

US, allies OK energy grid aid for Ukraine

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. and its European allies agreed Tuesday to hurry more supplies into Ukraine to help rebuild an energy system that has been ravaged by Russia's bombardment of civilian infrastructure.

"We need to support Ukraine because what we see is President (Vladimir) Putin trying to use winter as a weapon of war, which is inflicting a lot of suffering on the Ukrainian people," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Tuesday at the start of high-level talks in Bucharest, Romania.

Stoltenberg, who is leading the meeting of 30 NATO states, pointed to nighttime satellite imagery of a blacked-out Ukraine to highlight the enormity of the challenge at hand.

"It is a huge task to rebuild all of this," he said.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony

Blinken, who is leading the American delegation at the two-day meeting of NATO foreign ministers, also is expected to announce further aid to help Ukraine rebuild its energy grid.

In addition, allies made new pledges in Bucharest for sending more air defense systems and other weaponry to Ukraine.

The meeting in Romania comes 14 years after NATO members during a 2008 summit in Bucharest declared that Ukraine will one day become a member of the security pact. The assertion, pushed at the time by President George W. Bush despite opposition from Germany and France, was made with no plan for Ukraine's entry.

Stoltenberg reaffirmed NATO's support for Ukraine and its commitment to an "open door" policy, but offered no indication that membership for Kyiv is imminent.

"We stated that Ukraine will

become a member," Stoltenberg said. "I expect allies to reiterate that position. However, the main focus now is supporting Ukraine. We are in the midst of a war."

For the past decade, NATO has made a point of stating it remains committed to the idea of Ukraine membership while also taking no steps to make it a reality. Unmentioned by Stoltenberg is that opposition to Ukraine's membership by key members like Germany and France make it a near political impossibility for the country to join, given that membership requires unanimous approval by allies.

In Bucharest, alliance member officials also met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, who came to Romania to press for even more military aid than what NATO countries have thus far been prepared to offer.

In an interview with Politico on the eve of the NATO talks, Kuleba said the alliance must ramp up

weapons production to ensure sufficient stocks for long-term support.

The depletion of munitions from U.S. and other allied countries' stockpiles has emerged as an urgent concern.

"While we are fighting the battles of today, we have to think how we will be fighting the battles of tomorrow," Kuleba told Politico.

Specifically, Kuleba said he would tell allies that his country needs air defenses, tanks and production lines. So far, the U.S. and other allies have balked at sending advanced battle tanks into Ukraine, though some Western aid has been used to refurbish Soviet-era tanks.

Some members said they will press for bigger contributions.

"My message to fellow foreign ministers at today's NATO meeting is simple: Keep calm and give tanks," Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said in a statement Tuesday.

Chancellorsville sails past disputed South China Sea islands

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy guided-missile cruiser steamed past a disputed island chain in the South China Sea on Tuesday, one of the service's regular freedom-of-navigation operations and the first since July.

The USS Chancellorsville cruised through the Spratlys, a group of about 100 islands between Vietnam and the Philippines, to "assert navigational rights and freedoms" in the region, the U.S. 7th Fleet said in a Tuesday news release. The ship later left the islands' vicinity and continued regular operations in the South China Sea.

China's Southern Command on Tuesday condemned the oper-

ation as "ironclad evidence" of the United States' attempt to militarize the South China Sea, according to a statement from its spokesman, air force Col. Tian Junli.

The Spratlys are claimed in full by China, Taiwan and Vietnam, and the Chancellorsville's presence challenged "unlawful" restrictions imposed by the three countries, including the requirement of permission or advance notice for "innocent passage" through the area, according to the 7th Fleet. All vessels, including warships, have the right to innocent passage through territorial seas under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea.

"Unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China

Sea pose a serious threat to the freedom of the seas, including the freedoms of navigation and overflight, free trade, and unimpeded commerce, and freedom of economic opportunity for South China Sea littoral nations," 7th Fleet wrote in its release.

The chain has also been militarized, with about 45 islands occupied by small military outposts from the three countries, along with Malaysia and the Philippines, which also claim portions of the archipelago, according to the CIA World Factbook website.

Tian said Chinese naval and air forces monitored, tracked and warned off the Chancellorsville.

"China has indisputable sovereignty over the South China Sea islands and their adjacent wa-

ters," Tian said Tuesday, according to the Southern Theater Command's official Weibo social media account. "Theater troops are always on high alert to resolutely safeguard national sovereignty and security as well as peace and stability in the South China Sea."

The 7th Fleet quickly responded to Beijing's accusations in an updated statement Tuesday afternoon defending the mission as being consistent with international law.

The Chancellorsville's operations were not affected by any interactions with foreign warships or aircraft, 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. j.g. Luta Bakic told Stars and Stripes by email Tuesday.

Russian encounter near US ship 'unprofessional'

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The George H.W. Bush Carrier Strike Group is encountering Russian aircraft and ships as it supports NATO operations in southern Europe, and in one recent case the Russian force behaved unprofessionally, Navy officials said Tuesday.

Officers aboard the USS George H.W. Bush wouldn't say exactly what happened or identify the Russian force involved in the encounter in the Mediterranean Sea.

Russian military activity in the Mediterranean and Black seas has increased in recent years, U.S. Navy leaders said repeatedly before Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February.

About a month ago, Navy pilots encountered a long-range Russian patrol in international airspace over the Mediterranean, said Rear Adm. Dennis Velez, commander of Carrier Strike Group 10.

"We've had multiple [encounters]; one of them was not what I would consider a pro-

fessional encounter at sea," Velez told Stars and Stripes aboard the USS George H.W. Bush on Tuesday. The aircraft carrier was moored in the Bay of Naples for a port call.

Velez and Capt. David-Tavis Pollard, commanding officer of the Bush, added that most Russian encounters had been safe and professional.

"We recognize that we're flying in international airspace and we're [transiting] in international waters, so all of the nations have every right to patrol and to sail," Pollard said.

The Bush strike group's encounters follow a report of unsafe and unprofessional behavior by two Russian fighter jets in the Baltic Sea on Nov. 17.

Those jets approached NATO ships at an altitude of about 300 feet and 80 yards distance, ignoring query communications, NATO said in a statement the next day.

The interaction increased the risk of a miscalculation or mistake, NATO said.

DOD says China's forces, nuke cache gaining strength

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — China's armed forces are gaining strength and the country is likely speeding up expansion of its nuclear stockpile as part of an effort to expand its influence and control in the Indo-Pacific region, U.S. defense officials concluded in the Pentagon's annual assessment of Beijing's military power.

The Defense Department outlined those concerns and others for Congress in its China Military Report. It details top concerns about China's military, including increased capabilities, based on the most recent data and intelligence from 2021 and part of 2022.

China is basing much of its activity on meeting three major milestone dates — the "mechanization, informatization and intelligentization" of its military by 2027, complete modernization of its national defense and armed forces by 2035, and full "national rejuvenation" by the 100th anniversary of its communist government in 2049, the nearly 200-page report concludes.

The "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" is the name of a grand vision by President Xi Jinping to increase Beijing's global reach and influence and restore the national greatness of early Chinese dynasties. It evokes memories of China as "the Middle Kingdom" that demands "tribute from the rest of the world," according to the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank based in New York. Xi has been promoting the great rejuvenation for about a decade.

Modernizing the People's Liberation Army, which is China's main military force, means expanding nuclear capabilities. Beijing has about 400 operational nuclear weapons, and if it meets the modernization milestone in 2035, that number will rise to 1,500, according to the Pentagon.

The 2027 milestone aims for technological and modernization advances in China's armed forces that will give Beijing a "more credible military tool" to wield as it pursues Taiwan unification, according to U.S. defense officials in the report.

The main findings in this year's report, officials said, are that Beijing has become "increasingly clear" with its intentions and is determined to "amass and expand its national power."

Submariner now first female executive officer of submarine

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

One of the Navy's first women to qualify for submarine service became the first female executive officer aboard a U.S. submarine this month.

Lt. Cmdr. Amber Cowan, of Colorado Springs, Colo., stepped into her new role Nov. 11 as second-in-command of the Gold Crew aboard the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine USS Kentucky, according to a Nov. 23 news release from Submarine Force Pacific Fleet.

Cowan's appointment comes more than a decade after then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2010 lifted the Navy's ban on women serving aboard submarines.

Cowan belongs to the first generation of U.S. naval officers to serve aboard subma-

lines starting in 2011. The following year, she and two other women became the first to earn their "dolphins," the submarine warfare insignia, according to the U.S. Naval Undersea Museum.

Cowan, then a junior-grade lieutenant aboard the Ohio-class USS Maine, shared the honor with Lt. j.g. Jennifer Noonan, also of the Maine, and Lt. j.g. Marquette Leveque, of the USS Wyoming.

Cowan served in a variety of roles aboard the Maine, according to the Nov. 23 release.

She later served as the engineering officer aboard the Virginia-class fast-attack submarine USS Texas. Cowan then went to Submarine Forces Pacific Fleet as the force radiological controls officer before being selected as executive officer for the Kentucky.

New GOP leaders prepare blitz of investigations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans are promising aggressive oversight of the Biden administration once they assume the majority next year, with a particular focus on the business dealings of presidential son Hunter Biden, illegal immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border and the origins of COVID-19.

Republicans won't have enough votes to advance key legislative priorities if there is no Democratic buy-in, but their oversight of government agencies could put Democrats on the defensive and dampen support for the Biden administration going into the 2024 presidential elections.

Some of the lawmakers expected to lead those investigations once House Republicans select their new committee chairs:

Judiciary's big role

Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, is expected to serve as the next chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. Jordan helped form and then lead the ultra-conservative House Freedom Caucus and voted on Jan. 6, 2021, to object to counting Pennsylvania's electoral vote. President Donald Trump thought so highly of Jordan that he presented the congressman with the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The Judiciary Committee handles over-

sight of the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security and issues such as crime, immigration and protection of civil liberties. It's typically one of the most partisan committees on Capitol Hill, yet Jordan's combative style stands out even there. The committee would be the place where any effort would begin to impeach a member of the Biden administration, as some Republicans have been proposing for Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Jordan's inquiries to the administration in recent months make clear the committee will investigate the FBI's execution of a search warrant at Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence. He has also advocated for a wide-ranging look at the Biden administration's immigration policies and the origins of COVID-19.

Oversight's long list

Rep. James Comer, R-Ky., is expected to serve as the next chairman of the House Oversight and Reform Committee and has made clear that investigating President Joe Biden's son Hunter will be one of his top priorities. The Republicans have said their investigation of Hunter Biden's business dealings is to "determine whether these activities compromise U.S. national security and President Biden's ability to lead with impartiality."

Comer has also been laying the ground-

work for investigating the situation on the U.S.-Mexico border. He sent a letter to Mayorkas seeking an array of documents and communications pertaining to the administration's border policy.

"We cannot endure another year of the Biden Administration's failed border policies," the letter said.

Afghanistan in focus

Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, is expected to serve as the next chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, which will be investigating the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. McCaul reiterated a request in mid-October for various documents and directed the State Department to preserve all records related to the chaotic withdrawal, which included the loss of 13 U.S. service members killed during a suicide bombing attack.

Energy and taxes

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., is expected to serve as the next chair of the Energy and Commerce Committee, which has the broadest jurisdiction of any authorizing committee in Congress, from health care to environmental protection to national energy policy. Republicans on the committee have already spent months investigating the origins of COVID-19 and are expected to continue that work in the next Congress.

Biden pleading with Congress to intervene, head off railroad strike

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — President Joe Biden on Monday asked Congress to intervene and block a railroad strike before next month's deadline in the stalled contract talks, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said lawmakers would take up legislation this week to impose the deal that unions agreed to in September.

"Let me be clear: a rail shutdown would devastate our economy," Biden said in a statement. "Without freight rail, many U.S. industries would shut down."

In a statement, Pelosi said: "We are reluctant to bypass the standard ratification process for the Tentative Agreement — but we must act to prevent a catastrophic nationwide rail strike, which would grind our economy to a halt."

Pelosi said the House would not change

the terms of the September agreement, which would challenge the Senate to approve the House bill without changes.

The September agreement that Biden and Pelosi are calling for is a slight improvement over what the board of arbitrators recommended in the summer. The September agreement added three unpaid days off a year for engineers and conductors to tend to medical appointments as long as they scheduled them at least 30 days in advance. The railroads also promised in September not to penalize workers who are hospitalized and to negotiate further with the unions after the contract is approved about improving regular scheduling of days off.

Hundreds of business groups had been urging Congress and the president to step into the deadlocked contract talk and prevent a strike.

Pence criticizes Trump for dinner

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A growing number of Republicans, including former Vice President Mike Pence, criticized Donald Trump on Monday for dining with a Holocaust-denying white nationalist and rapper Kanye West days after launching his third campaign for the White House.

Pence called on Trump to apologize and said the former president had "demonstrated profoundly poor judgment" when he met last week at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida with West as well as Nick Fuentes, a far-right activist with a long history of espousing antisemitic and white nationalist views.

Trump has said he didn't know who Fuentes was before the meeting. But he has refused to acknowledge or denounce the positions of either Fuentes or West, who made his own antisemitic comments in recent weeks.

Students sent home as China curbs protests

Associated Press

BEIJING — Chinese universities sent students home and police fanned out in Beijing and Shanghai to prevent more protests Tuesday after crowds angered by severe anti-virus restrictions called for leader Xi Jinping to resign in the biggest show of public dissent in decades.

Authorities have eased some controls after demonstrations in at least eight mainland cities and Hong Kong — but maintained they would stick to a “zero-COVID” strategy that has confined millions of people to their homes for months at a time. Security forces have detained an unknown number of

people and stepped up surveillance.

With police out in force, there was no word of protests Tuesday in Beijing, Shanghai or other major mainland cities that saw crowds rally over the weekend. Those were the most widespread protests since the army crushed the 1989 student-led Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement.

In Hong Kong, about a dozen people, mostly from the mainland, protested at a university.

Beijing’s Tsinghua University, where students rallied over the weekend, and other schools in the capital and the southern province of Guangdong sent students home. The schools said

they were being protected from COVID-19, but dispersing them to far-flung hometowns also reduces the likelihood of more demonstrations. Chinese leaders are wary of universities, which have been hotbeds of activism including the Tiananmen protests.

On Sunday, Tsinghua students were told they could go home early for the semester. The school, which is Xi’s alma mater, arranged buses to take them to the train station or airport.

Nine student dorms at Tsinghua were closed Monday after some students tested positive for COVID-19, according to one who noted the closure would

make it hard for crowds to gather. The student gave only his surname, Chen, for fear of retribution from authorities.

Beijing Forestry University also said it would arrange for students to return home. It said its faculty and students all tested negative for the virus.

Universities said classes and final exams would be conducted online.

Authorities hope to “defuse the situation” by clearing out campuses, said Dali Yang, an expert on Chinese politics at the University of Chicago.

Depending on how tough a position the government takes, groups might take turns protesting, he said.

Senate set to vote on bill to protect same-sex marriage

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate was set to vote Tuesday on legislation to protect same-sex and interracial marriages, putting Congress one step closer to passing the landmark bill and ensuring that such unions are enshrined in federal law.

Senate Democrats were moving quickly, while the party still held the majority in both chambers of Congress, to pass the bill requiring that such unions are legally recognized nationwide. The House would still have to vote on the legislation and send it to President Joe Biden.

The bill has gained steady momentum since the Supreme Court’s June decision that overturned the federal right to an abortion, and comments from Justice Clarence Thomas at the time that suggested same-sex marriage could also come under threat. Bipartisan Senate negotiations kick-started this summer after 47 Republicans unexpectedly voted for a House bill and gave supporters new optimism.

The legislation would not codify the Supreme Court’s 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision that legalized gay marriage nationwide or force any state to allow same-sex couples to marry. But it would require states to recognize all marriages that were legal where they were performed, and protect current same-sex unions.

It would also protect interracial marriages by requiring states to recognize legal marriages regardless of “sex, race, ethnicity or national origin.”

“The rights of all married couples will never truly be safe without the proper protections under federal law, and that’s why the Respect for Marriage Act is necessary,” Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Monday.

Passage of the legislation would be a major victory for Democrats as they usher out their two years of consolidated power in Washington, and a massive win for advocates who have been pushing for decades for federal legislation legalizing same-sex marriages.

Hawaii officials: Plan now in case lava nears towns

Associated Press

KAILUA-KONA, Hawaii — Waves of orange, glowing lava and smoky ash belched and sputtered Monday from the world’s largest active volcano in its first eruption in 38 years, and officials told people living on Hawaii’s Big Island to be ready in the event of a worst-case scenario.

The eruption of Mauna Loa wasn’t immediately endangering towns, but the U.S. Geological Survey warned the roughly 200,000 people on the Big Island that an eruption “can be very dynamic, and the location and advance of lava flows can change rapidly.”

Officials told residents to be ready to evacuate if lava flows start heading toward populated areas.

The eruption began late Sunday night following a series of fairly large earthquakes, said Ken Hon, scientist-in-charge at the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory.

The areas where lava was

emerging — the volcano’s summit crater and vents along the volcano’s northeast flank — are both far from homes and communities.

Officials urged the public to stay away from them, given the dangers posed by lava, which is shooting 100 to 200 feet into the air out of three separate fissures roughly estimated to be 1 to 2 miles long.

Volcanic gases wafting out of the vents, primarily sulfur dioxide, are also harmful.

Air quality on the Big Island is generally good right now but officials are monitoring it carefully, said Dr. Libby Char, the director of the state Department of Health.

Hon said air quality could deteriorate while the eruption lasts, which scientists expect will be about one or two weeks if the volcano follows historical patterns.

Scientists hope the flow will parallel the 1984 eruption, where the lava was more viscous and slowed down.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police arrest 2 after violent home invasions

CA EL MONTE — Two suspects were arrested Sunday after allegedly breaking into three homes in a Los Angeles County neighborhood then tying up and striking some people inside, according to the El Monte Police Department.

Three people, all from the same home, were hospitalized and one was in critical condition, said Lt. Pete Rasic with the department.

Police received a call just after 1 a.m. Sunday about a home burglary in progress. When they arrived, they saw two people running from the location. Police set up a large perimeter and eventually caught two suspects. One is a 17-year-old juvenile and the other a 24-year-old male, Rasic said.

Based on witness and victim statements, Rasic said the police believe up to two additional suspects may be at large.

Car flips into marsh, trapping 3; driver killed

NJ TOMS RIVER — A vehicle flipped over into a New Jersey marsh over the weekend, trapping three occupants and killing the driver as the other two were able to reach safety, authorities said.

Toms River police said officers and emergency medical personnel were dispatched just before 2:30 a.m. Saturday to the scene on South Shore Drive and found the vehicle upside-down in the marsh “with the occupants trapped inside.”

Police said the two passengers were unhurt and freed themselves, but 28-year-old Paolo

Helfers-Lariva, of Toms River, “was trapped and submerged in the water.” He was eventually freed and taken to Community Medical Center, where he was later pronounced dead.

Police said the initial investigation indicated the vehicle was heading south at a high speed when it lost control and left the road, striking a pole before overturning in the marsh. The accident remains under investigation.

Sergeant who aided in 2017 birth helps another

NY SHIRLEY — A group of police officers who helped deliver a baby at a Long Island home over the weekend included a sergeant who helped another newborn take his first breath five years ago.

This time, Suffolk County Sgt. Jon-Erik Negron joined officers Conor Diemer, Jadin Rodriguez and Zachary Vormittag after a woman went into labor at her Shirley home on Saturday.

The woman gave birth to a boy about 15 minutes after calling 911, police said.

An ambulance arrived soon after the birth, and the baby and mother were taken to a hospital in good health.

In August 2017, Negron responded when another baby arrived unexpectedly at a Mount Sinai home. After a complication, the baby wasn’t breathing when Negron arrived. He sucked fluid out of the infant’s airway with a turkey baster or the like from the parents’ kitchen, and the boy started breathing.

The grateful parents asked Negron to be the infant’s godfather, and he accepted. The boy’s

father, Mike Pappalardo, told Newsday that the sergeant celebrates birthdays and holidays with the family.

Fire suspect also faces domestic battery charge

NV RENO — Washoe County sheriff’s deputies have arrested a 44-year-old suspect in a pair of arson fires in the Reno area this summer, including one that destroyed a home off the Mount Rose Highway.

Matthew Kimmens was being held Sunday at the Washoe County Jail on a dozen criminal counts. His bail was set at \$310,000, according to jail records.

Kimmens is accused of starting two separate fires Aug. 14 on Joy Lake Road. One home was destroyed. Three neighboring homes suffered significant property damage, authorities said.

In addition to numerous counts of arson and destruction of property, Kimmens faces two domestic battery charges. He was arrested Nov. 23.

State high court revokes ex-judge’s law license

WI MILWAUKEE — The Wisconsin Supreme Court has revoked a law license from a former Milwaukee County juvenile court judge who had pleaded guilty to federal charges of transmitting child pornography.

The state Supreme Court ruled Friday that the seriousness of Brett Blomme’s misconduct while a judge merited the revocation of his law license, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported. Blomme’s license was al-

ready suspended, but he had filed a “petition for the consensual revocation” of his license.

Blomme is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence. He pleaded guilty to two federal counts of distributing child pornography in September.

According to a criminal complaint, the state Department of Justice began investigating Blomme in February after receiving a tip from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that he had uploaded child pornography through the Kik messaging application 27 times in October and November 2020.

Firefighter saves driver while outside of state

CT BROOKFIELD — A suburban New York firefighter said his instinct and training kicked in when he spotted a burning car on a Connecticut roadside this weekend and went on to rescue the injured driver.

Nicholas Perri Jr. was off-duty, driving home from work, and didn’t have firefighting gear when he saw the blazing vehicle on the side of Route 7 near Brookfield early Saturday morning. But he pulled over, ran to the fire and “did the best I could do,” he told NBC Connecticut.

He said he broke the front passenger-side window and was able to pull the driver through it after struggling a bit to free one of her legs, which was mangled.

Brookfield volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel arrived to find Perri guiding the driver to them. She was taken to a hospital.

— From wire reports

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Snell's late TD puts Steelers over Colts

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Benny Snell Jr. kept waiting for his first carry of the season.

When he finally got the chance, in Week 12 during prime time, Snell showed everyone what he could do.

He ran for 62 yards, scored the go-ahead touchdown with 9:55 left and then watched as his Pittsburgh Steelers teammates fended off a last-minute comeback bid to beat the Indianapolis Colts 24-17 on Monday night.

"We go to any guy wearing a helmet," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said. "He was on the punt team coming in, and sometimes you get battlefield promoted."

The Steelers (4-7) didn't have much of a choice after Najee Harris limped off the field in the first half. Harris was ruled out with an abdominal injury, and Snell took over.

He carried 12 times, produced his highest rushing total

since an 84-yard game on Dec. 21, 2020, and with the Steelers trailing 17-16 and plenty of Terrible Towels waving on the road on third-and-goal, Snell found an open lane to the end zone. Kenny Pickett threw to George Pickens for the two-point conversion to make it 24-17.

Pittsburgh's eighth straight win in this lopsided series allowed the Steelers to match San Francisco for the most Monday night victories in league history (52). The 49ers had edged in front last week when they beat Arizona in Mexico City.

Matt Ryan drove the Colts (4-7-1) into position to score, but Indy let a minute run off the clock in a span of three plays in Steelers territory, finally using its first timeout on fourth down with 30 seconds remaining. Ryan then threw incomplete to Parris Campbell on fourth-and-3 from the Steelers 26 and Indy fell to 1-2 under interim coach Jeff Saturday.

"I thought we had plenty of time," said Saturday, who never coached at the pro or college level before owner Jim Irsay hired him to replace Frank Reich. "We had plenty of timeouts, so I wasn't too concerned. This wasn't a press for time, we just didn't make enough plays."

It was the Colts' first home Monday night game since September 2015, and the first half was a complete dud.

Pittsburgh drove into Indy territory on all five possessions and produced three field goals and Harris' 6-yard TD run to take a 16-3 lead. Colts players jogged to the locker room to a chorus of boos.

But when rookie Dallis Flowers returned the opening kickoff of the second half 90 yards, the atmosphere changed.

Four plays later, Jonathan Taylor scored on a 2-yard run to cut the deficit to 16-10. The Colts drove to the Steelers 1-yard line on their next possession, but

Ryan and Taylor botched a handoff and Pittsburgh recovered.

Indy then forced a three-and-out and Ryan threw a 6-yard TD pass to Michael Pittman to give the Colts a 17-16 lead late in the third quarter.

It didn't last long. Snell, who played in college at nearby Kentucky, answered with the short TD run.

"He has an edge, he runs angry," said Pickett, Pittsburgh's rookie QB who finished 20-for-28 for 174 yards and no turnovers. "I love the juice he brings. He's a detailed guy who does his job very well."

Tomlin said he was uncertain about Harris' diagnosis. Harris had 10 carries for 35 yards before departing.

Ryan threw for 199 yards with a touchdown and an interception after going 5-for-13 with 36 yards and compiling a 14.6 rating in the first half. Taylor ran 20 times for 86 yards and scored in his third straight game.

Browns' Watson back from ban, clear to start in Houston

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Deshaun Watson won't have a playbook for everything that lies ahead.

The practices, meetings, film work, making handoffs, throwing passes for the Browns, all of that will be easy, second nature. The rest: protesters, heightened scrutiny and pointed questions, will be unscripted.

There's no blueprint for the once-revered quarterback now reviled in some circles.

Cleveland's controversial, \$230 million QB was officially reinstated Monday by the NFL after serving his 11-game suspension for sexual misconduct allegations made by more than two dozen women.

Watson's return wasn't accompanied by any fanfare, simply a posting on the league's personnel notice.

He's now a starter again and poised to make his regular-season debut for the Browns on Sunday, coincidentally, in Houston, where he began his pro career and quickly rose to stardom before off-field decisions knocked him off course.

The 27-year-old quarterback isn't starting over, but anew.

He's coming back to the Browns (4-7), who are clinging to the hope that he can lead them to the playoffs despite his long layoff.

Browns coach Kevin Stefanski believes Watson, who returned to practice two weeks ago, is ready for what will be his first game in 700 days — and whatever's next.

"I have confidence in Deshaun based on his preparation and, really, the focus is on just him doing his job," Stefanski said a day after the Browns rallied for a 23-17 overtime win against Tampa Bay. "We're still gonna be all about the team effort, still offense, defense and special teams. So this is never, ever gonna be about one person."

"But as it relates to Deshaun, I believe in his preparation, I believe that he worked really hard on a bunch of things to be ready to go."

In August, Watson ended months of legal entanglements by agreeing to the suspension, a \$5 million fine and to undergo professional counseling and treatment after an

independent arbitrator ruled he violated the league's personal conduct policy.

Watson was accused of being sexually inappropriate with the women during massage therapy sessions. The three-time Pro Bowler has long maintained he didn't harass or assault any of the women, some of whom said he forced them to have sex.

Watson wasn't indicted on criminal charges by two grand juries and reached financial settlements in 23 of 24 civil lawsuits.

While his return to Houston could be hostile, Stefanski said the Browns didn't consider delaying Watson's return. They didn't send three first-round draft picks to the Texans for him to watch.

Their wait is over. It's time for Watson to be a franchise quarterback.

"Deshaun is gonna come in and be Deshaun," wide receiver Amari Cooper said Sunday. "We've seen that greatness on display a multitude of times. So can't wait for him to get back, can't wait to practice with him. Can't wait to catch some balls from him."

Devils come from 2 down, top Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jack Hughes and Michael LeBlond scored in the second period, Vitek Vanecek stopped 35 shots and the New Jersey Devils rallied from an early two-goal deficit to beat the New York Rangers 5-3 on Monday night.

Yegor Sharangovich had two goals and Tomas Tatar also scored to help the first-place Devils win their third straight since having their 13-game winning streak snapped last week. New Jersey has won 10 road games in a row and has only one loss since starting the season 3-3-0.

Vanecek improved to 11-2-0 as scattered chants of “Let’s Go Devils” were heard at Madison Square Garden.

Artemi Panarin, Mika Zibanejad and Vincent Trocheck scored and Chris Kreider had two assists for the Rangers, who fell to 4-5-3 at home. Igor Shesterkin made 33 saves.

Oilers 4, Panthers 3 (OT): Evan Bouchard scored the tying goal with 5 seconds remaining in the third period and Leon Draisaitl got the winner 22 seconds into overtime as host Edmonton rallied past Florida.

Bouchard took a desperate shot from the slot and beat Panthers goalie Spencer Knight for his third of the season — all in the last two games. Early in the extra period,

Draisaitl took a pass from Connor McDavid and scored his 13th. The 27-second gap marked the shortest between a team scoring a regulation goal and an OT goal in NHL history.

Matthew Tkachuk, Anton Lundell and Brandon Montour scored for the Panthers, who have lost five of six. Knight finished with 36 saves.

Maple Leafs 4, Red Wings 2: Auston Matthews and William Nylander scored 51 seconds apart in the first period, Mitch Marner extended his point streak to 17 games and visiting Toronto beat Detroit.

Rasmus Sandin also scored and Matt Murray made 38 saves for the Maple Leafs, who have won a season-high four straight and earned a point in nine consecutive games.

Moritz Seider and Adam Erne scored for the Red Wings, who had won a season-best four in a row. Ville Husso was pulled after giving up four goals on 13 shots.

Golden Knights 3, Blue Jackets 2 (SO): Paul Cotter scored in his first shootout attempt and visiting Vegas beat Columbus to stop a two-game skid.

The shootout went four sudden-death rounds after each team scored once — Gustav Nyqvist for Columbus and Jonathan Marchessault for Vegas — in the first three rounds. Cotter, a second-year forward play-

ing in his 21st career game, was the seventh player to shoot for the Golden Knights and he beat goaltender Daniil Tarasov to end it.

William Karlsson and William Carrier scored in regulation for Pacific Division-leading Vegas, and Logan Thompson stopped 26 shots.

Stars 4, Blues 1: Scott Wedgewood made 23 saves and Wyatt Johnston broke a scoreless tie with a second-period goal to lead visiting Dallas over St. Louis.

Jason Robertson, Ty Dellandrea and Mi-ro Heiskanen also scored for the Stars, who have at least one point in eight of their last nine games.

Brandon Saad scored for the Blues, who have lost three of four.

Jamie Benn had two assists for the Stars, who lead the Central Division with 30 points.

Lightning 6, Sabres 5 (OT): Steven Stamkos scored his second goal of the game 2:44 into overtime to give visiting Tampa Bay a win over Buffalo.

Brayden Point also had two goals, Brandon Hagel had a goal and an assist, and Corey Perry scored for the Lightning, who rallied from two goals down in the third period. Nikita Kucherov and Mikhail Sergachev each had three assists, and Stamkos added one for a three-point night.

Brian Elliott made 32 saves to get the win.

In another must-win game, Senegal knocks off Ecuador

Associated Press

AL RAYYAN, Qatar — Senegal can now put the disappointment of 2018 to rest.

Kalidou Koulibaly led his team into the last 16 of the World Cup on Tuesday by volleying home the winning goal in a 2-1 victory over Ecuador, four years after the African champions were eliminated from the group stage because of the amount of yellow cards they received.

The Senegal captain’s right-footed shot flashed past Ecuador goalkeeper Hernan Galindez in the 70th minute. Koulibaly sprinted toward the corner flag and slid on his knees to celebrate.

The result erased lingering memories from four years ago, when Senegal could only draw its last group game in Russia and missed the knockout stage because it had collected more yellow cards than Japan, which advanced instead.

In another must-win match in Qatar, Senegal took the lead after a first-half penalty

from Ismaila Sarr. Moises Caicedo then scored for Ecuador to make it 1-1 in the 67th.

Ecuador would have advanced from Group A with a draw and Senegal would have been eliminated.

The Netherlands beat Qatar 2-0 in the other match to win the group. Senegal finished second while Ecuador and Qatar were eliminated.

Senegal last advanced from the group stage at the 2002 World Cup, when the team reached the quarterfinals in its tournament debut and its only other appearance at the event.

Sarr was knocked over by a clumsy challenge from Ecuador defender Piero Hincapié for the penalty just before halftime. He side-footed his shot into the bottom right corner in the 44th minute and almost the entire Senegal bench and coaching staff ran to celebrate with him near the corner flag.

Netherlands 2, Qatar 0: The Netherlands finished off the worst showing by any World

Cup host nation by shutting out Qatar.

The Dutch advanced to the round of 16 by winning Group A while the Qataris, who were already eliminated, became the first host to lose all three of its group matches at soccer’s biggest event.

Cody Gakpo put the Netherlands ahead midway through the first half with his third goal in as many matches and Frenkie de Jong doubled the advantage five minutes into the second half.

The Netherlands is a three-time runner-up at the World Cup, and also finished third in 2014, while Qatar was making its tournament debut.

The Dutch failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup.

The Netherlands finished with seven points at the top of the group. Senegal, which beat Ecuador 2-1 in the other group game, advanced in second place with six points. Ecuador was eliminated with four points and Qatar ended with zero.

Porzingis leads Wizards past T-Wolves

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Kristaps Porzingis scored a career-high 41 points, including 29 in the first half, and the Washington Wizards beat Minnesota 142-127 on Monday night after Timberwolves star Karl-Anthony-Towns was helped off the court in the third quarter with a right leg injury.

Towns grabbed at his leg and went down near midcourt. He was helped off without putting weight on the leg, and the team announced that he had a right calf strain.

All six of Porzingis' three-pointers came in the first half. Washington shot 57% from the field for the game.

The Wizards led 77-58 at halftime, and Porzingis was well on his way to surpassing his previous career high of 40 points.

"I have to admit, I feel good," Porzingis said. "I thought that I was not going to get it because we were going to blow them out by 30 and then not maybe play the fourth. I was thinking about that scenario."

Kyle Kuzma scored 23 points for the Wizards and Bradley Beal added 22.

Anthony Edwards led the Timberwolves with 29.

Nets 109, Magic 102: Kevin Durant scored a season-high 45 points and host Brooklyn beat Orlando to get back to .500.

Kyrie Irving added 20 points and Nic Claxton had 17 points and 13 rebounds for the Nets

(11-11), who had to play the second half without Ben Simmons after he was bothered by knee soreness.

Pacers 116, Lakers 115: Rookie Andrew Nembhard hit a three-pointer at the buzzer, and visiting Indiana rallied from a 17-point deficit in the fourth quarter for a stunning victory over Los Angeles.

Tyrese Haliburton scored 24 points and hit a tying layup with 39 seconds left for the Pacers.

76ers 104, Hawks 101: Joel Embiid sank the go-ahead 14-footer with 18.6 seconds left and scored 30 points in his return from a sprained left foot as host Philadelphia beat Atlanta.

Tobias Harris scored 24 points and Shake Milton had 21 for the Sixers.

Celtics 140, Hornets 105: Jayson Tatum scored 35 points, Marcus Smart had 22 points and a career-high 15 assists, and host Boston cruised past Charlotte.

Malcolm Brogdon had 21 points, six assists and five rebounds for Boston.

Suns 122, Kings 117: Devin Booker had 44 points, eight rebounds and six steals, and visiting Phoenix extended its winning streak to five.

Deandre Ayton added 17 points and 12 rebounds for his ninth double-double of the season for Phoenix, which has won six of seven.

Raptors 100, Cavaliers 88: Pascal Sia-

kam had 18 points and 11 rebounds in his return from injury, O.G. Anunoby scored 20 and host Toronto beat Cleveland.

Gary Trent Jr. scored 14 points, Fred VanVleet had 13 and Scottie Barnes 11 as the Raptors improved to 8-2 at home.

Pelicans 105, Thunder 101: Zion Williamson scored 23 points, matched his career high with eight assists and converted a go-ahead three-point play with 44 seconds left to lift short-handed New Orleans past visiting Oklahoma City.

With the Pelicans playing without Brandon Ingram and C.J. McCollum, Williamson also had eight rebounds and three blocked shots. Trey Murphy III scored 20 points for the Pelicans.

Nuggets 129, Rockets 113: Nikola Jokic had 32 points and 12 rebounds, Jamal Murray scored a season-high 31 and host Denver beat Houston.

The win was the Nuggets' third in a row following a home loss last Tuesday against lowly Detroit. Jokic and Murray combined to shoot 64.7% from the field.

Bulls 114, Jazz 107: DeMar DeRozan had 26 points and six assists to lead visiting Chicago past Utah.

Zach LaVine added 20 points, six rebounds, and five assists for the Bulls. Nikola Vucevic finished with 16 points and 10 rebounds.

No. 9 Kansas rebounds from loss, whips Texas Southern

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Kansas freshman MJ Rice has been through the ringer in his first couple months of college basketball: the back injury during preseason practices, a bout with COVID-19 and then kidney stones last week that sent him to the ER.

The five-star recruit showed Monday night what he can do when he's healthy and available.

Rice came off the bench to score 19 points, Jalen Wilson hit five three-pointers and scored 22, and the ninth-ranked Jayhawks bounced back from their first loss of the season with an 87-55 rout of Texas Southern.

"Just coming in and doing my job, really, whether that's bringing energy or playing defense," Rice said afterward. "I know I missed some time but it's also kind of like a build-up. I have to get that rhythm back."

Grady Dick added 15 points, Josef Yesu-

fu had 14 and KJ Adams 10 for the Jayhawks (7-1), who stumbled against No. 13 Tennessee in the championship game of the Battle 4 Atlantis. They are now 109-16 after a loss under coach Bill Self, who made his regular season debut in Allen Fieldhouse after missing three home games to a school-imposed suspension.

"I thought it was probably pretty good overall," Self said, "considering we were tired, and we hadn't practiced since we played Tennessee. I thought that was about as good as we could do."

Davon Barnes had 22 points and Zytarious Mortle scored 11 for the Tigers (1-7), whose brutal nonconference schedule has taken them to Texas Tech, Houston and Auburn with a trip to Wichita State still to come.

It was a rematch of a first-round NCAA Tournament game last season won by the Jayhawks on their way to the national

championship. And for a stretch in the first half, the Tigers gave the champs all they could handle.

No. 11 Arkansas 74, Troy 61: Ricky Council scored a season-high 27 points and the host Razorbacks used a 17-0 run late in the second half to hold off the Trojans.

Council scored 13 of Arkansas' final 19 points as the Razorbacks outscored Troy 19-3 in the final 6:25. The Trojans missed seven of eight during the stretch while Arkansas (6-1) made seven straight field goals.

Troy (6-2) made nine three-pointers to maintain a lead for a bulk of the game, but hit just one of its final eight from deep. Arkansas countered in the paint, outscoring the Trojans 46-26.

Makhi Mitchell joined Council in double figures with 14 points while grabbing nine rebounds. Anthony Black scored 14 points for Arkansas and had eight rebounds.