

## US base working nonstop on Gaza aid

By J.P. LAWRENCE

*Stars and Stripes*

AL UDEID AIR BASE, Qatar — Work has been going on around the clock since the beginning of this month at the largest U.S. base in the Middle East as soldiers and airmen scurry to assemble aid pallets for airdrop to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

On the Al Udeid flightline Saturday, service members loaded two Air Force C-17 Globemaster III cargo planes with more than 28,800 military rations and 34,500 bottles of water.

The planes took off from the base the following day, on their way to the U.S. military's 13th airdrop of aid into northern Gaza, a U.S. Central Command statement said Sunday.

Brig. Gen. Sean Davis, head of the Army's 13th Armored Corps Sustainment Command, said the provision of aid by various means could end up resembling a very different operation — the Berlin Airlift.

For 15 months between June

1948 and September 1949, that operation delivered more than 2.3 million tons of cargo to Berlin residents after the Soviet Union imposed a blockade.

"The entire base has mobilized for this," Davis said Sunday.

So far, the U.S. and Jordanian air forces have dropped 318,912 meals and 144,000 bottles of water, according to Central Command statements since March 2.

Pallets from Al Udeid are filled with Meals, Ready to Eat rations, which have about 1,300 calories each and include an entree, snacks and a heater.

The rations come from other U.S. bases in the region and do not contain pork, in accordance with Islamic dietary rules, Air Force officials said.

The war that began Oct. 7, after a Hamas terrorist attack killed 1,200 people in Israel, has created an acute crisis for Gaza residents.

Airdrops alone don't provide sufficient supplies, aid organizations argue. The air routes are part of a larger undertaking

that includes a sea route and efforts to send aid by land, which is seen as the fastest, most efficient method, Davis said.

The sea route refers to plans to deliver aid via a temporary pier, which U.S. officials say could provide as many as 2 million meals a day.

The land route, Davis said, could involve the U.S. providing food to contractors who bring the aid into Gaza. Should the sea and land routes ramp up, the air bridge can wind down, he added.

Earlier this month, the U.S., along with nations in the Persian Gulf and Europe, began a surge of aid into Gaza, where almost 2.2 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian relief, according to the United Nations and nonprofit relief groups.

Military food inspectors at the base check the condition of the rations, which are then prepared for airdrop by soldiers with the help of some 80 Air Force volunteers on base.

The pallets of food plus a par-

achute weigh 1,200 pounds, and the ones carrying water bottles weigh more than a ton. Soldiers attaching parachutes on top of each pallet said they are aware of the damage these pallets could do if the rigging malfunctions.

"We do everything in our power to ensure these bundles go down to the ground safely," said Army Staff Sgt. Jacob Engstrom, a parachute rigger from the 165th Quartermaster Company.

The drops are monitored through drone feeds and evaluated for issues with the landing, military officials said. The post-drop assessments and videos show that the pallets are surrounded as soon as they hit the ground, Davis added.

"These people are starving, and they need this food," he said, showing a photo of a Palestinian girl holding an MRE, a screenshot from a newscast that he had in his wallet.

"It's an honor to get it to them and alleviate any human suffering that we can."

## US military still in Niger despite junta declaration

By JOHN VANDIVER

*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — About 1,000 U.S. military personnel remain in Niger two days after the ruling junta announced that it wanted those forces out of the country in connection with an ongoing diplomatic dispute.

U.S. Africa Command on Monday confirmed that American forces are still in Niger, most of whom are concentrated at a drone base on the outskirts

of the Sahara Desert city of Agadez. A separate contingent is at a similar site in Niamey, the capital, AFRICOM said.

It's unclear how long the U.S. troops will be able to remain in the country, AFRICOM's hub for counterterrorism missions across western Africa.

The situation puts at risk AFRICOM's Agadez drone site, known as Air Base 201, which the Pentagon spent more than \$100 million developing.

On Saturday, Niger's military

junta announced that it was severing military ties with the United States and revoking a pact that allowed the American troops to be based in the country.

Junta spokesman Col. Amadou Abdramane, announced the move on national television. The decision came days after a visit to Niger by AFRICOM's Gen. Michael Langley and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee.

Abdramane accused the U.S.

delegation of not following diplomatic protocols and denounced what he called "the condescending attitude" of its members.

Insa Garba Saidou, a local activist who assists Niger's military rulers with their communications, criticized U.S. efforts to force the junta to pick between strategic partners.

"The American bases and civilian personnel cannot stay on Nigerien soil any longer," he told The Associated Press.

# N. Korea launches 3 missiles off coast

By DAVID CHOI  
AND HANA KUSUMOTO  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea fired three short-range ballistic missiles off its eastern coast Monday morning, according to Japanese and South Korean authorities.

The weapons were launched between 7:44 a.m. and 8:22 a.m. from Sangwon county in North Hwanghae province, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a text message to reporters. They flew more than 185 miles before splashing down in the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.

A news release from Japan's Ministry of Defense said North Korea fired three ballistic missiles to a maximum altitude of 30 miles and all three fell outside Japan's exclusive economic zone.

The South Korean military has strengthened its surveillance capabilities in preparation for additional launches and will work closely with U.S. and Japanese authorities to analyze them, the Joint Chiefs said.

The Japanese Coast Guard issued an alert Monday morning about a possible ballistic missile launch and advised ships in Japanese waters to avoid fallen objects but to report anything found.

Tokyo "strongly protested and strongly condemned" North Korea's actions, the defense ministry said.

"Actions by North Korea, including its repeated launches of ballistic missiles, threaten the peace and security of Japan, the region, and the international community," the release said. "Furthermore, such ballistic

missile launches violate relevant [U.N.] Security Council resolutions and are a serious issue concerning the national safety."

North Korea's last ballistic-missile launch, a solid-fuel intermediate-range weapon on Jan. 14, flew around 620 miles before falling into the Sea of Japan. The communist regime fired 24 ballistic missiles, five of them intercontinental range, last year.

From Jan. 5-7, Pyongyang fired around 350 artillery shells toward its southern maritime border, according to South Korea's military. The North also launched several cruise missiles over a 10-day span starting Jan. 24.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in South Korea on Sunday to attend the Summit for Democracy in Seoul and

meet with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul on Monday, according to a news release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

During his meeting with Yoon, Blinken reiterated that Washington will stand with Seoul and develop a "firm response to North Korean provocations," according to a news release from the South Korean presidential office.

Monday's launch comes four days after U.S. and South Korean troops wrapped up their 11-day Freedom Shield exercise. The militaries described the large-scale training held throughout South Korea as defensive in nature; however, North Korea's state-run media labeled it a rehearsal for an invasion.

## US expands anti-smuggling efforts aimed at Iranian arms

*The Washington Post*

The Biden administration is expanding efforts to surveil and intercept Iranian weapons being smuggled to Yemen, where Houthi militants have staged a deadly campaign of violence against commercial shipping that has proved resilient to six weeks of military strikes, said U.S. officials familiar with the matter.

The initiative seeks to map seafaring routes used by Tehran and stop the arms shipments while in transit, an acknowledgment that the Houthis are likely to pose a significant security challenge for the foreseeable future. It is part of a broader strategy that also includes sanctions and diplomatic pressure, but faces constraint as essential military resources are in short supply.

A senior U.S. defense official described the evolving mission as

"a renewed effort to try to better understand what those water routes look like." Like others interviewed for this report, the official spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe sensitive military activity. The work requires considerable collaboration with the U.S. intelligence community, the official said.

A second senior defense official characterized the effort as "very vigorous," saying Washington also is exploring how partner nations can expand their focus on disrupting Iranian arms smuggling to help offset a limited inventory of U.S. drones and other surveillance assets that are central to the process. The official declined to identify which nations are involved in those conversations, but said all governments affected economically by the Houthi attacks should do more.

## 'Havana syndrome' probe finds no brain injuries

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — An array of advanced tests found no brain injuries or degeneration among U.S. diplomats and other government employees who suffer mysterious health problems once dubbed "Havana syndrome," researchers reported Monday.

The National Institutes of Health's nearly five-year study offers no explanation for symptoms including headaches, balance problems and difficulties with thinking and sleep that were first reported in Cuba in 2016 and later by hundreds of American personnel in multiple countries.

But it did contradict some earlier findings that raised the specter of brain injuries in people experiencing what the State Department now calls "anomalous health incidents."

"These individuals have real

symptoms and are going through a very tough time," said Dr. Leighton Chan, NIH's chief of rehabilitation medicine, who helped lead the research. "They can be quite profound, disabling and difficult to treat."

Yet sophisticated MRI scans detected no significant differences in brain volume, structure or white matter — signs of injury or degeneration — when Havana syndrome patients were compared to healthy government workers with similar jobs, including some in the same embassy. Nor were there significant differences in cognitive and other tests, according to findings published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Researchers said it's good news that they couldn't spot long-term markers on brain scans that are typical after trauma or stroke.

# Americans fleeing Haiti due to gang violence flown to Miami

Associated Press

MIAMI — A charter flight carrying dozens of U.S. citizens fleeing spiraling gang violence in Haiti landed Sunday in Miami, U.S. State Department officials said.

More than 30 U.S. citizens were on the government-chartered flight, officials said in a statement. It arrived in the Miami International Airport after the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince earlier this month urged U.S. citizens to leave “as soon as possible” as chaos grips Haiti.

Passenger Avlot Quessa, who lives in Boston, traveled from the center of the country to board the charter flight after going to Haiti last month for what was supposed to be a weeklong trip to visit his mother.

“It’s just terrible ... The suffering, you can only imagine,” Quessa told the Miami Herald

of the nearby Caribbean nation. “Haiti is my homeland and it’s very stressful to see the homeland going through this act of violence, destruction ... and they are our neighbors.”

Haiti’s main airport in Port-au-Prince remains closed following gang attacks that have raged through Haiti in recent weeks, pushing many people to the brink of famine. Government and aid agencies this weekend reported looting of aid supplies as the situation worsened.

The State Department announced Saturday that it would offer limited charter flights for American citizens from the less chaotic northern city of Cap-Haïtien. Officials said they could not provide ground transportation to Cap-Haïtien and that U.S. citizens should consider the charter flights “only if you think you can reach Cap-Haïtien airport safely.”

“We encourage U.S. citizens still in Haiti who seek to depart to contact the Department of State using the crisis intake form on our website if they have not already done so,” the agency said.

People taking the U.S. government-coordinated flights must sign a promissory bill agreeing to reimburse the government.

Another passenger on Sunday’s flight, Marie Lucie St. Fleur, 69, of West Palm Beach, said she feels most at home in Haiti and it pains her to see what her homeland is enduring.

“I don’t feel well at all. I would like to live in my country and I can’t,” she said while sitting in a wheelchair.

Monday, gangs attacked two upscale neighborhoods in Haiti’s capital, looting homes in Laboule and Thomassin before sunrise and leaving at least a dozen people dead.

## Border impasse raises risk of shutdown

The Washington Post

A dispute over border security funding threatens to force a shutdown of vast swaths of the federal government in less than a week, as Congress and the White House struggled Sunday to reach a deal on long-term spending legislation.

Funding for roughly 70% of the federal government — including the departments of Defense, State and Homeland Security as well as the IRS and Transportation Security Administration — will expire Saturday just after midnight unless Congress acts before then.

A prolonged shutdown could have cascading effects on the government and economy. Two-thirds of IRS employees would face furloughs at the height of tax filing season. The roughly 1.3 million active-duty U.S. service members would remain on the job without pay. So would airport security officers, many of whom called in sick in protest during a previous shutdown, sparking nationwide travel delays.

As recently as Friday, congressional negotiators were nearing an agreement to complete a spending bill for all those agencies, with the goal of voting on it as soon as Thursday. (Congress has already passed separate legislation funding the other 30% of the government.)

But disagreements over immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border — an issue that has derailed legislation throughout this Congress and emerged as a key fault line between the parties in the November elections — stymied the talks, according to multiple people involved in the conversations, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private negotiations.

## Idaho considers ban on using public funds for some gender-affirming care

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Idaho lawmakers are expected to vote this week on a bill that would ban the use of any public funds for gender-affirming care, including for state employees using work health insurance and for adults covered by Medicaid.

The legislation already passed the House and only needs to clear the majority Republican Senate before it is sent to Gov. Brad Little’s desk, where it would likely be signed into law.

If the legislation is enacted, Idaho would become at least the 10th state to ban Medicaid funding for gender-affirming care for people of all ages, according

to the advocacy and information organization Movement Advancement Project. The laws are part of an ongoing national battle over the rights of LGBTQ+ Americans.

Opponents to the Idaho bill say it almost certainly will lead to a lawsuit in federal court. The state has already been sued multiple times over attempts to deny gender-affirming care to transgender residents and so far has not had much success defending the lawsuits.

Last year a federal judge barred Idaho from enforcing its newly enacted ban on gender-affirming medical care for minors until a lawsuit brought by transgender youth and their

families is resolved.

A different federal judge denied the state’s motion to dismiss a separate lawsuit filed by adults in 2022 who said Medicaid officials wrongly denied coverage for their medically necessary gender-affirming treatment.

“This bill violates the 14th Amendment equal protections clause” and the federal Medicaid Act, Boise attorney Howard Belodoff told lawmakers during a hearing on Thursday.

Belodoff represents the transgender adults who sued the state over what they said were discriminatory Medicaid policies excluding coverage for genital reconstruction surgery.



# UN: Famine ‘imminent’ in Gaza’s north

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — The U.N. food agency said Monday that “famine is imminent” in northern Gaza, where 70% of the remaining population is experiencing catastrophic hunger, and that a further escalation of the war could push around half of Gaza’s total population to the brink of starvation.

The alarming report came as Israel faces mounting pressure from even its closest allies to streamline the entry of aid into the Gaza Strip and open more crossings. The European Union’s top

diplomat said the impending famine was “entirely man-made” as “starvation is used as a weapon of war.”

Israeli forces meanwhile launched another raid on the Gaza Strip’s largest hospital early Monday, saying Hamas militants had regrouped there and had fired on them from inside the compound, where Palestinian officials say tens of thousands of people have been sheltering. The military said it killed a Hamas commander who was armed and hiding inside the medical center, and that one of its own soldiers

was killed in the operation.

The army last raided Shifa Hospital in November after claiming that Hamas maintained an elaborate command center within and beneath the facility. The military revealed a tunnel leading to some underground rooms, as well as weapons it said were found inside the hospital. But the evidence fell short of the earlier claims, and critics accused the army of recklessly endangering the lives of civilians.

The World Food Program on Monday released the latest findings of its Integrated Food Secur-

ity Phase Classification, or IPC, an international process for estimating the scale of hunger crises. It says virtually everyone in Gaza is struggling to get enough food, and that around 677,000 people — nearly a third of the population of 2.3 million — are experiencing the highest level of catastrophic hunger.

It warned that if Israel broadens its offensive to the packed southern city of Rafah, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly vowed, the fighting could drive over a million people into catastrophic hunger.

## Russia is planning to create buffer zone in Ukraine

Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin said after extending his rule in an election that had stifled opposition that Moscow will not relent in its invasion of Ukraine and plans to create a buffer zone along the border to help protect against long-range Ukrainian strikes and cross-border raids.

The Kremlin’s forces have recently made battlefield progress as Kyiv’s troops struggle with a

severe shortage of artillery shells and exhausted front-line units after more than two years of war. The front line stretches over 620 miles across eastern and southern Ukraine.

Advances have been slow and costly, and Ukraine has increasingly used its long-range firepower to hit oil refineries and depots deep inside Russia. Also, groups claiming to be Ukraine-based Russian opponents of the Kremlin have launched cross-

border incursions.

“We will be forced at some point, when we consider it necessary, to create a certain ‘sanitary zone’ on the territories controlled by the (Ukrainian government),” Putin said late Sunday.

This “security zone,” Putin said, “would be quite difficult to penetrate using the foreign-made strike assets at the enemy’s disposal.”

Monday marks the 10th anni-

versary of Russia’s seizure of Ukraine’s Crimea Peninsula, which set the stage for Russia to invade its neighbor in February 2022. However, Putin has been vague about his goals in Ukraine since that full-scale invasion floundered.

Putin also again warned the West against deploying troops to Ukraine. A possible conflict between Russia and NATO would put the world “a step away” from World War III, he said.

## Putin extends rule in preordained Russian election

Associated Press

President Vladimir Putin sealed his control over Russia for six more years on Monday with a highly orchestrated landslide in an election that followed the harshest crackdown on the opposition and free speech since Soviet times.

While the result was never in doubt, Russians attempted to defy the inevitable outcome, heeding a call to protest Putin’s repression at home and his war in Ukraine by showing up at polling stations at noon on Sunday. But from the earliest returns, it was clear Putin would extend his nearly quarter-century rule

with a fifth term.

With nearly all the precincts counted Monday, election officials said Putin had secured a record number of votes — an unsurprising development underlining the Russian leader’s total control of the country’s political system.

Putin has led Russia as president or prime minister since December 1999, a tenure marked by international military aggression and an increasing intolerance for dissent. At the end of his fifth term, Putin would be the longest-serving Russian leader since Catherine the Great, who ruled during the 18th century.

As early results came in, Putin hailed them as an indication of “trust” and “hope” in him — while critics saw them as another reflection of the preordained nature of the election.

“Of course, we have lots of tasks ahead. But I want to make it clear for everyone: When we were consolidated, no one has ever managed to frighten us, to suppress our will and our self-conscience. They failed in the past and they will fail in the future,” he said at a meeting with his campaign staff after polls closed.

Any public criticism of Putin or his war in Ukraine has been

stifled. Independent media have been crippled. His fiercest political foe, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison last month, and other critics are either in jail or in exile.

Beyond the fact that voters had virtually no choice, independent monitoring of the election was extremely limited.

Russia’s Central Election Commission said Monday that with nearly 100% of precincts counted, Putin got 87% of the vote. Central Election Commission chief Ella Pamfilova said that nearly 76 million voters cast their ballots for Putin, his highest vote tally ever.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Ex-cop pleads guilty after making man lick urine

**MS** JACKSON — A former Mississippi police officer pleaded guilty to a federal misdemeanor charge after authorities said he forced a man he had arrested to lick urine off the floor of a jail cell.

Michael Christian Green, 26, lost his job as a Pearl Police Department patrol officer in late December, four days after security cameras showed the violent encounter in Pearl, a suburb of the capital city of Jackson.

Security footage in the police department showed that once the man was in a holding cell, he knocked on the cell door and tried to tell Green that he needed to urinate, according to the court document. After waiting for some time, the man went to the back of the cell and urinated in a corner, the document said.

The man who was arrested is identified in the court document only by his initials, B.E. The security camera footage showed Green telling B.E. that he would beat him with a phone.

Green took the man back into the cell and told him to get on the ground and “suck it up,” then used his phone to take videos of B.E. while the man got on the ground and licked his own urine, the document said.

## Truck driver charged for deadly ‘super fog’ pileup

**LA** RESERVE — A Louisiana truck driver has been charged with negligent homicide for his role in a fiery highway pileup that left eight dead last year after a “super fog” of marsh fire smoke and dense fog snared more than 160

vehicles, authorities said.

On Oct. 23, Ronald Britt was operating a truck at unsafe speeds on Interstate 55 west of New Orleans when he slammed into the back of a car that had stopped in the left lane behind several other vehicles involved in minor crashes, Louisiana State Police said in a statement. That collision killed James Fleming, 60, and seriously injured his wife.

Britt, a 61-year-old commercial truck driver from Lafayette, was arrested on multiple charges, including negligent homicide, negligent injuring, reckless operation and other traffic-related offenses, state police said.

## Seat belt saved life on Boeing 737 jet blowout

**WA** SEATTLE — More passengers who were aboard an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 jet when part of its fuselage blew out in January are suing — including one who says his life was saved by a seat belt.

The latest lawsuit, representing seven passengers, was filed in Washington’s King County Superior Court against Boeing, Alaska Airlines, Spirit AeroSystems and 10 people listed as John Does. Cuong Tran, of Upland, Calif., was sitting in the row behind where the side of the aircraft tore away and left a door-sized hole on Alaska Airlines Flight 1282, according to a news release from attorney Timothy A. Loranger. Loranger, who filed the lawsuit, said air rushed out of the hole, pulling on Tran and others nearby.

The suction tore Tran’s shoes and socks from his feet and he felt his body lift off his seat, the

news release said, adding that Tran’s foot was hurt when it was jerked into the seat structure in front.

The lawsuit seeks punitive, compensatory and general damages for alleged negligence, product construction/manufacturing defect liability and failing in its duty to protect passengers from harm.

## Officer suspended after hitting someone off duty

**CT** MERIDEN — A Connecticut police officer was suspended for five days and arrested on assault charges after punching a motorist during an altercation while off duty in December.

Dash cam video obtained by WTIC-TV, FOX 61, following a freedom of information request, showed Meriden police Cpl. Allen Ganter punching the motorist, Thomas Brocuglio, in the face through his driver’s side window after the two argued over why Ganter wasn’t turning right at a red light.

Ganter is seen waving his badge and arguing there is no right turn on red at the intersection in Rocky Hill, even though there is no sign indicating that.

Ganter threatens to write a ticket. Brocuglio, who had honked his horn at Ganter, accuses the officer of having been distracted on his phone and asks for his badge number, just before the punch is thrown.

## Tenderloin district lawsuit seeks drug-free streets

**CA** SAN FRANCISCO — Two hotels and several residents of San Francisco’s troubled Tenderloin district sued the city, alleging it is using the neighborhood as a

containment zone for rampant illegal drug use and other vices, making residents terrified to leave their homes and businesses unable to recruit staff.

Plaintiffs do not seek monetary damages, according to the complaint filed in federal court. Instead, they want officials to clear sidewalks of illegal drug dealers and fentanyl users, violent behavior and tent encampments. They said city officials have allowed such behavior to flourish in the area by refusing to keep sidewalks clear for people using walkers or wheelchairs and failing to ban sidewalk vending, among other acts of omission.

## State looks to make ‘shaka’ official gesture

**HI** KANE OHE — A pinky and thumb extended with the remaining fingers curled down: That’s the “shaka” in Hawaii.

The gesture is sometimes known outside the islands as the “hang loose” sign associated with surf culture, but it was a fixture of daily life in the islands long before it caught on in California, Brazil and beyond. People in Hawaii have a variety of shaka styles and use it to convey a range of warmhearted sentiments, from hi and bye to thanks and aloha, among other meanings.

Now, a pair of bills in the state Legislature would make the shaka the state’s official gesture and recognize Hawaii as its birthplace.

Sen. Glenn Wakai, who introduced the Senate version, said he can’t imagine the measure meeting any opposition and expects it to “sail through.”

— From wire reports

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# Men's NCAA tournament picks full of surprises

Associated Press

Even before the brackets came out Sunday, March Madness was a muddled mess.

About the closest thing to a sure thing: UConn.

The defending champion Huskies earned the top seed in the NCAA Tournament, joined by Houston, Purdue and North Carolina as No. 1 seeds in a bracket that started going haywire even before the pairings were announced.

Of those top teams, only UConn heads into the tournament coming off a victory. The others lost in their conference tournaments, although those were hardly the only surprises during the final weekend of hoops before the sport's main event takes center stage.

Unexpected titles placed teams like Oregon, North Carolina State and even Duquesne, none of whom were projected to make the tournament, into the field of 68 via the automatic bids that go to conference champions. The teams they beat gobbled up a handful of the 34 at-large bids, thus shrinking the number of spots available to teams on the so-called bubble.

"It was one of the most difficult that I've been involved in," Charles McClelland, the chairman of the selection committee, said of the process that had everyone up until 2:30 a.m. the night before. "And I talked to some of the staff that's been in that room for the last 20 years, and they said this is probably the most difficult selection process that they've been a part of."

It showed in a bracket that had its share of head-scratchers:

■ Two of the last four teams in — Boise State and Colorado State — weren't even considered on the bubble by most bracketologists.

"A little surprised to be honest," Boise State coach Leon Rice said of his team's No. 10 seed.

■ Some of the teams left out — St. John's and Oklahoma — were thought to be safely in as late as Saturday. St. John's decided not to even play in the NIT.

"How is St. John's so far off the cut-line?" said UConn coach Dan Hurley, who was surprised only three Big East teams made it.

■ Florida Atlantic and Texas A&M were considered bubble teams but ended up with 8 and 9 seeds, respectively.

All of this could be fodder for the grow-

ing conversation about expanding the bracket to 76, maybe 80 teams. Under that scenario, bubble teams like Pittsburgh, Seton Hall and even Indiana State would almost certainly be in.

McClelland, also commissioner of the Southwestern Athletic Conference, said five bids were stolen during the conference tournaments. He said one of those was going to go to Indiana State, which lost to Drake in the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament to land squarely back on the bubble.

"Under normal circumstances with those additional bids, they would have been in ... but when you start splitting hairs you have to look at something, you have to find something and that's ultimately why they were not in the field," McClelland said.

Indiana State (28-6) will be in the NIT as a No. 1 seed. The Sycamores are among the nation's high-scoring teams at 84.4 points a game, bolstered by their school-record 373 made 3-pointers.

The tournament starts Tuesday with two First Four games, including a matchup between Virginia and Colorado State. The 32 first-round games take place Thursday and Friday. The Final Four is set for April 6-8 in Glendale, Ariz.

## UConn the favorite

UConn, which opens Friday against Stetson, is the favorite according to FanDuel Sportsbook and is trying to become the first repeat champion since Florida in 2006-07. The Huskies (31-3) are on a seven-game winning streak and are tied with James Madison for most wins in the nation.

For all its excellence this season, UConn ended up in an East region with two of last year's Final Four teams (San Diego State and Florida Atlantic) along with Iowa State, which is coming off a 69-41 victory over Houston and was thought, for a minute, to be top-seed material.

"If we're able to get to our identity ... and then we play harder than you, we keep ourselves from being vulnerable that way," Hurley said.

## Conference bragging rights

Both the SEC and Big 12 placed eight teams in the field, while the Big Ten and Mountain West each had six.

Speaking of pride: Michigan State extended its nation-leading streak to 26

consecutive years in the tournament. The ninth-seeded Spartans will play Mississippi State on Thursday, the same day No. 5 seed Gonzaga plays No. 12 McNeese State. In February, the Zags were considered a bubble team, but a stretch of nine wins in 10 games changed that, and coach Mark Few's team made the field for the 25th consecutive year.

## Injury worries

Injury-riddled Kansas comes in as a 4 seed, set to play Samford, after two of its best players, Hunter Dickinson and Kevin McCullar Jr., sat out the Jayhawks' 20-point loss in their Big 12 Tournament opener.

Florida is a 7 seed, and will play the winner of the Boise State-Colorado play-in game, but the Gators suffered a big blow when big man Micah Handlogten broke his leg early in the SEC title game.

## Small fry

The Ivy League is sending Yale, a 13 seed that needed a furious late comeback and a buzzer-beating basket against Brown to win the title and set up a game Friday against No. 4 Auburn. Saint Peter's is back in the tournament, two years after making an unlikely run to the Elite Eight as a No. 15. This year, the Peacocks are 15 seeds again, opening against Tennessee in the Midwest.

Should Tennessee advance, coach Rick Barnes could face his former school, No. 7 Texas, which opens against the Virginia-Colorado State winner.

Meanwhile, Duquesne, the surprise winner of the Atlantic-10, is back in the tournament for the first time since 1977. A game against No. 6 BYU awaits.

## Job security

Back in 1999, head coach Dan Monson and assistant Mark Few led Gonzaga on a surprise run all the way to the Elite Eight. Monson now coaches Long Beach State and, just last week, was relieved of his duties pending the end of the season. Funny enough, Monson's team went on a run and won the Big West to get a ticket to the tournament. The 15th-seeded Beach open Thursday against No. 2 Arizona.

"As Mark Few said in a text, why don't we have a run in the first year and one in the last," Monson said after his job-extending win.



# Gamecocks No. 1 for 4th straight year

*Associated Press*

Dawn Staley and South Carolina could see some familiar faces on their path to trying to finish off an undefeated season.

The Gamecocks, who are the No. 1 overall seed in the women's NCAA Tournament, are looking to become the 10th women's basketball team to go unbeaten for an entire season.

They had a chance last season before falling just short against Caitlin Clark and Iowa in the Final Four. The Hawkeyes received the other No. 1 seed in the Albany Regional. The two teams wouldn't potentially face off until the national championship game this time. Iowa is a one-seed for the first time since 1992.

USC and star freshman JuJu Watkins earned the Trojans' first No. 1 seed since 1986 as the top choice in a Portland Regional. Texas earned the fourth No. 1 seed, its first since 2004, and will play Drexel in the other Portland Regional opener. There was debate whether Texas or Stanford would get the fourth No. 1 seed.

"To say we talked about it more than once was an understatement," said NCAA selection committee Chair Lisa Pe-

tersen. "What it came down to was Texas had to play three tournament teams to get to the (Big 12) championship."

South Carolina coach Dawn Staley's squad has been challenged a few times this year, including needing a buzzer-beating 3-pointer from Kamilla Cardoso to win the semifinals of the SEC Tournament over Tennessee, but has always pulled through. The Gamecocks, who are a No. 1 seed for the fourth consecutive year, will play the winner of Sacred Heart and Presbyterian in the first round of the tournament.

"I always feel good to be the No. 1 overall seed and to be undefeated," Staley said. "I'm excited because we get a chance to know what our path is to win the national championship and, all great teams, a lot of familiar faces that are in our region. But we have to take it one game at a time and that's what we'll do on Friday."

Cardoso will miss the opening game after getting ejected for fighting in the SEC title game. The Gamecocks would have her back for a potential second-round matchup against either North Carolina or Michigan

State. South Carolina beat the Tar Heels earlier in the season.

"Fortunately for us, it's someone we played without for four games this season," Staley said. "We know we're a better basketball team when Kamilla Cardoso is in the lineup."

Joining the Gamecocks in the Albany Region are No. 2 seed Notre Dame, third-seeded Oregon State and fourth-seeded Indiana. South Carolina opened up its season against the Irish, routing them in Paris.

Clark, who became the NCAA's all-time leading scorer this year, is trying to win her first title. The Hawkeyes open up against the winner of Holy Cross and UT Martin. Last year she posted the first 40-point triple-double in men's or women's tournament history.

Joining the Hawkeyes in their region are No. 2 UCLA, defending champion and third-seeded LSU and fourth-seeded Kansas State. The Tigers beat the Hawkeyes for the title last year.

The other top teams in USC's bracket are Ohio State, UConn and Virginia Tech. The Huskies were the last team to go undefeated in a season, running through the 2015-16 season.

Texas could have to contend with No. 2 Stanford, No. 3 North Carolina State and fourth-seeded Gonzaga.

The NCAA changed its format last season and is having two regional sites for the Sweet 16 and Elite Eight rounds. Albany, N.Y., hosts one and Portland, Ore., the other. Once again the top four teams in each region will host the opening two rounds.

The tournament begins Wednesday with two First Four games. The full madness starts with 16 games Friday and 16 more the next day. The Final Four will be played in Cleveland this year for the first time since 2007. The national semifinals are April 5, with the championship game two days later.

Tennessee continued its streak of appearing in all 42 NCAA Tournaments. On the other end, Presbyterian, California Baptist, Columbia and Texas A&M-Corpus Christi are all making their first appearance.

The Lions were one of the last four teams in the field. Just outside the field of 68 were Penn State, Washington State, Miami and Villanova.

# Hamlin wins 4th career NASCAR Cup race at Bristol

*Associated Press*

BRISTOL, Tenn. — Denny Hamlin won the NASCAR Cup Series race at Bristol Motor Speedway on Sunday, passing Joe Gibbs Racing teammate Martin Truex Jr. in the final laps for his fourth victory at the famed short track.

Hamlin also won at NASCAR's bullring last September.

This one was much different. Tire issues hampered most everyone all afternoon as only five cars finished on the lead lap — the first time that has happened in the Cup Series in 20 years. The Gibbs cars were the class of

the field.

"My favorite racetrack!" Hamlin exclaimed over his radio while taking the checkered flag. "We got another."

He was booed — no surprise considering Hamlin has become arguably the series' biggest villain — as he stood atop his No. 11 Toyota following a smoky burnout.

It was Hamlin's 52nd career win and locks him into the playoffs. Brad Keselowski finished third in a Ford, Alex Bowman was fourth in a Chevrolet and Bowman's Hendrick Motorsports teammate Kyle Larson

rounded out the top five.

"It was weird," Larson said. "I accidentally finished fifth. I'll take it. I hope I never have to run another race like that again."

The other two Gibbs cars — driven by Ty Gibbs and Christopher Bell — finished ninth and 10th, respectively.

The race was chaotic from the start, with cars burning through tires at such an alarming rate that NASCAR issued each team an extra set. That gave them 11 sets total, including the one used in qualifying.

It made for four hours of tire management that gave control

to drivers and crew chiefs. It also led to the most lead changes (54) in NASCAR's short-track history, breaking the previous mark of 40 set in 1991 at Bristol.

JGR handled it better than the rest of the field.

NASCAR returned Bristol to "normal" for the first time in four years for the spring race. The track added red clay each of the last three years. Reviews were mixed, and as the novelty wore off, sub-par racing inside the high-banked oval overshadowed any excitement that came with the series running on dirt for the first time since 1970.

# Portis, Lillard lead Bucks past Suns

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Damian Lillard had 31 points and 16 assists and Bobby Portis had 31 points and 10 rebounds to lead Milwaukee past the Phoenix Suns 140-129 on Sunday, as the Bucks hit 24 3-pointers to win without star Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Antetokounmpo, averaging 30.8 points and 11.2 rebounds, was out with left hamstring soreness. He missed just his fourth game of the season and first since March 4, when he was out with Achilles tendinitis.

"It's not an injury, we were just concerned a little bit," Bucks coach Doc Rivers said. "Plus, when you look at the schedule, you have one, two, three, four, five days off. We planted it in him and he had to do it. We're happy that he decided to do it."

Phoenix trailed 109-94 after three quarters, but closed with in 122-115 on a lay-in by Bradley Beal with 6:17 left. Lillard's 3-pointer from the top left put Mil-

waukee up 134-120 with 3:18 remaining.

"I just wanted to come out and be in attack mode," said Lillard, who became the first Bucks player in history to have a 30-point, 15-assist game. "I didn't really think to myself I'm going to have to score a bunch of points. I just knew I had to be a problem for the defense."

Khris Middleton added 22 points for Milwaukee in his first game back after missing 16 games with a sprained left ankle.

Beal had 28 points, Grayson Allen had 25 points and Devin Booker scored 23 for the Suns.

**Mavericks 107, Nuggets 105:** Kyrie Irving hit a running left-handed shot at the buzzer, capping a wild final 26 seconds and giving host Dallas a victory over Denver.

The Nuggets rallied from 13 points down midway through the fourth quarter and went ahead on Jamal Murray's tie-breaking 3-pointer with 26 seconds remaining.

Luka Doncic answered almost immediately on the inbounds pass after a timeout, hitting from several feet behind the arc for a 105-105 tie.

After Murray missed an elbow jumper in the final seconds, Dallas called timeout. The right-handed Irving took the inbounds pass, dribbled with his left hand as Nikola Jokic pursued and hit the shot from about 20 feet.

**Celtics 130, Wizards 104:** Sam Hauser had career highs of 30 points and 10 3-pointers to help short-handed Boston beat host Washington.

Jayson Tatum also scored 30 points with six 3-pointers as the NBA-leading Celtics hit 24 shots from beyond the arc in a game in which they never trailed despite missing three starters.

**Magic 111, Raptors 96:** Paolo Banchero scored 29 points and host Orlando pulled away from Toronto, handing the Raptors their seventh straight loss.

Franz Wagner had 22 points, nine rebounds and five assists for Orlando, and his brother,

Moritz, scored 14 points. The Magic improved to 8-2 in their last 10 games.

**Heat 104, Pistons 101:** Bam Adebayo made a 3-pointer at the buzzer to lift visiting Miami to a win over Detroit.

Cade Cunningham missed a 3-pointer for Detroit with 9 seconds left and Terry Rozier sprinted up the court with the rebound. He couldn't get to the basket, so he tossed the ball to Adebayo, who made his third 3-pointer in the last three games.

**Hawks 110, Clippers 93:** Dejounte Murray scored 21 points, De'Andre Hunter added 20 and visiting Atlanta beat Los Angeles to snap a three-game losing streak.

Jalen Johnson had 18 points and 12 rebounds, and Clint Capela added 15 points and 13 rebounds for the Hawks.

**Spurs 122, Nets 115 (OT):** Victor Wembanyama had 33 points and 16 rebounds as host San Antonio overcame 31 points by Cam Thomas and beat Brooklyn in overtime.

## Rangers score 3 in 2nd, hand Isles 4th straight loss

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jonny Brodzinski scored the go-ahead goal in the second period and the New York Rangers defeated the New York Islanders 5-2 on Sunday.

Mika Zibanejad, Will Cuylle, Kaapo Kakko and Alexis Lafreniere also scored for the Rangers, who have won five of six. Igor Shesterkin finished with 25 saves.

"Our team is deep right now," Rangers forward Vincent Trocheck said. "We are getting contributions up and down the lineup. Even when lines aren't scoring, they are contributing in other ways. Getting the momentum, keeping the puck in the O-zone. If we can continue to do that, I like

our chances against anybody."

Bo Horvat scored twice, Ilya Sorokin made 26 saves, but the Islanders lost their fourth consecutive game.

The Rangers scored three times in the second period to erase a one-goal deficit and take a 3-2 lead.

"I saw a team that played better than us today," Islanders coach Patrick Roy said. "They managed the puck much better than what we did. They were very fast on transition. I thought they had more energy than us. ... They (Rangers) did what they had to do and that's why they're first in our division."

**Hurricanes 7, Senators 2:** Dmitry Orlov recorded four points and visiting Carolina scored four goals in the third pe-

riod to beat Ottawa.

Orlov had two goals and two assists. Evgeny Kuznetsov, Seth Jarvis, Jalen Chatfield, Jake Guentzel and Brendan Lemieux also scored for Carolina. Sebastian Aho chipped in with three assists. Frederik Andersen made 30 saves.

**Golden Knights 3, Devils 1:** Jack Eichel scored his 21st goal of the season and host Vegas beat New Jersey.

After the Devils took a 1-0 lead 38 seconds into the third period, the Golden Knights scored the next two goals.

**Penguins 6, Red Wings 3:** Sidney Crosby matched Wayne Gretzky for seventh-most goals with a single franchise in NHL history, and host Pittsburgh beat Detroit.

Crosby, Lars Eller, Reilly Smith and Valtteri Puustinen each had a goal and an assist for the Penguins.

**Jets 6, Blue Jackets 1:** Tyler Toffoli scored twice and added an assist, leading visiting Winnipeg past Columbus.

Connor Hellebuyck stopped 30 shots for the Jets, who pulled even with the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche atop the Central Division.

**Blackhawks 5, Sharks 2:** Ryan Donato, Kevin Korhonen and Joey Anderson scored in a 1:23 span of the third period, and host Chicago beat San Jose.

**Blues 4, Ducks 2:** Robert Thomas scored two power-play goals in the third period, and host St. Louis beat Anaheim for its fourth consecutive victory.