

Finland says it will apply to join NATO

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Finland on Thursday announced its intent to join NATO, a landmark decision that is expected to win swift approval from allies and could lead to more U.S. military training missions in the Arctic.

“Finland must apply for NATO membership without delay,” Prime Minister Sanna Marin and President Sauli Niinisto said in a joint statement.

The move, prompted by Russia’s war on Ukraine, reverses Finland’s quasi-neutral status, which dates to the Cold War. Sweden, citing the same concerns as Finland, is also expected to announce its plan to join NATO in the coming days.

Over the years, Finland has become a close partner with NATO, carrying out joint exercises and taking part in operations in places such as Afghanistan.

U.S. troops have also carried out periodic training events in the country. With full-fledged Finnish membership in NATO,

those opportunities to carry out joint missions are expected to expand.

Finland’s modernized military would also bring significant assets to NATO’s northeastern flank along the 800-mile border Finland shares with Russia.

Finnish leaders said NATO membership would strengthen the country’s security and also “the entire defense alliance.”

The view from Washington is similar.

Both Finland and Sweden would bring “advanced capabilities and abilities into the alliance” should they join, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters last week.

Russia’s foreign ministry on Thursday said in a statement that the country would be forced to take “retaliatory steps” should Finland follow through on its NATO membership bid.

“Helsinki must be aware of the responsibility and consequences of such a move,” the statement said.

The Kremlin did not spell out what types of military moves it could make, but one op-

tion is to add more troops and weaponry to its western border with NATO.

Moscow’s prior warnings of unspecified consequences should Finland move to join NATO have prompted the United States and United Kingdom to offer assurances during a transition period, when Finland would be without the Article 5 security guarantees that come with membership.

Kirby, without offering details, said last week that the U.S. “would be able to find ways to address any concerns that either Sweden or Finland might have about the period of time between a NATO membership application and their potential ascension into the alliance.”

Finland could be fast-tracked given security concerns over Russia and a recognition within the alliance that the country already meets all NATO military standards.

NATO’s summit in Madrid in June, which will be attended by President Joe Biden, is a venue where Finland’s membership could be made official.

Ukrainian attacks on Russian ships not just lucky strikes

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The destruction of at least eight Russian vessels in recent weeks has provided a morale boost for Ukraine, which managed to take them out despite having little naval capability of its own.

But it also points to an emerging strategic effort to break a Black Sea blockade that is strangling the Ukrainian economy.

Since March 21, Ukrainian missiles and drone attacks have damaged or sunk about four landing ships, three patrol boats and the cruiser Moskva, the Black Sea Fleet flagship, which sank in April, according to Ukrainian defense ministry announcements and data aggreg-

gated by the Istanbul-based ship blog Turkishnavy.net.

All told, Russia has lost about 13 vessels since it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry stated Thursday.

The attacks can’t be attributed to dumb luck or simple and opportunistic hits, said Bryan Clark, a senior fellow and director of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Defense Concepts and Technology.

The United States provided intelligence helpful in the sinking of the Moskva, the Washington Post reported May 5. Some analysts have said, however, that assistance confirmed information Ukraine already had about the ship’s location.

The sinking of one landing

ship and the damage inflicted on two others in port at Berdyansk on the Sea of Azov in late March heightened Russia’s concerns about the vulnerability of its ships and pushed them further out to sea, Clark said.

The loss of the Moskva, which was about 60 miles offshore, reinforced those concerns. And the attacks on patrol boats, which are what is left to enforce the blockade closer to shore, may further loosen the Kremlin’s grip on Ukraine’s economy, he said.

“They are taking this very stepwise approach to push Russian naval forces further and further back in an attempt to get the blockade to essentially be lifted,” Clark said. “Because that’s the goal, to restart the

economy.”

Last Saturday, Ukrainian attacks on Russian forces at Snake Island destroyed a landing ship, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry said.

Those strikes are likely aimed at destabilizing Moscow’s control of the Black Sea outcropping near the Danube River delta, said Dmitry Gorenburg, a senior research scientist at the Arlington, Va.-based think tank CNA.

Clark said Ukrainian attacks on the island appear to be an effort to isolate Russian troops and prevent the ability to sustain or resupply them. He characterized the attacks as too small to be a serious effort to re-establish control over the 42-acre island.

House panel raises alarm on carrier deaths

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — House lawmakers on Wednesday raised alarm over the string of suicides on the USS George Washington and the readiness of the Navy overall as the Pentagon's top official acknowledged shortcomings with how sailors are housed on ships undergoing repairs.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told a subpanel of the House Appropriations Committee that the Pentagon is awaiting the results of two investigations into the George Washington and figuring out how to lodge sailors in the future after three of the ship's crew members died in less than one week in April.

"Whether or not we made the right choices is left to be said," Austin said. "Certainly there's a problem there. We've got to understand what the problem is a bit more and then we have to figure out what to do to ensure we don't have these kinds of problems in the future."

Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio, said she was "terribly concerned" that the slow pace of ship repairs was creating a "dispirited situation" for the crews assigned to them. The George Washington has been undergoing a mid-life overhaul and refueling process at Newport News, Va., since 2017.

"For hundreds of sailors, they have no access to housing or a car, and they're stuck on the ship," Kaptur said. "This is really demoralizing."

Work on the George Washington was expected to end in late 2021 but will now stretch into 2023, she said. Austin attributed the delay to the coronavirus pandemic and said the repair of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier such as the George Washington required "very, very sophisticated work."

"It certainly was not anticipated that the ship would be in a repair cycle this long, but nonetheless I expect the leadership to make the right decisions and I look for-

ward to seeing what the investigations show," he said.

The Navy allowed more than 200 sailors from the carrier to move to temporary housing at another local service installation earlier this month. Austin said Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro will meet with the ship's command Tuesday.

Kaptur and several other lawmakers said they were worried the Navy was not spending enough money to improve repair backlogs, improve morale or prepare for the rising threat from China. The Pentagon's requested budget for fiscal year 2023, which begins Oct. 1, seeks to retire 24 ships and decreases the fleet size from 298 ships today to 280 by 2027.

"I am troubled by the [Department of] Defense submission on the Navy because I see it getting worse," Kaptur said. "I wanted to point a flashlight on this part of the budget and say we've got to do something ... we are not taking care of those who are in service to our country right now."

N. Korea fires 3 ballistic missiles off eastern coast

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea launched three short-range ballistic missiles off its eastern coast on Thursday, according to South Korean military officials.

The weapons were fired around 6:29 p.m., the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a message to reporters. It said it was coordinating with the United States on the matter.

The missiles were estimated by the Joint Chiefs to have flown about 224 miles at a peak altitude of 56 miles.

The Japanese prime minister's office in a tweet said it also detected a suspected missile being fired from North Korea.

The missiles mark North Korea's 15th round of weapons testing so far this year. The regime's latest launch was on May 7, when it fired a short-range submarine-launched ballistic missile.

The launches come two days after South Korea inaugurated its newest president, Yoon Suk Yeol. A conservative member of the People Power Party, Yoon has vowed to reinforce the country's alliance with the U.S. and respond firmly against North Korean provocations.

In his inauguration speech on Tuesday, Yoon said "the door to dialogue will remain open" for North Korea to "resolve" its nuclear weapon program.

"If North Korea stops developing its nuclear program and turns to substantive denuclearization, I will prepare for an audacious plan to achieve epoch-making improvement in North Korea's economy and North Koreans' lives in cooperation with the international community," Yoon said in his speech.

The president also floated the idea of a vast economic package for the North, should it take steps toward denuclearization.

Navy sailor killed in Va. training accident was Texas man

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Navy on Wednesday said the Naval Special Warfare sailor killed in a training accident in Virginia was Petty Officer 1st Class Ryan DeKorte from Lubbock, Texas.

DeKorte, an electronics technician, died Monday from injuries received late last

week in a helicopter landing incident during an exercise at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story in Virginia. He was 35.

"Ryan was an exceptional teammate, and we mourn his tragic loss," said Rear Adm. H.W. Howard III, commander of Naval Special Warfare Command. "Ryan was one of our premiere combat support technicians,

who possessed all the attributes that make our force combat ready for highly complex and high-risk missions in the nation's defense."

Howard said DeKorte's "humility, stewardship and commitment to Naval Special Warfare made an indelible mark on his teammates and our community."

Senate bid to save Roe v. Wade falls short

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate fell far short Wednesday in a rushed effort toward enshrining Roe v. Wade abortion access as federal law, blocked by a Republican filibuster in a blunt display of the nation's partisan divide over the landmark court decision and the limits of legislative action.

The almost party-line tally promises to be just the first of several efforts in Congress to preserve the nearly 50-year-old court ruling, which declares a constitutional right to abortion services but is at serious risk of being overturned this summer by a conservative Supreme Court.

President Joe Biden said that Republicans "have chosen to stand in the way of Americans' rights to make the most personal decisions about their own bodies, families and

lives."

Biden urged voters to elect more abortion-rights lawmakers in November and pledged in the meantime to explore other ways to secure the rights established in Roe.

For now, his party's slim majority proved unable to overcome the filibuster led by Republicans, who have been working for decades to install conservative Supreme Court justices and end Roe v. Wade. The vote was 51-49 against proceeding, with 60 votes needed to move ahead.

Congress has battled for years over abortion policy, but the Wednesday vote to take up a House-passed bill was given new urgency after the disclosure of a draft Supreme Court opinion to overturn the Roe decision that many had believed to be settled law.

The outcome of the conservative-majority court's actual ruling, expected this summer, is

sure to reverberate around the country and on the campaign trail ahead of the fall midterm elections that will determine which party controls Congress.

Security was tight at the Capitol where Vice President Kamala Harris presided, and it has been bolstered across the street at the Supreme Court after protesters turned out in force last week following the leaked draft.

Harris can provide a tie-breaking vote in the 50-50 split Senate, but that was beside the point on Wednesday. One conservative Democrat, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, voted with the Republicans, saying he supported keeping Roe v. Wade but believed the current bill was too broad.

"The Senate is not where the majority of Americans are on this issue," Harris said afterward.

Few schools are mandating masks amid COVID rise

Associated Press

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — U.S. COVID-19 cases are up, leading a smattering of school districts, particularly in the Northeast, to bring back mask mandates and recommendations for the first time since the omicron winter surge ended and as the country approaches 1 million deaths in the pandemic.

The return of masking in schools is not nearly as widespread as earlier in the pandemic, particularly as the public's worries over the virus have ebbed. But districts in Maine, New Jersey and Pennsylvania have brought masks back, with a few in Massachusetts also recommending them even as the school year enters its final weeks.

Maine's largest school district, in Portland, said this week masks would return, with Superintendent Xavier Botana saying that was the "safest course at this time" amid rising cases. Bangor, Maine, schools also brought back a universal mask requirement.

High schools in the suburbs of Pittsburgh and in Montclair, N.J., a commuter suburb of New York City, also announced a return to masking, albeit temporarily through this week. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most of the counties in the country considered to have "high" levels of COVID-19 are in the Northeast.

In parts of Massachusetts that have seen high levels of COVID-19 transmission, authorities are also recommending masks in schools.

Reactions have ranged from supportive to angry. On the Facebook page of Woodland Hills High School in suburban Pittsburgh, one woman called the change "#insane."

Diana Martinez and Owen Cornwall, who have a first grader at Graham and Parks School in Cambridge, Mass., have been following the recommendation to mask their daughter.

"We're very happy about it. It gives us a little peace of mind," said Martinez, 42, a professor at Tufts University.

Biden urges renewed virus fight as US nears 1M deaths

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden appealed to world leaders on Thursday for a renewed international commitment to attacking COVID-19 as he led the U.S. in marking the approaching "tragic milestone" of 1 million deaths at home from the virus. He ordered flags lowered to half-staff and warned against "complacency" around the globe.

"This pandemic isn't over," Biden told the second global pandemic summit. "Today, we mark a tragic milestone here in the United States, 1 million COVID deaths — 1 million empty chairs around the family dinner table."

The coronavirus has killed nearly 999,000

people in the U.S. and more than 6.2 million people globally since it emerged in late 2019, according to figures compiled by Johns Hopkins University. Biden issued a proclamation Thursday directing that U.S. flags be flown at half-staff through sunset on Monday to honor those who lost their lives to the virus.

The president called on Congress to provide more funding for testing, vaccines and treatments, something lawmakers have been unwilling to deliver so far.

The lack of funding — Biden has requested another \$22.5 billion of what he calls critically needed money — is a reflection of faltering resolve at home that jeopardizes the global response to the pandemic.

Eight months after he used the first such summit to announce an ambitious pledge to donate 1.2 billion vaccine doses to the world, the urgency of the U.S. and other nations to respond has waned.

Momentum on vaccinations and treatments has faded even as more infectious variants rise and billions of people across the globe remain unprotected.

Biden addressed the opening of the virtual summit Thursday morning with prerecorded remarks and made the case that tackling COVID-19 "must remain an international priority." The U.S. is co-hosting the summit along with Germany, Indonesia, Senegal and Belize.

US jobless aid numbers up slightly last week

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for jobless aid ticked up slightly last week, but the total number of Americans collecting benefits remained at its lowest level in more than five decades.

Applications for unemployment benefits rose by 1,000 to 203,000 for the week ending May 7, the Labor Department reported Thursday. First-time applications generally track the number of layoffs.

The four-week average for claims, which evens out some of

the weekly ups and downs, rose 4,250 from the previous week to 192,750.

The total number of Americans collecting jobless benefits for the week ending April 30 fell by 44,000 from the previous week to 1,343,000. That's the fewest since Jan. 3, 1970.

American workers are enjoying historically strong job security two years after the coronavirus pandemic plunged the economy into a brief but devastating recession. Weekly applications for unemployment aid have been consistently below the pre-pandemic

level of 225,000 for most of 2022, even as the overall economy contracted in the first quarter.

Last week, the government reported America's employers added 428,000 jobs in April, leaving the unemployment rate at 3.6%, just above the lowest level in a half-century. Hiring gains have been strikingly consistent in the face of the worst inflation in four decades, with employers adding at least 400,000 jobs for 12 straight months.

Earlier this month, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that U.S. employers posted a record

11.5 million job openings in March — an unprecedented two job openings for every person who is unemployed. A record 4.5 million Americans quit their jobs in March — a sign they are confident that they can find better pay or improved working conditions elsewhere.

As hot as the job market is, inflation is even hotter. On Thursday, the government reported that U.S. producer prices soared 11% in April from a year earlier, which indicates high inflation will remain a burden for consumers and businesses for months.

Judge: Trump must meet conditions to end contempt order

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A New York judge said Wednesday that he will lift Donald Trump's contempt of court order if the former president meets conditions including paying \$110,000 in fines he's racked up for being slow to respond to a civil subpoena issued by the state's attorney general.

Judge Arthur Engoron said he will end his contempt finding if Trump submits additional paperwork by May 20 detailing efforts to search for the subpoenaed records and explaining his and his company's document retention policies.

Engoron declared Trump in contempt on April 25 and fined him \$10,000 per day for not complying with a subpoena in New

York Attorney General Letitia James' long-running investigation into Trump's business practices.

James, a Democrat, has said her three-year investigation uncovered evidence that Trump's company, the Trump Organization, misstated the value of assets like skyscrapers and golf courses on financial statements for over a decade.

Trump, a Republican, has denied the allegations. He has called James' investigation "racist" and a politically motivated "witch hunt." James is Black. Trump's lawyers have accused her of selective prosecution.

Engoron ordered Trump to pay \$110,000 because that is the total amount of fines he

accrued through May 6, when Trump's lawyers submitted 66 pages of court documents detailing the efforts by him and his lawyers to locate the subpoenaed records. The judge required a company hired by Trump to aid in the search, HaystackID, to finish going through 17 boxes kept at an off-site storage facility, and for that company to report its findings and turn over any relevant documents.

Engoron said he could reinstate the fine, retroactive to May 7, if his conditions aren't met. He told Trump to pay the money directly to James' office and for the attorney general to hold the money in an escrow account while Trump's legal team appeals the original contempt finding.

Calif. under-21 semiautomatic gun ban ruled unconstitutional

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A U.S. appeals court ruled Wednesday that California's ban on the sale of semiautomatic weapons to adults under 21 is unconstitutional.

In a 2-1 ruling, a panel of the San Francisco-based 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said Wednesday that the law violates the Second Amendment right to bear arms and a San Diego judge should have blocked what it called "an almost total ban on semiautomatic centerfire rifles" for young adults.

"America would not exist without the heroism of the young

adults who fought and died in our revolutionary army," Judge Ryan Nelson wrote. "Today we reaffirm that our Constitution still protects the right that enabled their sacrifice: the right of young adults to keep and bear arms."

The Firearms Policy Coalition, which brought the case, said the ruling makes it optimistic age-based gun bans will be overturned in other courts.

Adam Winkler, a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, said the decision is a clear sign of how courts — including the U.S. Supreme Court,

which has a major gun case before it — are expanding gun rights.

"Federal judges can read the tea leaves," Winkler said. "In the coming years, the courts seem certain to strike down numerous gun safety measures in the name of the 2nd Amendment. This 9th Circuit ruling is a harbinger of things to come."

The ruling, however, was not a total victory for gun rights advocates. They also sought an injunction blocking the state from requiring a hunting license for adults under 21 — who are not in the military or law enforcement

— to purchase rifles or shotguns. The 9th Circuit ruled the hunting license requirement was reasonable for increasing public safety through "sensible firearm control." But it said an outright ban on semiautomatic rifles for those under 21 went too far.

"It's one thing to say that young adults must take a course and purchase a hunting license before obtaining certain firearms," Nelson wrote. "But to say that they must become police officers or join the military? ... It is a blanket ban for everyone except police officers and servicemembers."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man facing possible life sentence wins lottery

SD PIERRE — A man facing a possible life sentence on federal drug and money laundering charges has won the lottery in South Dakota.

Canbie Thompson, 45, was featured on the state lottery's website for winning \$40,000 on a scratch-off ticket, KELO-TV reported.

Thompson earlier pleaded guilty to the charges, which resulted from a larger Minnehaha County drug bust.

Thompson faces a maximum life in prison when he is sentenced in federal court in July. He was previously sentenced to 10½ years in prison on a 2010 federal drug distribution charge.

According to state lottery officials, Thompson bought his winning lottery ticket in April.

2 Outer Banks houses collapse into Atlantic surf

NC RODANTHE — Two beach houses have fallen into the waves along North Carolina's coast, U.S. National Park Service officials said in a statement Tuesday.

The unoccupied homes were located along Ocean Drive in the Outer Banks community of Rodanthe.

Debris from the first fallen house was spreading widely. Officials from the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, which is part of the park service, said they will be working closely with the homeowner to coordinate cleanup.

This is the third time a home has fallen into the surf this

year. A house in Rodanthe collapsed in February and spread debris across many miles of beaches before the homeowner and volunteers were able to clean up most of it.

Hundreds of pricey Outer Banks vacation homes have been built in places where experts say they probably should not have been. The narrow, low-lying barrier islands are particularly vulnerable to storm surges and to being washed over from both sides.

Illegally-stocked walleye caught in Lake Cascade

ID BOISE — The Idaho Fish and Game Department is investigating how many illegally-stocked walleye fish are in Lake Cascade after a second walleye catch was reported in a four-year span.

Off-duty Regional Fisheries Biologist Mike Thomas was fishing with another angler, Chris Weber, when Weber landed the nearly 3-pound fish, Boise television station KTVB reported. Another angler reported catching a walleye in the lake back in 2018.

State wildlife officials say walleye are incompatible with the perch in Lake Cascade and its fisheries downstream. Walleye commonly prey on other fish.

Police on 425-mile trek to honor fallen officer

MA WORCESTER — Police officers in Massachusetts have begun a 425-mile journey on foot to the nation's capital to honor an officer who drowned last year as he tried to save a teen.

Officer Enmanuel "Manny" Familia, a five-year veteran of the Worcester police department, died attempting to rescue a teenager drowning in the pond at Green Hill Park on June 4, The Telegram & Gazette reported Monday. The teen also died.

Twenty officers launched their pilgrimage Monday from the park, where Familia's son Jovan was presented a baton with his father's name inscribed on it, the police department said in a Facebook post.

The officers will carry the baton to Washington, ending the run at the National Law Enforcement Memorial where Familia's name was recently inscribed. Officers will attend National Police Week events to honor Familia and other officers who have died in the line of duty, police said.

Native American ballerina statue to be restored

OK TULSA — Enough pieces of a bronze statue of a famous Native American ballerina that was stolen in Tulsa have been recovered to restore it, historical officials said.

The additional missing pieces of the statue of Marjorie Tallchief that were found include the head, said Tulsa Historical Society and Museum Director Michelle Place, according to the Tulsa World.

Still missing are the lower portion of each leg, both feet and one arm, but Gary Henson, one of the original sculptors, said he will be able to restore it.

The statue is believed to have been stolen April 28 and cut in-

to pieces that have been found at different recycling centers in the Tulsa area, Place said, but no arrests have been made.

Tallchief and her sister Maria were among five renowned Native American ballerinas from Oklahoma known as Five Moons and a bronze statue of each was unveiled outside the Tulsa museum in 2007.

Tunnel contractor pokes through ceiling at Capitol

VA RICHMOND — A contractor working on a \$25 million tunnel that will connect Virginia's Capitol to a nearby legislative office building "inadvertently" poked through the ceiling of a subterranean Capitol extension earlier this year, causing debris to fall into the visitors center cafe, a state official said.

The Capitol was briefly evacuated on March 14 while crews evaluated the damage, said Dena Potter, a spokeswoman for the state agency overseeing the project. The debris fell into the kitchen area and the cafe was closed at the time, with no employees inside.

"The Capitol resumed normal operations following the incident; however, the cafe remained offline in anticipation of a planned May 2 closure of the entire underground Visitor Center to accommodate both the tunnel excavation and a project to replace part of the extension's roofing system," Potter wrote in response to an Associated Press inquiry. That closure is expected to remain in place through at least December, her email said.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

International players go 1-2-3 in MVP voting

Associated Press

LONDON — Maybe it's the cevapi, or the souvlaki, or the mbanga soup.

Whatever it is, there's no denying the tinge of international flavor when it comes to the NBA elite with Denver Nuggets center Nikola Jokic winning the league's MVP award Wednesday for a second straight season.

Jokic made it four straight MVPs for foreign-born players. This marks the first time international players have won the award in four consecutive seasons. Canada's Steve Nash went back-to-back for Phoenix in 2005 and 2006, followed by Germany's Dirk Nowitzki for Dallas in 2007.

The Serbian big man beat out two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo of Greece and the reigning champion Milwaukee Bucks and Philadelphia center Joel Embiid of Cameroon to mark another first — never before have the top three in MVP voting all been internationals.

Jokic got 65 first-place votes and 875 points from the panel of

writers and broadcasters. Embiid was second with 26 first-place votes and 706 points; Antetokounmpo was third, with nine first-place votes and 595 points.

The 27-year-old Jokic averaged 27.1 points, 13.8 rebounds and 7.9 assists on a team that was missing two max players in Jamal Murray (ACL) and Michael Porter Jr. (back) and won 48 games. The do-it-all center nicknamed "Joker" created a new category, too, in becoming the first NBA player to eclipse 2,000 points, 1,000 rebounds and 500 assists in a season.

"It was a real emotional moment for me," Jokic said. "Amazing."

The NBA playoffs are loaded with international talent, including Dallas Mavericks guard Luka Doncic, the 2019 rookie of the year and EuroLeague champion from Slovenia.

The influx of international talent was former Commissioner David Stern's vision. He saw the NBA as a global entity and insisted the league be a driving

force in growing the game internationally.

"It's David Stern's dream," Philadelphia coach Doc Rivers said. "Everybody else is good. It's a world game. It's no longer just 'us,' whatever us means. It's a world game and that's a good thing."

The ripple of effect of international players extends well beyond the U.S.

For the basketball-mad countries of Serbia and Greece, the success of Jokic and Antetokounmpo means bragging rights. Antetokounmpo won back-to-back MVP awards (2018-19, 19-20), and now the pride of Sombor, Serbia, has matched him.

"We are a country of basketball. This is more proof that we are the best," said Marko Cosic, who trained a teenage Jokic as strength and conditioning coach at Belgrade club Mega. "It is not easy for a country like Serbia with 7 million people to compete with the rest of the world."

Cosic, now a professor at the University of Belgrade, said

Jokic's style of play "is really poetry... he's an artist."

Across NBA Europe's social media channels, content featuring Antetokounmpo performs 100% better than the average post, according to the NBA. Jokic content does 10% better than average.

Subscriber growth for NBA League Pass shows a 17% increase in Serbia, 14% in Slovenia and 9% in Greece this season over last season. It was up 40% in Africa as a whole, though the NBA does not release its total number of subscribers.

The league has scheduled the Bucks and Atlanta Hawks to play two preseason matchups at Abu Dhabi in October, marking the NBA's first games in the United Arab Emirates and the Arabian Gulf.

It's impossible to overestimate the impact Antetokounmpo has had on Greece, both as a player and a person. He was born to immigrant Nigerian parents and acquired a Greek passport shortly before being drafted in 2013.

Bucks stop Celtics, take 3-2 lead in series

Associated Press

BOSTON — Giannis Antetokounmpo was having his best shooting night of the playoffs. Milwaukee dominated on the boards. And still the Bucks trailed Boston by 14 points in a game that could send the defending NBA champions to the brink of elimination.

Then Jrue Holiday showed the Defensive Player of the Year a thing or two about defense.

Bobby Portis put back Antetokounmpo's missed free throw with 15 seconds left, and Holiday snuffed Marcus Smart on Boston's final two possessions Wednesday night as Milwaukee erased a 14-point, fourth-quarter deficit to beat the Celtics 110-107 and take a 3-2 series

lead.

"Obviously, in Boston you're down 14 in the fourth quarter, people would say everything's against us. But we come together," said Holiday, who also hit the tying three-pointer with 43 seconds left. "We live and die like that."

Antetokounmpo had 40 points and 11 rebounds, making 16 of 27 shots — including a long three-pointer to make it 105-102 with 1:40 to play. Holiday finished with 24 points, eight rebounds and eight assists and Portis added 14 points and 15 rebounds. The Bucks can advance to the Eastern Conference finals with a victory in Game 6 at home Friday night.

Jayson Tatum scored 34 points and Jaylen Brown had 26

points for the Celtics, who need a victory in Milwaukee to force a decisive seventh game back in Boston on Sunday.

The Celtics led 93-79 early in the fourth before the Bucks closed the gap, tying it at 105 with 43 seconds left on back-to-back threes from Antetokounmpo and Holiday. Tatum hit two free throws to give Boston back the lead.

Milwaukee had 17 offensive rebounds to Boston's five, with Portis grabbing seven.

Grizzlies 134, Warriors 95: Jaren Jackson Jr., Desmond Bane and Tyus Jones each scored 21 points and host Memphis routed Golden State to avoid elimination and force a sixth game in the Western Conference semifinal.

The Grizzlies never trailed, turning in their best performance of this series to pull to 3-2 even with All-Star guard Ja Morant sitting out his second straight game because of a bone bruise in his right knee. They improved to 4-11 when facing elimination.

Memphis scored 77 points in the first half, the most in franchise postseason history. The Grizzlies pushed their lead to 55 in the third quarter, threatening the three biggest postseason blowouts in NBA history. Their 52-point lead after three tied for largest in a playoff game in the past 70 years.

Klay Thompson led Golden State with 19 points.

Game 6 is Friday night in San Francisco.

Comeback Cats do it again, top Caps

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Carter Verhaeghe was brought to the Florida Panthers for big postseason moments.

Like this one.

Verhaeghe set a Panthers franchise playoff record with a five-point night — two goals, three assists — and the Comeback Cats pulled off another rally, this one obviously the most important of their season. Florida erased a 3-0 deficit to beat the Washington Capitals 5-3 on Wednesday night, taking a 3-2 lead in the teams' Eastern Conference first-round series.

"Things are going pretty well right now for me," said Verhaeghe, who helped Tampa Bay win a Stanley Cup in 2020. "And the team. We're up 3-2, we have two chances to win one game, things are looking pretty good."

Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 30 shots for Florida. Patric Hornqvist, Claude Giroux and Sam Reinhart also scored for the Panthers, and Aleksander Barkov had two assists.

T.J. Oshie scored twice for

Washington, which also got a goal from Justin Schultz and two assists from Evgeny Kuznetsov. Ilya Samsonov stopped 33 shots.

"Giving up a three-goal lead, I don't know how many times we've done that this year," Oshie said.

The answer would be twice. Both times at Florida.

Verhaeghe broke the Panthers' playoff scoring record that Ray Sheppard set on a four-point night back on April 22, 1996 — which remains the last, and only, season in which the Panthers won a playoff series.

They can change that Friday, when Game 6 is played in Washington. Game 7, if necessary, would be back at Florida on Sunday.

"We didn't start the way we wanted to ... then we started to play the right way," Barkov said.

Verhaeghe gave the Panthers the lead to stay at 3:04 of the third, after a pair of marvelous plays at both ends. He created a turnover deep in the zone, sent

the puck to Barkov and then went into a full sprint for about 100 feet of ice to find a spot to receive the return pass.

Barkov put it on his stick, Verhaeghe put it into the net, and Florida led 4-3. Bobrovsky slammed the door from there, Giroux scored the insurance goal at 15:55, and the Comeback Cats had done it again.

"Felt like we gave that game away," Washington's Nicklas Backstrom said.

This was the season of the comeback for Florida, which had an NHL-best 29 come-from-behind wins during the regular season. The Panthers pulled off five wins after trailing by three goals, and rallied in the final moments of Game 4 to force overtime in Washington before winning early in the extra session and tying the series.

Florida's rally matched the largest in an NHL playoff game since April 19, 2011, when the San Jose Sharks erased a four-goal deficit to beat the Los Angeles Kings 6-5. There had been three two-goal deficits in these

playoffs entering Wednesday, but nobody had successfully dug out of a three-goal hole.

Until now.

Oshie opened the scoring at 7:09 of the first, doing what he probably does best — redirection. He set up in the slot, obstructing Bobrovsky as best he could, then changed the flight of a shot by John Carlson just enough to get it into the net for a 1-0 Washington lead.

It stayed that way until the second, when two goals in a span of 1:25 looked to give Washington full control. Schultz found a crease within a maze of bodies in front of the net and blasted the puck through to make it 2-0, and Oshie finished off a pass from Kuznetsov on a 2-on-1 break to make it 3-0.

And that's when the Panthers did what they do best — rally.

"There's two games that were played," Washington coach Peter Laviolette said. "There was a game to push it to 3-0 where I liked everything we did. ... And then there's a game that took place after that."

Chytil's goal helps Rangers stave off elimination

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Unhappy with the way they played in two bad losses on the road that pushed them to the brink of elimination, the New York Rangers bounced back with a needed win to keep their season going.

Filip Chytil scored the tie-breaking goal early in the third period and the New York Rangers beat the Pittsburgh Penguins 5-3 Wednesday night in Game 5 of their first-round playoff series.

Jacob Trouba and Alexis Lafrenière each had a goal and an assist, and Adam Fox and Ryan Lindgren also scored for the Rangers. Igor Shesterkin, torched for 10 goals over three

periods in the previous two games, had 27 saves.

"We were not happy with what happened in Pittsburgh," Chytil said. "We just didn't play the whole season (the) way that we played, just (to) lose games like this in Pittsburgh. So we just had a good meeting, good practice yesterday and we just believed today that we're gonna win and we're gonna go back to Pittsburgh."

Jake Guentzel had two goals and Kris Letang also scored for Pittsburgh, which leads the best-of-seven series 3-2. Evgeni Malkin had two assists and Louis Domingue finished with 29 saves.

Penguins star Sidney Crosby left with about seven minutes

remaining in the second period after taking a hard high hit from Trouba in the offensive zone minutes earlier. He did not return.

Pittsburgh coach Mike Sullivan said Crosby had an upper body injury and his status was being evaluated.

Game 6 is Friday in Pittsburgh, and a potential deciding Game 7 would be Sunday back at Madison Square Garden.

"We played a good 60 minutes," Lafrenière said. "We defended well and played a good all-around game. We did a good job of staying calm. We have to keep it going and win Game 6. We played a really good one when we needed it most."

The Rangers got their first

power play of the night early in the third period and took advantage as Chytil got a pass from Lafrenière in the right circle, turned around and whipped a shot past Domingue to put the Rangers ahead 4-3 at 2:53.

Flames 3, Stars 1: Mikael Backlund, Andrew Mangiapane and Trevor Lewis all scored in the third period, leading host Calgary over Dallas to take a 3-2 lead in their first-round playoff series.

Jacob Markstrom made 20 saves for the Flames, who can win the series Friday in Dallas. If necessary, Game 7 would be back in Calgary on Sunday.

Jason Robertson scored the lone goal for Dallas, and Jake Oettinger stopped 29 shots.

Yelich ties record by hitting third cycle

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Christian Yelich bolted out of the box, sprinting around the bases and cruising into third standing up for his first triple of the season.

A very well-timed triple, too.

The Milwaukee Brewers star hit for a record-tying third cycle — amazingly, all of them against Cincinnati. Yelich accomplished the feat Wednesday in a 14-11 loss to the Reds.

Yelich tripled during a six-run ninth inning rally. His teammates were well aware of the significance, and they stood on the top row of the dugout to applaud him.

Yelich became the sixth player in major league history to hit at least one home run, triple, double and single in the same game three times. He joined Trea Turner, Adrián Beltré, Babe Herman, Bob Meusel and John Reilly in accomplishing the feat.

Earlier, Yelich doubled in the first, hit a three-run homer in the third and singled in the fifth.

Yankees 5, Blue Jays 3: Gleyber Torres homered and drove in five runs, and host

New York beat Toronto for its 15th win in 17 games.

DJ LeMahieu had two hits and scored twice for New York.

Nationals 8, Mets 3: Juan Soto and Nelson Cruz homered and host Washington sent New York right-hander Tylor Megill to the earliest exit of his career.

Athletics 9, Tigers 0: Zach Logue pitched seven sharp innings in his second major league start and visiting Oakland spoiled the debut of Joey Wentz by thumping Detroit.

Sean Murphy and Kevin Smith each drove in two while Christian Bethancourt supplied three hits, two runs scored and an RBI for the A's.

Rays 4, Angels 2 (10): Vidal Bruján got an RBI double leading off the 10th inning for his first hit of the season, and visiting Tampa Bay rebounded from its no-hit loss with a win over Los Angeles.

The game was a 1-0 pitchers' duel until the eighth, with Tampa Bay's Shane Bieber barely outpitching Shohei Ohtani.

Cubs 7, Padres 5: Alfonso Rivas hit a tiebreaking two-run single against his hometown

team in the eighth inning, leading visiting Chicago to the victory over San Diego.

Pirates 5, Dodgers 3: Daniel Vogelbach hit a go-ahead homer in the seventh inning, and host Pittsburgh took a series from Los Angeles for the first time in nearly five years.

Braves 5, Red Sox 3: Orlando Arcia hit a two-run homer in the bottom of the ninth inning to give host Atlanta a win over Boston.

Arcia lined his first homer of the season over the left-field wall off Ryan Brasier (0-1) with one out in the ninth for his third hit of the game. The homer drove in Ozzie Albies, who led off with a single to end an 0-for-10 slump.

Cardinals 10, Orioles 1: Juan Ypez homered and Miles Mikolas pitched seven strong innings, leading host St. Louis to a win over Baltimore.

Paul Goldschmidt drove in three runs for St. Louis, which snapped a three-game losing streak. Brendan Donovan added a two-run double to the Cards' 11-hit attack, and Tommy Edman also drove in a pair of runs.

Marlins 11, Diamondbacks 3: Jacob Stallings hit a go-ahead single during visiting Miami's eight-run ninth inning, and Jazz Chisholm Jr. followed with a three-run homer.

Miami controlled most of the game until the eighth, when pinch hitter Jordan Luplow connected for a tying two-run homer against Marlins reliever Steven Okert.

Phillies 4, Mariners 2: Rhys Hoskins homered for the third straight game and provided all of visiting Philadelphia's offense with his second career grand slam.

Royals 8, Rangers 2: Local high school star Bobby Witt Jr. hit a two-run double and had his first three-RBI game in the majors, Whit Merrifield homered for the first time since August and visiting Kansas City beat Texas to snap a three-game losing streak.

Giants 7, Rockies 1: Brandon Crawford homered, and host San Francisco earned its 10th straight win over Colorado.

Crawford drove in three runs and scored twice as the Giants extended their overall winning streak to five.

NASCAR Cup playoff grid already has 10 berths locked up

Associated Press

DARLINGTON, S.C. — The NASCAR Cup Series playoff grid is filling up fast and the dwindling number of spots may lead to more of the aggressive driving that grabbed headlines over the weekend at Darlington Raceway.

Joey Logano sent leader William Byron into the wall on the next-to-last lap and went on to become the 10th different winner in the first 12 races of the season, locking up one of the 16 playoff spots with the victory.

"I did what I had to do," Logano said. "I had to win the race. It was very important to win and get into the playoffs."

Maybe more this season than ever before.

It is the second straight season 10 drivers have posted victories by the season's 12th race. But it is only the third time it's happened since NASCAR expanded the playoffs

from 12 cars to 16 before the 2014 season.

NASCAR saves a spot for the regular season's points champion if he doesn't have a win.

"Yeah, it's something you think about," said Erik Jones, who is 16th in points after getting knocked out of Darlington in a 12-car wreck with 25 laps left.

"We're going to keep doing a good job with the points," Jones said. "But you see different guys winning and you want to be one of them to get in."

A year ago, there were 14 drivers with wins who made the playoffs, tied for the most ever since the field expanded. The wild card this year is the Next Gen car, which has led to stronger, more competitive races and left even the most powerful programs scrambling to find an edge.

Logano's Team Penske crew chief, Paul

Wolfe, said his Ford has had difficulty matching the speed of the Chevrolets and Toyotas, which had combined for nine of 12 wins this season until Darlington.

"It was good for us to show we had speed in qualifying and back it up in the race," Wolfe said. "So, yeah, it's going to be tough to win races because a lot of guys have speed right now."

Wolfe, however, doesn't see traditionally dominant programs like Hendrick Motorsports, Joe Gibbs Racing or Stewart-Haas Racing hitting on something and watching racers like Kyle Larson, Kevin Harvick or Logano run off several victories the rest of the way.

Larson won 10 races in 2021 for Hendrick on the way to the championship. Kevin Harvick had eight wins for Stewart-Haas in 2020 in making the final eight.