

Security guarantees for Ukraine mull

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO leaders are discussing ways to ensure that Ukraine does not come under attack from Russia again once the war is over, but they are concerned about doing anything that might drag the organization into a wider conflict, the head of the military alliance said Monday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is seeking “security guarantees” from the 31-nation alliance to ward off any future attack from Ukraine’s neighbor. Some countries are weighing what could be done to avoid a repeat of the war. Russia already annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

“There are consultations that are going on,” ahead of a summit involving President Joe Biden and his counterparts in Lithuania on July 11-12, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said during an interview with his predecessor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, at a conference in Copenhagen.

Stoltenberg declined to provide details about those talks.

NATO allies benefit from a collective security guarantee — so called Article 5 of the

organization’s founding Washington Treaty — which ensures that an attack on any one of their number would be considered an attack on them all.

In the past year, the U.S., U.K., France and Germany committed to provide security guarantees to Finland and Sweden when they applied to join NATO, should it be necessary to dissuade President Vladimir Putin from trying to destabilize the two Nordic neighbors.

Finland has since joined and has Article 5 protection, but Sweden’s accession is pending.

“We don’t know how this war will end, but what we do know is that when it ends it is extremely important that we are able to prevent history from repeating itself,” Stoltenberg said. Beyond the annexation of Crimea, he also noted Russia’s conflict with Georgia in 2008, saying: “This has to stop.”

“The only way to ensure that that stops is partly to ensure that Ukraine has the military strength to deter and defend against further aggression from Russia but also to find some kind of framework to prevent Presi-

dent Putin from continuing to chip away at European security,” Stoltenberg said.

But he said that “if NATO allies, and especially of course the big ones, start to issue security guarantees bilaterally to Ukraine we are very close to Article 5. So, there’s no way to find an easy solution to these issues.”

In February, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak called on NATO countries to provide long-term security guarantees for Ukraine. He said they are necessary to shield Ukraine from future Russian aggression and to protect the system of international rules that has helped keep peace since the end of World War II.

NATO as an alliance does not provide weapons to Ukraine — although its members do bilaterally and in smaller groups — and the organization defends only the territory of its member countries as it is wary of being dragged into a wider war with nuclear armed Russia. Ukraine has applied to join NATO but for that to happen, all 31 current members would have to agree. Most of the allies oppose letting the country in at a time when a war is raging.

Furry friend gives sailors a boost aboard USS Ford

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

With the help of a yellow Labrador retriever, the Navy’s newest aircraft carrier is testing a pilot program to improve quality of life for sailors at sea.

USS Gerald R. Ford is the first Navy ship to host an operational stress military working dog, said Cmdr. Genevieve Clark, a chaplain aboard the carrier.

Three-year old Sage from the Virginia Beach, Va.-based nonprofit Mutts With A Mission was aboard when the carrier left Naval Station Norfolk on May 2 for a global deployment.

With a wag of her tail, love for attention and friendly demeanor, Sage offers sailors a way to get the stress-reducing benefits that animals can bring, Navy officials said.

“In a lot of ways, Sage normalizes life,” said Clark, who completed 120 hours of training before deployment in becoming the canine’s pri-

mary handler. “Because just like people have pets at home, that’s a normal part of life that we can offer now at sea.”

The Navy is working to address quality of life issues and pushing to expand services amid concerns about mental health and suicide.

In 2022, 70 active-duty sailors died by suicide. There were 59 and 65 suicide deaths of active-duty sailors in 2021 and 2020, respectively, according to the Navy’s website.

Recent Navy efforts include installing waterfront resiliency centers at some bases, such as Naval Station Rota in Spain, where sailors can seek counseling or other mental health services just steps from four homeported destroyer berths.

The Navy also plans to place chaplains on all its destroyers by 2025 to help fill a critical need for counseling, Stars and Stripes reported Feb. 27.

And officials at Naval Support Activity Bah-

rain last month held a mental health stand down designed to raise awareness of expanded services available there.

Sage offers sailors aboard Ford more than a chance to say “hello” or cuddle for a few minutes, officials say.

A casual encounter can offer an opportunity for Clark or one of three other trained handlers to talk with sailors who may be feeling homesick, anxious or have personal or work-related problems, she said.

“It’s an entry point to further conversation where we can either help directly or connect them with the people (needed),” Clark said.

Sage is trained to assist sailors in distress with a technique to help them regulate their breathing. She also intuitively seeks out service members who need attention, Clark said.

Sage has taken part in thousands of hours of training, exposure and socialization since she was 8 weeks old. She’s even received training on how to use ship ladders, Corson said.

UK promises drones, more missiles for Ukraine

Associated Press

LONDON — Britain's prime minister promised Monday to provide Ukraine with attack drones and hundreds more missiles as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited the U.K. to drum up support in advance of a counteroffensive against Russian forces.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak greeted Zelenskyy with a handshake and a hug after he landed by helicopter at Chequers, the British leader's official country retreat. It's Zelenskyy's second trip to the U.K. since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

Zelenskyy thanked Britain for its support so far, and said the war was a matter of "security not only for Ukraine, it is important for all of Europe."

Sunak told Zelenskyy that "your leadership, your country's bravery and fortitude are an inspiration to us all."

This is the fifth European country Zelenskyy has visited in the

past three days, after Italy, the Vatican, Germany and France. He is seeking more aid as Ukraine prepares a long-anticipated spring offensive to retake territory seized by Russia.

The Kremlin said it took London's promise to supply Ukraine with more weapons "extremely negatively," but at the same time believed the supplies wouldn't drastically change the course of the war, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday.

"Britain aspires to be at the forefront among countries that continue to pump weapons into Ukraine," Peskov said. "We repeat once again, it cannot yield any drastic and fundamental influence on the way the special military operation (in Ukraine) is unfolding. But, definitely, it leads to further destruction, further action. ... It makes this whole story for Ukraine much more complicated."

Sunak responded by pledging the U.K.'s long-term support for

Ukraine.

The U.K. has become one of Ukraine's major military allies, sending Kyiv short-range missiles and Challenger tanks and training 15,000 Ukrainian troops on British soil. Last week, Britain announced it had sent Ukraine Storm Shadow cruise missiles, which have a range of more than 150 miles — the first known shipment of the weaponry that Kyiv has long sought from its allies.

Sunak's office also said it was giving Ukraine hundreds more air defense missiles, as well as "long-range attack drones" with a range of more than 120 miles.

"This is a crucial moment in Ukraine's resistance to a terrible war of aggression they did not choose or provoke," Sunak said. "They need the sustained support of the international community to defend against the barrage of unrelenting and indiscriminate attacks that have been their daily reality for over a year.

"We must not let them down."

Zelenskyy had said one of his missions on the trip was to build a "fighter jet coalition" to provide Ukraine with vital defenses from the skies. He said more work was needed on that front.

While the U.K. will not provide the planes, the prime minister said it would be a key part of the coalition and would begin training Ukrainian fighter pilots as soon as this summer.

Sunak will also push allies to deliver more support to Ukraine at a meeting of Group of Seven leaders in Japan later this week, Downing Street said.

As Zelenskyy visited European capitals, Russia stepped up attacks across Ukraine with drones and missiles. On Sunday, Russia shelled two communities in the northern border region of Sumy, regional officials said on Telegram. They said 109 explosions were recorded. Zelenskyy's office said Monday that the shelling had killed nine civilians and injured 19 in the past day.

Erdogan rallies, forces Turkey presidential election runoff

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's presidential election will be decided in a runoff, election officials said Monday, after incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdogan pulled ahead of his chief challenger, but fell short of an outright victory that would extend his increasingly authoritarian rule into a third decade.

The May 28 second-round vote will determine whether the strategically located NATO country remains under the president's firm grip or can embark on a more democratic course promised by his main rival, Kemal Kilicdaroglu.

While Erdogan has governed for 20 years, opinion polls had suggested that run could be coming to an end and that a cost-of-liv-

ing crisis and criticism over the government's response to a devastating February earthquake might redraw the electoral map.

Instead, Erdogan's retreat was still less marked than predicted — and with his alliance retaining its hold on the parliament, he is now in a good position to win in the second round.

The uncertainty drove the main Turkish stock exchange BIST-100 more than 6% lower at the open Monday, prompting a temporary halt in trading. But shares recovered after trading resumed. Western nations and foreign investors were particularly interested in the outcome because of Erdogan's unorthodox leadership of the economy and often mercurial but successful efforts to put Turkey at the center of

many diplomatic negotiations.

At a crossroads between East and West, with a coast along the Black Sea and borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria, Turkey has been a key player on issues including the war in Syria, migration flows to Europe, exports of Ukraine's grain, and NATO's expansion.

Preliminary results showed Erdogan won 49.5% of the vote, while Kilicdaroglu grabbed 44.9%, and the third candidate, Sinan Ogan, received 5.2%, according to Ahmet Yener, the head of Supreme Electoral Board.

The remaining uncounted votes were not enough to tip Erdogan into outright victory, even if they all broke for him, Yener said.

In the last presidential election in 2018, Erdogan won in the first round, with more than 52% of the

vote.

Even as it became clear a runoff was likely, Erdogan, who has governed Turkey as either prime minister or president since 2003, painted Sunday's vote as a victory both for himself and the country.

"That the election results have not been finalized doesn't change the fact that the nation has chosen us," Erdogan, 69, told supporters in the early hours of Monday.

Kilicdaroglu sounded hopeful, tweeting around the time the runoff was announced: "Don't lose hope.... We will get up and win this election together."

Kilicdaroglu, 74, and his party have lost all previous presidential and parliamentary elections since he took leadership in 2010 but increased their votes this time.

Biden, leaders to have debt limit talks

Associated Press

REHOBOTH BEACH, Del. — President Joe Biden and congressional leaders will likely resume talks on Tuesday at the White House over the debt limit, the president said Sunday, as the nation continues to edge closer to its legal borrowing authority with no agreement in sight.

The meeting was initially supposed to be Friday, but was abruptly postponed so staff-level talks could continue before Biden and the four congressional leaders huddled for a second time. Administration and congressional officials said Sunday that a meeting has not been finalized, although Tuesday was the likeliest option as Biden returns to Washington on Monday and is scheduled to leave for the Group of 7 summit in Japan on Wednesday.

Biden did not detail much progress in the talks, but said he remained hopeful that an agreement could be reached with Republicans to avoid what would be an unprece-

dent debt default, which could trigger a financial catastrophe.

“I remain optimistic because I’m a congenital optimist,” Biden told reporters while out for a bike ride in Rehoboth Beach, Del. “But I really think there’s a desire on their part as well as ours to reach an agreement. I think we’ll be able to do it.”

Aides said talks had continued throughout the weekend. But at least publicly, there was little indication that either the White House or House Republicans had budged from their initial positions.

Biden has called on lawmakers to lift the debt limit without preconditions, warning that the nation’s borrowing authority should not be used to impose deep spending cuts and other conservative policy demands.

“We’ve not reached the crunch point yet,” Biden told reporters Saturday before flying to his beach home for the weekend. “There’s real discussion about some

changes we all could make. We’re not there yet.”

On Sunday, senior administration officials said the talks among staff had so far been productive after Biden and the leaders — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky — ended their first meeting last Tuesday without a breakthrough.

The president described that Oval Office session as “productive” even though McCarthy said later he “didn’t see any new movement” toward resolving the stalemate. White House and congressional aides have been in talks since Wednesday.

“The staff is very engaged. I would characterize the engagement as serious, as constructive,” Lael Brainard, head of the White House’s National Economic Council, said on CBS’ “Face the Nation.”

Biden wants conservation on par with oil drilling

Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — The Biden administration wants to put conserving vast government-owned lands on equal footing with oil drilling, livestock grazing and other interests, according to a top administration official who defended the idea against criticism that it would interfere with industry.

The proposal would allow conservationists and others to lease federally owned land to restore it, much the same way oil companies buy leases to drill and ranchers pay to graze cattle.

Companies could also buy conservation leases, such as oil drillers who want to offset damage to public land by restoring acreage elsewhere.

Tracy Stone-Manning, director of the Bureau of Land Management, said in an interview with The Associated Press that the proposed changes would address rising pressure from climate change and development.

While the bureau previously issued leases for conservation in limited cases, it has never had a dedicated program for it, she said.

“It makes conservation an equal among the multiple uses that we manage for,” Stone-Manning said. “There are rules around how we do solar development. There are rules around how we do oil and gas. There have not been rules around how we deliver on the portions of (federal law) that say, ‘Manage for fish and wildlife habitat, manage for clean water.’”

The pending rule also would promote establishing more areas of “critical environmental concern” due to their historic or cultural significance, or their importance for wildlife conservation. More than 1,000 such sites covering about 33,000 square miles have been designated previously.

By comparison, about 242,000 square miles of bureau land are open to grazing livestock.

Migrants depend on app to make asylum appointments

Associated Press

TIJUANA, Mexico — Pandemic-era limits on asylum known as Title 42 have been rarely discussed among many of tens of thousands of migrants massed on Mexico’s border with the United States.

Their eyes were — and are — fixed instead on a new U.S. government mobile app that grants 1,000 people daily an appointment to cross the border and seek asylum while living in the U.S. With demand far outstripping available slots, the app has been an exercise in frustration for many — and a test of the Biden administration’s strategy of coupling new legal paths to entry with severe consequences for those who don’t follow them.

“You start to give up hope but it’s the only way,” said Teresa Muñoz, 48, who abandoned her home in the Mexican state of Michoacan after a gang killed her husband and beat her. She has been trying for a month to gain entry through the app,

called CBPOne, while staying in a Tijuana shelter with her two children and 2-year-old grandson.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the Border Patrol made 6,300 arrests on Friday — the first day after the Title 42 restrictions expired — and 4,200 Saturday.

That’s sharply below the 10,000-plus on three days last week as migrants rushed to get in before new policies to restrict asylum took effect.

“It is still early,” Mayorkas said Sunday on CNN’s ‘State of the Union.’ “We are in day three, but we have been planning for this transition for months and months. And we have been executing on our plan. And we will continue to do so.”

Despite the drop in recent days, authorities predict arrests will spike to between 12,000 and 14,000 a day, Matthew Hudak, deputy Border Patrol chief, said in a court filing Friday.

More car owners fixing instead of replacing due to high costs

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — With new and used cars still painfully expensive, Ryan Holdsworth said he plans to keep his 9-year-old Chevy Cruze for at least four more years. Limiting his car payments and his overall debt is a bigger priority for him than having a new vehicle.

A 35-year-old grocery store worker from Grand Rapids, Mich., Holdsworth would probably be in the market for a vehicle within a few years — if not for the high cost. For now, it's out of the question.

"You're not going to get one for a price you can afford," he said.

Holdsworth has plenty of company. Americans are keeping their cars longer than ever. The average age of a passenger vehicle on the road hit a record 12.5 years this year, according to data gathered by S&P Global Mobility. Sedans like Holdsworth's are even older, on average — 13.6 years.

Blame it mainly on the pandemic, which in 2020 triggered a global shortage of automotive computer chips, the vital component that runs everything from radios to gas pedals to transmissions. The shortage

drastically slowed global assembly lines, making new vehicles scarce on dealer lots just when consumers were increasingly eager to buy.

Prices reached record highs. And though they've eased somewhat, the cost of a vehicle still feels punishingly expensive to many Americans, especially when coupled with now much-higher loan rates.

Since the pandemic struck three years ago, the average price of a new vehicle has rocketed 24% to nearly \$48,000 as of April, according to Edmunds.com.

Typical loan rates on new-car purchases have ballooned to 7%, a consequence of the Federal Reserve's aggressive streak of interest rate hikes to fight inflation.

It's all pushed the national average monthly auto loan payment to \$729 — prohibitively high for many. Experts have said a family earning the median U.S. household income can no longer afford the average new car payment and still cover such necessities as housing, food and utilities.

Used vehicle prices, on average, have surged even more since the pandemic hit — up

40%, to nearly \$29,000. With an average loan rate having reached 11%, the typical monthly used-vehicle payment is now \$563.

Faced with deciding between making a jumbo payment and keeping their existing vehicles, more owners are choosing to stick with what they have, even if it means spending more on repairs and maintenance.

Auto mechanics have been struck by the rising ages and mileages of vehicles that now arrive at the shop in numbers they'd never seen before.

"You see cars all the time in here with 250,000, 300,000 miles," said Jay Nuber, owner of Japanese Auto Professional Service, a repair garage in Ann Arbor, Mich. "They haven't been really having major work or anything. They've just been doing the (routine) service."

It doesn't mean that most owners of older vehicles are necessarily stuck with constant repair bills. One reason people can hold their vehicles for increasingly long periods is that auto manufacturing has improved over time. Engines run longer, bodies don't rust as quickly and components last longer.

Man breaks record for time living underwater

Associated Press

KEY LARGO, Fla. — A university professor broke a record for the longest time living underwater without depressurization this weekend at a Florida Keys lodge for scuba divers.

Joseph Dituri's 74th day residing in Jules' Undersea Lodge, situated at the bottom of a 30-foot-deep lagoon in Key Largo, wasn't much different than his previous days there since he submerged March 1.

Dituri, who also goes by the moniker "Dr. Deep Sea," ate a protein-heavy meal of eggs and salmon prepared using a microwave, exercised with resistance bands, did his daily pushups and took an hour-long nap.

Unlike a submarine, the lodge does not use technology to adjust for the increased underwater pressure. The previous record of 73 days, two hours and 34 minutes was set by two Tennessee professors — Bruce Cantrell and Jessica Fain — at the same location in 2014.

But Dituri isn't just settling for the record and resurfacing: He plans to stay at the lodge until June 9, when he reaches 100 days and completes an underwater mission dubbed Project Neptune 100.

The mission combines medical and ocean research along with educational outreach and was organized by the Marine Resources Development Foundation, owner of the habitat.

"The record is a small bump and I really appreciate it," said Dituri, a University of South Florida educator who holds a doctorate in biomedical engineering and is a retired U.S. Naval officer.

"I'm honored to have it, but we still have more science to do."

World's oldest dog celebrates birthday

Associated Press

The world's oldest dog recently celebrated his 31st birthday, according to Guinness World Records.

Bobi, a purebred Rafeiro do Alentejo, a breed of Portuguese dog, celebrated during a party Saturday at his home in the Portuguese village of Conqueiros, where he has lived his entire life.

More than 100 people attended the "very traditional" Portuguese party, owner Leonel Costa said.

Local meats and fish were served to up to

100 guests, with extra for Bobi, who only eats human food. A dance troupe also performed with Bobi participating in one of their routines.

Costa has owned several old-age dogs in the past, including Bobi's mother, Gira, who lived to be 18. Costa said, however, that he never imagined any of his dogs would reach their 30s.

"We see situations like this as a normal result of the life that they have, but Bobi is one of a kind," Costa said.

One of the biggest contributing factors to Bobi's longevity is the "calm, peaceful environment" in which he lives, according to Costa.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Brother stopped abduction with slingshot

MI ALPENA — A Michigan girl was able to escape an attempted kidnapping when her brother used a slingshot to strike the would-be attacker, authorities said.

Mlive.com reported the Michigan State Police arrested the accused assailant in the city of Alpena on Wednesday.

The 17-year-old's name has not been released though he has been charged as an adult with one count of attempted kidnapping/child enticement, one count of attempted assault to do great bodily harm less than murder, and one count of assault and battery.

Michigan State Police said in a news release that the 8-year-old girl was in her backyard when the alleged assailant came out of the woods, grabbed her and covered her mouth. Authorities said the girl's brother, 13, hit the alleged attacker in the head and chest using a slingshot.

City council nomination brawl leaves 2 injured

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A brawl broke out over nominations for Minneapolis City Council candidates, leaving at least two people injured, a newspaper reported.

The scuffle arose during the Democratic—Farmer—Labor Party's endorsing convention for Minneapolis Ward 10, held Saturday at a magnet school in the city, the Star Tribune reported. Video posted on social media showed the disturbance began after supporters of Minneapolis Council Member Aisha Chughtai took the stage, which caused

an uproar among supporters of her challenger, Nasri Warsame. Some Warsame supporters jumped on stage, shouting, banging on tables and waving signs, the paper reported.

Convention chair Sam Doten called the behavior embarrassing and adjourned the event without a nominee being chosen, saying it was no longer safe.

Governor signs bill to fight antisemitism

VA RICHMOND — Joined by Jewish faith and community leaders, Gov. Glenn Youngkin hosted an event last week to ceremonially sign a bill supporters have said will help Virginia better track and combat growing instances of antisemitism.

Under the legislation, which will take effect July 1, Virginia will adopt a definition of antisemitism used by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The state will use that non-legally binding definition for training and education, and for tracking and reporting antisemitism.

The bill was a recommendation of a commission, chaired by former Acting U.S. Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, that Youngkin created on his first day in office.

Police shootout leaves 1 dead, police dog injured

TN SEVIERVILLE — A gunfight between police and a man inside a home in east Tennessee left him dead and wounded a K-9 police dog named Hank, who is recovering from surgery, authorities said Saturday.

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation did not say if police gunfire killed David Wright, 63. The bureau said an autopsy would determine the manner and cause of death.

A second person in the home was hospitalized with unspecified injuries. The bureau's news release did not identify the injured person.

Officers went to the house in Sevierville on Friday night after a felony in which someone evaded police in a vehicle, the bureau said. Someone inside the home fired at the officers, who shot back. The bureau is investigating the shooting.

Rescue completed after partial bridge collapse

NM LOS LUNAS — First responders completed a search for victims after a bridge over a New Mexico river partially collapsed Saturday night.

Los Lunas Fire Chief John Galdon said two people were rescued after the Los Lunas River Bridge collapsed, KOAT-TV reported.

Emergency crews initially looked for more victims, but Galdon later confirmed there were no others trapped or believed to be missing.

Rutgers' unions ratify contracts, ending strike

NJ NEW BRUNSWICK — Three faculty unions that went on strike last month at New Jersey's flagship university have overwhelmingly approved four-year contracts, formally ending the first such job action in the school's 257-year history.

Thousands of professors, part-time lecturers and graduate student workers at Rutgers University staged the five-day strike at the New Brunswick, Piscataway, Newark and Camden campuses as students were finishing their semester and preparing for finals and commencement. It began April 10 after months of negotiations had failed to resolve disputes over salary increases, job security for adjunct faculty and guaranteed funding for graduate students, among other requests.

Union leaders announced last week that the new contracts were approved by 93% of members casting ballots. The deals include across-the-board raises and additional job security for part-time lecturers, along with raises and job security provisions for graduate workers.

State moves toward gender inclusivity

IL CHICAGO — Illinois bills that would update existing laws to be more gender inclusive and add protections for LGBTQ+ marriages are ready for action by Gov. J.B. Pritzker, who said he will sign them.

The trio of state bills passed this month are meant to move the state in the "opposite direction" of those restricting LGBTQ+ youth, said Sen. Mike Simmons, the bills' sponsor and the first and only current openly LGBTQ+ lawmaker in the Illinois Senate.

The Illinois Democratic supermajority passed the bills out of the Senate on Thursday, and the measures now await Pritzker's signature.

— From wire reports

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Jokic has been steady hand for Nuggets

Associated Press

Nikola Jokic is anything but flashy, and never seems to be in a hurry to get where he is going.

After leading the Denver Nuggets to a series-clinching shellacking of the Phoenix Suns, Jokic planned to unwind this weekend by watching his beloved horses race in Europe and getting in some much-needed daddy-daughter time in the pool with 20-month-old Ognjena.

Easygoing — just like his game.

With Jokic's methodical play and folksy personality leading the way, the Nuggets have overpowered Anthony Edwards, Karl-Anthony Towns, Kevin Durant and Devin Booker en route to the Western Conference finals against LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers.

The opener is Tuesday night in Denver.

While the Nuggets are one of six NBA teams never to reach the Finals, this is the first time they've been the top-seeded

team in the West, and their .851 homecourt winning percentage is the best in the league.

Jokic may not have captured a third consecutive regular season MVP award (this year that trophy went to Philadelphia's Joel Embiid). But the center from Serbia doesn't seem to mind.

All that interests him — besides family and his prized horses — is an NBA title. Against Phoenix, Jokic averaged a triple-double — 34.5 points, 13.2 rebounds, 10.3 assists — over the six games. He also shot nearly 60% from the floor.

"Jokic is an all-time great," Durant marveled, chiding anyone surprised by Jokic's night-in, night-out effectiveness. "Going to go down as one of the all-time great centers to ever touch a basketball."

With Jamal Murray and Michael Porter Jr. back from injuries, Jokic wasn't supposed to carry as much of the load this season but he still put up stellar numbers in guiding the Nug-

gets to the best record in the West.

His 29 triple-doubles in the regular season were by far the most in the league, more than double the 14 recorded by Sacramento Kings power forward Domantas Sabonis. The Nuggets were 27-2 in those games.

The 6-foot-11, 285-pound Jokic does things at his tempo — using some of the 24-second clock to lumber down the court, more to post up, leaning this way, then that, backing in, spinning or pivoting and the rest to score or deliver a did-he-really-just-do-that? pass.

He's also made big strides in a category that's not on the stat sheet — leadership.

"Not only finding his voice but being comfortable with his voice," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said. "All season long, there have been so many different examples ... whether it's in a timeout huddle, in the locker room, at practice, before a game in Houston when he gathered the troops together because we knew he didn't like

the way they were warming up.

"He's had to do a little less this year" on the court, Malone said, "because we're healthy."

On deck, the Lakers. It's a team that beat Denver in five games in the 2020 West finals, held in the NBA bubble.

"It's a great challenge, of course," Jokic said. "You need to play your game, trust your game, don't let anything disturb you."

Despite his stellar season, Jokic came up short in the voting to become fourth ever back-to-back-to-back MVP and joining Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain and Larry Bird.

One thing Jokic doesn't have in common with that trio is a championship ring.

But he does have game — and in the NBA, game recognizes game no matter what it looks like. Jokic has reached 300 points, 100 rebounds and 100 assists in a postseason for the third time in his career. No other Nuggets player has accomplished the feat, according to ESPN Stats & Info.

Tatum sets Game 7 record as Celtics eliminate 76ers

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jayson Tatum gave Boston a long-overdue fast start and followed it up with a finish the NBA had never seen before.

After struggling in back-to-back games, Tatum erupted for 51 points — the most in a Game 7 in history — and the Celtics beat the Philadelphia 76ers 112-88 on Sunday to advance to the Eastern Conference finals for the second straight year.

One game after missing 14 of his first 15 shots only to awaken in the fourth quarter in time to save their season, Tatum scored 25 in the back-and-forth first half and 17 more in Boston's 33-10 third quarter that turned a three-point lead into a runaway. The Celtics, who lost to the

Golden State Warriors in the NBA Finals last year, will face the Miami Heat in the East finals for the second straight season. Game 1 is on Wednesday in Boston.

"I was relieved just to get another chance. Our season could have been over after Game 6," said Tatum, who broke the Game 7 record of 50 points Stephen Curry set two weeks ago. "It definitely was on my mind that I had played as bad as it could get, for 43 minutes.

"We had a saying: 'It's only up from here.'"

Tatum added 13 rebounds and Jaylen Brown scored 25 for Boston, which rallied from a 3-2 deficit to keep alive its hopes for an unprecedented 18th NBA title. "You always come into a se-

ries with the expectation of how it's supposed to go," said Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla, who is in his first year as an NBA head coach after being promoted on the eve of training camp after Ime Udoka was suspended. "That's not how the playoffs are."

Tatum was subbed out of the game with three minutes left to a standing ovation from the crowd, which soon broke out in a "Beat the Heat!" chant. Miami beat Boston in six games in the 2020 East finals and the Celtics took a seven-game matchup last season.

"It's the best time of the year," Tatum said. "As a competitor, I love the opportunity."

NBA MVP Joel Embiid scored 15 points on 5-for-18 shooting, and Tobias Harris scored 19 for

Philadelphia. The Sixers lost in the conference semifinals for the third straight year, and the fifth time in six seasons. They have not gotten any farther since reaching the NBA Finals in 2001 despite "The Process" — tanking their way to four top-three draft picks in a row, including Embiid.

"I thought we had the right group. I really did," said Sixers coach Doc Rivers, who coached the Celtics to the title in 2008. "We played great all year and this loss absolutely diminishes what we did this year in some way. ... I think this team is headed right. I thought we took another step this season. And then tonight I think we took a step backward. But that's OK. That happens, too."

Knights top Oilers, advance to West finals

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — The Vegas Golden Knights are back in familiar territory in the Western Conference finals.

Jonathan Marchessault scored three goals for his second career postseason hat trick as the Golden Knights beat the Edmonton Oilers 5-2 in Game 6 of their second-round series on Sunday night to reach the semifinal round for the fourth time in the franchise's six-year history.

"We're only halfway done to our goal here," Marchessault said. "We're going to keep going until our organization, we win the ultimate goal. Tonight is just one step in the right direction."

Reilly Smith and William Karlsson also scored for the Golden Knights, and Ivan Barbashev had two assists. Adin Hill finished with 39 saves in his third career playoff start.

"I've worked very hard my whole life to get to the NHL and to be here," the 27-year-old Hill said. "It's exciting being on a team that's this good and has chance to really do it all. I'm grateful and I'm excited about it."

Vegas will next face the winner

of the series between Dallas and Seattle, which went to a Game 7 on Monday night.

The Golden Knights still have half a dozen players from the team that reached the Stanley Cup Final in their inaugural season in 2017-18.

"We have a lot of older guys on the team that have been through a lot of situations," Marchessault said. "We don't panic. It's one of our strengths and it's definitely going to help in the future."

Connor McDavid and Warren Foegele scored early in the first period for Edmonton, which led 2-1 less than three minutes into the game. Stuart Skinner gave up four goals on 17 shots through two periods, and Jack Campbell stopped all four shots he faced in the third.

The Oilers fell short of returning to the conference finals for the second straight year after losing to eventual Stanley Cup champion Colorado a year ago.

"It hurts," Edmonton forward Leon Draisaitl said with a shaking voice. "It's tough to find words right now. When you start a season, you're in it to win it. We're at that stage. If you don't complete

that, it feels like a failure or a wasted year almost. It hurts."

Edmonton's loss officially extended the drought for a Canadian team winning the Cup to 30 years since Montreal won in 1993.

Marchessault tied the score 2-2 at 4:26 of second period as the puck redirected off a skate in front of the crease and the right wing fired it into the opening as Skinner slid across the goalmouth to try to stop him.

"A little bit of lack of execution defensively in the second period ended up really hurting us tonight," Oilers coach Jay Woodcroft said.

Marchessault then put Vegas ahead at 7:44. After a slap shot by Alec Martinez deflected into the air off Skinner's shoulder and landed on the goal line, Marchessault tapped it in.

Seconds after a Vegas power play expired late in the middle period, Marchessault completed his hat trick with a 4-on-4 goal with 1:24 remaining. His wrist shot from just above the hash marks on a cross-ice feed from Alex Pietrangelo beat Skinner far side.

Draisaitl, who scored 13 goals in his first eight playoff games,

and McDavid were reunited on the same line in the third period in an attempt to produce more offense. The Oilers generated several chances and McDavid rang a shot off the post.

Campbell was pulled for an extra attacker with over three minutes to play in the third, but Hill and the Golden Knights stood firm.

"What was the difference? They did a lot of good things, they shut it down," McDavid said. "The third period was clinical. We still had our looks and didn't find a way to get one past him."

Karlsson sealed the win with an empty-netter in the final minute.

The Golden Knights held Edmonton's vaunted power play to one scoreless chance in the second period. The Oilers, the NHL's highest-scoring team in the regular season, were held to 10 goals over the last four games of the series.

The Knights also outscored Edmonton 17-10 even-strength.

"Our 5-on-5 game, I think it's been good all year," Marchessault said. "We were down 1-0 and 2-1 quite often in that series and we battled back."

Grizzlies suspend Morant over another gun video

Associated Press

Ja Morant was suspended by the Memphis Grizzlies on Sunday after he appeared to be holding a gun in another social media video that was streamed live on Instagram, the latest in a series of concerning incidents involving the two-time All-Star guard.

It's the second time in less than three months that Morant was seen on Instagram holding what appeared to be a weapon. The first led to an eight-game NBA suspension that was handed down in March and cost Morant about \$669,000 in salary.

It's unclear what sanctions Morant could face for the second video, which was captured Saturday night and widely shared online. The video was streamed on the Instagram account of Morant associate Davonte Pack, a person familiar with the situation told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because neither the NBA nor the Griz-

zlies have commented on the specifics of the latest video.

"We are aware of the social media post involving Ja Morant and are in the process of gathering more information," NBA spokesman Mike Bass said.

The Grizzlies, whose season is over, said Morant is suspended from all team activities "pending league review."

The video streamed by Pack shows Morant in the passenger seat of a vehicle, briefly appearing to display a handgun. At the very brief moment — only about a second — when Morant is shown holding what appears to be a weapon, the livestream had 111 viewers.

The video that got Morant suspended during the season happened when the Grizzlies star went live on his own Instagram account while holding a gun at a club in the Denver suburbs in early March. After that went viral, Morant announced that he was taking time

away from basketball to seek help, without specifying what sort of treatment he was getting. ESPN later reported that he was getting counseling in Florida, which the team eventually confirmed but did not share any details.

"Ja's conduct was irresponsible, reckless and potentially very dangerous," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said in a statement after meeting with Morant and deciding on the suspension's length. "It also has serious consequences given his enormous following and influence, particularly among young fans who look up to him."

"He has expressed sincere contrition and remorse for his behavior," Silver continued. "Ja has also made it clear to me that he has learned from this incident and that he understands his obligations and responsibility to the Memphis Grizzlies and the broader NBA community extend well beyond his play on the court."

Harper ejected as Rockies top Phillies

Associated Press

DENVER — Philadelphia Phillies star Bryce Harper was ejected for charging Colorado's dugout, and Kyle Freeland dominated for six innings on his 30th birthday in the Rockies' 4-0 win Sunday.

Harper appeared to respond to Colorado reliever Jake Bird, who clapped a hand against his glove and said something toward the Philadelphia dugout after the last out of the top of the seventh.

"I get emotion," Harper said. "I understand getting fired up for an inning and stuff like that, but once you make it about a team or make it about yourself and the other team, that's when I've kind of got a problem with it."

Harper was initially restrained by Rockies catcher Elias Díaz, then Phillies third base coach Dusty Wathan prevented the two-time NL MVP from entering a group of players and coaches gathered near the first-base line.

"It could be," Phillies manager Rob Thomson said when asked whether Harper's reaction was the result of mounting frustration. "But a guy yelling in your dugout? That shouldn't happen. Flat out, that shouldn't happen."

Bird, who said his comments weren't directed at anyone in particular, also was ejected.

"I get a little emotional on the

mound sometimes," Bird said. "It's a good team. It was a big moment. I got a little emotional out there. They took exception to it."

Thomson had been thrown out the previous inning after arguing with plate umpire Ryan Wills over a called third strike on Kyle Schwarber. Philadelphia's season-high five-game winning streak was stopped.

Nationals 3-2, Mets 2-8: Max Scherzer pitched five steady innings in his return from neck spasms as visiting New York finally broke loose for eight runs in the fifth to beat Washington.

Slumping outfielders Starling Marte and Mark Canha both had two hits and two RBIs during New York's biggest inning this season.

After losing 3-2 hours earlier in the completion of a game suspended Saturday because of rain, the \$355 million Mets (20-21) improved to 6-14 in their last 20.

In the completion of Saturday's game, suspended in the third inning after a rain delay that lasted 3 hours, 56 minutes, Nationals center fielder Alex Call made a pair of outstanding defensive plays in the ninth to preserve the victory.

Dodgers 4, Padres 0: Tony Gonsolin and four relievers combined on a three-hitter, Mookie Betts launched a two-run homer

and host Los Angeles blanked San Diego to complete a three-game sweep for its fifth straight victory.

Gonsolin (1-1) allowed two hits over five innings, struck out six and walked one in lowering his ERA to 1.42 in the Dodgers' third shutout of the season.

Rays 8, Yankees 7: Taylor Walls broke a fifth-inning tie with a grand slam off Albert Abreu, and visiting Tampa Bay held off New York to gain a four-game split.

Blue Jays 6, Braves 5: Danny Jansen hit a two-run single in the ninth inning as host Toronto rallied past Atlanta to complete a three-game sweep.

Cardinals 9, Red Sox 1: Nolan Arenado and Andrew Knizner each hit a two-run homer, and visiting St. Louis routed Boston to complete a three-game sweep.

Pirates 4, Orioles 0: Mitch Keller struck out a career-high 13 in his second straight outstanding start, and visiting Pittsburgh blanked Baltimore to win for only the second time in 13 games.

Astros 4, White Sox 3: Yainer Diaz hit his first major league home run to back rookie Hunter Brown (4-1), who allowed three runs in 5½ innings and tied his career high with eight strikeouts for visiting Houston.

Guardians 4, Angels 3: Josh

Naylor hit a three-run homer off Los Angeles' Carlos Estévez in the eighth, his third go-ahead homer in three days in that same inning for host Cleveland.

Rangers 11, Athletics 3: Adolis García doubled against Austin Pruitt (0-1) to start an eight-run eighth inning capped by his second grand slam this season as visiting Texas took three of four in the series with Oakland.

Diamondbacks 2, Giants 1: Lourdes Gurriel Jr. drove home Christian Walker with a double in the ninth inning, lifting host Arizona over San Francisco.

Tigers 5, Mariners 3: Riley Greene had three hits, Javier Báez drove in two runs and host Detroit beat Seattle to prevent a three-game sweep.

Twins 16, Cubs 3: Trevor Larnach hit a three-run homer, Joey Gallo connected for the second straight game and Louie Varland pitched 6⅓ solid innings as host Minnesota routed Chicago.

Marlins 3, Reds 1: Bryan De La Cruz doubled twice and singled, and host Miami avoided a three-game sweep against Cincinnati.

Brewers 9, Royals 6: Christian Yelich homered in the first and scored on two missed throws as part of host Milwaukee's seven-run outburst against Kansas City in the third.

Byron wins Goodyear 400 at Darlington Raceway

Associated Press

DARLINGTON, S.C. — William Byron saw Ross Chastain and Hendrick Motorsports teammate Kyle Larson ahead of him late at Darlington Raceway.

Byron made sure he was prepared for the fireworks he thought could happen.

Byron moved in front when Chastain and Larson wrecked while racing for the lead on a restart with six laps left and held off Kevin Harvick in overtime to win the Goodyear 400 at Darlington Raceway on Sunday.

"We talked about it under the caution," Byron said of a potential dustup. "I didn't think that they would wreck, but, obviously,

it happened and we rolled on by."

Chastain and Larson have raced each other tooth-and-nail this season with incidents impacting potential wins at Talladega and Dover heading into the track "Too Tough To Tame."

It didn't take a rocket scientist — Byron is taking college courses at Liberty University — to know the two might tangle again.

It was a measure of retribution for Byron, who was two laps from victory in this race a year ago until he was shoved out of the way by eventual winner Joey Logano.

"It's pretty amazing," Byron said. "Things have a way of working out."

He got away cleanly from Harvick on the green-white-checkered finish for his third win this season and seventh of his career.

Harvick was second and Chase Elliott third, his best finish since returning to NASCAR from a broken leg while snowboarding.

Brad Keselowski was fourth, followed by Bubba Wallace, Harrison Burton, Kyle Busch, Justin Haley, Ryan Blaney and Chris Buescher.

It was the 100th win for Hendrick Motorsports' No. 24 car and the organization's first victory at Darlington since Jimmie Johnson won the 2012 race.