

Israel pounds Gaza as diplomats work on truce

Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — The Israeli military unleashed a wave of heavy airstrikes on the Gaza Strip early Monday, saying it destroyed 9 miles of militant tunnels and the homes of nine Hamas commanders, as international diplomats worked to end the week of fighting that has killed hundreds of people.

The latest attacks killed a top Gaza leader of the Islamic Jihad militant group whom the Israeli military blamed for some of the thousands of rocket attacks launched at Israel in recent days.

Israel has said it intends to press on for now with its attacks against Hamas, the militant group that rules Gaza, and the United States signaled it would not pressure the two sides for a cease-fire.

At least 200 Palestinians have been killed in the week of airstrikes, including 59 children and 35 women, with some 1,300 people wounded, according to the Gaza

Health Ministry. Ten people in Israel, including a 5-year-old boy and a soldier, have been killed in the ongoing rocket attacks launched from civilian areas in Gaza toward civilian areas in Israel.

Violence has also erupted between Jews and Arabs inside Israel, leaving scores of people injured. On Monday, an Israeli man attacked last week by a group of Arab citizens in the central city of Lod died of his wounds, according to police.

Gaza's mayor, Yahya Sarraj, told Al-Jazeera TV that the strikes had caused extensive damage to roads and other infrastructure. "If the aggression continues, we expect conditions to become worse," he said.

The U.N. has warned that the territory's power station is at risk of running out of fuel, and Sarraj said Gaza was also low on spare parts. Gaza already experiences daily power outages for between eight and 12 hours, and tap water

is undrinkable. Mohammed Thabet, spokesman for the territory's electricity distribution company, said it has fuel to supply Gaza with electricity for two or three days.

The war broke out last Monday, when Hamas fired long-range rockets at Jerusalem after weeks of clashes in the holy city between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police. The protests were focused on the heavy-handed policing of a flashpoint sacred site during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers.

More protests were expected across the region Tuesday in response to a call by Palestinian citizens of Israel for a general strike. The protest has the support of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party.

Since the fighting began, the Israeli military has launched hundreds of airstrikes it says are targeting Hamas' militant infrastructure. Palestinian militants in

Gaza have fired more than 3,200 rockets into Israel. Israeli military officials said Hamas had stockpiled about 15,000 rockets before the war started. Rocket attacks continued Monday, with one hitting a building in Ashdod that caused injuries, the Israeli police said.

U.S. diplomat Hady Amr met with a delegation from the Palestinian Authority on Monday, a day after meeting senior Israeli leaders. But the Biden administration has declined so far to publicly criticize Israel's part in the fighting or send a top-level envoy.

Speaking to reporters during a trip to Denmark, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States would support any initiative to stop the fighting, but signaled the country did not intend to put pressure on the two sides to accept a cease-fire.

"Ultimately it is up to the parties to make clear that they want to pursue a cease-fire," he said.

Some mask rules phased out at Japan, Guam bases

BY JOSEPH DITZLER

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — U.S. air, naval and Marine Corps commands in Japan and on Guam had dropped their coronavirus mask mandates, with some exceptions, for fully vaccinated people on their installations as of 6 p.m. Monday.

In each case, commanders stipulated that everyone on U.S. installations must wear a mask around Japanese co-workers, base employees and members of the Japan Self-Defense Force. Local commanders may tailor the overall policy change to fit their situations.

Misawa Air Base in northeastern Japan, citing a policy change by U.S. Forces Japan, was first in the country to announce an end to mandatory masks indoors and out-

doors on the base for fully vaccinated individuals, according to a Facebook post by Misawa on Monday afternoon.

Later Monday, Kadena Air Base on Okinawa and Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, the USFJ headquarters, did the same, according to orders signed by their respective commanders.

Yokosuka Naval Base, homeport for the 7th Fleet south of Tokyo, dropped its mask mandate following guidance from Naval Forces Japan commander Rear Adm. Brian Fort. Three remaining Navy installations in Japan had made no change by 6 p.m. Finally, III Marine Expeditionary Force at 7:15 p.m. on its Facebook page announced the same change to its policy for Marines on Okinawa.

On Guam, Andersen Air Force Base also dropped its mask mandate, according to an order Sunday by 36th Wing commander Brig. Gen. Jeremy Sloane.

The Guam territorial government on Friday also exempted fully vaccinated, incoming travelers from the mandatory 10-day coronavirus quarantine, according to the U.S. island territory's Joint Information Center. People who are not fully vaccinated are still expected to quarantine upon arrival, according to the order.

At bases in Japan, the Defense Department mask mandate from February remains in force for unvaccinated individuals. In some cases, everyone must continue wearing masks, including in schools, day care centers, medical

and dental facilities, public transportation on and off base and anywhere in public outside the installations.

And everyone must wear a mask while in proximity to Japanese co-workers and service members, according to the Air Force and Navy orders. Japan lags behind other developed nations in vaccinating its population and many Japanese employees at U.S. bases are not inoculated.

U.S. bases in Japan reported five new cases of COVID-19, the coronavirus respiratory disease, between Friday and 6 p.m. Monday.

At Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Col. Lance Lewis said masks remain mandatory for all on the air station south of Hiroshima, regardless of their vaccination status.

USSF CO fired after Marxist plot claims

The Washington Post

The self-published book carries a conspiratorial title and a purportedly urgent message: A Marxist plot is afoot to infiltrate the military and overthrow the U.S. government, it alleges.

Some of its subjects are familiar specters in right-wing politics — critical race theory, diversity initiatives and the New York Times' 1619 Project — but these claims came from a new source last week: an active-duty member of the U.S. Space Force.

Lt. Col. Matthew Lohmeier published his book, "Irresistible Revolution: Marxism's Goal of Conquest & the Unmaking of the American Military," this week and appeared on multiple conservative podcasts to promote it, each time criticizing Defense Department leadership and accusing the agency of pushing an agenda that is "rooted in Marxism."

Lohmeier, who spent more than a decade with the Air Force before joining the military's newest branch in 2020, was fired Friday for his comments, a move first reported by Military.com a day later and confirmed by The Washington Post on Sunday. Lt. Gen.

Stephen Whiting, the head of Space Operations Command, relieved Lohmeier of his command "due to loss of trust and confidence in his ability to lead," a Space Force spokesperson said in a statement.

"This decision was based on public comments made by Lt. Col. Lohmeier in a recent podcast," said the spokesperson, who added that an investigation is underway "on whether these comments constituted prohibited partisan political activity."

In an email to The Post, Lohmeier said that he consulted with a military public affairs officer and legal counsel before publishing the book and that he had a team of attorneys read the manuscript.

"I complied with what I understood was required as part of the pre-publication process," he said.

Lohmeier said he did not inform his chain of command that he was writing a book.

"The entirety of the work was done during my free time, after duty hours and on weekends, using my own resources," he said.

Lohmeier, who is based in Colorado, graduated from the Air Force Academy in 2006 and spent time as a fighter pilot and instruc-

tor. His Space Force unit was charged with detecting missile launches.

A description of the book promises readers that "after becoming aware of the Marxist conquest of American society, you will never again look at things in the same way." In podcast interviews over the past two weeks, Lohmeier argued that part of that "conquest" has taken place in the U.S. military.

"What we saw taking place in the country and in the military, frankly, during this past year especially was reminiscent of Mao's cultural revolution where you had to toe a certain party line," Lohmeier said on "The Steve Gruber Show," a conservative radio program, in a reference to Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China, which is estimated to have led to 1.5 million deaths.

Some experts have denied Lohmeier's assertions.

"We seem to have more and more people spouting off about Marxism, communism and socialism who don't seem to have a clue what they're talking about," said John Sipher, a former CIA operative and fellow at the Atlantic Council, in a tweet responding to Lohmeier's comments.

Air Force gets \$152M upgrade at Romania base

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Major improvements to a Romanian base are set to begin this summer as the U.S. Air Force looks to boost its presence and support larger NATO missions in the strategically important Black Sea region.

The \$152 million in construction projects will enable Campia Turzii air base to support heavy cargo aircraft, host fighter jets and deployed personnel, and quickly respond to any security issues in the region, the Air Force said. The upgrades will also allow the former Soviet airfield to safely receive and store munitions.

The Cold War-era base in central Romania is expected to

serve as a rotational hub in the future.

The work is being paid for through the European Deterrence Initiative, a program launched in June 2014 to reassure U.S. allies in Europe after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

Last year, the U.S. and Romania signed a 10-year road map for defense cooperation that put increased focus on security around the Black Sea, an area where Moscow in recent years has increased activity and installed sophisticated air defense systems.

The Air Force will award about \$130 million in construction funds at the base this year, said Darren Walls, an Air Force construction program manager.

La. man to command modern version of WWII-era ship

The (Baton Rouge, La.) Advocate

BATON ROUGE, La. — As a youngster, Matt Noland explored the USS Kidd Veterans Museum in Baton Rouge — and the World War II-era ship in his hometown played a part in his decision to follow a career in the Navy.

Now he's second in command of the modern USS Kidd, a guided missile destroyer based in Everett, Wash., that provides air defense, anti-submarine defense and anti-surface warfare. And on Wednesday, he'll become the commander of the ship and its crew of 350.

Noland, 43, has served as executive officer of the ship for the last 20 months, making sure the ship ran like a well-oiled machine for Commander Nath-

an Wemett, who's leaving for duty on the administrative staff of an overseas Navy base.

"All the ship's five departments and the divisions in those departments come together for the first time at the level of executive officer," Noland said in an interview last week.

Noland said it's the hardest job he's ever had — but also the best job.

"You're in the position every single day to be a positive example to hundreds of people," Noland said. "That's humbling and exciting and makes you want to be a better person every day."

"The commanding officer's job will be even better," he added. "I can't wait."

Virus testing views vary in US schools

Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. — Children are having their noses swabbed or saliva sampled at school to test for the coronavirus in cities such as Baltimore, New York and Chicago. In other parts of the U.S., school districts are reluctant to check even students showing signs of illness for COVID-19.

Education and health officials around the country have taken different approaches to testing students and staff — and widely varying positions or whether to test them at all as more children give up virtual classrooms for in-person learning. Some states have rejected their share of the billions of dollars the Biden administration made available for conducting virus tests in schools.

Officials in districts that have embraced testing describe it as an important tool for making sure schools reopen safely and infections remain under control. They note that the virus might otherwise elude detection since young people with the virus often are asymptomatic and most teachers have

been vaccinated.

But many school administrators and families, weary of pandemic-related disruptions, see little benefit in screening children, who tend not to become as sick from COVID-19 as adults. Meanwhile, each positive test that turns up at a school can trigger quarantine orders that force students back into learning from home.

In Nebraska, Superintendent Bryce Jorgenson said he doubts parents with children in the Southern Valley Public School District would embrace school-based virus tests. His rural, 370-student district eliminated its mandatory mask policy in March.

“I can tell you right now, I would say that not just in our district, but in many districts around, there is not an appetite for that at all,” he said of ongoing screening. “I don’t know as a leader, too, if I want to get into testing kids because we don’t test kids for any other virus, really.”

Elected officials in Iowa and Idaho made their opinions known by turning down mil-

lions in federal aid for voluntary COVID-19 testing in schools.

“Here’s your \$95 million back,” Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican, declared on Fox News after commenting that in her view, President Joe Biden “thinks that COVID just started.”

Idaho’s state House of Representatives rejected \$40.3 million in offered funding.

Experts are divided about how worthwhile it is to test for the coronavirus inside schools as more people are vaccinated and confirmed cases decline.

Joshua Salomon, a professor of medicine at Stanford University who supports screening students, said the procedure could help curb outbreaks involving more contagious variants.

But Dr. Monica Gandhi, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, said the nation’s vaccination program makes the tests less useful because immunized individuals are much less likely to get infected.

Joy for UK pubs tempered by surge of virus variant

Associated Press

LONDON — Pubs and restaurants across much of the U.K. opened for indoor service for the first time since early January on Monday, even as the prime minister urged people to be cautious amid the spread of a more contagious COVID-19 variant.

The latest step in the gradual easing of nationwide restrictions imposed on Jan. 4 also includes the reopening of theaters, sports venues and museums, raising hopes that the economy may soon start to recover from the devastating effects of the pandemic. The government is also relaxing guidance on close personal contact, such as hugging, and permitting international travel, though only 12 countries and territories are on the list of “safe” destinations.

But the rapid spread of a variant first discovered in India is

tempering the optimism for pubs and hugs amid memories of how another variant swept across the country in December, triggering England’s third national lockdown. Public health officials and the government are urging people to continue to observe social distancing and hygiene guidance, even though they say the situation is different now because almost 70% of the adult population has received at least one dose of vaccine.

“Please, be cautious about the risks to your loved ones,” Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in a video posted on Twitter. “Remember that close contact such as hugging is a direct way of transmitting this disease, so you should think about the risks.”

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are following similar but slightly different reopening paths.

India sees glimmer of hope, but virus crisis not over yet

Associated Press

BENGALURU, India — For the first time in months, Ishaar Hussain Shaikh is feeling somewhat optimistic.

The 30-year-old ambulance driver in India’s metropolis of Mumbai has been working tirelessly ever since the city became the epicenter of another catastrophic COVID-19 surge slashing through the country. Last month, he drove about 70 patients to the hospital, his cellphone constantly vibrating with calls.

But two weeks into May, he’s only carried 10 patients. Cases are falling and so are the phone calls.

In the last week, the number of new cases plunged by nearly 70% in India’s financial capital, home to 22 million people. After a peak of 11,000 daily cases, the city is now seeing fewer than 2,000 a day.

The turnaround represents a

glimmer of hope for India, still in the clutches of a devastating coronavirus surge that has raised public anger at the government.

A well-enforced lockdown and vigilant authorities are being credited for Mumbai’s burgeoning success. Even the capital of New Delhi is seeing faint signs of improvement as infections slacken after weeks of tragedy and desperation playing out in overcrowded hospitals and crematoriums and on the streets.

It is still too early to say things are improving, with Mumbai and New Delhi representing only a sliver of the overall situation.

“There will always be smaller states or cities where things are getting worse, but this won’t be as clear in the national caseload numbers,” said Murad Banaji, a mathematician modeling India’s cases.

Choice between chair, firing squad in SC

Associated Press

COLUMBIA — South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster has signed into law a bill that forces death row inmates for now to choose between the electric chair or a newly formed firing squad in hopes the state can restart executions after an involuntary 10-year pause.

South Carolina had been one of the most prolific states of its size in putting inmates to death. But a lack of lethal injection drugs brought executions to a halt.

McMaster signed the bill Friday with no ceremony or fanfare, according to the state Legislature's website. It's the first bill the governor decided to deal with after nearly 50 hit his desk Thursday.

Last week, state lawmakers gave their final approvals to the bill, which retains lethal injection as the primary method of execution if the state has the drugs, but requires

prison officials to use the electric chair or firing squad if it doesn't.

Prosecutors said three inmates have exhausted all their normal appeals, but can't be killed because under the previous law, inmates who don't choose the state's 109-year-old electric chair automatically are scheduled to die by lethal injection. They have all chosen the method that can't be carried out.

How soon executions can begin is up in the air. The electric chair is ready to use. Prison officials have been doing preliminary research into how firing squads carry out executions in other states, but are not sure how long it will take to have one in place in South Carolina. The other three states that allow a firing squad are Mississippi, Oklahoma and Utah, according to the Death Penalty Information Center.

Three inmates, all in Utah, have been

killed by firing squad since the United States reinstated the death penalty in 1977. Nineteen inmates have died in the electric chair this century, and South Carolina is one of eight states that can still electrocute inmates, according to the center.

Lawyers for the men with potentially imminent death dates are considering suing over the new law, saying the state is going backward.

"These are execution methods that previously were replaced by lethal injection, which is considered more humane, and it makes South Carolina the only state going back to the less humane execution methods," said Lindsey Vann of Justice 360, a nonprofit that represents many of the men on South Carolina's death row.

South Carolina's last execution took place in May 2010, and its batch of lethal injection drugs expired in 2013.

2nd Amendment sanctuaries face 1st court test in Oregon

Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — The first court test of whether local governments can bar police from enforcing certain gun laws is playing out in a rural Oregon county, one of a wave of U.S. counties declaring itself a Second Amendment sanctuary.

The measure that voters in the logging area of Columbia County narrowly approved last year forbids local officials from enforcing most federal and state gun laws and could impose thousands of dollars in fines on those who try.

Second Amendment sanctuary resolutions have been adopted by some 1,200 local governments in states across the nation, including Virginia, Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, Illinois and Florida, according to Shawn Fields, an assistant professor of law at Campbell University who tracks them. Many are symbolic, but some, like in Columbia County, carry legal force.

The movement took off around 2018, as states considered stricter gun laws in the wake of mass shootings, including a high school shooting near Parkland, Fla., that killed 17 people and made some survivors into high-profile gun control activists.

After President Joe Biden took office, conservative lawmakers in several states proposed banning police from enforcing federal

gun measures, and at least one proposal in Arizona has been signed into law.

The movement hasn't yet faced a major legal challenge. The Oregon case was filed by Columbia County under an unusual provision in state law that allows a judge to examine a measure before it goes into effect. No timeline has been set for a court hearing.

"This will allow the court to tell us whether the county can actually decline to enforce certain state laws, and it will tell us how to abide by the will of the voters to the extent that we can," said Sarah Hanson, who serves as counsel in the conservative-leaning county in deep-blue Oregon.

Supporters of the ordinance include the Oregon Firearms Federation, which said in a November statement that "extremists" and "big city radicals" were trying to curtail gun rights.

The group referenced Portland protests opposing police brutality that occasionally turned violent last summer and called the ordinance a "common sense" step that would "ensure your right and ability to defend your life and the lives of your loved ones."

The ordinance would ban the enforcement of laws like background check requirements and restrictions on carrying a gun, though it would have exceptions for others, including keeping firearms from convicted felons.

Census takers rely on rural proxies

Associated Press

In Alaska, West Virginia and other mostly rural states, census takers relied more on the word of neighbors, landlords and others for information about a home's residents. In New Jersey, New York and other more densely populated states in the Mid-Atlantic region, they were more likely to come away from a household lacking basic information on race, sex and ethnic background.

An Associated Press review of the first data-quality measurements released by the U.S. Census Bureau last month shows some early patterns that may point to red flags in the data that could emerge when more detailed numbers from the 2020 census are released in August.

While it's too early to reach any conclusions about the accuracy of the data gathered during the once-a-decade head count, these types of responses — a reliance on proxies for answers and just a head count with no basic demographic information — result in poorer quality data compared to other methods.

Besides Alaska and West Virginia, other rural states that had the highest rates of household answers coming from proxies such as neighbors and landlords included Maine, Montana, Vermont and New Mexico. In these states, census takers relied on information from proxies for between almost a quarter and a third of households. Puerto Rico's rate was 37.3%.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

22 people rescued after roller coaster gets stuck

AZ PHOENIX — Nearly two dozen people who were stranded after a roller coaster stalled mid-ride at an Arizona amusement park are safe.

News reports and the Phoenix Fire Department said the ride at Castles N' Coasters in Phoenix got stuck with riders perched 20 feet off the ground.

Rescue crews were able to escort 22 people off the ride safely.

There was no immediate word on what caused the Desert Storm roller coaster to freeze up.

K-9 officer charged in second biting incident

UT SALT LAKE CITY — A Salt Lake police K-9 officer already facing a criminal charge accusing him of releasing his dog on a Black man who was kneeling in his yard with his hands up has been charged in connection with a second biting incident.

The Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office filed amended charges against Nickolas John Pearce, 39, of Herriman, charging him with a second count of aggravated assault, a second-degree felony, the Deseret News reported.

On Nov. 14, 2019, police pulled over an SUV that was reported to be stolen. The female driver complied with orders to hold her hands out the window.

She was not making threatening moves toward the officers and did not have a weapon, prosecutors said.

Pearce is accused of lifting up his police dog, Tuco, so he could

reach the woman's extended arms and told the dog to "hit," prosecutors said. The dog bit the woman's arm and pulled it down, prosecutors said.

Low-flying flights set to map state's geology

ME AUGUSTA — A low-flying airplane over northern Maine later this month is going to be mapping the region's geology.

The low-level flights through August are being coordinated by U.S. Geological Survey and Maine Geological Survey scientists to get images of geology at the surface and below ground.

Instruments on the airplane will measure variations in the Earth's magnetic field and natural low-level radiation created by different rock types up to several miles beneath the surface. Parts of Aroostook, Penobscot, Piscataquis and Somerset counties will be covered.

The information will help researchers develop maps in three dimensions, providing scientists with the framework needed to better evaluate natural resources, groundwater and earthquake hazards.

Officials mull move of historic lighthouse

NC OCRACOKE — The National Park Service has begun a project to evaluate how to repair and whether to relocate the historic lighthouse on North Carolina's Ocracoke Island.

The bright white structure is the second-oldest lighthouse in the nation still operating and has been damaged several times in recent years by hurri-

canes, The Virginian-Pilot reported. The lighthouse bricks and mortar are deteriorating from moisture trapped by a coat of concrete that was applied to its exterior nearly 70 years ago.

Water levels on the remote island are also rising, threatening to inundate the site, which sits on property just 2 feet above sea level.

Swans at lake died from parasitic worm infection

IN HAMMOND — Wild swans found dead last winter along a lake that straddles the Indiana-Illinois border succumbed to infections caused by parasitic worms, Indiana wildlife officials said.

The mute swans were found dead along with Canada geese in late February and early March along Wolf Lake, which abuts both Hammond and Chicago's southeast side.

The Indiana Department of Natural Resources said that testing by the U.S. Geological Survey's National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wis., found that the swans had fatal infections of parasitic flatworms.

Snails consumed by swans and other waterfowl serve as an intermediate host for that parasite, which causes infected birds to appear weak or unable to fly, The (Northwest Indiana) Times reported.

Founding college hall set to be demolished

VT COLCHESTER — The founding and original building of St. Michael's College will be torn down.

Founders Hall was built in 1903 and for many years, it was the only building for the school in Colchester, WCAX-TV reported. It later became a residence hall, then an office space before it was closed two years ago.

St. Michael's College said the building would be too expensive to fix, so it will be deconstructed and a green space will remain where it now stands.

The cupola will be removed and preserved. Bricks will also be saved and sold to alumni, according to the news station.

Beach town says July 4 fireworks back this year

DE REHOBOTH BEACH — A Delaware city's popular fireworks display celebrating Independence Day is back on this year after the coronavirus pandemic led to the event being called off last year.

The city of Rehoboth Beach announced that its traditional fireworks show will take place July 3, the News Journal reported.

City officials had recently discussed canceling the display for a second consecutive year, according to the newspaper. The decision followed new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that said fully vaccinated Americans no longer need to wear masks or ensure social distancing in most cases.

"We're really excited that the country is opening back up and that we are able to celebrate with our annual fireworks display," City Manager Sharon Lynn said in a statement.

— From wire reports

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Play-in game will be superstar tussle

Associated Press

LeBron vs. Steph.

Oh, what a way to get into NBA playoff mode.

The matchups for the NBA's new play-in tournament are set. It starts Tuesday night with the Eastern Conference: No. 10 Charlotte at No. 9 Indiana and No. 8 Washington at No. 7 Boston. And things shift to the Western Conference on Wednesday night: No. 10 San Antonio at No. 9 Memphis and No. 8 Golden State at the seventh-seeded Los Angeles Lakers.

LeBron James and Stephen Curry have squared off four times for championships, back in the days of those Warriors-Cleveland matchups in the NBA Finals being annual events. They'll square off Wednesday for a slightly different prize — the No. 7 seed in the West playoffs, but it'll still be a game loaded with hype and intrigue.

"It'll be a different scenario, but another chapter in it," said Curry, the NBA's scoring champion this season for the second time in his career. "At the end of the day, you expect

greatness. That's the part I've enjoyed so much about playing in the finals against him ... those games that matter, it just brings out another level of intensity and excitement and a sense of urgency about it."

The Lakers are still the second choice to win the NBA title, according to FanDuel, behind only Brooklyn. And they're the favorites to win the West. Problem is, technically, they're not in the playoffs yet — and they need a win in the play-in round, Wednesday or Friday if necessary, just to get back to the postseason.

Jazz thump Kings to grab top seed in NBA playoffs

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Rudy Gobert wasn't about to stop his Utah teammates from celebrating after securing the No. 1 spot for the NBA playoffs. He just wants the Jazz to keep focus on the bigger picture.

A year after blowing a 3-1 lead and getting bounced in the first round of the playoffs, the Jazz are headed back to the postseason — and they're going in with the league's best record.

"Going through what we went through last year, I learned to enjoy every moment," Gobert said following Utah's 121-99 victory over the Sacramento Kings on Sunday night. "That doesn't mean you don't prepare for what's coming. Just enjoy the moment."

Jordan Clarkson scored 33 points and Gobert added 13 points and 16 rebounds for the Jazz.

Utah (52-20) won its final two to edge Western Conference-rival Phoenix for the top spot. It's the first time in franchise history that the Jazz have finished with sole possession of the best record in the NBA.

"As much as the accomplishment, for me you appreciate this group of men and appreciate the opportunity to coach them," coach Quin Snyder said. "That feeling about our team, I want all of them, all of us, to enjoy this moment because I feel like if we

do that, appreciate the regular season, I think that transitions us to the mindset we need to have to try to play well in the playoffs."

Mike Conley had 11 points, nine assists and six rebounds in his second game back after missing two weeks because of a right hamstring injury.

Now comes the waiting game for Snyder's team. Utah awaits one of the surviving teams from the play-in games that begin Tuesday and end Friday.

Lakers 110, Pelicans 98: LeBron James scored 25 points before he appeared to mildly aggravate a right ankle injury and Los Angeles Lakers closed out the regular season with a victory at New Orleans.

While the win was the Lakers' fifth straight, it was not enough to pull them high enough in the Western Conference standings to skip the NBA's new play-in format.

Warriors 113, Grizzlies 101: Stephen Curry became the oldest scoring champion since Michael Jordan at age 35 in 1998, finishing with 46 points as host Golden State held off Memphis in a regular-season finale that determined the play-in tournament's eighth and ninth spots.

The Warriors wrapped up the No. 8 seed and will play Wednesday at the Los Angeles Lakers, while the Grizzlies finished ninth and will host San Antonio on Wednesday.

Nets 123, Cavaliers 109: Kevin Durant had 23 points, 13 assists and eight rebounds and host Brooklyn beat Cleveland to take the No. 2 seed in the Eastern Conference.

Kyrie Irving added 17 points for the Nets, who will open the playoffs next weekend against either Boston or Washington. The Celtics and Wizards will meet Tuesday in the play-in tournament to determine the No. 7 seed.

Suns 123, Spurs 121: E'Twaun Moore scored 22 points and made a three-pointer with 2.2 seconds remaining to lift Phoenix to a win at San Antonio.

Knicks 96, Celtics 92: Julius Randle capped his All-Star season with 20 points, seven rebounds and seven assists host New York beat Boston to take the No. 4 seed in the Eastern Conference.

Wizards 115, Hornets 110: Bradley Beal scored 20 of his 25 points in the second half and host Washington rallied to beat Charlotte to finish eighth in the Eastern Conference.

Hawks 124, Rockets 95: Rookie Onyeka Okongwu set career highs with 21 points and 14 rebounds and host Atlanta beat Houston.

Pacers 125, Raptors 113: Oshae Brissett scored a career-best 31 points, Domantas Sabonis added 25 points, 16 rebounds and three steals and visiting In-

diana beat Toronto to lock up the Eastern Conference's ninth seed.

76ers 128, Magic 117: Tyrese Maxey had 30 points, seven rebounds and six assists, and Eastern Conference champion Philadelphia beat visiting Orlando in a meaningless regular-season finale.

Trail Blazers 132, Nuggets 116: Damian Lillard had 22 points and 10 assists and host Portland beat Denver to secure its eighth straight playoff berth, the longest active streak in the NBA.

Heat 120, Pistons 107: Nemanja Bjelica scored 17 of his 21 points in the first half and Miami rolled at Detroit despite holding out several key players in a relatively meaningless game.

Timberwolves 136, Mavericks 121: Anthony Edwards scored 30 points in his final audition for NBA Rookie of the Year, leading host Minnesota past Dallas.

Bulls 118, Bucks 112: Thaddeus Young scored 20 points, Cody White added 19 and Chicago beat visiting Milwaukee with Giannis Antetokounmpo and the rest of the Bucks' starters missing the regular-season finale.

Thunder 117, Clippers 112: Rookie Aleksej Pokusevski scored a career-high 29 points and host Oklahoma City beat Los Angeles to snap a nine-game losing streak.

Lightning take Game 1 from Panthers

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — For the Tampa Bay Lightning, the return of several key players couldn't have come at a more opportune time.

Brayden Point scored two late goals, including the game-winner with 1:14 left in the third period, to lift the defending champion Lightning to a 5-4 win over the Florida Panthers on Sunday night in Game 1 of their playoff series.

Nikita Kucherov scored two power-play goals in his first appearance after missing the entire regular season with a hip injury. Kucherov had surgery on Dec. 29 and played his first game since Sept. 28.

"I was excited to get back in a game. I've waited for this for a long time," Kucherov said.

Blake Coleman scored a short-handed goal. Andrei Vasilevskiy made 35 saves and Victor Hedman, who also returned after missing the last two games, had three assists.

Jonathan Huberdeau had a goal and two assists, Owen Tippett and Aleksander Barkov each had a goal and an assist and Carter Verhaeghe scored a goal against his former

team to lead the Panthers. Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 34 shots, and Keith Yandle and Sam Bennett each had two assists.

The game featured four lead changes.

"Two exceptional hockey teams going at it." Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said. "A win is a win. Whether you blow a team out or win by one goal or you come back to do it. You just want to win. I was proud of the guys. We had a one-goal lead and coughed it up. There was no panic on the bench."

Point tied it at 4 with seven minutes to go on his power-play goal and then got the winner when he skated in on a breakaway and backhanded the puck past Bobrovsky.

"I knew I might have some space, made a move and it went in," Point said.

Florida had won its last six games of the regular season, including the final two against the Lightning before the return of several of their top players.

"They have good offense and a good team," Bobrovsky said. "We have a good team, we have to forget this one and keep competing. We did some great things offensively. We have to put this behind us and move on."

With the Panthers trailing 3-2, Huber-

deau skated in on a breakaway and slid the puck under Vasilevskiy's pads at 1:27 into the third to tie the score at 3.

Tippett gave Florida a 4-3 lead on his goal at 4:09 of the third.

"Very intense game. There was a lot going on out there," Panthers coach Joel Quenneville said. "Their power play was the difference tonight."

His team thought it scored a power-play goal when Sam Bennett pushed the puck past Vasilevskiy at 7:26 of the first, but the goal was waved off due to goalie interference. The Lightning took a 1-0 lead on Coleman's short-handed goal 16 seconds later.

Florida tied it at 1 on Barkov's power-play goal at 9:41, and Verhaeghe put them ahead with 3:29 left in the first, which sent the crowd of over 9,000 into a towel-waving frenzy.

"I got goosebumps before the game," Barkov said. "You want this to happen every game. We want to keep going, having fun."

Kucherov tied the score 2-2 on his first power-play goal at 4:48 of the second. His second gave the Lightning a 3-2 lead when he one-timed a pass from Hedman from the right circle with 5:09 left in the second.

Eriksson Ek lifts Wild over Knights with goal in OT

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Between hard hitting, fast skating, a torrid pace, spectacular goaltending — Game 1 of the first-round series between the Minnesota Wild and Vegas Golden Knights on Sunday had everything but a goal in regulation.

The scoring drought ended with Joel Eriksson Ek's goal at 3:20 of overtime that lifted the Wild past the Knights 1-0, helping Minnesota take home-ice advantage in the series.

Wild goaltender Cam Talbot stopped all 42 shots he faced and improved to 7-4-2 in 13 starts against the Golden Knights.

Game 2 is Tuesday night in Las Vegas.

Minnesota improved to 6-1-2 against Vegas this season, including 3-1-1 at T-Mobile Arena. But grabbing the home-ice edge was critical for the Wild, who are 6-0-2 all-time against the Golden Knights in Minnesota.

Palmieri overtime goal carries Islanders past Pens in Game 1

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The New York Islanders brought Kyle Palmieri home at the trade deadline believing his mix of grit and scoring touch would make a difference in the playoffs.

So far, so very good.

Palmieri knocked a fluttering puck past Tristan Jarry 16:30 into overtime to give the Islanders a 4-3 victory over Pittsburgh in Game 1 of their first-round series on Sunday.

The Long Island native collected a pass from Jean-Gabriel Pageau near the goal line and lifted it over Jarry's left shoulder as New York beat the Penguins for the first time in five tries at PPG Paints Arena this season.

"I was brought here to try to help this team win," Palmieri said. "Obviously, it's just one game. Tomorrow, we'll get back to work and get ready for Game 2. But it's nice to start off on the right foot."

Pageau and Brock Nelson also scored for the Islanders. Rookie goaltender Ilya Sorokin made 39 saves in his playoff debut and New York handed Pittsburgh its 10th loss in the franchise's last 11 postseason games.

Game 2 is Tuesday night in Pittsburgh.

Sidney Crosby, Frederick Gaudreau and Kasper Kapanen scored for the Penguins, but the East Division champions couldn't capitalize despite controlling play for most of the first two periods.

Jarry finished with 37 saves but had issues with his glove side. All four of New York goals sailed over, around or seemingly through Jarry's left arm, though Pittsburgh coach Mike Sullivan declined to place blame for the loss at the feet of a netminder making just his second playoff start.

"I thought Tristan made some big saves throughout the course of the game to keep the game where it was at," Sullivan said. "There were some good saves at both ends of the rink. I just think we have to do a better job as a group."

Padres use backups to sweep Cards

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — A COVID-19 outbreak that sidelined star shortstop Fernando Tatis Jr. and three other key position players hasn't slowed the San Diego Padres in the slightest.

On Sunday, it was a cast of call-ups that came up big for the Padres. Among them: Rookie Ivan Castillo, who had a pinch RBI single for his first big league hit to cap a go-ahead, four-run rally in the fourth inning of a 5-3 victory against the NL Central-leading St. Louis Cardinals that completed a three-game sweep.

"We're just a big group of men coming together and pulling for one another," manager Jayce Tingler said.

San Diego is 5-1 since Tuesday, when Tatis tested positive for the coronavirus before

a game at Colorado and right fielder Wil Myers and first baseman Eric Hosmer were pulled from the game. A positive test was returned for Myers while Hosmer was put in the contact tracing protocol. Also Tuesday, infielder/outfielder Jurickson Profar and utility man Jorge Mateo were sidelined because of contact tracing.

The Padres have made their newcomers feel welcome.

"I think it's our environment in the clubhouse, just how welcoming we are with our guys," Tingler said. "Our leadership team, our veteran players, do a tremendous job of bringing people in whether it's your first game in the big leagues or you've been maybe a journeyman and bounced around. You're a Padre and you're a part of the family. It's a great environment in that club-

house.

"We're having a blast right now," the manager added.

It was the first meeting between the teams since San Diego took two of three from the Cardinals to win a wild-card playoff series last season.

Castillo was promoted from Triple-A on Friday and made his big league debut that night.

"It's only a matter of time. This lineup is going to happen," said center fielder Trent Grisham, who made a spectacular diving catch to end the first inning with runners on second and third, and hit an RBI double in the sixth. "It's just a matter of when, not if. It all came together these last six days. We've been going good and we're going to try to keep it rolling."

Ohtani's homer in ninth carries Angels past Red Sox

Associated Press

BOSTON — Shohei Ohtani hit a two-out, two-run homer in the ninth inning and the Los Angeles Angels rallied past the Boston Red Sox 6-5 Sunday, ending a four-game losing streak.

Matt Barnes (1-1) retired the first two batters in the ninth before giving up a bloop single to Mike Trout.

Ohtani followed with his 12th homer, tying for the major league lead, a drive tugged just inside the Pesky Pole in right field. It was Ohtani's second homer of the series and stopped Boston's three-game winning streak.

Raisel Iglesias (2-2) pitched a scoreless eighth and Mike Mayers got his second save.

Blue Jays 10, Phillies 8: At Dunedin, Fla., television cameras showed a confrontation in the dugout between Phillies manager Joe Girardi and second baseman Jean Segura, who committed two errors.

Marcus Semien and Bo Bichette hit consecutive first-inning homers, and Randal Grichuk had a two-run double in a five-run second as Toronto burst to an 8-0 lead. Vladimir Guerre-

ro Jr. hit his 11th homer.

Orioles 10, Yankees 6: Michael Franco homered and drove in three runs, and rookie Bruce Zimmermann (2-3) came out of the bullpen to allow one run and two hits over 5½ innings as Baltimore avoided rallied from a four-run deficit to avoid a three-game sweep at home.

Aaron Judge homered for the third straight game and went 6-for-10 with four home runs and five RBIs in the series.

Rays 7, Mets 1: Manuel Margot, Willy Adames and Brandon Lowe homered off Marcus Stroman (3-4) as host Tampa completed a three-game sweep and extended its winning streak to four.

Stroman (3-4) dropped to 0-4 in his last five starts. He allowed five runs and six hits in six innings as his ERA rose from 2.01 to 2.72.

Cubs 5, Tigers 1: Chicago's Kyle Hendricks (3-4) allowed one run and eight hits in eight-plus innings, and struck out a season-high eight in a win at Detroit.

Ian Happ had three hits, including a homer, and was aggressive on the bases as the Cubs

won for the second time in six games.

Giants 4, Pirates 1: Alex Wood (5-0) gave up one run and eight hits in six innings as NL West-leading San Francisco gained a four-game split in Pittsburgh.

Astros 6, Rangers 2: Yuli Gurriel broke a 2-2 tie with a sacrifice fly off Joely Rodríguez (1-2) in a four-run eighth, Chas McCormick added a two-run single and host Houston won its sixth straight game.

White Sox 4, Royals 3: Wade Davis (0-2) bounced a wild pitch that allowed host Chicago's José Abreu to dash home with the game-ending run, capping a two-run rally in the ninth that included Yoán Moncada's RBI single.

Athletics 7, Twins 6: Oakland's Matt Chapman had three hits and three RBIs, and Ramón Laureano scored the go-ahead run in Minnesota on a wild pitch in the ninth inning by Taylor Rogers (0-2) as Matt Chapman struck out.

Brewers 10, Braves 9: Freddy Peralta (4-1) struck out eight and allowed two hits over six scoreless innings for host Milwaukee, which took an 8-0 lead

and held on.

Nationals 3, Diamondbacks 0: Washington's Erick Fedde (3-4) allowed three hits in seven innings with four strikeouts, Daniel Hudson pitched a one-hit eighth and Brad Hand struck two for his fourth save, finishing a four-hitter in a win at Arizona.

Reds 7, Rockies 6: Dom Nunez's passed ball allowed the tying run to score in the ninth inning and Jordan Sheffield's wild pitch scored the go-ahead run for visiting Cincinnati.

Marlins 3, Dodgers 2: Host Miami's Adam Duvall hit a three-run homer in the fifth inning off Edwin Uceta (0-2) for three unearned runs in a rally that began with fill-in second baseman Sheldon Neuse's fielding error.

Mariners 3, Indians 2: Seattle's Mitch Haniger hit two doubles and ended the record streak of Shane Bieber (4-3), who struck out seven, ending a string of 20 games with eight or more strikeouts for the the visiting Cleveland pitcher.

Bieber was pulled after his fourth walk, finishing his shortest outing of the season at 4½ innings trailing 3-0.