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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Navy beefing up presence in Mideast

Hegseth orders 2 aircraft carriers in region as attacks on Houthis increase

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, in a rare move, is beefing up the Navy warship presence in the Middle East, ordering two aircraft carriers to be there next month as the U.S. increases strikes on the Yemen-based Houthi rebels, according to a U.S. official.

It will be the second time in six months that the U.S. has kept two carrier strike groups in that region, with generally only one there. Prior to that it had been years since the U.S. had committed that much warship power to the Middle East.

According to the official, Hegseth signed orders on Thursday to keep the USS Harry S. Truman in the Middle East for at least an additional month. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing military operations.

The ship has been conducting operations in the Red Sea against the Houthis and was

scheduled to begin heading home to Norfolk, Va., at the end of March.

And Hegseth has ordered the USS Carl Vinson, which has been operating in the Pacific, to begin steaming toward the Middle East, which will extend its scheduled deployment by three months.

The Vinson is expected to arrive in the region early next month. It had been conducting exercises with Japanese and South Korean forces near the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan and was slated to head home to port in San Diego in three weeks.

The presence of so much U.S. naval power in the region not only gives commanders additional ships to patrol and launch strikes, but it also serves as a clear message of deterrence to Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor.

The Houthis have been waging persistent attacks against commercial and military ships

in the region.

The Houthi rebels attacked more than 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones, sinking two vessels and killing four sailors, from November 2023 until January this year.

Their leadership described the attacks as aiming to end the Israeli war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Hegseth's move shifts the Vinson and its warships away from the Indo-Pacific region, which the Trump administration has touted as its main focus.

Instead, this bolsters the latest U.S. campaign against the Iran-backed Houthis. U.S. ships and aircraft launched a new intensive assault against the militant group, including a barrage of attacks over the weekend that continued into this week.

President Donald Trump, in a marked departure from the previous administration, lowered the authorities needed for launching offensive strikes against the Yemen-based

Houthis.

He recently gave U.S. Central Command the ability to take action when it deems appropriate.

President Joe Biden's administration had required White House approval to conduct offensive strikes such as the ones over the weekend. It did allow U.S. forces to launch defensive attacks whenever necessary, including the authority to take out weapons that appeared to be ready to fire.

Biden went to two carriers in the region for several weeks last fall.

Then-Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had ordered the Roosevelt to extend its deployment for a short time and remain in the region as the USS Abraham Lincoln was pushed to get to the area more quickly.

The Biden administration beefed up the U.S. military presence there to help defend Israel from possible attacks by Iran and its proxies and to safeguard U.S. troops.

Musk says he's ready to 'be helpful' at Pentagon

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — SpaceX founder and President Donald Trump's chief government efficiency liaison Elon Musk met with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Friday at the Pentagon, saying he was ready to do "anything that could be helpful."

According to a CNN video of the two men exiting their meeting, Musk refused to answer questions as to whether he re-

ceived a classified briefing on China as part of the visit.

Hegseth had said late Thursday that he would be meeting with Musk to discuss "innovation, efficiencies & smarter production."

The Pentagon is in the middle of identifying personnel and programs it can cut to save between 5% and 8% of its budget, but lawmakers and government watchdogs have questioned whether Musk should

have any role in decisions at the Pentagon, where his company SpaceX receives billions of dollars in federal contracts.

Musk's Department of Government Efficiency has played an integral role in the Trump administration's push to dramatically reduce the size of the government.

Musk has faced intense blowback from some lawmakers and voters for his chain saw-wielding approach to lay-

ing off workers and slashing programs, although the Republican president's supporters have hailed it.

A senior defense official told reporters Tuesday that roughly 50,000 to 60,000 civilian jobs will be cut in the Defense Department.

In a post on Musk's X platform, Hegseth emphasized that "this is NOT a meeting about 'top secret China war plans,'" denying a newspaper report.

Russian drones strike Odesa, underlining truce challenges

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian drones pummeled the Ukrainian Black Sea port city of Odesa, injuring three people and sparking massive fires, officials said Friday, an attack that underlined Moscow's intention to pursue aerial strikes even as it agreed to temporarily halt strikes on energy facilities.

The head of the Odesa region, Oleh Kiper, said the city suffered "local emergency power outages" in three of its districts, an indication that the energy infrastructure of the city could have been damaged.

Reacting to the attack, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that "joint pressure on Russia, strengthening sanctions and defense support for our state ... is the way to stop such terror and Russia's prolongation of the war."

"We expect real pressure on Russia from the US, Europe and all our partners," Zelenskyy said in a statement on Telegram. "And this is what will allow di-

plomacy to work."

Russia, meanwhile, accused Ukraine of blowing up a gas facility in the Kursk region, where Ukrainian forces have launched an incursion, in violation of the ceasefire deal. Ukraine denies the accusations.

The strike came shortly before Czech Republic President Petr Pavel visited Odesa early Friday morning and held meetings with the city's leaders and officials from other southern regions.

"This is another reminder to the whole world: The war continues and Ukraine continues to fight," Kiper said in a statement.

He reported blazes at at least three locations after the attack late Thursday. "Civilian infrastructure, commercial facilities are on fire, cars damaged," Kiper said.

Over 70 people and 20 fire engines were involved in extinguishing what the emergency services called "massive fires."

Russia's Defense Ministry

accused Ukrainian forces of blowing up a gas metering station near the town of Sudzha in Russia's Kursk region, in what it described as a "deliberate provocation by the Kyiv regime, which is part of a series of recent strikes on Russia's energy infrastructure in order to discredit the U.S. president's peaceful initiatives."

Ukraine's military General Staff rejected Moscow's accusations and blamed the Russian military for shelling the Sudzha gas metering station as part of Russia's "discrediting campaign."

The gas metering station serves a major pipeline that had pumped Russia's natural gas to Europe until supplies were halted last year.

Ukraine and Russia agreed in principle Wednesday to a limited ceasefire after U.S. President Donald Trump spoke with the countries' leaders this week, though it remained to be seen what possible targets would be off limits to attack.

Starmer considering air cover for Ukraine

The Washington Post

Prime Minister Keir Starmer is focusing a postwar European military guarantee for Ukraine on air and sea support, moving away from plans for securing troops on the ground to enforce any peace deal with Russia.

"We're looking at sea in one scenario, the sky, obviously land and borders and regeneration," Starmer told a Thursday meeting of military planners from the so-called "coalition of the willing" of nations that are in talks to provide security guarantees to Kyiv.

While the U.K. had previously sought to build what it called a "reassurance force" of some 30,000 European troops to be stationed in Ukraine after the end of the war, the number was now likely to be lower, people familiar with the matter said.

Only the U.K. and France have publicly committed to sending troops to Ukraine so far, and some European leaders such as Italy's Giorgia Meloni have opposed the idea of putting "boots on the ground." Most other countries involved in the talks have instead offered military assets or troops to backfill other parts of NATO that are willing to provide soldiers, the people familiar said.

Russia has said it would not countenance troops from NATO countries being deployed in Ukraine, providing another potential complication to the plans.

Starmer suggested at the meeting that the priority was to support Ukrainian soldiers who would form the first line of defense against any future threats from Russia, with the European focus now on providing air and maritime support.

Top Russian official meets N. Korea's Kim, thanks him for support in war in Ukraine

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — A top Russian security official met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang on Friday and thanked him for the country's support of Moscow's war efforts in Ukraine, according to Russian state media.

The meeting came after South Korea's spy agency said in late February that North Korea appeared to have sent additional troops to Russia af-

ter soldiers fighting in the Russian-Ukraine war suffered heavy casualties.

Russia's state-run news agency Tass reported that Sergei Shoigu, Russia's Security Council secretary, during a meeting with Kim, expressed gratitude for North Korea's "solidarity with Russia's position on all critical geopolitical issues, particularly on the Ukrainian issue."

Tass said Shoigu also conveyed a message from Rus-

sian President Vladimir Putin, who extended his greetings and vowed to give "utmost attention" to implementing agreements reached in their recent summits.

Interfax, another Russian news agency, quoted Shoigu as saying that various issues were discussed with Kim, including Russia's war in Ukraine, Moscow's dialogues with the Trump administration and the security situation on the Korean Peninsula.

NATO to ask Europe, Canada to boost stocks

Bloomberg News

NATO plans to ask European allies and Canada to increase their stocks of weaponry and equipment by about 30% in the next few years, according to a senior alliance official.

New targets for the military capabilities of NATO allies, which would update ones set before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are currently being discussed with the aim of adopting them by early June, when the alliance's defense ministers gather in Brussels.

Reaching these new levels would require a massive financial effort from most European allies and Canada, while U.S. outlays wouldn't need to change, officials added.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is responding to the

growing threat from Russia, as well as President Donald Trump's drive to shift more of the burden for defense from the U.S. to the rest of the alliance.

As currently envisioned, the new targets would require a 30% increase broadly across sectors in the volume of equipment, with some specific categories going up much more, or less, according to one of the officials, who like the others was granted anonymity to discuss sensitive plans.

According to the senior NATO official, these new targets, which will take 5 to 15 years to implement, will lead to a much stronger European and Canadian force within NATO that is less reliant on the U.S.

The U.S. would largely be able to meet the new targets

with equipment it already has. But most allies would need to raise defense spending to more than 3% of gross domestic product — a level that leaders are widely expected to set as their new spending target when they meet for a NATO summit in The Hague in late June.

Trump has repeatedly accused NATO members of taking advantage of Washington by not spending enough on defense. He has indicated that the U.S. will step back from its security role in Europe and demanded allies spend 5% — a goal widely viewed as unrealistic and one even the U.S. doesn't meet.

Allies now widely expect the U.S. to reduce its troop presence in Europe as its priorities shift to the Indo-Pacific region.

Ever since Trump won the

election, European countries have been scrambling to boost defense spending and rethink their military positioning.

The five main areas being targeted in the next period are air defense systems, deep-fight capacities, logistics, communication and information systems and land maneuver capacities. Those will be underpinned with increased weapons stocks and spare parts. Air defense systems were specifically singled out as an area that require more capability from all allies, including the U.S.

Even as Europe boosts its capabilities, the U.S. would remain an essential backbone, particularly in areas of high-end combat power such as intelligence and reconnaissance, logistics and nuclear submarines.

DOD spokesman sidelined after uproar over websites

The Washington Post

The Trump administration has sidelined a senior Defense Department spokesman, defense officials said Thursday, ending a brief and tumultuous tenure in which he clashed with colleagues and journalists who cover the Pentagon, and aggressively defended the agency's purge of government-produced content recognizing the contributions of minorities in the military.

John Ulyot, a public affairs official who also held senior communications roles during President Donald Trump's first term in office, is expected to take another role within the Defense Department working on "special projects," said a person familiar with the matter who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive personnel decision. Ulyot declined to comment.

Ulyot's removal followed an uproar Wednesday over the

Pentagon's removal of an online article about the military background of Jackie Robinson, who became the first African American to play in Major League Baseball in 1947, after serving in the U.S. Army. As news of the article's removal drew widespread condemnation on social media, Ulyot released a statement attempting to explain the administration's rationale — striking an unusually combative tone for a spokesman representing the view of a government agency with a nonpartisan national security mission.

"Discriminatory Equity Ideology," his statement said in part, "... Divides the force, Erodes unit cohesion and Interferes with the services' core warfighting mission."

Ulyot's statement did not address whether the removal of Defense Department articles about Robinson and other minority trailblazers was done in error.

Israel orders troops to go deeper into Gaza Strip

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israel's defense minister said Friday he has ordered ground forces to advance deeper into the Gaza Strip, vowing to hold more land until Hamas releases the remaining hostages it holds.

After retaking part of the strategic Netzarim corridor that divides Gaza's north from south, Israeli troops moved Thursday toward the northern town of Beit Lahiya and the southern border city of Rafah. The military said it had resumed enforcing a blockade on northern Gaza, including Gaza City.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was delivered a setback in his attempt to fire the country's domestic security chief. Hours after Netanyahu's Cabinet unanimously approved the firing of Ronen Bar, the Supreme Court ordered a halt to his dismissal until an appeal can be heard.

The court said it was delaying

the firing until an appeal could be heard no later than April 8. Netanyahu's office had said Bar's dismissal was effective April 10, but that it could come earlier if a replacement was found.

Israel's attorney general has ruled that the Cabinet has no legal basis to dismiss Bar.

A Shin Bet report into Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack that prompted the war acknowledged failures by the security agency. But it also said policies by Netanyahu's government created the conditions for the attack.

In his comments about Gaza on Friday, Defense Minister Israel Katz said operations there would continue "with increasing intensity until the hostages are released by Hamas."

The decision to sack Bar deepens a power struggle focused largely over who bears responsibility for the 2023 Hamas attack that sparked the war in Gaza.

White House eyes claiming 'state secrets' over flights

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Top leaders of President Donald Trump's administration are debating whether to invoke a "state secrets privilege" in response to a judge's questions about deportation flights carrying Venezuelan immigrants to El Salvador, a Justice Department official informed the judge on Friday ahead of a hearing.

Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche said in a court filing that there are "ongoing Cabinet-level discussions" about Chief Judge James Boasberg's demand for more information. The district judge ordered the Trump administration to either provide more details about the flights or assert a claim that dis-

closing the information would harm "state secrets."

The Republican administration has largely resisted the judge's request, calling it an "unnecessary judicial fishing" expedition. Boasberg dismissed its response as "woefully insufficient," increasing the possibility that he may hold administration officials in contempt of court.

Government lawyers filed Blanche's sworn statement hours before the judge was scheduled to hold a hearing for the case on Friday in Washington.

The Trump administration has transferred hundreds of Venezuelan immigrants to El Salvador under an 18th century wartime law. Flights were in the

air on March 15 when Boasberg issued an order temporarily barring the deportations and ordered planes to return to the U.S.

The Justice Department has said that the judge's oral directions did not count, that only his written order needed to be followed and that it couldn't apply to flights that had already left the U.S.

Trump and many Republican allies have called for impeaching Boasberg, who was nominated by President Barack Obama, a Democrat. In a rare statement earlier this week, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts said "impeachment is not an appropriate response to disagreement concerning a judicial decision."

Measles outbreak likely to last for months

Associated Press

As measles cases in West Texas are still on the rise two months after the outbreak began, local public health officials say they expect the virus to keep spreading for at least several more months and that the official case number is likely an undercount.

But there's a silver lining, officials say: More people have received a measles, mumps and rubella vaccination this year in Texas and New Mexico, which also has an outbreak, compared to last year — even if the number is not as high as they would like. And pharmacies across the U.S., especially in Texas, are seeing more demand for MMR shots.

As of Friday, the outbreak in Texas was up to 309 cases and one measles-related death, while New Mexico's case count was up to 42 and also one mea-

sles-related death. Forty-two people have been hospitalized across the two states.

Texas' outbreak, which has largely spread in undervaccinated Mennonite communities, could last a year based on studies of how measles previously spread in Amish communities in the U.S. Those studies showed outbreaks lasted six to seven months, said Katherine Wells, director of the public health department in Lubbock, Texas. Lubbock's hospitals have treated most of the outbreak's patients and the public health department is closely assisting with the response.

"It being so rural, now multistate, it's just going to take a lot more boots on the ground, a lot more work, to get things under control," Wells said during a media briefing this week. "It's not an isolated population."

The outbreak includes 14

Texas counties, two New Mexico counties and four probable cases in Oklahoma, where health officials said the first two were "associated" with the West Texas and New Mexico outbreaks.

Measles is one of the world's most contagious diseases. Its slow way of spreading makes it especially hard to contain and outbreaks can have multiple peaks, said Justin Lessler, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina's Gillings School of Global Public Health.

Many people spread the measles virus unknowingly for days before the telltale rash appears. The virus also can hang in the air for up to two hours after a sick person has left a room.

If the outbreak goes on until next January, it would end the United States' status of having eliminated measles, which is defined as 12 months without lo-

Education Department dismantling outlined

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Friday began sketching a road map for dismantling the Education Department, with other agencies taking over responsibility for federal student loans and programs serving students with disabilities.

The executive order Trump signed Thursday to do away with the department did not offer a timeline or instructions, but his administration appears poised to carve away all but the department's most vital operations.

Trump said student loans will be handled by the Small Business Administration, and "it will be serviced much better than it has in the past." He also said programs involving students with disabilities would be shifted to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Education Secretary Linda McMahon said she is preparing to relocate the department's core operations to other agencies and roll back federal regulations. In an opinion piece published Friday by Fox News Channel, she said abolishing the department "will not happen tomorrow," but she plans to pave the way.

The functions to be reassigned include the distribution of federal money to support low-income students and students with disabilities, the department's management of student financial aid, civil rights enforcement and data collection, she wrote.

Only Congress has the power to bring a full end to the Education Department. Republicans in Congress are planning legislation to eliminate the agency, though they face heavy opposition from Democrats.

No. 12 seed McNeese edges Clemson

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — McNeese coach Will Wade and his boombox-toting manager are moving on in March Madness after the 12th-seeded Cowboys held off late-charging No. 5 seed Clemson 69-67 on Friday in the first bracket buster of the NCAA Tournament.

Brando Murray scored 14 of his 21 points in a stifling first half, when the Southland Conference school from Lake Charles, La., held Clemson to 13 points. After falling behind by as many as 24, the Tigers rallied, erasing most of a 12-point deficit in the final minute before running out of time.

With its first NCAA Tournament victory, McNeese earned a second-round matchup on Saturday with fourth-seeded Purdue, a 75-63 winner over High Point.

Chris Shumate added 13 points and 11 rebounds for McNeese, which has been best-known this March for its viral, rapping manager and a renegade coach who has reportedly already lined up his next job — at NC State.

Purdue 75, High Point 63: Trey Kaufman-Renn had 21 points and eight rebounds, and fourth-seeded Purdue held off High Point for a victory in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

Big Ten player of the year Braden Smith added 20 points and six assists as Purdue (23-11) avoided a first-round exit after reaching the championship game last season. The Boilermakers will meet the winner of Clemson and McNeese State in the second round of the Midwest Region on Saturday.

D'Maurian Williams had 12 points for No. 13 seed High Point (29-6), which had won 14 straight. Trae Benham added 11 points.

Houston 78, SIU-Edwardsville 40: Milos Uzan scored 16 points, LJ Cryer added 15 and No. 1 seed Houston was able to rest up for the rest of the NCAA Tournament while romping past No. 16 seed SIU Edwardsville in the first round of the Midwest Region.

Ja'Vier Francis added 13 points and eight rebounds for the Big 12 champs, who will carry a 14-game winning streak into a second-round matchup with eighth-seeded Gonzaga. Houston (31-4) has won 26 of its last 27 overall.

Ray'Sean Taylor had 10 points for SIUE (22-12), which was just 2 of 24 from the 3-point arc in its first NCAA appearance.

Gonzaga 89, Georgia 68: Khalif Battle scored 24 points, Nolan Hickman had 18 and eighth-seeded Gonzaga routed Georgia in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

Braden Huff added 18 points on 8-for-11 shooting as Gonzaga (26-8) advanced to an intriguing second-round matchup with top-seeded Houston. The Cougars rolled to a 78-40 victory over SIU Edwardsville.

The Zags used a sharp, focused performance to move into the second round for the 22nd time since Mark Few took over as coach in 1999. They went 12 for 20 from 3-point range and shot 55% from the field overall.

Tennessee 77, Wofford 62: Chaz Lanier scored 29 points on 11-of-22 shooting and No. 2 seed Tennessee never trailed in a

victory over Wofford that sent the Volunteers to the second round of the NCAA Tournament for the fourth straight season.

Coach Rick Barnes' Vols (28-7) will play No. 7 seed UCLA on Saturday in the Midwest Region as they try to reach a third straight Sweet 16.

Zakai Zeigler had 12 points and 12 assists. He became Tennessee's career assist leader after setting the single-season record for assists at the Southeastern Conference Tournament.

No. 15 seed Wofford was making its sixth NCAA Tournament appearance as the Southern Conference Tournament champion but ended a run of reaching four straight second rounds. The Terriers' last first-round loss was in 2010.

Jackson Sivils led the Terriers (19-16) with 15 points. Corey Tripp scored 14, Jeremy Lorenz 12 and Justin Bailey 10.

UCLA 72, Utah St. 47: Skyy Clark and Eric Dailey Jr. each scored 14 points and No. 7 seed UCLA routed 10th-seeded Utah State to reach the second round of the NCAA Tournament for the fourth time in five seasons.

Aday Mara, a 7-foot-3 reserve center, added 10 points for coach Mick Cronin's Bruins (23-10), who will face second-seeded Tennessee on Saturday in the Midwest Region as they seek their fourth Sweet 16 appearance in the past five editions of March Madness.

Mason Falslev scored 17 points and Deyton Albury had 12 for Utah State (26-8), which reached its third consecutive NCAA Tournament — this time under Jarrod Calhoun, the Ag-

gies' third coach in that span.

Arkansas 79, Kansas 72: Jonas Aidoo scored 22 points to help 10th-seeded Arkansas to an opening-round NCAA Tournament victory over No. 7 seed Kansas in the latest meeting between two of college basketball's winningest coaches.

Johnell Davis added 18 points, including some crucial late free throws, to help John Calipari to his first tournament victory as Razorbacks coach. Freshman standout Boogie Fland played for the first time since having right thumb surgery in January and scored six points in 24 minutes.

Arkansas will play No. 2 seed St. John's in the second round of the West Region on Saturday.

Zeke Mayo had 18 points for Kansas (21-13), which has made 35 straight NCAA Tournaments and hadn't lost in the first round since 2006. AJ Storr finished with 15 points and Hunter Dickinson added 11 points and nine rebounds.

Drake 67, Missouri 57: Bennett Stirtz scored 21 points and No. 11 seed Drake, a team relying heavily on Division II transfers, held on after blowing most of a 15-point lead to beat sixth-seeded Missouri in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

Tavion Banks added 15 points and nine rebounds for the Bulldogs (31-3), who along with first-year coach Ben McCollum advanced to a second-round matchup with third-seeded Texas Tech on Saturday.

Caleb Grill had 14 points for Missouri (22-12). Tamar Bates had 10 before fouling out.

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STARS AND STRIPES

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Coach Pitino leads St. John's over Omaha

FROM PAGE 5

St. John's 83, Omaha 53:

Rick Pitino returned to Providence and picked up a March Madness victory with yet another school, coaching St. John's past Omaha and into a second-round matchup with longtime nemesis John Calipari.

RJ Luis Jr. had 22 points and eight rebounds for the second-seeded Red Storm, who recovered from a cold-shooting start to pull away early in the second half. That earned them a matchup against No. 10 seed Arkansas on Saturday.

But more delectable for basketball fans will be the pairing of Pitino and Calipari, two strong-willed Hall of Famers — and NCAA infraction magnets — who developed an unfriendly rivalry in the 2010s when Calipari was at Kentucky and Pitino was an hour away in Louisville.

Texas Tech 82, UNC-Wilmington 72: Kerwin Walton scored a career-high 27 points and No. 3 seed Texas Tech attempted an NCAA Tournament-record 46 3-pointers in beating No. 14 seed UNC Wilmington.

The Red Raiders raced to a 16-point lead, lost most of it by going cold in the final 6 1/2 minutes of the first half and then made enough plays down the stretch to recover after the Seahawks went ahead with about 14 minutes remaining.

Texas Tech (26-8) finished 13 for 46 behind the arc, breaking the tournament record of 43 attempts by Saint Joseph's in a 1997 second-round game

against Boston College. The 46 3s also set a school record.

Elijah Hawkins scored 14 for the Red Raiders and Darrion Williams had 13 to set up a second-round matchup with No. 11 seed Drake on Saturday.

Big 12 Player of the Year JT Toppin had 12 points and 10 rebounds for his 16th double-double of the season.

Nolan Hodge scored 18 points for UNC Wilmington (27-8). The Seahawks shot 41% from the floor.

Wisconsin 85, Montana 66:

Wisconsin grinded its way back into the March Madness win column, getting 19 points from John Blackwell and double-digit scoring from four others.

The third-seeded Badgers won in the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2022.

Next, coach Greg Gard's team will try to make the Sweet 16 for the first time in eight years with a game against BYU.

BYU 80, VCU 71: Igor Demin and Richie Saunders led BYU over VCU, giving first-year Cougars coach Kevin Young a better memory of Ball Arena than his last one.

The former Suns assistant watched the Denver Nuggets bounce Phoenix from the playoffs at this arena in 2023.

It was Saunders (16 points) and Demin (15) who propelled the sixth-seeded Cougars (25-9) into a Saturday showdown against third-seeded Wisconsin.

Zeb Jackson scored a season-high 23 points for the Rams (28-7), who reached the NCAA Tournament for the third time

in five years but haven't had a March Madness win since 2016.

Auburn 83, Alabama St. 63:

Mike Kelly made seven 3-pointers and scored 23 points, All-American Johni Broome added 14 points and 11 rebounds, and No. 1 seed Auburn beat 16th-seeded Alabama State.

Coach Bruce Pearl's Tigers (29-5) came in having lost three of four inside the power-packed SEC with a résumé still strong enough to earn the top overall seed. Auburn will play No. 9 seed Creighton in the second round of the South Region on Saturday.

Creighton 89, Louisville 75:

Jamiya Neal scored a career-high 29 points and had 12 rebounds, Steven Ashworth connected from well beyond the arc on the way to 22 points, and ninth-seeded Creighton beat No. 8 seed Louisville.

Coach Greg McDermott's Bluejays (25-10) won their fifth consecutive March Madness opener and beat a team ranked in the top 10 for the second time this season.

Louisville (27-8), despite its unimpressive seeding, entered at No. 10 in the AP Top 25.

Seeking its fourth Sweet 16 appearance in five years, Creighton will play No. 1 overall seed Auburn in the second round of the South Region on Saturday.

Texas A&M 80, Yale 71:

Texas A&M snuffed out hope of another Ivy League upset Thursday, sending Yale back to class with a victory behind a career-high 25 points along with

10 rebounds from big man Pharel Payne.

The fourth-seeded Aggies (23-10) were on a lot of "upset watch" lists, thanks mainly to going against a Yale team some thought might be even better than the one that pulled off a first-round shocker last year against Auburn.

But an upper-division team from the best conference in the country, the Southeastern, proved too much for the Yalies.

Coach Buzz Williams earned his second March Madness win in six years at College Station. A&M's next game is Saturday against Michigan.

John Poulakidas led 13th-seeded Yale with 23 points.

Michigan 68, UC San Diego 65:

Vladislav Goldin and Michigan proved a bit too much for UC San Diego when the Russian center scored 14 points and the fifth-seeded Wolverines overcame Tyler McGhie's 25 points to escape with a win.

McGhie's 3-point attempt at the buzzer with 7-footer Danny Wolf in his face hit the back iron.

Michigan advanced to face fourth-seeded Texas A&M in the South Region.

McGhie's bucket with 2:29 left gave the 12th-seeded Tritons their only lead at 65-63.

Tre Donaldson responded with a 3-pointer to restore Michigan's lead.

Goldin, who picked up his fourth foul at the 8:25 mark, grabbed an offensive rebound and was fouled with 19.3 seconds left. He sank both to make it 68-65.

Fewer than 1% of March Madness brackets perfect after 1st day

Associated Press

Fewer than 1% of NCAA Tournament brackets were still perfect after Thursday's 16-game slate, according to several services where fans attempt the all-but-impossible task of predicting every March Madness game correctly — or, barring that, win their office pools.

ESPN's tracker listed 25,802 perfect brackets remaining out of more than 24 million filled out on its site following the final game of the day, Texas Tech's win over UNC-Wilmington.

The NCAA said 0.0938% of more than 34 million brackets were still perfect.

The numbers were similar at

CBS Sports, where 0.09% of brackets were unblemished following the first day of action.

Yahoo Sports said 99.9% of its brackets had fallen short of perfection after 11th-seeded Drake beat No. 6 seed Missouri.

Earlier Thursday, about 6.6 million brackets were busted on ESPN when No. 12 seed

McNeese beat No. 5 seed Clemson 69-67.

Creighton — which saw a boost in this category because it played the first game of the day — was listed as ESPN's top bracket buster after its 89-75 win over Louisville. There were 13,339,089 ESPN brackets busted by that game.

Hornets use balanced scoring to beat Knicks

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — LaMelo Ball had 25 points and five Charlotte players scored in double figures as the Hornets beat the New York Knicks 115-98 Thursday night for their fourth victory in seven games.

Ball added eight assists as teammates Mark Williams (19 points, 14 rebounds), Miles Bridges (15 points, 10 rebounds), DaQuan Jeffries (14 points) and Nick Smith, Jr. (13 points) also reached double figures.

Charlotte snapped a two-game skid that included losses of more than 30 points.

The Hornets have lost five games by 30 or more points in the last month.

Charlotte (18-51) took the lead for good late in the first quarter and led by as many as 19 points.

O.G. Anunoby scored 25 points and Karl-Anthony Towns added 24 points and 10 rebounds for the Knicks, who have lost three of their last four

games and six of their last nine.

Pacers 105, Nets 99: Benedict Mathurin scored six of his 28 points in overtime and Indiana defeated Brooklyn.

Mathurin added a career-high 16 rebounds for the Pacers. Myles Turner added 23 points, 10 rebounds and five blocks.

Zaire Williams and D'Angelo Russell each scored 22 points for Brooklyn.

Indiana trailed 52-42 at halftime and outscored the Nets by four points in the third quarter and six in the fourth to force overtime tied at 91.

In overtime, Mathurin shot 2 for 3 from the field and 2 for 3 from the line.

Warriors 117, Raptors 114:

Jimmy Butler had 18 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists for his second triple-double with Golden State, and the Warriors held on to beat Toronto after Stephen Curry left the game with an injury.

Curry, who was held out of Tuesday's win over the Milwaukee Bucks to get rest, did not play the final 15 minutes after suffering a pelvic contusion. Curry was going for a rebound and got undercut before crashing hard to the floor.

He remained down for several moments before being helped to the locker room. He finished with 17 points.

Draymond Green added 21 points and seven rebounds for the Warriors. Quinten Post had 18 on six 3-pointers.

Scottie Barnes had 29 points and 10 rebounds for the Raptors. Immanuel Quickley scored 21 while Jakob Poeltl added 18 points and eight rebounds.

Bulls 128, Kings 116: Coby White scored 35 points as Chicago beat Sacramento.

Kevin Huerter scored 25 points while adding five rebounds, seven assists and four steals. Nikola Vucevic shot 9 for 14, including 4 for 5 from beyond the arc, to finish with 24 points.

Malik Monk led the way for

the Kings with 34 points and five assists. Sacramento also got 22 points and six rebounds from Trey Lyles.

The Bulls entered halftime down 64-55.

Vucevic paced the team in scoring in the first half with 11 points.

An 11-0 run in the third quarter turned a five-point deficit into a six-point lead for the Bulls. They outscored the Kings by 21 points in the final two quarters, as White led the way with 31 second-half points.

Bucks 118, Lakers 89: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 28 points and Milwaukee defeated short-handed Los Angeles.

Gary Trent Jr. had 23 points off the bench, Kyle Kuzma added 20 and the Bucks swept the season series with two comfortable wins eight days apart.

Bronny James had 17 points to reach double figures for the first time in 22 NBA games, but the Lakers had their nine-game home winning streak snapped.

Ex-coach charged with hacking for intimate photos of athletes

Associated Press

DETROIT — Former NFL and University of Michigan assistant football coach Matt Weiss hacked into the computer accounts of thousands of college athletes seeking intimate photos and videos, according to an indictment filed Thursday.

Weiss, who worked for the Baltimore Ravens before joining Michigan's staff in 2021, was charged with 14 counts of unauthorized computer access and 10 counts of identity theft.

The indictment was filed in federal court in Detroit.

Weiss was fired in 2023 as Michigan's co-offensive coordinator after failing to cooperate with the school's investigation of his access to computers.

His attorney did not respond to requests for comment.

From 2015 to 2023, Weiss gained access to the databases of more than 100 colleges and universities that were maintained by a third-party vendor, Keffer Development Services, and then downloaded personal information and medical data of more than 150,000 athletes, the indictment states.

The 14-page document portrays him as a computer whiz, saying Weiss "cracked the encryption protecting the passwords, assisted by research that he did on the internet."

Weiss then gained access to the social media, email and cloud storage accounts of more than 2,000 athletes as well as more than 1,300 students or alumni from schools across the country, according to the indictment.

Panama stuns US 1-0, eliminating Americans

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Cecilio Waterman scored a stunning goal in the fourth minute of second-half injury time, and Panama beat the three-time defending champion United States 1-0 on Thursday to reach the CONCACAF Nations League final.

Waterman took a pass down the right side from Adalberto Carrasquilla in front of a packed-in U.S. defense and fired a perfect right-footed diagonal shot past Matt Turner into the far left corner. Waterman's 11th international goal, on Panama's only shot on target on the night, advanced the Panamanians to a final Sunday against Mexico.

Waterman, a 33-year-old

striker who plays professionally in Chile, ripped off his jersey and hurdled the advertising end boards before climbing up onto a broadcast stage to celebrate with Thierry Henry, who looked just as stunned as the rest of the crowd at SoFi Stadium.

Waterman took his own step toward idol status as Panama beat the U.S. for the third straight time in competitive matches, following wins in a 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup semifinal and the group stage of last year's Copa America. Coach Thomas Christiansen's club has repeatedly exceeded expectations during his tenure, and this victory was only the latest remarkable achievement for Los Canalero.

Ovechkin scores 888th career NHL goal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin scored his 888th career goal to continue his pursuit of the NHL record, and the Washington Capitals became the first team to clinch a playoff berth by beating the Philadelphia Flyers 3-2 on Thursday night.

Ovechkin beat Samuel Ersson with 5:35 left in the first period to move eight goals back of passing Wayne Gretzky's career mark of 894. Chants of "Ovi! Ovi!" filled the arena as the goal counter in one corner flipped from 887 to 888.

Brandon Duhaime and Andrew Mangiapane also scored and Charlie Lindgren made 27 saves for the Capitals, who became the only team since the NHL playoffs expanded to 16 teams in 1979-'80 to be the first to clinch after being the last to get in the previous season.

Washington has won eight of its last nine games to reach 100 points and pass Winnipeg atop the standings.

The Flyers have gone the other way, losing nine of 11 to plunge into last place in the Metropolitan Division. Ryan Poehling and Sean Couturier scored, and Ersson allowed three goals on 16 shots.

Panthers 1, Blue Jackets 0, OT: Aleksander Barkov scored a power-play goal 29 seconds into overtime and Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 25 shots for his 49th career shutout to lead Florida to a victory over Columbus.

Florida swept the season series between the teams and has won eight straight against Columbus since Dec. 13, 2022.

Elvis Merzlikins, back in the lineup after missing two games for the birth of his second child, made 27 saves for Columbus, which has lost five straight and has fallen out of the Eastern Conference wild-card race.

Maple Leafs 4, Rangers 3: John Tavares scored twice and an added an assist, and Anthony Stolarz made 27 saves as Toron-

to beat the New York Rangers.

Bobby McMann and Matthew Kries also scored to help Toronto win its third straight game. Jake McCabe had three assists and William Nylander contributed two.

Will Borgen, Artemi Panarin and Chris Kreider scored for the Rangers, who lost their third game in a row at home in regulation and fell to 2-5-2 in their last nine overall.

Avalanche 5, Senators 1: Nathan MacKinnon, Brock Nelson, Cale Makar and Joel Kiviranta all scored in Colorado's first-period barrage and the Avalanche cruised to a victory over Ottawa.

Nelson finished with two goals and Scott Wedgewood made 15 saves.

Wedgewood's shutout bid being ended by Dylan Cozens' power-play goal with 4:41 left in the game.

The Avalanche chased Linus Ullmark from the game just 17:29 in after he allowed four goals on 13 shots.

Nelson scored his second of the night on the power play 1:54 into the middle frame after tipping Artturi Lehkonen's shot to beat Anton Forsberg, who allowed one goal on 19 shots in relief of Ullmark.

Flames 5, Devils 3: Jonathan Huberdeau scored with 3:20 left to play to lift Calgary to a come-from-behind victory.

Matt Coronato, Connor Zary, Daniil Miromanov and Nazem Kadri also had goals for Calgary, which erased a two-goal deficit in the third period with four unanswered goals for its second straight road win.

Nico Hischier recorded a goal and an assist for New Jersey, extending his points streak to five straight games. Erik Haula and Paul Cotter also scored and Jacob Markstrom stopped 23 shots.

With the Flames trailing 3-2, Miromanov tied it with his second goal of the season on assists from Blake Coleman and Joel

Farabee with 4:20 left.

Huberdeau's unassisted snap shot one minute later put Calgary up with its 26th goal of the season.

Kadri closed it out for the Flames with an empty-netter with 12 seconds left.

Blues 4, Canucks 3, OT: Philip Broberg scored 3:42 into overtime and St. Louis beat Vancouver for their fourth straight victory.

Tyler Tucker and Dylan Holloway scored 24 seconds apart for the Blues in the third period. Zack Bolduc also had a goal, and Jordan Binnington made 15 saves as St. Louis moved two points ahead of Vancouver for the second wild card in the Western Conference.

Brock Boeser scored twice and Kiefer Sherwood also had a goal in the third period for the Canucks. Boeser's second goal tied it 3-3 with 4 seconds left in regulation.

Lightning 3, Stars 2, SO: Gage Goncalves scored Tampa Bay's third goal in the fourth round of the shootout and the Lightning beat Dallas.

Brandon Hagel and Anthony Cirelli had a goal and an assist each for the Lightning, who have won three consecutive games. Andrei Vasilevskiy made 22 saves through overtime and two in the shootout.

Kings 3, Blackhawks 1: Trevor Moore and Alex Turcotte scored in the first period, and Los Angeles held on to beat Chicago for their sixth win in seven games.

Joel Edmundson fired from deep in the Kings' zone and scored into an empty net with 19 seconds left to seal the win.

Darcy Kuemper made 17 saves in his fifth straight start to help Los Angeles tighten its grip on a playoff spot. Kuemper has allowed just four goals and has two shutouts in his five-game run.

Ducks 4, Predators 1: Trevor Zegras had a goal and an assist on his 24th birthday, John

Gibson made 33 saves and Anaheim defeated Nashville.

Jackson LaCombe, Troy Terry and Alex Killorn also scored for the Ducks. Mason McTavish added two assists.

Utah Hockey Club 5, Sabres 2: Dylan Guenther scored on a rebound with 5:47 to play to put Utah ahead to stay in a win over Buffalo.

Guenther's team-leading 25th goal of the season gave Utah a 3-2 lead before the team added a pair of empty-netters.

Mikhail Sergachev had two goals, including one of the empty-netters, and Logan Cooley also scored a goal. Karel Vejmeka stopped 25 shots.

Jets 4, Oilers 3, OT: Kyle Connor scored 1:13 into overtime to lift Winnipeg over Edmonton, who lost Connor McDavid and Stuart Skinner to injuries.

Cole Perfetti, Josh Morrissey and Brandon Tanev also scored for the Jets, who have won four of their last five. Connor Hellebuyck made 20 saves.

Jeff Skinner had a pair of goals and Zach Hyman also scored for the Oilers, whose three-game winning streak was snapped.

Golden Knights 5, Bruins 1: Pavel Dorofeyev scored three times for his second career hat trick and Las Vegas beat Boston.

Brett Howden and Ivan Barbashev also scored for Vegas, which extended its Pacific Division lead to three points over Edmonton. Adin Hill made 18 saves.

Hurricanes 3, Sharks 1: Sebastian Aho, Seth Jarvis and Sean Walker each scored a goal, Frederik Andersen made 24 saves and Carolina extended their winning streak to eight games with a victory over San Jose.

The Hurricanes broke a 1-all tie on Aho's 26th goal less than five minutes into the third period. Walker scored at 14:18 to make it 3-1.