

US touts 'slight progress' in Iran talks

Bloomberg News

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said there was "slight progress" in mediated negotiations with Iran, as the prospect of a deal to turn a fragile ceasefire into a lasting peace agreement remains uncertain.

"I don't want to exaggerate it, but there's been a little bit of movement, and that's good," Rubio said at a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Sweden, on Friday.

Tehran is considering the latest proposal submitted by the U.S. through Pakistan, but has given no indication of when it will formally respond. The status of the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial conduit for global energy supplies, and Iran's nuclear program remain major sticking points.

Iran's ambassador to France, Mohammad Amin-Nejad, told Bloomberg on Wednesday his

country is discussing with Oman some form of a permanent toll system in the strait, something the U.S. has said is unacceptable.

Rubio said it would set a precedent for other areas of the world and that no country should accept the imposition of tolls in Hormuz. President Donald Trump said Thursday that he opposed the idea.

"We want it open, we want it free, we don't want tolls," he told reporters at the White House. "It's an international waterway. They are not charging tolls right now."

Oil prices rose, snapping a three-day decline, as it remains unclear if the U.S. and Iran are any closer to a compromise. Brent crude traded above \$105 a barrel, up 2.7%, and remains significantly above pre-war levels.

Outside of Hormuz, the U.S.

has repeatedly demanded Tehran hand over its enriched uranium and commit to ending enrichment for at least a decade. Iranian leaders have publicly rejected that, and the country's President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Thursday "we will never back down" in talks.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi held a new round of talks with Pakistan's interior minister Mohsin Naqvi on Friday, semi-official Iranian Students' News Agency reported. Pakistan, the main mediator, has been shuttling between the two sides in recent days, in a push to broker a compromise to advance the ceasefire agreed on April 8.

Pakistan Field Marshal Asim Munir, the favored interlocutor between Washington and Tehran, had been expected to visit Tehran on Thursday, but there have been no reports as yet that

he has made the trip.

In related news:

■ Japan, one of Asia's largest importers of energy from the Middle East, flagged the impending arrival of its first oil shipment from the Persian Gulf since the war began.

■ Iran claimed 35 ships crossed Hormuz in the past day after obtaining permission, ISNA reports citing an IRGC statement.

■ Iran has destroyed more than two dozen MQ-9 Reaper drones operated by U.S. forces since the war began, according to a person with direct knowledge of the matter. That represents 20% of the Pentagon's pre-war inventory for the hard-to-replace unmanned system.

■ House Republican leaders in the U.S. abruptly canceled a vote on the Iran war as GOP absences threatened an embarrassing defeat for Trump.

Nimitz heads to Caribbean as pressure mounts on Cuba

Miami Herald

In what appears to be a carefully calibrated show of force, the United States deployed the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz and its strike group to Caribbean waters this week, a move that coincided with the unsealing of murder charges against former Cuban leader Raúl Castro and an intensifying pressure campaign by the Trump administration against Havana.

U.S. Southern Command confirmed Wednesday that the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group had entered the region, describing the deployment as a demonstration of "readiness and presence, unmatched reach and lethality, and strategic advantage."

"Welcome to the Caribbean, Nimitz Carrier Strike Group!" the command posted on social media.

The strike group includes the Nimitz with Carrier Air Wing 17, the guided-missile destroyer USS Gridley and the replenishment oiler USNS Patuxent.

The deployment came the same day the U.S. Justice Department unsealed an indictment charging Castro and several other officials with murder and conspiracy in connection with the 1996 shoot-down of two civilian aircraft operated by the Miami-based humanitarian group Brothers to the Rescue.

The attack, which occurred over international waters, killed

four men, including three U.S. citizens.

During remarks to reporters Wednesday, President Donald Trump linked the indictment to his administration's broader focus on Cuba.

"Cuba is on our mind," Trump said. "It's very important. It was a very big moment for people, not only Cuban Americans, but people who came from Cuba, that want to go back to Cuba, see their family in Cuba."

The arrival of the Nimitz has fueled speculation that Washington may be preparing additional measures against Havana, particularly after the January military operation in Cara-

cas that led to the capture of Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, who were transferred to the United States to face narcotics charges they deny. The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford played a major role in that operation.

U.S. officials cited by news outlets said the administration plans to keep the strike group in the Caribbean for several days primarily as a "show of force," with no immediate combat operation planned. Still, reports that the Pentagon has developed contingency options for possible military action against Cuba have heightened tensions across the region.

Poland troop increase adds new twist to plans in Europe

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — President Donald Trump on Thursday said he will send an additional 5,000 troops to Poland, marking the latest twist in the U.S. military's fast-changing mission in Europe.

In a post on his Truth Social website, Trump cited his close relationship with Polish President Karol Nawrocki as the reason for the move.

Trump did not say when the troops would be deployed to Poland or from where they would come. U.S. European Command did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

It is not clear how Trump's announcement affects an earlier Pentagon decision to halt the deployment of a Fort Hood, Texas-based armored brigade

to Poland. That unit, which already had deployed some of its 4,000 troops and equipment to Europe, was expected to carry out a nine-month rotation in Poland before the plan was curtailed.

That decision was met with immediate bipartisan criticism by U.S. lawmakers who called for the mission to be restored. Polish officials also were left confused by the move, given that Trump has frequently praised Poland as a model ally.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, speaking at the start of a meeting of alliance foreign ministers in Sweden on Friday, welcomed Trump's announcement and said that military commanders were working through the details.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, speaking alongside Rutte,

acknowledged Trump's Poland announcement without offering specifics on how the troop boost would be completed. He added that because of the U.S.'s global military commitments, the overseas force posture is constantly being reexamined.

If the Pentagon wants to immediately carry out Trump's directive, one option is to simply resume the deployment of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, which was already underway.

Otherwise, the Pentagon will need to either shift U.S. forces from other locations in Europe or bring troops over from the United States.

The back-and-forth announcements have left allies and lawmakers struggling to understand the Pentagon's broader plans for Europe.

Rubio warns Cuba can't 'buy time'

Miami Herald

Secretary of State Marco Rubio cast doubt on Thursday that conflict with Cuba can be resolved diplomatically and issued a strong warning to the government in Havana, telling reporters Cuba is a national security threat and that Cuban leaders will not be able to "buy time."

"They're not going to be able to wait us out or buy time," Rubio told reporters in Miami on his way to Sweden. "We're very serious, we're very focused."

He added, "The president's preference is always a negotiated agreement that's peaceful,"

Pressed about the likelihood of the use of military force to achieve a political change in Cuba, Rubio stressed the administration's preference is "a diplomatic solution, always, and a negotiated agreement."

"But to answer your question, if there's a threat to the national security of the United States, the President not just has the right, he has the obligation to address that national security threat," he added.

The administration has been ramping up the pressure on the Cuban government in recent days, when it announced sanctions on the military conglomerate GAESA, which runs much of the island's economy, and on several government officials.

On Wednesday, the Justice Department unsealed an indictment against Raúl Castro, the island's longtime ruler, who was charged with murder for the deaths of four Cuban exiles in a 1996 shoot-down by Cuba's air force of two civilian planes from Miami.

In recent days, Rubio's tone has hardened, tying economic reforms in Cuba with regime change.

GOP senators balk at Trump's \$1.8B fund, force delay in immigration vote

Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's grip on his party slipped on Thursday as anger boiled over among Senate Republicans about a growing list of issues.

In a striking display of defiance, GOP senators abruptly derailed plans to vote on legislation to fund Trump's immigration crackdown amid deep disagreements over security funding for a White House ballroom and a \$1.8 billion fund to pay people who claim to have been politically persecuted.

The discontent had been building for weeks. Many sen-

ators had grown frustrated over Trump's decision to endorse candidates running against longtime Republican incumbents.

Others, worried about rising costs as a result from the war in Iran, had aired concerns ahead of the midterm elections. But the breaking point came when the Justice Department, with little warning, pushed to create what it termed the "anti-weaponization fund."

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., acknowledged the concerns over the fund Thursday following a reportedly contentious private meeting about it between Senate Repu-

blicans and Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche.

He also conceded midterm politics had added to the tension.

"It's hard to divorce anything that happens here from what's happening in the political atmosphere around us," Thune told reporters. "You can't disconnect those things."

A day earlier, Sen. Bill Cassidy, a Louisiana Republican who lost his primary race on Saturday to a Trump-backed challenger, expressed strong disagreement with the creation of the fund, which would be controlled by appointees without congressional oversight.

Spending bill outlines cuts to watchdog

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — The House Appropriations Committee advanced a draft fiscal 2027 Legislative Branch spending bill on Wednesday that would slash the budget for the Government Accountability Office by nearly one-quarter and give a boost to Capitol Police.

The party-line vote of 34-28 came after a contentious markup stretching late into the evening, as Democrats argued the GAO cut would undermine its mission.

“The keyword in the GAO is accountability,” said Rep. Adriano Espaillat, D-N.Y., the ranking member on the Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee. “This is not budgeting, it is giving away our oversight authority.”

The measure would provide \$611.9 million for the GAO, a cut of 25 percent compared to fiscal 2026, and would bar it from suing under the 1974 budget law restricting presidential impoundments, unless specifically authorized by Congress.

Now that the committee has approved the spending proposal, it is expected to be up for floor consideration at a later date.

Overall, the measure would provide \$5.4 billion for operations of the House and its various support agencies. Adding in an estimate of Senate-only funds, the total would come to \$7.3 billion.

“Fundamentally, this legislation is about stewardship, ensuring that Congress serves the nation, is responsive to its citizens and invests taxpayer dollars responsibly,” said House Appropriations Chair Tom Cole, R-Okla.

Ranking member Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., said the GAO move runs counter to Republicans’ goal of rooting out waste, fraud and abuse.

“GAO is what DOGE pretended to be — a force for efficiency within the federal government,” DeLauro said, referring to the Trump administration’s sweeping purge of federal programs.

Capitol Police would get a more than 6 percent boost in fiscal 2027 under the proposal, though that \$907.5 million falls short of the agency’s request, which topped \$1 billion amid rising threats against lawmakers.

The Members’ Representational Allowance account, which covers operational and office expenses for members of the House and can be used for some types of security, would come in at \$900 million, a roughly 6 percent boost.

Sexual misconduct in Congress was another topic on Wednesday, as lawmakers reckon with a recent wave of allegations.

A provision in an amendment added language to the bill report that would direct the Office of Congressional Workplace Rights and the Office of Employee Advocacy to brief the committee on ways to improve resources and reporting processes.

Speaking in favor of the amendment, Rep. Glenn F.

Ivey, D-Md., implored his colleagues, particularly the male ones, to take the issue seriously.

“And here’s the challenge, and I’ll speak to the men in the room for a second. We know that these issues exist; we don’t necessarily know the full depth of it,” said Ivey, who is also a member of the House Ethics Committee.

Nearby, Rep. Chuck Edwards, R-N.C., who is currently under investigation by the Ethics Committee for allegations of sexual misconduct, scrolled on his phone as Ivey spoke. Edwards has said he will comply with the ethics probe to “expose the facts, not politically motivated fiction.”

But appropriators also sparred Wednesday over whether to press forward with more proposals to address misconduct or to wait on the results of a bipartisan effort that House leaders recently announced between the Democratic Women’s Caucus and the GOP Women’s Caucus.

Multiple wildfires trigger unhealthy air quality alert

Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — Wide swaths of Southern California are under a smoke advisory through Thursday night, as wildfires burn across the area.

According to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, onshore winds will push smoke from the Sandy fire into Los Angeles County, impacting residents along the coast and from the San Fernando Valley to Arcadia, where the air could become unhealthy for sensitive groups.

A smoke advisory that went into place Wednesday afternoon is now extended until at least 10 p.m. Thursday, according to a Los Angeles County

Public Health news release.

Other fires in the region are also impacting Southern Californians.

The Bain and Verona fires in Riverside County have put wildfire smoke into several valleys in the Inland Empire, including in Perris, Temecula, Riverside and San Jacinto, according to the AQMD website.

Widespread smoke impacts are expected in the L.A. Basin, on Catalina Island and the Coachella Valley, too.

Overnight, smoke from the Santa Rosa Island and Sandy fires is expected to come onshore, settling over the coast with little wind to clear the air.

Trump delays signing AI order over parts he dislikes

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said he called off the signing of an executive order that would address cybersecurity concerns raised by powerful new artificial intelligence models because he objected to parts of the directive, casting doubt on U.S. efforts to respond to new risks posed by the emerging technology.

“Because I didn’t like certain aspects of it. I postponed it,” the president said during an event Thursday at the White House. “I really thought that could have been a blocker, and I want to make sure that it’s not.”

The directive was set to be signed Thursday, and invita-

tions had been sent to a range of technology industry executives for an event at the White House. Trump said that he wanted to be sure that it didn’t take any steps that would reduce the U.S. advantage over China in AI, though he didn’t specify what changes he wanted to the order.

“We’re leading China, we’re leading everybody, and I don’t want to do anything that’s going to get in the way of that lead,” Trump said.

The move throws into turmoil a push to shape policy governing artificial intelligence, a technology that promises to transform the global economy yet also carries a broad range of potential security risks.

Child safety groups want FTC to probe Roblox video game

Los Angeles Times

Child safety advocates say the popular gaming platform Roblox could be bad for kids.

Fairplay and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation have requested the Federal Trade Commission to investigate if the games on Roblox are designed to make kids spend an unhealthy amount of time and money on their screens.

Roblox's core users are young kids.

In a letter submitted to the FTC, the groups argue that Roblox's engagement-maximizing design features, virtual currency system, and voice and text chat communication features are inappropriate for the platform's user base and pose a substantial risk of harm.

"Alone and in combination, these three components capitalize on young users' developmental vulnerabilities, exploit their desire for authentic self-expression, monetize their lack of impulse control, and turn in-game purchasing power into a form of social status," the groups noted in the letter submitted Thursday to the FTC.

Roblox allows the purchase of

virtual assets — clothing and dance moves, for example — which can only be purchased with the platform's in-game currency, Robux. The platform obscures the exchange rate between dollars and the in-game currency, leaving young players to navigate a complex system of fluctuating conversion rates that increases the amount of real-world money players spend, the letter said.

For instance, players can receive more Robux per dollar by purchasing larger bundles of currency or buying a "Roblox Premium" subscription, making it harder for children to perform financial calculations on how much they are spending on the platform.

The letter pointed to instances of unexpected Roblox charges, as one parent discovered that his daughter spent more than \$5,000 on Roblox without understanding that she was spending real money.

The letter also outlined examples of "scarcity marketing" techniques that increase demand through limited-quantity assets and time-based reward to drive sales of virtual items, driv-

ing a false sense of urgency. Some see it as a strong-arm sales technique that should not be used on children:

"Items only available for a limited time encourage both rapid purchases and returning to the platform frequently — sometimes multiple times per day — to avoid missing out on items," the letter said.

A Roblox spokesperson said that the company "strongly disputes these claims. Our platform is designed to provide a positive, healthy and enjoyable experience — we build for fun and connection, not short-term engagement. While no system can be perfect, we have a set of safeguards designed to support a safe and civil environment, and clear policies for game creators that require fair treatment of players."

The groups pointed out that third-party games developed on Roblox are designed to profit from in-game purchases, and have "gambling-like" engagement mechanisms such as lootboxes, in which players cannot see what's inside until after they have purchased it — and the items vary in value.

FBI flagged mosque gunman

Bloomberg News

One of the teenagers accused of carrying out a deadly shooting at a California mosque was flagged by the FBI as a potential threat last year, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Caleb Vazquez was the subject of a 2025 FBI eGuardian alert. Authorities say Vazquez, 18, and Cain Clark, 17, on Monday killed three men, including a security guard, outside the Islamic Center of San Diego before dying from what police said were self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

The FBI had no immediate comment. The eGuardian system is a platform used by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies to share and track potential threats and suspicious activity. Alerts are reviewed by a joint terrorism task force.

Authorities recovered at least 30 firearms, ammunition and a crossbow from two residences tied to the suspects and is investigating whether they had broader plans, the FBI has said.

Authorities said the pair had been radicalized online, where they met and shared White supremacist views.

Women's museum bill defeated over transgender issues

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — A once-bipartisan effort broke down Thursday as the House rejected a bill to pave the way for construction of a Smithsonian museum honoring women.

Previously championed by both sides of the aisle, the legislation saw last-minute changes at a House Administration Committee markup in March that led Democrats to withdraw their backing.

The new version would prohibit exhibits from including

transgender women or girls, as well as give the final say on location to President Donald Trump.

"They have shown that they are willing to destroy a bipartisan bill in order to respond to the White House," said Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández, D-N.M., who chairs the Democratic Women's Caucus.

The bill would allow the museum to be built within the reserve of the National Mall, an area where construction is tightly restricted.

Although the bill names the South Monument site across from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, it would also give the president the ability to "designate an alternative site" at his discretion. Democrats have decried the changes as a "poison pill" that derailed years of work.

The floor vote this week was supposed to be a chance for Republicans to position themselves as defenders of women's rights and to paint their opponents as unsympathetic to the

cause.

"They claim, the other side, to be the party of women ... (but) it will be the Republican majority in Congress that gets this done," the bill's lead sponsor, Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, N.Y., said earlier Thursday on the floor.

But Republicans couldn't stay united to pass the bill on their own, with several of their members breaking away to vote with Democrats to defeat it. GOP leaders circulated around the chamber, trying to convince the holdouts.

Rossi gets OK to drive in Indy 500

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Alexander Rossi hobbled into his Indianapolis 500 media day interview on crutches Thursday.

He's still planning to start Sunday's big race.

Three days after having surgery on his right ankle and the middle finger of his left hand following a crash, Rossi told reporters he'd been cleared to drive and then spent most of his interview session playfully poking fun at questions about his health and himself.

"I have to be on crutches because it's a non-weight bearing injury, but fortunately to drive a race car, you don't have to bear weight," he said.

"Range of motion is good. Pain is minimal. Swelling, as you can see, I fit into my race boot, so good to go."

He was injured early in Monday's practice when his car spun going through the second turn on the Brickyard's 2.5-mile oval. He slammed hard into the outside wall then took a second shot when the trailing Pato O'Ward couldn't avoid hitting the side of Rossi's car.

Rossi, the 2016 Indy winner, was eventually transferred to a local hospital where he had surgery Monday night. Rossi's Ed Carpenter Racing team members spent Monday night and Tuesday preparing his backup car, the one he used last year when he led the race, hopeful Rossi would return to the cockpit and start from the No. 2 spot that he earned in last weekend's qualifying.

2-time NASCAR champ Kyle Busch dies at 41

Associated Press

CONCORD, N.C. — Kyle Busch, a two-time Cup Series champion who won more races than anyone across NASCAR's three national series, has died. He was 41.

The Busch Family, Richard Childress Racing and NASCAR issued a joint statement Thursday saying Busch died after being hospitalized. No cause of death was given.

Busch's family said earlier Thursday that he was hospitalized with a "severe illness," three days before he was to compete in the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Busch was testing in the Chevrolet racing simulator in Concord on Wednesday when he became unresponsive and was transported to a hospital in Charlotte, several people familiar with the situation told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because details have not been disclosed by Busch's team or family.

Busch was the younger brother of Kurt Busch, a NASCAR Hall of Famer. He's survived by wife Samantha and children Brexton and Lennix.

"Our entire NASCAR family is heartbroken by the loss of Kyle Busch," the statement said.

"A future Hall of Famer, Kyle was a rare talent, one who comes along once in a generation. He was fierce, he was passionate, he was immensely

skilled and he cared deeply about the sport and fans."

The statement went on to say that "throughout a career that spanned more than two decades, Kyle set records in national series wins, won championships at NASCAR's highest level and fostered the next generation of drivers as an owner in the Truck Series. His sharp wit and competitive spirit sparked a deep emotional connection with race fans of every age, creating the proud and loyal 'Rowdy Nation.'"

The news comes 11 days after Busch radioed into his crew near the end of a Cup Series race at Watkins Glen asking a doctor to give him a "shot" when he finished the race. According to the TV broadcast, Busch had been struggling with a sinus cold exacerbated by the intense G-forces and elevation changes at the New York road course.

Busch finished the race in eighth place.

Busch competed at Dover last weekend and won the Trucks Series race for Spire Motorsports. He then finished 17th at the NASCAR All-Star race, his final race.

"Absolutely cannot comprehend this news," NASCAR driver and former teammate Denny Hamlin posted on social media. "We just need to think of his family during this time. We love you KB."

A polarizing figure known as "Rowdy" and "Wild Thing" for

his post-race fights, regular feuds with other drivers and sometimes outlandish behavior, Busch stormed on the Cup Series scene in 2005 by winning Rookie of the Year.

He went on to win championships in 2015 and 2019 for Joe Gibbs Racing.

Busch, from Las Vegas, experienced unrivaled success across NASCAR's three national series.

He won a combined 234 Cup, O'Reilly Auto Parts and Trucks Series races. He had 63 Cup victories along with 102 O'Reilly Auto Parts wins and 69 Trucks victories — both records.

Busch was fired early in his career by Hendrick Motorsports to make room on the team for Dale Earnhardt Jr.

"Kyle and I had a really challenging existence for many years," Earnhardt said in a statement. "But we luckily took the time to figure out our differences and that was something he instigated with a conversation in his bus around how we each managed our racing teams. I was super eager for us to get on better terms. But it was he who made the effort for that to be possible."

Busch moved on to Joe Gibbs Racing where he experienced the vast majority of career success. But Busch was let go when there was no sponsor after the 2022 season and joined Richard Childress Racing, where he had struggled to win races.

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Surging Knicks halfway to NBA Finals

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Josh Hart scored a playoff career-high 26 points, Jalen Brunson had 19 with 14 assists, and the New York Knicks moved halfway to their first NBA Finals appearance since 1999 by beating the Cleveland Cavaliers 109-93 on Thursday night.

Mikal Bridges also scored 19 points and Karl-Anthony Towns had 18 points and 13 rebounds to help the Knicks win their ninth straight game. That's the NBA's longest postseason winning streak since the Boston Celtics won 10 straight on their way to the 2024 championship.

Hart went 5 for 11 from 3-point range, burning a defensive strategy that seemed built around leaving him open from long range, and also had seven assists.

"Just a whale of a game from Josh," Knicks coach Mike Brown said.

Two nights after rallying

from a 22-point deficit in the fourth quarter, the Knicks made sure they would be in control late with an 18-0 run in the third quarter that gave them a 71-53 lead. Fans chanted "Knicks in four! Knicks in four!" in the final minute, long after the starters had gone to the benches.

"In our mind it's 0-0. We've got to win the next game. It's the most important game of the year, and that's how we treat it," Towns said.

Donovan Mitchell scored 26 points and James Harden had 18 for the Cavaliers, who will have to climb out of a 2-0 deficit for the second straight round. They host Game 3 on Saturday.

"Nothing to hang our head about," Mitchell said. "They protected home court, and we've seen this before, so we're going to go to Game 3."

The Knicks are in the Eastern Conference finals for the second straight year but haven't

played for the championship since losing to the San Antonio Spurs in 1999.

Brunson scored 38 points and led the Game 1 comeback. He had only two points in the first half Thursday before making the first basket of the run that broke open the game and finished with the highest assist total of his playoff career.

Hart was benched for the rally in Game 1, playing just three minutes combined in the fourth quarter and overtime. The forward had been shooting just 26.7% from 3-point range and after a third straight miss from long range early Thursday, he put his jersey in his mouth and bit it, bouncing the ball down hard in frustration three times. But he kept firing.

"I knew I had to just keep shooting and if I did that I'd be good," Hart said.

Mitchell got off to a slow start with just seven points in the first half, triggering more of the

questions that followed Game 1 about whether he was injured. His 3 with 0.7 seconds left gave the Cavs a 27-24 lead after one.

The Knicks led 53-49 at halftime. The Cavs got the first two baskets of the third to tie it, but Brunson answered with a 3-pointer to start the 18-0 run. He had two more buckets in the burst and Hart hit a pair of 3-pointers, the latter capping it to make it 71-53 with 5:36 remaining in the third. After the Cavs scored five straight, Hart made another 3 and Towns scored to restore the 18-point advantage.

Cleveland cut it to single digits with just under eight minutes left but ruined any chance of getting closer with poor free-throw shooting, missing 10 in the game and finishing at 68.8%. The Knicks eventually pushed their lead to 19 points.

"It's difficult when you're not making shots," Harden said. "It puts twice as much pressure on you defensively to get stops."

Mitchell's health still a question for Cavaliers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donovan Mitchell insists he is feeling good. Actually even better than that.

He had better be, or the Cleveland Cavaliers are in trouble.

Questions about Mitchell's health persisted after he and his teammates lost Game 2 of the Eastern Conference finals to the New York Knicks on Thursday night. They're down 2-0 in the best-of-seven series, and Mitchell twice this week has been asked if he's playing through any sort of injury.

"I'm great," he said. "Great. Great."

It's the same word Cleveland's leading scorer used after Game 1, when he scuffled down the stretch as part of a collapse from a 22-point lead to a crushing loss. In Game 2, Mitchell at least showed some signs of progress.

At halftime, coach Kenny Atkinson agreed with the idea that Mitchell was lacking the usual burst on his lift. After

scoring just seven points in the first half, Mitchell had 19 in the second to finish with 26.

"After halftime, I thought he was moving well," Atkinson said. "Donovan, he's not complaining about it to me. I did see him trying to work through it — probably some stiffness. But I asked him if he wanted to come out in the fourth quarter and he's like, 'I'm fine,' so I think he's fine."

The deficit is not fine and dandy for the Cavaliers, though it is one they are accustomed to overcoming. They trailed Detroit by this same margin last round before winning the series in seven games.

"This isn't our first time at it," Mitchell said. "This isn't our first time facing adversity. We've been through two Game 7s, so being down 2-0 is not the biggest challenge."

There are plenty of big challenges in the East finals, including how to slow down New York's one-two punch of Jalen Brunson and Josh Hart and not let either

take over. Then add in self-inflicted issues, like Cleveland getting to the free-throw line 32 times but missing 10 of those attempts in a game that got closer at times than the final 109-93 score indicates.

The Cavs made just 37% of their shots from the floor, too, and were 9 of 35 from 3-point range. That's not exactly a winning recipe in the playoffs or any time.

"It wasn't a great shooting night," Atkinson said. "At the end of the day, you've got to put the ball in the hole. Tonight, we didn't."

Game 3 on Saturday night will be Cleveland's seventh over a 13-day period, facing an opponent that swept through last round and has what Atkinson calls a "massive rest advantage." Center Jarrett Allen acknowledged fatigue may be playing a role but didn't want to use it as an excuse for falling behind in the series.

Mitchell is having none of that talk.

"We're not tired," Mitchell said. "We're not tired. We're ready to go for Game 3."

Canadiens pounce on Canes in Game 1

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — The Montreal Canadiens never flinched in winning two Game 7s on the road to reach the Eastern Conference Final. Opening on the road again was no different, even against a well-rested top seed that had yet to lose in the postseason.

The Canadiens pounced for four first-period goals on slow-starting Carolina — coming off the longest postseason break in more than a century — and beat the Hurricanes 6-2 on Thursday night.

“We knew we could come in here and try to get off to a good start to the series,” Canadiens captain Nick Suzuki said after a three-assist night. “We’re happy with the result, but they’re definitely going to be better than what they were tonight.”

Cole Caufield and Phillip Danault scored in the opening four

minutes, Alexandre Texier followed four minutes later, and Ivan Demidov finished a breakaway for a shocking 4-1 lead midway through the first period. That came against a team that hadn’t allowed more than two goals in an 8-0 playoff start.

Juraj Slafkovksy scored twice in the third period for Montreal, the second on a late empty-netter, while Jakub Dobes had 24 saves.

Game 2 is Saturday night.

The Hurricanes were the first team to sweep their first two playoff rounds since the NHL went to best-of-seven series in all four rounds in 1987. But that led to a lengthy break of 11 days, the longest rest for any team before starting the next playoff run since at least 1920, while waiting on the Canadiens to battle their way past Tampa Bay and Buffalo.

That led to the rest-versus-

rust discussion about the Hurricanes, along with how well the Canadiens would pivot from those to-the-limit wins.

And outside of Seth Jarvis beating Dobes just 33 seconds in, the Canadiens answered that question resoundingly in those opening minutes to extend Carolina’s misery in this round.

“I didn’t think we were very sharp, to put it bluntly,” Carolina coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “Our top guys had tough nights. That’s not going to work at this time of the year.”

Much of Carolina’s success comes from pressuring opponents in the offensive zone and minimizing chances going the other way. But Montreal effectively moved the puck out of danger against Carolina’s aggressive pressure early, setting up clean breakouts, open-ice space and multiple breakaway chances at Frederik Andersen.

Danault’s goal was a full-speed breakaway right up the middle off a feed from Alexandre Carrier, while Demidov went forehand-backhand-forehand to beat Andersen for the 4-1 lead with 8:28 left in the first.

Andersen was leading the postseason in goals-against average (1.12) and save percentage (.950), but finished with just 16 saves.

Eric Robinson also scored for Carolina, which is in the Eastern final for the third time in four years and fourth time in the current eight-season playoff run under Rod Brind’Amour. But the Hurricanes are now 1-13 in those games, including sweeps against Boston in 2019 and Florida in 2023.

Carolina’s loss meant the two Stanley Cup favorites both lost the opener of the conference finals. Colorado lost at home to Vegas on Wednesday night.

Koepka shoots 8-under 63, sits 1 behind Moore in Byron Nelson

Associated Press

McKINNEY, Texas — Scottie Scheffler won’t be the wire-to-wire winner of his hometown CJ Cup Byron Nelson again this year.

For now, the world’s top-ranked player is chasing a leaderboard that includes Brooks Koepka, the five-time major champion looking for his first victory since returning to the PGA Tour from LIV Golf.

Koepka shot an 8-under 63 on Thursday and trailed first-round leader Taylor Moore by one at the revamped TPC Craig Ranch, with Scheffler at 66 while playing with Koepka and Si Woo Kim, one of seven players at 64.

“I felt like I was getting lapped out there for a little bit,” said Scheffler, who led from the start of last year’s Nelson and won by eight shots at 31 under

while tying the tour’s 72-hole scoring record at 253. “So I was fortunate to make a couple birdies late in the round and keep myself in the tournament.”

Moore, whose only win in his first 128 tour starts came at the 2023 Valspar Championship, made a 14-foot birdie putt from the fringe on the par-5 ninth to finish the best round of his tour career.

The Texas native and Oklahoma resident leads Koepka and Jesper Svensson, who had a chance to join Moore atop the leaderboard but missed a 9-footer on the ninth.

Emiliano Grillo, Keith Mitchell, Stephan Jaeger, Michael Thorbjornsen, Tyler Duncan and Kensei Hirata were tied with Kim. Doug Ghim was at 65 with Mackenzie Hughes, Hank Lebioda, Austin Eckroat and Lanto Griffin.

NFL MVP Stafford agrees to extension with Rams

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Reigning NFL Most Valuable Player Matthew Stafford has agreed to a one-year contract extension through the 2027 season with the Los Angeles Rams.

The Rams announced the deal Thursday without immediately revealing its value. ESPN reported the 2027 deal is worth \$55 million with a potential to increase to \$60 million, a raise from his salary for the upcoming season.

The deal indicates that Stafford, 38, is at least strongly thinking about staying with the Rams past 2026. That’s notable because Stafford has professed a year-to-year mentality about his future ever since he led the Rams to a Super Bowl championship in February 2022, and he only confirmed he would re-

turn for the upcoming season while accepting his MVP trophy in February.

The Rams then surprised the league by drafting Alabama quarterback Ty Simpson with the 13th overall pick last month, throwing Stafford’s long-term future into momentary doubt — until head coach Sean McVay made it clear that Stafford is the Rams’ starting quarterback for as long as he decides to play.

Stafford is coming off one of the best seasons of his career in which he won his first MVP award, edging New England’s Drake Maye in the voting. Stafford passed for an NFL-best 4,707 yards and a career-high 46 touchdowns against just eight interceptions before he led the Rams to two road playoff victories and a spot in the NFC championship game.

Guardians top Tigers, win 6th straight

Associated Press

DETROIT — Patrick Bailey hit a solo home run, Joey Cantillo threw 5 $\frac{2}{3}$ shutout innings and the Cleveland Guardians extended their winning streak to six games with a 3-1 victory over the Detroit Tigers on Thursday.

Brayan Rocchio had three hits, including two doubles, and scored a run. Daniel Schneemann and Jose Ramirez drove in the other runs for the Central Division-leading Guardians, who completed a four-game series sweep.

Cantillo (4-1) limited the Tigers to three hits while striking out six. Hunter Gaddis got the last three outs for his first save.

Cleveland has won nine of its past 10 games, while the Tigers have lost six straight and 14 of their past 16.

Dillon Dingler hit his team-leading ninth homer for the Tigers. Starter Casey Mize (2-3) gave up two runs and four hits without a walk while striking out five in 6 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings.

Detroit loaded the bases in the first inning. Cantillo then settled in, allowing only a single and two walks before he departed.

Bailey led off the eighth against Burch Smith with his second homer this season. Dingler homered off Tim Herrin in the bottom of the inning.

Pirates 6, Cardinals 2: Brandon Lowe homered and Marcell Ozuna drove in two runs to lead Pittsburgh to a win at St. Louis.

Rookie Konnor Griffin extended his hitting streak to eight games with a double. He also scored a run and stole a base. Griffin went 6 for 13 in the series and improved to 13 for 33 during his streak.

Braxton Ashcraft (3-2) struck out nine in seven innings. He gave up one run on four hits and two walks.

The Pirates won their fourth consecutive road series against NL Central opponents.

Ozuna, a former Cardinal, singled with one out to score Spencer Horwitz and Griffin, extending the lead to 4-1 in the sixth.

Henry Davis hit a leadoff homer in the seventh and Bryan Reynolds drove in a run with a groundout, making it 6-1.

Lowe, who also singled, hit a 3-2 fastball that bounced off the top of the wall just inside the left-field foul pole in the first inning. It was the sixth inside-the-park homer in the big leagues this season. It was just the third one ever hit at Busch Stadium.

Dustin May (3-5) pitched 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ innings, allowing four runs on six hits and two walks while striking out seven.

Mets 2, Nationals 1: Bo Bichette hit a

two-run single, David Peterson earned his first victory as a starter this season, and New York won at Washington to earn a four-game series split.

New York avoided its first three-game skid since April 24-26 in winning for the seventh time in 10 games.

Washington (25-26) failed to move above .500 this deep into a season for the first time since it was 40-39 on July 1, 2021.

Peterson (3-4) escaped early trouble against the Nationals, who entered the game averaging a MLB-leading 5.58 runs. He escaped a bases-loaded threat in the first and worked out of a two-on jam in the second.

Peterson, making his first start since an April 29 loss to Washington, allowed one run and four hits in five innings while striking out three. The 30-year-old left-hander, 2-0 with a 2.25 ERA in a bulk relief role, lowered his ERA as a starter from 8.10 to 6.99.

Braves 9, Marlins 3: Michael Harris II hit a two-run homer and a solo shot, Mike Yastrzemski also went deep, and Atlanta beat host Miami.

Spencer Strider (2-0) had a season-high nine strikeouts in 6 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings as the Braves continued their strong start to the season, taking three of four at Miami for their 14th win in 16 series.

Three of the four hits Strider allowed were a solo homer to Owen Caissie and two homers to Kyle Stowers. He also walked two.

Ronald Acuña Jr. had two hits, including an RBI single that put the Braves ahead 5-2 in the fifth, before exiting in the sixth as a precaution because of left thumb pain. Eli White replaced him in right field.

Dominic Smith, who hit a three-run homer on Wednesday, singled and doubled. Ha-Seong Kim added a single, walk and steal.

Atlanta went up 2-0 in the first against Sandy Alcantara (3-3). Acuña hit a leadoff single and scored on Harris' 10th home run of the season, a 389-foot shot to right-center.

Harris homered three times in the series and had six hits. He added a 404-foot drive in the ninth.

Blue Jays 2, Yankees 0: George Springer homered, Vladimir Guerrero Jr. reached base three times and Toronto won at New York to split a four-game series.

Springer hit his second homer of the series and gave the Blue Jays a 2-0 lead in the seventh inning by sending a 2-2 slider from Camilo Doval into the left-field seats.

Toronto went with a bullpen game — highlighted by a career-best 4 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings

from Spencer Miles — and held the Yankees to three hits, the fifth time New York finished with three or fewer. Aaron Judge went 0 for 4, was 1 for 15 in the series and has not homered or driven in a run in 10 games since May 10 at Milwaukee.

Judge's streak without an RBI matches the worst of his career, done three times previously.

The Yankees lost for the ninth time in 13 games heading into Gerrit Cole's return from reconstructive elbow surgery in the opener of a three-game series against Tampa Bay. New York dropped 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ games behind the Rays in the AL East.

Diamondbacks 2, Rockies 1: Corbin Carroll lined a run-scoring single with two outs in the ninth inning and Arizona extended its winning streak to five games with a victory over visiting Colorado.

Arizona's Eduardo Rodriguez pitched seven scoreless innings after suffering his first loss of the season against the Rockies last weekend.

Colorado took advantage after he left, tying it at 1 in the eighth when Juan Morrillo hit Tyler Freeman with the bases loaded.

Paul Sewald (1-4) worked a perfect ninth and Juan Mejia (0-4) walked two in the bottom half.

Carroll lined a single to right on a 2-2 count and Gabriel Moreno beat the throw to the plate for Arizona's second walk-off win in three games. Ketel Marte hit a winning two-run homer in the Diamondbacks' 5-3 victory over San Francisco on Tuesday.

Carroll also drove in a run on a fielder's choice in the sixth inning for Arizona's first five-game winning streak since June 9-14, 2025.

Athletics 3, Angels 2 (10): Zack Gelof's fielder's choice groundout in the 10th inning drove in Nick Kurtz to give the Athletics a victory over host Los Angeles.

With the bases loaded and one out, Gelof hit a grounder off Ryan Zeferjahn (2-2) to shortstop Zach Neto, who got the force at second. However, second baseman Adam Frazier had trouble getting the ball out of his glove before the throw to first. Gelof was called out originally but the A's won a challenge and Kurtz scored from third.

In the bottom of the 10th, Mark Leiter Jr. retired the Angels to earn his fourth save. A's reliever Joel Kuhnel (1-1) pitched a scoreless ninth inning. The Angels have lost 11 of their last 13 games.

Nolan Schanuel hit a two-run homer in the first to give the Angels a 2-0 lead.