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# STARS AND STRIPES

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ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

Contractors work on bachelor enlisted quarters at Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz, Guam, on Dec. 10.

## At Camp Blaz, a work in progress

First contingent of Marines arriving on Guam to live elsewhere amid construction

By ALEX WILSON  
Stars and Stripes

The first contingent of Marines moving from Okinawa to Guam will bunk at Andersen Air Force Base, Naval Base Guam or off-base, not the Corps' Camp Blaz, a 4,000-acre, multibillion construction project still in the works.

About 100 logistics support

troops from III Marine Expeditionary Force have begun moving from the III Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa to Guam, according to a joint statement by the Marine Corps and Japan's Ministry of Defense on Saturday.

Their transfer has been underway for several months, Marine Corps Headquarters spokeswoman Capt. Brenda McCarthy said by email Tuesday.

The first 100 Marines should be in place by 2025, according to a report Saturday by Kyodo News that cited the Defense Ministry.

They are the first of more than 4,000 Marines expected to move from Okinawa under the Defense Policy Review Initiative, a 2012 agreement between the two allies to reduce the military presence on Okinawa, where nearly 30,000 of the 55,000 U.S. service members

in Japan are stationed.

Blaz — the first new Marine Corps installation in 72 years — is still largely under construction. It's expected to eventually house rotational units that are moving from Okinawa.

About 1,300 Marines from III MEF may be permanently stationed on Guam, while another

SEE BLAZ ON PAGE 7

## Senate gives approval to \$895 billion defense bill

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA  
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Wednesday approved a \$895 billion defense policy that in January will give junior enlisted troops a historic 14.5% pay raise and all other service members a 4.5% pay bump.

The National Defense Authorization Act passed the Senate in an 85-14 vote despite opposition from some Democratic senators over a provision that bans coverage of certain gender-affirming care for the transgender children of troops.

"This year's NDAA is not a perfect bill, but it nonetheless has some very good things," said Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The bill outlines \$850 billion in expenditure for the Pentagon, including the significant pay increase for E-1 to E-4 service members. It also authorizes \$33.5 billion for nuclear weapons programs in the Energy Department and \$11.6 billion for defense-related spending across other agencies.

The Senate Armed Services Committee had sought to add another \$25 billion to the total \$895 billion spending plan, but lawmakers ultimately stuck to the amount requested by President Joe Biden and mandated by last year's debt limit deal.

Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the top Republican on the committee, led the push for a higher topline, arguing it was needed to fund missile defense, shipbuilding, counter-drone technology and other modernization

SEE BILL ON PAGE 7

# BUSINESS/WEATHER

## Nissan, Honda confirm talks on closer collaboration

Associated Press

BANGKOK — Japanese automakers Nissan Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. confirmed Wednesday that they are discussing closer collaboration but denied reports they have decided on a merger.

Nissan's share price soared nearly 24% in Tokyo after reports citing unnamed sources said it might merge with Honda to form the world's third-largest automaking group. Honda's share price fell as much as 3%. Nissan alliance

member Mitsubishi Motors Corp. is also part of the talks.

Trading in Nissan's shares was suspended but then resumed after the companies jointly issued a statement saying they were "considering various possibilities for future collaboration, but no decisions have been made."

The ascent of Chinese automakers is rattling the industry at a time when manufacturers are struggling to shift from fossil fuel-driven vehicles to electrics. Relatively inexpensive EVs from Chi-

na's BYD, Great Wall and Nio are eating into the market shares of U.S. and Japanese car companies in China and elsewhere.

Japanese automakers have lagged behind big rivals in EVs and are now trying to cut costs and make up for lost time.

Nissan, Honda and Mitsubishi announced in August that they will share components for electric vehicles like batteries and jointly research software for autonomous driving to adapt better to dramatic changes in the auto industry.

### EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 19)	0.93	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Dec. 19)	\$1.24	Britain (Pound)	1.2700
Japanese yen (Dec. 19)	150.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.4312
South Korean won (Dec. 19)	1400.00	China (Yuan)	7.2865
		Denmark (Krone)	7.1085
		Egypt (Pound)	50.8492
		Euro	0.9528
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7709
		Hungary (Forint)	392.85
		Israel (Shekel)	3.5942
		Japan (Yen)	153.78
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3076
		Norway (Krone)	11.2139
		Philippines (Peso)	58.90
		Poland (Zloty)	4.06
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7510
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3510
		South Korea (Won)	1438.85
Switzerland (Franc)	0.8932		
Thailand (Baht)	34.21		
Turkey (NewLira)	35.0158		

(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)

### INTEREST RATES

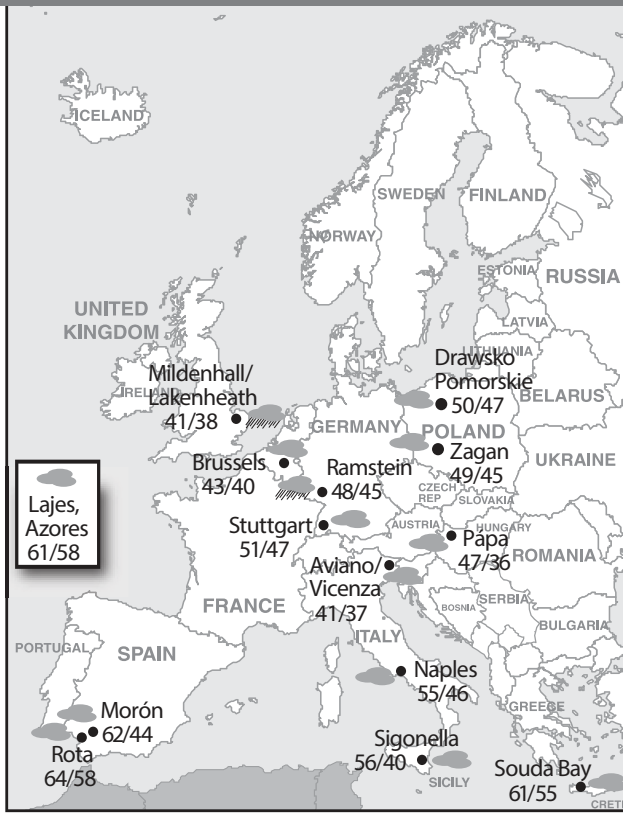
Prime rate	7.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.75
Federal funds market rate	4.58
3-month bill	4.37
30-year bond	4.59

## WEATHER OUTLOOK

### THURSDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



### THURSDAY IN EUROPE



### FRIDAY IN THE PACIFIC



The weather is provided by the American Forces Network Weather Center, 2nd Weather Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.

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## MILITARY

# Master sergeant wins \$250,000 on 'The Summit'

BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER  
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Ladeania Jackson, an Air National Guard master sergeant, and three others who completed a 14-day challenge in the Southern Alps of New Zealand shared a \$1 million prize on the reality TV show "The Summit."

The 16 contestants who started the show carried a share of the prize money in their backpacks but, as they dropped out, surrendered it to those who carried on.

Jackson — known as "Punkin Jackson" on the show — said she has been an avid reality TV fan since childhood. When she found out about auditions for "The Summit" through an Instagram post, she seized the opportunity.

"We had no idea what exactly we were signing up for," she told Stars and Stripes in an interview Tuesday at Yokota, an airlift hub in western Tokyo. "I just thought it would be a great experience and a great opportunity."

A native of Columbus, Miss., Jackson serves with the 194th Air Support Operations Group at Camp Murray, Wash. But her home is at Yokota with her spouse, Senior Master Sgt. Tamika Boler of the 374th Logistics Readiness Squadron.

Jackson went home with \$250,000 and plans to use the money to expand her family. It

will cover some of the cost of in vitro fertilization, she said in a Facebook message Wednesday.

Jackson said the competitors weren't told what they had signed up for until the first day of filming.

They were given 14 days to scale a mountain while carrying an equal share of a \$1 million prize in addition to all their gear. Anyone who made it to the top would win a share of the prize money, but if no one completed the journey, all the money would be lost.

"Hearing those words was a shock, to say the least," Jackson said. "None of us had any kind of hiking experience or mountain climbing experience, so it was going to be challenging for sure. I was getting what I signed up for, a challenge."

As their trek wore on, contestants were eliminated through votes and challenges until the final three reached the summit of Mount Head.

"We all had a goal to make it to the top, and to be one of the three that made it, win the game and accomplish that goal, was an amazing feeling that is truly hard to describe," Jackson said.

The show averaged 2.1 million viewers per episode, according to TV tracker tvseriesfinale.com, but earned mixed reviews.

"The Summit" ends up a cheap knockoff of the CBS network's de-



CBS

Air National Guard Master Sgt. Ladeania Jackson competes on the reality TV show "The Summit."

fining reality show, "Survivor," said Kelly Lawler, TV critic for USA Today.

The show is "too physically difficult for most of its contestants and full of nonsensical twists and rules that make it hard to understand, let alone get sucked into," she wrote Sept. 27. "There's very little suspense to a show where it seems clear the biggest guy is probably going to be the winner."

Joel Keller of the Decider website was kinder. "The vistas in that part of the world are spectacular," he wrote Sept. 29. "The show is worth watching just to show this group going from the lush greenery at the base of the mountain to the Arctic conditions near the top."

Jackson hopes to compete on more reality TV shows and is eager for the next challenge.

"Your mind is your biggest obstacle," she said. "If you can get over that, you can accomplish any dream or goal you set out to accomplish."



Ladeania Jackson

Jackson shared a \$1 million prize on "The Summit."

## Lawsuit seeking return of Confederate to memorial tossed

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
Stars and Stripes

ATLANTA — A federal judge on Monday dismissed an Army Ranger foundation's lawsuit seeking the reinstatement of a prominent Confederate officer's name to the Ranger memorial at Fort Moore.

U.S. District Judge Clay Land wrote he was unpersuaded by the National Ranger Memorial Foundation's arguments that the Defense Department overstepped its authority in removing the name of Confederate Col. John S. Mosby from the Georgia post's monument.

The judge wrote the Pentagon acted appropriately and lawfully in removing Mosby's name under the 2020 law that established a method to remove items honoring the Confederacy and those who served it voluntarily from U.S. military installations.

"Congress ... has the authority to decide whether Mosby should be memorialized and honored on a United States military installation," Land wrote in the 24-page order issued just days after a Dec. 12 hearing in Columbus, Ga. "Congress has determined that he should not be, and the court finds that its determination was properly implemented by the secretary of defense."

Mosby was an Antebellum lawyer who opposed slavery and secession but ultimately volunteered for the Confederate army out of loyalty to his family and native state of Virginia, according to his post-Civil War writings.

Known as the "Gray Ghost,"

Mosby commanded a cavalry battalion known as Mosby's Rangers, which conducted daring raids on Union forces, often behind their lines. In 1992, he was inducted into the initial class of the Ranger Hall of Fame. He remains the only Confederate ever admitted into the group.

Last year, the National Ranger Memorial Fund, which oversees fundraising and upkeep of the memorial, sued the Defense Department and top officials, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, seeking to return Mosby's name to the monument. They argued the Naming Commission, a panel created by Congress to study and make recommendations on removing Confederate-tied items from the Defense Department, omitted Mosby's name on the Ranger memorial and in the Ranger Hall of Fame in its massive list of

items for removal in the annex of its first of three official reports.

But the commission did specifically identify Mosby's name for removal from those items in the body of that report, which also recommended the changing of names for nine Army posts that previously were named for Confederate leaders, including Fort Moore, which was then known as Fort Benning for Confederate Brig. Gen. Henry Benning. Fort Moore is home to the Army's Ranger School, the 75th Ranger Regiment's headquarters, its 3rd Battalion and the annual Best Ranger Competition.

Officials with the National Ranger Memorial Foundation did not immediately respond Tuesday to requests for comment about the lawsuit's dismissal. Foundation officials previously had vowed to continue their efforts to have Mos-

by's name restored to the monument and Ranger Hall of Fame no matter the lawsuit's outcome.

Jonathan Corley, a lawyer for the Ranger foundation, told Land on Dec. 12 that the judge should allow the suit to move forward to the evidence-gathering stage to determine whether the Naming Commission had intentionally omitted Mosby's name from the list at the end of its report.

Land posited the omission was likely a "clerical error," and wrote in his Monday order that the foundation's argument drew an "absurd conclusion" that the Naming Commission's report meant anything other than to remove Mosby's name from the monument.

The law "does not specify what form that list should take and does not mandate that it must be an itemized appendix or inventory," the judge wrote.



Mosby

## MILITARY

# Army emergency fund to expand its travel grants

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Soldiers in need of financial help to travel during a family emergency can receive money from an Army-focused nonprofit relief fund without the added stress of repaying a loan, the organization announced Monday.

Emergency travel loans previously required a soldier to repay half the amount borrowed. Making this change to be a full grant has been a focus for Tony Grinston, who retired as sergeant major of the Army in August 2023 and soon after became CEO of Army Emergency Relief, the nonprofit that administers the grants.

"I know firsthand the difficulties of losing a parent while serving away from home and the expenses that come along with it," Grinston said. "Rather than a 50% zero-interest loan, 50% grant, it is essential soldiers can attend funerals or visit hospitals with immediate family without the financial burden, especially when serving overseas. This change to full

grants honors their sacrifices for protecting this great country during difficult moments."

Army Emergency Relief's mission is to relieve financial distress faced by soldiers and service families through interest-free loans, grants and scholarships for a variety of reasons, such as health care that falls outside of military health insurance, funeral expenses, home repair or spouse licensing and recertification. It can also help soldiers obtain child car seats, clothing and child care. All assistance is considered on an individual basis and 5.5% received assistance last year.

The emergency travel program is widely used among soldiers. As of the end of November, 4,327 soldiers have received nearly \$4.6 million in assistance for emergency travel, according to the nonprofit. Soldiers ranked specialist to sergeant first class are most represented in the program.

The amount provided each soldier can vary greatly, Grinston said. For example, airfare to get a

soldier, spouse and children back to the U.S. from Germany following a death in the family is far more expensive but just as important as helping a single soldier drive home in a similar situation.

Beginning Jan. 1, the amount of grant money provided for round-trip airfare will be capped at \$2,000 per request for domestic and \$4,000 for flights outside the continental U.S., according to AER. If there are costs beyond the cap, it could be provided to the family in an interest-free loan. Based on the family's financial situation, that loan could also become a grant, the nonprofit said.

Grinston began working in March to find a way to change this partial loan to a full grant after touring the globe to meet with soldiers and hear what they thought about Army Emergency Relief.

Last year, AER received more than \$2.2 million in donations. Soldiers received more than \$38.6 million in loans, \$7.8 million in grants and the organization provided \$5.2 million in scholarships.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

## WWII vets honored in DC

**Battle of the Bulge veterans Frank Cohn, left, and Harry Miller salute the presentation of the colors during the battle's 80th anniversary wreath-laying ceremony at the World War II Memorial's Circle of Remembrance in Washington on Monday. Representatives from Belgium, Canada, France and Luxembourg attended the ceremony. The event included a wreath-laying at the Atlantic arch of the memorial by representatives of the Allied nations and concluded the playing taps played by a U.S. service member.**

## IG: EUCOM, SOCOM lapsed in oversight of classified devices

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. European Command and portions of U.S. Special Operations Command may have put sensitive information at risk by haphazardly handing out mobile devices to personnel for three years, according to Pentagon investigators.

A heavily redacted report released Monday contains the findings of an audit by the Defense Department Inspector General. EUCOM and two SOCOM segments didn't maintain complete or accurate inventory records for classified mobile devices, it said.

Deficiencies were found in all the required elements related to device training and user agreements, annual reviews and so-called incident response plans.

Maintaining complete inventory records enables commands to ensure proper administration and quick intervention if a device is involved in a cybersecurity breach, the IG said.

Mobile devices are "a primary target for cyber threats which could compromise data and the national security landscape," Inspector General Robert Storch said in a statement Monday. "Securing these devices is not merely

a technical priority; it's a critical operational mandate."

Under certain circumstances, the military provides personnel with commercial off-the-shelf mobile devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones that are configured to securely access classified information.

One of the driving factors in the lax distribution of mobile devices was the surge in demand for telework brought on by coronavirus, according to the report.

The Pentagon components investigated in the audit between August 2021 and September 2024 included the Defense Information

Systems Agency, which the report said had the same problems in issuing mobile devices.

The IG called for a corrective action plan and made dozens of recommendations focused on ensuring that the commands abide by cyber security protocols.

All Pentagon components should reevaluate their needs for classified mobile devices outside of secure spaces and recall ones that are no longer used or needed, the IG said.

Cyber security has been a top DOD issue for years. Troops and civilian employees must complete various training programs that

highlight cyber vulnerabilities and the dangers of mishandling classified information.

The cyber realm has emerged as a major battleground, with Russia and China routinely trying to penetrate U.S. and allied networks.

Large chunks of the report were blacked out, making many of the circumstances and specifics related to mismanagement of the classified devices unclear.

EUCOM, DISA and SOCOM headquarters and Special Operations Command Central did not dispute the findings and indicated that steps would be taken to come into compliance.

## Japan court rejects appeal by family of taxi driver beaten by Marines

By BRIAN McELHINEY  
AND KEISHI KOJA  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAHA, Okinawa — The family of an Okinawan taxi driver assaulted by two Marines in 2008 has lost an appeal to the Supreme Court of Japan seeking additional compensation from the Japanese government.

Relatives of Munekazu Ura, who died of cancer in 2012, had appealed a 2022 Naha District Court decision that said the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of the Japan's Ministry of Defense, was not

responsible for interest payments included in an award from a 2018 ruling in their case.

On Monday in Tokyo, a four-judge Supreme Court panel led by Judge Mamoru Miura upheld a 2023 Fukuoka High Court decision rejecting the family's appeal, according to the Supreme Court's website.

Ura's family filed a 2017 lawsuit in Naha District Court seeking the equivalent of about \$240,000 in damages from Marines Joseph Wayne Riddle and Reginald Crapps.

Riddle was a 20-year-old corporal and Crapps a 19-year-old private first class at the time of the incident.

Ura was assaulted early Jan. 7, 2008, in Okinawa city after picking up the pair, who were assigned to Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. Riddle hit the 59-year-old driver from the back seat with a liquor bottle while Crapps punched him in the face. They then chased him down and struck him with the bottle again. Ura suffered injuries to his head and neck.

Riddle was sentenced to 4½

years in prison with forced labor, while Crapps received three to four years with forced labor.

The court ruled in favor of the family on July 5, 2018, stating the incident caused Ura "injuries, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder." The family was awarded more than \$237,000, including 10 years of interest payments, according to court documents provided by the family's attorney, Yoichiro Hidaka.

The U.S. Foreign Claims Commission agreed to pay the family about \$12,700, according to an

April 26, 2019, letter signed by assistant claims officer Dale Sonnenberg and addressed to Hidaka and attorney Tsutomu Arakaki. The family signed the document in May of that year and received payment.

The Okinawa Defense Bureau agreed to pay an additional \$145,000 but declined to pay the \$82,000 awarded in interest, according to documents. The family filed suit again in 2022 in Naha District Court, seeking the full amount of the original award minus what the U.S. paid.

PACIFIC

# DOD report: Corruption may be slowing China's military

By **CAITLYN BURCHETT**  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Corruption may be slowing the pace of China's military modernization program despite significant improvements and growth since 2023, the Pentagon said in a report Wednesday.

In the second-half of 2023, 15 high-ranking Chinese military officials and defense industry executives were ousted, several of whom oversaw equipment development projects related to modernizing China's ground based nuclear and conventional missiles.

Corruption touched every service in the People's Liberation Army, according to the Pentagon's annual report to Congress on the state of military developments in the People's Republic of China.

"This wave of corruption-related investigations and the removal of senior leaders may have disrupted the [People's Liberation Army] toward its 2027 goal" of having the capability to take over Taiwan, a senior defense official told reporters on the condition of anonymity.

As a result, China's military saw frequent turnover and replacement of high-level personnel followed by time-consuming, deep investigations to determine the extent of the corruption, the official

said. The most prominent removal was that of PRC Minister of National Defense Li Shangfu in October 2023.

Li led the Central Military Commission Equipment Development Department from 2017 to 2022, where he would have signed off on all weapons acquisitions.

"There is a bit of a spiraling kind of effect where it drives in additional officials who are connected to the one official originally at the center of the investigation," he said.

Still, a key takeaway from the Pentagon's assessment is that China is continuing its rapid nuclear buildup.

The congressionally mandated report is meant to update lawmakers on China's latest military developments and activities, including the growth of its nuclear program, hypersonic missiles, increased international influence and expansion into other countries.

China's strategy continues to be to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 to match or surpass U.S. global influence and power, displace U.S. alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region and revise the international order to be more advantageous to Beijing's author-

itarian system and national interests.

"This policy largely understates the [People's Republic of China] objective of revising the international order in support of its interests," the official said.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has called China the "pacing threat" for the U.S. military with its increasingly aggressive actions in the Indo-Pacific region, rapid military development and expanding international ambitions.

China considers Taiwan part of its territory, to be brought under its control by force if necessary. In recent years, it has worked to raise its forces, setting a goal to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027 and to complete the modernization of its services by 2035.

China's army has worked to hone its long-range joint firing capabilities, while the rocket force is developing new intercontinental ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, shore-based, fixed-wing aviation units have been transitioned from the navy to its air force, which the Defense Department thinks will enable better command and control.

Numerically, China has the largest navy in the world with a battle force of more than 370 ships and submarines — 140 of which are surface combatant ships. In the

near term, the navy will have the ability to conduct long-range precision strikes against land targets from its submarine and surface combatants using land-attack cruise missiles, notably enhancing China's power projection capability, the report reads.

"They are going to be able to target a larger number of targets, some different types of targets, do greater levels of damage, have more options for multiple rounds of counter strikes, and more kinds of tailored deployment of lower yield weapons," the official said.

In 2023, according to the report, China's navy deployed one of its carriers three times to the Philippine Sea, a record number for any Chinese carrier in a calendar year.

A new YUSHEN-class amphibious assault ship belonging to the Chinese Navy also conducted its first extended area deployment, sailing beyond the first island chain, a series of islands enclosing the East Asia coastline.

The islands, which include the Japanese archipelago, Taiwan, Okinawa and the northern Philippines, former a barrier that makes it difficult to enter or exit the China Seas.

The official did not speculate on when a Chinese carrier strike group might deploy to or around

areas like Hawaii or California but noted China has worked to increase its power projection capabilities.

The navy have deployed to the eastern Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. They have also made port calls as distant as the Middle East and Africa, according to the report.

The Defense Department estimates China surpassed 600 operational nuclear warheads as of mid-2024. The report estimates China will have more than 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030. The country is expected to continue growing its nuclear force through 2030.

According to the Federation of American Scientists, the U.S. arsenal includes an estimated 1,770 deployed nuclear warheads and more than 1,900 more in reserve.

Despite the Chinese military's rapid development, it has not yet demonstrated the type and sophistication of certain capabilities it would need in the major regional contingency, the report reads. These include urban warfare and long-distance logistics. China has noted its personnel lack of recent experience in combat operations. To counter this, the country is pouring time into training exercises and operations.



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## WAR IN UKRAINE

## Russia says suspect held in killing of general

Associated Press

Russia's security service said Wednesday that it has detained a suspect in the killing of a senior general in Moscow.

The suspect was described as an Uzbek citizen recruited by Ukrainian intelligence services.

Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov was killed Tuesday by a bomb hidden in a scooter outside his apartment building in Moscow, a day after Ukraine's security service leveled criminal charges against him. His assistant also died in the attack. A Ukrainian official said the service carried out the attack.

Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB, didn't name the suspect, but said he was born in 1995. According to a statement by the FSB, the suspect said himself that



Kirillov

he was recruited by Ukrainian special services. AP can't confirm the conditions under which the suspect spoke to the security services.

The FSB said the suspect had been promised a reward of \$100,000 and permission to move to a European Union country in exchange for killing Kirillov.

The agency stated that acting on instructions from Ukraine, the suspect traveled to Moscow, where he picked up a homemade explosive device. He placed the device on an electric scooter and parked it at the entrance to the residential building where Kirillov lived.

The suspect then rented a car to monitor the location and set up a camera that livestreamed the scene to his handlers in the central Ukrainian city of Dnipro. Once Kirillov was seen leaving the building, the suspect detonated the bomb. The suspect faces a sentence of up to life imprisonment, the FSB said.

The suspect was detained in a village in the Moscow region, according to Ministry of Internal Affairs official Irina Volk, who was quoted by Russian state news agency TASS.

Kirillov, 54, was the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces and was under sanctions from several countries, including the U.K. and Canada, for his actions in Russia's

full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On Monday, Ukraine's Security Service, or SBU, opened a criminal investigation against him, accusing him of directing the use of banned chemical weapons.

Russia has denied using any chemical weapons in Ukraine and has accused Kyiv of using toxic agents in combat.

Kirillov, who took his current job in 2017, was one of the most high-profile figures to level those accusations. He held numerous briefings to accuse the Ukrainian military of using toxic agents and planning to launch attacks with radioactive substances — claims that Ukraine and its Western allies rejected as propaganda.

An official with the SBU said Tuesday that the agency was be-

hind the attack. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information, described Kirillov as a "war criminal and an entirely legitimate target."

The SBU official provided video that they said was of the bombing. It shows two men leaving a building shortly before a blast fills the frame.

Russia's top state investigative agency said it's looking into Kirillov's death as a case of terrorism, and officials in Moscow vowed to punish Ukraine.

The Kremlin said Wednesday that it was "obvious" that Ukraine was behind Kirillov's killing. Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that Kyiv "does not shy away from terrorist methods."

## General's assassination a chilling new phase in war?

BY LAURA KING  
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — On the snowy sidewalk of a drab residential street in Moscow, blood, soot and the mangled remnants of an electric scooter marked the spot where a top Russian general was assassinated — and signaled a potentially dangerous new phase of the war in Ukraine.

Coming just over a month before President-elect Donald Trump takes office, the bombing that killed

**ANALYSIS** Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov and his assistant was widely attributed to Ukraine, which stopped short of a formal claim of responsibility but quietly let the role of its security services be known.

Kirillov, 54, was the highest-ranking Russian military figure to die outside the battlefield since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine nearly three years ago. With the U.S. president-elect vowing to bring a swift end to the fighting, analysts say both sides are scrambling to inflict heavy blows aimed at achieving maximum leverage in any upcoming negotiations.

"This is a new chilling stage in this war," former Ukrainian government minister Tymofiy Mylovanov wrote on X, casting the killing as part of an apparent retaliatory campaign in which Russia has similarly targeted Ukrainian military officials.

Russian state media cited investigators as saying the early-morning blast that killed Kirillov and his assistant — an act of suspected terrorism — was triggered by an explosive device planted in a scooter parked near the entrance to an apartment building.

Ukrainian officials had made it abundantly clear they considered Kirillov a legitimate target. Only a day earlier, authorities in Kyiv lodged charges in absentia against the general, accusing him of order-



AP

Investigators work at the place where Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the head of Russia's Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defense Forces, and his assistant were killed by an explosive device in Moscow, on Tuesday. Ukrainian officials had made it abundantly clear they considered Kirillov a legitimate target.

ing the use of banned chemical weapons in Ukraine.

The Biden administration too had linked Kirillov to Russia's use of the chemical agent chloropicrin — a poison gas dating to the trenches of World War I — against Ukrainian troops on the front lines in the country's south and east.

The State Department, joined at various points by Britain, Canada and New Zealand, imposed sanctions over Moscow's alleged violation of the three-decade-old Chemical Weapons Convention.

In his capacity as chief of Russia's radioactive, biological and chemical defense forces, the general had often publicly turned international accusations back against his accusers, claiming the Ukrainian military employed toxic agents and plotted to carry out attacks with radioactive materials. Ukraine and its backers denied those claims.

As it has at many key points in the

war, Russia vowed harsh retaliation for the killing. The deputy head of the Kremlin's Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, pledged there would be "imminent retribution" in kind against senior Ukrainian figures. Russia's United Nations mission said it would bring the matter before the Security Council, of which it is a permanent member.

Some analysts pointed out that the killing was a likely prelude to talks in which Russia and Ukraine will each desperately seek to avoid negotiating from a position of perceived weakness.

"I think it's a significant escalation," analyst Ian Bremmer said of the killing, citing Kirillov's rank and importance. In an analysis posted online for his GZERO Media, Bremmer suggested that escalatory moves by both sides in the conflict probably reflected the belief that "negotiations are coming soon."

The killing of Kirillov was partic-

ularly audacious and high-profile but not an unprecedented attack. Last week, Moscow was also reportedly the scene of the apparent targeted killing of a top engineer of its cruise missiles, deployed with the aim of sowing havoc and death in Ukrainian cities.

Those attacks on civilian targets have increased in tempo and intensity in recent weeks, often targeting Ukraine's power grid as cold weather tightens its grip.

On the battlefield, outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces are increasingly beleaguered. In a bloody war of attrition on the eastern front, Russian forces have steadily gained ground.

In addition, a slice of Russian territory that Ukraine captured in a surprise late-summer incursion has been shrinking in size, with Russia using North Korean troops to augment the push to regain ground in the Kursk region.

Trump's election victory in November sent tremors of dread across Ukraine, where people had closely tracked his campaign-trail commentary denigrating billions of dollars in crucial Western assistance to Kyiv.

But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy quickly turned his attention to a public relations campaign of sorts, seeking to persuade Trump that there were distinct advantages — from personal prestige to potential access to Ukraine's mineral wealth — in avoiding capitulation to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The president-elect and Zelenskyy spoke this month in Paris, a meeting brokered by French President Emmanuel Macron when the U.S. and Ukrainian leaders both attended the grand reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral, which had been ravaged by fire in 2019.

Even before taking office, Trump has rattled nerves in Ukraine and among U.S. allies over the prospect of withholding crucial support.

Ukraine considered it a significant breakthrough last month when President Joe Biden, after months of public pleas from Zelenskyy, reversed course and gave Ukraine the go-ahead to use U.S.-supplied long-range missiles for strikes against military targets deeper inside Russian territory. On Monday, Trump called that decision "stupid" and suggested he would reverse it.

Hours after the targeted bomb blast against Kirillov in Moscow, Zelenskyy, speaking remotely to the summit of a regional alliance, did not mention the general's killing. But he cited the expectation that negotiations might come soon.

"We all understand that next year could be the year this war ends — we must make it happen," the Ukrainian leader said. But he added: "We need to establish peace in a way that Putin can no longer break."

## MILITARY



ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

Contractors work on bachelor enlisted quarters at Marine Corps Base Camp Blaz, Guam, on Dec. 10.

## Blaz: Rotational US service members to stay at camp regardless of ranks

FROM PAGE 1

3,700 Marines may be on the island as a rotational force.

The recently arrived logistics Marines are considered permanently stationed on Guam, Blaz spokeswoman Maj. Diann Rosenfeld said Wednesday. She said staff sergeants and above who are permanently stationed on Guam will live on the Air Force and Navy bases or in the local community.

The rotational force will be quartered at Camp Blaz regardless of rank, Rosenfeld said.

Marines, sailors and civilians included in the relocation, regard-

less of their place of residence, may work at spots around the island, including Blaz, Andersen or the naval base, Rosenfeld said.

Blaz was officially activated in 2020 and has remained under construction since.

At least 22 projects have been completed across the island, mostly at other installations. Another 32 are expected to be completed in fiscal year 2025, Rachel Landers, a spokeswoman for the Office in Charge of Construction Marine Corps Marianas, said Dec. 10.

The Defense Policy Review Initiative relocates some Marine as-

sets from Okinawa to Guam, and elsewhere, including Hawaii. Japan is providing approximately \$3 billion of the estimated \$8.6 billion to build Blaz and its surrounding infrastructure.

McCarthy did not elaborate on a timeline for coming troop arrivals on Guam.

“The Marine Corps continues to explore options for future force posture in the Indo-Pacific region that is geographically distributed, operationally resilient, politically sustainable, and remains capable of supporting our Allies, partners, and the Joint Force,” she said.

# US hands effort to arm Ukraine to NATO group

By JOHN VANDIVER  
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A new NATO-led command designed to support Ukraine is up and running in Wiesbaden, taking over an effort previously overseen by American forces, the alliance’s military headquarters said Wednesday.

The formation of the group known as NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine amounts to an administrative reshuffling that the alliance says will ensure more stable support for Ukraine over the long term.

The move “is designed to place Ukraine in a position of strength, which puts NATO in a position of strength to keep safe and prosperous its 1 billion people in both Europe and North America,” Gen. Christopher Cavoli, NATO’s supreme allied commander, said in a statement Wednesday.

In July, NATO leaders agreed to establish the new command at U.S. Army Europe and Africa headquarters in Wiesbaden.

The organization, which involves about 700 troops, was billed as a means for putting alliance support “on a firmer footing” by

providing more predictability for Kyiv when it comes to addressing its long-term military needs, NATO said at the time.

While NATO hasn’t called the shift a hedge ahead of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump’s second term, observers have nonetheless described it as an attempt to Trump-proof allied support for Ukraine in the event American weapons supply is halted.

Trump has pledged to bring a quick end to the Russia-Ukraine war by forcing peace negotiations, and he has been critical of U.S. efforts to arm Ukraine.

Previously, U.S. European Command’s Security Assistance Group—Ukraine headed up the armaments deliveries.

That command, which also operates at Army headquarters in Wiesbaden, will continue to function, U.S. military officials have said.

German army Maj. Gen. Hartmut Renk, deputy commander of the new NATO headquarters, said Wednesday that the new organization is ready to begin taking on responsibilities from the EUCOM group and a separate international donor coalition.

## Bill: Lawmakers try to boost quality of life, military hardware

FROM PAGE 1

programs. “We are currently experiencing the most dangerous national security moment since World War II — one need only scroll through the headlines summarizing this year’s world events,” Wicker said Wednesday. “Congress needed to respond in kind at every possible opportunity.”

Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Senate Republican minority leader, said the legislation represented a “tremendous missed opportunity” to boost defense spending and forced lawmakers to give junior troops a large pay raise at the expense of investments in critical weapons and munitions.

“If this NDAA offers any valuable lesson, it’s that we have a tremendous amount of work to do,” he said.

The 14.5% pay raise for junior troops was a compromise between the Senate and the House after months of negotiations. House lawmakers had lobbied for

a 19.5% pay hike, citing steep inflation and the rising cost of living, while the Senate countered with a 5.5% pay raise.

The White House opposed singling out junior troops for extra pay, warning of billions in added costs and premature changes to military pay tables that are due to be revised next year.

Junior enlisted service members now earn as little as \$24,000 in basic pay but are also provided various allowances, including housing. The Pentagon announced last week that the housing allowance will increase by an average of 5.4% next year.

Lawmakers drafting this year’s defense policy bill made a concerted effort to focus on improving troop quality of life. Other provisions to meet that goal include investments in new barracks and family housing, child-care centers and health care.

The bill also authorizes spending on military hardware. It approves two Virginia-class attack submarines despite the Navy only

wanting one and authorizes three Arleigh Burke-class destroyers instead of the two the Navy had requested.

Funding authorization for the Constellation-class frigate was cut from a requested \$1.2 billion to \$50 million as part of \$31 billion in cuts to programs and systems lawmakers deemed too obsolete and costly.

They also refused to expand troop access to in vitro fertilization and require women to register for the Selective Service should there be a military draft — all measures Democrats had advocated for.

More than 20 Democratic senators this week unsuccessfully attempted to amend the final bill to remove a controversial provision that limits treatment for underage children of service members who suffer from gender dysphoria.

The provision bans Tricare, the military’s health care program, from covering treatments “that could result in sterilization” and

was inserted into the defense legislation by House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La. At least 4,000 children of service members are receiving gender-affirming care.

“I, for one, trust these service members and their families to make their own decisions about health care without politicians butting in,” said Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis. “It’s flat out wrong to put this provision in this bill and take away a service member’s freedom to make that decision for their families.”

Most Democrats in the House voted against the defense bill last week due to the provision. The House’s version initially contained other divisive measures targeting troop abortion access and Pentagon diversity initiatives, but they were dropped during negotiations with the Senate.

Some divisive culture war provisions remained, however. The bill continues a hiring freeze for diversity-related positions at the Defense Department and bars military academies from teaching



JUSTIN WOLPERT/U.S. Navy

The U.S. Navy has wanted to add one Virginia-class fast attack submarine, seen above, but Congress approved two.

critical race theory, an academic concept that argues racism is systematic.

There was bipartisan agreement to give the Air Force permission to transfer Air National Guard units that perform space missions into the Space Force without gubernatorial consent. The provision affects 578 personnel and was strongly opposed by Guard officials and all state governors.

The bill next heads to President Joe Biden’s desk for his signature and is expected to become law by the end of the year.

## NATION

# Intelligence panel says skies safe despite drones

BY MARK SATTER  
CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — Members of the House Intelligence Committee left a classified briefing on Tuesday largely satisfied that there was nothing nefarious behind the recent uptick in alleged drone sightings over New Jersey that have sparked concerns and speculation from the press, social media users, Congress and the president-elect in recent weeks.

Committee ranking member Jim Himes, D-Conn., told reporters following the briefing that there was zero evidence of any laws being broken by the alleged drones, and that government officials assured lawmakers there were no federal operations taking place over the New Jersey area.

“There are 800,000 registered drones in this country, and then millions and millions of unregistered drones. And so some combination of those things, and stars and Starlink satellites probably account for the vast majority of what people are seeing,” Himes said.

Rep. Josh Gottheimer, D-N.J., said the briefing gave members a full sense that there was no threat.

The three-hour briefing, led by 28 officials who represented the departments of Defense, Justice and Homeland Security, the FBI and the intelligence community, was the latest in a monthlong saga that has stumped local law enforcement and prompted lawmakers to call for more transparency and to introduce legislation.

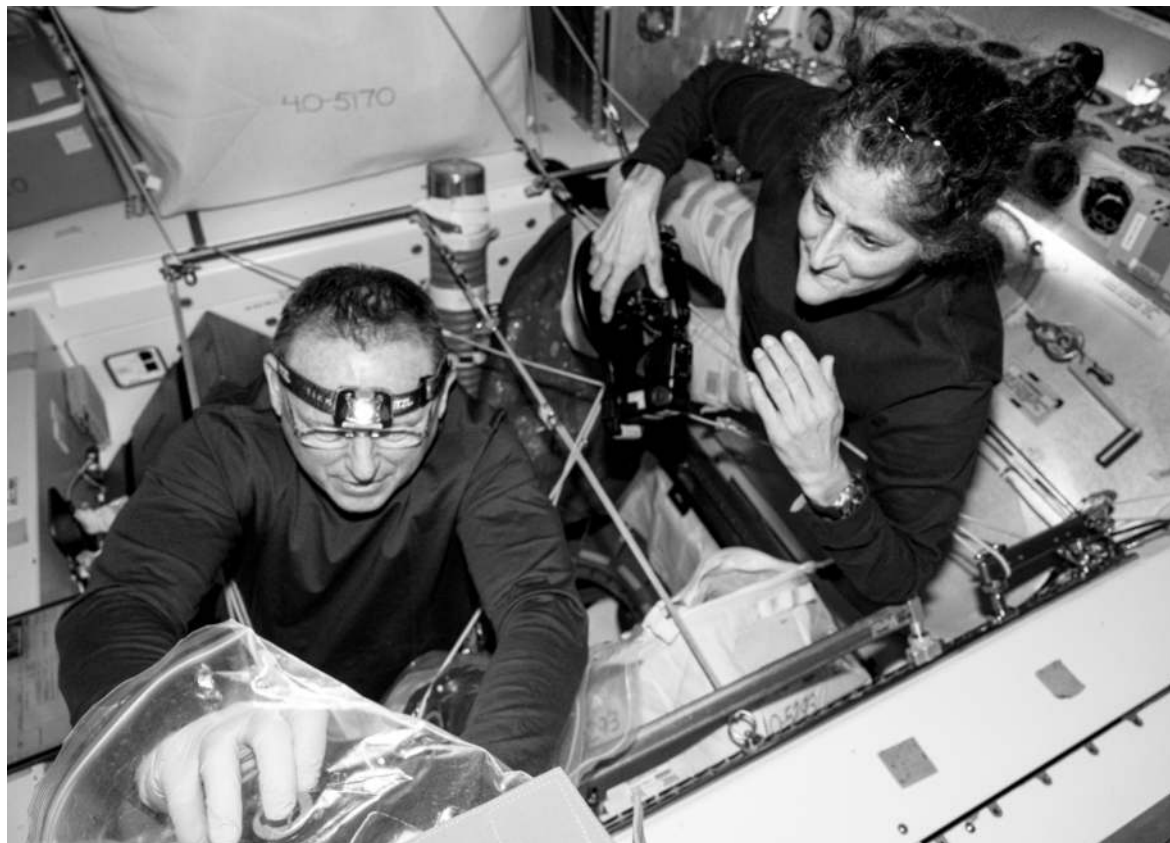
On Monday, President-elect Donald Trump hinted that the government may know more about the station than officials were letting on.

“The government knows what is happening,” Trump said during a news conference. “For some reason, they don’t want to comment. And I think they’d be better off saying what it is our military knows and our president knows.”

White House officials have maintained there is no national security threat stemming from the alleged drones, and that most of the sightings can be explained by manned aircraft, hobbyist drones, satellites and stars, among other common phenomena.

Emerging from the briefing, Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa., who is also a member of the House Armed Services Committee, panned some of her fellow lawmakers and the media for “scaring the public” by furthering the drone story, but also said that the incident was an opportunity for Congress to renew legislation that would help address such situations in the future.

“We have some work to be done to make sure that people have the authorities and the technologies to be able to respond to this. There’s only going to be more drones in our airspace this Christmas. There will be more drones under people’s trees — but once we have the permissions that different organizations need, hopefully we’ll be able to have less of a worry concerning this,” Houlahan said.



NASA/AP

Astronauts Butch Wilmore, left, and Suni Williams inspect safety hardware aboard the International Space Station on Aug. 9.

## 2 stuck astronauts face longer delay with return set for March

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — NASA’s two stuck astronauts just got their space mission extended again. That means they won’t be back on Earth until spring, 10 months after rocketing into orbit on Boeing’s Starliner capsule.

NASA announced the latest delay in Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams’ homecoming on Tuesday.

The two test pilots planned on being away just a week or so when they blasted off June 5 on Boeing’s first astronaut flight to the International Space Station. Their mission grew from eight days to eight months after NASA decided to

send the company’s problem-plagued Starliner capsule back empty in September.

Now the pair won’t return until the end of March or even April because of a delay in launching their replacements, according to NASA.

A fresh crew needs to launch before Wilmore and Williams can return and the next mission has been bumped more than a month, according to the space agency.

NASA’s next crew of four was supposed to launch in February, followed by Wilmore and Williams’ return home by the end of that month alongside two other astronauts.

But SpaceX needs more time to prepare the brand new capsule for liftoff. That launch is now scheduled for no earlier than late March.

NASA said it considered using a different SpaceX capsule to fly up the replacement crew in order to keep the flights on schedule. But it decided the best option was to wait for the new capsule to transport the next crew.

NASA prefers to have overlapping crews at the space station for a smoother transition, according to officials.

Most space station missions last six months, with a few reaching a full year.

## Trump sues Des Moines Register, pollster for ‘election interference’

Associated Press

President-elect Donald Trump sued the Des Moines Register and its pollster for “brazen election interference” in publishing a survey the weekend before the election that showed Democrat Kamala Harris with a surprising lead of three percentage points in the state.

The Register’s parent Gannett Co. on Tuesday dismissed the lawsuit as meritless and said it would vigorously defend its First Amendment rights.

The lawsuit continues the president-elect’s campaign against media outlets he feels have wronged him. ABC this past weekend agreed to pay \$15 million toward a Trump presidential library in order to settle a defamation law-



JABIN BOTSFORD/The Washington Post

Former president Donald Trump arrives for a caucus night watch party in Des Moines on Jan. 15.

suit against George Stephanopoulos for inaccurately saying Trump had been found civilly liable for

rape.

The Des Moines survey, done by since-retired pollster J. Ann Selzer, was considered shocking for indicating that an earlier Trump lead in the Republican-leaning midwestern state had been erased. In the actual election, Trump won Iowa by more than 13 percentage points.

“There was a perfectly good reason nobody saw this coming: because a three-point lead for Harris in deep-red Iowa was not reality,” the lawsuit said. “It was election-interfering fiction.”

The poll increased enthusiasm among Democrats, compelled Republicans to divert campaign time and money to areas in which they were ahead, and deceived the public into thinking Democrats

were doing better than they actually were, Trump charged.

The lawsuit was filed late Monday in Polk County district court in Iowa. It cites Iowa consumer fraud law, and doesn’t ask for specific monetary damages, but rather wants a trial jury to award triple the amount of what it determines actual damages to be.

Whatever happens legally, the case could have a chilling effect beyond Iowa. Trump said in legal papers that he wanted it to deter “radicals from continuing to act with corrupt intent in releasing polls manufactured for the purpose of skewing election results in favor of Democrats.”

Lark-Marie Anton, Des Moines Register spokeswoman, said the newspaper acknowledged the

pre-election poll did not reflect Trump’s ultimate margin of victory and released the data and a technical explanation.

“We stand by our reporting on the matter and believe a lawsuit would be without merit,” she said.

Selzer did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Tuesday. But she told PBS in Iowa last week that “it’s not my ethic” to set up a poll to deliver a specific response. She said she was mystified about what motivation people would think she had.

“To suggest without a single shred of evidence that I was in cahoots with somebody, I was being paid by somebody, it’s all just kind of, it’s hard to pay too much attention to it except that they are accusing me of a crime,” she said.

## NATION

# Funding deal has over \$100B in disaster aid

By KEVIN FREKING  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congressional leaders have unveiled a stopgap spending bill that will keep the federal government funded through March 14 and provide more than \$100 billion in emergency aid to help states and local communities recover from hurricanes Helene and Milton and other natural disasters.

The measure would prevent a partial government shutdown set to begin after midnight Friday. It would kick final decisions on this budget year's spending levels to a new Republican-led Congress and President-elect Donald Trump. The continuing resolution generally continues current spending levels for agencies.

Passage of the measure is one of the final actions that lawmakers will consider this week before adjourning for the holidays and making way for the next Congress. It's the second short-term funding measure the lawmakers have taken up this fall as they struggled to pass the dozen annual appropriations bills before the new fiscal year began Oct. 1, as they typically do.

The bill will provide \$100.4 billion in disaster relief, with an additional \$10 billion in economic assistance for farmers struggling with low commodity prices and high input costs.

"We have to be able to help those who are in these dire straits," House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., told reporters.

Net farm income is projected to decline 4.1% this year after falling 19.4% the year before from the record highs reached in 2022. Johnson indicated more farm aid



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

**Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., takes questions from reporters following a closed-door strategy session, at the Capitol, on Tuesday. Congressional leaders have unveiled an agreement that will keep the federal government funded through March 14 and provide more than \$100 billion in emergency aid.**

could be delivered in the next Congress, saying "we can't do all it right now."

"Congress is doing the best it can under difficult circumstances, and I think it will be a big boost for the industry," Johnson said.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said the agreement was "free of cuts and poison pills," and would provide money for Democratic priorities like child care, workforce training and job placement.

"With this agreement, we are now on our way to avoiding a government shutdown," Schumer said.

Pennsylvania Rep. Glenn Thompson, the Republican chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, said he was hoping for more economic relief for farmers, but "it's a great start."

"I think it's going to send the right signal to the markets that most farmers and ranchers are going to be able to get eligible for the credit they need to borrow in order to plant a crop or raise a herd," Thompson said.

President Joe Biden has sought about \$114 billion in disaster aid, submitting a \$99 billion request in November, telling law-

makers the funding was "urgently needed." The administration subsequently updated its request to include funding to repair federal facilities damaged due to natural disasters.

The largest share of the money, about \$29 billion, will go to the main disaster relief fund at the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The fund helps with debris removal, repairing public infrastructure and providing financial assistance to survivors. About \$21 billion goes to help farmers who have experienced crop or livestock losses.

Another \$8 billion will go to help rebuild and repair highways and bridges in more than 40 states and territories. And some \$12 billion would go toward helping communities recover through block grants administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. About \$2.2 billion would go to low-interest loans for businesses, nonprofits and homeowners trying to rebuild after a disaster.

"While this is not the legislation I would have written on my own, it is a strong, bipartisan package that provides the resources communities urgently need to recover," said Sen. Patty Murray, the Democratic chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Congress is expected to pass the measure just before another shutdown deadline. House Republicans generally give lawmakers 72 hours to review text of the legislation, which would push a vote on final passage to Friday. The Senate is not known for acting speedily, but many lawmakers are anxious to adjourn for the year.

## Suit: State Department created loopholes for Israel

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The State Department has carved out exceptions for close ally Israel that block a U.S. law restricting foreign military support over human rights abuses, a lawsuit from a group of Palestinians in Gaza and American relatives asserted Tuesday.

Former State Department officials and crafters of the 1997 Leahy law were among those advising and backing the lawsuit.

The lawsuit details the barriers that it accuses the State Department of creating on Israel's behalf to skirt enforcement and asks courts to intervene. That is after campus protests and moves by some lawmakers failed in their goal of limiting U.S. military support to Israel over civilian deaths in Gaza during the war with Hamas.

"It's really a modest set of goals here: There's a U.S. law. We'd like the federal government to adhere to U.S. law," said Ahmed Moor, a Philadelphia-based Palestinian American who joined the lawsuit on behalf of cousins, uncles and aunts displaced and killed in the 14-month war.

The law bars U.S. military assistance to foreign military units when there is credible evidence of gross human rights abuses.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has denied that the department has given Israel a pass. "Do we have a double standard? The answer is no," he said in April. The State and Justice departments declined to comment Tuesday.

Israel says it makes every effort to limit

harm to Palestinian civilians in its military operations. The Biden administration has warned Israel to do more to spare civilians in the Gaza war, holding back one known weapons shipment of 2,000-pound bombs.

A State Department report in May concluded there was "reasonable" evidence that Israel's use of U.S.-provided weapons in Gaza violated international law that protects civilians but bypassed a decision on limiting arms, saying the war itself made it impossible for U.S. officials to judge for certain. It also declined last month to hold back arms transfers as it had threatened over humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Charles Blaha, a former State Department official who helped oversee reviews under the Leahy law, argued that enforcing the law for Israel would have prevented much of the harm that civilians in Gaza are suffering.

"The secretary of state has made all the decisions so far on Israel and the Leahy law, and every single decision has resulted in those units being eligible" for continued U.S. military support, Blaha said. "And that's not the way the normal process works."

U.S. military support to Israel in the light of Palestinian civilian deaths was a fraught issue in the presidential election. Republicans and many Democrats demanded unwavering military backing of Israel. The Biden administration's refusal to limit support cost Democrats some votes from some Arab and Muslim voters and others.

Tuesday's lawsuit is part of a last push on the outgoing Biden administration by Muslim Americans and others to limit U.S. military support to Israel — which is estimated to have reached \$17.9 billion in the first year of the war — over its treatment of Palestinian civilians.

Hamas militants began the war with an Oct. 7, 2023, attack in Israel, killing about 1,200 people and taking some 250 hostages, some of whom are still being held. The Gaza health ministry, which does not distinguish between combatants and civilians in its death tolls, said the war has killed 45,000 Palestinians.

It accuses State Department officials under President Joe Biden of creating a series of high barriers when vetting Israel's military for Leahy law violations. Former State officials, including Blaha, have accused the U.S. of effectively exempting Israel from enforcement, and the lawsuit offers some details for the first time.

It claims obstacles include setting up a multimember committee from the State and Defense departments in 2020 solely to consider possible violations by the Israeli military and uniquely requiring the deputy secretary of state to sign off on any findings of violations.

The process also carves out an additional loophole for Israel, the lawsuit says, giving its government alone a chance to stave off a restriction of military support over a human rights abuses by showing it has addressed the problem.

## US repatriates Gitmo detainee to Kenya

The Washington Post

One of the last remaining 30 prisoners held at the Guantanamo Bay detention center was repatriated Tuesday to Kenya, the Pentagon announced.

Mohammed Abdul Malik Bajabu, a Kenyan national, was arrested by Kenyan authorities in 2007, accused of belonging to al-Qaida's branch in East Africa. He was among the last five detainees to arrive at the U.S. detention facility in Cuba, established after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, that once held hundreds of alleged al-Qaida operatives.

A Pentagon review board said it had considered Bajabu's "low level of training and lack of leadership role in his pre-detention activities," as well as his family ties, and compliance while in detention, in determining he could be transferred.

Bajabu and 15 others were cleared for release a number of years ago by the Periodic Review Board, established by President Barack Obama as part of an unsuccessful effort to clear the facility and close it. President Joe Biden said early in his term that he planned to close the prison. To do so, the administration must negotiate transfer deals with detainees' home governments or third countries.

The administration has hoped to move all of the cleared prisoners before Biden leaves office Jan. 20.

## NATION

# Bunker sales increase as nuclear threats rise

## Experts warn they won't provide expected protection

By **MARTHA MENDOZA**  
Associated Press

When Bernard Jones Jr. and his wife, Doris, built their dream home, they didn't hold back. A grotto swimming pool with a waterfall for hot summer days. A home theater for cozy winter nights. A fruit orchard to harvest in fall. And a vast underground bunker in case disaster strikes.

"The world's not becoming a safer place," he said. "We wanted to be prepared."

Under a nondescript metal hatch near the private basketball court, there's a hidden staircase that leads down into rooms with beds for about 25 people, bathrooms and two kitchens, all backed by a self-sufficient energy source.

With water, electricity, clean air and food, they felt ready for any disaster, even a nuclear blast, at their bucolic home in California's Inland Empire.

"If there was a nuclear strike, would you rather go into the living room or go into a bunker? If you had one, you'd go there too," said Jones, who said he reluctantly sold the home two years ago.

Global security leaders are warning nuclear threats are growing as weapons spending surged to \$91.4 billion last year. At the same time, private bunker sales are on the rise globally, from small metal boxes to crawl inside of to extravagant underground mansions.

Critics warn these bunkers create a false perception that a nuclear war is survivable. They argue that people planning to live through an atomic blast aren't focusing on the real and current dangers posed by nuclear threats, and the critical need to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Meanwhile, government disaster experts say bunkers aren't necessary. A Federal Emergency Management Agency 100-page guide on responding to a nuclear detonation focuses on having the public get inside and stay inside, ideally in a basement and away from outside walls for at least a day. Those existing spaces can provide protection from radioactive fallout, says FEMA.

But increasingly, buyers say bunkers offer a sense of security. The market for U.S. bomb and fallout shelters is forecast to grow from \$137 million last year to \$175 million by 2030, according to a market research report from BlueWeave Consulting. The re-

port says major growth factors include "the rising threat of nuclear or terrorist attacks or civil unrest."

### Building bunkers

"People are uneasy and they want a safe place to put their family. And they have this attitude that it's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it," said Atlas Survival Shelters CEO Ron Hubbard, amid showers of sparks and the loud buzz of welding at his bunker factory, which he says is the world's largest in Sulphur Springs, Texas.

Hubbard said COVID lockdowns, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war have driven sales.

On Nov. 21, in the hours after Russia's first-ever use of an experimental, hypersonic ballistic missile to attack Ukraine, Hubbard said his phone rang nonstop.

Four callers ended up buying bunkers in one day, he said, and more ended up ordering doors and other parts for shelters they were already building.

Hubbard said his bunkers are built for all disasters.

"They're good for anything from a tornado to a hurricane to nuclear fallout, to a pandemic to even a volcano erupting," he said, sweeping his arms toward a massive warehouse where more than 50 different bunkers were under construction.

A loaded shotgun at arm's length and metal mesh window shields to block Molotov cocktails nearby, Hubbard said he started his company after building his own bunker about 10 years ago. He says callers ask about prices — \$20,000 to multimillions, averaging \$500,000 — and installations — they can go just about anywhere. He said most days he sells at least one bunker.

Under Hubbard's doomsday scenario, global tensions could lead to World War III, a situation he is prepared to live through.

"The good news about nuclear warfare," he said, "if there ever was any, that it's very survivable if you're not killed in the initial blast."

He's not wrong, say U.S. government disaster preparedness experts.

### 'Most robust building'

"Look, this fallout exposure is entirely preventable because it is something that happens after the



Hubbard stands in a bunker his company is building for a client.

detonation," said Brooke Buddemeier a radiation safety specialist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where the U.S. government designs nuclear weapons. Buddemeier and his colleagues are tasked with evaluating what could happen after an attack and how best to survive. "There's going to be a fairly obvious nuclear explosion event, a large cloud. So just getting inside, away from where those particles fall, can keep you and your family safe."

Buddemeier and others in the U.S. government are trying to get Americans — who decades ago hid under desks during nuclear attack drills — educated about how to respond.

After a deadly and deafening blast, a bright flash and a mushroom cloud, it will take about 15 minutes for the radioactive fallout to arrive for those a mile or more away from ground zero, said Michael Dillon, a scientist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

"It's going to literally be sand falling on your head, and you're going to want to get out of that situation. You want to go to your most robust building," he said. In their models, they estimate people may need to stay inside for a day or two before evacuating.

The government's efforts to educate the public were reinvigorated after a false alarm missile alert in Hawaii in 2018 caused widespread panic.

The emergency alert, which was sent to cellphones statewide just before 8:10 a.m., said: "BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT IN-



PHOTOS BY LM OTERO/AP

Ron Hubbard, owner of Atlas Survival Shelters, walks over to concrete bunkers during a tour of his operations in Sulphur Springs, Texas, on Aug. 27.

BOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL."

For the next 40 minutes there were traffic jams, workers running into and out of buildings, families huddling in their bathrooms, students gathering in gyms, drivers blocking tunnels, all in an attempt to seek shelter, without any clear idea of what "seek immediate shelter" actually meant.

Today the federal government offers a guide to prepare citizens for a nuclear attack that advises people to find a basement or the center of a large building and stay there, possibly for a few days, until they get word about where to go next.

"Gently brush your pet's coat to remove any fallout particles" it says, adding that the 15-minute delay between bomb and fallout allows "enough time for you to be able to prevent significant radiation exposure."

Jeffrey Schlegelmilch, who directs the FEMA-backed National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, said "the scenarios of a nuclear detonation are not all or nothing."

If a small number of weapons detonate rather than all-out war, he said, sheltering inside a large building to avoid the fallout could save lives.

### 'Aren't going to protect'

Nonproliferation advocates bristle at the bunkers, shelters or any suggestion that a nuclear war is survivable.

"Bunkers are, in fact, not a tool to survive a nuclear war, but a tool to allow a population to psychologically endure the possibility of a nuclear war," said Alicia Sanders-Zakre at the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

Sanders-Zakre called radiation the "uniquely horrific aspect of nuclear weapons," and noted that even surviving the fallout doesn't prevent long-lasting, intergenerational health crises. "Ultimately, the only solution to protect populations from nuclear war is to

eliminate nuclear weapons."

Researcher Sam Lair at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies says U.S. leaders stopped talking about bunkers decades ago.

"The political costs incurred by causing people to think about shelters again is not worth it to leaders because it forces people to think about what they would do after nuclear war," he said. "That's something that very, very few people want to think about. This makes people feel vulnerable."

Lair said building bunkers seems futile, even if they work in the short term.

"Even if a nuclear exchange is perhaps more survivable than many people think, I think the aftermath will be uglier than many people think as well," he said. "The fundamental wrenching that it would do to our way of life would be profound."

That's been a serious concern of Massachusetts Congressman James McGovern for almost 50 years.

"If we ever get to a point where there's all out nuclear war, underground bunkers aren't going to protect people," he said. "Instead, we ought to be investing our resources and our energy trying to talk about a nuclear weapons freeze, initially."

Next, he said, "We should work for the day when we get rid of all nuclear weapons."

Year after year he introduces legislation pushing for nonproliferation, but looking out his office window at the Capitol, he said he's disappointed by the lack of debate over what will be a \$1 trillion expenditure to build and modernize the U.S. arsenal.

McGovern pushed back against FEMA's efforts to prepare the public for a nuclear attack by advising people to take shelter.

"What a stupid thing to say that we all just need to know where to hide and where to avoid the most impacts of nuclear radiation. I mean, really, that's chilling when you hear people try to rationalize nuclear war that way," he said.

## MIDEAST

# Netanyahu says troops to stay in Syria buffer zone

By MELANIE LIDMAN  
Associated Press

JERUSALEM—Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday that Israeli forces will stay in a buffer zone on the Syrian border, seized after the ouster of Syria's President Bashar Assad, until another arrangement is in place "that ensures Israel's security."

Netanyahu made the comments from the summit of Mount Hermon—the highest peak in the area—inside Syria, about 6 miles from the border with the Israel-held Golan Heights.

It appeared to be the first time a sitting Israeli leader had set foot that far into Syria. Netanyahu said he had been on the same mountaintop 53 years ago as a soldier, but the summit's importance to Israel's security has only increased given recent events.

Israel seized a swath of southern Syria along the border with the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights days

after Assad was ousted by rebels last week.

Israel's capture of the buffer zone, a roughly 155-square-mile demilitarized area in Syrian territory, has sparked condemnation, with critics accusing Israel of violating a 1974 ceasefire and possibly exploiting the chaos in Syria in the wake of Assad's ouster to make a land grab.

"We will stay ... until another arrangement is found that ensures Israel's security," said Netanyahu who had traveled to the buffer zone on Tuesday with Defense Minister Israel Katz.

Katz said he instructed the Israeli military to quickly establish a presence, including fortifications, in anticipation of what could be an extended stay in the area. "The summit of the Hermon is the eyes of the state of Israel to identify our enemies who are nearby and far away," he said.

An Israeli military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in

line with military regulations, said there is no plan to evacuate the Syrians living in villages within the buffer zone.

The buffer zone between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights was created by the U.N. after the 1973 Mideast war. A U.N. force of about 1,100 troops had patrolled the area since then.

A U.N. spokesman said Tuesday that the advance of Israeli troops, however long it lasts, violates the deal that set up the buffer zone.

That agreement "needs to be respected, and occupation is occupation, whether it lasts a week, a month or a year, it remains occupation," spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

There was no immediate comment from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the insurgent group that led the ouster of Assad, or from Arab states.

Israel still controls the Golan Heights, which it captured from Syria during the 1967 Mideast war and



ISRAEL GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE/AP

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left, visits Israeli forces in a buffer zone inside Syria on Tuesday.

later annexed—a move not recognized by most of the international community. Mount Hermon's summit is divided between the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights, Lebanon, and Syria. Only the United States recognizes Israel's control of the Golan Heights.

With Assad gone, a top U.N. official said Tuesday that militant leaders who have taken over Syria have committed to "an ambitious scaling-up of vital humanitarian support" for millions in desperate need of food and other aid.

The leader of the insurgent HTS

— Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Mohammed al-Golani—and the country's caretaker prime minister, Mohammed al-Bashir, pledged to support the movement of aid from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and other neighboring countries "for as long as humanitarian operations are required," said Tom Fletcher.

Fletcher, who heads the the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, known as OCHA, spoke to the U.N. Security Council members from Damascus via a video link.

# Task of unearthing Syria's mass graves is just beginning

By SARAH EL DEEB  
Associated Press

NAJHA, Syria—Bones are visible here and there among the mounds of earth in a field south of Damascus, one of the mass graves around Syria believed to hold the bodies of tens of thousands of people killed under Bashar Assad's rule. With his ouster, residents, forensic teams and international groups face what could be a yearslong task of unearthing the dead.

In this site alone, by the town of Najha, several tens of thousands of bodies could have been buried, said Stephen Rapp, a former U.S. ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues who was visiting the site Tuesday. Some are believed buried under already existing graves of a regular cemetery nearby, he said.

It's too soon to start digging, and it's unknown how many bodies remain there or if some were moved over the years. But here and there, bones were visible, including some vertebrae from a human spine and fragments of a femur.

Rapp is working with two organizations that aim to help document mass graves and identify officials implicated in war crimes—the Commission for International Justice and Accountability and the Syria Emergency Task Force. They and other groups have for years been remotely gathering witness testimonies and satellite imagery to track and estimate the size of mass graves that swelled



HUSSEIN MALLA/AP

Syrian fighters from rebel group observe a location identified as a mass grave for detainees killed under rule of Bashar Assad in Najha, south of Damascus, Syria, on Tuesday.

from crackdowns by Assad's feared security agencies, particularly in the early years of Syria's civil war that began in 2011.

With Assad's fall 10 days ago, they are now able to see them firsthand. That gives the chance to "really corroborate what we already know about the machinery of death that was maintained and operated by the Assad regime," Rapp said.

"It is all so unthinkable that this is happening in the 21st Century."

More than 150,000 Syrians remain unaccounted for after disappearing into Assad's prisons and most are believed to be in mass graves around the country, said Mounir al-Mustafa, deputy director of the White Helmets, a Syrian search and rescue team.

An array of prisons run by the military, intelligence and security

agencies were notorious for systematic torture, mass executions and brutal conditions that killed other inmates from disease and starvation, according to human rights groups, whistle-blowers, and former detainees.

The White Helmets have received reports of at least 13 mass grave sites around the country, eight of them near Damascus, including Najha, al-Mustafa said.

"We can't open these mass graves yet. That is a massive task to document and take samples and give codes to the corpses before we can identify those people," he said.

The priority is to take stock of the unidentified bodies above ground, those in hospital morgues and in clashes, al-Mustafa said.

Rapp, who arrived in Syria on Monday, visited another suspected grave site, in al-Qutayfah, 23 miles north of the capital. He plans to meet with officials from the new transitional government installed since the lightning offensive on Damascus on Dec. 8 that forced Assad to flee the country. He intends to discuss ways to secure and eventually excavate the sites, gather samples from remains for identification and preserve thousands of documents discovered in many security branches and prisons.

"There needs to be a process. That is what I will be engaging with government representatives about," Rapp said. He said he will also see what the international community can do to assist the government in criminal prosecutions and in ensuring they meet international standards.

On Monday, residents and medical teams began on their own digging up a mass grave in the village of Izraa in southern Daraa province. The remains of over 30 corpses were uncovered, and the teams estimated the total number could reach 70.

## WORLD

# Rescuers dig for survivors of violent earthquake in Vanuatu

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — Vanuatu's capital was without water on Wednesday, a day after reservoirs were destroyed by a violent magnitude 7.3 earthquake that wrought havoc on the South Pacific island nation, with the number of people killed and injured expected to rise.

The government's disaster management office said early Wednesday that 14 deaths were confirmed, but hours later said nine had been verified by the main hospital. The number was "expected to increase" as people remained trapped in fallen buildings, a spokesperson said. About 200 people have been treated for injuries.

Two of those killed were Chinese nationals, according to China's official Xinhua News Agency, which cited Gu Zihua, an official at the Chinese embassy in Vanuatu.

Frantic rescue efforts that be-

gan at flattened buildings after the quake hit Tuesday afternoon continued 30 hours later, with dozens working in dust and heat with little water to seek those yelling for help inside. A few more survivors were extracted from the rubble of downtown buildings in Port Vila, also the country's largest city, while others remained trapped and some were found dead.

A near-total telecommunications collapse meant people struggled to confirm their relatives' safety. Some providers began to reestablish phone service but connections were patchy.

Internet service had not been restored because the submarine cable supplying it was damaged, the operator said.

The earthquake hit at a depth of 35 miles and was centered 19 miles west of the capital of Vanuatu, a group of 80 islands home to about 330,000 people. A tsunami warning was called off less than

two hours after the quake, but dozens of large aftershocks continued to rattle the country.

The Asia-Pacific head of the International Federation of Red Cross, Katie Greenwood, said it was not clear how many people were still missing or killed.

"We have anecdotal information coming from people at the search and rescue site that are fairly confident that unfortunately those numbers will rise," she said.

The capital's main medical facility, Vila Central Hospital, was badly damaged and patients were moved to a military camp. Clement Chipokolo, Vanuatu country director at the Christian relief agency World Vision, said health care services, already strained before the quake, were overwhelmed.

While power was out in swathes of Port Vila, the biggest fear among aid agencies was the lack of water.



ADRIENNE SURPRENANT/AP

People bring goods for victims of cyclone Chido in Mayotte at the House of Mayotte, in Saint-Denis, Réunion Island, on Wednesday.

## Overnight curfew imposed in cyclone-ravaged Mayotte

Associated Press

SAINT-DENIS, Reunion — French authorities on Tuesday announced an overnight curfew in Mayotte as they sought to stabilize the island territory in the aftermath of Cyclone Chido, the most intense storm to hit the Indian Ocean archipelago in 90 years.

The French military said it is sending four to five planes a day with up to 50 tons of assistance, including food, water and medicine. Hundreds of military personnel have arrived since the weekend in Mayotte, an island group off Africa that is France's poorest territory.

The official death toll from Saturday's cyclone rose to 22 according to the latest report from Mayotte Hospital quoted by Ambdilwahedou Soumaila, the mayor of the capital, Mamoudzou.

The newly appointed Prime Minister François Bayrou provided an update later on Tuesday saying that more than 1,500 people were injured, including more than 200 critically. However, authorities fear hundreds and possibly

thousands of people have died.

French President Emmanuel Macron will travel to Mayotte on Thursday, his office said. "Our compatriots are living through the worst just a few thousand kilometers away, and I will be by their side in a few hours in Mayotte," Macron said in a statement.

"The priority today is water and food," Soumaila told RFI radio, adding that "there are people who have unfortunately died where the bodies are starting to decompose that can create a sanitary problem."

The curfew requires people to stay in their homes between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. as authorities try to prevent looting of damaged buildings.

Speaking on France Inter radio Tuesday morning, Mayotte lawmaker Estelle Youssouffa described the challenges in accounting for victims, especially among migrants.

"The real toll of those swept away by the mud, winds and tin from shanty towns will never be known," Youssouffa said.

## Pirates demand \$10M in ransom after hijacking Chinese-owned fishing vessel

Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia — The pirates who hijacked a Chinese-owned fishing vessel with 18 crew off the northeastern coast of Somalia last month are demanding \$10 million in ransom, according to a Somali official.

The hijackers also shared photos on social media of their captives surrounded by armed men on the ship's deck.

The vessel was hijacked in late November and taken to Xaafuun

district in the semi-autonomous state of Puntland, where it is being held along with the captives. The ship's security guards later joined forces with the armed men from the coastal region.

A Somali government official said the vessel was issued with a fishing license by Puntland in 2020, but the license had expired.

The official spoke on Sunday on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter.

He did not elaborate on the ransom demand.

The European Union's anti-piracy naval force, EUNAVFOR Atalanta, last week classified the incident as "robbery at sea".

The hijacking underscores the persistent challenges of maritime security in Somalia's waters. Somalia has for years been blighted by piracy, which peaked in 2011, when the United Nations says more than 160 attacks were recorded off the Somali coast.

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WORLD

# Deadly Nigerian violence linked to church breakup

Associated Press

A religious schism has turned deadly in Nigeria, with a church member fatally shot and two young children killed as homes were set ablaze, according to United Methodist News Service.

The news service said the reported violence Sunday stemmed from a schism in the worldwide United Methodist Church over its decision to repeal LGBTQ bans — and the ensuing formation of the new Global Methodist Church by breakaway conservative churches.

According to the news service, a United Methodist church member was shot and killed in a confrontation between both factions in Taraba, a state in northeast Nigeria.

Homes were set ablaze, claiming the lives of two children, ages 2 and 4, of the overseer of a United Methodist school and nursery, the news service said. Another 10 church members were reported injured.

The worldwide Global Methodist Church held its inaugural general conference earlier this year. It was created by churches breaking away from the United Methodist Church — an international denomination with a strong U.S. presence.

While the UMC, at its general conference in May, lifted its longstanding bans on LGBTQ ordination and same-sex marriage, it also granted local conferences the right to set their own standards. The West Africa Central Conference,

which includes Nigeria, restricts marriage to between a man and a woman and instructs its churches to follow national laws on LGBTQ issues, according to the news service.

In a statement, local United Methodist bishops condemned the violence and asked that there be no retribution.

“We are outraged that such an atrocity would occur among Christians, especially brothers and sisters who were once part of the same Methodist family,” they said in a statement. “We further urge GMC members, at all levels, to put an immediate end to the violence and refrain from disseminating misinformation that fuels fear and disdain that can lead to violence.”



BRUNA PRADO/AP

A firefighter dressed as Santa Claus rescues a man on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro on Tuesday.

# Brazilian Santa uses Jet Ski for deliveries to disabled kids in Rio

Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO — Santa Claus is coming to town ... on a Jet Ski.

Dozens of children with disabilities gathered on Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana beach Tuesday to receive presents — and joy — from the white-bearded man himself, a joint effort by the city's firefighters and nonprofit associations.

Under 80 degrees Fahrenheit, firefighter sergeant Thiago Carvalho de Paiva wore Santa Claus costumes in tropical Rio, moving through the water as beachgoers cheered.

“We wanted to find a special way for Santa Claus to arrive,”

said Renato Grigorovski, a spokesman for Rio's firefighters' department.

The day began with a show of sniffing dogs displaying their skills and continued through lunch, with popcorn and acai bowls. The celebration reached its peak when Santa arrived on a Jet Ski, making a grand entrance on the shores of Brazil's postcard city.

But it was not all fun and games for Santa. After delivering presents, De Paiva quickly jumped back into the water to rescue three people who appeared to have trouble returning to shore.

No injuries were reported, firefighters said.

# Iran pauses implementation of stricter headscarf law for women

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran has paused the process of implementing a new, stricter law on women's mandatory headscarf, or hijab, an official said — a bill that many believe could have reignited the protests that engulfed the Islamic Republic after the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini.

The controversial law, which was approved by the parliament in

September 2023, will not be sent to the government as planned this week, according to one of the country's vice presidents. The development effectively means that Iran has halted enacting the legislation.

The law levies harsher punishments for women who refuse to wear the hijab and for businesses that serve them, penalties previously rejected by Iran's reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian as

he tries to restart talks with the West over sanctions imposed on Iran over its nuclear program.

“According to the discussions held, it was decided that this law will not be referred to the government by the parliament for now,” Shahram Dabiri, the vice president in charge of parliamentary affairs, was quoted as saying in an interview Monday with the pro-reform Ham Mihan daily.

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# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Man sues for wrongful conviction in robbery

**TN** MEMPHIS — A man who spent more than 20 years behind bars before he was exonerated of robbing a Memphis music club is suing the city and 10 police officers, alleging they made up evidence that led to his wrongful conviction and a lengthy prison sentence.

The federal lawsuit filed last week by Artis Whitehead, 61, says Memphis Police Department officers fabricated evidence that led to charges of armed robbery and kidnapping in the 2002 robbery of B.B. King's Blues Club on Beale Street.

Whitehead, who is Black, was tried, convicted and sentenced in 2003 to 249 years in prison. But Whitehead's conviction and sentence were thrown out in December 2023 and he was released from prison. A Memphis judge determined that no physical evidence connected Whitehead to the robbery and that police fabricated information about the crime, including false identifications of Whitehead by club employees who had been held hostage and robbed.

## 2 teens killed, 4 injured at makeshift nightclub

**TX** HOUSTON — Two teens were killed and four were injured — including a 13-year-old girl — in a shooting at a makeshift club in Houston, police said Sunday.

Officers arriving at the site late Saturday night found “a very hectic scene — a large crowd of people running out of a makeshift club,” Assistant Chief Luis Menendez-Sierra said at a news conference.

Police have not yet identified a suspect and have asked those who were at the event to call police with any information. Police said some witnesses told detectives that they saw a man wearing all black, including a hooded sweatshirt and a black mask covering his face, shoot a pistol into a crowd of people at the venue.

Police said a 16-year-old male died at the scene and a 14-year-old female died at the hospital. The four who were injured, all females, were hospitalized.

Menendez-Sierra said most of those attending the event in an empty business were juveniles.

## Vehicles to warn until rear riders buckle up

**MI** DETROIT — Starting in September 2027, all new passenger vehicles in the U.S. will have to sound a warning if rear-seat passengers don't buckle up.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said Monday that it finalized the rule, which also requires enhanced warnings when front seat belts aren't fastened.

The agency estimates that the



KEVIN RIVOLI, THE CITIZEN/AP

## Pining for pins

**Auburn's Jack Sliwka winds up during a bowling match against Baldwinsville at Rainbow Lanes in Weedsport, N.Y., on Monday.**

new rule will save 50 lives per year and prevent 500 injuries when fully in effect, according to a statement.

The new rule will apply to passenger cars, trucks, buses except for school buses, and multipurpose vehicles weighing up to 10,000 pounds.

## Study suggests Saturn's rings also 4.5B years old

**FL** CAPE CANAVERAL — New research suggests that Saturn's rings may be older than they look — possibly as old as the planet.

Instead of being a youthful 400 million years old as commonly thought, the icy, shimmering rings could be around 4.5 billion years old just like Saturn, a Japanese-led team reported Monday.

The scientists surmise Saturn's rings may be pristine not because they are young but because they are dirt-resistant.

Saturn's rings are long thought to be between 100 million and 400 million years old based on more

than a decade of observations by NASA's Cassini spacecraft before its demise in 2017. Images by Cassini showed no evidence of any darkening of the rings by impacting micrometeoroids — space rock particles smaller than a grain of sand — prompting scientists to conclude the rings formed long after the planet.

Through computer modeling, the Institute of Science Tokyo's Ryuki Hyodo and his team demonstrated that micrometeoroids vaporize once slamming into the rings, with little if any dark and dirty residue left behind. They found that the resulting charged particles get sucked toward Saturn or out into space, keeping the rings spotless and challenging the baby rings theory. Their results appear in the journal *Nature Geoscience*.

## Death penalty sought for 8 charged in killing

**AL** BIRMINGHAM — Alabama prosecutors are seeking the death penalty for the

eight people charged in the kidnapping, assault and killing of a 20-year-old mother.

Jefferson County deputy district attorney Charissa Henrich filed notice with the court on Friday that she would seek the death penalty if any of the suspects are convicted of capital murder. Henrich characterized the case as “especially heinous, atrocious, or cruel compared to other capital offenses.”

Mahogany Jackson sent a text to her family the morning of Feb. 25 that shared her location and said that she had been kidnapped, according to Scott Thurmond, the police chief at the time. The location appeared to show that she was at the residence of someone she knew. The next day, law enforcement found her body on a street in southwest Birmingham. She died from a gunshot wound.

Birmingham homicide detective Mark Green testified that videos taken by the suspects themselves and submitted by an unnamed witness show that Jackson was kidnapped and physically and

sexually assaulted before three of the suspects drove her to where she was shot and left on a street, AL.com reported.

Five of the suspects were initially charged with felony murder, but a grand jury in September upgraded the charges to capital murder.

## 10 winners of the 'I Love My Librarian Award' feted

**NY** NEW YORK — At Wisconsin's Mukwonago Community Library, director Abby Armour isn't only committed to providing books and other media for local residents.

Armour, one of 10 recipients this year of an “I Love My Librarian Award,” has been overseeing the cataloging of some 12,000 Native American artifacts donated to the library in the 1960s and making sure they are returned to the tribes that have claimed them. Armour's efforts led to members of her community nominating her for the honor presented by the American Library Association, which gives each of the 10 winners \$5,000 and a \$750 stipend for an association gathering next month in Phoenix.

The other librarians cited by the ALA are based everywhere from Morgantown, West Virginia, to Wailuku, Hawaii.

The I Love My Librarian Award was established 2008, and is sponsored by the Carnegie Corp. of New York, with assistance from the New York Public Library.

## 3 dogs that fatally mauled owner euthanized

**CA** SAN DIEGO — The San Diego Humane Society said it has euthanized three dogs that fatally mauled their owner last week at a neighborhood park while horrified onlookers tried to help him.

A second person was hospitalized with bite injuries following the attack Friday afternoon at the children's playground area of Mesa Viking Neighborhood Park in the Mira Mesa area, the San Diego Union-Tribune reported.

The owner of the three XL bully dogs died at a hospital. He has not been publicly identified.

One of the dogs was immediately secured in a vehicle and officers managed to corral the other two after they ran from the scene. The Humane Society said Sunday that all three dogs were destroyed after a second owner agreed to the humane euthanasia.

FOX 5 San Diego reported that other people at the park may have used a shovel and golf club to try to intervene before police officers arrived and used a stun gun on the dogs to break up the attack.

XL bullies are not officially recognized as their own breed, but are a larger version of the Standard American Bully, according to the National Kennel Club.

## FACES

# Breathing life into 'Mufasa'

Star, director, composer discuss the process of developing the Disney lion's origin story

BY JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.  
Associated Press

**W**hen Aaron Pierre was cast as Mufasa, he felt the weight of following in the late James Earl Jones' legendary footsteps. But instead of letting the pressure roar too loudly, he harnessed his nerves to breathe fresh life into his young lion character.

"I had a lot of nerves and I actually think those nerves served me because that is what the adolescent version of that lion is," Pierre said about his leading role in "Mufasa: The Lion King." He took the reins as the new voice of Mufasa after Jones played the iconic King Mufasa in both the 1994 and 2019 versions of Disney's "The Lion King."

Here are some details and insights about "Mufasa," coming to theaters on Friday:

## A tribute to Jones

Jones' voice isn't heard in the movie, but it opens with a brief tribute to the beloved actor, who died in September.

Pierre had hoped to meet Jones for the first time but didn't get the chance. Now, he's determined to honor his idol by building on his character's legacy.

"I imagine that an individual experiencing those things might have moments of not being sure, and I wasn't sure about myself," he said. "I tried to channel those emotions, as opposed to being something that prohibited me, as something that propelled me forward. I gave it my best. I hope that I was able to serve James Earl Jones and honor James Earl Jones and the character."

## Mufasa's origin story

The live-action prequel offers a fresh exploration into Mufasa's origin.

After the events in the 2019 film, Rafiki takes on the role of a storytelling sage, weaving the untold tale of Mufasa for Kiara — the spirited granddaughter of Mufasa and the daughter of Simba and Nala. The duo Timon and Pumbaa stick around for Rafiki's flashback.

Rafiki reveals that Mufasa's cubhood wasn't all royal ease and sunlit horizons. After a heart-wrenching tragedy of being sepa-

rated from his parents, young Mufasa finds himself lost and alone.

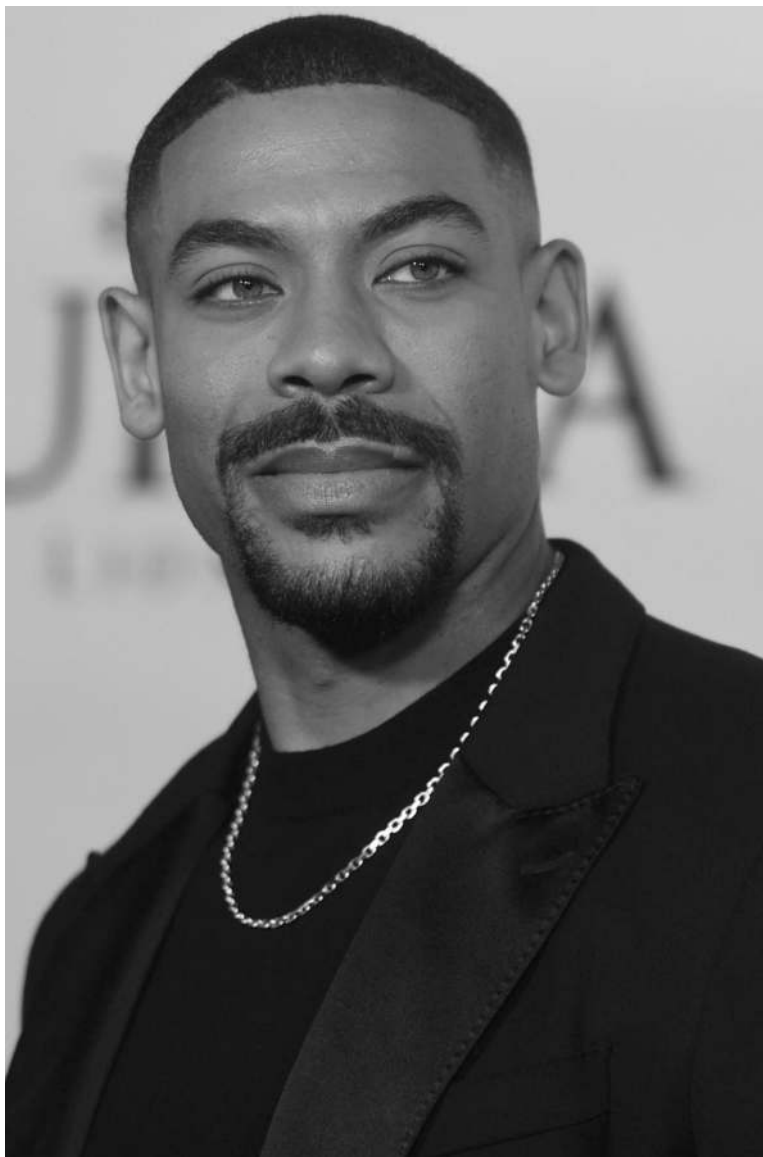
"He's been separated from his family. He's an orphan. He's been ostracized; he's been dismissed. He's been degraded," said Pierre, the British actor who's starred in the "Genius: MLK/X" series and the Netflix action hit "Rebel Ridge."

Mufasa was a stray until fate led him to Taka, the compassionate heir of a different pride. Taka, with his fierce yet nurturing mother, offer the displaced cub a new beginning in their pride.

Over the years, Mufasa and Taka's bond grows from camaraderie to brotherhood. But their loyalty is put to the ultimate test during a journey that uncovers Mufasa's true origins and rightful kingdom as well as the reasons behind Taka becoming Scar.

"There was a bit of Taka resting on the privilege that he was supposed to be afforded," said Kelvin Harrison Jr., who plays Taka. He drew some inspiration from Jeremy Irons, who voiced the villainous Scar in the 1994 original.

"There's a little bit of 'Well, it seems like I need to command attention,'" continued Harrison, who starred in "The Trial of the Chicago 7." "It seems like the only way to win over a pride of anything is to assert dominance. That was Taka's version of that, which ended up being a staple as Scar."



PHOTOS BY RICHARD SHOTWELL, INVISION/AP

**Aaron Pierre voices Mufasa in "Mufasa: The Lion King." James Earl Jones first played the character on screen in the 1994 and 2019 versions of Disney's "The Lion King."**



**Beyoncé's daughter Blue Ivy Carter plays Kiara, the daughter of Simba and Nala and granddaughter of Mufasa, in the film.**

## Blue Ivy's major debut

Beyoncé has a small role in "Mufasa," but her daughter Blue Ivy Carter is the family's shining star in the film.

The eldest daughter of Beyoncé and Jay-Z makes her feature film debut, lending her voice as Kiara, the daughter of Simba and Nala, who is portrayed by her mother.

"She came into this prepared," said director Barry Jenkins, who heard Blue Ivy's narration on the audio book of Oscar winner Matthew Cherry's "Hair Love." He said the 12-year-old displayed skills that could not be ignored.

"She was the main character, and this whole movie starts with

just voices," Jenkins said. "They're doing almost like a radio play and hearing that quality in her voice, I thought, 'Oh, I think that's my character.' Then she auditioned and it was clear that she is my character."

Jenkins likens the Kiara character to the many children who will see the movie. In the film, she eagerly listens to John Kani's Rafiki tell her grandfather's origin story.

"They get to see themselves in that character and she's learning the story about Mufasa," Jenkins said. "She's learning how he went through the same trials and tribulations, the same growth as she is."

## Miranda's contributions

Composer Lin-Manuel Miranda was up for the challenge to leave his own imprint on the storied franchise. He said there are seven new songs on the soundtrack.

"I was emboldened by the fact that there's the '94 original, which is like an immortal classic," said Miranda. "But there's also the Broadway musical and there's also Beyoncé's album 'The Lion King: The Gift,' which I think expanded the musical vocabulary of what can be a 'Lion King' song. So I felt a lot of space to create because I felt like 'Lion King' is practically a genre of music and there was room to play and find new stuff within it."

## Judge orders worldwide ban on Adele song

From wire reports

It seems Adele will face the music for alleged plagiarism as a judge in Brazil orders a worldwide ban on one of the pop star's songs.

Adele's song "Million Years Ago" must be pulled from global platforms — including streaming services — judge Victor Torres ordered in an injunction filed Friday in Rio De Janeiro, the Agence France Presse reported. The order reportedly threatens the Brazilian branches of Adele's labels, Sony Music Entertainment and Universal Music, with an \$8,000 fine for each "act of non-compliance."

Torres ordered the labels to stop "immediately and globally, from using, reproducing, editing, distributing or commercializing" the ballad from Adele's 2015 album "25," which has been accused of lifting from the samba classic "Mulheres," performed by Martinho Da Vila. The Brazilian song was written by composer Toninho Geraes, who sued Adele for plagiarism in 2021, according to Brazilian outlet Veja Magazine. Adele and music producer Greg Kurstin co-wrote "Million Years Ago."

Torres filed the injunction pending the ongoing plagiarism case, according to AFP. Geraes' attorney Fredimio Trotta told AFP he condemns the "parasitic use" of Brazilian music and that his firm will work to ensure that Adele's song is kept off radio, TV, streaming services and other platforms worldwide.

Adele's "Million Years Ago" also faced scrutiny in 2015 from fans of late Kurdish singer Ahmet Kaya. Listeners drew comparisons and found similarities between Kaya's 1985 song "Acilara Tutunmak" and the Adele track amid its release, NME reported at the time. A legal battle never spawned from the alleged plagiarism.

## Other news

■ A new novel from Kiran Desai, her first fiction since the Booker Prize-winning "The Inheritance of Loss" came out nearly 20 years ago, will be published next September. Desai's "The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny" is scheduled for release by Hogarth, an imprint of the Random House Publishing Group. Hogarth calls the novel "a sweeping tale" of two Indians finding their way in the U.S. amid personal and historical forces.

■ Actor Diane Delano, best known as Officer Barbara Semanski in the CBS series "Northern Exposure," died of cancer Dec. 13 at her home in Sherman Oaks, Calif. She was 67.

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## German political chaos threatens a wobbly world

BY MARC FISHER

*The Washington Post*

War, disorder and regime change rattle the Middle East. Russia and Iran, two of the world's major disrupters, suffer humiliating setbacks. China, despite a troubled economy, presses its expanding ambitions in much of the developing world. And now the German government collapses.

This is the sort of confluence of world events that historians will later look back on and wonder why people at the time failed to recognize an elemental pivot point.

All this as the West's U.S. anchor seems incapable of — or not interested in — holding the ship of state steady.

Monday's fall of the Berlin governing coalition led by Social Democrat Olaf Scholz is in some ways strictly about Germany. Watching German TV coverage of the momentous vote in the Bundestag to dump this government and call new elections, I was struck by how the news was perceived by Germans as confirmation of two American political adages: "All politics is local," and "It's the economy, stupid." If you took the German coverage as your guide, this collapse is mainly about threats to trim pension and welfare benefits.

But behind the threat is a classic and abiding German anxiety: a fear that the country's enviable stability is no longer dependable. And that takes us straight to the bigger picture, which is not at all parochial.

Since World War II, the U.S. role in Europe has been to provide security — against Russia, but also within Europe. Ukraine aside, this is the longest period of peace among European nations in centuries, and while surely the European Union is a key reason for that, it's the assurance of U.S. support and defense through the Atlantic alliance that provides the foundation.

Now that foundation is looking pretty dang shaky. Although the Republican Party seems

hopelessly tangled up between its long-standing internationalism and its ascendant Trumpian America-First-ism, the president-elect is threatening to act on his decades-old annoyance with NATO and the Europeans whom he views as leeches and layabouts. This is not a recipe for effective U.S. leadership.

No country has believed more in the European experiment, and in the value and goodness of U.S. leadership, than Germany. It's a near-miracle of history that West Germany's enduring postwar democracy was in part inspired, imposed and sustained by exactly the country that had just reduced much of Germany to rubble.

In every decade since the war, rumblings of right-wing extremism have greeted each dip in the country's economic or political fortunes. Yet Germans, both before and after the reunification of East and West that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, have consistently put their trust and effort into a philosophy of Stability Über Alles.

Now, the far right is surging once more, in the form of an anti-immigrant political party, the Alternative for Germany, which is gaining votes even as the government's domestic security agency keeps tabs on the threat it poses to the country's constitution and democracy.

That surge is happening at the same time that the two major parties, the conservative Christian Democrats and the leftist Social Democrats, have — much like our own Republicans and Democrats — lost their clear visions for the future and, as a result, seen a muddling of their traditional followers.

In a European parliamentary system, when such consensus fails, disorder can follow quickly compared with the U.S. federal system. Our no-confidence votes arrive over years rather than mere weeks or months. Other parliamentary systems, in France and Britain, are struggling along with Germany's

to assure a stable confidence in government.

But the U.S. election was a clear thumbs-down to the status quo, and contributes to the disquiet of the West. Without a reasonably united Europe, U.S. capacity to resist China's power grabs or restrain Vladimir Putin's fantasies of restoring empire will be severely cramped.

With luck, the Germans will stumble into a new governing coalition after an election campaign, but there's little reason to believe that the election will produce a clear notion of where the country is heading. For Germans, as for Americans, the issues that divide and frighten people are just too big, the risks too scary, the forces of change seemingly impossible to regulate in any effective way.

Germans, as former Chancellor Angela Merkel discovered in her last years in office, are eager to present themselves to the world as a force for peace and equality, but they are not willing to risk economic security to take in the world's refugees to a degree that would change the basic character of their country. And while committed to Ukrainian sovereignty — Germans have put up the money and military hardware to prove it — they are not willing to poke the Russian bear to the point of risking their own security. Their shaky confidence is further rattled by the possibility of global tariff wars that threaten to strike their export-dependent economy especially hard.

The collapse of Germany's government comes at a fragile moment for the world. It's especially unnerving because, whether they like it or not, the Germans have become a vital symbol of stability for the West — a model of what the U.S.-led community of nations can achieve. Germans tend to think they very much depend on U.S. strength. We — and they — should realize that we also need theirs.

Marc Fisher, an associate editor of The Washington Post, moved to Opinions in 2024 after 37 years as a reporter and editor at The Post.

## S. Korea's impeachment saga could reset alliances

BY DANIEL DEPETRIS

*Chicago Tribune*

South Korea, one of Washington's closest allies in East Asia, is no stranger to scandal and political intrigue. But the last two weeks of political infighting in Seoul has made the previous 40 years look like a snooze-fest by comparison.

The latest saga started Dec. 3, when South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol inexplicably declared martial law in response to what he claimed was an opposition-run National Assembly that was trying to stop the machinery of government, impeach his officials and block his agenda. It was the first time such an extreme measure was used since South Korea transitioned into a democracy in 1987. Shortly thereafter, hundreds of troops and police officers descended on the National Assembly, blocking lawmakers from getting into the facility and even coming to blows with staff.

Yoon's decree, however, didn't last long. Hours later, lawmakers inside the assembly building voted to overturn martial law. The troops pulled back, and Yoon was forced to give a speech apologizing for the harm his decision caused. Yoon's political career is essentially over. On Saturday, the National Assembly impeached him on a 204-85 vote, with 12 members of his own party joining the effort.

(His powers are suspended until the Constitutional Court makes a verdict on whether the impeachment stands.)

Worse still, Yoon is now under investigation for rebellion and is barred from leaving South Korea. A man who made a name for himself as a prosecutor may become the face of criminal malfeasance.

For the United States, this entire affair is not only embarrassing but potentially disruptive to our geopolitical agenda in East Asia. It's embarrassing because President Joe Biden's administration frequently held up South Korea as the beacon of democracy in Asia, the quintessential success story of a military-run autocracy-turned-pluralistic society. To state the obvious, having a democratically elected president turn into a wannabe dictator, where dissent is stifled and parliament is turned into a relic, isn't what Washington expected.

The U.S. foreign policy establishment has reason to worry about what Yoon's demise as a leader might mean for its broader grand strategy in Asia. Yoon may have been a depreciated commodity in the South Korean capital, but he was feted in Washington as a visionary. Yoon, for instance, used a significant amount of political capital to improve South Korea's relationship with Japan, another key U.S. ally in the region but one whose historical differences with Seoul over the 1910-45 Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula hurt

Washington's ability to create a latticework of alliances to contain China and North Korea.

In August 2023, Biden, Yoon and then-Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced a comprehensive aspirational agreement that would institutionalize relations between their countries on all matters of mutual interest. Trilateral military exercises became routine, South Korea and Japan were sharing more intelligence with each other on North Korea's missile program, and the two countries were following Washington's line on Taiwan more frequently.

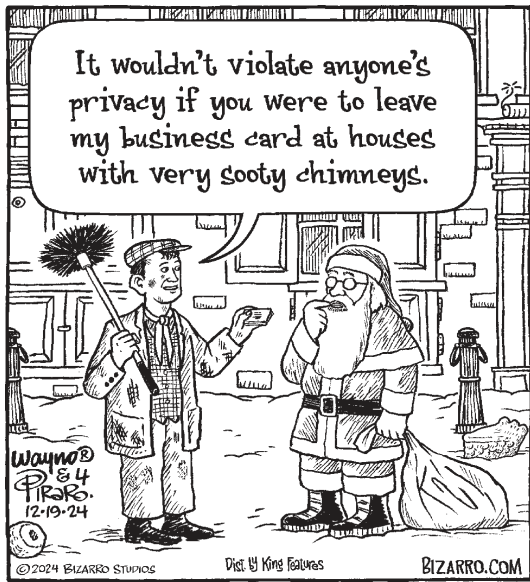
Yoon's potential departure from office, however, risks undoing some of that progress from Washington's perspective. Assuming Yoon's impeachment stands, South Koreans will go to the polls in 60 days for another election. The favorite, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, is a traditional South Korean leftist who views Japan skeptically and doesn't believe South Korea's foreign policy should mirror Washington's own.

Lee's views on China don't jibe with Washington's, either.

Ultimately, Yoon was more popular in Washington than he was in Seoul. His departure as leader will create questions for the U.S.-South Korea relationship.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

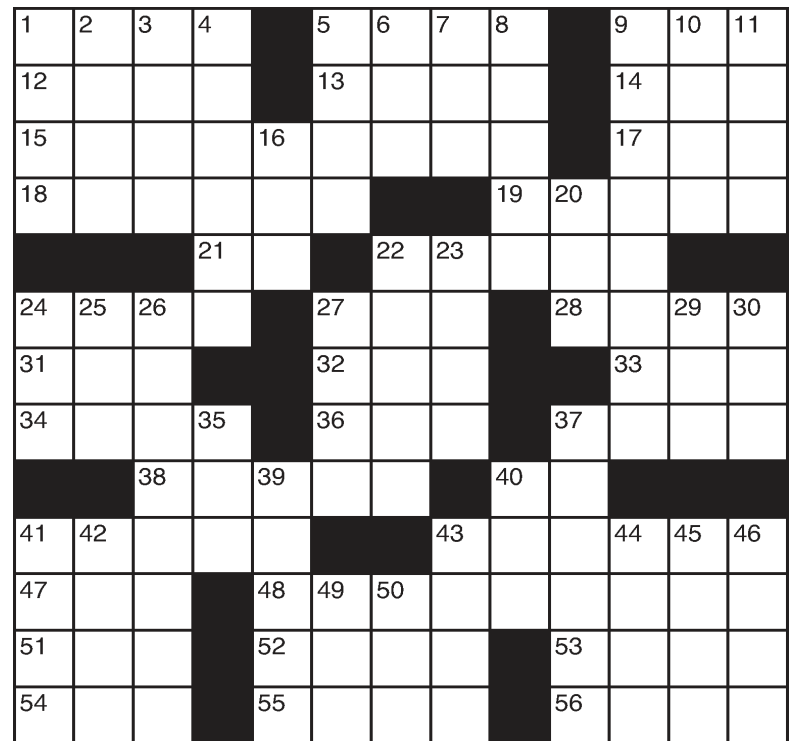
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 Ball-shaped cheese
- 5 School session
- 9 Catchall abbr.
- 12 Grown-up nits
- 13 A law — itself
- 14 Roth svgs. plan
- 15 Yuletide tree, typically
- 17 Tom Collins liquor
- 18 Comedian George
- 19 Sierra Nevada lake
- 21 "Carol — the Bells"
- 22 Nodded off
- 24 Latin 101 word
- 27 Casual shirt
- 28 Dessert fruit
- 31 Apprehend
- 32 Ms. Longoria
- 33 College URL ender
- 34 Throat clearer
- 36 Hamilton bill
- 37 Unforeseen problem
- 38 Critic, often
- 40 "Sideways" actress Sandra
- 41 — blitz
- 43 Start of a nursery rhyme
- 47 Hearty quaff
- 48 At neither extreme

- 51 British verb ending
- 52 Research sites
- 53 Old Italian money
- 54 Lair
- 55 Faction
- 56 Pack cargo

- 22 Cut off
- 23 Be inclined
- 24 Literary collection
- 25 — -jong
- 26 Scotland's "Granite City"
- 27 Head, to Henri
- 29 Nabokov novel
- 30 Bad hairpiece
- 35 Avril follower
- 37 Shoulder garments
- 39 Follows
- 40 Feedbag morsel
- 41 Hotel worker
- 42 Different
- 43 Optimum on a course
- 44 "So —" ("Amen")
- 45 Prefix with dynamic
- 46 From the start
- 49 Scot's refusal
- 50 Telly network

DOWN

- 1 Power co. supply
- 2 Prima donna
- 3 Computer brand
- 4 Red wine
- 5 Rotate
- 6 Chemical suffix
- 7 Hwy.
- 8 — Carlo
- 9 Number of holes on a course
- 10 Half a sextet
- 11 Walking stick
- 16 Computer image, briefly
- 20 iPhone download

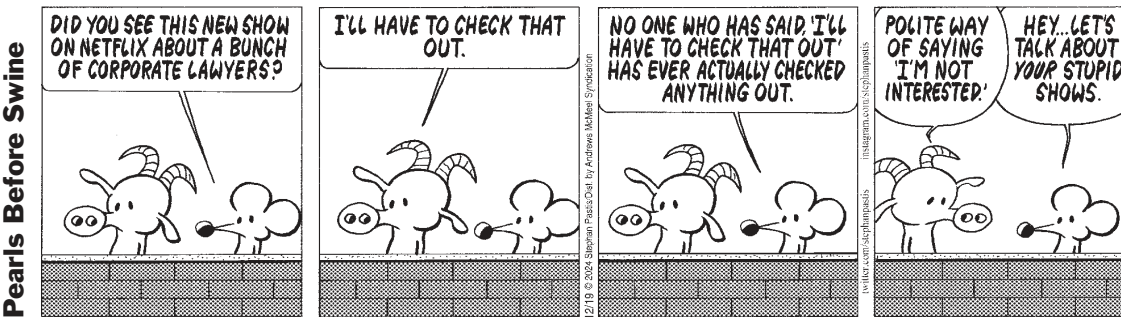
Answer to Previous Puzzle



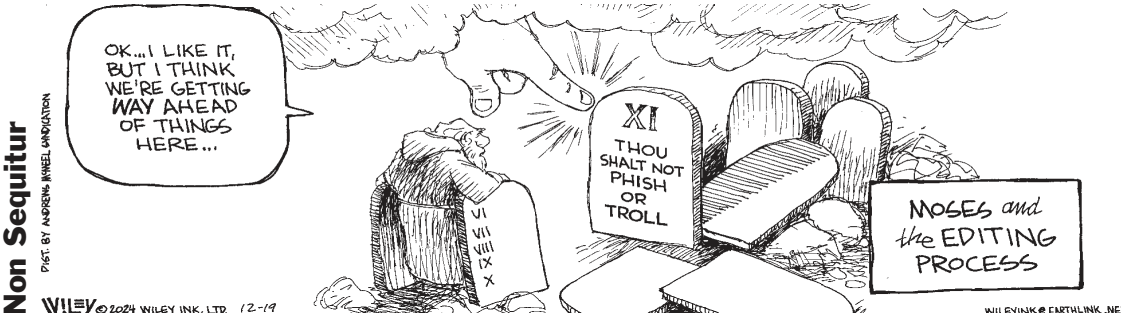
Frazz



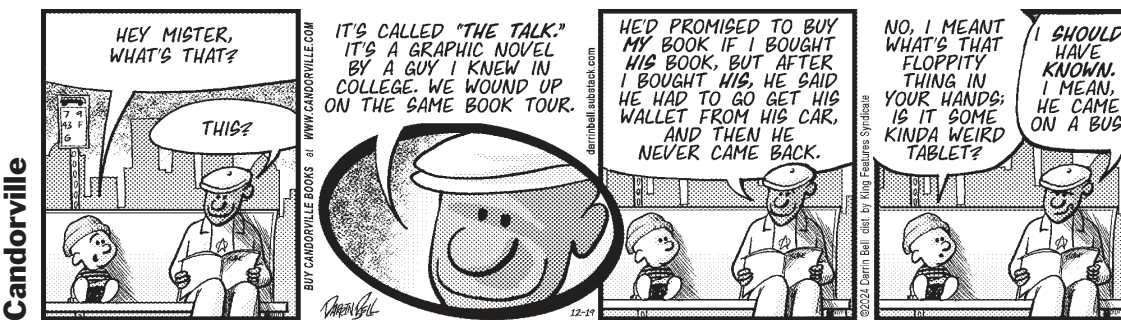
Pearls Before Swine



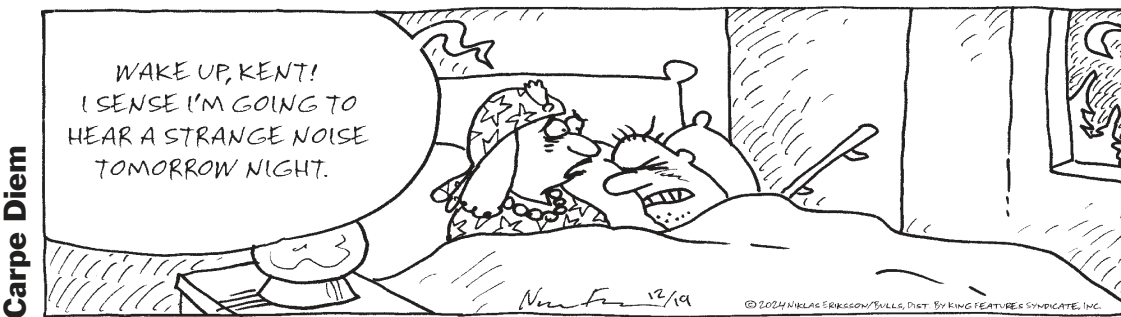
Non Sequitur



Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



12-19

CRYPTOQUIP

PDQ ISVPG XDZ HCBFYSNC W  
 JWIDZB JWFSRSGX QPCYC  
 FPCCBC WKH NZGGCY WYC  
 IWHC? RCVCKH-HWSYX.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN THE GROUND SQUIREL WASN'T QUITE SURE IT WAS UP TO THE CHALLENGE, I CRIED, "GOPHER IT!"  
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: X equals Y



# NHL

## Scoreboard

Eastern Conference							
Atlantic Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Toronto	31	19	10	2	40	92	81
Florida	32	19	11	2	40	114	104
Boston	33	17	13	3	37	86	104
Tampa Bay	29	17	10	2	36	117	85
Ottawa	31	16	13	2	34	96	89
Detroit	30	12	14	4	28	78	94
Montreal	31	12	16	3	27	88	114
Buffalo	32	11	17	4	26	93	110
Metropolitan Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
New Jersey	34	21	10	3	45	114	87
Washington	31	21	8	2	44	118	83
Carolina	31	20	10	1	41	112	87
Pittsburgh	33	14	14	5	33	100	123
Philadelphia	31	14	13	4	32	93	106
N.Y. Rangers	31	15	15	1	31	92	93
N.Y. Islanders	33	12	14	7	31	86	103
Columbus	32	12	15	5	29	104	116
Western Conference							
Central Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Winnipeg	33	23	9	1	47	121	84
Minnesota	31	20	7	4	44	98	80
Dallas	30	19	11	0	38	98	75
Colorado	33	18	15	0	36	108	114
Utah	30	14	11	5	33	91	88
St. Louis	33	15	15	3	33	85	102
Chicago	32	11	19	2	24	81	101
Nashville	32	9	17	6	24	72	98
Pacific Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Vegas	31	20	8	3	43	108	92
Los Angeles	31	18	9	4	40	94	79
Edmonton	31	18	11	2	38	102	90
Vancouver	30	16	9	5	37	96	93
Calgary	32	15	11	6	36	87	99
Seattle	33	15	16	2	32	96	99
San Jose	34	11	18	5	27	94	122
Anaheim	29	11	14	4	26	71	90

**Note:** Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

**Monday's games**  
 Dallas 3, Washington 1  
 Florida 6, Edmonton 5  
 Vancouver 3, Colorado 1

**Tuesday's games**  
 Pittsburgh 3, Los Angeles 2, OT  
 Montreal 6, Buffalo 1  
 Tampa Bay 5, Columbus 3  
 Carolina 4, N.Y. Islanders 0  
 Nashville 2, N.Y. Rangers 0  
 New Jersey 4, St. Louis 1  
 Chicago 3, Washington 2  
 Boston 4, Calgary 3, OT  
 Ottawa 3, Seattle 0  
 Winnipeg 4, San Jose 3

**Wednesday's games**  
 Philadelphia at Detroit  
 Toronto at Dallas  
 Florida at Minnesota  
 Vancouver at Utah  
 Winnipeg at Anaheim

**Thursday's games**  
 New Jersey at Columbus  
 St. Louis at Tampa Bay  
 Los Angeles at Philadelphia  
 Pittsburgh at Nashville  
 Seattle at Chicago  
 Boston at Edmonton  
 Ottawa at Calgary  
 Vancouver at Vegas  
 Colorado at San Jose

**Friday's games**  
 Carolina at Washington  
 Montreal at Detroit  
 St. Louis at Florida  
 Toronto at Buffalo  
 N.Y. Rangers at Dallas  
 Utah at Minnesota  
 Colorado at Anaheim

**Scoring leaders Through Tuesday**

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	33	13	37	50
Nikita Kucherov, TB	27	14	33	47
Mikko Rantanen, COL	33	18	29	47
Kirill Kaprizov, MIN	30	22	25	47
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	31	23	24	47
Martin Necas, CAR	31	14	30	44
Connor McDavid, EDM	28	14	30	44
Jack Eichel, LV	31	9	33	42
Jesper Bratt, NJ	34	14	28	42
Mitch Marner, TOR	31	10	31	41
Jack Hughes, NJ	34	13	28	41
Sam Reinhart, FLA	32	20	21	41
Kyle Connor, WPG	33	19	21	40
Cale Makar, COL	33	9	29	38
Dylan Strome, WSH	31	11	27	38

## ROUNDUP

# Laine leads Canadiens over Sabres

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Patrik Laine scored his first hat trick with Montreal and the Canadiens extended the Buffalo Sabres' winless streak to 11 games with a 6-1 victory on Tuesday night.

Juraj Slafkovsky, Joel Armia and Josh Anderson also scored for Montreal while Cole Caufield, Nick Suzuki and Lane Hutson provided two assists each and Sam Montembeault stopped 20 shots.

Dylan Cozens scored for struggling Buffalo and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 15 saves on 21 shots. Backup James Reimer stopped all six shots that he faced after entering to start the third.

The loss came a day after Sabres owner Terry Pegula flew to Montreal for a team meeting.

Armia scored only 19 seconds into the game, capitalizing on a wide-open net after Buffalo defenseman Owen Power mishandled the puck off the end boards.

Laine scored three goals for the 11th time in his career, bringing the winger's season total to six in seven games since returning from a knee injury.

**Penguins 3, Kings 2 (OT):** Rickard Rakell scored at 1:44 of overtime and host Pittsburgh rallied to beat Los Angeles.

Rakell deflected Erik Karlsson's point shot behind Darcy Kuemper for the game-winner.

Evgeni Malkin scored, while Matt Grzelcyk forced overtime with 5:35 left in the third period with his first goal as a Penguin. Michael Bunting had two assists in his 300th NHL game.

Alex Nedeljkovic made 29 saves for Pittsburgh.

Adrian Kempe scored 33 seconds into the game for the Kings, and Alex Turcotte also scored. Vladislav Gavrikov added two assists.

**Lightning 5, Blue Jackets 3:** Nick Paul had a goal and two assists to lead host Tampa Bay past Columbus.

Jake Guentzel, Luke Glendening, Brayden Point and Mitchell Chaffee also scored for the Lightning, who have won five of six. Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 28 saves.

Adam Fantilli, Cole Sillinger and Mikael Pyyhtia scored for the Blue Jackets. Jet Greaves made 27 saves for Columbus, which has one win in its past nine games.

Tampa Bay pulled away in the second period, scoring three times, including on a five-minute power play with Sillinger serving 17 minutes for instigating a fight.

Trailing 4-0, the Blue Jackets scored twice in 43 seconds in the third period. Sillinger scored on a power play with 5:49 left to make it close before Point converted an



GRAHAM HUGHES, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

The Canadiens' Patrik Laine, left, celebrates with teammate Juraj Slafkovsky after scoring his third goal against the Buffalo Sabres during the second period in Montreal on Tuesday. The Canadiens won 6-1.

empty-netter with 2:09 remaining.

**Hurricanes 4, Islanders 0:** Pyotr Kochetkov made 32 saves for his first shutout of the season as host Carolina beat New York.

Sebastian Aho had a goal and an assist, while Andrei Svechnikov, Jordan Martinook and Tyson Jost also scored. Shayne Gostisbehere provided two assists.

The Hurricanes won back-to-back games for the first time since Nov. 25 and 27.

With the loss, the Islanders have their second three-game stretch of the season without a point. Goalie Ilya Sorokin was pulled after allowing four goals on 23 shots through two periods, with Marcus Hogberg finishing with six saves in the third.

Kochetkov stopped 13 first-period shots, but faced only nine in the third to pick up his ninth career shutout. Carolina needed only one penalty kill in the team's second shutout of the season.

**Devils 4, Blues 1:** Ondrej Palat and Stefan Noesen scored as New Jersey won at St. Louis.

Brenden Dillon also scored and Jesper Bratt added an empty-net goal for the Devils, who won their third straight game and fifth out of their last seven. Jacob Markstrom made 19 saves.

Jordan Kyrou scored and Jordan Binnington made 24 saves for the Blues.

Palat gave New Jersey the lead with 4:47 left in the first period with a slap shot off a banked entry pass from Luke Hughes. Palat has three goals in his last four games.

Noesen, playing in his 400th career game, made it 2-0 with a power-play goal with 6:51 left in the

second period. Dillon's unassisted goal early in the third extended the Devils' lead.

**Predators 2, Rangers 0:** Jonathan Marchessault and Adam Wilsby scored and Juuse Saros made 25 saves to lead host Nashville to a victory over New York.

The Predators have won two of three following a franchise record-tying eight-game losing streak.

Igor Shesterkin made 30 saves for the struggling Rangers, losers of three straight.

The shutout was the third of the season and 26th of Saros' career. Steven Stamkos and Filip Forsberg each had two assists.

**Blackhawks 3, Capitals 2:** Ryan Donato scored his team-leading 11th goal with 2:18 left in regulation to cap host Chicago's three-goal, third-period rally and lift it to a win over Washington.

Donato skated out of the right corner and stuffed a shot past Logan Thompson to hand the Capitals a second straight loss for only the second time this season.

TJ Brodie connected with 5:53 left in the third period to tie it at 2. Ilya Mikheyev scored the Blackhawks' first short-handed goal of the season, connecting 51 seconds into the third to start Chicago's comeback from a two-goal deficit.

Teuvo Teravainen had three assists for the Blackhawks, who won their second straight by scoring on three of five shots in the third.

**Bruins 4, Flames 3 (OT):** Former Flame Elias Lindholm had a goal and an assist and David Pastrnak scored 4:22 into overtime as Boston came from behind for a victory at Calgary.

Morgan Geekie and Marc

McLaughlin also scored for the Bruins, who have won six of their last eight.

Matt Coronato, Nazem Kadri and Ryan Lomberg, with his first of the season, scored for the Flames.

Jeremy Swayman, who made 20 stops, has won five of his last six starts.

**Senators 3, Kraken 0:** Linus Ullmark made 30 saves and visiting Ottawa beat Seattle for its fourth straight win.

Shane Pinto broke the scoreless tie 8:02 into the second period, and Noah Gregor scored a few minutes later to put the Senators ahead for good.

Tim Stutzle made it a three-goal game at 4:18 the third period when he snuck one past Kraken goaltender Joey Daccord for his 11th goal of the season and first since Nov. 30.

Daccord finished the night with 24 saves.

**Jets 4, Sharks 3:** Adam Lowry scored the winning goal with just over a minute left in regulation, Kyle Connor had two goals and visiting Winnipeg rallied from a third-period deficit to beat San Jose.

Gabriel Vilardi, with three assists, and Mark Scheifele, with a goal and two assists, each added three points for the NHL's top team.

Tyler Toffoli had a goal and an assist for the Sharks, and Fabian Zetterlund and Macklin Celebrini each added a goal.

Lowry scored his ninth goal at 18:47 of the third period off assists from Dylan DeMelo and Mason Appleton.

## MLB/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

## Yankees get Bellinger in trade with Cubs

BY RONALD BLUM  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Outfielder Cody Bellinger was acquired by the New York Yankees from the Chicago Cubs on Tuesday for right-hander Cody Poteet.

The Cubs will send the Yankees \$5 million as part of the trade.

The 29-year-old Bellinger, whose father Clay helped the Yankees win World Series titles in 1999 and 2000, could play center field next year as Aaron Judge returns to right following the departure of Juan Soto to the Mets. Bellinger can also play first base, a position that opened when Anthony Rizzo became a free agent.

Bellinger is owed \$27.5 million in 2025 under the first of two player options as part of an \$80 million, three-year contract. The two-time All-Star also has a \$25 million player option for 2026 with a \$5 million buyout that would be payable in equal installments Jan. 15, 2026, and Jan. 15, 2027.

Bellinger batted .266 with 18 homers and 78 RBIs in 130 games this year. He was on the injured list from April 24 to May 7 with a broken right rib.

He drove in 33 runs in his last 39

games of the season, but the Cubs finished with an 83-79 record.

Bellinger made his major league debut in 2017 and spent his first six seasons with the Los Angeles Dodgers. He was the NL MVP in 2019, batting .305 with 47 homers and 115 RBIs in 156 games. He also helped LA win the World Series in 2020.

He was cut by the Dodgers in November 2022 and signed a \$17.5 million, one-year deal with the Cubs a month later. He regained his form with the Cubs, hitting a career-best .307 with 26 homers, 97 RBIs and 20 steals in 130 games in 2023.

Bellinger is a .259 hitter with 196 homers and 597 RBIs in 1,005 games. He turns 30 in July.

Poteet, 30, made his major league debut with Miami in 2021, had Tommy John surgery on Aug. 17, 2022, returned to the mound with Kansas City's Triple-A Omaha farm team on Sept. 23, 2023, was released by the Royals and signed with the Yankees last January. He went 3-0 with a 2.22 ERA in four starts and one relief appearance during a season in which he was sidelined between June 12 and Sept. 25 by a strained right triceps.



ERIN HOOLEY/AP

The Chicago Cubs sent Cody Bellinger and \$5 million to the New York Yankees in exchange for right-handed pitcher Cody Poteet. Bellinger will likely play either center field or first base for the Yankees.

## TOP 25 ROUNDUP

## No. 7 Florida staves off UNC rally to remain undefeated

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Will Richard scored 22 points, Alijah Martin added 19 points and No. 7 Florida held off a furious second-half rally by North Carolina to remain unbeaten with a 90-84 victory Tuesday night in the Jumpman Invitational.

R.J. Davis had 29 points and eight rebounds for the Tar Heels (6-5), who battled back from a 17-point first-half deficit to take a four-point lead late in the second half.

The Gators (11-0) jumped to a 35-17 lead after making 6 of 12 3-pointers, while UNC missed its first 11 shots from beyond the arc.

But the Tar Heels closed the gap to 12 at halftime and then started the second half on a 11-0 run after stepping up their defensive pressure, creating turnovers and cashing in on transition opportunities. UNC finally took the lead at 70-68 with 7:56 left when Seth Trimble came up with a steal and scored on a layup at the other end.

But Florida was strong down the stretch and Richard's putback off an offensive rebound with 54 seconds left put the Gators ahead for good.

**No. 1 Tennessee 84, Western Carolina 36:** Chaz Lanier scored 19 points to lead the No. 1 Volun-



NELL REDMOND/AP

Florida guard Denzel Aberdeen, left, and UNC guard Seth Trimble fight for the ball during the second half in Charlotte, N.C., on Tuesday.

teers to a victory over the visiting Catamounts.

Tennessee (11-0) tied for the third-best start in program history. Jordan Gainey scored 17, Darlstone Dubar added 13 points and Zakai Zeigler just missed a triple-double with 10 points, 10 rebounds and 9 assists.

**No. 2 Auburn 100, Georgia State 59:** Chaney Johnson had a

career-high 26 points with eight rebounds and four assists as the No. 2 Tigers beat the visiting Panthers after losing center Johni Broome to an apparent shoulder injury.

Broome, who entered the contest averaging 19.7 points and a Division I-leading 12.7 rebounds, left the game and went to the locker room with an arm injury just 2:17

into the game. No additional information was released about the injury.

**No. 5 Duke 68, George Mason 47:** Freshman star Cooper Flagg had 24 points and nine rebounds as the No. 5 Blue Devils held the visiting Patriots to just 29.4% shooting in a win.

Flagg, a preseason Associated Press All-American, shot 7 for 20 from the field but was active on the glass. He had four assists and was perfect in eight trips to the foul line for Duke (9-2).

**No. 17 Mississippi 74, Southern 61:** Jaylen Murray scored 18 points and was 6 for 7 from 3-point range, and the No. 17 Rebels defeated the visiting Jaguars.

It was the fourth-straight win for Ole Miss (10-1). Jaemyn Brakefield had 15 points and Dre Davis 14 for the Rebels.

**No. 18 UCLA 111, Prairie View A&M 75:** Dylan Andrews scored 21 points, Tyler Bilodeau added 18 and the No. 18 Bruins extended their winning streak to nine games with a victory over the visiting Panthers.

Eric Dailey scored 14 points, Kobe Johnson 12 and Trent Perry 11 for UCLA (10-1), which shot 59% overall and made 10 of 21 3-point attempts. Aday Mara had 10 rebounds.

**No. 20 Michigan State 77, Oakland 58:** Xavier Booker scored a career-high 18 points, Jaden Akins had 16 and Jaxon Kohler added 14 to lead the No. 20 Spartans in a win over the visiting Golden Grizzlies.

Michigan State (9-2) has won four straight and seven of its last eight games.

**No. 22 Dayton 66, UNLV 65:** Malachi Smith scored five of his 11 points in the final 37 seconds, including a decisive three-point play, and the No. 22 Flyers beat the visiting Runnin' Rebels.

Nate Santos had 14 points for Dayton (10-2), which moved into the AP Top 25 poll this week for the first time this season. The Flyers extended their homecourt winning streak to 25 games—the fifth-longest in Division I.

**South Carolina 91, No. 25 Clemson 88 (OT):** Collin Murray-Boyles scored 22 points and Morris Ugusuk hit a 3-pointer in overtime to give the host Gamecocks the lead for good in a victory over the rival No. 25 Tigers.

South Carolina (8-3) seemed to have things in hand, ahead 76-69 in the final two minutes of regulation. But Chase Hunter had three 3-pointers for Clemson (9-3) down the stretch, including a bank shot with 0.3 seconds left that tied it at 80 and forced the extra period.

# NFL

## Weekly statistics

AFC individual leaders					
Quarterbacks					
	Att	Com	Yds	TD	Int
Burrow, Cin	527	361	3977	36	8
L.Jackson, Bal	404	275	3580	34	3
Allen, Buf	427	275	3395	25	5
Mahomes, KC	502	335	3348	22	11
Rodgers, NYJ	488	305	3255	23	8
Stroud, Hou	456	290	3248	17	9
Nix, Den	467	297	2972	20	11
Herbert, LAC	399	255	2959	16	2
Tagovailoa, Mia	365	269	2652	18	7
Winston, Cle	296	181	2121	13	12

Rushers					
	Att	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
Henry, Bal	254	1474	5.8	87t	13
Pollard, Ten	230	982	4.3	41	5
Taylor, Ind	208	911	4.4	58	5
Mixon, Hou	217	910	4.2	59	11
Harris, Pit	229	891	3.9	36t	5
C.Brown, Cin	191	832	4.4	40	7
Cook, Buf	171	828	4.8	65t	13
Dobbins, LAC	158	766	4.8	61	8
L.Jackson, Bal	117	743	6.4	39	3
Stevenson, NE	193	740	3.8	33t	6

Receivers					
	No	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
Chase, Cin	102	1413	13.9	70t	15
Jeudy, Cle	70	1052	15.0	89t	4
Bowers, Las	90	968	10.8	57t	4
B.Thomas, Jac	64	956	14.9	85t	8
Wilson, NYJ	84	933	11.1	42	6
Flowers, Bal	66	916	13.9	53t	4
Sutton, Den	66	878	13.3	37	6
McConkey, LAC	63	873	13.9	60t	5
D.Adams, NYJ	67	860	12.4	71t	6
Pickens, Pit	55	850	15.5	44	3

Punters					
	No	Yds	Lg	Avg	
Cooke, Jac	54	2754	73	51.0	
Stonehouse, Ten	61	3102	75	50.9	

Scoring Touchdowns					
	TDRush	Rec	Ret	Pts	
Chase, Cin	15	0	15	0	90
Henry, Bal	15	13	2	0	90
Cook, Buf	14	13	1	0	84
Allen, Buf	12	11	1	0	72

Kicking					
	PAT	FG	LG	Pts	
Boswell, Pit	30-30	38-41	57	144	
Fairbairn, Hou	31-31	33-39	59	130	

AFC team statistics			
AVERAGE PER GAME OFFENSE			
	Yards	Rush	Pass
Baltimore	424.1	178.4	245.6
Buffalo	369.6	130.8	238.8
Cincinnati	362.5	91.1	271.4
Kansas City	336.3	112.1	224.1
Pittsburgh	325.6	126.6	198.9
Houston	324.2	111.4	212.8
Miami	324.1	101.4	222.6
Indianapolis	311.4	120.9	190.4
Denver	311.1	108.4	202.7
Cleveland	309.6	92.1	217.5
N.Y. Jets	307.0	89.7	217.3
Jacksonville	306.0	101.6	204.4
L.A. Chargers	302.1	105.8	196.4
Tennessee	301.0	110.4	190.6
Las Vegas	299.1	78.1	221.1
New England	292.5	119.3	173.2

DEFENSE			
	Yards	Rush	Pass
Tennessee	297.4	115.2	182.2
Houston	302.4	105.6	196.9
Kansas City	306.9	91.9	215.0
Miami	308.6	103.6	205.0
N.Y. Jets	315.0	121.1	193.9
Denver	315.3	98.6	216.7
Pittsburgh	316.6	94.4	222.3
Las Vegas	329.5	121.2	208.3
L.A. Chargers	336.7	125.1	211.6
Baltimore	339.6	80.7	258.9
Cleveland	340.9	128.2	212.7
New England	344.1	127.4	216.7
Buffalo	345.5	117.7	227.8
Cincinnati	366.1	126.9	239.2
Indianapolis	366.1	141.6	224.4
Jacksonville	396.4	132.1	264.3

NFC individual leaders					
Quarterbacks					
	Att	Com	Yds	TD	Int
Goff, Det	440	314	3759	30	10
Smith, Sea	485	339	3623	14	13
Mayfield, TB	463	328	3617	32	14
Darnold, Min	426	288	3530	29	11
Cousins, Atl	453	303	3508	18	16
Stafford, LAR	466	309	3463	19	7
Purdy, SF	380	247	3174	15	9
Murray, Ari	426	294	3086	15	8
Daniels, Was	393	277	3045	17	6
Love, GB	355	226	2953	23	11

Rushers					
	Att	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
Barkley, Phi	285	1688	5.9	72t	11
Jacobs, GB	265	1147	4.3	38t	12
K.Williams, LAR	280	1121	4.0	30	12
Robinson, Atl	237	1102	4.7	37t	8
Gibbs, Det	186	1047	5.6	70t	11
Hubbard, Car	225	1043	4.6	38t	8
A.Jones, Min	215	979	4.6	41	5
Conner, Ari	217	973	4.5	53	7
Kamara, NO	228	950	4.2	24	6
Dowdle, Dal	177	880	5.0	27	1

Receivers					
	No	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
Jefferson, Min	82	1243	15.2	97t	8
Lamb, Dal	94	1089	11.6	65t	6
St. Brown, Det	95	1056	11.1	66t	10
Smth-Njgba, Sea	85	994	11.7	46	5
McLaurin, Was	68	969	14.3	86t	11
A.Brown, Phi	56	946	16.9	67t	5
McBride, Ari	89	938	10.5	37	0
London, Atl	78	919	11.8	31	7
Nabers, NYG	90	901	10.0	39	4
Mooney, Atl	57	873	15.3	49	5

Punters					
	No	Yds	Lg	Avg	
Fox, Det	42	2146	68	51.1	
Mann, Phi	44	2185	70	49.7	

Scoring Touchdowns					
	TDRush	Rec	Ret	Pts	
Gibbs, Det	14	11	3	0	84
Hurts, Phi	14	14	0	0	84
K.Williams, LAR	14	12	2	0	84
Barkley, Phi	13	11	2	0	78

Kicking					
	PAT	FG	LG	Pts	
Aubrey, Dal	26-26	32-38	65	122	
Bates, Det	54-55	21-23	58	117	

NFC team statistics			
AVERAGE PER GAME OFFENSE			
	Yards	Rush	Pass
Detroit	403.9	143.7	260.1
Tampa Bay	388.4	144.4	244.0
Green Bay	375.8	144.4	231.4
Washington	373.9	155.5	218.4
Philadelphia	373.2	186.2	187.0
San Francisco	365.1	133.5	231.6
Atlanta	363.1	124.2	238.9
Arizona	351.4	141.5	209.9
Minnesota	349.8	113.2	236.6
L.A. Rams	337.9	105.8	232.1
New Orleans	334.6	124.4	210.2
Seattle	334.6	94.3	240.4
Dallas	328.9	99.8	229.1
N.Y. Giants	296.4	111.3	185.1
Carolina	288.9	102.9	186.0
Chicago	288.2	106.4	181.9

DEFENSE			
	Yards	Rush	Pass
Philadelphia	275.6	102.2	173.4
San Francisco	298.8	117.8	181.0
Green Bay	320.4	105.0	215.4
Washington	321.8	132.1	189.6
Minnesota	334.0	89.1	244.9
Detroit	335.8	101.3	234.5
Arizona	338.4	121.4	217.0
Seattle	341.1	127.5	213.6
Atlanta	342.6	116.8	225.9
N.Y. Giants	344.1	143.7	200.4
Chicago	351.1	133.3	217.8
L.A. Rams	353.6	135.4	218.1
Dallas	356.0	136.1	219.9
Tampa Bay	356.9	109.2	247.7
New Orleans	376.6	134.4	242.2
Carolina	386.2	173.0	213.2

# Broncos charging ahead with eye on playoff berth

By ARNIE STAPLETON  
Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — The Denver Broncos are on the cusp of their first playoff berth since winning Super Bowl 50 following the 2015 season.

That's the longest playoff drought following a Super Bowl win, but one they can finally snap with a victory over the Los Angeles Chargers (8-6) on Thursday night.

A win would also give the Broncos (9-5) their first five-game winning streak since they beat the Carolina Panthers 24-10 in that Super Bowl for the franchise's third title.

Punching their ticket to the playoffs "would be absolutely amazing, especially my first year here, too," said safety Brandon Jones, who joined the team in free agency in March. "I am just super happy and super grateful for this opportunity to be here. I truly just love every guy in here, and I think we deserve it. We have put the work in. We have a bond that goes beyond the field and I am just happy that is finally able to be shown off."

While Jones and other players openly pondered that elusive playoff berth, seventh-year pro Courtland Sutton doesn't want to get ahead of himself.

"Naw, not at all. I mean, shoot, we've got a big game Thursday, another opportunity to step in the direction of where we ultimately want to go, but man, there's so much more ahead of us," Sutton said Tuesday.

One thing Sutton is relishing, however, is that the Broncos, with a better than 90% chance of making the playoffs, hold their hopes in their own hands.

"It is a good feeling to be in a space of if we take care of what we need to take care of, it's (not) like a 'we need six teams to lose and do this and do that,'" Sutton said. "So, it's nice to almost be able to control our own destiny. But with that being said, we do have some big games to finish the season."

After the Chargers game, the Broncos travel to Cincinnati for another prime-time matchup against the Bengals (6-8) on Dec. 28, followed by a season finale at home against the Kansas City Chiefs (13-1), who have won the AFC West nine years running.

The Broncos ended one long skid Sunday with their 31-13 win over the Indianapolis Colts. They have their first winning season since 2016, when they went 9-7 in Gary Kubiak's final year.

"I didn't even know about that," said right tackle Mike McGlin-



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

**Broncos cornerback Pat Surtain II Celebrates after breaking up a pass Sunday against the Indianapolis Colts. Denver can clinch a playoff spot with a victory over the L.A. Chargers on Thursday night.**



**Denver Broncos (9-5)  
at Los Angeles Chargers (8-6)**  
AFN-Sports  
2:15 a.m. Friday CET  
10:15 a.m. Friday JKT

chey, who joined the Broncos last year as a free agent from the 49ers. "I guess mathematically, we can't go under .500 now, which is cool. It's not really about that. That's a consolation prize to me. What it's really about is getting into the dance, and we have a chance to do that in these next few weeks."

"It's been tough here for a while," pass rusher Jonathon Cooper said. "So, the fact that we're getting this thing turned around, I'm sure it's great for the fans and shout-out to Broncos Country."

Tight end Nate Adkins, who scored a touchdown last week, considered the Broncos' win a double dose of goodness because it

gave them a two-game lead over the Colts, plus the tiebreaker against them, in the AFC wild-card chase.

"This was the team that was running on our heels," Adkins said. "But we're more so looking to catch teams. Getting up to the five (seed), get the best seed possible. So obviously, just turn our focus to the Chargers."

The Broncos and Chargers flip-flopped playoff position last weekend with Denver moving up to sixth and the Chargers, who lost to Tampa Bay, falling to the seventh and final spot. Baltimore (9-5), which walloped Denver on Nov. 3, is in fifth place.

While Sutton isn't allowing himself to think ahead too much, eighth-year left tackle Garrett Bolles, the longest-tenured Bronco, imagines just what it'll be like to finally reach the playoffs.

"It means the world to me, you know, I haven't done it since I've been here so to get back to where we belong and to bring our amazing fans the opportunity to cheer for us deep in the playoffs, it's awesome, it's an awesome feeling," Bolles said. "We just got to focus on one game at a time. We got a big game coming up this week."

## NFL/COLLEGE FOOTBALL

## Falcons bench Cousins, turn to Penix

BY CHARLES ODUM  
Associated Press

ATLANTA — The Atlanta Falcons are turning to rookie Michael Penix Jr. as their starting quarterback and benching veteran Kirk Cousins as they fight for their first playoff berth since 2017.

Coach Raheem Morris announced the decision in a statement Tuesday night.

“After review we have made the decision Michael Penix Jr. will be the Atlanta Falcons’ starting quarterback moving forward,” Morris said. “This was a football decision and we are fully focused on preparing the team for Sunday’s game against the New York Giants.”

The Falcons (7-7) ended a four-game losing streak with Monday night’s ugly 15-9 victory at Las Vegas. Cousins passed for 112 yards with one touchdown — his first TD pass in five games — and one interception. The 36-year-old has thrown nine picks over the past five games and leads the NFL with 16 interceptions.

Atlanta signed Cousins to a four-year, \$180 million contract in the offseason with \$100 million guaranteed before selecting Penix No. 8 overall in the NFL Draft.

Cousins ended his touchdown drought with a 30-yard scoring pass to Drake London in the first quarter but had few other highlights against the woeful Raiders.

“It’s not where I want to be,” he said of his performance. “There’s a lot of room for improvement and we’d like to finish a lot stronger here these last three weeks.”

The Falcons made the switch about three hours after Morris told reporters he wasn’t ready to make a decision on this week’s starter.

“We talked about it last night,” Morris said. “You know, there’s no secret. We didn’t play well enough



DAVID BECKER/AP

The Atlanta Falcons, fighting for their first playoff berth since 2017, will start Michael Penix Jr. (above), the No. 8 overall pick in the NFL Draft, against the New York Giants on Sunday.

at the quarterback position, and we’ve got to find ways to play better. So, all those things over the course of the week and we’ve got to do whatever is best to win versus the Giants.”

The quarterback move comes with the Falcons still contending for the NFC South title. Atlanta is one game behind division-leading Tampa Bay, but the Falcons hold the tiebreaker advantage.

Penix has appeared in only two games, completing 3 of 5 passes for 38 yards. He was the Heisman Trophy runner-up in 2023, when he passed for 4,903 yards with 36 touchdowns and 11 interceptions for Washington.

Cousins had a strong start to the season, leading the Falcons to a

6-3 start and first place in the division. He has completed 66.9% of his passes, exactly matching his standard for his 13-year career. He has passed for 3,508 yards but has an unhealthy ratio of 18 touchdown passes to 16 interceptions.

Morris acknowledged that Cousins’ confidence appears to have been shaken by his struggles.

“I’m not trying to sugarcoat this thing for him,” Morris said.

“He’s not trying to sugarcoat it for himself. ... When you go through the stress that we’re going through right now, you’re not going to have that same confidence and the same swagger that you had in the first, two months or three months, whatever it was, of the season.”

Morris has consistently said the plan was for Cousins to handle the job this season while Penix prepared to take over at some point in the future. Morris was reluctant to veer from that plan before Tuesday night, though he said earlier in the day he saw no downside if he chose to start Penix.

The first-year coach has praised the way Penix has handled the backup role.

“You could never say there’s a downside to turn it over to somebody that you put a lot of investment into, somebody that you brought in here, somebody you’ve done some things with, somebody that’s done nothing but the right thing since they’ve been here,” Morris said.

### Source: Browns sitting Winston against Bengals

CLEVELAND — Finally, an acceptable turnover for the Browns.

Cleveland will start quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson on Sunday in Cincinnati, turning to the second-year QB to replace Jameis Winston after he threw three more interceptions, a person familiar with the decision told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

Winston, who took over Cleveland’s starting job in October when Deshaun Watson suffered a season-ending ruptured Achilles tendon, was benched after throwing his third pick — and eighth in three games — in the fourth quarter of Sunday’s 21-7 loss to the Kansas City Chiefs.

Thompson-Robinson finished the game and will now move into the starting lineup and face the Bengals (6-8), said the person who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the team has not commented.

The Browns (3-11) were off Tuesday.

On Monday, coach Kevin Stefanski said he and his staff were working through their plans at QB, but his lack of commitment toward Winston was a strong sign he would make the change and go with Thompson-Robinson, who started three games as a rookie in 2023.

From The Associated Press

## Henigan ties AAC record as No. 25 Memphis wins Frisco Bowl



LM OTERO/AP

Memphis quarterback Seth Henigan threw for two touchdowns, tying the American Athletic Conference career record with 104, as the Tigers beat West Virginia 42-37 on Tuesday night in Frisco, Texas.

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Seth Henigan had quite a homecoming for his final game as a four-year starter for Memphis, tying the American Athletic Conference career record with his 104th touchdown pass and leading the 25th-ranked Tigers to one more victory.

Henigan threw for 294 yards and two touchdowns, and was one yard short of another score, as the Tigers held on for a 42-37 win over West Virginia in the Frisco Bowl on Tuesday night. They got 11 wins for only the second time in 109 years of Memphis football.

“It’s meant the world to me, and just to be able to go out with the win, I feel like that’s a good way to cap off a pretty good career,” Henigan said.

“And having stayed at the same university four years, I hope that’s a testament to who I am, and about the people around me.”

The only current four-year FBS starting quarterback to do that all with the same school, Henigan’s 50th game for the Tigers (11-2) came just over 20 miles from his hometown of Denton, Texas. He com-

pleted 18 of 26 passes, including an 89-yard catch-and-run in the fourth quarter when DeMeer Blankumsee was tripped up at the 1.

Even though Henigan knew that would have pushed him one past the 104 touchdowns that Clayton Tune had for Houston from 2018-22, he handed off to Brandon Thomas for a 1-yard touchdown on the next play.

Even when he had a run-pass option.

“I’m just happy that we came out with a win,” Henigan said.

West Virginia (6-7) had scored on six consecutive possessions (four touchdowns) before one more chance in the final minute after the Tigers missed a 50-yard field goal. But the Mountaineers’ final push ended when Elijah Herring had an interception.

Garrett Greene was 29-for-40 passing for 328 yards with two TD passes to Hudson Clement, and also ran for 95 yards and a score for West Virginia.

Clement finished with 11 catches for 166 yards, and CJ Donaldson ran for 83 yards and two TDs.

# NBA

## Scoreboard

Eastern Conference				
Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	21	5	.808	—
New York	16	10	.615	5
Brooklyn	10	16	.385	11
Philadelphia	8	16	.333	12
Toronto	7	20	.259	14½
Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	17	11	.607	—
Miami	13	11	.542	2
Atlanta	14	13	.519	2½
Charlotte	7	19	.269	9
Washington	3	21	.125	12
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	23	4	.852	—
Milwaukee	14	11	.560	8
Indiana	12	15	.444	11
Chicago	12	15	.444	11
Detroit	11	16	.407	12

Western Conference				
Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Memphis	18	9	.667	—
Houston	17	9	.654	½
Dallas	17	9	.654	½
San Antonio	13	13	.500	4½
New Orleans	5	22	.185	13
Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	20	5	.800	—
Denver	14	10	.583	5½
Minnesota	14	11	.560	6
Portland	8	18	.308	12½
Utah	5	20	.200	15
Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Phoenix	14	11	.560	—
Golden State	14	11	.560	—
L.A. Clippers	15	12	.556	—
L.A. Lakers	14	12	.538	½
Sacramento	13	14	.481	2

**Monday's games**  
 Philadelphia 121, Charlotte 108  
 Detroit 125, Miami 124, OT  
 Cleveland 130, Brooklyn 101  
 Chicago 122, Toronto 121  
 Denver 130, Sacramento 129  
 L.A. Clippers 144, Utah 107

**Tuesday's game**  
 Milwaukee 97, Oklahoma City 81 (NBA Cup Championship Game)

**Wednesday's games**  
 No games scheduled

**Thursday's games**  
 Charlotte at Washington  
 Oklahoma City at Orlando  
 Utah at Detroit  
 Brooklyn at Toronto  
 Chicago at Boston  
 Atlanta at San Antonio  
 Golden State at Memphis  
 New Orleans at Houston  
 L.A. Clippers at Dallas  
 Indiana at Phoenix  
 New York at Minnesota  
 Denver at Portland  
 L.A. Lakers at Sacramento

**Friday's games**  
 Charlotte at Philadelphia  
 Milwaukee at Cleveland  
 Oklahoma City at Miami

**Saturday's games**  
 L.A. Lakers at Sacramento  
 Miami at Orlando  
 Memphis at Atlanta  
 Utah at Brooklyn  
 Boston at Chicago  
 Golden State at Minnesota  
 New York at New Orleans  
 Philadelphia at Cleveland  
 Washington at Milwaukee  
 L.A. Clippers at Dallas  
 Portland at San Antonio  
 Detroit at Phoenix

**Sunday's games**  
 Indiana at Sacramento  
 Houston at Toronto  
 Denver at New Orleans

**Monday, Dec. 23**  
 Boston at Orlando  
 Houston at Charlotte  
 Utah at Cleveland  
 San Antonio at Philadelphia  
 Toronto at New York  
 Brooklyn at Miami  
 Minnesota at Atlanta  
 Milwaukee at Chicago  
 Washington at Oklahoma City  
 L.A. Clippers at Memphis  
 Portland at Dallas  
 Indiana at Golden State  
 Phoenix at Denver  
 Detroit at L.A. Lakers

# 4 teams, 3 games, 1 night

## League announces All-Star tournament plan for this season

BY TIM REYNOLDS  
 Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The NBA's All-Star Game is going to be an All-Star tournament this season, with the league announcing Tuesday that it plans to use a different format for the upcoming midseason showcase in San Francisco.

Scoring is sure to be down — way, way, way down.

This season's format is a four-team, three-game, one-night tournament, three teams of eight All-Stars apiece and the fourth team being the winner of the Rising Stars challenge for first- and second-year players. The winning team in all games will be the first to score 40 points.

It'll happen Feb. 16 at the home of the Golden State Warriors. The Rising Stars event is there Feb. 14, headlining All-Star Friday.

"I think we've come to terms that modern All-Stars are in part about competition, but ultimately they're about entertaining the fans and creating a strong experience for them," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said Tuesday.

Silver has wanted a more competitive All-Star event for some time, and this change comes after the teams combined to score a record 397 points — 211-186 was the final — in last season's game at Indianapolis.

There have been other All-Star format shakeups in recent years. After the first 66 All-Star Games were basically played like a normal game — Eastern Conference vs. Western Conference, four quarters, 12 minutes apiece — the league switched to a format where the leading vote-getters from each conference served as captains who got to draft their teams.

LeBron James served as one of the captains all six times, with Giannis Antetokounmpo the other captain three times, Kevin Durant twice and Stephen Curry once.

In four of the captain's-pick years, All-Star Games used a target score at the end of games, ensuring that the winner was decided on a made shot. Fourth quarters were untimed and the winner was the first team to reach whatever the leading team's score was after three quarters, plus 24 points — the 24 being a nod to Kobe Bryant's last jersey number.

It went back to the East vs. West format last year and saw a record point total along with Luka Doncic trying a 70-foot jumper, Donovan Mitchell throwing a 50-foot underhand inbounds pass, Bam Adebayo inbounding the ball to himself by tossing it off Nikola Jokic's backside, Tyrese Haliburton trying and making five 3-pointers in a 92-second span, and Damian Lillard capping the night with a 44-foot jumper — which wasn't even his longest shot of the game.

lard capping the night with a 44-foot jumper — which wasn't even his longest shot of the game.

### Voting format

All-Star voting begins Thursday and the format is unchanged.

Fans can cast ballots daily through Jan. 20 for three frontcourt and two backcourt players from both conferences.

That'll be part of a weighted formula — 50% fan vote, 25% media panel vote, 25% current player vote — to determine the 10 players designated as "starters."

NBA head coaches will pick the 14 "reserves."

The starter and reserve columns won't mean much on game night, since there will be 15 players starting — five from each of the three teams — and only nine players coming off the bench in those semifinal games.

### Picking the teams

TNT analysts Shaquille O'Neal, Charles Barkley and Kenny Smith will draft teams from the 24-player All-Star pool on Feb. 6. The teams will bear their names — Team Shaq, Team Charles and Team Kenny.

The Rising Stars winner that'll go to the All-Star tournament will be called Team Candace, for Candace Parker.



Mavericks guard Luka Doncic dunks during last season's high-scoring NBA All-Star Game on Feb. 18 in Indianapolis.

### Coaching staffs

The coaching staffs from the teams with the best records in the Eastern and Western Conferences will go to the All-Star Game. (It cannot be the Milwaukee or Minnesota staffs, since they coached last year.)

The East and West head coaches will each coach a team in the tournament; one assistant coach from each staff will serve as head coach for the other two teams in the tournament.

### Prize money

There is a prize pool of \$1.8 million. Each player on the All-Star champion team gets \$125,000, the runner-up team will get \$50,000 per player and the players on the teams eliminated in the semifinals will each get \$25,000.

# Potential: Time helped Lillard acclimate to Bucks

FROM PAGE 24

"I think it reminds us that we can beat anybody," Rivers said. "And we don't care if it tells everybody else that. We only care about us. It's what I said on the first day of camp. I also said we can lose to anybody if we don't play right."

Antetokounmpo and Lillard are leading the way, and that can't be a surprise.

Both are playing at their perennial All-Star level. They're the highest-scoring duo in the league, combining to average more than 58 points per game. They were the best two players on the floor in the NBA Cup final, Antetokounmpo getting a triple-double — 26 points, 19 rebounds and 10 assists — on his way to MVP honors, and Lillard scoring 23.

The Bucks connected on 17 3-pointers.

"Everybody did their job," Lillard said. "We defended. We played well from the start of the game all the way through the finish. I think it just showed what we've been building. I think it all came out in our biggest game to this point."

Brook Lopez and Gary Trent Jr. each scored 13 for Milwaukee, which joined the Los Angeles Lakers as the only champions of the 2-year-old event. A 19-5 Bucks run in the second half turned what was a five-point game into a 19-point game early in the fourth, and Milwaukee kept control the rest of the way.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 21 and Jalen Williams added 18 for the Thunder, who had scored at least 99 points in every game this season. But they sputtered in plenty of ways Tuesday, getting outscored 51-15 from beyond



Milwaukee Bucks guard Damian Lillard passes between Oklahoma City Thunder guard Luguentz Dort, left, and center Isaiah Hartenstein on Tuesday night in Las Vegas.

the arc and shooting only 34%.

It's a game that only counted for tournament purposes; the win, the loss and the stats won't count toward the regular season.

Lillard's first season with the Bucks after 11 years in Portland wasn't perfect. It was good, not great. Year 2 is clearly better. It's another sign of what might be for Milwaukee.

"People wanted to put me with Giannis and think it was just going to be perfect right away because we've both been high-level players," Lillard said. "But I come from a situation where I've always had the ball, and he's had a decade of him having the ball and playing a certain way.

"I think time is the No. 1 thing," he added. "It just took time for us to get to know each other better as people. You can't just trust somebody that you're paired with when you don't really know who they are, how they think and how they operate. So, I think time has helped us."

Time has helped Lillard as well.

He averaged 24.3 points and 7 assists per game last year. Those are all-world numbers for just about anyone. He didn't think much of how he played, though, and he never got to the point of feeling totally comfortable in a new role, a new place, with a new team.

He does now.

"Getting healthy, getting my training in and having my mind right coming back into the season was all it really was for me," Lillard said. "When we lost in the playoffs last year, I said it right after the game. 'People will see.'"

Seeing is believing.

There's still more than two-thirds of the regular season left. The Cavaliers — the Bucks' first opponent when the Bucks return to regular-season play on Friday — and the defending NBA champion Celtics have clearly been the best two teams in the Eastern Conference to this point. There are tons of challenges ahead and there will surely be plenty of ebbs and flows.

"I'm so happy for Dame that we got our first trophy together," Antetokounmpo said.

"This is just the beginning. We have to keep on improving and getting better, and we will be better."

# SPORTS



## Seeking a spark

Falcons, fighting for a playoff spot, turn to Penix at QB » NFL, Page 22



IAN MAULE/AP

Milwaukee Bucks guard Damian Lillard lifts the NBA Cup while forward Giannis Antetokounmpo, left, celebrates after their 97-81 victory over the Oklahoma City Thunder in the championship game Tuesday night in Las Vegas. The Bucks have been one of the league's hottest teams since starting 2-8.

# A preview of their potential

After winning NBA Cup together, next challenge for Lillard and Antetokounmpo is chasing the big prize

By TIM REYNOLDS  
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Damian Lillard and Giannis Antetokounmpo stood side-by-side during the celebration after the NBA Cup final. Antetokounmpo was holding the MVP trophy. Lillard was holding the bigger trophy.

It was a moment that Lillard had waited a long time to savor.

He's been a rookie of the year, a 3-point contest champion, an All-Star MVP, even a member of the league's 75th anniversary

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team. And while his biggest goal is still winning an NBA championship, the significance of winning the NBA Cup was not lost on the 13-year veteran.

"I've had a lot of experience individually

where I've had accomplishments and stuff," Lillard said after the Milwaukee Bucks beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 97-81 on Tuesday night. "But to have some team success and win something and be the last team standing in this tournament, it feels great."

Milwaukee has a championship coach in Doc Rivers, the core of a team that won a title in 2021 — Antetokounmpo, Khris Middleton, Brook Lopez, Bobby Portis and Pat Connaughton among them — and one of the

game's elite guards in Lillard. Starting 1-6 and 2-8 this year might have raised some eyebrows, but the Bucks insisted they never doubted themselves.

They've been one of the league's hottest teams since that awful start and rolled through the in-season tournament with a 7-0 record. Winning the NBA Cup might be a reminder — perhaps an unnecessary one — of Milwaukee's potential.

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