots and was named the Greenville 1 Region's most outstanding player.

Staley ran around the court thanking players, coaches and supporters. She hugged the pep band director and cheered on the musicians with a glowing smile.

Maryland (28-7) was routed at home, 81-56, by the Gamecocks last Nov. 11, but played without injured All-American Diamond Miller.

With a healthy Miller and an offense averaging nearly 80 points a game, the Terrapins were ready to take on the big, imposing Gamecocks. Maryland pushed the pace early, disrupting South Carolina's No. 1 defense and was ahead 21-15 as an edgy, pro-Gamecocks crowd wasn't sure what it was watching.

South Carolina didn't panic. Cooke shook off an 0-for-3 start to score nine points. Boston was her steady self with 12 points in the half as the Gamecocks outscored the Terps 23-9 in the second quarter to lead 38-30 at halftime.

"I thought the game was lost in the second quarter," Maryland coach Brenda Frese said. "Their size, their depth, they wear you out."

Maryland got two quick baskets after the break to cut South Carolina's lead to 48-42. But the Gamecocks answered with a 14-3 burst to take control for good.

Miller led the Terps, looking for their first trip to the Final Four since 2015, with 24 points. Miller picked up a technical foul late in the game and thought it

was an unevenly called game. "I'm not going to say the refs lost us the game," she said. "I mean, they outrebounded us as we kind of expected."

Maryland shot 50% for the game, yet couldn't hold up down low against the Gamecocks. South Carolina outrebounded the Terps 48-26 and 25-7 on the offensive glass.

## Big picture

**South Carolina:** These are certainly the glory days for Gamecocks women's basketball. Maryland gave Iowa a glimpse into what may rattle the Gamecocks, although they quickly adjusted to gain control. But tightening up to prevent easy layups the Terps got early will certainly be a focus at South Carolina's practices this week.

**Maryland:** The Terps have seven seniors, including Miller and four other starters. But Shyanne Sellers is a rising sophomore and likely focal point for Maryland the next couple of seasons. Expect Frese to work hard in the offseason to scour the portal for additions who can augment Maryland's young roster.

# Virginia Tech women headed to 1st Final Four

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Virginia Tech coach Kenny Brooks stood at the stop of the ladder about to trim the final strands from the net when the familiar thumping beat started blaring through the speakers of the arena.

The Hokies' first Final Four berth deserved a little Metallica and a little "Enter Sandman."

Elizabeth Kitley scored 25 points with 12 rebounds, Georgia Amoore added 24 points and top-seeded Virginia Tech advanced to the Final Four with an 84-74 win over No. 3 seed Ohio State in the Seattle 3 Region final on Monday night.

For the seventh time in the past 10 Final Fours, there will be a first-time participant and it's the champions of the ACC, adding another accomplishment to the best season in

school history.

Playing in its first regional final, Virginia Tech (31-4) won its 15th straight game and will head to the Final Four having not lost in more than two months. The Hokies will face LSU in the national semifinals on Friday in Dallas.

Kitley, the Hokies' 6-foot-6 center and leading scorer this season, took over on the interior in the second half. She scored the first seven points of the fourth quarter and her three-point play gave Virginia Tech a 70-60 lead.

Amoore hit her fourth three-pointer of the game to push the lead to 13. Ohio State pulled within six in the final minute, but the Hokies were nearly perfect at the foul line down the stretch.

After the final buzzer sounded, "Enter Sandman" blasted throughout Climate Pledge Arena for the first time, setting off an

even louder party for the Hokies fans in attendance.

And it played again as Brooks stood on the ladder above the celebration.

"I don't know if you envision it more than you dream it. Obviously this is not easy and one day I will sit back and realize how hard it was for us to get here and realize we are one of four teams standing," Brooks said.

Amoore shook off the scare of a potential injury in the first half to score 16 points in the second half. Cayla King added 12 points, all in the first half for the Hokies.

"This group, we all come from different places, but this year we came together because we all wanted the same thing," Kitley said. "It's so nice to be at this spot, but we know that we don't want to be done, either, yet because we have so much fun playing together."

# Astros remain clear favorite in AL West

Associated Press

Once Shohei Ohtani struck out Mike Trout for an epic finish to the World Baseball Classic, the former AL MVPs quickly returned to being teammates again for what could be their last chance together to lead the Los Angeles Angels to the playoffs.

In the AL West, they all still have to try to get by Dusty Baker and his reigning World Series champion Houston Astros.

## How they project

**1. Houston Astros:** Second baseman Jose Altuve is out until possibly June after getting hit by a pitch, but the Astros added former MVP 1B José Abreu in free agency to a lineup that otherwise remained mostly intact, including slugging DH Yordan Alvarez, 3B Alex Bregman and RF Kyle Tucker. All-Star lefty Framber Valdez is 28-12 the past two seasons and Cristian Javier threw 11½ scoreless innings in two postseason starts last year. But their rotation depth will

be tested with Lance McCullers Jr. (strained right elbow) out to start the season.

**2. Seattle Mariners:** Coming off their first playoff appearance in more than two decades, the Mariners believe they have added pieces to close the gap in the division. They boast one of the strongest starting rotations in baseball and should benefit from having ace Luis Castillo for a full season following his midseason trade from Cincinnati last year. AL rookie of the year Julio Rodríguez is the face of the franchise and should be even better in his second season. Seattle's success will depend largely on if the offense is improved after adding Kolten Wong, Teoscar Hernández and AJ Pollock.

**3. Texas Rangers:** Bruce Bochy was coaxed out of a three-year retirement by one of his former pitchers, GM Chris Young, who then revamped the Rangers' starting rotation. Along with Jacob deGrom (\$185 million over five years), whose final two seasons with the Mets were injury-plagued, former All-Star Nath-

an Eovaldi and lefty Andrew Heaney signed multiyear deals in free agency. Jake Odorizzi was acquired in a trade. None pitched the full season last year because of injuries. Neither did Jon Gray, signed to top the rotation last season before three IL stints, though lefty Martín Pérez was a first-time All-Star. At 68 wins, Texas had only eight more than in 2021 before the \$500-million addition of middle infielders Corey Seager and Marcus Semien.

**4. Los Angeles Angels:** Two-way superstar Ohtani has made it clear he wants to play for a winner. The 2021 AL MVP, and runner-up for that award last year (15-9, 2.33 ERA, .283 batting average with 34 homers, 95 RBIs), is going into his sixth and final season under contract with the Angels. They haven't even had a winning season since he arrived from Japan. Three-time MVP Trout, the U.S. captain at the WBC and signed with LA through 2030, has been to the playoffs only once in his 12 seasons. The Angels were swept in the 2014 ALDS, four years

before Ohtani arrived, and their postseason drought since matches the longest in the majors. They did sign another All-Star pitcher, lefty Tyler Anderson (\$39 million, three years) after he was 15-5 for the Dodgers, and added the bats of Gio Urshela, Hunter Renfroe and Brandon Drury to the lineup.

**5. Oakland Athletics:** Coming off the franchise's first 100-loss season since 1979, the A's then traded away their stars in another winter of salary shedding — dealing catcher Sean Murphy to the Braves and left-hander Cole Irvin to the Orioles. That comes after last year's trade-heavy winter sending away several other stars. That makes it tough on manager Mark Kotsay, who kept his cool and positive spirit even as his club lost 102 games in his first season, only two years after the low-budget A's won the AL West during the virus-shortened 2020 campaign. Oakland did acquire hard-throwing 6-foot-6 Japanese right-hander Shintaro Fujinami on a \$3.25 million, one-year contract.

# Judge, Yanks still leading baseball's deepest division

Associated Press

From 1998-2003, the five AL East teams finished in the exact same order every season. Back then, the New York Yankees were dominant, the Boston Red Sox were contenders and everyone else was left chasing those teams — and that remained the status quo for a while.

Consider this a different era.

In the past nine seasons, every team in the division has won it at least once. Boston has placed first three times, but the Red Sox have also finished last four times — including 2022. The days when the order of finish was so easy to predict are long gone.

## How they project

**1. New York Yankees:** Aaron Judge returns after hitting an American League-record 62 homers last season with a \$360 million, nine-

year contract and a new role as captain for the Bronx Bombers — the franchise's first since Derek Jeter. The Yankees added two-time All-Star lefty Carlos Rodón to bolster the Gerrit Cole-led rotation but otherwise are bringing back largely the same roster that won the division in 2022 before getting swept by the Astros in the AL Championship Series. New York hasn't been to the World Series since 2009, its second-longest pennant drought since the club won its first in 1921.

**2. Tampa Bay Rays:** Tampa Bay has made the postseason four straight years, and the Rays did it last season despite injuries to shortstop Wander Franco (limited to 83 games) and second baseman Brandon Lowe (65 games). Right-hander Tyler Glasnow missed almost the whole season, and Shane Bieber finished sixth in the Cy Young vote despite his own shoulder problems. Outfielder Kevin Kiermaier and

catcher Mike Zunino are gone from last season's team, but at this point the Rays have earned the benefit of the doubt that they can withstand losses like that and still win.

**3. Toronto Blue Jays:** The Blue Jays started slowly enough that they switched managers, and a 46-28 mark under John Schneider was enough to lift them to a wild card berth. Toronto's lineup is certainly good enough to contend for a pennant with Vladimir Guerrero Jr., George Springer, Matt Chapman and Bo Bichette, although outfielder Teoscar Hernández was traded to Seattle. The Blue Jays' pitching staff was top-heavy last year. Alek Manoah finished third in the Cy Young race and Kevin Gausman had a fine season as well, but Hyun Jin Ryu had forearm problems and made only six starts.

**4. Boston Red Sox:** The Red Sox lost shortstop Xander Bogaerts and slugger J.D. Martinez, and infielder Trevor Story had elbow surgery.

Boston did make some significant additions, though, adding closer Kenley Jansen, infielder Justin Turner and outfielder Masataka Yoshida. Perhaps most importantly, the Red Sox kept Rafael Devers, signing the third baseman to a massive deal. That was a big move for a fan base still smarting from the losses of Mookie Betts and Bogaerts in recent years. Boston could use a healthy season from Chris Sale, who has pitched in only 11 games over the past three years.

**5. Baltimore Orioles:** The Orioles could contend for a playoff spot and still finish last. They had a pretty quiet offseason, and it remains to be seen if they could afford that in this division. Rookie catcher Adley Rutschman led last year's resurgence, and there are more top prospects on the way. Infielder Gunnar Henderson made it to the majors toward the end of last season, and pitcher Grayson Rodríguez could give a big boost to the rotation.

# Mavs top Pacers to end 4-game skid

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Luka Doncic started Monday hopeful he would play at Indiana.

A few hours later, NBA officials announced they had rescinded the All-Star's most recent technical foul and the subsequent one-game suspension. Doncic responded to that news with the kind of dazzling performance the Dallas Mavericks desperately needed for their final playoff push.

He finished with 25 points, seven rebounds and six assists, helping the Mavericks snap a four-game losing streak with a dominant 127-104 victory over the short-handed Pacers.

"That's what he does," coach Jason Kidd said. "He's one of the best players in the league at finding guys and then he's able to catch and shoot — not just once but multiple times."

The victory keeps Dallas within striking distance of the Los Angeles Lakers and Oklahoma City Thunder in the race for the final two play-in spots in the Western Conference.

Kyrie Irving added 16 points and six assists for Dallas.

Indiana was led by Benedict Mathurin, who scored 22 points, and Andrew Nembhard, who had 17 points, five rebounds and five assists on a night the Pacers were missing three starters and a key backup.

Indiana has lost three straight and six of eight as they move closer to locking up a lottery pick. And they had no chance with Doncic working his magic.

**Timberwolves 119, Kings 115:** Jaden McDaniels scored 20 points and visiting Minnesota spoiled Sacramento's bid to clinch a playoff berth for the first time since 2006, the longest playoff drought in NBA history.

The Timberwolves won their fourth straight and completed a sweep of a back-to-back set at Golden State and Sacramento to tie the Warriors for sixth place in the Western Conference playoff race.

De'Aaron Fox scored 29 points and Domantas Sabonis added 24 points and 10 rebounds for Sacramento.

**Clippers 124, Bulls 112:** Nicolas Batum got all of his season-high 24 points on eight three-pointers, and Eric Gor-

don added 22 points as host Los Angeles beat Chicago.

Russell Westbrook had 12 points, 10 assists and five rebounds as Los Angeles (40-36) kept hold of fifth place in the Western Conference standings and moved a half-game behind fourth-place Phoenix.

**Suns 117, Jazz 103:** Devin Booker scored 24 points and Phoenix reserves sparked the decisive run in a win over host Utah.

Deandre Ayton had 14 points after missing four games with a bruised hip. But a trio off the bench was pivotal for Phoenix: Terrence Ross had 13 points, Cameron Payne added 12 and Bismack Biyombo scored 11.

The Suns (40-35) sit more securely in the fourth spot in the Western Conference playoff race.

**Knicks 137, Rockets 115:** Immanuel Quickley scored a career-high 40 points and Julius Randle had 26 as host New York snapped a three-game losing streak with a win over Houston.

RJ Barrett added 19 points, Obi Toppin had 15 and Quinten Grimes scored 14 for the

Knicks.

**Bucks 126, Pistons 117:** Khris Middleton scored 34 points against the team that drafted him, and visiting Milwaukee beat Detroit without Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Milwaukee improved to an NBA-best 54-21 despite the absences of Antetokounmpo (knee) and Jae Crowder (calf). Goran Dragic made his Bucks debut after signing with the team on March 4, but didn't score in nine minutes.

**Nuggets 116, 76ers 111:** Nikola Jokic recorded his 29th triple double of the season and host Denver beat short-handed Philadelphia in a game Joel Embiid sat out with a sore right calf.

That scuttled the highly anticipated showdown between MVP front-runners that many felt could have decided whether Embiid, the runner-up the last two years, denies Jokic a third consecutive award. Jokic scored 25 points, pulled down 17 rebounds and had 12 assists.

**Pelicans 124, Trail Blazers 90:** Brandon Ingram scored 29 points and visiting New Orleans routed short-handed Portland.

## Boldy's hat trick helps Minnesota stay in first place

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Matt Boldy had his second hat trick in the last five games for Minnesota, Marc-Andre Fleury made 35 saves and the surging Wild beat the Seattle Kraken 5-1 on Monday night.

Jake Middleton had a rare goal, Ryan Hartman scored late and Jared Spurgeon, Marcus Johansson and Joel Eriksson Ek each had two assists as the Wild stayed in first place in the Central Division. They took a one-point lead on both Colorado and Dallas into the day, with a critical road game against the Avalanche coming next on the schedule.

Boldy is a big reason why the Wild are in the lead, with 11 goals in the nine games they've played since superstar Kirill Kaprizov was sidelined by a lower-body injury. The Wild are 6-1-2 without Kaprizov.

**Canadiens 4, Sabres 3 (SO):** Michael Pezzetta scored the decisive shootout goal and visiting Montreal avoided playoff elimination.

Montreal would have been eliminated from playoff contention for a second straight season — and two years removed from reaching the Stanley Cup Final — with any type of loss.

**Oilers 5, Coyotes 4:** Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored the tie-

breaking goal with 7:55 remaining to lead visiting Edmonton.

Connor McDavid picked up an assist for his 140th point of the season, becoming the first player to reach the mark since Pittsburgh's Mario Lemieux and Jaromir Jagr both achieved it in 1995-96.

**Senators 5, Panthers 2:** Brady Tkachuk had a goal and an assist, Mads Sogaard stopped 32 shots and host Ottawa beat Florida.

Gustav Forsling scored twice for the Panthers in their fourth straight loss. Sergei Bobrovsky finished with 21 saves as Florida remained three points behind Pittsburgh for the second wild

card in the Eastern Conference.

**Islanders 5, Devils 1:** Kyle Palmieri had two goals and an assist, Ilya Sorokin made 30 saves and host New York extended its lead in the wild-card race.

Eric Haula scored for the Devils and Vitek Vanecek finished with 31 saves. New Jersey, which clinched a playoff spot with a win against Ottawa on Saturday, remained three points behind first-place Carolina in the Metropolitan Division.

**Avalanche 5, Ducks 1:** Nathan MacKinnon had a goal and an assist in his 700th NHL game, and visiting Colorado won its third straight.