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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Analysts see security concerns in Syria

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

A withdrawal of American troops from Syria raises the risk of thousands of ISIS fighters escaping from sprawling prison camps guarded by Kurdish forces, analysts and former defense officials say as the White House reviews its security posture in the Middle East.

Since at least 2019, American troops leading Operation Inherent Resolve have trained members of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces as security guards who oversee the “literal and figurative ‘ISIS army’ in detention,” as U.S. Central Command described it in January.

Besides the 9,000 fighters kept in 22 jails across Syria, the U.S. trains SDF guards to secure the displaced persons camp in Al-Hol and Roj, where ISIS is trying to recruit many of the more than 42,000 detainees who have lived for years in makeshift tents, often without adequate

sanitation and limited access to water.

But security guard training has progressed slowly. The SDF is frequently pulled into skirmishes with Iranian-backed militia groups, local Arab tribes and Turkish fighters, according to reports from the Defense Department inspector general’s office.

Security concerns persist at the camps, including weapons smuggling. Seizing on the instability in the region, ISIS recently renewed its campaign to break fighters and their families out of the detention centers, the inspector general said.

President Donald Trump has vowed to keep the U.S. out of foreign entanglements and following the ouster of the Assad regime has repeatedly said the U.S. should not get involved in Syria.

NBC News reported last month that the Defense Department is developing plans to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria,

though the White House has not confirmed any decisions.

Few security analysts, if any, are calling for U.S. military involvement in Damascus and its new political order after a combined 53 years of rule by former President Bashar Assad and his father, Hafez Assad.

Some worry, however, that an end to the U.S. military presence in remote areas could make ISIS prison breaks and camp raids easier to pull off, potentially unleashing a new wave of fighters.

The U.S. troops help prevent ISIS from exploiting the power vacuum that has followed the Assad regime’s fall, said Amy Holmes, a research professor of international affairs at George Washington University who visits the detention centers regularly.

“If the U.S. were to withdraw, it would be a huge security risk for not just Syria but the entire region,” said Holmes, who added that ISIS has continued

launching attacks and is believed to retain sleeper cells.

Quarterly IG reports detail the challenges faced by Operation Inherent Resolve personnel. The U.S.-led task force has often reported struggles in training SDF guards, citing regular bombardments from Turkey, a NATO ally that views the SDF as an offshoot of a terrorist group.

Shortly after rebel forces took Damascus in December, Turkish forces increased their assaults on the SDF. The U.S., concerned about the stability of the camps, stepped in to broker a ceasefire deal and has been calling for a path to de-escalation between the groups.

The SDF views U.S. forces in the region as a deterrent to Turkish attacks and in the past has asked for more U.S. personnel, the IG reports say.

However, Trump has long been reluctant to bulk up forces in the country.

Trump’s tariffs on Mexico and Canada go into effect

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump launched a trade war Tuesday against America’s three biggest trading partners, drawing immediate retaliation from Mexico, Canada and China and sending financial markets into a tailspin as the U.S. faced the threat of rekindled inflation and paralyzing uncertainty for business.

Just after midnight, Trump imposed 25% taxes, or tariffs, on Mexican and Canadian imports, though he limited the levy to 10% on Canadian energy. Trump also doubled the tariff he slapped last month on Chinese products to 20%.

Beijing retaliated with tariffs of up to 15% on a wide array of U.S. farm exports. It also expanded the number of U.S. companies subject to export controls and other restrictions by about two dozen.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his country would plaster tariffs on more than \$100 billion of American goods over the course of 21 days.

“Today the United States launched a trade war against Canada, their closest partner and ally, their closest friend. At the same, they are talking about working positively with Russia, appeasing Vladimir Putin, a lying, murderous dictator. Make

that make sense,” Trudeau said.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Mexico will respond to the new taxes with its own retaliatory tariffs. Sheinbaum said she will announce the products Mexico will target on Sunday in a public event in Mexico City’s central plaza, perhaps with the delay indicating Mexico still hopes to de-escalate the trade war set off by Trump.

As he promised voters, the U.S. president is abandoning the free trade policies the United States pursued for decades after World War II.

Trump argues that open trade cost America millions of factory jobs and that tariffs are the path

to national prosperity. He rejects mainstream economists who contend that such protectionism is costly and inefficient.

Import taxes are “a very powerful weapon that politicians haven’t used because they were either dishonest, stupid or paid off in some other form,” Trump said Monday at the White House. “And now we’re using them.”

Dartmouth College economist Douglas Irwin, author of a 2017 history of U.S. tariff policy, has calculated that Tuesday’s hikes will lift America’s average tariff from 2.4% to 10.5%, the highest level since the 1940s. “We’re in a new era for sure.”

Defense Health Agency director retires

By CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The director of the Defense Health Agency suddenly retired Friday, a week after several top generals were fired at the Pentagon, the agency announced.

Army Lt. Gen. Telita Crosland vacated her post, which she held for slightly more than two years. She was the fourth director of the agency and the first Black woman to hold the position.

"I want to thank [Dr.] Crosland for her dedication to the nation, to the Military Health System and to Army medicine for the past 32 years," Dr. Stephen Ferrara, the acting assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said in a statement issued

Friday.

Officials did not provide additional details on Crosland's retirement, which came one week after President Donald Trump abruptly fired Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth followed by firing Adm. Lisa Franchetti, the chief of naval operations, and Gen. James Slife, the vice chief of the Air Force. That same day, Hegseth also said he would replace each military service's top judge advocate general because they were not "well suited" for the jobs.

Dr. David Smith, the acting principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, was appointed as the acting di-

rector of the health agency while the Defense Department conducts the nomination process.

The director of the Defense Health Agency is a position held by an O-9, the second-highest military pay grade, which requires Senate confirmation to attain the post.

The Defense Health Agency was established in 2013 as a U.S. military combat support agency to manage medical services worldwide. The agency manages all military hospitals and clinics.

"Dr. Smith is a steady hand with decades of experience in the Military Health System in and out of uniform," Ferrara said. "I ask everyone to support Dr. Smith and the entire DHA

team as we stabilize and strengthen our system serving the most lethal fighting force on the planet."

Crosland entered the Army as a medical corps officer in 1993. She has served in more than a dozen leadership positions including commander of the Army Health Clinic in Grafenwoehr, Germany, commander of the Army Medical Department Activity in Heidelberg, Germany, and deputy chief of staff for operations for the Army Medical Command in Falls Church, Va. Prior to becoming the agency director, Crosland served as the Army deputy surgeon general and deputy commanding general for the Army Medical Command.

Researchers track water flow beneath Red Hill site

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — University researchers are using a fluorescent dye in the aquifer near Pearl Harbor to better understand the flow of water beneath the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, the site of a massive jet fuel spill three years ago.

Over six days in mid-February, researchers injected 50 pounds of rhodamine dye, mixed with 5,000 gallons of water, into a well shaft operated by the Navy, Toomas Parratt, a researcher at the University of Hawaii's School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology, said Feb. 24.

The injection point was about a quarter mile upgradient of the Navy's Red Hill well, which was contaminated with jet fuel in late 2021 from a spill at the fuel storage facility. The facility was subsequently closed.

The aquifer's flow in that area is not fully understood, and the re-

searchers hypothesize that the underground water will primarily flow toward the Red Hill well rather than to wells in other directions.

The Red Hill well, one of three used by the Navy for its water distribution system in supplying more than 90,000 households in military communities on and near Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, was isolated from the system in the wake of the contamination.

In January 2022, the Navy installed a series of massive carbon filters at the Red Hill well site.

Each day, millions of gallons of tainted water are pumped up, filtered and released into nearby Halawa Stream. The continuous pumping is intended to prevent petroleum contamination in the well from migrating elsewhere.

Parratt said he expects most, if not all, of the nontoxic dye will end up at the Red Hill well and be absorbed by the carbon filters.

North Korea warns US, South to 'not test' regime

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — A visit by a U.S. aircraft carrier to South Korea prompted a warning Tuesday from the sister of North Korea's autocratic leader that Washington and Seoul "should not test the will and ability" of the communist regime.

Kim Yo Jong alleged the arrival Sunday of the Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group at Busan disregards Pyongyang's security concerns and was "aggravating the situation." Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, is a high-ranking government and Communist Party official.

"The hostile policy toward the [North] pursued by the U.S. at present is offering sufficient justification for [North Korea] to indefinitely bolster up its nuclear war deterrent," she said through the state-run Korean Central News Agency. "We will never confine ourselves to sitting still

and commenting on the situation."

Pyongyang plans to "carefully examine" unspecified options that will threaten "the security of the enemy," she added.

The USS Carl Vinson arrived at Busan, roughly 200 miles southeast of Seoul, for a port call accompanied by the guided-missile cruiser USS Princeton and the guided-missile destroyer USS Sterett.

The visit demonstrates the allies' commitment to their military partnership and "shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific," U.S. 7th Fleet spokeswoman Lt. Cmdr. Jamie Moroney said by email Sunday. Moroney declined to specify how long the U.S. warships will remain at Busan.

North Korea regularly criticizes joint military drills between the U.S. and its ally, and the appearance of U.S. strategic assets, like aircraft carriers and long-range bombers, in South Korea.

DOD: No change to cybersecurity against Russia

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Cybersecurity operations against Russia have not been stopped, the Pentagon confirmed Tuesday as defense officials denied multiple reports that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had halted intelligence gathering against the country.

"TO BE CLEAR: [The defense secretary] has neither canceled nor delayed any cyber operations directed against malicious Russian targets and there has been no stand-down order whatsoever from that priority ...," read a Defense Department Rapid Response post on X.

The denial came after The Record, a cybersecurity publication, reported Hegseth had ordered U.S. Cyber Command to stand down from all planning against Russia, including offensive digital actions. The story was followed by reports by The Washington Post and The New York Times that added their own confirmations from unnamed officials.

Hegseth on Monday retweeted to his personal X account a post from a D.C.-based CBS reporter, seemingly confirming cybersecurity operations against Russia were continuing. The report also claimed Hegseth ordered a temporary pause last month on "some provocative offensive actions" against Russia ahead of negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.

Separately, President Donald Trump on Monday directed a pause to U.S. assistance to Ukraine as he seeks to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr

Zelenskyy to engage in negotiations to end the war. The move came days after a disastrous Oval Office meeting in which Trump and Vice President JD Vance tore into Zelenskyy for what they perceived as insufficient gratitude for the more than \$180 billion in military aid the U.S. has sent to Kyiv since Russia invaded three years ago.

A defense official Tuesday was unable to comment on Hegseth's posts to his personal X account. Cyber Command directed questions to Hegseth's office.

"Due to operational security concerns, we do not comment nor discuss cyber intelligence, plans, or operations. There is no greater priority to Secretary Hegseth than the safety of the warfighter in all operations, to include the cyber domain," said a senior defense official for the command who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Cyber Command oversees 135 "cyber mission force" teams, or its "action arm," according to the command's website.

In the 2023 National Cybersecurity Strategy, the command identified Russia — as well as China, Iran and North Korea — as a malicious actor that is using cyber capabilities aggressively.

"Russia remains a persistent cyber threat as it refines its cyber espionage, attack, influence and disinformation capabilities to coerce sovereign countries, harbor transnational criminal actors, weakening U.S. alliances and partnerships, and subvert the rules-based international system," the 2023 strategy read.

Fort Benning name returned without any confederate ties

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Fort Moore, the Army base in Georgia that is home to infantry and armor training, will once again be called Fort Benning but without ties to the Confederacy, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth wrote in a memorandum announced Monday.

"I direct the U.S. Army to change the name of Fort Moore, Ga., to Fort Benning, Ga., in honor of Cpl. Fred G. Benning, who served with extraordinary heroism during World War I," Hegseth wrote.

The Army base, founded in 1918, was named for Henry Benning, a local resident who worked as a lawyer and a judge before joining the Confederate army and rising to general. A slave owner, Benning never served in the U.S. Army and worked, even after the Civil War, to promote racial segregation and white supremacy, according to historians.

The base was renamed in 2023 for Army Lt. Gen. Hal and his wife Julie Moore after Congress mandated the Pentagon rid its installations of names and items honoring those who served the Confederacy.

In a 2022 report, the panel that oversaw the name-changing process included several Bennings who were nominated for consideration for the post's name. Only one appeared to have ties to the Army — Cpl. Fred G. Benning.

Born in Norfolk, Neb., Benning enlisted in the Army in April 1917. He served in the Machine-Gun Company, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division of the American Expeditionary Forces in France during World War I.

Benning was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross — the Army's second-highest award for battlefield valor — for heroic actions on Oct. 9, 1918, as an 18 year old fighting in France.

Zelenskyy ready to work, calls spat with Trump 'regrettable'

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Tuesday the Oval Office blowup with President Donald Trump last week was "regrettable," adding that he stands ready to work under Trump's "strong leadership" to get a lasting peace.

Zelenskyy's remarks — an apparent attempt to placate Trump — came in a social media post on X, hours after the White House announced a pause on military aid to Ukraine that is critical to fighting Russia's invasion.

He also said Ukraine is ready to sign a lucrative deal on rare-earth minerals and security with Washington.

In an apparent reference to

Trump's criticism following the contentious White House meeting on Friday that Zelenskyy does not want a peace deal, the Ukrainian leader said: "None of us want an endless war."

"Ukraine is ready to come to the negotiating table as soon as possible to bring lasting peace closer. Nobody wants peace more than the Ukrainians. My team and I stand ready to work under President Trump's strong leadership to get a peace that lasts," he said.

The meeting "did not go the way it was supposed to be," Zelenskyy said. "It is regrettable that it happened this way. It is time to make things right. We would like future cooperation and communication to be constructive."

Serbian lawmakers hurt as chaos erupts

Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia — At least three lawmakers were injured Tuesday, one of them seriously, after chaotic scenes in Serbia's parliament, during which smoke bombs and flares were thrown, further fueling political tensions in the Balkan country.

Lawmakers were scheduled to vote on a law that would increase funding for university education, but opposition parties said the ruling majority was also planning to approve dozens of other decisions. They said this was illegal and that lawmakers should first confirm the resignation of Prime Minister Milos Vucevic and his government.

Chaos erupted about an hour after the parliamentary

session started, with opposition lawmakers blowing whistles and holding up a banner reading "Serbia has risen so the regime would fall!" Hundreds of opposition supporters rallied outside the parliament building during the session.

Video footage from the assembly hall showed a clash first between lawmakers and later flares and smoke bombs being thrown. Serbian media said eggs and water bottles also were thrown. Officials later said three people were injured in the disturbance.

Parliament speaker Ana Brnabic, who accused the opposition of being a "terrorist gang," said one of those injured was in a serious condition.

The incident reflects a deep

political crisis in Serbia where monthslong anti-corruption protests have rattled a populist government.

Vucevic resigned in January as the government faced protests over the collapse in November of a concrete train station canopy in the Serbia's north that killed 15 people and which critics blamed on rampant corruption. Parliament must confirm the prime minister's resignation for it to take effect.

A rise in education funding has been one of the demands by Serbia's protesting students who have been a key driving force behind almost daily street protests that started after the Nov. 1 canopy collapse.

Opposition parties have in-

sisted that the government has no authority to pass new laws. Leftist lawmaker Radomir Lazovic said the opposition was ready to support the passing of the student-requested education bill, but not the other decisions listed at the assembly agenda.

He said the only way out of the current crisis would be a transitional government that would create conditions for a free and fair election, a demand populists have rejected.

Serbia's increasingly authoritarian President Aleksandar Vucic and his ruling right-wing Serbian Progressive Party have imposed a firm grip on power in the past decades despite formally seeking European Union membership.

Driver to be investigated in German car ramming

Associated Press

MANNHEIM, Germany — Investigators on Tuesday will question a driver who allegedly rammed a car into a crowd in the southwestern German city of Mannheim, killing two people and injuring 11.

Andreas Stenger, head of the State Criminal Police Office, told German news agency dpa that police hope the interview with the perpetrator will lead to information about a motive for Monday's attack.

Mourners, including Sara Stefani, left flowers in the city's center Tuesday to honor the victims.

"It's where I live, the center of my life," a tearful Stefani said.

The suspect is a 40-year-old German man from the nearby state of Rhineland-Palatinate who was detained and is in a hospital after being injured, State Interior Minister Thomas Strobl of Baden-Württemberg told dpa on Monday.

Strobl later told reporters that "as far as the specific motivation of the crime is concerned, we have no indication of an extremist or religious background at the moment. The motivation could rather be based in the person of the perpetrator himself."

German police and prosecutors said Monday at a joint news conference that the driver intentionally rammed his car into people and is being investigated for murder and attempted murder.

Five of the 11 injured were seriously hurt.

Police and prosecutors said the driver shot himself in the mouth when he was arrested and had to undergo medical treatment at a hospital.

While the driver did not seem to be ideologically motivated, prosecutors said that the man, whose identity was not revealed in line with German privacy rules, has several previous convictions.

UNICEF: Rape of children used as war tactic in Sudan

Associated Press

CAIRO — Children in conflict-ravaged Sudan as young as a year old have been raped since the beginning of 2024, according to the U.N. children's agency Tuesday, which said sexual violence is being used as a tactic of war.

UNICEF said 221 children, including boys, were raped by armed men, according to records compiled by gender-based violence service providers in the North African nation.

The war in Sudan broke out in April 2023 between the military and its rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces with battles in Khartoum and around the country.

Since then, at least 20,000 people have been killed, though the number is likely far higher.

The war has driven more than 14 million people from their homes and pushed parts of the country into famine.

Right groups have said that

atrocities, including sexual violence and forced child marriages, have been committed by both sides.

An estimated 61,800 children have been internally displaced since the war began, UNICEF reported last month.

On Tuesday, the agency reported documented cases involving children who were raped during attacks on cities.

More than 30% of the child rape victims were boys, UNICEF said. The victims include 16 children under the age of 5 and four infants. The cases were reported in the states of Gedaref, Kassala, Gezira, Khartoum, River Nile, Northern State, South Kordofan, North Darfur and West Darfur.

Of the 221 children raped, 73 cases were conflict-related and 71 were not, while the others were unidentified, Tess Ingram, a spokesperson with UNICEF, told The Associated Press.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ship completes 1st leg of journey to become reef

AL MOBILE — The historic, aging ocean liner that a Florida county plans to turn into the world's largest artificial reef has completed the first leg of its final voyage.

The SS United States, a 1,000-foot vessel that shattered the trans-Atlantic speed record on its maiden voyage in 1952, arrived Monday in Mobile, Ala., nearly two weeks after departing from south Philadelphia's Delaware River.

Crews will spend about six months cleaning and preparing the ship before it is eventually sunk off Florida's Gulf Coast.

The 1,800-mile move south started on Feb. 19, about four months after a years-old rent dispute was resolved between the conservancy that oversees the ship and its landlord. Plans to move the vessel last November were delayed over U.S. Coast Guard concerns about whether the ship was stable enough to make the trip.

Convicted double-killer from El Salvador arrested

NY NEW YORK — A convicted double-killer from El Salvador has been arrested in New Jersey on a charge of "illegally reentering the United States," prosecutors said.

César Eliseo Sorto-Amaya was taken into custody by federal authorities in Elizabeth, according to a statement from the U.S. Attorney's Office in New Jersey. ICE agents found him sitting on the front porch of a home at an address provided by

law enforcement in El Salvador, where he's wanted on charges of double aggravated homicide.

Sorto-Amaya was convicted in absentia on April 24, 2024, and sentenced to 50 years in prison. No other information, including specific details about the crime, was provided.

The 28-year-old suspect also has a long history of deportations that dates back to 2015. In February of that year, he was arrested by border agents in Texas and sent back to El Salvador on March 3, 2015, according to the criminal complaint.

CEO resigns following probe into conduct

OH CINCINNATI — Kroger Chairman and CEO Rodney McMullen has resigned after an internal investigation into his personal conduct.

Kroger, the nation's largest grocery chain, said Monday that the investigation into McMullen's personal conduct was unrelated to the business, but was found to be inconsistent with its business ethics policy.

Board member Ronald Sargent will serve as chairman and interim CEO, effective immediately.

Sargent has been on Kroger's board since 2006 and has served as the lead director of the company since 2017. He's worked in several roles at the grocery chain across stores, sales, marketing, manufacturing and strategy. Sargent is also the former chairman and CEO of Staples.

McMullen, 64, began his career with Kroger in 1978 as a part-time stock clerk and bag-

ger at a store in Lexington, Ky. He worked his way up through the company, becoming chief financial officer in 1995 and chief operating officer in 2009. McMullen was named Kroger's CEO in 2014 and became the company's chairman the following year.

Treasury will not enforce business database rule

DC WASHINGTON — The U.S. Treasury Department announced it will not enforce a Biden-era small-business rule intended to curb money laundering and shell company formation.

In a Sunday evening announcement, Treasury said in a news release that it will not impose penalties now or in the future if companies fail to register for the agency's beneficial ownership information database that was created during the Biden administration.

Despite efforts by small businesses to undo the rule in the courts, it remains in effect.

On Sunday, President Donald Trump on his Truth Social media site praised the suspension of enforcement of the rule and said the database is "outrageous and invasive."

Confirmed measles case is state's first of year

PA PHILADELPHIA — A patient who came to a hospital emergency room in Montgomery County is Pennsylvania's first confirmed measles case this year amid a national surge of the highly contagious virus, according to health officials.

According to the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services Office of Public Health, an infected patient was seen at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia in King of Prussia last week. No other details about the patient were available.

"More information will be shared regarding exposure sites, dates and times when available," a spokesperson for the county's public health office said in a written statement. "CHOP and the Office of Public Health have been in contact with potentially affected individuals."

Multiple tractor-trailers crash, causing deaths

AZ TONOPAH — Authorities in Arizona are investigating a crash that killed four people and left two in critical condition after several tractor-trailers collided with nearby cars on a highway.

Firefighters hosed down charred cars as billowy smoke covered the roadway after seven vehicles caught fire from crashing on an Arizona interstate Saturday afternoon. The wreck caused hourslong road closures.

Six more people were injured and transported to hospitals, five of whom were treated and released, according to a statement from the Arizona Department of Public Safety. The fatal crash occurred near Tonopah, about 50 miles west of Phoenix.

Authorities were investigating whether an initial collision caused by poor visibility from "blowing dust" led to a series of secondary crashes.

— From wire reports

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Thunder guard SGA scores 50-plus again

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's putback basket in the fourth quarter put him over 50 points and sent the Oklahoma City crowd into a frenzy.

The Thunder star responded by jogging downcourt expressionless, as if it were no big deal.

That's because it has become almost routine for him. His final touch on a 51-point night clinched his fourth 50-point performance in his past 19 games.

"It becomes — you can say it's not as exciting as the first one, but it's more like getting lost in the process of just competing and playing the game you love," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "And then wherever that

takes you, it takes you."

Besides, he was most concerned with the final result — a 137-128 win over the Houston Rockets on Monday.

Gilgeous-Alexander became the 12th player in NBA history with at least four 50-point games in a season. His scoring binges have helped Oklahoma City roll to a Western Conference-leading 50-11 record. The Thunder are 3-1 when he scores at least 50 points.

"Whether it's 50, whether it's 27, whether it's 17 — as long as we win, I have fun with it," he said. "It's a fun night."

Gilgeous-Alexander played 397 career games before reaching the 50-point mark. His first time hitting the milestone was a career-high 54-point outburst

in a win over Utah on Jan. 22. He then scored 52 on Jan. 29 in a loss to Golden State and 50 in a home win over Phoenix on Feb. 5.

The NBA's scoring leader finished with at least 40 for the ninth time in 2024-25. He made 18 of 30 field goals, went 5-for-9 on 3-pointers and hit all 10 of his free throws.

From the outset against the Rockets, it appeared this might become a special night when Gilgeous-Alexander scored 20 points in the first quarter. He said he took over because the team got off to a rough start. Even with his scoring spree, Houston led 31-30 at the end of the period.

"I tried to be a little bit more aggressive once we kind of got

out to that (slow) start there, like kind of lift us a little bit," he said. "I tried to be aggressive, be assertive."

He had 28 points at halftime and 45 going into the fourth quarter. His six points in the final period were vital in helping the Thunder hang on.

"I just think you play the game to win," he said. "Like, you don't play the game to score a bunch of points. You don't play the game to get a bunch of rebounds or assists or steals. ... You don't play for anything besides to win, and that's what it's all about."

Cam Whitmore matched career highs with 27 points and 11 rebounds, and Reed Sheppard added a career-best 25 points for the Rockets.

Trail Blazers pull away in second half to beat 76ers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Anfernee Simons scored 21 of his 34 points in the second half, and the Portland Trail Blazers beat the Philadelphia 76ers 119-102 on Monday night.

Simons shot 13-for-26, including 6-for-11 from beyond the arc. Shaedon Sharpe added 20, a career-high 11 rebounds and five assists.

Andre Drummond finished with 25 points, 18 rebounds and two steals for the 76ers. Justin Edwards added 16 points and six rebounds.

The Blazers trailed 61-56 at the half but outscored the 76ers by 22 in the second half.

Warriors 119, Hornets 101: Stephen Curry had 21 points and 10 assists in his annual homecoming game, and Golden State pulled away in the second half to defeat host Charlotte for its sixth win in seven games.

Curry, who was raised in Charlotte and played at nearby Davidson College, finished 6-for-14 from the field, with three 3-pointers.

The Hornets appeared determined not to let Curry beat them in the first half and repeatedly double-teamed the 11-time All-Star, who found open teammates for easy buckets.

Buddy Hield scored 22 points and Brandin Podziemski added 19 points and 10 rebounds for the Warriors, who were coming off a 126-119 loss at Philadelphia on Saturday. Draymond Green had 16 points and 13 rebounds.

Heat 106, Wizards 90: Bam Adebayo had 19 points and 15 rebounds to break host Miami's franchise record for double-doubles in a victory over NBA-worst Washington.

Adebayo, in his eighth season with Miami, reached the milestone with a rebound late in the second quarter. He has 222 double-doubles, one more than Rony Seikaly had in six seasons from 1988-94.

Wizards rookie Kyshawn George left with a jaw injury in the fourth quarter after taking an inadvertent elbow from Adebayo.

Duncan Robinson scored 17

points, and Tyler Herro and Pelle Larsson had 16 apiece for the Heat, who have won three of four.

Khris Middleton led Washington with 16 points and Bub Carrington scored 14.

Hawks 132, Grizzlies 130: Caris LeVert made a layup as time expired, finishing with 25 points as Atlanta rallied to win at Memphis.

Desmond Bane had his first career triple-double for Memphis, but Dyson Daniels stole the ball from him with 3.8 seconds remaining. LeVert got the ball and streaked down the floor for a layup that beat the horn, confirmed after an officials' review.

LeVert had 16 points in the fourth quarter.

Zachcharie Risacher scored 27 points for Atlanta. Onyeka Okongwu had 16 points and 12 rebounds, while Trae Young had 12 points and 15 assists.

Bane led Memphis with a season-high 35 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists. Luke Kennard had 17 points.

Kings 122, Mavericks 98: Zach LaVine scored 22 points

and DeMar DeRozan added 20, each sitting out the fourth quarter, as visiting Sacramento beat Dallas.

The Mavericks lost Kyrie Irving late in the first quarter to a left knee sprain.

Sacramento played without Domantas Sabonis, the NBA's top rebounder, who suffered a grade 1 left hamstring strain in the first minute of Saturday's win at Houston. Sabonis will miss at least one week.

Jonas Valanciunas made his first start since being acquired by the Kings on Feb. 5 and had 14 points and nine rebounds in 23 minutes.

Pistons 134, Jazz 106: Cade Cunningham had 29 points, nine assists and four steals, and Detroit won at Utah for its 10th victory in 11 games.

Ausar Thompson added 17 points and was 7-for-7 from the field, while Jaren Duren was also perfect at 5-for-5 en route to 16 points and 12 rebounds.

Kyle Filipowski finished with a career-high 25 points and had eight rebounds for the Jazz.

Jones debuts for Panthers; Tkachuk out

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Seth Jones impressed the Florida Panthers in his debut Monday night, but it's anyone's guess when Matthew Tkachuk will be sharing the ice with his newest teammate.

Jones played just under 23 minutes and nearly scored in the defending Stanley Cup champion Panthers' 2-1 victory over their in-state rival the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"He's an unbelievable skater, a great guy," said goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky, who stopped 28 shots to help the Panthers stretch their winning streak to four games.

"Played well both sides of the puck. I'm excited to have him. He's a great addition to our team."

Earlier Monday, the Panthers confirmed that star forward

Tkachuk is on long-term injured reserve with a lower-body injury and won't be back for a few weeks — maybe not until the postseason.

"Matthew's going to be out for an extended period of time," Panthers general manager and hockey operations president Bill Zito said during Jones' introductory news conference. "We hope to get him back for the playoffs. You have a projection, you have a diagnosis and a rehab course of action. How and where and in what manner is the progress of that rehab is yet to be determined."

Losing Tkachuk, who hasn't played since the 4 Nations Face-Off last month, is a big blow. Adding Jones, the stellar defenseman who was acquired over the weekend in a trade with the Chicago Blackhawks, is a big boost.

"I wanted to play for a conten-

der, and Florida was obviously at the top of my list when it came to that," said Jones, who hasn't appeared in a playoff game since 2020. "I want to fit in with this team, be a part of the system, come and bring my game, play hard defensively, help a little bit offensively, really just fit into the system and bring what I can, whatever's asked of me."

Panthers fans were excited before the five-time all-star even took the ice Monday night — they welcomed Jones with a fervent applause and ovation when he was announced in the starting lineup at Florida's Amerant Bank Arena.

They roared again when Jones nearly scored a goal in the second period.

The plan was to ease him into things while he learns the Eastern Conference and some new systems, but in a tight game be-

tween two bitter rivals, Jones got plenty of special teams action and helped Florida kill seven penalties.

"He's gonna be really good for us," coach Paul Maurice said. "Moves the puck clean, and he's got a set of hands on him. So I thought for flying in yesterday to get here, and then everything (being) brand new, mostly he's playing on instinct out there ... I was really pleased."

Few Panthers players know what Jones can bring more than Bobrovsky, who played alongside him on the Columbus Blue Jackets from the 2015-16 season to 2018-19.

"He still was amazing," Bobrovsky recalled. "And, you know, he was an amazing skater. He was smart. It was a privilege to play with him. And I'm so, so happy to reunite with him again."

Capitals beat Senators in shootout, stop 3-game skid

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Tom Wilson fought Brady Tkachuk late in the first period, scored on the power play in the second and assisted on Martin Fehervary's goal in the third to help the Washington Capitals end their season-worst losing streak at three games by beating the Ottawa Senators 5-4 on Monday night in a shootout.

Wilson finished off his "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" — a goal, an assist and a fight — by setting up Fehervary with 7:17 left in regulation. Tkachuk tied it with 1:08 left with a 6-on-4 goal to get the Senators a point.

The Capitals killed their seventh minor penalty of the game in overtime when they were whistled for too many men on the ice. Dylan Strome scored the lone goal in the shootout to rescue the Eastern Conference leaders, who had blown a 3-0 lead.

Pierre-Luc Dubois had a goal and two assists, Connor McMi-

chael scored and Logan Thompson made 33 saves in regulation and OT and was perfect in the shootout for his 26th victory of the season. Alex Ovechkin remained 10 goals from tying the NHL career record.

The Senators lost for the sixth time in seven games.

Canadiens 4, Sabres 3 (OT): Mike Matheson scored at 1:21 of overtime to lift surging Montreal over visiting Buffalo.

Nick Suzuki had a goal and three assists for the Canadiens who, despite blowing a 3-0 lead, rallied for their fifth straight win.

Cole Caufield — with his team-leading 30th of the season — and Juraj Slafkovsky also scored for Montreal. Sam Montembeault made 33 saves.

Rasmus Dahlin scored the equalizer with 61 seconds remaining in regulation, while Alex Tuch and Tage Thompson also scored for Buffalo.

Panthers 2, Lightning 1: Alexander Barkov scored twice in

the second period and host Florida beat in-state rival Tampa Bay.

The defending Stanley Cup champions won their fourth straight, while the Lightning had their eight-game winning streak snapped. Tampa Bay hadn't lost a game since Feb. 1.

Brayden Point got the Lightning on the board with his team-leading 32nd goal of the season early in the third.

Rangers 4, Islanders 0: Will Cuylle and Will Borgen scored in the first period, Igor Shesterkin stopped 21 shots for his fourth shutout of the season, and the New York Rangers beat the crosstown-rival Islanders.

J.T. Miller and Artemi Panarin each had a goal and an assist for the Rangers, who have won four of five and got their second shutout in two nights.

Ilya Sorokin finished with 22 saves for the Islanders, who have lost five of seven.

Sharks 3, Maple Leafs 2 (SO):

Fabian Zetterlund scored in the fourth round of the shootout as San Jose battled back from a two-goal deficit in the third period to stun host Toronto and snap an eight-game slide.

Tyler Toffoli and Jack Thompson scored in regulation for last-place San Jose. Alexander Wennberg added two assists. Alexander Georgiev made 25 saves through 65 minutes of action.

John Tavares, with a goal and an assist, and Matthew Knies scored for Toronto, which had won five straight.

Blackhawks 5, Kings 1: Spencer Knight made 41 saves in his first game with host Chicago as it beat Los Angeles.

Knight was acquired by the Blackhawks when they traded defenseman Seth Jones to Florida on Saturday night.

Anze Kopitar scored his 14th goal of the season for Los Angeles, which dropped its fourth straight.

Duke freshman star Flagg weighing future

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Duke was minutes away from completing a perfect record on its famed home court with a Senior Night rout of Wake Forest.

That's when the buzzer sounded for freshman phenom Cooper Flagg, who checked out — possibly for the final time at Cameron Indoor Stadium.

"One more year! One more year!" The Blue Devils' "Cameron Crazies" chanted toward their star rookie, who delivered his latest stellar performance during Monday's 93-60 win over the Demon Deacons.

Did Flagg hear the chants?

"For sure," he said.

And?

"I mean, I'm living in the present right now, living in the moment, taking it day by day. ... I don't know what the future holds."

The player who has long been mentioned as a likely No. 1 overall NBA draft pick isn't

ready to talk about his future plans just yet. But that left room to consider the season-long journey for the 6-foot-9 prodigy, who arrived as a 17-year-old facing impossibly high expectations and is now the tested — by college standards, anyway — veteran at the heart of Duke's title aspirations in March.

Flagg finished with 28 points, eight rebounds, seven assists, three blocks and two steals against Wake Forest. That included 18 points on 8-for-10 shooting after halftime as the Blue Devils turned a 13-point halftime edge into a 40-point bulge on the way to clinching at least a share of the Atlantic Coast Conference regular-season title.

Along the way, there were the highlights that Flagg's made look routine with his versatile game, from his passing ability to his reliable 3-point shot. And he's proven dangerous in transition, like when he

pushed the ball up the court, used a crossover to get inside of Wake Forest's Cam Hildreth in the paint and then took off for a two-handed dunk — punctuated by a flex for the roaring crowd.

When the time came for Flagg to check out with 3:34 left, he slapped hands with teammates Sion James and Isaiah Evans, then started untucking his jersey as he made his way to the Duke bench. He greeted coach Jon Scheyer with a high-five and a hug, then made his way down the bench embracing coaches, staffers and teammates as the crowd began asking for an unlikely second act next season.

"The talent speaks for itself. Love coaching his talent," Scheyer said. "But I love coaching the person. He's all about the right stuff."

Flagg acknowledged thinking earlier Monday that it could be his final game at Cameron,

even as he quickly pivoted back to that "live in the moment" answer that revealed little.

If this was the end, Flagg made plenty of memories in the venerable arena.

There was last month's blowout of North Carolina, with Flagg posting a stuffed stat line in his first taste of the blueblood rivalry. This was also the venue where he scored an ACC freshman record 42 points in a win over Notre Dame in January.

Or there's Flagg's personal favorite: a highlight-reel transition dunk against Pittsburgh on which he all but stuffed 7-foot defender Guillermo Diaz Graham into the basket while being fouled.

"I mean, this is the best place in college basketball for sure," Flagg said. "I've loved every single minute of being here. I've loved everybody I've met, everybody I've been around for this whole year. It's been an amazing year."

Cryer, No. 3 Houston beat Kansas for 9th straight win

Associated Press

HOUSTON — L.J. Cryer scored 22 points and No. 3 Houston won its ninth straight game with a 65-59 victory over Kansas on Monday night.

Emanuel Sharp added 12 points off the bench, including two free throws that pushed the Cougars' lead to 63-59 with 20 seconds left. Houston (26-4, 18-1 Big 12) went 4-for-4 from the foul line down the stretch.

Cryer had 18 points on 7-of-13 shooting in the first half as the Cougars took a 30-27 lead into the break.

Milos Uzan finished with 10 points for Houston, which had already clinched its second consecutive outright Big 12 regular-season title. Mylik Wilson had 10 points, six assists and five rebounds.

The Cougars shot 35% from the field and were 7 of 20 on 3-pointers.

Hunter Dickinson had 17 points and 12 rebounds for the scuffling Jayhawks (19-11, 10-9), who shot 45%. KJ Adams Jr. added 15 points and David Coit had 14 off the bench.

UCLA 73, Northwestern 69: Tyler Bi-
lodeau scored 19 points to lead the visiting Bruins to a victory over the Wildcats after UCLA nearly blew a 14-point lead in the final three minutes.

Back-to-back dunks by Bilodeau gave the Bruins a 68-54 lead with 3:07 remaining. UCLA had three turnovers and a failed one-and-one in the next five possessions. Northwestern chipped away at their deficit and got within 68-65 on Ty Berry's 3-pointer with 33 seconds left. After another turnover by the Bruins, Berry's driving layup made it 68-67.

Skyy Clark made one free throw for the Bruins with 21 seconds left, then William Kyle III's steal helped the Bruins ice the win as the Wildcats were forced to foul and UCLA finished it off with four made free throws.

Eric Dailey Jr. scored 12 points, Aday Mara had 11 off the bench and Clark had 10 for the Bruins (21-9, 12-7 Big Ten). Mara added 10 rebounds for his second career double-double.

Berry had 22 points, Martinelli 20 and

K.J. Windham 10 for Northwestern (16-14, 7-12).

North Texas 68, Wichita State 66: Atin Wright had 21 points to help the host Mean Green hold on for a victory over the Shockers, upping their win streak to six.

Wright shot 7-for-13 (4-for-7 from 3-point range) and 3 of 4 from the free-throw line for North Texas (22-6, 13-3 American Athletic Conference), which is a game behind 16th-ranked Memphis for the conference lead.

Brenen Lorient had 15 points and Latrell Jossell scored 13.

Wichita State (17-12, 7-9) was led by Xavier Bell with 19 points. Harlond Beverly added 16 points and Bijan Cortes scored nine.

The Mean Green went into halftime leading the Shockers 31-28. Jossell put up 10 points in the half. North Texas pulled off the victory after a 9-0 second-half run erased a four-point deficit and gave them the lead at 52-47 with 9:33 remaining. Wright scored 14 second-half points.