

US sends more planes to Afghanistan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States has deployed a dozen additional warplanes to bolster protection of American and coalition troops making a final withdrawal from Afghanistan as Taliban insurgents step up pressure on Afghan government forces, top Pentagon officials said Thursday.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said F/A-18 attack planes have been added to a previously announced package of air and sea power — including the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier in the North Arabian Sea and six Air Force B-52 bombers based in Qatar — that can be called upon as protection for withdrawing troops. Also part of that previously announced package are several hundred Army Rangers.

U.S. officials said before the withdrawal began that they expected the Taliban to attempt to interfere, even as the insurgents continue pressuring government forces, especially in Helmand and Kandahar provinces in southern Afghanistan.

“There continue to be sustained levels of violent attacks” by the Taliban against Afghan security forces, Milley said, speaking alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at a Pentagon news conference. He said there have been no attacks against U.S. or coalition forces since they began pulling out of the country on about May 1, and he described the Afghan forces as “cohesive,” even as speculation swirls around Kabul’s ability to hold off the Taliban in the months ahead.

Both Milley and Austin, a retired Army general, are veterans of the war in Afghanistan.

“They’re fighting for their own country now, so it’s not a foregone conclusion, in my professional military estimate, that the Taliban automatically win and Kabul falls, or any of those kinds of dire predictions,” Milley said. “That’s not a foregone conclusion. There’s a significant military capability in the Afghan government. We have to see how this plays out.”

Milley said the Pentagon is considering options for continued support of Afghan

government forces after the troop withdrawal is complete, including possibly training Afghan security forces in another country. That would be in addition to urging the Congress to authorize continued financial assistance to the Afghan forces, which has been in the range of \$4 billion a year for many years, and possibly providing aircraft maintenance support remotely from another country.

“We haven’t figured that out 100% yet,” Milley said.

Milley said Afghanistan’s air force is central to the strategy for holding off the Taliban, but the durability of those planes is in some doubt. The U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction said in an April 30 report that without continued foreign contractor support, none of the Afghan air force’s airframes can be sustained as combat effective for more than a few months.

Austin acknowledged that holding off the Taliban without American support on the ground “will be a challenge” for the Afghans.

Rights group: Afghan women’s health care is bleak

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — After nearly 20 years since the ouster of the Taliban and billions of dollars spent on infrastructure and aid, many Afghan women still have desperately poor access to health facilities and adequate health care, a leading rights group said Thursday.

Human Rights Watch offered a bleak assessment of women’s health care in Afghanistan in its latest report, saying that even basic information on health and family planning is not available to most Afghan women. And even when women can get the care they need, the quality is often poor, the New York-based group said.

New health facilities that have opened over the years are often insufficiently staffed and inadequately equipped, HRW said. The group’s researchers visited several health facilities in the capital of Kabul, where many of the country’s better

clinics and hospitals are located.

The report says there are 4.6 medical professionals to 10,000 people in Afghanistan; the World Health Organization considers 23 medical professionals to 10,000 people a critical shortage.

“What emerged is a picture of a system that is increasingly unaffordable to the estimated 61% to 72% of Afghan women, who live in poverty, and one in which women often have more children than they want because of lack of access to modern contraception; face risky pregnancies because of lack of care; and undergo procedures that could be done more safely with access to and capacity to use more modern techniques,” the report said.

Most women cannot afford the increasingly costly medicines they need or even the cost of a taxi ride to a clinic, often at least a half-hour away. Most Afghans live

on less than \$1.90 a day.

Patricia Gossman, associate director of HRW’s Asia division, said the money that came to Afghanistan after 2001 was squandered due to widespread corruption. Before that, the Taliban regime, which was also heavily sanctioned, had mostly ignored women’s health issues.

Washington alone committed \$1.5 billion to rebuild Afghanistan’s health care sector, according to a 2017 report by the U.S. watchdog overseeing the billions of dollars America invested in Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

“The question everyone should be asking is why after 20 years and hundreds of millions of dollars the state of women’s health care is so grim,” said Gossman in an email. “Where did the money go ... a horrendous amount has been lost to corruption, and nothing — nothing — has really ever been done about it.”

Milley: Sexual assault data softened stance on changes

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Thursday that new data about sexual assaults and command climates throughout the service softened his stance against changes to how the military prosecutes those cases.

Milley told reporters at the Pentagon that his opinion was “significantly influenced” by recent data “about the confidence in the chain of command by junior soldiers — men and women alike — in their ability to deal successfully with sexual assault.”

“We have lost the trust and confidence of those subordinates in our ability to deal with sexual assault,” the general said.

The Defense Department estimates about 20,000 service members were sexually assaulted in 2020 based on “some pretty solid data” collected in recent surveys, Milley said.

“If we had 20,000 killed or wounded in Afghanistan or Iraq — those are casualties. That’s huge, that’s significant,” he said. “And that number hasn’t significantly been reduced over time.”

Milley’s comments came days after he

said he would drop his previous opposition to taking prosecution authority away from commanders in sexual-assault investigations.

An independent review commission’s initial report analyzing the Pentagon’s sexual-assault policies and procedures last month suggested removing the chain of command from sexual-assault investigations and immediately starting the discharge process for service members credibly accused of such a crime, according to a report by The Associated Press last week.

The commission, ordered by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Feb. 26, was given 90 days to conduct its analysis. The Pentagon has not yet received its completed report with its final recommendations, but Austin on Thursday said he would consult the services before deciding how to proceed.

“People like me keep going behind a microphone in front of committees saying, ‘We need to do this and we need to do that; we need to this and that’ and it hasn’t changed,” Milley said. “So, we need to take a hard look and I welcome the independent review commission and their views.”

Fort Jackson trainee charged with 19 kidnapping counts in bus theft

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

ATLANTA — The Fort Jackson Army trainee who hijacked a school bus full of elementary school children using a service-issued rifle was charged Thursday with 19 counts of kidnapping, law enforcement officials in South Carolina said.

Jovan Collazo, 23, also faces counts of armed robbery, car-jacking and weapons charges after fleeing Fort Jackson on Thursday morning during his third week of Basic Combat Training, said Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott.

Collazo, who is from New Jersey, was likely trying to go home when he hopped a

razor-wire fence at about 7 a.m. toting an unloaded M-4 carbine that he was issued for training, said Brig. Gen. Milford H. Beagle Jr., Fort Jackson’s commander.

The general said he was thankful none of the 18 children aboard the school bus nor its driver were injured in the incident. He said he would order a review of procedures because the incident highlighted problems in Fort Jackson’s accountability processes.

In addition to charges from the Richland County Sheriff’s Department, Collazo could also face Army charges including theft of the rifle and going absent without leave, said Beagle, who added the trainee would also be disqualified from future service.

First women graduate from Calif. boot camp

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — There was excitement in the air as family and friends of new Marines made their way to the grandstands on the parade deck of Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego on Thursday morning. At the end of the parade grounds, 397 freshly minted Marines stood at parade rest in formation. Passing family members stole glances trying to find their Marines among the uniformed mass.

While the San Diego depot graduates about 40 companies of new Marines each year, Thursday’s ceremony was special. It was only the third graduation open to family and friends since they were suspended in March 2020 due to the coronavirus. And in one of the six graduating platoons were 53 women — the first women to graduate from Marine Corps’ San Diego boot camp in its 100-year history.

Until now, all women enlistees in the Marine Corps trained at the service’s East Coast boot camp in South Carolina — and, until recently, trained in segregated companies away from their male counterparts. In 2019, Congress ordered the Marines to fully integrate both its boot camps within a decade — Parris Island, S.C., by 2025 and San Diego by 2028.

Lima Company’s graduation Thursday marked a “significant milestone” in the depot’s history and represents a top priority for the service, the Marines said in a statement.

“The inaugural integrated training company will help inform infrastructure and personnel requirements to support permanent gender-integrated recruit training,” the statement said.

The women training at MCRD San Diego had to accomplish the same training milestones as men — including the grueling 54-hour Crucible exercise at Camp Pendleton.

Pfc. Katey Hogan, 18, said the historic nature of her platoon’s accomplishment wasn’t lost on the women of the platoon. But for the most part, they were just focused on training.

“Boot camp is just boot camp to me; it’s another part of my journey and another chapter that I’m trying to get through,” she said.

Federal grand jury indicts 4 in Floyd death

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A federal grand jury has indicted the four former Minneapolis police officers involved in George Floyd's arrest and death, accusing them of willfully violating the Black man's constitutional rights as he was restrained face-down on the pavement and gasping for air.

A three-count indictment unsealed Friday names Derek Chauvin, Thomas Lane, J. Kueng and Tou Thao.

Specifically, Chauvin is charged with violating Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure and unreasonable force by a police officer. Thao and Kueng are also charged with violating Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure, alleging they did not intervene to stop Chauvin as he knelt on Floyd's neck. All four officers are charged for their failure to provide Floyd

with medical care.

Floyd's arrest and death, which a bystander captured on cellphone video, sparked protests nationwide and widespread calls for an end to police brutality and racial inequities.

Chauvin was also charged in a second indictment, stemming from the arrest and neck restraint of a 14-year-old boy in 2017.

Lane, Thao and Kueng made their initial court appearances Friday via videoconference in U.S. District Court in Minneapolis. Chauvin was not part of the court appearance.

Chauvin was convicted last month on state charges of murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death and is in Minnesota's only maximum-security prison as he awaits sentencing. The other three former officers face a state trial in August, and they are free

on bond. They were allowed to remain free after Friday's federal court appearance.

Floyd, 46, died May 25 after Chauvin pinned him to the ground with a knee on his neck, even as Floyd, who was handcuffed, repeatedly said he couldn't breathe. Kueng and Lane also helped restrain Floyd — state prosecutors have said Kueng knelt on Floyd's back and Lane held down Floyd's legs. State prosecutors say Thao held back bystanders and kept them from intervening during the 9 1/2-minute restraint.

Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, argued during his murder trial that Chauvin acted reasonably in the situation and that Floyd died because of underlying health issues and drug use. He has filed a request for a new trial, citing many issues including the judge's refusal to move the trial due to publicity.

Sheriff: Girl shoots 3 at middle school in Idaho

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — A sixth-grade girl brought a gun to her Idaho middle school, shot and wounded two students and a custodian and then was disarmed by a teacher Thursday, authorities said.

The three victims were shot in their limbs and expected to survive, officials said at a news conference. Jefferson County Sheriff Steve Anderson says the girl pulled a handgun from her backpack and fired multiple rounds inside and outside Rigby Middle School in the small city of Rigby, about 95 miles southwest of Yellowstone National Park.

A female teacher disarmed the girl and

held her until law enforcement arrived and took her into custody, authorities said, without giving other details. Authorities say they're investigating the motive for the attack and where the girl got the gun.

"We don't have a lot of details at this time of 'why' — that is being investigated," Anderson said. "We're following all leads."

The girl is from the nearby city of Idaho Falls, Anderson said. He didn't release her name.

Police were called to the school around 9:15 a.m. after students and staffers heard gunfire. Multiple law enforcement agencies responded, and students were evacuated to a nearby high school to be reunited with their parents.

"Me and my classmate were just in class with our teacher — we were doing work — and then all of a sudden, here was a loud noise and then there were two more loud noises. Then there was screaming," 12-year-old Yandel Rodriguez said. "Our teacher went to check it out, and he found blood."

Both of the students who were shot were being held at the hospital, and one of them might need surgery, said Dr. Michael Lemon, trauma medical director at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center.

"It's an absolute blessing" that they weren't hurt worse, Lemon said. The adult was treated and released for a bullet wound that went through an extremity, the doctor said.

Texas House passes GOP-driven elections bill

Associated Press/Report for America

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas Republican lawmakers advanced a sweeping elections bill early Friday following hours of discussion that would put America's biggest red state closer to imposing a raft of new voting restrictions in the face of growing warning from corporations.

The key vote at 3 a.m. in the Texas House followed hours of debate as Democrats, who had little means of stopping the bill in the GOP-controlled state Capitol, deployed technical challenges and hours of questioning that the bill's author, Republican state Rep.

Briscoe Cain, appeared unprepared at times to answer. Finally, an agreement was reached between Republicans and Democrats leaving the bill with 20 amendments that significantly watered down some of what advocates called the most problematic aspects of the bill as it passed the key vote 81-64.

The amendments lowered initially proposed enhanced criminal penalties, allowed poll watchers to be removed if they breach the peace and clarified that election judges and volunteers wouldn't be held liable for honest mistakes. Additionally, they instructed the state to send voter registration appli-

cations to high schools and instructed the state to develop an online format for tracking early ballots.

Thursday's bill was combined with a similar bill, which already passed the Senate, and both chambers still need to negotiate a final version before it goes to Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, who has broadly defended the measures. The session ends May 31.

Abbott reiterated his support Thursday.

"I made election integrity an emergency item this session to help ensure every eligible voter gets to vote & only eligible ballots are counted," Abbott tweeted.

US job growth slows in sign of hiring woes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America's employers added just 266,000 jobs last month, sharply lower than in March and a sign that some businesses are struggling to find enough workers as the economic recovery strengthens.

With coronavirus cases declining and states and localities easing restrictions, businesses have added jobs for four straight months, the Labor Department said Friday. Still, the unemployment rate ticked up to 6.1% from 6% in March.

At the same time, optimism about the economic recovery is growing. Many Americans are flush with cash after having received \$1,400 federal relief checks, along with savings they have built up after cutting back

on travel, entertainment and dining out over the past year. Millions of consumers have begun spending their extra cash on restaurant meals, airline tickets, road trips and new cars and homes.

Among industries, the sharpest loss last month was in temporary work, which shed 111,000 jobs. Construction companies added no jobs in April after having added 97,000 in March. Manufacturing lost 18,000 positions after hiring 54,000 the previous month. And transportation and warehousing cut 74,000 jobs after months of solid gains.

By contrast, restaurants, hotels and entertainment venues — businesses that have complained the loudest about a shortage of workers — added 331,000 jobs in April, even more

than their 206,000 increase in March.

In its monthly report Friday, the government also sharply lowered its estimate of March's job gain to 770,000 from its earlier estimate of 916,000.

Most economists expect job growth to strengthen as more vaccinations are administered and trillions in government aid spreads through the economy. Even if another uptick in COVID-19 cases were to occur, analysts don't expect most states and cities to reimpose tough business restrictions. Oxford Economics, a consulting firm, predicts that a total of 8 million jobs will be added this year, reducing the unemployment rate to a low 4.3% by year's end.

Still, the economic rebound

has been so fast that many businesses, particularly in the hard-hit hospitality sector — which includes restaurants, bars and hotels — have been caught flat-footed and unable to fill all their job openings. Some unemployed people have also been reluctant to look for work because they fear catching the virus.

Others have entered new occupations rather than return to their old jobs. And many women, especially working mothers, have had to leave the workforce to care for children.

Most of the hiring so far represents a bounce-back after tens of millions of positions were lost when the pandemic flattened the economy 14 months ago. The economy remains more than 8 million jobs short of its pre-pandemic level.

Pressure rises for India lockdown; virus cases again break daily record

Associated Press

NEW DELHI — Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi faced growing pressure Friday to impose a strict nationwide lockdown, despite the economic pain it will exact, as a startling surge in coronavirus cases that has pummeled the country's health system shows no signs of abating.

Many medical experts, opposition leaders and even Supreme Court judges are calling for national restrictions, arguing that a patchwork of state rules is insufficient to quell the rise in infections.

Indian television stations broadcast images of patients lying on stretchers outside hospitals waiting to be admitted, with hospital beds and critical oxygen in short supply. People infected with COVID-19 in villages are being treated in makeshift outdoor clinics, with IV drips hanging from trees.

As deaths soar, crematoriums and burial grounds have been swamped with bodies, and relatives often wait hours to perform the last rites for their loved ones.

The situation is so dramatic that among those calling for a strict lockdown are merchants who know their businesses will be affected but see no other way out.

"Only if our health is good, will we be able to earn," said Aruna Ramjee, a florist in Bengaluru. "The lockdown will help everyone, and coronavirus spread will also come down."

Infections have swelled in India since February in a disastrous turn blamed on more contagious variants as well as government decisions to allow massive crowds to gather for religious festivals and political rallies. On Friday India reported a new daily record of 414,188 confirmed cases and 3,915 additional deaths.

Talks resume on US nuclear deal with Iran

Associated Press

VIENNA — World powers began a fourth round of high-level talks in Austria aimed at bringing the United States back into the nuclear deal with Iran, with major stumbling blocks remaining Friday but both sides suggesting a resolution was possible.

The U.S. pulled out of the landmark 2015 deal in 2018 after then-President Donald Trump said the pact needed to be renegotiated. The deal had promised Iran economic incentives in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program, and the Trump administration reimposed heavy sanctions in an unsuccessful attempt to bring Tehran into new talks.

Iran reacted by steadily increasing violations of the deal, which is intended to prevent the country from obtaining nuclear weapons, by enriching uranium to a greater purity and stockpiling more than allowed, and beginning to use more advanced centri-

fuges. It also pressured the world powers remaining in the deal — France, Britain, Russia and China — for economic relief.

President Joe Biden has said he wants to rejoin the deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, but that Iran needs to return to compliance.

Iran, which insists it does not want to produce a nuclear bomb, has said it is prepared to reverse all of its violations but that Washington must remove all sanctions imposed under Trump, including ones outside the JCPOA.

On the other side is the question of what Iran's return to compliance would look like. Delegates to the Vienna talks concede, for example, that Iranian nuclear scientists cannot unlearn the knowledge they acquired in the last three years, but it is not clear whether Iran's new centrifuges would need to be destroyed, mothballed and locked away, or simply taken offline.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Feds: Man used bad loan to buy alpaca farm

MA BOSTON — The owner of a Massachusetts pizza parlor lied about the number of employees he had to fraudulently obtain more than \$660,000 in federal coronavirus relief funds, then used some of the money to buy and stock an alpaca farm in Vermont, federal prosecutors said Tuesday.

Dana McIntyre, 57, of Grafton, Vt., was arrested Tuesday and charged with wire fraud and money laundering, according to a statement from the U.S. attorney's office in Boston.

McIntyre, who formerly lived in Beverly and Essex, Mass., was the owner of Rasta Pasta Pizzeria in Beverly in April 2020 when he applied for a Paycheck Protection Program loan, prosecutors said.

But in his application, he falsified an official tax form and claimed the pizza shop had almost 50 employees, when records indicate it had fewer than 10, in an effort to inflate the size of the loan he was entitled to, authorities said.

After receiving the loan, he sold the pizza shop and used the money to purchase and upgrade a farm in Vermont and buy several alpacas, authorities said.

Dog owner cited following attack by pit bulls

NE OMAHA — The owner of two pit bull-mixed breed dogs accused of violently attacking an Omaha couple and their miniature poodle now faces several citations, including having no proof of vaccinations, no proof of licenses, no proof of insurance, allowing the

pit bulls to be unmuzzled in public and damage to property.

Police and Nebraska Humane Society officials have said the woman's dogs attacked a husband and wife who were walking their dog in the neighborhood Sunday evening, sending the woman to a hospital with bites to her face and hands. The man suffered bites to his arm, and the poodle underwent surgery for severe injuries to its leg.

Humane Society officials picked up the pit bulls following the attack and placed them on a 10-day rabies hold.

The owner of the pit bulls told the Omaha World-Herald that she has proof her dogs are vaccinated.

Police: Motorcyclist speeds across border

ME MILLINOCKET — A New Brunswick man sped through a U.S.-Canadian border checkpoint on a motorcycle and led police on a high-speed pursuit in Maine, police said.

Jeremy Richard, 27, roared through Maine at speeds topping 150 mph before being arrested Monday in Millinocket, more than 60 miles from the border crossing in Houlton, police said.

Richard, who was turned over to the U.S. Border Patrol, was charged with eluding police, criminal speeding, driving to endanger and reckless conduct, according to East Millinocket police.

A Maine Forestry Service helicopter served as a spotter for police during the pursuit down I-95, where Richard topped 150 mph at one point, police said.

The U.S.-Canadian border is

closed to most traffic through May 21 because of the pandemic.

Customs: Woman hid drugs in shoes at airport

GA ATLANTA — A Georgia woman was caught trying to smuggle \$40,000 worth of cocaine in multiple pairs of shoes through the Atlanta airport, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Customs officers stopped the 21-year-old on Sunday after she arrived on a flight from Jamaica, the agency said in a statement Monday. Her bags were inspected, and seven pairs of shoes were found to have a powdery white substance concealed in their bottoms.

The substance tested positive for cocaine, according to the agency. About 3 pounds of the drug were recovered.

11 guests injured when restaurant deck collapses

TN SODDY-DAISY — Eleven people were injured when a deck collapsed during a birthday party at a Tennessee restaurant, authorities said.

About 40 people were on the deck at Zois Harbor Lights Restaurant in Soddy-Daisy on Saturday and fell when it collapsed, news outlets reported, citing the Hamilton County Office of Emergency Management. Eleven people were taken to hospitals, including two with critical injuries.

"They all congregated outside on the deck to take a group photo. So when somebody went down to get ready to take the picture, the deck caved in, in the

center, and gave in. So then everybody fell to the rocks below," said emergency management spokeswoman Amy Maxwell.

The county's building inspection department will review the collapse to determine the cause, authorities said.

Teen charged as adult in rigged homecoming vote

FL PENSACOLA — A Florida teen accused of rigging a homecoming queen election with her mother is being charged as an adult, prosecutors said.

Emily Rose Grover was still 17 when she was arrested in March. She turned 18 in April, and the State Attorney's Office in Escambia County confirmed Tuesday that Grover will be tried as an adult.

Grover and her mother, Laura Rose Carroll, 50, face multiple felony charges stemming from the October homecoming vote at Tate High School in Pensacola.

While employed as an assistant principal at Bellview Elementary School in the same county, Carroll accessed the school district's internal system to cast fraudulent votes for her daughter so that she would win, officials said.

Multiple Tate students told investigators that Grover described using her mother's system access, or of watching her mother access records, for years, the report said. Investigators learned that since August 2019, Carroll's account accessed 372 high school records and 339 of those were Tate students.

— From wire reports

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NHL fights are embarrassing

Associated Press

The National Hockey League is an embarrassment.

This is not a new development, but it's worth revisiting. As long as the league condones the sort of mindless, reckless violence we've seen this week, it will never be anything more than MMA On Ice.

To contend the carnage that went on these past few days between the Washington Capitals and the New York Rangers is simply a part of the game is the sort of Neanderthal thinking that keeps hockey in the dark ages.

It is bloodlust, pure and simple, and not really worth taking seriously.

Will this be the light-bulb moment when the NHL finally exorcises this wretched stain that holds back any chance of it becoming a truly major sport?

Not a chance.

For some reason, the league thinks that one grown man grabbing another grown man by the hair and slamming him face-first to the ice is not even worthy of a single-game suspension.

Which, in the natural order of the NHL, leads to the next game transforming into Fight Club — except there's nothing secretive about the silly, sorry little enterprise.

It's proudly staged in a giant arena for the entire world to see.

Instead of easing tensions, the NHL's hands-off approach to fists flying and other assorted acts of brutality — hey, the players also carry sticks that double as effective weapons — leads inevitably to the sort of criminal behavior we've seen this week.

This latest black eye for the league was sparked by a familiar source: Capitals goon Tom Wilson, who already has quite the impressive rap sheet for a wide array of illegal hits over the years.

In Monday night's game against the Rangers, a scrum broke out at the side of the Capitals' net after the whistle blew. Wilson wound up on top of Pavel Buchnevich and figured that would be a good time to show how tough he is, so he delivered a punch to the back of the Rangers player's head.

Coming to the aid of his teammate, Artemi Panarin jumped on Wilson's back. But the 5-foot-11, 170-pound Panarin was no match for the 6-4, 220-pound Wilson, who grabbed his opponent by the hair and slammed him face-first to the ice like a rag doll.

Now, it seemed obvious to everyone that Wilson was headed for another suspension, with some rightly arguing that he deserved to be suspended for the rest of the season — including the playoffs.

Especially when news broke that Panarin would miss the final three games of the Rangers' season with what was vaguely described as a lower-body injury. (Side note: In the NHL, they won't be more specific about injuries other than describing which half of the body they occurred for fear an opponent will specifically target the ailing body part the next

time that player is on the ice. Yes, this is actually a thing.)

Turns out, a suspension for Wilson was obvious to everyone except the Capitals (their coach, Peter Laviolette, ludicrously described it as nothing more than "a physical play") and the NHL's even more absurdly titled head of player safety, George Parros.

Parros doled out a \$5,000 fine for the hit on Buchnevich — and didn't even mention the mauling of Panarin.

That was it.

Incensed, the Rangers issued a scathing statement that charged the league with "a dereliction of duty" and blasted Parros, a former player, as "unfit to continue in his current role."

No argument there, yet the problem runs far deeper than this one nasty incident and one hare-brained suit in the league office.

This is about a league that has taken tepid steps to rein in its unwritten code of cheap shots and unrestrained brawling — the kind that led to sick jokes such as "I went to a fight and a hockey game broke out" — but has never been willing to fully break from barbarism as a supposed selling point.

Maybe they view all those "Best Hockey Brawls" videos on YouTube as a sign that this is what the fans want. As if pouring salt on a self-inflicted wound, the NHL levied an extraordinary \$250,000 fine against the Rangers for their demeaning assessment of Parros.

Anyway, when the Capitals and the New Yorkers met again on Wednesday, with Wilson still allowed on the ice, one didn't have to be Carnac the Magnificent to figure out what would happen next.

The Rangers were in the mood for some vigilante justice.

Three fights broke out at center ice as soon as the puck was dropped. Before the game was a minute old, Rangers defenseman Brendan Smith got into it with Wilson. And, yes, two more fights erupted just past the four-minute mark.

"I think it was good," Smith said proudly. "We were just trying to stick up for our teammate. It was a good response for sure."

No, it wasn't.

A much better response would be for the league to follow the path of the NBA, which cracked down mightily after the infamous 2004 "Malice at the Palace" melee spilled into the stands, involving both players and fans.

Hockey is a graceful, magnificent game when played the right way. The league where it should be played at the highest level needs to realize that the only way to grow the sport beyond its niche fan base is to weed out all the needless savagery.

Until that changes — and we're not holding our breath — the first rule of the NHL should be: Don't talk about the NHL.

It's too embarrassing.

Carter, Pens beat Sabres

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Jeff Carter scored a career-high four goals and the Pittsburgh Penguins moved back into first place in the crowded East Division with an 8-4 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Thursday night.

The 36-year-old Carter, acquired from Los Angeles at the trade deadline, beat Michael Houser three times in the first 25 minutes for his first hat trick since March 28, 2018. He added his fourth with a pretty backhand — the 398th goal of his career — early in the third period that put the Sabres away.

The four-goal performance was the first by a Penguins player since Chris Kunitz did it in a victory over Washington on Feb. 3, 2013.

Tristan Jarry overcame a sloppy start to finish with 19 saves as Pittsburgh moved two points ahead of Washington for the top spot in the East.

Maple Leafs 5, Canadiens 2: Auston Matthews scored his NHL-leading 40th goal of the season to help Toronto beat visiting Montreal.

Bruins 4, Rangers 0: Patrice Bergeron scored in his fourth straight game, Jeremy Swayman needed to stop only 15 shots for his second career shutout and host Boston beat New York.

Devils 2, Islanders 1: At Uniondale, N.Y., Michael McLeod scored the tiebreaking goal late in the second period, Mackenzie Blackwood stopped 32 shots and New Jersey beat playoff-bound New York for its fifth win in six games.

Blackhawks 2, Hurricanes 1 (OT): Alex DeBrincat beat Petr Mrazek at 2:02 of overtime and visiting Chicago beat NHL-leading Carolina to salvage the finale of a three-game set.

Canucks 6, Oilers 3: Travis Hamonic, Nils Hoglander and Jayce Hawryluk each had a goal and Vancouver beat host Edmonton to snap a six-game losing streak.

Slumping slugger Pujols cut by Angels

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Albert Pujols was cut by the Los Angeles Angels on Thursday, abruptly ending the 41-year-old superstar slugger's decade with his second major league team.

The Angels surprisingly announced the move to designate Pujols for assignment one day after he wasn't in the lineup for the slumping club's fourth consecutive loss. The decision was made after Pujols, dissatisfied with irregular playing time, had a late-night meeting with general manager Perry Minasian and team president John Carpino.

Pujols, who is batting .198 this season, is determined to play first base regularly for another team after he clears waivers, Angels manager Joe Maddon said. Pujols is fifth in major league history with 667 career homers and 13th with 3,253 hits.

"He wants to play, and he

wants to be in the field," Maddon said. "Hopefully he's going to get that opportunity somewhere else, and believe me, we're all going to be rooting for him."

The three-time NL MVP for St. Louis was in the final season of a 10-year, \$240 million contract with Los Angeles, but Pujols' determination was incompatible with the Angels' desire to make everyday players out of first baseman Jared Walsh and designated hitter Shohei Ohtani, who have both significantly outperformed Pujols as two of the American League's top hitters.

"Albert is not a bench player," said Minasian, the club's first-year GM. "Him being on the bench would not do him any good, and would not do the team any good. He's as motivated as he's ever been. If the situation was different and there were at-bats for him to play here, it

would be different."

A 10-time All-Star and the oldest active player in the majors, Pujols had five homers and 12 RBIs this year while playing in 24 of the Angels' 29 games. After a decent start to the season, Pujols had been in a 7-for-43 slump since April 20, hitting three homers in that stretch.

Minasian said the decision to cut ties with Pujols was "really difficult. These are never easy, especially with a guy like this who loves the game as much as anybody I've ever met, who works as hard as anybody I've ever met. But since I've taken this job, to me it's about what's best for the organization moving forward. It really weighed on me. I think it weighed on all of us."

Pujols joined the Angels after 11 successful seasons with the Cardinals during which he won three league MVP awards, earned two World Series rings,

received nine All-Star selections, won an NL batting title and hit 445 homers while establishing himself as one of the greatest sluggers of his generation.

Angels owner Arte Moreno persuaded Pujols to leave for the West Coast with a lavish contract, but the Angels have not won a playoff game during the concurrent tenures of Pujols and three-time AL MVP Mike Trout at the heart of their lineup.

And though Pujols has crossed several statistical milestones with the Angels, the contrast in the two halves of his career is stark.

He batted .328 with a 1.037 OPS in St. Louis, but hit .256 with a .758 OPS in Anaheim along with 222 homers — just under half his total for the Cards. Pujols also earned just one All-Star selection with the Halos, back in 2015.

Altuve's homer helps Astros avoid sweep by Yankees

Associated Press

NEW YORK — José Altuve responded to jeering fans by marking his 31st birthday with a go-ahead, three-run homer off Chad Green in the eighth inning, and the Houston Astros beat the New York Yankees 7-4 on Thursday to avoid a three-game sweep.

Booed throughout the series by fans getting to express their anger directly at the Astros since their cheating scandal en route to the 2017 World Series title was exposed, Altuve turned on a shoulder-high 96 mph 3-2 pitch and drove it over the left-field scoreboard for a 5-3 lead. Gleyber Torres made an incredible, daring dash for the Yankees, scoring from first base on an infield single, but New York's five-game winning streak ended.

Yordan Álvarez hit a pair of

solo homers off Gerrit Cole, who turned a 3-2 lead over to Green starting the eighth. After Torres pulled the Yankees within a run in the bottom half, Martín Maldonado hit a two-run homer off Justin Wilson in the ninth, ending a streak of 75 plate appearances without an RBI.

Cole faced the Astros for the first time since leaving them after the 2019 World Series.

Alex Scrubb (1-0) pitched a perfect seventh, and Ryan Pressly got six outs for his fifth save. Houston climbed back above .500 at 16-15.

Red Sox 12, Tigers 9: Franchy Cordero came off the bench with three hits to snap an 0-for-25 slump, then brought home the winning run in the eighth with the help of Detroit's fourth error, and host Boston held on after blowing three previous leads.

Braves 3, Nationals 2: Ehire Adrianza made the most of a rare start on a day off for slumping NL MVP Freddie Freeman, providing a nice defensive play and a two-run single to back Drew Smyly's (1-2) strong outing, leading visiting Atlanta past Washington.

Rangers 4, Twins 3 (10): Willie Calhoun singled in the winning run in the 10th inning and visiting Texas dropped Minnesota to 0-7 in extra innings.

Phillies 2, Brewers 0: Zack Wheeler (3-2) struck out eight and pitched a three-hitter and Alex Bohm homered to help host Philadelphia beat Milwaukee for a four-game sweep.

Mets 4, Cardinals 1: Taijuan Walker (2-1) allowed one hit in seven innings and visiting New York scored three runs on bases-loaded walks to beat St. Louis.

Indians 4, Royals 0: Triston McKenzie (1-1) pitched one-hit ball into the sixth inning and visiting Cleveland beat Kansas City to complete a four-game sweep.

Blue Jays 10, Athletics 4: Randal Grichuk homered, doubled and drove in five runs and visiting Toronto beat Oakland to split the four-game series after dropping the first two games against the AL West leader.

Rays 8, Angels 3: Mike Zunino homered, Brett Phillips had two hits during a seven-run eighth inning and visiting Tampa Bay rallied to beat Los Angeles.

Marlins 3, Diamondbacks 1: Adam Duvall hit a tiebreaking homer in the seventh inning, five pitchers combined on a five-hitter and host Miami beat Arizona for its first sweep of the season.

Wiz take 4-game lead in play-in race

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Bradley Beal scored 14 of his 28 points in the fourth quarter and overtime Thursday night, and Russell Westbrook had his 34th triple-double of the season in the Washington Wizards' 131-129 win over Toronto that all but eliminated the Raptors from the NBA's play-in tournament.

Pascal Siakam matched his career high with 44 points for the Raptors, who lost for the fifth time in six games and fell four games behind the Wizards for the 10th spot in the Eastern Conference with five left to play. Siakam missed a long three-pointer at the end of overtime.

"We just needed one of those (shots) to go," Toronto coach Nick Nurse said, "but it was not to be."

Beal, who played 45 minutes just a day after the Wizards lost at Milwaukee, spent most of the game trying to escape Toronto's defensive attention.

"As soon as I walked out of the locker room they had a guy on me," he said. "It was tough, but it was effective. It kept me out of the game. I had to move without

the ball and let my teammates make plays."

"I think we had him turned in circles most of the night," Nurse said.

Westbrook had 13 points, 17 rebounds and 17 assists before fouling out with 15.3 seconds left in overtime. The triple-double was the 180th of his career, leaving him one behind Oscar Robertson. It was the sixth triple-double in seven games for Westbrook.

Mavericks 113, Nets 109: Luka Dončić scored 24 points, Tim Hardaway Jr. added 23 and Dallas beat visiting Brooklyn to finish a season sweep.

Kyrie Irving scored a season-high 45 points for the Nets. They lost a season-high fourth straight game and dropped two games behind Eastern Conference-leading Philadelphia.

Warriors 118, Thunder 97: Stephen Curry had 34 points and seven assists and host Golden State raced past Oklahoma City.

Ty Jerome scored 23 points to lead the Thunder and Darius Bazley added 22. They have lost five straight and 19 of 20.

Bulls 120, Hornets 99: Nikola Vučević had 29 points and 14 rebounds and visiting Chicago breezed past Charlotte with Zach LaVine back on the floor for the Bulls.

LaVine returned from an 11-game absence due to the league's health and safety protocols and scored 13 points on 5-for-11 shooting.

P.J. Washington, who missed Charlotte's last game for the birth of his child, led the Hornets with 24 points on six three-pointers.

Pacers 133, Hawks 126: Caris LeVert scored nine of his 31 points in the final 2:17, and host Indiana awoke from a recent funk to beat Atlanta.

The Pacers had lost four of five, including one of the season's ugliest losses Wednesday in which they managed just 93 points at home against Sacramento's NBA-worst defense.

Trae Young led the Hawks with 30 points and 10 assists.

Pistons 111, Grizzlies 97: Wayne Ellington and Cory Joseph scored 18 points apiece and Detroit beat visiting Memphis to snap a four-game losing streak.

Fighting Golden State for eighth place in the Western Conference, Memphis couldn't take advantage of the matchup against lowly Detroit.

Clippers 118, Lakers 94: Paul George scored 24 points and the Los Angeles Clippers routed a Los Angeles Lakers team minus LeBron James, moving into the No. 3 spot in the Western Conference playoff race.

The loss kept the defending NBA champion Lakers at No. 6. The Staples Center co-tenants could potentially face each other in the first round.

The Lakers have lost four of five, with six games remaining in the regular season. The only thing they've clinched so far is a spot in the new play-in tournament, which James has derided. Still dealing with a high ankle sprain, he will be out again Friday night for a pivotal game at Portland. That season series is tied at one.

Kawhi Leonard had 15 points, eight rebounds and six assists, and Ivica Zubac added 14 points and eight rebounds for the Clippers.

First of 2 races NASCAR Cup races hits Darlington

Associated Press

Darlington Raceway was strangely busy at the start of the pandemic when the old, country track opened its gates to help NASCAR restart its engines during a hectic stretch of three races in five days.

It was the perfect warmup for a return to two scheduled Cup Series races this season at NASCAR's oldest superspeedway for the first time since 2004.

Darlington hosts all three of NASCAR's national series this weekend that closes with the Cup stars celebrating Mother's Day on Sunday. NASCAR then returns in September for the Southern 500 on Labor Day weekend.

It is something of a rebirth for a track that seemed closer to extinction during the 17 years since NASCAR stripped the "Lady In Black" of one of its coveted race dates.

"We're certainly excited with what's occurred," said Kerry Tharp, track president since 2016. "We consider ourselves like the Wrigley Field of NASCAR."

The South Carolina track hosted two NASCAR weekends a year from 1960 through 2004 before the Labor Day race was moved to a larger market.

It's not that Darlington wasn't appreciated. Harold Brasington carved the 1.366-mile, egg-shaped oval out of farmland and "The Track Too Tough To Tame" is one of the most unique on the circuit. But it opened in 1950, seats less than 50,000 in the grandstands and sits along a four-lane highway on the way to the beach.

Simply put, NASCAR outgrew the place.

But, track officials also took for granted Darlington's status as a staple on NASCAR's schedule and it led to neglect and disrepair at

the raceway.

When Darlington lost its Labor Day weekend date after 2003, the whispers began about the track maybe shutting down. It's what happened to two other NASCAR originals: Rockingham and North Wilkesboro in North Carolina are now shuttered.

But Darlington leaders and officials at NASCAR, which now owns the track, have worked to modernize the venue by adding lights, new grandstands, suite areas and a tunnel entry to improve access for teams.

Tharp understands Darlington can't make the same mistake again by sitting back content with its two-races-a-year status. There are areas he and NASCAR are targeting for improvements.

The path back has been rocky. The first big step came in 2015 when Darlington regained its Labor Day date for the Southern 500.