

US maintains strong force in Caribbean

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military continues to maintain a presence in the Caribbean Sea to strike alleged drug traffickers with five warships and thousands of troops.

That does not include the Navy's newest and world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, which left the region in mid-February and is now operating in the Middle East. The U.S. and Israel launched extensive strikes against Iran on Feb. 28 following months of stalled negotiations over the country's nuclear program.

The Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group is operating in the Caribbean, a Navy official confirmed Thursday. The official was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The Amphibious Ready

Group includes the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima and amphibious transport dock ships USS Fort Lauderdale and USS San Antonio.

The guided-missile cruisers USS Gettysburg and USS Lake also are patrolling the region as part of Operation Southern Spear, the official said.

The 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit also is part of the group, which includes more than 4,500 Marines and sailors, according to the Navy.

As of late 2025 and early 2026, there were as many as 11 warships and as many as 10,000 troops.

Shortly after taking office, President Donald Trump designated several drug cartels as terrorist organizations, including Venezuela's Tren de Aragua.

His administration has asserted that the U.S. is in an

"armed conflict" with cartels and will treat their members as "unlawful combatants." The administration, however, has offered little evidence to support its claims of killing "narcoterrorists."

The death toll from the Trump administration's campaign against alleged traffickers has risen to at least 157 people since the strikes began in early September in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean.

In October, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced the deployment of the Ford, along with accompanying ships USS Mahan, USS Bainbridge and USS Winston S. Churchill, to the Caribbean. At the time, nearly 20% of the Navy's deployed warships were concentrated in the region.

The destroyers USS Gravelly and USS Stockdale were also previously patrolling the re-

gion. The official would not speak about their locations.

The U.S. resumed strikes in late January after largely backing off in the region following the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Jan. 3.

Trump said at a regional summit in Doral, Fla., on March 7 that the U.S. and Latin American countries are collaborating to combat cartels and encouraged the use of military force.

"The only way to defeat these enemies is by unleashing the power of our militaries," the president said during the "Shield of the Americas" summit. "We have to use our military. You have to use your military."

The summit came a day after U.S. Southern Command said it supported Ecuadorean forces in operations against "Designated Terrorist Organizations" within the country.

More than 2K Marines, USS Tripoli ordered to Mideast

Staff and wire reports

More than 2,000 Marines and at least one warship are headed from the Pacific to the Middle East, multiple news outlets reported Friday.

One U.S. official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told The Associated Press that roughly 2,500 Marines from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and the amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli have been ordered to deploy.

ABC News reported that the deployment will include three amphibious ships. Tripoli has recently been operating with Tripoli Amphibious Ready Group, including amphibious transport docks USS New Or-

leans and USS San Diego, in the Philippine Sea.

Tripoli was participating in the three-week Iron Fist exercise in Japan as recently as March 9.

The Wall Street Journal, which was first to report the news, cited three officials who said Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth approved a U.S. Central Command request for an element of an amphibious ready group and attached Marine expeditionary unit.

The Pentagon did not respond to a request for comment.

Tripoli would join the world's largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford, as well as the USS Abraham Lincoln as part of

an armada of American warships, stealth fighters and air defense systems in the region. About 50,000 troops have been deployed.

It is unclear what assets are being brought on Tripoli. The 855-foot America-class amphibious assault ship in 2022 set a record when it loaded 16 F-35 fighter jets. The ship can also carry MV-22 Osprey tiltrotors and a variety of helicopters such as the MH-60S Seahawk.

The 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit is based on Okinawa. Marine expeditionary units integrate air and ground combat elements into a single force, making it suited for amphibious operations. Aside from the stan-

dard tasks such units are trained for, like humanitarian assistance and port seizure operations, the 31st MEU is also trained for limited scale raids and the seizure of maritime platforms, according to its website.

The deployment does not necessarily mean U.S. troops will conduct a ground operation in Iran.

The deployment comes as fighting disrupts trade through the Strait of Hormuz, a key route for global oil exports.

Contributing: *Stars and Stripes* reporters Seth Robson, Matthew Adams and Alison Bath; *The Associated Press*.

N. Korea's Kim, daughter observe drill

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, accompanied by his teenage daughter, observed a live-fire test of multiple rocket launch systems, state media reported Sunday, a likely response to ongoing U.S.-South Korean military training that North Korea views as an invasion rehearsal.

The official Korean Central News Agency reported that Kim watched the strike drill involving 12 600 mm caliber, ultraprecision rocket launchers off North Korea's east coast on Saturday.

South Korea's military said

Saturday it detected about 10 ballistic missiles fired from North Korea's capital region toward the eastern sea. South Korea's national security council called the launches a provocation that violated U.N. Security Council resolutions that bans any ballistic activities by North Korea.

KCNA cited Kim as saying that the drill would expose enemies within the 260-mile striking range, to "uneasiness" and give them "a deep understanding of the destructive power of tactical nuclear weapon," KCNA said. He apparently referred to South Korea and U.S. troops stationed

in South Korea.

"If this weapon is used, the opponent's military infrastructure within its striking range can never survive," Kim said, according to KCNA.

KCNA photos showed Kim and his daughter, reportedly named Kim Ju Ae and aged about 13, walking near huge olive-green launch trucks and looking at weapons being launched from them. The girl has been accompanying her father at numerous high-profile events like missile tests and military parades since late 2022, stoking outside speculation that she's being groomed

as his heir.

Experts say North Korea's large-sized rocket launchers blur the boundaries between artillery systems and ballistic missiles because they can create their own thrust and are guided during delivery. North Korea has said some of these systems are capable of delivering nuclear warheads.

The springtime U.S.-South Korean Freedom Shield training, a computer-simulated command post exercise, is to run through Thursday. North Korea often reacts to the exercise with its own weapons tests and fiery rhetoric.

Pyongyang warns Tokyo over its long-range missiles

BY YOOJIN LEE

Stars and Stripes

North Korea on Friday condemned Japan's plan to deploy upgraded long-range missiles across the country, calling the move a dangerous military escalation, according to the communist regime's state-run media.

The criticism was reported by the Korean Central News Agency, which said the deployments would allow Japan to target neighboring countries from

multiple locations.

The missile deployments are "undoubtedly an extremely dangerous military act," KCNA said. "If this becomes reality, Japan would be deploying missiles capable of targeting neighboring countries across the entire nation."

Japan's Ministry of Defense announced Monday that a Type-12 missile unit will be deployed by March 31 to Camp Kengun on Kyushu, the south-

ernmost of Japan's four main islands.

Tokyo also plans to station a Type-12 unit at Camp Fuji by March 2028 and deploy high-velocity gliding missiles to that site beginning this month.

The upgraded Type-12 has a range of about 620 miles and can be launched from land, sea or air platforms, according to Japanese defense officials. From Kyushu, the upgraded weapon could reach parts of China's

coastline and North Korea.

Japan insists its missiles are for "defensive purposes" but are capable of extended range and multiple operational roles, according to KCNA.

"Despite strong concerns and criticism from the public, if Japan continues to act inappropriately and recklessly as it is now, it will inevitably cross the 'red line' that will bring themselves into 'submergence,'" KCNA said.

Senate Dems file war powers resolution over Cuba

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats have filed legislation that would prevent the U.S. from attacking Cuba without congressional approval as they seek to force a vote on President Donald Trump's stated goal of a "takeover" of the Caribbean country.

Democrats have repeatedly used war powers resolutions to force debate on Trump's foreign policy moves, though Republi-

cans have so far mostly backed the president. The resolution filed Thursday by Democratic Sens. Tim Kaine, Ruben Gallego and Adam Schiff would require the president to remove the military from any hostilities with Cuba and could potentially receive a vote by the end of the month.

"Only Congress has the power to declare war under the Constitution, but he operates with the belief that the U.S. military is a

palace guard, ordering military action in the Caribbean, Venezuela, and Iran without Congress' authorization or any explanation for his actions to the American people," Kaine said in a statement.

Trump said earlier in the week that Secretary of State Marco Rubio was negotiating with Cuba's leadership as the country faces a crippling energy crisis that has been exacerbated by a U.S. blockade of the island.

"It may be a friendly takeover, it may not be a friendly takeover," Trump told reporters at a news conference in Florida. He added that he and Rubio would focus on that goal after the war with Iran.

The U.S. for decades has had a tense relationship with Cuba, but Trump's turn to using military action to take out foreign opponents has raised anticipations that the island could be next.

'He was proud to put his uniform on and serve'

Pentagon identifies 6 airmen lost in KC-135 crash in Iraq during campaign against Iran

Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon on Saturday identified six airmen killed when their KC-135 Stratotanker crashed in western Iraq while supporting Operation Epic Fury, the U.S. campaign with Israel against Iran.

The airmen were Maj. John A. Klinner, 33, of Auburn, Ala.; Capt. Ariana G. Savino, 31, of Covington, Wash.; and Tech. Sgt. Ashley B. Pruitt, 34, of Bardstown, Ky. — who were assigned to the 6th Air Refueling Wing at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida — and Capt. Seth R. Koval, 38, of Mooresville, Ind.; Capt. Curtis J. Angst, 30, of Wilmington, Ohio; and Tech. Sgt. Tyler H. Simmons, 28, of Columbus, Ohio — who were assigned to the 121st Air Refueling Wing at Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base in Ohio.

The refueling aircraft went down in friendly airspace at about 2 p.m. Eastern time on Thursday. The circumstances of the crash remain under investi-

gation, though U.S. Central Command said it was not caused by hostile or friendly fire.

Klinner — a pilot from Alabama who was promoted in January — had been deployed for less than a week when the crash occurred, his brother-in-law, James Harrill, told The Associated Press on Saturday.

He is survived by his wife, Libby Klinner, and three young children — 7-month-old twins and a 2-year-old son — according to the report.

"It's kind of heartbreaking to say: He was just a really good dad and really loved his family a lot — like a lot," Harrill said.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., issued a statement expressing condolences to Savino's family after the airmen's names were released.

"I am deeply grateful for her courage and sacrifice in service to our country," Murray wrote. "Our servicemembers put their lives on the line to keep our country safe — remarkable women

like Capt. Savino represent the absolute best of our state and country."

Pruitt had served in the Air Force since 2017 and deployed four times, according to WLKY News in Louisville, Ky.

"Praying for the family and friends of TSgt. Ashley Pruitt of Bardstown," Rep. Andy Barr, R-Ky., said in a statement Saturday. "God bless her memory and her ultimate sacrifice in Operation Epic [Fury] to rid the world of the largest state sponsor of terror. Her legacy will never be forgotten."

Pruitt is the second service member from Kentucky killed during the operation. Sgt. Benjamin N. Pennington, 26, of Glendale, died March 8 from injuries he suffered in a March 1 attack on Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia.

In a statement posted to Facebook on Saturday, Koval's family said he "was truly the most amazing husband, father, son, brother, friend, and Airman. He loved

what he did, and he was proud to put his uniform on and serve others. He grew up dreaming about becoming a pilot and to stand beside him as he made his dreams come true was an honor."

Angst, a KC-135 pilot, held a bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering from the University of Cincinnati, according to WBNS-TV in Columbus, Ohio.

He enlisted in the Ohio Air National Guard in 2015 as a vehicle maintenance technician before earning his commission in 2021 and qualifying as a refueling pilot in 2024, the CBS affiliate reported Saturday.

The family of Simmons — the youngest of the six airmen — said in a statement that "Tyler's smile could light up any room."

"His strong presence would fill it," they wrote Saturday. "His parents, grandparents, family and friends are grief stricken for the loss of life."

The deaths bring to 13 the number of U.S. service members killed in Operation Epic Fury.

Gulf Arab nations intercept new Iranian missiles, drones

Associated Press

CAIRO — Gulf Arab states reported new missile and drone attacks on Sunday after Iran threatened to widen its campaign and called for the evacuation of three major ports in the United Arab Emirates as the war in the Middle East, now in its third week, expands further.

Israel and the United States attacked Iran on Feb. 28, saying they were striking nuclear and military sites and encouraging the Iranian people to rise against their leaders. Iran has responded with attacks against Israel and neighboring countries in the Persian Gulf.

Israel said it continued to strike Iran on Sunday as Bah-

rain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE told residents they were working to intercept incoming projectiles, a day after Iran threatened three Emirati ports, the first time it has done so against a neighboring country's non-U.S. assets.

Iran has fired hundreds of missiles and drones at the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman during the war. It says it targets U.S. assets, even as Iranian strikes are reported at civilian sites such as airports and oil fields.

Though their air defenses have intercepted most, the war has caused significant damage and rattled economies in the Gulf countries.

US strikes strategic island as Iran war enters Week 3

Stars and Stripes

U.S. forces struck more than 90 targets on Iran's Kharg Island on Friday, U.S. Central Command said in a post on X on Saturday, the 15th day of the conflict.

The small coral island about 21 miles off Iran's coast is the primary terminal through which nearly all of Iran's oil exports pass.

A Friday post by President Donald Trump on Truth Social said "for reasons of decency, I have chosen NOT to wipe out the Oil Infrastructure on the Island," but that the decision would be reconsidered if transit through the Strait of Hormuz continues to be threatened.

That was followed by a Saturday morning post in which the president said "many countries" would be sending warships in conjunction with the U.S. "to keep the Strait open and safe."

The president also said "Hopefully China, France, Japan, South Korea, the UK, and others" affected by the strait's effective closure would send ships.

Energy Secretary Chris Wright told NBC he has been "in dialogue" with some of the countries, and said he expected China "will be a constructive partner" in reopening the strait through which one-fifth of global oil exports normally pass. But as of Sunday there had been no commitments from the countries.

Russian strike on Kyiv kills 4 as talks stalled

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A combined Russian missile and drone attack on the Kyiv region killed at least four people and wounded 15, a Ukrainian official said Saturday, after the United States postponed Russia-Ukraine talks due to the war with Iran.

The attack hit four districts, damaging residential buildings, educational institutions, enterprises and critical infrastructure, the head of the regional administration, Mykola Kalashnyk, wrote in a social media post. He said three of the wounded were critical.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the main

target of the strikes was the energy infrastructure of the Kyiv region. He said Russia launched around 430 drones and 68 missiles.

Russia's Defense Ministry on Saturday said the nighttime strikes targeted energy and industrial facilities serving Ukraine's armed forces, as well as military airfields.

The U.S. has postponed its sponsored talks planned this week between the two sides due to the war in the Middle East.

As U.S. and Israeli missiles and bombs rain on Iran, Russia has responded with words of indignation but no action to support its ally. Moscow's failure to help another ally, after the 2024

ouster of former Syrian ruler Bashar Assad and January's U.S. arrest of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, highlighted the limits of its influence.

Russia is already profiting from a surge in global energy prices, and could hope that the Mideast war will detract attention from Ukraine, deplete Western arsenals and force NATO allies to reduce military support for Kyiv.

Zelenskyy on Saturday called on Kyiv's partners to pay "one hundred percent attention" to the need to boost the production of air defense missiles.

"Russia will try to exploit the war in the Middle East to cause even greater destruction here in

Europe, in Ukraine," he said in a post on social media.

"We must be fully aware of the real level of the threat and prepare accordingly, namely: in Europe, we need to develop the production of air defense missiles — especially those capable of countering ballistic threats — as well as all other systems necessary to truly protect lives," he said.

Kyiv is also awaiting White House approval for a major drone production agreement proposed by Ukraine last year, Zelenskyy said Thursday, as countries scramble to modernize their air defenses after the Iran war exposed shortcomings.

US flag raised at embassy in Venezuela

Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — The American flag was raised Saturday over the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela for the first time since 2019, a move that highlighted the recent shift in relations between the two countries since then President Nicolás Maduro was captured by American troops in January.

Though the flag is now waving, the building is undergoing renovations and it remains unclear when it will fully reopen to the public.

The move comes after several statements from President Donald Trump in support of Maduro's successor, acting President Delcy Rodríguez, who has continually tried to keep negotiations open with the American government since the capture of her predecessor.

The flag was raised "exactly seven years after it was taken down," the U.S. Embassy team said in a statement published on its social media channels.

The American flag being

raised drew immediate attention from local residents.

"It's a good thing, really, what a joy," Caracas resident Luz Verónica López told a reporter. "Other countries must come back too because that's what we need; progress, to move forward with good relations with the rest of the world, as it should be."

Alessandro Di Benedetto, another Caracas resident, noted the overwhelmingly positive atmosphere among those witnessing the moment.

"I found several people here surprised and happy because today they raised the U.S. flag at the embassy," he said. "This is positive; this is another step."

Despite the initiative, large chunks of Venezuelan society and the political establishment remain critics of Trump, his decision to forcefully remove Maduro from office and jail him in New York with his wife, and growing U.S. influence in the South American country's oil industry.

Taiwan reports increased Chinese aircraft presence

Associated Press

HONG KONG — Taiwan saw a surge of Chinese military planes near the island, its defense ministry said Sunday, after a sharp drop in flights over the past two weeks had sparked discussions among observers.

The ministry detected 26 Chinese military aircraft around the island on Saturday, with 16 of them entering its northern, central and southwestern Air Defense Identification Zone. Seven naval ships were spotted around the island, it reported.

The increased number of aircraft came after the ministry reported a fall that left analysts scratching their heads about what China's military may be up to.

Taiwan didn't report any Chinese military planes that went beyond the median line and entered the zone for a week from Feb. 27 to March 5. After two were detected on March 6, the next four days had none. Such flights resumed in small numbers between Wednesday and Friday.

The drop coincided with the annual meeting of China's legislature. While such flights have fallen in the past during major events and public holidays, this year's fall was more prominent than in the past.

Analysts said the meeting could not be the sole reason behind the recent drop. Another potential factor could be a desire to calm the waters with Washington weeks before a visit by President Donald Trump. The White House has said that Trump would travel to China from March 31 to April 2, though Beijing has not officially confirmed that.

Some observers also suggested the decline may be driven by a shift to a next phase in China's military training and modernization, with the army appearing to be exploring a new model for joint training between its forces.

China has vowed to seize the island, by force if necessary. Over the years, Beijing has sent warplanes and navy vessels toward the island on a near-daily basis.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Judge rejects challenge to new US House districts

MO JEFFERSON CITY — A Missouri court has rejected a legal challenge to new U.S. House districts backed by President Donald Trump that are aimed at helping Republicans win an additional seat in the midterm elections.

Opponents of the new districts claimed they violated a state constitutional provision requiring districts to be compact. But Jackson County Circuit Judge Adam Caine rejected that in a ruling Thursday.

Although the decision marked a victory for Republicans, a separate legal challenge remains pending at the Missouri Supreme Court alleging that mid-decade redistricting is unconstitutional. Opponents also have submitted over 300,000 petition signatures in an attempt to force a statewide vote on the new congressional map.

Missouri is one of several states targeted for congressional redistricting by Trump.

Lawmakers approve money to buy waterfall

OR SCOTT MILLS — The state of Oregon may soon have some new public property: A spectacular waterfall, beloved by generations, that was recently put up for sale on Redfin.

Abiqua Falls — known for its 92-foot vertical drop over a columnar basalt cliff — has been privately owned for over a century but open to the public. Its owner, a nonprofit that supports a community of Benedictine monks, put it on the market earlier this year.

The listing worried fans of the natural wonder. But at the tail end of the legislative session this month, a bipartisan group of lawmakers stepped in and approved \$2.1 million to buy the falls and its surrounding land.

“It’s not every day where you see a waterfall come up for sale on Redfin or Realtor.com with no price,” said Travis Williams, president of the Willamette River Preservation Trust, a conservation nonprofit. “The public was really confused and fearful that the site would be closed off.”

The waterfall is about 30 miles east of the state capital, Salem. It’s reached by a rough, unpaved road and short, steep hike — so steep that previous visitors have left ropes in some spots for assistance.

State halts permitting for weekend rallies at Capitol

MT HELENA — Organizers of the upcoming “No Kings” rally in Helena say that a new state rule banning permits for weekend rallies on the Capitol grounds violates their First Amendment rights. State officials countered that the new rule, quietly instituted just last month, was intended to save money.

The update to permitting guidelines on the Montana.gov site, which has not been previously reported, states that public events requiring a permit “may only occur on weekdays and between the hours of 7 a.m. and 6 p.m., excluding holidays.”

The revisions apply to all state-owned or leased spaces or grounds at the Capitol Complex. The policy requires a permit for any public event that uses “state resources, requires setup of any

structures, materials, displays, or requires clean-up.” A public event is defined as “any event that is open to the public and to which the public will have full access.”

The Capitol Complex has long been a preferred location for protests, government press conferences, ceremonies and other gatherings, including “No Kings” rallies that have drawn thousands of protesters to Helena, most recently on a Saturday last October. The next nationwide “No Kings” rally is scheduled for Saturday, March 28.

Clyburn will run for 18th term in Congress

SC COLUMBIA — U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, the dean of South Carolina’s Democrats, said Thursday he will run for an 18th House term, a move that could position him as an influential elder statesman in Congress if his party regains the majority in November.

The decision by the 85-year-old cuts against calls for generational change within the party. Clyburn is one of several veteran Democrats running again instead of stepping aside for younger politicians. He is among the oldest Democrats serving in Washington, and the only member of the last Democratic leadership team who is looking to stick around.

NASA clears moon rocket for launch in April

FL CAPE CANAVERAL — NASA cleared its moon rocket on Thursday for an April launch with four astronauts after completing the latest round of repairs.

The 322-foot rocket will roll out of the hangar and back to the

pad this week at Kennedy Space Center, leading to a launch attempt as early as April 1. It will mark humanity’s first trip to the moon in more than 50 years.

The Artemis II crew should have blasted off on a lunar fly-around earlier this year, but fuel leaks and other problems with the Space Launch System rocket interfered. Although NASA managed to plug the hydrogen fuel leaks in February, a helium-flow issue forced the space agency to return the rocket to the Vehicle Assembly Building for repairs, bumping the mission to April.

The space agency has only six days at the beginning of April to launch before standing down until April 30 into early May.

Foxy stowaway travels from England to US

NY NEW YORK — A red fox somehow slipped onto a cargo ship that traveled from Southampton, England, to New York, where the animal is now in the Bronx Zoo’s care.

The zoo said that the 11-pound male fox appears healthy after early examinations.

“He seems to be settling in well,” said Keith Lovett, the zoo’s director of animal programs. “It’s gone through a lot.”

It’s not clear how the animal got on the ship full of automobiles, which left Southampton on Feb. 4, according to the zoo. U.S. Customs and Border Protection said the ship’s crew discovered the furry passenger while traveling to the Port of New York and New Jersey, where the vessel arrived Feb. 18. Officials brought the fox to the zoo the next day. He’s estimated to be 2 years old.

— From wire reports

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Abreu hits 3-run homer to lift Venezuela

Associated Press

Wilyer Abreu watched the ball leave the park and tossed his bat high in the air. His Venezuelan teammates streamed out of the dugout in celebration. The comeback was on, and the win over the reigning World Baseball Classic champion Japan was within reach.

Japan, its 11-game WBC winning streak on the line, held a 5-4 lead in the sixth inning of Saturday's thrilling quarterfinal matchup in Miami when Abreu put his team ahead with the biggest swing of the game: a three-run shot off Hiromi Itoh that sent the loan Depot Park crowd into a passionate roar and helped clinch Venezuela's 8-5 win and first WBC semifinal appearance in 17 years.

"That was an exciting moment," Abreu said in a postgame television interview. "I tried to at least tie the game with a sac fly. He gave me a really good pitch to hit. I made good contact. I'm very excited for this win. Now in the semifinals I hope I can do the same thing I did today."

Venezuela faces unbeaten Italy on Monday, a day after the U.S. plays the Dominican Republic.

Shohei Ohtani's third home run of the tournament wasn't enough for Japan. Ohtani, the 2023 WBC MVP, led off the bottom of the first by lifting a 2-1 slider from Ranger Suárez 427 feet to center after Ronald Acuña Jr. homered on the second pitch from Yoshinobu Yamamoto, driving a fastball 401 feet to right-center for his second home run of the WBC.

Enmanuel De Jesus pitched 2½ scoreless innings for the win, and Daniel Palencia got the save, ending Japan's fate by getting Ohtani to pop out for the final out. He dejectedly detached his batting gloves, took off his helmet and headed down the dugout steps past shocked teammates who leaned on the railing and stared at the celebrating Venezuelans.

Japan led 5-2 after a four-run third in which Shota Morishita, who replaced the injured Seiya Suzuki at center field, hit a tie-

breaking, three-run homer off Suárez. The veteran left-hander who picked up a win in a group stage game against the Netherlands pitched 2⅔ innings on Saturday, allowing three hits, five runs and two home runs.

Ohtani was intentionally walked ahead of Morishita's homer, but didn't come through in his final three plate appearances, striking out in the fourth and seventh innings before making the final out in a 1-2-3 ninth.

Maikel Garcia sparked the comeback with a two-run homer in the fifth. Abreu followed with his first homer of the tournament, a 409-foot drive to right that put his team ahead for good.

Abreu, a two-time Gold Glove-winning right fielder for the Boston Red Sox, is hitting .294 with six RBIs in five WBC games.

He described Saturday's moment as one of the best in his career — but he's no stranger to epic performances.

Abreu hit a grand slam and inside-the-park home run in the same game against the Cincin-

nati Reds last year, becoming the sixth player in major league history and the second Red Sox player since 1939 to accomplish that. The inside-the-park home run was the first by a Boston player in Fenway Park since Jacoby Ellsbury on Sept. 19, 2011.

On Saturday, in a game with much higher stakes, Abreu said the team fed off the energy of the Venezuelan fans. They stood on their feet most of the game, cheering and banging drums after each play.

"I think that the crowd today and every game that we have played in this WBC, the fans have been great, incredible," Abreu said. "You can feel the vibes. You can feel the support from the stands and from all the Venezuelans at home watching the game on TV."

Abreu and his teammates know they're not done. Venezuela will face Italy in the semifinals but also clinched a spot in the six-nation field for the 2028 Olympic baseball tournament, along with the United States and the Dominicans.

Italy remains unbeaten, advances to WBC semifinals

Associated Press

HOUSTON—Warm up the espresso machine and chill the wine, Italy is heading to the World Baseball Classic semifinals.

The Azzurri continued their perfect WBC run with an 8-6 win over Puerto Rico on Saturday to earn their first trip to the semifinals.

"It's amazing," Italy manager Francisco Cervelli said. "This is great. This is one of the best chapters of my life. It's incredible. This group, it's phenomenal."

They advance to Miami to face Venezuela, which knocked off defending champion Japan later Saturday, on Monday night.

Italy didn't homer Saturday after hitting a dozen through its first four wins — and downing es-

presso shots after each dinger. But its offense still packed enough of a jolt to send the Puerto Ricans home after they had made the quarterfinals for a sixth time.

J.J. D'Orazio doubled with three RBIs and Andrew Fischer drove in two runs as Italy kept up its charmed run. The Azzurri trailed only briefly after a leadoff home run by Willi Castro before scoring four runs in the first inning to go on top for good. Puerto Rico rallied late, scoring four runs in the eighth, but Greg Weissert allowed one hit in a scoreless ninth for a five-out save.

Cervelli and the players credited the win over the U.S. as the confidence boost this team needed in this history-making run.

"The key was the victory

against USA," Cervelli said. "Those guys beat one of the best teams in the world, best players in the world. Now they're gonna believe."

Italy's success in this tournament is huge for a country in which baseball isn't nearly as popular as it is in many of the countries competing in the WBC.

"I don't think it would be hyperbole to say this is the best day in Italian baseball history," Pasquantino said.

The team has received some criticism because most of the roster is comprised of Italian-Americans, many of whom have never even been to Italy. The players have heard that and brushed it off, saying getting a chance to represent Italy in this tournament has helped them grow clos-

er to their heritage.

Andrew Fischer, who drove in two runs in Saturday's victory, grew up on the Jersey Shore and is fiercely proud of being from New Jersey and of his Italian heritage. He's so proud being from New Jersey that he has multiple tattoos on his left arm paying homage to the state. While the tattoos are meant to highlight his home state, prominently featured in that ink is one of the most famous Italian Americans of all: Frank Sinatra.

"Being here and representing it definitely has brought some light to it in my life," he said.

Now these plucky players will try to keep their undefeated run going and continue to impress the people in the country they represent.

Arizona beats Houston for Big 12 title

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Brayden Burries scored 21 points, including a pair of free throws with 8.3 seconds left, and second-ranked Arizona held off No. 5 Houston 79-74 on Saturday night in a rematch of last year's Big 12 Tournament title game won by the Cougars.

Koa Peat also had 21 points and Jaden Bradley followed his game-winner in the semifinals against Iowa State with 13 for the No. 1 seed Wildcats (32-2), who head into the NCAA Tournament having won nine straight games — six against ranked opponents.

Joseph Tugler had 20 points and 10 rebounds for the second-seeded Cougars (28-6). Mercy Miller added 13 points.

Houston, which beat the Wildcats 72-64 in its title game debut a year ago, trailed 75-66 with just over a minute to go before Miller and Milos Uzan hit 3-pointers on consecutive possessions.

But when Peat missed a jum-

per with 22 seconds to go, Arizona big man Motiejus Krivas gathered the rebound and was fouled under the bucket. The 7-foot-2 junior from Lithuania calmly made both free throws to extend the Wildcats' lead.

No. 1 Duke 74, No. 10 Virginia 70: Isaiah Evans scored 20 points, Cameron Boozer made two free throws with 3.9 seconds to seal the game and host Duke defeated Virginia for its second straight Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament championship under coach Jon Scheyer and its third title in the past four years.

Cayden Boozer had 16 points, and Cameron Boozer finished with 13 points, eight rebounds and eight assists as the Blue Devils (32-2) extended their winning streak to 11 games heading into the NCAA Tournament as the likely No. 1 overall seed.

No. 3 Michigan 68, No. 23 Wisconsin 65: Yaxel Lendeborg made a tiebreaking 3-pointer with 0.4 seconds re-

maining, and host Michigan beat Nick Boyd and Wisconsin to advance to the Big Ten Tournament championship.

Aday Mara scored 16 points and Elliot Cadeau had 15 as top-seeded Michigan (31-2) avenged its only conference loss from the regular season, a 91-88 setback against Wisconsin on Jan. 10. Mara also grabbed eight rebounds.

No. 22 Vanderbilt 91, No. 4 Florida 74: Tyler Tanner scored 20 points as host Vanderbilt beat Florida, ending the defending national champion's bid to win a second straight Southeastern Conference Tournament title and possibly hurt the Gators' bid for a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

The fourth-seeded Commodores won their fourth straight.

The Gators (26-7) had their 12-game winning streak end. Thomas Haugh led them with 19 points, and Boogie Fland had 15.

No. 13 St. John's 72, No. 6 UConn 52: Zuby Ejiofor had seven blocks, nine rebounds

and three steals to anchor a tenacious defensive performance that carried St. John's to its second straight Big East Tournament championship with a home blowout of UConn at Madison Square Garden.

Ejiofor and Bryce Hopkins each scored 18 points for the top-seeded Red Storm (28-6), who became the first team to win consecutive Big East Tournament titles since Villanova took three in a row from 2017-19.

No. 17 Arkansas 93, Mississippi 90 (OT): Darius Acuff Jr. scored five of his 24 points in overtime and host Arkansas held off Mississippi to reach the Southeastern Conference Tournament championship game for the first time since 2017.

No. 18 Purdue 73, UCLA 66: Oscar Cluff had 17 points and 14 rebounds, and Purdue beat short-handed UCLA to advance to the Big Ten Tournament championship game.

Cluff scored eight points as Purdue (26-8) outscored UCLA (23-11) 11-4 over the final 3:41.

Doncic hits last-second 3, Lakers edge Nuggets in OT

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Luka Doncic made a fall-away jumper with 0.5 seconds remaining in overtime and the Los Angeles Lakers beat the Denver Nuggets 127-125 on Saturday night.

Austin Reaves forced overtime when he rebounded his intentionally missed free throw and made a floater with 1.9 seconds remaining in regulation.

Doncic created enough distance from Spencer Jones to make the 17-foot shot, finishing with 30 points, 13 assists and 11 rebounds as he continued his spectacular play during Los Angeles' five-game winning streak. Doncic then blocked Tim Hardaway Jr.'s desperation heave following a Denver timeout.

Reaves finished with 32

points, making the first free throw and then perfectly executing his missed second attempt off the front of the rim after the Nuggets fouled him to prevent a tying 3-point attempt leading 118-115 with 5.2 seconds left.

Nikola Jokic had 24 points, 16 rebounds and 14 assists for his 27th triple-double of the season.

Magic 121, Heat 117: Paolo Banchero scored 27 points, Desmond Bane added 21 and visiting Orlando beat Miami, becoming the second team in the last 30 years to beat the same opponent five times in one season.

Wendell Carter Jr. scored 15 for the Magic, who won their seventh straight and snapped Miami's season-best, seven-game winning streak.

76ers 104, Nets 97: Quen-

tin Grimes scored a season-high 28 points and Philadelphia held on for a home victory over Brooklyn.

Grimes had eight rebounds for the short-handed 76ers, who were missing Joel Embiid, Tyrese Maxey and Kelly Oubre Jr., among other players. Justin Edwards scored 19 points while adding three steals.

Hawks 122, Bucks 99: CJ McCollum scored 30 points, Jalen Johnson had his 12th triple-double of the season and host Atlanta beat Milwaukee for its ninth straight victory.

Johnson finished with 23 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds as Atlanta extended the longest current winning streak in the NBA.

Spurs 115, Hornets 102: Victor Wembanyama had 32

points, 12 rebounds, eight assists and three blocks in his return from a one-game absence, leading San Antonio to a home victory over Charlotte.

The Spurs have won 17 of 19 to tighten their grip on second in the Western Conference.

Celtics 111, Wizards 100: Jayson Tatum had 20 points and 14 rebounds in a season-high 32 minutes, Neemias Queta had 24 points and 10 rebounds and host Boston withstood a late charge to beat Washington for its 11th straight loss.

Kings 118, Clippers 109: Russell Westbrook had 12 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for his 209th career triple-double and DeMar DeRozan scored 27 points to lead Sacramento to a road victory over Los Angeles.

Bruins top Caps in 9th round of SO

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Charlie McAvoy scored twice and Fraser Minten had the shootout winner as the Boston Bruins beat the Washington Capitals 3-2 on Saturday.

Minten beat Washington's Logan Thompson with a backhand shot in the ninth round of the shootout to give the Bruins their third win in five games and help Boston gain ground in the Eastern Conference wild-card race.

Rasmus Sandin had a goal and an assist and Matt Roy also scored for the Capitals, who have lost two of their last three.

After a scoreless first period, the Capitals picked up their pressure to open the second, and it paid off. Just 1:15 minutes into the middle period, Roy fired an 86-mph slap shot past Boston's Jeremy Swayman and into the top corner to give Washington the lead. It was Roy's first goal since Nov. 17, ending a 45-game scoring drought.

Minutes later, McAvoy fired a one-timer through traffic and past Thompson to even the score at 1. McAvoy has points in six straight games and 15 of his last 16 contests overall.

Sandin became the third defenseman to get on the board when his shot from point knuckled past Swayman, giving the Caps a 2-1 edge.

Following a couple of power-play chances for the Bruins, including a 5-on-3 opportunity halfway through the third, McAvoy tied the game by deflecting Pavel Zacha's shot past Thompson and eventually forcing overtime.

Swayman had 25 saves in the win. Thompson stopped 32 shots in the loss.

Senators 2, Ducks 0: Linus Ullmark made 23 saves for his second shutout of the season and host Ottawa blanked Anaheim.

Michael Amadio and Thomas Chabot scored for Ottawa.

Shane Pinto had two assists. It was the 14th shutout of Ullmark's career. The Senators have won four of five.

Ville Husso stopped 27 shots for Anaheim.

Jets 3, Avalanche 1: Kyle Connor reached 30 goals for a franchise-record eighth time and added an assist, Connor Hellebuyck made 28 saves and host Winnipeg beat NHL-leading Colorado.

Connor broke a tie with Ilya Kovalchuk for the most 30-goal seasons in Thrashers/Jets history. Connor has reached the 30-goal mark in every season of his nine-year NHL career except for the 56-game COVID-19 shortened campaign when he had 26.

Mackenzie Blackwood made 15 saves for the Avalanche. They had won six in a row on the road.

Rangers 4, Wild 2: Igor Shesterkin made 46 saves and Vladislav Gavrikov had a goal and two assists as New York extended its winning streak to four games with a road win over Minnesota.

Noah Laba, Jaroslav Chmelar and Vincent Trocheck also scored for New York, which won for the fifth time in six games despite being outshot 48-18.

Matt Boldy and Danila Yurov scored for the Wild, who dropped their second straight and lost for the third time in four games. Filip Gustavsson had 14 saves.

Hurricanes 4, Lightning 2: Sebastian Aho and Andrei Svechnikov each had a goal and an assist and visiting Carolina defeated Tampa Bay.

Carolina coach Rod Brind'Amour coached his 600th career game for the franchise and picked up his 367th career win, the most for a head coach at the 600-game mark, besting Tampa Bay's Jon Cooper, who set the previous record of 364.

Yanni Gourde and Charles-Edouard D'Astous scored for Tampa Bay, which fell to 3-7

since the Olympic break. Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 31 saves.

Islanders 3, Flames 2: Simon Holmstrom scored twice and host New York raced to an early lead and held on to beat Calgary.

Casey Cizikas also scored for New York and David Rittich made 30 saves as the Islanders won for the third time in four games.

Mikael Backlund and Blake Coleman scored for Calgary, which slipped to 2-5-1 in its last eight games.

Devils 6, Kings 4: Jack Hughes scored the go-ahead goal with 2:29 to play and Jake Allen made 27 saves as host New Jersey edged Los Angeles.

Hughes put the Devils ahead 5-4 in the seesaw game with a power-play goal. Nico Hischier scored twice and Cody Glass, Arseny Gritsyuk and Timo Meier — with a last minute empty-netter — also scored.

Anze Kopitar scored twice for Los Angeles — to establish a Kings franchise points record — and Artemi Panarin and Taylor Ward also scored.

Sabres 3, Maple Leafs 2 (SO): Jack Quinn scored the tying goal and also connected in a shootout, Alex Tuch ended the tiebreaker and host Buffalo beat Toronto to rebound from its first loss since the Olympic break.

Buffalo was coming off a 2-1 home loss to Washington on Thursday night that ended an eight-game winning streak. The Atlantic Division-leading Sabres stretched their advantage over second-place Tampa Bay to four points and remained two points behind Carolina in the Eastern Conference.

Max Domi scored for Toronto in his 800th NHL game. Dakota Joshua also scored, and Joseph Woll made 30 saves.

Sharks 4, Canadiens 2: Macklin Celebrini had two goals and an assist to lead San Jose to a road win over Montreal.

Collin Graf had a goal and two

assists and Mario Ferraro also scored for San Jose, which ended Montreal's three-game winning streak.

Blue Jackets 2, Flyers 1 (SO): Kirill Marchenko scored his 25th goal and lifted a backhand over Dan Vladar in the third round of a shootout to give Columbus a road victory over Philadelphia.

The Blue Jackets extended their points streak to nine games as they fight Detroit for the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. They are 5-0-4 during the streak.

Stars 3, Red Wings 2 (OT): Defenseman Thomas Harley scored 2:05 into overtime to give streaking Dallas a home win over Detroit.

Wyatt Johnston had a goal and an assist, and Michael Bunting also scored for the Stars. Jake Oettinger stopped 22 of 24 shots. Harley scored his seventh OT goal in regular-season games.

The Stars are 14-0-1 in their last 15 games, matching the longest point streak in club history. Their 1998-99 Stanley Cup team had a streak of 12 wins and three ties.

Penguins 4, Mammoth 3: Noel Acciari scored the go-ahead goal at the 8:03 mark of the third period to lift visiting Pittsburgh past Utah.

Acciari won a battle for the puck with Nick Schmaltz and scored on a close-range snap shot to help the Penguins complete a rally from an early two-goal deficit.

Golden Knights 4, Blackhawks 0: Pavel Dorofeyev recorded two goals and an assist for the second straight game and Adin Hill had his first shutout in a year as host Vegas defeated Chicago.

The victory put the Golden Knights back into first place in the Pacific Division with 76 points, one ahead of Anaheim, which lost 2-0 at Ottawa on Saturday.