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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

US fires strikes on Houthis for 3rd day

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. strikes on Houthis in Yemen are ongoing daily and will continue until the Iran-backed terrorists stop attacking military and merchant vessels transiting shipping lanes in and near the Red Sea, Pentagon officials said Monday.

"There is a very clear end state to this operation, and that begins the moment that the Houthis pledge to stop attacking our ships and putting American lives at risk," Sean Parnell, the top Defense Department spokesman, said during the first Pentagon news briefing since President Donald Trump took office for his second term.

U.S. Central Command on Saturday began attacking Houthi targets with more than 30 targets struck, according to Air Force Lt. Gen. Alex Grynkevich, director of operations for the Joint Staff. The barrage of strikes in Yemen are ongoing daily.

"The Houthis could stop this tomorrow, if they said we're going to stop shooting at your people, but they've clearly chosen not to do that, and so this campaign will be relentless to degrade their capability and to open up shipping lanes in the region and to defend our homeland," Parnell said.

For years, the Houthis have targeted ships transiting Egypt's Suez Canal, one of the world's most used shipping routes. But in the past year, the Houthis have ramped up their attacks, sinking two vessels in what they have called acts of solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, where Israel has been at war with Hamas militants, another Iranian ally.

The Houthis have launched more than 100 drone and missile attacks since October 2023, targeting American and allied ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, according to the Defense Department.

The U.S. Navy has maintained a carrier strike group in

the Middle East since November 2023, when the Houthis upped their assault on military and merchant ships. Navy forces have fired more than 200 missiles against those attacks since the Houthis began their campaign in the strategic waterway in November 2023. Destroyers and cruisers have also fired more than 150 artillery rounds, said Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander of Naval Surface Forces.

The attacks stopped when an Israel-Hamas ceasefire took hold in January — a day before Trump took office. But last week, the Houthis said they would renew attacks against Israeli vessels after Israel cut off the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza this month.

Trump on Saturday vowed to use "overwhelming lethal force" until the Houthis cease their attacks and warned Iran would be held "fully accountable" for their actions.

At least one Houthi drone facility was targeted in the U.S.

airstrikes Saturday, which killed several people, Grynkevich said.

"Those were key individuals who led their unmanned aerial vehicle enterprise and were some of the technical experts in there," he said.

Grynkevich said the number of people killed in the U.S. airstrikes in Yemen during the past three days is not yet known, but he estimated it could be dozens of Houthi rebels. He said Yemeni civilians are not believed to be among the deaths.

In response to the attack, the Houthis fired 11 drones and at least one missile in a period of about 12 hours, an official told The Associated Press.

Ten of the drones were intercepted by U.S. Air Force fighter jets, and one was intercepted by a Navy F/A-18 fighter jet.

The missile fell into the water far from the ship, and nothing came close to hitting either the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman or the warships in its strike group.

Trump-Putin call advances effort for limited ceasefire

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed during a lengthy call Tuesday to seek a limited ceasefire against energy and infrastructure targets in the Russia-Ukraine war, according to the White House.

The White House described it as the first step in a "movement to peace" it hopes will eventually include a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea and a full and lasting end to the fighting.

"Both leaders agreed this conflict needs to end with a lasting peace," the White House said in a statement. "The blood and treasure that both Ukraine and Russia have been spending in this war would be better spent on the needs of their people."

The White House added negotiations would "begin immediately" on those steps. It was not immediately clear whether Ukraine is on board with the phased ceasefire plan.

Ukrainian officials had proposed a limited ceasefire cover-

ing the Black Sea and long-range missile strikes and the release of prisoners at their meeting with the U.S. delegation in Saudi Arabia this month.

Putin also told Trump that Russia and Ukraine are set to exchange 175 prisoners of war each on Wednesday, and Russia will also hand over 23 badly wounded soldiers to Ukraine, the Kremlin said.

Putin also called on Trump to end foreign military and intelligence assistance to Ukraine as the United States looks to bring an end to Russia's invasion of

Ukraine, according to the Kremlin.

The move comes as the White House has pushed for Russia to sign off on its 30-day ceasefire proposal aimed at ending the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials last week agreed to the 30-day ceasefire proposal during talks in Saudi Arabia led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, however, remains skeptical that Putin is ready for peace as Russian forces continue to pound Ukraine.

Navy moves to get more high-flying drones

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy signed a \$267 million deal to acquire two more Triton drones as it moves toward purchasing dozens of the long-range surveillance aircraft.

The project awarded to Northrop Grumman last week includes an operating base and logistics package for the drones, according to a Pentagon statement.

The MQ-4C Triton is designed to work with P-8 Poseidon patrol planes by aiding their intelligence gathering and supporting search and rescue operations. The Triton also can serve as a communications relay.

In March 2024, the Navy's un-

manned patrol squadron, VUP-19, celebrated the deployment of a detachment and opening of a Triton hangar at Naval Air Station Sigonella on the Italian island of Sicily.

There also is a detachment on Guam, with plans for at least one more in a yet-to-be announced location, potentially at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington state or a base in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.

VUP-19 is homeported at Naval Air Station Jacksonville and Naval Air Station Mayport in Florida.

Spare parts for Australia, which received its first Triton drone in July, also are included in the new contract, according to

the statement.

As of September 2023, the Navy had five Tritons, which reached initial operating capacity that same month. The achievement cleared the way for the drone to ease into operations in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

In its 2024 budget, the service reduced the number of Tritons it planned to purchase from 70 to 27 because of a reassessment by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council, according to budget documents. The Pentagon council assesses joint military strength and identifies any gaps in capability.

The Triton can fly for more than 24 hours at altitudes above 50,000 feet with a range of 7,400

miles. It has flown more than 5,000 operational hours, according to Northrop Grumman.

The Triton's crew consists of five members per ground station: a pilot, a tactical coordinator, two mission payload operators and a foreign signals intelligence coordinator, according to the Navy.

The drone recently demonstrated its ability to carry out missions in the Arctic, flying within 100 miles of the North Pole in September, the defense contractor said in a statement the same month.

"Arctic regions are an increasingly important theater of operations," Capt. Josh Guerre, the Triton program manager, said in the September statement.

Marines back in Australia for operations and training

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Marines have arrived in northern Australia for six months of training and operating as an air-ground task force across the country and in the Philippines, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

The 2,500-strong Marine Rotational Force-Darwin is the 14th contingent to deploy to Australia's Northern Territory since the rotation began in 2012, according to a statement from force spokesman Capt. Johnny Fischer.

"The Marines and Sailors of this year's rotation look forward to training with our Australian counterparts and regional partners, building upon decades of shared tradition and operational experience," Col. Jason Armas, the force's commander, said in the Monday statement. "The shared experiences during this deployment will

strengthen our collective ability to address challenges and promote stability across the Indo-Pacific."

The rotational force did not immediately respond to questions emailed Tuesday regarding the specific units and equipment involved in this year's deployment.

The Marines' arrival in Darwin is being facilitated by a standing coordination element in the Northern Territory port, according to the statement.

Over the next six months, the Marines will train for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, noncombatant evacuations, embassy reinforcements, expeditionary operations and rapid force deployments. They will participate in 17 exercises, including the biennial Talisman Sabre drill, which will be Australia's largest military exercise since World War II, with 19 nations set to take part.

VA ends transgender-related medical treatments for vets

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Veterans seeking transgender-related medical treatments "will have to do so on their own dime," Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Doug Collins said Monday, as he announced an end to health coverage for gender dysphoria.

The VA is phasing out what is known as cross-sex hormone therapy as well prosthetics for veterans with a medical diagnosis or history of gender dysphoria, the VA said. Gender dysphoria is the medical term for individuals whose gender identity does not match their biological sex at birth.

Democratic lawmakers and advocates for transgender veterans immediately condemned the decision, along with the change Friday to VA policy that ensured health care access for transgender veterans. Rep. Mark Takano of California, the top Democrat on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, accused VA leaders of

making transgender veterans a "pawn in [the] cruel political games" of President Donald Trump's administration.

The VA's end to medical treatment for gender dysphoria will make the health care system align with Trump's Jan. 20 executive order that withdrew federal recognition for transgender people and directed the end to gender-affirming care, the VA said.

Titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government," the order stated the sexes "are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality."

"I mean no disrespect to anyone, but VA should not be focused on helping veterans attempt to change their sex. The vast majority of veterans and Americans agree, and that is why this is the right decision," Collins said when he announced the decision.

Pentagon aims to cut up to 60K civilians

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Roughly 50,000 to 60,000 civilian jobs will be cut in the Defense Department, but fewer than 21,000 workers who took a voluntary resignation plan are leaving in the coming months, a senior defense official told reporters Tuesday.

To reach the goal of a 5% to 8% cut in a civilian workforce of more than 900,000, the official said, the department aims to slash about 6,000 positions a

month by simply not replacing workers who routinely leave.

A key concern is that service members may then be tapped to fill those civilian jobs. But the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to provide personnel details, said Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth wants to ensure the cuts don't hurt military readiness.

The cuts are part of the broader effort by the Department of Government Efficiency Service, including billionaire

Trump adviser Elon Musk, to slash the federal workforce and dismantle U.S. agencies. Acknowledging that some military veterans will be among the civilians let go, the official would not estimate how many but agreed it could be thousands.

The department is using three ways to accomplish the workforce cuts: voluntary resignations, firing probationary workers and cutting jobs as employees routinely leave. The official said the military services

and Pentagon officials are going over the personnel on a case-by-case basis to ensure cuts don't affect critical national security jobs.

Plans to cut probationary workers — which the Pentagon said targeted about 5,400 of the roughly 54,000 in the department — are already on hold due to court challenges.

The official added that Hegseth is confident the cuts can be done without negatively affecting military readiness.

Judge sees

'possible defiance' of flight order

Associated Press

A federal judge on Monday questioned whether the Trump administration ignored his orders to turn around planes carrying deportees to El Salvador, a possible violation of the decision he'd issued minutes before.

District Judge James E. Boasberg was incredulous over the administration's contentions that his verbal directions did not count, that only his written order needed to be followed, that it couldn't apply to flights that had left the U.S. and that the administration could not answer his questions about the deportations due to national

security issues.

Deputy Associate Attorney General Abhishek Kambli contended that only Boasberg's short written order, issued about 45 minutes after he made the verbal demand, counted.

The written order did not contain any demands to reverse planes, and Kambli added that it was too late to redirect two planes that had left the U.S. by that time.

The hearing over what Boasberg called the "possible defiance" of his court order marked the latest step in a high-stakes legal fight that began when President Donald Trump

invoked the 1798 wartime law to remove immigrants over the weekend.

On Tuesday, Trump said Boasberg should be impeached. The president described Boasberg as an unelected "troublemaker and agitator" in a post on Truth Social, his social media platform.

Trump's call for impeachment — a rare step that is usually taken only in cases of grave ethical or criminal misconduct — represents an intensifying clash between the judicial and executive branches.

On Monday, Boasberg said he'd record the proceedings and

additional demands in writing.

"I will memorialize this in a written order since apparently my oral orders don't seem to carry much weight," Boasberg said.

On Saturday, Boasberg ordered the administration not to deport anyone in its custody through the newly-invoked Alien Enemies Act, which has been used three times before in U.S. history, all during congressionally declared wars. Trump issued a proclamation that the law was newly in effect due to what he claimed was an invasion by the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua.

House Dems file request seeking DOGE details

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Top Democrats on the House Judiciary and House Oversight committees have filed a lengthy Freedom of Information Act request questioning whether the Trump administration's DOGE Service is operating "outside the bounds of federal law," The Associated Press has learned.

Reps. Jamie Raskin of Maryland and Gerald Connolly of Virginia are seeking detailed information about the authority of the Department of Government

Efficiency Service, including billionaire Trump adviser Elon Musk, to carry out firings of federal workers and dismantling of federal agencies.

They also are requesting detailed information about DOGE's access to sensitive data, its use of artificial intelligence, the résumés and training of its staff and its communications related to Musk-held entities including SpaceX, Starlink and Tesla.

"The Administration and Mr. Musk have hidden behind a veil of secrecy as they systematically

ly dismantle the federal government of the United States," the Democrats wrote in a letter to DOGE administrator Amy Gleason accompanying the FOIA request. "The American people deserve answers, and we are committed to using every tool at our disposal to expose the truth about DOGE's operations."

They are seeking expedited review of the request, with a response within 20 days.

The FOIA request is the latest action in a confrontation be-

tween Congress and the executive branch as President Donald Trump is rapidly slashing portions of the federal government by doing away with thousands of workers and unwinding various agencies and services.

The Oversight Committee Democrats have already issued a formal request for information on Musk's potential conflicts of interest, which is pending. Their attempt to subpoena Musk was rejected by committee Republicans, who hold the majority in Congress.

Deadly airstrikes by Israel shatter ceasefire in Gaza

Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Israel launched airstrikes across the Gaza Strip early Tuesday, killing at least 400 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to local health officials. The surprise bombardment, the deadliest in Gaza since the start of the 17-month war, shattered a ceasefire in place since January.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the strikes after Hamas refused Israeli demands to change the ceasefire agreement. Officials said the operation was open-ended and expected to expand. The White House said it had been consulted and voiced support for Israel's actions.

The Israeli military ordered people to evacuate in eastern Gaza, including much of the northern town of Beit Hanoun and communities further south, and head to the center of the territory, indicating Israel could soon launch renewed ground operations.

"Israel will, from now on, act against Hamas with increasing military strength," Netanyahu's

office said.

The attack during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan could signal the full resumption of a war that has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians and caused widespread destruction across Gaza. It also raised concerns about the fate of the roughly two dozen Israeli hostages held by Hamas who are believed to still be alive.

The renewal of the campaign against Hamas, which is supported by Iran, came as the U.S. and Israel stepped up attacks this week across the region. The U.S. launched deadly strikes against Iran-allied rebels in Yemen, while Israel has targeted Iran-backed militants in Lebanon and Syria.

A senior Hamas official said Netanyahu's decision to return to war amounts to a "death sentence" for the remaining hostages. Izzat al-Risheq accused Netanyahu of launching the strikes to try and save his far-right governing coalition and called on mediators to "reveal facts" on who broke the truce. Hamas said at least six senior officials were killed in Tues-

day's strikes.

There were no reports of any attacks by Hamas several hours after the bombardment, indicating it still hoped to restore the truce.

The strikes came as Netanyahu comes under mounting domestic pressure, with mass protests planned over his handling of the hostage crisis and his decision to fire the head of Israel's internal security agency. His testimony in a long-running corruption trial was canceled after the strikes.

The strikes appeared to give Netanyahu a political boost, with a far-right party that had bolted the government over the ceasefire announcing Tuesday that it was rejoining.

The main group representing families of the captives accused the government of backing out of the ceasefire, saying it "chose to give up on the hostages."

"We are shocked, angry and terrified by the deliberate dismantling of the process to return our loved ones from the terrible captivity of Hamas," the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said in a statement.

Midwife is charged over Texas abortions

The Washington Post

HOUSTON — A Houston-area midwife was arrested for providing illegal abortions, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican, said Monday, marking the first criminal charges under the state's near-total abortion ban and one of the few times a provider anywhere in the country has been charged since the fall of Roe v. Wade in 2022.

Maria Margarita Rojas, 49, is accused of performing abortions and practicing medicine without a license, both of which are felonies.

Also charged was Jose Ley, 29, whom officials said Rojas employed. Court records allege Ley, a Cuban citizen, does not have a Texas medical license.

Rojas owned and operated four health clinics in the Houston suburbs of Waller, Cypress and Spring, Paxton's office said in a statement. Clínicas Latinoamericanas employed unlicensed people who presented themselves as medical professionals, officials said.

Rojas and Ley attempted an abortion twice on someone this month, court records allege. Rojas presented herself as an obstetrician and performed an abortion on someone else in Harris County earlier this year, according to court records.

Rojas and Ley's bonds were set at \$200,000 on the charge of practicing without a license and \$500,000 on the charge of "performance of abortion," Waller County jail records show.

Rojas was first booked into jail March 6 on a charge of practicing medicine without a license, according to jail records. She was released on a \$10,000 bond the following day. The new charges were added Monday.

NASA's stuck astronauts finally coming back to Earth after 9 months

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — NASA's two stuck astronauts headed back to Earth with SpaceX on Tuesday to close out a dramatic marathon mission that began with a bungled Boeing test flight more than nine months ago.

Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams bid farewell to the International Space Station — their home since last spring — departing aboard a SpaceX cap-

sule alongside two other astronauts. The capsule undocked in the wee hours and aimed for a splashdown off Florida by early evening, weather permitting.

The two expected to be gone just a week or so after launching on Boeing's new Starliner crew capsule on June 5. So many problems cropped up on the way to the space station that NASA eventually sent Starliner back empty and transferred the test pilots to SpaceX, pushing

their homecoming into February. Then SpaceX capsule issues added another delay.

Sunday's arrival of their relief crew meant Wilmore and Williams could finally leave. NASA cut them loose a little early, given the forecast later this week. They checked out with NASA's Nick Hague and Russia's Alexander Gorbunov, who arrived in their own capsule last fall with two empty seats reserved for the duo.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

World's first Lego Festival coming to theme parks

CA ANAHEIM — Legoland California will follow the lead of Disney, Universal and other rivals and jump into the festival business with the world's first Lego Festival that will encourage kids and parents to embrace the power of play.

Legoland California will host the inaugural Lego Festival on six weekends from May 3 through June 8.

The global event will take place at the Carlsbad theme park as well as Legoland parks in Florida, New York, Denmark, Germany, England and South Korea. The festival that focuses on imagination, exploration and play will take place at each park in five zones themed to music, dance, gaming, creativity and relaxation.

Sharp rise in correction officers out on leave seen

NY NEW YORK — The city Correction Department has seen a mysterious jump over the past 18 months in the numbers of officers taking time off under laws that allow leave for pregnancies and caring for sick relatives—sparking concerns that officers are using the leaves as their own literal get-out-of-jail-free card, according to data and correction sources.

Until August 2023, the number of officers out each day on so-called FMLA leave was fairly steady at around 45 a day on average, according to department figures cited in a November report by the federal monitor tracking violence and uses of force in the jails.

The total jumped to an average of 86 officers a day in August 2023 and then to about 110 a day on average one month later, the figures show. The daily average has remained consistently above 110 since then, the figures show. In 2024, the average was 113 officers a day—or 151% higher than in the summer of 2023.

State schedules another execution for next month

SC COLUMBIA — A man who shot and killed an off-duty police officer in South Carolina is scheduled to become the fifth person executed in the state since the death penalty resumed last fall following a 13-year pause.

Mikal Mahdi's execution will take place April 11 at 6 p.m. at a prison in the capital of Columbia, the state Supreme Court announced Friday.

The court postponed a potential sixth execution, that of Steven Bixby, who killed two police officers in an Abbeville County land dispute in December 2003. Bixby was slated to be put to death in May, but the court decided that a judge first needs to determine if he is mentally competent.

Mahdi, 41, can choose between lethal injection, electrocution or a firing squad.

Voters to elect education leader, decide on voter ID

WI MADISON — The high-stakes race for Wisconsin Supreme Court has gotten most of the attention leading up to the April 1 election. But it is not the only issue voters will decide as early voting has begun.

Also on the ballot is a race for the battleground state's top education official who will guide policies affecting K-12 schools during President Donald Trump's second term.

There is also a measure that would place the state's voter ID law into the state constitution.

Both of those contests have sharp partisan divisions, even though the spending and national attention have been far less than those for the race for control of the state's highest court.

Senate approves fix to prevent \$1B in cuts

DC WASHINGTON — The Senate swiftly approved legislation late Friday that would allow the District of Columbia to keep its budget intact, rather than roll back to 2024, fixing a provision that had drawn protests from the mayor and residents warning it would require \$1 billion in cuts to services.

The bill passed unanimously, without dissent, and now heads to the House. Lawmakers there are on recess, but expected to consider it when they return in late March.

"The issue here is just allowing the D.C. government to proceed to spend its own tax revenues," said Sen. Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, the chair of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, during a brief floor debate.

State votes on flag design and chooses current one

IL SPRINGFIELD — Flags engender such loyalty and pride, they often become very personal emblems with quirky or quaint nicknames: Old Glory, Union Jack,

Maple Leaf—or SOB.

That would be (state) "Seal on a Bedsheet," the derisive moniker with which some have burdened the Illinois state flag, a gleaming white banner emblazoned with the state's bald eagle-themed emblem.

Some forward-looking lawmakers set up a contest to design a new flag and put it to a vote. In a landslide, a winner was chosen.

And it's the current flag.

Of nearly 385,000 votes cast, the existing bunting received 43%—more tallies than the next six finalists combined.

Cuomo quickly raises \$1.5M for mayoral run

NY NEW YORK — Since launching his mayoral campaign earlier this month, ex-Gov. Andrew Cuomo has raised more than \$1.5 million in private donations, cementing his status as the race's early front-runner.

Cuomo's campaign, which shared the top-line dollar figure ahead of its first detailed public fundraising disclosure due Monday, said \$330,000 of the money came from 1,700 New York City residents. That means Cuomo has met the thresholds to be eligible for public matching funds, making his estimated fundraising total for the most recent reporting period \$4.1 million, according to his campaign.

The flood of private cash—the largest, single-period haul out of any of the 2025 mayoral candidates to date—flowed into Cuomo's coffers between his March 1 campaign launch and this past Friday, the close of the last reporting period.

—From wire reports

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Dodgers top Cubs in Japan to open season

Associated Press

TOKYO — Yoshinobu Yamamoto had a little extra zip on his fastball. Shohei Ohtani even admitted to some nerves.

There was little doubt this was no ordinary baseball game.

But the Japanese players who were playing in front of their home country at the Tokyo Dome on Tuesday night handled any jitters they had quite well, delivering in clutch moments as the Los Angeles Dodgers beat the Chicago Cubs 4-1 in Major League Baseball's season opener.

"I was actually pretty nervous," Ohtani said through an interpreter. "It's been a while since I was nervous, but today, definitely felt it."

Ohtani finished with two hits in the Dodgers' win, including a single in the fifth and a double in the ninth. Both hard-hit balls brought roars from the roughly 42,000 fans at a packed Tokyo Dome and were instrumental in helping Los Angeles get off to a good start this season.

"I don't think I've ever seen

Shohei nervous," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "One thing I did notice is how emotional he got during the Japanese national anthem. That was something very telling."

Yamamoto pitched five quality innings to earn the win, giving up just one run on three hits and a walk while striking out four. The right-hander's fastball touched 98 mph and consistently sat in the 96-97 range, which is a few ticks higher than last year.

It was the first time Yamamoto had been on the mound in a regular season game since his fantastic performance in Game 2 of the World Series, and the results carried over to the Tokyo Dome.

"What I experienced in October, I learned a lot of things," Yamamoto said through a translator. "What I should and what I shouldn't do in certain situations. Based on that, I feel more confident."

Yamamoto said he wasn't trying to overthrow on his fastball. Instead, he said better mechan-

ics have allowed him to throw a little harder. Roberts said there's no reason the 26-year-old can't compete for the NL Cy Young award if he pitches like he did against the Cubs and stays healthy.

"Great outing, I thought he commanded the baseball really well tonight," Roberts said. "The fastball was as good as we've seen. Competed really well. There was some soft contact in there and he just navigated the game really well."

Even in a losing effort, Chicago left-hander Shota Imanaga was fantastic through four scoreless innings, giving up no hits while walking four. The Imanaga vs. Yamamoto matchup was the first all-Japanese starting pitching duel on opening day in MLB history.

"Imanaga and Yamamoto did a really good job handling the nerves of the start of the game," Cubs manager Craig Counsell said.

Imanaga said he was pleased with his outing, even if the final result wasn't what he wanted.

The lefty retired Ohtani twice, once on a groundout and another time on a lineout. He said the experience from Tuesday's game should serve him well throughout the season.

"One of the lessons regarding the fastball was it felt really good," Imanaga said through an interpreter. "Once I go back to the U.S. — obviously there's differences in humidity, environment and how far the ball goes — but bottom line if I can throw the fastball I did today all the time and have confidence in it, I'll be good."

The only Japanese player who had a quiet night was Chicago slugger Seiya Suzuki, who finished 0 for 4 at the plate. With a runner on second in the eighth inning, he hit the ball fairly hard, but LA third baseman Max Muncy was there to snag the line drive.

Japanese rookie Roki Sasaki will make his MLB debut on Wednesday night when the teams meet again at the Tokyo Dome for the finale of the two-game set.

Meier, Bratt lead Devils to hang on over Blue Jackets

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Timo Meier and Jesper Bratt scored 39 seconds apart in the second period, and the New Jersey Devils beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 2-1 on Monday night.

Jake Allen had a season-high 45 saves to improve to 12-13-1 for New Jersey.

Mathieu Olivier scored for Columbus, and Jet Greaves finished with 18 saves while falling to 2-2-2 in six starts this season.

Olivier spoiled Allen's shutout bid with 6:36 remaining in the third as he knocked in a loose puck in front.

Sabres 3, Bruins 2 (OT): Alex Tuch scored a power-play goal with 10.7 seconds left in overtime, and visiting Buffalo snapped an eight-game road losing streak with a victory over Boston.

Peyton Krebs scored a power-play goal and Owen Power also had a goal for the Sabres. Buffalo's last road win came on

Jan. 21, at Vancouver.

Morgan Geekie scored a goal and set up Pavel Zacha's score for the Bruins. Boston has lost three straight since winning the first two after trading away three key players, including captain Brad Marchand.

Lightning 2, Flyers 0: Andrei Vasilevskiy recorded his sixth shutout of the season after stopping 21 shots as host Tampa Bay defeated Philadelphia.

Nikita Kucherov and Jake Guentzel scored for the Lightning, who have won eight of the past nine games at home. Vasilevskiy recorded his 39th career shutout to tie Jocelyn Thibault for 49th on the all-time list.

Ivan Fedotov finished with 21 saves for the Flyers, who have been shutout in back-to-back games. Philadelphia has lost seven of its past eight games.

Maple Leafs 6, Flames 2: Auston Matthews scored twice on the power play and

added an assist as host Toronto beat Calgary.

William Nylander added a goal and two assists for the Maple Leafs, who had lost five of their last six games.

Rasmus Andersson and Kevin Bahl scored for the Flames, who are in a battle for the Western Conference's second wild-card spot. Dustin Wolf allowed five goals on 26 shots before getting pulled after the second period. Dan Vladar finished with two saves in relief.

Wild 3, Kings 1: Mats Zuccarello scored the tiebreaking power-play goal with 4:38 left and host Minnesota beat Los Angeles.

Ryan Hartman had a goal and an assist, Marcus Johansson also scored, and Jared Spurgeon had two assists for the Wild. Filip Gustavsson finished with 28 saves.

Adrian Kempe scored for the Kings, and Darcy Kuemper — coming off shutouts in his last two starts — had 19 saves. LA snapped a five-game win streak.

Knicks rally, hand Heat 8th straight loss

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Mikal Bridges scored 28 points, Josh Hart tied a franchise record with his eighth triple-double this season and the New York Knicks beat Miami 116-95 on Monday night, sending the Heat to their first eight-game losing streak of coach Erik Spoelstra's career.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 23 points for the Knicks, who fell behind 12-0, then completely turned around the game after Towns scored 15 straight in the second quarter. New York won the season series 3-0 for its first sweep of Miami since 1992-93.

The Knicks led by six midway through the third quarter when the game was delayed for the court to be cleaned up after actor and comedian Tracy Morgan got sick. New York outscored Miami 24-6 after the delay to lead 88-64 heading into the fourth.

Duncan Robinson scored 22 points for the Heat (29-39), who lost a game they led by double digits for the 18th time this season. The eight-game skid is their longest since March 2008, the last season under Hall of Fame coach Pat Riley before Spoelstra took over.

"We're all getting tested — I said this before — including myself," Spoelstra said after the loss. "There's no one that's absolved from this. I have not come up with enough answers for this team. I have to do a better job. Our group has to do a better job."

Nuggets 114, Warriors 105: Aaron Gordon scored a season-best 38 points, Russell Westbrook hit a crucial late 3-pointer and delivered a triple-double, and undermanned Denver missing its two main stars beat host Golden State.

Westbrook contributed 12 points, a season-high 16 assists and 11 rebounds.

Jimmy Butler had 23 points, eight rebounds and six assists as the Warriors had their seven-game winning streak

snapped. Golden State dropped to 14-3 since Butler made his debut Feb. 8 and 14-2 in games he played.

Michael Porter Jr. had 21 points, 10 rebounds and five assists for the Nuggets, playing without big man Nikola Jokic because of a bruised right elbow and left ankle impingement and Jamal Murray sidelined by a sprained right ankle.

Rockets 144, 76ers 137: Jalen Green and Jabari Smith Jr. had 30 points apiece and host Houston rallied for an overtime victory over Philadelphia, extending its season-best winning streak to seven games.

The Rockets trailed by as many as 25 points and never led in regulation before their late rally.

Alperen Sengun made two free throws with just over a minute left in OT before Aaron Holiday added two more with 12.1 seconds remaining, making it 144-137 and securing the win.

The Sixers played without Paul George, who had been ruled out for the rest of the season before the game. Philadelphia announced that George had received injections in his left adductor muscle and left knee following consultations with specialists.

Pistons 127, Pelicans 81: Cade Cunningham had 24 points and eight assists, and visiting Detroit routed New Orleans.

Simone Fontecchio scored 23 points for the Pistons, who had dropped four of six.

Zion Williamson had 30 points for the Pelicans, and Yves Missi finished with 12 points, 10 rebounds and two blocks. Williamson also grabbed six rebounds and blocked two shots.

New Orleans lost for the seventh time in eight games.

Pacers 132, Timberwolves 130: Obi Toppin's fourth 3-pointer of overtime came with 3.5 seconds left to lift short-handed Indiana over host Min-

nesota, ending the Timberwolves' eight-game winning streak.

Toppin had a season-high 34 points on 7-for-10 shooting from deep to help the Pacers win without their top six scorers down the stretch. Four starters were out, Andrew Nembhard was ejected in the third quarter and Benedict Mathurin fouled out in the fourth.

Anthony Edwards scored 29 of his 38 points after halftime for Minnesota, which led by five with a minute left in overtime until Thomas Bryant hit a 3. Edwards missed from deep, Toppin hit his clutch shot and Julius Randle's fadeaway fell short at the buzzer.

Bulls 111, Jazz 97: Coby White scored 26 points and visiting Chicago beat Utah, sending the Jazz to their 10th straight loss.

White, who shot 9-for-19 from the field and 2-for-10 from long distance, was helped by 6-for-7 shooting from the line. Tre Jones added 18 points, 12 assists and three steals as the Bulls won for the fifth time in six games. Kevin Huerter and Matas Buzelis each scored 17. Dalen Terry chipped in with 11 points as six Chicago players scored in double figures.

Keyonte George and Lauri Markkanen each scored 16 points for the Jazz, who last won Feb. 28, in a 117-116 victory over Minnesota. Jordan Clarkson added 14 points and Brice Sensabaugh had 13.

Suns 129, Raptors 89: Devin Booker scored 27 points and led a second-quarter surge as host Phoenix routed Toronto.

Playing without injured guard Bradley Beal again, the Suns saw seven players score in double figures. Thirteen players scored for Phoenix and the final margin of 40 was the biggest lead of the night.

The Suns trailed 29-24 at the end of the first quarter but outscored the Raptors 39-11 to take

a 23-point halftime lead. Most of it came with reserves Royce O'Neale, Tyus Jones, Cody Martin and Oso Ighodaro joining Booker on the court.

Kings 132, Grizzlies 122: Malik Monk had 28 points and seven assists, and host Sacramento beat Memphis to end a four-game losing streak despite losing center Domantas Sabonis to a pair of injuries.

Sabonis suffered a cut over his left eye and blood trickled down his face after the Kings' big man was hit in the face by the back of Luke Kennard's head. Sabonis returned but left for good in the third quarter after rolling his right ankle.

DeMar DeRozan had 22 points, six rebounds and nine assists. Keegan Murray added 16 points and 10 rebounds.

Trail Blazers 112, Wizards 97: Anfernee Simons scored 30 points and host Portland beat Washington for its second consecutive victory following a five-game slide.

Shaedon Sharpe added 16 points, and rookie center Donovan Clingan had 11 points and 13 rebounds in 25 minutes. Deni Avdija and Duop Reath both scored 15.

Alex Sarr led the Wizards with 20 points. Tristan Vukcevic had 17 points and eight rebounds.

Lakers 125, Spurs 109: Austin Reaves scored 30 points and Luka Doncic had 21 points, 14 assists and nine rebounds in host Los Angeles' victory over San Antonio.

Dorian Finney-Smith added 15 points while hitting four 3-pointers for the Lakers, who extended their home winning streak to eight games with back-to-back victories over Phoenix and San Antonio following four consecutive losses on the road.

Stephon Castle had 23 points and Devin Vassell scored 15 of his 17 in the first half for the Spurs, who have lost five of seven.

Uzan's transfer helped Houston reload

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Milos Uzan was searching for a new school last year after entering the transfer portal following two seasons at Oklahoma when he talked to Houston assistant Kellen Sampson.

"He was saying how a lot of schools are trying to get into the tournament and what got me was he was saying how we're trying to win it," Uzan said. "And that's just really what pulled me in."

Uzan joined the second-ranked Cougars this season and his performance has helped them earn a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament as they chase their first national championship.

While Uzan is thriving now, it took time for him to start feeling good in his new environment. The point guard was the only new starter on the team and replaced Jamal Shead, one of the most decorated and popular players in recent school history.

Shead spent four seasons

with Houston, helping the team to a 120-18 record in his career. He capped his spectacular time with the Cougars by becoming the first player in Big 12 history to win both player of the year and defensive player of the year and was a consensus All-American.

Given all that, coach Kelvin Sampson knew picking the right person to replace Shead could make or break his team.

"You just can't take anybody," Sampson said. "When you have four starters back, you got to be really careful about the kind of personality you add. Forget his skill set or what the numbers say. That's never really floated my boat ... but (it was) his personality, his willingness to fit in, and then did we think we could develop a little more competitiveness in him."

The pressure of replacing Shead compounded Uzan's adjustment. He admitted September and October were particularly difficult for him, made worse when a collision in prac-

tice led to a broken nose.

Uzan began to gel with his new team thanks to the squad's veterans.

"There's great leadership on this team, L.J. (Cryer), Emmanuel (Sharp), J'Wan (Roberts)," he said. "I feel like those guys really accepted me for who I am super early. So I was able to get comfortable pretty quickly around these dudes."

Uzan still wasn't playing the way everyone knew he could when the games started. Teammates and coaches chided him for not being more aggressive as the leader of the offense.

Uzan recalled a film session where Sampson told him that it feels like he's "renting the place right now and needs me to own it."

Cryer, a senior guard who leads the team at 15.3 points a game, agreed and said everyone encouraged Uzan to be himself on the court.

"At first he was trying so hard to fit in and taking a back-seat to us and that was good,"

Cryer said. "But we knew we needed him to take another step for us to be a great team, and we ain't need him to fit in no more. We needed him to stand out."

Slowly Uzan heeded their advice and after averaging just 8.9 points a game in the 12 games before Jan. 1, his average jumped to almost 12.6 points in the last 19 games of the regular season.

"When he noticed that we really have that belief in him," Cryer said. "That's when he started to take off."

Uzan's career-high 25 points against Arizona led Houston to the Big 12 tournament championship, and he is confident he can help the Cougars reach the Final Four again and perhaps even bring home that elusive first title.

"This is why you come to places like this, and this is what you grow up dreaming about — playing in March Madness and making a run," Uzan said. "I think we can get this one done for sure."

'D2 guys' have helped make Drake lovable underdogs

Associated Press

Ben McCollum had a job offer from Drake in hand last spring when he decided he should sleep on it.

Clarity came to him at 3 a.m.

"I woke up," he said, "and I'm like, 'Man, I want to make the NCAA Tournament. They're Division I.' So I took the job, and now we're there."

The Bulldogs sure are, and the pieces are in place for them to become one of those lovable March Madness underdogs.

It's not because Drake doesn't have history in the tournament. This will be the eighth appearance for the 4,700-student school in Des Moines, Iowa, the fifth since 2008 and the third in a row. Darian DeVries, now at West Virginia, was coach for the last two.

Enter McCollum, the Iowa native who won four Division II national championships in 15 years at Northwest Missouri State. No one doubted his coaching chops, and he didn't blink while making the transition to Division I.

What makes the Bulldogs so intriguing is that four of McCollum's starters came with him, and they didn't blink, either.

Do-it-all man Bennett Stirtz is the face of the program. He was Missouri Valley player of the year and the most outstanding player in the league tournament. A year ago he didn't even make the all-conference first team, and neither did any of his teammates.

Naturally, expectations were not high for Drake entering this season. It was picked fifth in the 12-team league and received no first-place votes.

It ended up winning the regular season by two games with 17 conference wins, its most ever.

Seeded No. 11 in the West Region, it'll carry a seven-game winning streak into its matchup with Missouri on Thursday night.

"We've got more to do," said Mitch Mascari, who had graduated from Northwest Missouri and accepted a job in finance in the Chicago area before he changed his mind and decided to use his remaining year of eligibility with McCollum and the Bulldogs.

Proving doubters wrong has fueled Drake from the start.

"Yeah, the preseason pick, we could start with that, and just having that label as being D2 guys," Stirtz said. "No one believed in us."

Stirtz, who had no Division I offers when he was coming out of high school in Liberty, Mo., is the only player in the nation with more than 600 points (631), 180 assists (188) and 70 steals (71). The only player in Valley history to also achieve those numbers was Indiana State great Larry Bird.

Stirtz's fellow Northwest Missouri transfers — Mascari, Isaiah Jackson and Daniel Abreu — have also proved they can have success in Division I.

"From day one," Abreu said, "I knew what we were capable of at the D2 level, and I didn't think it was going to be that big of a difference. Nor did the coaches. They were like, 'Hey, we can compete at this level, too. Just bring it like you did at D2.'"