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STARS AND STRIPES[®]

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PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

Members of the U.S. Army's Task Force Voit load a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System with test rockets at the Central Training Area near Tapa, Estonia, on Monday as part of a live-fire exercise.

'We are ready and capable'

US soldiers help Estonia gear up for HIMARS era with live-fire drill on Russia's doorstep

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

TAPA, Estonia — Rockets fired by members of a U.S. Army-led mission in this Baltic country lit up the sky this week on the cusp of Russian territory, a show of strength that heralded more to come.

Test rounds launched Monday from the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems of Task Force Voit during a live-fire exercise at a training area near Tapa previewed the added NATO firepower headed to the eastern flank.

Within months, Estonia is ex-

pecting the arrival of a half-dozen HIMARS after taking delivery of them in the United States a couple of weeks ago. Meanwhile, a handful of Estonian military personnel watched the display put on by the U.S. contingent.

Task Force Voit was established in Tapa two years ago with the dual mission of deterring aggression and teaching the Estonians how to use HIMARS. That training is now primed to take off in the coming months.

"The message that it sends is that we are here, and we are ready

SEE HIMARS ON PAGE 6



A High Mobility Artillery Rocket System launcher belonging to the U.S. Army-led Task Force Voit fires a test rocket Monday.

Trump orders revise DOD's transgender, DEI policies

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump signed four executive orders Monday that revise the Pentagon's transgender policy, eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs, reinstate service members who were kicked out for refusing the coronavirus vaccine and create an "Iron Dome" for the country.

Trump signed the orders while aboard Air Force One on a return flight to Washington from Florida. "We will get transgender ideology the hell out of our military. It's going to be gone," Trump said Monday night at a retreat of House Republicans at his Doral golf resort in Miami.

The order does not immediately ban transgender troops but requires the Defense Department to update all medical standards "to establish high standards of readiness, lethality ... and integrity." It will end the use of pronouns in the military "that inaccurately reflect an individual's sex" and prohibits men from "sharing sleeping, changing, or bathing in facilities" designated for women. The order also applies to women using facilities for men.

The order directs the Pentagon to determine a policy for service members based on readiness within 30 days.

Former President Joe Biden ended Trump's de facto ban on transgender service members and allowed individuals who meet military entrance qualifications to enlist, serve in their self-identified gender and access care deemed medically necessary for gender transition.

In July 2017, Trump issued a se-

SEE ORDERS ON PAGE 8

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Profit, revenue top GM expectations in 4th quarter

Associated Press

General Motors swung to a loss in the fourth quarter on huge charges related to China, but still topped profit and revenue expectations on Wall Street.

Last month, GM cautioned that the poor performance of its Chinese joint ventures would force it to write down assets and take a restructuring charge totaling more than \$5 billion in the fourth quarter.

China has become an increasingly difficult market for foreign

automakers, with BYD and other domestic companies raising the quality of their vehicles and reducing costs. The country has subsidized its automakers.

For the three months ended Dec. 31, GM lost \$2.96 billion, or \$1.64 per share. A year earlier, the company earned \$2.1 billion, or \$1.59 per share.

Stripping out the charges and other items, GM earned \$1.92 per share in the quarter. That topped the \$1.85 per share that analysts surveyed by FactSet predicted.

Revenue climbed to \$47.7 billion from \$42.98 billion, beating Wall Street's estimate of \$44.98 billion.

In a letter to shareholders, CEO Mary Barra said GM doubled its electric vehicle market share over the course of 2024 as it scaled production.

Barra noted that China had positive equity income in the fourth quarter before restructuring costs, and that GM is taking steps with its partner to improve from there.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Jan. 29)	0.94	Bahrain (Dinar)	.3768
British pound (Jan. 29)	\$1.21	Britain (Pound)	1.2433
Japanese yen (Jan. 29)	152.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.4380
South Korean won (Jan. 29)	1,401.00	China (Yuan)	7.2510
		Denmark (Krone)	7.1510
		Egypt (Pound)	50.1643
		Euro	.9582
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7919
		Hungary (Forint)	391.01
		Israel (Shekel)	3.6221
		Japan (Yen)	155.30
		Kuwait (Dinar)	.3081
		Norway (Krone)	11.2892
		Philippines (Peso)	58.48
		Poland (Zloty)	4.03
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7501
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3508
		South Korea (Won)	1,448.23
Switzerland (Franc)	.9042		
Thailand (Baht)	32.92		
Turkey (New Lira)	35.7654		

(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.)

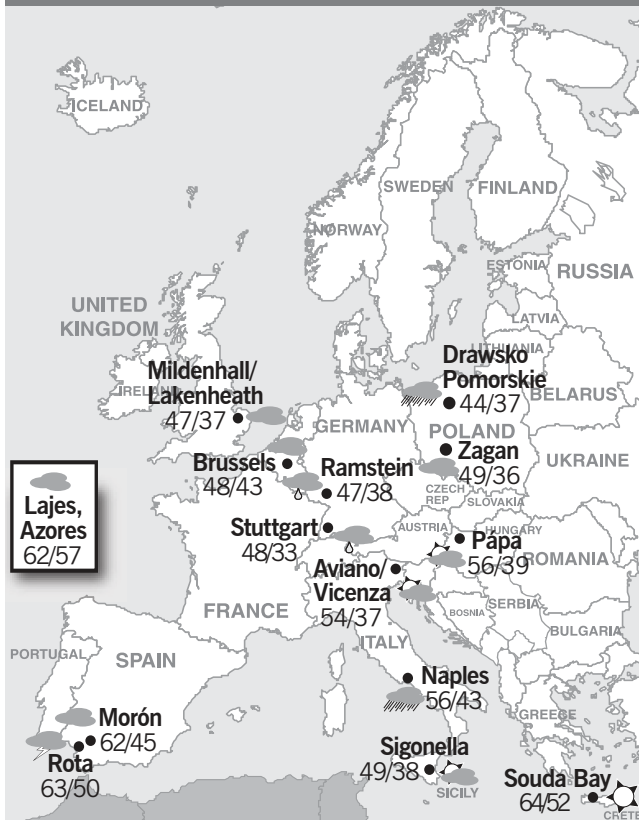
INTEREST RATES	
Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.30
30-year bond	4.77

WEATHER OUTLOOK

WEDNESDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



WEDNESDAY IN EUROPE



THURSDAY IN THE PACIFIC



The weather is compiled from weather.com

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MILITARY



DANIEL TAYLOR/U.S. Navy

Robert Storch, left, then the inspector general for the Defense Department, speaks with Capt. Richard Gilliard at the hospital at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, in April.

DOD inspector general among over a dozen fired by Trump

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Robert Storch, the inspector general at the Defense Department, was among more than a dozen IGs at federal agencies fired by President Donald Trump

“It’s a very common thing to do,” Trump claimed Saturday night to reporters on Air Force One traveling to Florida — his first comments after a decision that caused alarm among government watchdogs and members of Congress.

“I don’t know them,” he said, though many of those he fired late Friday night were people who he appointed during his first term. “But some people thought that some were unfair, or some were not doing their job. It’s a very standard thing to do.”

Other inspector generals termi-

nated include the departments of agriculture, education, labor, transportation and state. The move did not affect the inspectors general for the Justice Department or the Department of Homeland Security, NBC News reported.

An inspector general conducts investigations and audits into any potential malfeasance, fraud, waste or abuse by a government agency or its personnel and issues reports and recommendations on its findings. An inspector general’s office is intended to operate independently.

The firings could clear the way for Trump to install loyalists in the role of identifying fraud, waste and abuse in the government.

In 2020, he replaced multiple key inspectors general, including those leading the Defense Depart-

ment and intelligence community, as well as the inspector general tapped to lead a special oversight board for the \$2.2 trillion economic relief package on the coronavirus pandemic, the Associated Press reported.

Storch’s tenure as the Pentagon inspector general began in December 2022. For the past year, Storch investigated former Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin’s handling of his undisclosed hospitalization. Other matters the department’s internal watchdog investigated include how effectively the military facilitated the delivery of food aid into Gaza, the Navy’s oversight of the Red Hill fuel facility in Hawaii and weapons systems sent to Ukraine which could be rendered useless on the battlefield because the Pentagon lacks a plan for Ukrainian troops to maintain them.

US credit cards wrongly charged \$500K in 2023

Watchdog report shows casino withdrawals, bar charges among worrisome spending

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Charges at bars during the Super Bowl, withdrawals from casino ATM machines and Roblox game purchases were among \$500,000 of worrisome spending that went unnoticed on government credit cards in 2023, according to a Pentagon watchdog report.

The Defense Department inspector general found the problematic spending during fiscal year 2023, which ended Sept. 30, 2023, according to the report released Jan. 21. Much of the money went under the radar because one-third of program supervisors were not using available data systems to track potentially fraudulent spending.

The credit cards are issued to employees and service members to cover the cost of work-related travel and do allow for cash withdrawals, according to the report. The contracts for the cards require certain fraud prevention measures be in place, and last week’s report focused on strengthening those guardrails.

While 70% of the \$6.4 billion charged on 2.3 million government cards that year was found to be appropriate, 12% was inadvertently spent on the wrong things, such as alcohol or in Google’s online store for games, smartphone applications and video streaming services. Inspectors also found cards used on federal holidays and during

major sporting events when employees were unlikely to have work expenses.

About 2% of spending was considering abuse and less than 1% fraud, according to the report.

That’s down from a decade ago, when the inspector general found about \$1 million had been charged to government cards at casinos and adult entertainment venues.

The most egregious case highlighted by the IG was an Air Force airman who withdrew more than \$10,500 from two Maryland casinos between April and August 2023. The airman tried the card nine more times totaling \$3,500, but those transactions were rejected because the card had reached its spending limit.

That service member received nonjudicial punishment after the Air Force program manager reached out to the commander a year after the problem began, according to the report.

The inspector general made 15 recommendations to review, update and create rules to better identify high-risk merchants and transactions, and better ensure that program supervisors are watching how much is spent using online spending data. It specifically called for transactions be flagged for review that involve Everi, the company behind the casino ATMs used by the airman. It had recently changed its name, according to the report.

Air Force reins in shaving waivers for airmen, guardians

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force is resetting the expiration dates on waivers for airmen and guardians with shaving exemptions, or profiles, according to a memo from the service’s surgeon general.

“All current shaving profiles remain valid but will expire 90 calendar days after the next Periodic Health Assessment,” said a Friday memo from Dr. (Lt. Gen.) John DeGoes.

A periodic health assessment is an annual screening by the armed forces to evaluate the individual

medical readiness of their service members.

The Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs Office did not respond after business hours Tuesday to an email seeking further information.

In 2020, Air Force surgeon general Dr. (Lt. Gen.) Dorothy Hogg authorized shaving waivers up to five years for airmen and guardians diagnosed with pseudofolliculitis barbae, which causes painful razor bumps and disproportionately affects Black men.

The number of shaving waivers for medical conditions granted to

airmen and guardians has nearly doubled over the past three years, according to an April report by Military.com.

In December, Congress decided against a pilot program to allow airmen and guardians to grow beards but asked the Air Force to brief it by April on the feasibility of such a program, the military news site reported Dec. 10.

DeGoes’ memo directs airman and guardians with a medical necessity for a shaving profile to be re-evaluated by a health care provider. Commanders may request a service member be evaluated

“due to operational concerns stemming from a medical condition,” according to the memo.

The memo states that extended shaving profiles are reserved for severe cases of pseudofolliculitis barbae while mild-to-moderate cases would be given temporary profiles. It does not state how long a waiver may last based on the severity of the case.

Shaving waivers based on religious accommodation are excluded from the new policy, according to the memo.

A study published last year in Military Medicine found that Air

Force shaving waivers are associated with longer times to promotion, which disproportionately affects Black service members.

In the study, only 13% of the cohort were Black, of whom 64% were on shaving waivers.

“I have absolutely no issues with shaving waivers for those who need them,” a technical sergeant wrote in a Tuesday comment on the Leadership University Facebook page.

“But when I see an Airmen with a scraggly, 8 haired goatee 1½” long and a baby face everywhere else it infuriates me.”

PACIFIC

Heavy snow slams US bases in South Korea

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — Heavy snow Monday night prompted school closures, travel warnings and suspended services for some U.S. bases on the peninsula as the country observes its longest holiday of the year.

Up to 8 inches of snow accumulated Tuesday in some parts in Pyeongtaek city, home of Osan and Camp Humphreys, according to the Korea Meteorological Administration.

All schools on both bases were closed for two days starting Tuesday, the Department of Defense Education Activity announced in emails to parents and staff.

More snow was forecast for Tuesday evening with temperatures dipping to 20 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the meteorological administration. No snow is expected after Wednesday; however, temperatures are anticipated to drop to 15 degrees.

Outpatient services at the Sgt. Whin Woo Kim Clinic at Humphreys were also suspended Tuesday, according to the Brian D. Allgood Army Community Hospital's Facebook page. Emergency, inpatient and ancillary services were still open.

Some services remained open, including gyms, post offices, commissaries, troop dining facilities and restaurants, according to posts on the official Humphreys and Osan Facebook pages.

No damage was reported at



Taxis wait in the snow at Osan Air Base, South Korea, on Tuesday.

ERIC MENDIOLA/Stars and Stripes

Humphreys on Tuesday, garrison spokesman Jeff Nagan said in an email that day.

The snow prompted road-condition warnings from Humphreys and Osan. Drivers on both bases were advised to exercise extreme caution and use snow chains. U.S. service members were limited to

driving military vehicles for essential duties only, according to official Facebook pages.

Some roads leading toward Pyeongtaek were icy Tuesday morning. A car was seen sliding off course and hitting a guardrail, joining two other vehicles that met the same fate.

Mission-essential personnel in Pyeongtaek and Seoul were given a delayed, 10 a.m. report time to account for the inclement weather; everyone else was not required to commute to work, according to a text message from the Defense Department's mass warning system.

"We encourage our workforce and residents to remain off the road until conditions improve," Nagan said.

Humphreys, the largest U.S. military base overseas, is about 40 miles south of Seoul; Osan, home of the 7th Air Force, is about 30 miles south of the capital city.

Kunsan Air Base, home of the 8th Fighter Wing, 120 miles south of Seoul, also imposed mission-essential travel only. Traveling by bicycle, motorcycle and scooters was suspended and taxis and buses should only be used when necessary, according to a post on Kunsan's official Facebook page Tuesday.

U.S. and South Korean military bases are relatively vacant this week as the country observes the Lunar New Year, a six-day holiday during which many businesses and government offices are closed while the population visits their families.

U.S. Forces Korea, the command responsible for the 28,500 American troops in the country, also observes the Lunar New Year and grants its personnel a holiday Wednesday "in honor of [South Korean] custom," according to a command memo.

South Korean acting president Choi Sang-mok encouraged government safety officials to work "day and night" throughout the holiday to ensure residents "can have a safe and comfortable holiday," according to a presidential office news release Monday.



SEAN CAMPBELL/U.S. Air Force

An Outdoor Recreation program guide teaches airmen to ski during a trip to 49 Degrees North Ski Resort in Washington in 2016.

USAF eliminates subsidies for popular quality-of-life program

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force has again cut funding for a program that provides substantial discounts for recreational trips and other activities, a service spokeswoman told Stars and Stripes.

Recharge for Resiliency allows up to \$200 per person per day to offset the cost of trips through Outdoor Recreation and Morale, Welfare and Recreation, according to a program guide published in January 2024.

Last year, approximately 120,000 airmen, guardians and their families participated in the program at reduced costs or no cost to them, a spokeswoman for the Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center, Debbie Aragon, said by email Jan. 22.

The federal budget has not paid for the program for the past several years, Aragon said.

Instead, money was reallocated from others areas to support the

program, but not for fiscal year 2025, which began Oct. 1, and due to "competing priorities," it will probably not be funded in fiscal 2026, she said.

Moving money for the program "was not viable" in fiscal 2025 due to funding constraints, Aragon added.

Launched in 2015, Recharge for Resiliency includes three components, the Single Airmen Program Initiative, RecOn and Deployed Affected Program. They offer something for nearly every service member stationed at an Air Force or Space Force base, from ski outings to tourist-destination bus trips.

The program was developed at the height of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom to subsidize social and recreation programs within the Force Support Squadrons and create an Air Force culture that supports a healthy and resilient lifestyle, Aragon said.

Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D.,

will lose \$60,000 for this year's Recharge for Resiliency program, Kevin Ott, a retired Air Force chief master sergeant, told Stars and Stripes by phone Sunday.

He said he was shocked when he heard the news this month at a Black Hills Military Advisory Coalition meeting and wrote to his elected officials expressing concerns about the quality-of-life cut that could affect 400,000 airman and their families worldwide.

"If you have the greatest, shiniest new airplane out there, and if the people that are working on it, the people that are flying it, the people that are supporting it, if all those people are not at their 100% mentally and physically, then the airplane is not going to be as capable as it should be," he said.

"When you start looking at the people aspect of things, you always want to be able to have everybody that wants to remain in the Air Force to remain and part of it is the quality of life," Ott added.

MILITARY

US, Japan to run Iron Fist amphibious exercise

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — At least three U.S. Navy ships and four Marine Corps Ospreys will join an annual amphibious exercise by Marines, sailors and Japanese troops next month, according to Japan's military.

Iron Fist is scheduled Feb. 19 through March 7 at several locations, including the Marines' Camp Hansen and Kin Blue Beach Training Area on Okinawa, according to a Japan Ground Self-Defense Force news release Friday.

Drills will also take place at Vice-Camp Takayubarū and Camp Ainoura on Kyushū, and on Okinoerabu Island, about 43 miles northeast of Okinawa.

The U.S. 7th Fleet's amphibious assault ship USS America, the amphibious transport dock ship USS San Diego and the dock-landing ship USS Rushmore will take part in the exercise, according to the release.

Seventh Fleet spokesman Lt. Cmdr. John Mike declined by

email Monday to confirm the ships' participation, citing security reasons.

Four MV-22 Ospreys from the 36th Marine Aircraft Group at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma on Okinawa will fly to Camp Ainoura as part of the training, according to a Friday news release from Japan's Ministry of Defense.

A spokeswoman for III Marine Expeditionary Force, 1st Lt. Isabel Izquierdo, declined by email Monday to confirm the Ospreys' participation.

Iron Fist, in its 19th year, will feature "combined planning to improve preparedness through real-world amphibious training," according to Izquierdo's email.

The exercise will also focus on advanced marksmanship, amphibious reconnaissance, fire and maneuver assaults, bilateral logistics, medical support and fire support operations, such as mortars, artillery and close-air support, she said.

This year's Iron Fist comes amid ongoing concerns about the pace of China's moves around Japan and Taiwan.

China demonstrated in exercises last year an ability to surround and isolate Taiwan, which Beijing has expressed intent to reclaim one day.

China's coast guard also spent a record 355 days in waters around the Senkaku Islands. Japan administers the small islets and rocks in the East China Sea, which are also claimed by China and Taiwan.

Iron Fist locations will include Camp Courtney and the Northern Training Area on Okinawa, Ie Shima Auxiliary Airfield northwest of Okinawa and Japan's Camp Naha, a spokesman with Japan's Ground Staff Office said by phone Monday.

Approximately 2,700 Marines and sailors and 1,300 Japanese troops will participate in Iron Fist, with observers from England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and the Philippines scheduled to attend, the spokesman said.

Some Japanese government officials speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

Last year's Iron Fist focused on



TYLER ANDREWS/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marines train during the Iron Fist amphibious exercise at Kin Blue Beach, Okinawa, on March 12.

island defense, with troops training to recapture an island in the Indo-Pacific.

"This training remains impera-

ative in allowing the U.S. Marine Corps to maintain its commitments under the U.S.-Japan Alliance," Izquierdo said.

Japan, US, Australia set for F-35 drills over Guam

By SETH ROBSON
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

Japanese F-35A Lightning II stealth fighters are set to train for the first time with American and Australian F-35s in the skies over Guam, according to the Japan Air Self-Defense Force.

For two weeks, the fifth-generation fighters will practice joint operations over a vast area for Cope North, a large-scale drill next month, said Gen. Hiroaki Uchikura, the service's chief of staff.

"Also, this will be a good opportunity to train how to deal with opponents with the same capabilities," he told reporters at a press conference Thursday.

Cope North is scheduled Feb. 3-21 at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, Pacific Air Forces said in a statement Monday.

The exercise focuses on air combat and large-force employment to enhance the stealth fighters' ability to work together, the statement said.

Fifth-generation fighters like the F-35 and the F-22 Raptor can move at supersonic speeds and boast radar-evading designs, high-tech sensors and networking technology.

Cope North will be based on a "contemporary scenario," PACAF stated, without elaborating further.

The U.S., Australia and Japan are gearing up to deter Chinese aggression over contested territory in the South China Sea and East China Sea and around Taiwan.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has stated his intent to reunite the self-governing and democratic island with the mainland, by force if necessary.

"The U.S., Australian, and Japanese air forces serve as the trilateral exercise leads, establishing command and control and organizing training for the multinational task force," the PACAF statement said, without listing other nations involved in the task force.

PACAF was preparing to release additional in-



DEANA HEITZMAN/U.S. Air Force

Japan Air Self-Defense Force members watch the arrival of the country's first F-35A Lightning II at Misawa Air Base in Japan in 2018.

formation about the exercise, a spokeswoman for Andersen's 36th Wing, 1st Lt. Ariana Wilkinson, said by phone Tuesday.

Last year, around 1,700 U.S. airmen, sailors and Marines joined the training, along with 700 troops from Australia, Canada, France, South Korea and Japan.

The Australian Defence Force, in an unsigned email Tuesday, said it may release information about Cope North by next week.

Japan has 39 F-35As deployed to Misawa Air Base in northeast Japan, Defense Minister Gen Nakatani told reporters Friday.

The country is sending six F-35As, two E-2D Advanced Hawkeye command and control planes and a KC-46A Pegasus tanker to Cope North, the Air Self-Defense Force announced on its website a day earlier.

The planes are from Japan's 3rd Air Wing and the Airborne Warning and Control Wing at Misawa and the 3rd Tactical Airlift Group at Miho Air Base in the country's southwest, according to the statement.

"We share universal values and strategies with the U.S. and Australia, and through this exercise we can show the strong ties between the three countries, to ensure peace and stability in the region, and will help to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific," Uchikura said Thursday.

Cope North started in 1978 at Misawa as a quarterly exercise between the U.S. and Japan.

The training moved to Guam in 1999, and brought the Australian air force into the fold in 2012.

Other U.S. allies, including New Zealand and the Philippines, have participated intermittently.

Former soldier sentenced

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

A soldier found to have a teenage girl living with him for nearly four months in his Fort Bliss barracks room was sentenced to eight years in federal prison, according to the Justice Department.

Carlos Humberto Richard Walsh, 23, of Washington brought the girl to stay with him in his room in 2022 and had sex with her multiple times, according to court records. He was a specialist assigned to the base but is no longer in the Army, according to the Justice Department.

The girl was 14 years old at the time, according to the El Paso Times.

Walsh's leaders found the girl in his car on Jan. 24, 2023, during a barracks inspection, as well as many of her personal items in his room. She told police that she had been living in the barracks room with Walsh since Oct. 1, 2022, according to court documents. He was arrested May 25, 2023.

Walsh pleaded guilty Aug. 13 and was sentenced by Judge David Guaderrama in El Paso, the city located just outside the gates of Fort Bliss in west Texas.

A hearing to discuss restitution is set for March 27, according to the online court docket.

EUROPE

HIMARS: Estonians likely will conduct similar drills by summer**FROM PAGE 1**

and capable to defend our shared values and interests,” Maj. Adrian Betancourt, the task force’s officer in charge, said of the exercise.

Betancourt added that the Americans are thrilled for the opportunity to show their Estonian counterparts the ropes on a weapons system that has been used to devastating effect against Russian forces in Ukraine.

Estonian personnel likely will be conducting similar drills by the summer and officials are scouting additional areas in the country where they can test the launchers, Betancourt said.

The Estonians’ training so far has consisted of academic modules and some hands-on work, but live-fire drills will begin once the U.S.-made systems are in the country.

Demand for the weapon has taken off as a result of Ukraine’s battlefield successes with HIMARS. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania took notice.

Over the next two years, the latter two will join Estonia in adding the weapon to their arsenal, marking the start of a long-range artillery evolution in region. Altogether, the three countries are expected to field 20 of the launchers by 2027.

The system’s armored cab holds three operators — a driver, gunner and section chief — and is designed to withstand small-arms fire and artillery fragments.

It can fire different projectiles, including GMLRS-guided rockets that can strike targets out to roughly 40 miles, and M57 ATACMS ballistic missiles that can travel 180 miles.

Sgt. 1st Class Margus Oras, first sergeant of the Estonian military’s HIMARS battery, was among those watching Task Force Voit’s



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

U.S. Army Maj. Adrian Betancourt, Task Force Voit officer in charge, talks to Estonian troops on the sidelines of an exercise with the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System near Tapa, Estonia, on Monday.

live fire on Monday.

The roughly 100 Estonian reservists who have been training with the Americans will be ready to use the new systems on day one, Oras said.

Most of the U.S. contingent arrived at the training area on Sunday. The task force is made up mostly of soldiers from 3rd Battalion, 321st Field Artillery Regiment, 18th Field Artillery Brigade, based at Fort Liberty, N.C.

For the task force’s soldiers, the drill Monday was a chance to maintain their sharpness. They spent the night in their HIMARS vehicles or in tents amid freezing temperatures and didn’t fire the rockets until Monday.

A key part of the training is ensuring that soldiers can operate the launchers in the conditions they’re likely to face.

Cpl. Kadarius Nash, a gunner, said maneuvering the HIMARS through muddy terrain, avoiding getting stuck and dealing with the snow and winter chill of the high northern latitude were the most challenging aspects of the drill.

“The environment is definitely different here, not like any of my experiences in the past,” Nash said.

Observers more than a 5 miles from the HIMARS launchers sent coordinates for a target to a temporary control center set up at the training site.

The center processed the data and relayed it to the launcher crews, who then opened fire. The observers reported back whether the target was hit. All told, they spent several hours engaged in firing.

With the HIMARS, the Baltic countries would be able to strike Russia’s Kaliningrad and Pskov regions, the St. Petersburg metro area and the entire northern part of Belarus, including Minsk.

Analysts say the immediate threat of direct Russian action against any of the Baltic states appears low because of the Kremlin’s focus on the war in Ukraine.

However, regional intelligence services assess that Moscow has

developed longer-term plans to reconstitute its forces and redeploy a large military presence in the region, according to the Congressional Research Service.

So it is wise for the Baltics to be investing in HIMARS and other military hardware, said Scott Boston, a senior defense analyst at the Rand Corp.

“We will be in an antagonistic relationship with Russia for probably the rest of our lives, and they feel it more than anyone,” Boston said. “This is a very good reason for our allies to be looking ahead.”

Leaders of Task Force Voit said the unit intends to stay and continue training Estonian forces once their HIMARS arrive, with the aim of eventually conducting live fires together.

The fate of the task force’s mission is in the hands of President Donald Trump, who has long badgered NATO allies that don’t meet the bloc’s benchmark of spending at least 2% of gross domestic product on defense.

All three Baltic countries already exceed that target, and Lithuania’s foreign minister said recently that his country intends to increase its defense spending to between 5% and 6% of GDP from next year until 2030.

For the time being, Task Force Voit’s soldiers are availing themselves of the mutual benefits of their interactions with the Estonians in Tapa. Sgt. Cade England, a gunner who participated in the live fire Monday, said camouflage techniques and winter operations tips were among the lessons shared with the Americans.

“We’re taking ideas and bouncing them off each other so we can move forward in future missions,” England said. “We’re learning so much from each other and we want to continue learning.”

Danish leader visits with NATO head, moves to protect Greenland

Associated Press

BERLIN — Denmark’s prime minister embarked on a tour of major European capitals Tuesday as the Continent faces what she called “a more uncertain reality” and her country moves to strengthen its military presence around Greenland.

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen stopped in Berlin, Paris and Brussels, meeting with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte in the Belgian capital. Her trip comes as new U.S. President Donald Trump has said he would not rule out the use of military force to seize control of Greenland, an autonomous territory belonging to NATO and European Union member Denmark.

On Monday evening, her government announced a roughly 14.6 billion-kroner (nearly \$2 billion) agreement with parties including

the governments of Greenland and the Faroe Islands to “improve capabilities for surveillance and maintaining sovereignty in the region.”

Those will include three new Arctic naval vessels, two additional long-range surveillance drones and satellite capacity, the Defense Ministry in Copenhagen said.

Frederiksen didn’t directly mention Trump’s threat in comments at a meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, but she said that “we are facing a more uncertain reality, a reality that calls for an even more united Europe and for more cooperation.”

She pointed to Russian activities in Ukraine and beyond and said that “it is up to Europe to define the future of our continent, and I think we have to take more responsibility for our own security.”

In its announcement on the Arc-

tic and North Atlantic region, the Danish Defense Ministry said that the parties agreed to negotiate a second agreement in the first half of this year focused on strengthening deterrence and defense.

“We must face the fact that there are serious challenges regarding security and defense in the Arctic and North Atlantic,” Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said. “For this reason, we must strengthen our presence in the region.”

His ministry said ensuring that investments provide support for local jobs and businesses in Greenland and the Faroe Islands will be “a focal point.” Vivian Motzfeldt, Greenland’s minister of statehood and foreign affairs, said she was “pleased with the steps we are taking towards increased security in and around Greenland” with the accord.



MADS CLAUS RASMUSSEN, RITZAU SCANPIX/AP

Denmark’s Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, left, meets with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte in Brussels, Belgium, on Tuesday.

MILITARY

Portugal called out for slight defense spending rise

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO ally Portugal is doubling down on its intent to raise defense spending only slightly, even as leaders in the bloc warn of the dangers from Russian long-range bombers to a country that hosts a strategic U.S. airfield.

“The threats from Russia may seem distant, but let me assure you, it is not,” NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said Monday, speaking alongside Portuguese Prime Minister Luis Montenegro. “Russian ships and long-range bombers menace the Portuguese coast.”

Rutte’s visit to Lisbon came as pressure intensifies on NATO to meet U.S. President Donald Trump’s demands for big increases in defense spending.

Last week, Trump called on allies to boost levels from the current benchmark of 2% of gross domestic product to 5%.

But Portugal falls short of even the 2% mark, which it says it won’t reach until 2029.

That’s five years later than a deadline imposed by NATO in 2014 that said members should be



EDGAR GRIMALDO/U.S. Air Force

A U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon takes off from Lajes Field in the Azores in 2022. The base in the Portuguese island chain provides an important mid-Atlantic link for U.S. and allied forces traveling to and from Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

at 2% by 2024.

Allies closer to Russia’s border have been quicker to elevate defense outlays, but southern Euro-

pean countries such as Italy, Spain and Portugal, all of which have U.S. military bases and sites on their territory, have lagged.

The Azores, a chain of Portuguese islands in the Atlantic Ocean, are where the U.S. Air Force maintains Lajes Field, a lo-

gistics hub for American and allied forces.

For Rutte, the central challenge of his term as NATO’s top official will be getting allies reluctant to go big on defense spending to showcase more urgency on an issue that will dominate Trump’s approach to the alliance.

In Lisbon, Rutte told Montenegro that the allies need to prepare for larger defense spending commitments “to guarantee our security in the future.”

Montenegro said Monday that there was a possibility his country would be able to speed up the timetable for getting to the 2% target.

During Trump’s first term, lag-gard defense spending by Germany was one reason Trump cited in calling for the withdrawal of 12,000 U.S. troops from that country.

Lajes Field, hosted on a Portuguese air base, is home to the 65th Air Base Group.

The location has the ability to act as a power projection platform for bombers and fighters and also serves as a refueling stopping point.

Explosion forces crew to abandon ship in the Red Sea

By JON GAMBRELL
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — An explosion struck a Hong Kong-flagged container ship Tuesday traveling north through the Red Sea, sparking a major fire that forced its crew to abandon the vessel, shipping industry officials said.

The ship was drifting and ablaze some 140 miles off the coast of Ho-

deida, a port city in Yemen held by the country’s Houthi rebels, said the Diaplous Group, a maritime firm.

It wasn’t immediately clear what caused the fire in the Red Sea, which has been repeatedly targeted by attacks from the Houthis.

The rebels said last week they were limiting their assaults following a ceasefire in the Israel-

Hamas war in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis did not immediately acknowledge the fire incident.

The vessel was abandoned and the crew later rescued unharmed, another maritime industry official told The Associated Press. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as authorization hadn’t been given to speak publicly about the incident.

The official described the cargo

aboard the vessel as “dangerous,” without immediately elaborating.

The name of the vessel wasn’t released.

The Red Sea is home to coral and marine life that previously has been threatened by burning ships from the Houthi campaign in the area and the threat of wider oil spills.

The Houthi attacks, which began in November 2023, have

halved the number of ships passing through the Red Sea corridor, a crucial route for energy shipments and cargo moving between Asia and Europe. Despite the pledge by the Houthis to limit their attacks, shippers broadly are still shying away from the route over the risks.

Some \$1 trillion worth of trade passed through the region each year before the attacks.

Potential weapons buyer played part in Trump impeachment

By TARA COPP
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump’s nominee to be the military’s top weapons buyer is an official who directed the Pentagon to withhold aid from Ukraine in 2019 as Trump sought a commitment from President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to investigate the Biden family — a key component of the impeachment of Trump in his first term.

That relationship is raising questions among some senators about whether the nominee will follow the law if confirmed for a powerful new position that oversees a budget of \$311 billion.

Michael Duffey, Trump’s nominee to be undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, served as the associate director at the Office of Management and Budget during Trump’s

first term.

In that job, he directed the Pentagon in July 2019 to place the hold on \$391 million in security assistance for Ukraine. It continued until mid-September as Trump tried to secure an announcement from Zelenskyy about investigating Trump’s 2020 election rival Joe Biden and son Hunter Biden on corruption charges tied to the younger Biden’s role with the Ukrainian gas company Burisma.

Withholding money for a policy reason is a violation of the 1974 Impoundment Control Act, which prohibits the executive branch from freezing funds appropriated by Congress, the branch controlling the power of the purse. The hold on Ukraine aid became a key factor in lawmakers’ party-line vote to impeach Trump in December 2019 for abuse of power

and obstruction of Congress. The Senate later acquitted him.

In a letter obtained by The Associated Press, Massachusetts Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren told Duffey that his role in withholding aid “raises concerns” about whether he will follow the law if approved for the powerful Pentagon position that oversees a large weapons-buying budget. It has been a gatekeeper for generating more than \$66 billion in military assistance to Ukraine since Russia invaded in February 2022.

Kori Schake, a senior fellow and director of foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, said Duffey’s budget-office experience was valuable and should make him an effective weapons buyer for the Pentagon.

But “he and others who favor presidential impoundment of con-

gressional appropriated funds should be made to commit in confirmation hearings to expending what Congress appropriates,” Schake said.

Warren sent Duffey more than 40 questions in advance of his Senate confirmation hearing that not only seek more information about his part in the 2019 aid pause but ask whether he would be responsive to congressional oversight because he did not comply with a subpoena to testify during Congress’ impeachment investigation.

That refusal “bodes poorly for your plans to be honest and open with Congress and the American people when overseeing acquisitions and contracts for programs that uphold our national security,” Warren said in her letter to Duffey.

The White House did not re-



KEVIN WOLF/AP

spond to a request for comment Monday about Duffey’s nomination or whether his nomination signaled a change in direction for weapons support to Ukraine.

Trump was impeached a second time in 2021 following the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

MILITARY

Orders: Trump reverses vaccine dismissals, pushes for 'Iron dome'

FROM PAGE 1

ries of surprise tweets announcing his intention to ban transgender men and women from serving “in any capacity.”

The Pentagon’s de facto ban on transgender men and women enlisting in the military went into effect in April 2019, following nearly two years of legal battles launched after transgender service members and military hopefuls sought to halt its implementation.

The Pentagon long insisted its policy was not a blanket ban because of its protections for those transgender service members who came out after the 2016 policy and a waiver process that could allow some transgender people to join the military.

But the policy barred nearly all people diagnosed with gender dysphoria — described by the American Psychiatric Association as “a conflict between a person’s physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify.”

It did allow people to enlist with a diagnosis of gender dysphoria who had doctor certification that they had remained stable in their biological sex for 36 months. It disqualified all people who had medically transitioned their sex.

The Pentagon in March 2021, when the department unveiled the policy change to allow transgender troops, estimated the number of service members who identified as transgender ranged from 1,000 to 8,000.

The Human Rights Campaign in November estimated a ban on transgender troops could impact about 15,000 service members.

DEI

Among Trump’s initial executive orders signed last week was one that declared the government would recognize only two sexes — male and female. He also rolled back diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, programs across all federal agencies.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Sunday posted on X that the president’s orders are clear, “no more DEI” at the Pentagon.

“The Pentagon will comply, immediately. No exceptions, name-changes or delays,” Hegseth said.

The order calls for the Defense Department and the Department of Homeland Security to abolish every DEI office within the agencies.

The secretaries of both departments must provide detailed guidance for the implementation of this order to their respective agencies within 30 days of the order signing.

Within 180 days, the secretaries must submit a report through the White House deputy chief of staff for policy documenting the progress of implementing the order,



DAVID HUSKEY/U.S. Army

The Army tests the Iron Dome Defense System at White Sands Missile Range, N.M., in 2021. A recent executive order signed by President Donald Trump would start the process of creating a “next generation” missile defense shield to protect the U.S. against ballistic missiles and other long-range attacks.

along with any recommendations for action to fulfill the objectives of this order.

It remains unclear Tuesday what Pentagon policies were canceled and what programs are still in effect.

The Air Force last week was told to eliminate barrier analysis working groups, which aim to improve equal employment for women, minorities, LGBTQ+ and disabled service members.

Courses featuring videos about the pioneering Black combat pilots and female flyers who ferried warplanes during World War II were removed last week to comply with the Trump administration’s crackdown on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, the Air Force said.

The move prompted Sen. Katie Britt, R-Ala., to post Sunday on social platform X, tagging Hegseth, that she expected he would correct “malicious compliance” seen in recent days.

The Air Force is restoring videos of the Tuskegee Airmen and Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs, to its basic training curriculum, Hegseth announced Sunday.

Gen. David Allvin, Air Force chief of staff, in a statement Monday said he directed the service to

implement the president’s orders swiftly — “no equivocation, no slow-rolling, no foot-dragging.” He took the time to clear up any confusion regarding the Tuskegee Airmen or WASPs.

“Allow me to clearly dispel a rumor — while we are currently reviewing all training courses to ensure compliance with the executive orders, no curriculum or content highlighting the honor and valor of the Tuskegee Airmen or Women Air Force Service Pilots has been removed from Basic Military Training,” Allvin said.

“The historic legacy and decorated valor these airmen embodied during World War II and beyond will continue to guide our newest recruits and all who serve in our ranks,” he said.

Coronavirus vaccine

During Trump’s inauguration speech last week, he said he would sign an executive order reinstating all service members, with full back pay, kicked out for refusing the coronavirus vaccine.

“The vaccine mandate was an unfair, overbroad, and completely unnecessary burden on our service members,” according to the executive order. “Further, the military unjustly discharged those who refused the vaccine, regard-

less of the years of service given to our nation, after failing to grant many of them an exemption that they should have received. Federal government redress of any wrongful dismissals is overdue.”

The executive order calls for service members to revert to their former rank, along with receiving full back pay, benefits, bonus payments or compensation.

It also allows any service members “who provide a written and sworn attestation” because they voluntarily left or allowed their service time to lapse to return to service with no impact on their service status, rank or pay.

Former Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered in August 2021 that all active-duty, National Guard and Reserve service members be vaccinated against the coronavirus or face separation.

Troops at the time with a health condition incompatible with the vaccine could get a waiver. Additionally, troops with religious beliefs that prohibit the use of vaccines could seek exemption.

The order was rescinded January 2023. More than 8,000 service members were discharged from the military for refusing to get the vaccine for religious or other reasons.

The number affected repre-

sents less than 1% of the military but dismissals were a political headache for Biden’s administration and the Pentagon. Some of those troops sued to try and stay in the service, calling the order an illegal mandate.

Only 113 military personnel have returned since the mandate was lifted — 73 for the Army, 13 for the Air Force, 25 for the Marine Corps and two for the Navy, according to service spokespersons.

The Space Force did not have any Guardians kicked out for refusing the vaccine, Air Force spokeswoman Rose Riley said.

‘Iron Dome’ for America

Another executive order that Trump signed would begin the process of creating a “next generation” missile defense shield to protect the U.S. against ballistic missiles and other long-range attacks.

It orders the construction of an “Iron Dome” shield, borrowing the name of the vaunted short-range Israeli missile defense system that for years has been used to intercept launches against them. The U.S. provided billions of dollars in funding to Iron Dome, and the Army has its own system.

“President Ronald Reagan endeavored to build an effective defense against nuclear attacks, and while this program resulted in many technological advances, it was canceled before its goal could be realized,” the executive order reads.

“Over the past 40 years, rather than lessening, the threat from next-generation strategic weapons has become more intense and complex with the development by peer and near-peer adversaries of next-generation delivery systems and their own homeland integrated air and missile defense capabilities.”

The order calls for the Defense Department to work with the director of the Office of Management and Budget to submit to the president a plan to fund this directive, allowing sufficient time for Trump to consider before finalizing the fiscal year 2026 budget.

The U.S. has the capability to deploy a layered air-defense system, from long-range Patriot missiles that have proven effective at intercepting ballistic and cruise missiles over Ukraine to shorter-range systems such as shoulder-launched Stinger missiles.

Since 2002, the Pentagon’s Missile Defense Agency has spent more than \$194 billion, including \$10.4 billion for fiscal year 2022, to equip operational commanders with a layered system of sensors, interceptors and command and control capabilities to detect, track and destroy incoming missiles, the Government Accountability Office said in a 2023 report.

NATION

Pacific Palisades fully reopens to residents

BY CLARA HARTER
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — For the first time since the devastating Palisades fire ignited on Jan. 7, all Pacific Palisades residents can now return to their homes — or what is left of them.

All remaining evacuation orders were lifted at noon Monday, with most zones converted to residents-only access. Residents were previously allowed limited access with a California Highway Patrol escort, but now they can pick up an entry pass and enter independently during non-curfew hours from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

“Thanks to the tireless efforts of our public safety, public works, and utilities partners — as of noon (Monday) all of the Pacific Palisades will be opened for resident reentry,” said City Councilmember Traci Park in a statement. “This is a watershed moment and I want to thank you all for your patience to allow these workers to clear major hazards.”

Residents can pick up an entry pass at Lot 3 at 1150 Pacific Coast Highway between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. daily and are allowed to bring contractors, tow trucks and tax assessors with them to their property, she said.

“I think this will mean relief that at least they (residents) can go back and see for themselves what’s happened to the neighborhood,” said Quentin Fleming, a member of the Pacific Palisades Community Council, who lost his

home. “Now the process of healing can begin.”

The 23,448-acre fire destroyed 6,837 properties, damaged more than 1,000 others and claimed 12 lives, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. At the fire’s peak, more than 10,000 residents were under evacuation orders.

A curfew remains in effect in the fire zone to protect property during the repopulation process. The U.S. Environmental Agency will begin debris removal this week, and returning residents are asked not to attempt to remove debris themselves due to safety concerns.

For many residents, the reopening process has been a painfully slow and frustrating one. Evacuation orders were lifted in a piecemeal fashion, and there was a lot of confusion over what areas could be accessed and when, said Fleming. California Highway Patrol officers began escorting residents back to their properties last week, but an escort was often challenging to secure.

On Sunday, Fleming lined up to get an escort back to his property. After waiting for 90 minutes, he learned that escorts were on an indefinite hold due to the risk of mudslides.

“No one seemed to really be in charge of communicating or having the information available (about access), and that can be a maddening thing,” he said.

Weekend rain triggered mud-



JAE C. HONG/AP

A member of the California Conservation Corps works in the rubble of the Palisades Fire in the Pacific Palisades section of Los Angeles, Monday.

slides and flooding in the Palisades fire area on Sunday, prompting the closure of Topanga Canyon Boulevard in both directions and of Pacific Coast Highway west of Topanga Canyon Boulevard.

Residents seeking to access the Highlands area of the Palisades on Monday were warned to expect delays as Palisades Drive only had one lane of traffic open due to the rain.

Although his home was burned

to the ground, Fleming is hoping to find something to salvage from the ashes and, if nothing else, looks forward to finally knowing where he stands.

“It feels good knowing I can finally go back and then begin the process of trying to recover or at least finding out that that’s not possible,” he said. “Being left in limbo can be very draining.”

Bendick Sy, whose home is still standing, is also eager to return.

“I feel fortunate that I can get to

my stuff and that it (the home) is recognizable,” Sy said, “whereas many, many people can’t do that.”

In particular, he is looking forward to retrieving his family photos and his children’s sports trophies, items that are “irreplaceable.”

Although Sy still has his home, he believes it will be many months before his family can live there again due to smoke damage, road damage, toxic-debris removal and infrastructure damage.

Shooting in Indiana store leaves 3 dead

Associated Press

ELKHART, Ind. — A shooting at a grocery store in northern Indiana on Monday left three people dead, including the suspected shooter, and two police officers wounded, officials said.

Police received a 911 call at about 5:30 p.m. about a shooting at Martin’s Super Market in Elkhart, the city police department said in a social media post. When officers arrived, they found two shooting victims dead inside the store.

When police “engaged” the shooting suspect outside the store, two officers were wounded and the suspect was fatally shot, according to the Elkhart Police Department post, which was made to update information given at an earlier news conference.

The officers were taken to hospitals with gunshot wounds, the post said. One has since been released and the other is in stable condition, it said.

“In this horrific situation, words

cannot express the pain felt in our community when a tragic incident like this happens,” Elkhart Police Department Chief Dan Milanese said in a statement.

The names of the victims, suspect and officers will not be released until families have been notified.

Erin Swary, a pregnant mother, was at the store checking out and talking with the person bagging her groceries when she heard a pop, she told WNDU-TV.

She said she first thought the sound was a balloon but then saw everyone ducking down so she did, too.

Swary said she eventually got out of the store, shaken and breathless.

Elkhart Mayor Rod Roberson in a statement Monday night asked people to continue to pray for the victims including “our two police officers who were wounded, our heroic first responders, and those at the incident.”

New player arrives in US Steel-Nippon takeover saga with the goal to quash it

BY MICHELLE CHAPMAN
Associated Press

An asset manager is seeking to quash Nippon Steel’s takeover of U.S. Steel and oust the leadership of the U.S. steelmaker after taking a stake in the company.

Ancora Holdings Group, with \$10 billion in assets, reported acquiring a 0.18% stake in the Pittsburgh company. It said Monday that U.S. Steel CEO David Burritt and the company’s board have prioritized a sale to Nippon because they stand to receive more than \$100 million if it goes forward.

Then-President Joe Biden blocked the nearly \$15 billion acquisition this month — affirming an earlier vow to prevent the acquisition of Steeltown USA’s most storied steel company.

But the deal is not dead yet. The deadline to unwind the proposed takeover was extended by the Biden administration and this month U.S. Steel and Nippon challenged the Biden decision in a federal lawsuit.

Ancora is seeking an indepen-

dent slate of directors at U.S. Steel and new CEO that are committed to walking away from the Nippon deal. In an open letter on Monday, the firm said it has nominated nine independent directors for election at U.S. Steel’s annual shareholders meeting this year. Those directors have a plan that includes making Alan Kestenbaum, a former steel executive, the new chief executive of U.S. Steel.

Ancora wants new board members to focus on U.S. Steel’s turnaround, not selling the company. It also wants them to pursue the \$565 million breakup fee from Nippon.

“U.S. Steel is now in a dire state due its excessive capital spending, high debt, soft earnings and non-existent contingency plan,” Ancora wrote.

The exit of the Biden administration does not necessarily improve the odds of the Nippon deal going through.

President Donald Trump has consistently voiced opposition to the deal and questioned why U.S.

Steel would sell itself to a foreign company given the regime of new tariffs he has vowed.

“We see no reason to believe that President Trump, a high-conviction businessman who was elected by middle-class and working-class voters, is going to contradict his self-described “America First” agenda and disregard the opposition of the United Steelworkers,” Ancora said Monday.

U.S. Steel said it remains committed to pursuing a deal with Nippon, believing it is best for the U.S. steel industry, supply chains and for steel workers.

It also raised earlier allegations that rival steelmaker Cleveland-Cliffs had attempted to sabotage its merger with Nippon. U.S. Steel filed a separate federal lawsuit against the Ohio steelmaker and its CEO Lourenco Goncalves, as well as David McCall, the head of the U.S. Steelworkers union, accusing them of “engaging in a coordinated series of anticompetitive and racketeering activities” to block the deal.

NATION



ALEX BRANDON/AP

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers use a chain to more comfortably restrain a detained person using handcuffs positioned in front, on Monday, in Silver Spring, Md.

ICE officers embark on new mission: 'The worst go first'

By REBECCA SANTANA
Associated Press

SILVER SPRING, Md. — A week into Donald Trump's second presidency and his efforts to crack down on illegal immigration, federal officers are operating with a new sense of mission, knowing that "nobody gets a free pass anymore."

A dozen officers from Immigration and Customs Enforcement gathered before dawn Monday in a Maryland parking lot, then fanned out to the Washington suburbs to find their targets: someone wanted in El Salvador for homicide, a person convicted of armed robbery, a migrant found guilty of possessing child sexual abuse material and another with drug and gun convictions. All were in the country illegally.

"The worst go first," Matt Elliston, director of ICE's Baltimore field office, said of the agency's enforcement priorities.

The Associated Press accompanied the officers, who offered a glimpse of how their work has changed under a White House intent on deporting large numbers of immigrants living in the U.S. without permission.

People considered public safety and national security threats are still the top priority, Elliston said.

That is no different from the Biden administration, but a big change has already taken hold: Under Trump, officers can now arrest people without legal status if they run across them while looking for migrants targeted for removal. Under Joe Biden, such "collateral arrests" were banned.

"We're looking for those public safety, national security cases. The big difference being, nobody has a free pass anymore," Elliston said.

The number of collateral arrests has fluctuated, he said. By the end of Monday across Maryland, ICE had arrested 13 people. Of those, nine were targets and the other four were people ICE came across during the course of the morning.

Of those "collaterals," one had an aggravated theft conviction. Another had already been deported once, and two others had final orders of removal.

The administration highlighted the participation of other agencies in immigration operations over the weekend, including the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, which are part of the Justice Department.

Emile Bove, the acting deputy attorney general, observed arrests Sunday in Chicago, a sign of the Justice Department's growing involvement.

ICE's daily arrests, which averaged 311 in the year ending Sept. 30, stayed fairly steady in the first days after Trump took office, then spiked dramatically Sunday to 956 and Monday to 1,179. If sustained, those numbers would mark the highest daily average since ICE began keeping records.

Trump also has lifted longtime guidelines that restricted ICE from operating at "sensitive locations" such as schools, churches or hospitals. That decision has worried many migrants and advocates who fear children will be traumatized by seeing their parents arrested in the drop-off line at school or that migrants needing medical care won't go to the hospital for fear of arrest.

Elliston pushed back on those fears, saying it's been exceedingly rare for ICE to enter one of those locations. In his 17 years on the job, he

said he's gone into a school only once and that was to help stop an active shooter.

He said the removal of other guidelines that had restricted ICE operations at courthouses makes a bigger difference in the agency's work. But getting rid of the sensitive locations policy does affect ICE in more subtle ways.

For example, at one point Monday, the team stopped at a parking lot in hopes of catching a Venezuelan gang member who was believed to be working as a delivery driver at a nearby business. Across the street was a church, and one street over was an elementary school, which under the previous guidance would have made it off limits to park to do surveillance.

What has not changed, Elliston said, is that these are targeted operations. ICE has a list of people they're going after as opposed to indiscriminately going to a workplace or apartment building looking for people in the country illegally.

"I really hate the word 'raids' because it gives people the wrong impression, as if we're just arbitrarily going door to door and saying, 'Show us your papers,'" he said. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

In the week since Trump returned to office, Elliston said he's constantly been on the phone, trying to dispel rumors about what ICE is doing and who is getting arrested.

Since starting his job in 2022, Elliston has reached out to cities to educate them about what ICE does and whom officers pursue. He also tries to build relationships with city officials so they feel more comfortable letting authorities know when migrants who have been detained are going to be released. That way ICE can get them.

Threat of tariffs on Mexico, Canada has higher stakes

By JOSH BOAK
AND CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Having already forced Colombia to accept deportees by threatening a 25% tariff, President Donald Trump is readying the same move against Canada and Mexico as soon as Saturday.

But this time, the stakes are higher and many economists surveying the possible damage doubt Trump would be comfortable with what they say would be self-inflicted wounds from the tariffs.

"The potential for such sizable economic impacts ought to act as enough of a deterrent that Trump will not end up implementing these higher tariffs," said Matthew Martin, senior U.S. economist at the consultancy Oxford Economics.

Trump has repeatedly insisted that tariffs are coming on Canada and Mexico, despite both countries seeking to address his stated concerns about illegal border crossings and the smuggling of fentanyl. But the Republican president is also motivated by the idea that tariffs would force other countries to "respect" the United States.

"We're going to immediately install massive tariffs," Trump said in a Monday speech, adding, "Colombia is traditionally a very, very strong-willed country," but it backed down rather than face import taxes.

Tariffs are a risk, but the Trump White House says it's looking at the big picture.

Multiple economic analyses show that universal tariffs against Canada and Mexico risk more inflation and an economic slowdown. It's a much larger play than Trump's moves against Colombia, which accounts for roughly 0.5% of U.S. imports. By contrast, nearly 30% of all U.S. imports hail from Canada and Mexico, amplifying the risk that tariffs could fuel inflation and undermine Trump's campaign promises to get prices under control.

Trump's director of the White House National Economic Council, Kevin Hassett, dismissed these concerns. He said the skeptical analyses of tariffs don't look at the totality of Trump's promises.

"When the people who are trying to cause panic over President Trump's trade policy simulate what it's going to do, they don't account for all the other policies," Hassett said in a Monday interview on the Fox Business Network. "So President Trump is drill, baby, drill, and deregulate and tax cuts and reduce spending."

After Trump's initial threat of

25% tariffs in November, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum suggested Mexico could retaliate with tariffs of its own. Since then, she has been more measured, choosing to emphasize the strong bilateral relationship and willingness to engage in dialogue as the number of detentions at the U.S.-Mexico border has plunged.

Sheinbaum pointed out in November that drugs were a U.S. problem, but in December the Mexican military seized more than a ton of fentanyl pills in two raids, calling it the biggest catch of synthetic opioids in Mexico's history. On Monday, Sheinbaum applauded the agreement reached by the Trump administration and Colombia.

"I believe the important thing, as I said on the first day, is to always act with a cool head, defending each country's sovereignty and the respect among nations and peoples," she said.

Top Canadian ministers said last week that Canada was prepared to retaliate if Trump imposed import taxes, even as Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly said they "will continue to work on preventing tariffs." The working theory in Canada appears to involve being ready for anything that the U.S. president might do.

On Monday, the economics division of the insurance company Nationwide estimated that Trump's proposed tariffs on Canada and Mexico would increase inflation by as much as 0.5 percentage points and pull down growth by 0.7 percentage points.

The analysis noted it did not "account for potential retaliatory tariffs from Canada or Mexico, which could amplify the deleterious impact on inflation and GDP growth."

Trump has made lower gasoline prices one of his key strategies for tackling inflation, but tariffs on Canada could drive up prices at the pump unless Trump creates carve-outs in his plan.

"For example, 60% of oil and gas imports come from Canada," said Oxford Economics' Martin. "A 25% tariff would lead to higher gasoline, diesel, and petroleum product prices for households and firms, especially in the Midwest and Rocky Mountain regions, where refineries are connected to Canada by pipeline."

The tax services firm PwC looked at the possible impact of 25% tariffs and found that companies importing from Canada could have to pay \$106 billion more annually in import taxes and those importing from Mexico could owe \$131 billion more.

NATION

DOJ fires officials who worked on Trump cases

By PERRY STEIN
The Washington Post

The Justice Department fired more than a dozen officials who worked on the special counsel team that investigated Donald Trump in two separate criminal cases, citing a lack of trust in them, a department spokesman said Monday.

Acting attorney general James McHenry informed the officials of their firings, saying that he “does not trust these officials to assist in faithfully implementing the President’s agenda.”

The firings were effective immediately and focused on officials who played key roles in prosecuting Trump, the spokesman said.

In a letter sent to the officials, McHenry referred to Trump’s claims that previous administrations weaponized law enforcement to hurt political enemies.

“Nowhere was that effort more salient than in the unprecedented prosecutions the Justice Department vigorously pursued against President Trump himself,” reads a copy of the letter obtained by The Washington Post. “You played a significant role in prosecuting President Trump. The proper functioning of government critically depends on the trust superior officials place in their subordinates.”

The terminations are the latest example of the Trump administration reshaping the Justice Department since the inauguration last week, transferring or firing veteran career officials who the president’s allies believe would impede or interfere with their agenda.

The shake-up has hit nearly every major department and could eliminate some guardrails at the Justice



CRAIG HUDSON/For The Washington Post

The Justice Department is shown in Washington. The department fired more than a dozen officials who worked on the special counsel team that investigated Donald Trump in two separate criminal cases, citing a lack of trust in them, a department spokesman said Monday.

Department intended to keep politics from interfering with investigations, according to people familiar with the moves.

Among the people transferred to a less-influential position was Bradley Weinsheimer, the Justice Department’s most senior career official. His position included being involved in some of the department’s thorniest cases, acting as a mediator in ethical disputes, and telling political appointees in the law enforcement agency what they could and could not do.

The chief of the Justice Department’s public integrity section, Corey Amundson, was also being removed from his post, according to people familiar with the personnel move. The section oversees election crimes and investigations into public officials, and its chief is a nonpartisan career official, according to the

Justice Department website.

Veteran career officials in the national security, criminal, environmental and civil rights divisions were also removed from their positions. Some were transferred to a newly created division focused on sanctuary cities and immigration enforcement.

The transfers to less-desirable positions are probably, in part, intended to skirt career civil service protections and push at least some of these people to resign if they do not want to accept the transfers, according to legal experts familiar with the workings of the Justice Department.

Legal experts said the attorney general will have the authority to convert some of these career positions into political ones, giving the Trump administration authority to pick whomever it wants for the pow-

erful posts.

While the people removed from their positions have deep expertise in complicated legal areas, some experts said it was important to note whom the administration puts in their place.

“We have to wait and see,” said Harvey Eisenberg, a recently retired national security prosecutor in Maryland. “We need to calm down and evaluate each step on its merits, not on speculation.”

In November 2022 — soon after Trump announced his presidential bid — Attorney General Merrick Garland said he would appoint Jack Smith to serve as special counsel to oversee the investigations of Trump.

The special counsel prosecutors fired Monday were concentrated in the U.S. attorney’s office for the District of Columbia, where the election interference case against Trump was prosecuted.

Many were longtime career prosecutors who had expertise in national security and public-corruption prosecutions. Those people have protections as career government employees, and it is unclear what — if any — legal ramifications the Trump administration could face because of the firings.

“This is without a doubt retaliation, pure and simple,” said Stephen A. Saltzburg, a former Justice Department official who now teaches at George Washington University’s law school. “We have never had a situation like this before. On the other hand, we’ve never had a president who was indicted in two different federal cases.”

It was unclear how many people on the special counsel team were

terminated Monday. Smith built a team of at least 40 lawyers to investigate Trump. They looked into Trump’s alleged mishandling of national defense secrets after he left the White House in 2021 and his alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

Smith brought some people from outside the government to serve on the special counsel team, though many were career employees who were detailed to work on the team. Once the prosecutions were over, some officials left the Justice Department or retired. But many went back to their career positions in different parts of the department.

“In light of their actions, the Acting Attorney General does not trust these officials to assist in faithfully implementing the President’s agenda. This action is consistent with the mission of ending the weaponization of government,” the Justice Department spokesman said.

The two special counsel investigations resulted in indictments, but Smith dropped the cases against Trump after the election, citing long-standing federal guidelines that prohibit the prosecution of a sitting president.

Smith was hired from outside the government and left the Justice Department before Trump was inaugurated.

Days before the inauguration, Garland released Smith’s special counsel report detailing the findings of the D.C. election interference case against Trump. Smith concluded in the report that he was confident prosecutors had ample evidence against Trump to secure a guilty verdict had the case gone to trial.

New top prosecutor for DC advocated for Jan. 6 rioters

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER
AND MICHAEL KUNZELMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — For years, conservative activist Ed Martin has promoted Donald Trump’s false claims about a stolen 2020 election, railed against the prosecution of the rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol and represented some of them in court.

Now he’s leading the office that prosecuted the nearly 1,600 defendants charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, riot before Trump — now back in the White House — ended the largest investigation in Justice Department history with the stroke of a pen.

Martin’s first week as the interim U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia ushered in a dizzying sea change for the office’s rank-and-file prosecutors. He oversaw the dismissals of hundreds of Jan. 6 cases and celebrated Trump’s pardons for police officers and anti-abortion activists who had been



Martin

prosecuted by attorneys in the office. And on Monday, Martin ordered an internal review of prosecutors’ use of a felony charge brought against hundreds of Capitol rioters, directing employees to hand over files, emails and other documents, according to an email obtained by The Associated Press.

The appointment of Martin, the former head of the Missouri Republican Party, underscores Trump’s commitment to installing loyalists in key positions at the Justice Department, which the Republican president contends was “weaponized” against him and his supporters by President Joe Biden’s administration. Mike Davis, a Trump ally, called Martin in a social media post a “bold and fearless” leader who will “clean house” at the office, which Davis de-

scribed as “an epicenter of the lawfare and political persecution.”

Martin told employees in an email that he was alongside Trump in the Oval Office when the president granted clemency last week to two Washington police officers prosecuted by the U.S. attorney’s office for their roles in the deadly chase of a man on a moped and the subsequent cover-up. And in a social media post last week, Martin appeared to describe federal prosecutors as “the President’s lawyers.”

“Based on the public reporting, it appears that he is in this role purely to execute on the president’s political priorities more so than the work of protecting public safety in Washington,” said Alexis Loeb, who was deputy chief of the section that prosecuted the Jan. 6 cases before leaving the government last year.

It’s unclear whether Trump intends to nominate Martin to the permanent post, which would re-

quire Senate confirmation. A White House spokesperson didn’t immediately respond to a text message about Martin on Monday.

Shortly after Trump’s sweeping clemency order, Martin’s name showed up last on a flurry of court filings seeking to dismiss the pending Jan. 6 prosecutions, including cases against people charged with assaulting police officers.

One week later, Martin announced a “special project” to review the use of an obstruction felony charge brought against hundreds of Capitol riot defendants. Prosecutors had to drop the obstruction of an official proceeding charge in many cases after a Supreme Court ruling last year limiting the offense, finding it must include proof that defendants tried to tamper with or destroy documents.

Calling the use of the charge “a great failure of our office,” Martin ordered attorneys to hand over to two supervisors all relevant “files, documents, notes, emails and oth-

er information,” according to a copy of the email reviewed by the AP. He ordered the supervisors to provide a preliminary report on the matter to him by Friday.

“We need to get to the bottom of it,” Martin wrote. He’s calling it the “1512 Project,” because the offense falls under that section of the law.

Trump’s clemency action led to the release of more than 200 people in federal custody, including people seen on camera engaging in hand-to-hand combat with police and violently attacking law enforcement with makeshift weapons.

Martin spoke at a “Stop the Steal” rally on the eve of the riot and served on the board of a group called the Patriot Freedom Project, which has raised money to support Jan. 6 defendants and their families. Court filings listed him as an attorney for at least three Capitol riot defendants, including a Proud Boys member who pleaded guilty to felony charges.

WORLD

Theft of ancient golden helmet leaves Romanians devastated

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The prize in this art heist is worth more than its gold. To Romania, the ancient helmet is a priceless cultural heirloom. To the Netherlands, it's a stolen artifact that authorities hope to retrieve to uphold a reputation for safe museums.

The intricate golden Cotofenesti helmet dates back some 2,500 years and is one Romania's most revered national treasures from the Dacia civilization. It was on display at the small Drehts Museum in eastern Netherlands on the last weekend of a 6-month stint when thieves nabbed it.

The theft of the helmet and three golden wristbands also on display sent shockwaves through the art world, and devastated Romanian authorities who thought they were loaning the items to a nation where security for museums was paramount.

"It is a pitch dark day for us," museum director Harry Tupan said.

Investigators had found few clues by late Monday beyond a burnt-out car close to the museum, indicating the thieves wanted to cover their tracks.

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis said the artifacts have "ex-



DREHTS MUSEUM/AP

The golden Cotofenesti helmet.

ceptional cultural and historical importance" for Romanian heritage and identity, and that their disappearance had "a strong emotional and symbolic impact on society."

It was a heist that "even in our most pessimistic dreams, we would not have believed possible," said the director of Romania's National History Museum, Ernest Oberlander-Taroveanu.

Romanian Justice Minister Radu Marinescu called the incident a "crime against our state" and said recovering the artifacts "is an ab-

solute priority."

The helmet's fame and dramatic studded appearance means it could never easily be sold, raising fears the thieves were after the gold itself.

"It is simply unsellable. The whole world knows it. So, they likely went for the gold to — I almost dare not utter the words — melt it," said Dutch art expert Arthur Brand.

That would reduce the treasure to a fraction of its cultural and historical value. Gold stands at about \$89,000 per kilo and the helmet is estimated to weigh slightly less than that.

"It is not only about the gold. It is about the cultural heritage," Tupan said. "And it has been taken in a strange way and hurts incredibly."

On grainy security video distributed by police, three people are seen opening a museum door with a big crowbar, after which an explosion is seen. Then they must have made off with the loot in a matter of minutes.

"Security, as it is supposed it be, was as far as we know, totally as it should be," Tupan said. "And now, it is a small battlefield. There is nothing else for us to do but sit and wait and see what will happen."

Chemical chlorate concerns prompt Coca-Cola to recall some soft drinks in Europe

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Coca-Cola has recalled some of its soft drinks in Europe after higher-than-normal levels of a chemical called chlorate were detected in bottles and cans at a production plant in Belgium.

Batches of Coca Cola, Fanta, Sprite, Minute Maid and Fuze Tea were among the products recalled in Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, the company said on Tuesday. The recall concerns drinks with production codes 328 GE to 338 GE.

"We are also in contact with authorities in a very small number of European markets — France, Germany and Great Britain — where a very limited quantity of stock was also shipped," the company said. No produce was recalled in those countries.

Health authorities in Denmark, Portugal and Romania were notified by the European Union's rapid alert system to investigate whether shop shelves or vending machines had been stocked with potentially contaminated soft drinks. It designated the risk as "serious."

Chlorate comes from chlorine disinfectants which are used in

the treatment of water used for food processing. The chemical has been linked to potentially serious health problems, notably among children by interfering with the proper functioning of the thyroid gland.

Coca-Cola said that it tracked the problem back to one specific container used in its water treatment process at its factory in the city of Ghent while conducting routine safety checks.

It has advised customers not to consume drinks from the batches concerned and to return them to the point of sale to obtain a refund. "We apologize to consumers and our commercial partners," the company said.

Experts say consumers would have to drink a lot of any product contaminated with chlorate to suffer vomiting or other serious illness.

"It is almost non-existent or very unlikely that those large quantities are present in it," Philippe Jorens, a poisons and critical care professor at Antwerp University Hospital, told Belgian public broadcaster VTM. "You have to have consumed so many different bottles of it to possibly see an effect."

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WORLD

Demonstrators attack embassies in Congo to protest rebel advance

BY JUSTIN KABUMBA AND CHINEDU ASADU
Associated Press

GOMA, Congo — Congolese security forces on Tuesday tried to slow the advance of Rwanda-backed M23 rebels who say they have captured Goma after entering eastern Congo's largest city, as U.N. officials reported an unspecified number of bodies on the streets.

The officials said hospitals are overwhelmed in Goma, a regional trade and humanitarian hub that is a refuge for hundreds of thousands now fleeing gunfire and shelling in the major escalation in one of Africa's longest conflicts driven by ethnic tensions.

The M23 rebels are one of about 100 armed groups vying for a foothold in the conflict-battered North Kivu province — which includes Goma — rich in minerals critical to much of the world's technology.

Dozens of demonstrators, meanwhile, looted and set fires to parts of at least nine foreign embassy buildings far off in the capital, Kinshasa, including those of Rwanda, France, Belgium, Kenya and Uganda.

The protesters demanded that the international community condemn Rwanda over its role in the conflict. "We denounce the hypocrisy of the international community," said Timothée Tshishimbi, one of the protesters. "They must tell Rwanda to stop this adventure."

The attacks were condemned by the respective countries as well as the Congolese government, which said it has reinforced the security



SAMY NTUMBA SHAMBUY/AP

People protest in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, on Tuesday, against the Rwanda-backed M23 rebels' advances into eastern Congo's capital, Goma.

at the embassies.

Many continued to flee across the border into Rwanda, braving gunfire and heavy rains earlier and caught in between shootouts on both sides from the Congolese soldiers and the rebels.

"What we want is this war to come to an end," said Christian Bahati, a Congolese teacher among hundreds now sheltering in the Rwandan town of Gisenyi. "You can see the level of frustration. Congolese people are victims, but now they find themselves seeking refuge from the aggressor."

There were reports of gender-based violence and rape committed by fighters, looting of property, including a humanitarian warehouse, and humanitarian and health facilities being hit in the city, U.N. humanitarian affairs office spokesman Jens Laerke said at a media briefing on Tuesday.

"The humanitarian situation in and around Goma remains extremely worrying, and this morning (there were) heavy small arms fire and mortar fire across the city and the presence of many dead bodies in the streets," said Laerke, adding that hospitals are "struggling to manage the influx of wounded people."

Rwandan Foreign Minister Olivier Nduhungirehe said at least five people in Rwanda have been killed and 35 others wounded in shelling from Congo. He also told The Associated Press that while the country has "behaved well" since the rebels entered Goma, "we have been shelled by the military coalition" of the Congolese army and its allies.

Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi "will have to accept talks with M23 to end the situation once and for all," Nduhungirehe added.

2 killed at protests in southern Lebanon

BY SALLY ABOU ALJOUD
Associated Press

BEIRUT — Firing by Israeli troops killed two people and wounded 17 on Monday in the second day of deadly protests in southern Lebanon, health officials said, as residents displaced by the 14-month war between Israel and Hezbollah attempted to return to villages where Israeli troops remain.

The shooting came a day after 24 people were killed and more than 130 wounded when Israeli troops opened fire on protesters who breached roadblocks set up along the border.

Under a U.S.-brokered ceasefire on Nov. 27, Israeli forces were to withdraw from southern Lebanon and Hezbollah was to move north of the Litani River by Jan. 26. While the Lebanese army and U.N. peacekeepers had already deployed in several villages before the deadline, Israel remained in over a dozen villages.

The United States and Lebanon announced later on Sunday that the deadline to meet the ceasefire terms had been extended to Feb. 18.

In a pre-recorded speech aired Monday, Hezbollah leader Naim Kassem said his group won't accept the extension of the ceasefire deadline, without addressing the fact that the Lebanese government had already done so.

Kassem also said his group has not violated the ceasefire terms and acknowledged that they con-

sidered retaliating against Israeli airstrikes but were advised by Lebanese authorities against it.

Protests resumed Monday particularly in eastern border villages, where residents again attempted to return home. Israeli troops opened fire, killing one person in the town of Odaiseh and wounding seven others across four southern villages, the Health Ministry reported.

The Israeli military has blamed Hezbollah for pushing people to protest and has said soldiers fired warning shots when demonstrators approached.

Lebanon's national news agency reported that Israel dropped a bomb at the entrance of the southern village of Yaroun to deter residents from proceeding farther.

Israel blamed the Lebanese army for not deploying to the region fast enough, while the Lebanese military accused Israel of stalling its withdrawal, complicating its deployment efforts.

Some family members who entered border villages Sunday discovered the bodies of their relatives. Israeli strikes have killed over 4,000 people during the war.

Since the ceasefire began, Israel has conducted near-daily operations such as house demolitions, shelling and airstrikes in southern Lebanon, accusing Hezbollah of violating ceasefire terms by attempting to move weapons. Lebanon in turn has accused Israel of hundreds of ceasefire violations.

STARS AND STRIPES

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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Activists are arrested for attempted manure dump

NY NEW YORK — A pair of activists with the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals were arrested while attempting to dump a truck's worth of manure outside the Manhattan offices of a rival animal welfare group.

But the protest may have raised less of a stink than intended, as organizers acknowledged that much of the animal dung remained frozen solid to the truck bed.

"Because of the freezing temperatures, it didn't all fall out," explained Ashley Byrne, a PETA spokesperson. "Someone had to go up in the truck and start shoveling it out, and he was apprehended by the police before he finished."

The stunt was the latest escalation in the group's ongoing campaign against the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, or ASPCA, over their backing of an animal welfare certification program.

Trooper fatally shoots suspect at a hospital

FL OCALA — A Florida Highway Patrol trooper fatally shot a suspect during an altercation at a central Florida hospital on Friday, authorities said.

The altercation happened in the emergency department at HCA Florida Ocala Hospital in Ocala, Fla., according to a statement from the hospital. The unidentified suspect died when the trooper used deadly force, the Ocala Police Department said in a statement.

No law enforcement officers or hospital staff were injured. The highway patrol requested the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to investigate the shooting, according to the police department.

Last 4 escaped monkeys captured after 2 months

SC YEMASSEE — Authorities in South Carolina said the last four of 43 escaped monkeys have been recaptured after two months living in the woods, weathering a rare snowstorm and being tempted back into captivity by peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

The rhesus macaque monkeys, all females, made a break for it after police say an employee did not fully lock their enclosure at Alpha Genesis, a facility that breeds them for medical research — known to locals as "the monkey farm."

The recaptured monkeys appeared to be in good health, Alpha Genesis CEO Greg Westergaard said in a statement relayed by Yemassee Police in a social media post, without further details.

While they were on the loose, the area saw its first snow in seven years, accumulating up to 3 inches.



CHARLES SYKES/AP

Ready for their close-up

Lori Ney from Pennsylvania attends the Sundance Film Festival on Sunday in Park City, Utah.

The rhesus macaques made a break for it on Nov. 6, and mostly hung around near the facility. They're about the size of a cat, weighing roughly 7 pounds.

It appears a worker unintentionally left the gates unlocked when the monkeys escaped, Westergaard said in November. Workers were supposed to lock and latch one gate before opening another, but all three gates and latches were left unsecured.

Family of wrongfully imprisoned man awarded

CT HARTFORD — More than four years after his death, Richard Lapointe's family is set to receive a nearly \$5.9 million award from Connecticut for his wrongful, quarter-century imprisonment that ended in 2015 when his murder conviction was overturned in the rape and killing of his wife's 88-year-old grandmother.

Lapointe's case became a cause celebre, receiving widespread publicity from advocates for the disabled and celebrities, including writers Arthur Miller and William Styron, who called for his release. Lapointe, who died at age 74 in 2020, had Dandy-Walker syndrome, a rare congenital brain malformation that his lawyers believe was a factor in his falsely confessing to the crime.

The award by the state claims commissioner's office, which now moves to the legislature for approval, was issued Jan. 2 after

years of legal battles between Lapointe's lawyers and the state attorney general's office. Lapointe was never declared innocent, but the two sides eventually agreed to settle, leading to the award.

Overtaken abortion ban not in effect, court rules

ND BISMARCK — North Dakota's abortion ban will not be enforced while the state appeals an earlier decision that found it unconstitutional, the state's highest court ruled.

That appeal has yet to fully play out in the state Supreme Court after a judge struck down the law in September.

North Dakota has had no abortion providers since the only one moved from Fargo to neighboring Moorhead, Minn., in 2022. The only scenarios in which North Dakotans can currently obtain an abortion in the state would be for life- or health-preserving reasons at a hospital.

The plaintiffs had contended that keeping the overturned ban from being enforced was important for patients with pregnancy complications who go to a hospital seeking medical care that might be delayed because of the law.

Man sentenced to prison for food court shooting

GA ATLANTA — A gunman who shot and wounded three people at a busy food court in the heart of down-

town Atlanta in June has been sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Jeremy Malone pleaded guilty to one count of attempted murder, four counts of aggravated assault and other charges, WSB-TV reported.

Prosecutors said Malone walked into the large food court inside Atlanta's Peachtree Center office complex in the middle of the afternoon and punched a stranger, then shot three people. All of them survived.

An off-duty Atlanta police officer who was working a security job at the complex then shot Malone, stopping the attack, police said.

Duck farm weighs closure after outbreak in flock

NY NEW YORK — New York's Long Island was once synonymous with "duck" in the culinary world. Now it may lose its last commercial farm.

The avian flu outbreak that has led to the slaughter of millions of birds at U.S. poultry farms and driven up the price of eggs struck the Crescent Duck Farm last week, leading federal officials to order the destruction of the operation's entire flock.

Doug Corwin, whose family has owned the roughly 140-acre farm since the 1640s, said Friday that a multiday culling of about 100,000 birds has been completed at the now-quarantined barns in Aqueduct.

His remaining staff will thor-

oughly sanitize the facility, a process that could take months.

"We're just stunned right now," Corwin, 66, said by phone. "It's a very, very sad time. We're trying our best to work our way through this, one step at a time."

He said the family will have to reckon with the future of the fourth-generation business, which was established in 1908 and is tucked among the vineyards and agricultural lands of Long Island's North Fork, about 80 miles east of Manhattan.

Corwin said he was forced to lay off 47 of the farm's 75-member staff, including many who had worked there for decades as the farm's revenue cratered.

Man who shot at mayoral candidate is sentenced

KY LOUISVILLE — A Kentucky man who shot at Louisville Mayor Craig Greenberg when he was a candidate in 2022 was sentenced to 17 years and 6 months in federal prison after a tense sentencing hearing where Greenberg spoke of the harm the attack has caused.

Quintez Brown was arrested shortly after leaving Greenberg's campaign office, where one of his six shots grazed Greenberg's sweater.

Four other staffers were in the room with Greenberg, and one of them rushed to close the door on Brown after he fired.

FACES



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION/AP
“Mayhem,” the new studio album from Lady Gaga, drops March 7.

Lady Gaga announces new album

Associated Press

Expect mayhem this spring, courtesy of Lady Gaga.

The Grammy-winning songwriter and actor will release her seventh studio album March 7, which press materials say will explore “themes of chaos and transformation.” The 14-track album will be titled “Mayhem.”

It will follow last year’s “Harlequin,” a companion album for the film “Joker: Folie à Deux” that stalled at No. 20 on the Billboard 200. Two of the early singles from “Mayhem” have done well, with “Disease” hitting No. 27 on the Billboard Hot 100 and “Die With a Smile,” a collaboration with Bruno Mars, spending three weeks at No. 1.

“This is probably the most clear I have felt in about a decade for myself just personally. I feel more on my game with this music than I have in a really long time,” she told The Associated Press last year. “When you’re feeling clear and healthy and happy, I feel like that’s when your art can really fly.”

According to the announcement, “‘Mayhem’ reinvents her early sound with a kaleidoscopic approach that draws from her expansive musical library while embracing a fresh and fearless artistic perspective.”

This week: Ferrell-Witherspoon faceoff, ‘SNL’ music, Weeknd completes trilogy

Associated Press

Here’s a collection curated by The Associated Press’ entertainment journalists of what’s arriving on TV, streaming services and music platforms this week.

Movies

■ Rival weddings collide in “You’re Cordially Invited,” a comedy about double-booked destination nuptials starring Reese Witherspoon and Will Ferrell. The film, streaming Thursday on Prime Video, unites stars from different realms of comedy in Witherspoon, who’s planning a wedding for her sister (Meredith Hagner), and Ferrell, whose daughter (Geraldine Viswanathan) also is getting married. In the Nicholas Stoller-directed movie, the two families share a Georgia island wedding venue.

■ Nicole Kidman and Harris Dickinson star in Halina Reijn’s “Babygirl” (which came to premium video-on-demand Tuesday), a kinky and darkly comic erotic thriller from A24. Kidman stars as a married Manhattan chief executive who falls under the intense sway of a new intern (Dickinson), leading to some memorable sex games of manipulation and control. In my review, I praised “Babygirl” as “a sometimes campy, frequently entertaining modern update to the erotically charged movies of the 1990s, like ‘Basic Instinct’ and ‘9½ Weeks.’”

■ Robert Zemeckis’ “Here” has lived many lives since opening in theaters last October. It was roundly dismissed by critics at release, only to continue to pick up defenders as the year came to a close. “Here” gets a second chance Thursday on Netflix. The film, starring Tom Hanks and Robin Wright, fixes the camera, for seemingly one long take, on one plot of land, from the time of dinosaurs up until modern day. In his review, The AP’s Mark Kennedy wrote, “It’s not so strange after a while — so bursting with life is each shot and vignette — but there’s a gnawing feeling that we’re in some sort of film experiment, like testing an audience on how long they’ll watch old security camera footage.”

— AP Film Writer Jake Coyle

Music

■ Live from your Peacock subscription, it’s Saturday night! A new “Saturday Night Live” special, “Ladies & Gentlemen... 50 Years of SNL Music,” began streaming Tuesday. The three-hour program, directed by Grammy and Academy Award-winner Questlove and Emmy Award winner Oz Rodriguez, will spotlight memorable “SNL” music performances across



AMAZON PRIME VIDEO/AP

Reese Witherspoon, left, and Will Ferrell in “You’re Cordially Invited,” a comedy film about double-booked destination weddings. It begins streaming Thursday on Prime Video.

the show’s incredible run. It will feature sketches, performances and more than 50 interview subjects, including Bad Bunny, Miley Cyrus, Billie Eilish, Mick Jagger, Dua Lipa, Darryl DMC McDaniels, Tom Morello, Kacey Musgraves, Olivia Rodrigo, Paul Simon, Chris Stapleton and Justin Timberlake.

■ It is the end of an era and, no doubt, one heck of a closer. On Friday, The Weeknd will release the final album in his trilogy that began with 2020’s “After Hours” and 2022’s “Dawn FM.” It reaches its coda with “Hurry Up Tomorrow.” So, what can listeners expect from one of the biggest names in pop — and the only artist to have 25 songs with 1 billion streams on Spotify? The Weeknd, whose real name is Abel Tesfaye, is keeping the details close to his chest. But if this collection of songs comes close to something like “Blinding Lights,” well, expect them to stick around for a while.

— AP Music Writer Maria Sherman

Television

■ Since “This Is Us” aired its series finale in 2022, Sterling K. Brown has had voice roles in animated shows and has concentrated on film work. He is back on TV with a new series called “Paradise” also created by Dan Fogelman.

Brown, also an executive producer, plays a Secret Service agent for the U.S. President (James Marsden) and discovers a murder that leads to shocking revelations. The first three episodes debuted Tuesday on Hulu (with a linear rollout of the premiere on Hulu and FX). It will then drop weekly on the streaming service.

■ Noah Centineo’s “The Recruit” returns to Netflix with a second season after a long delay due in part to the Hollywood strikes. The actor plays a lawyer with a new job at the CIA who quickly finds himself embroiled in international politics. The show is suspenseful, compelling and funny. Centineo still has the charisma that charmed viewers of the “To All the Boys” movies and it carries over for an older demo with this series. “The Recruit” Season 2 premieres Thursday on Netflix.

■ The true crime docuseries “Scamanda” unravels the web of lies of Amanda Riley, a woman who faked having cancer and collected sympathy, money and gifts while she did it. Journalist Charlie Webster first told Riley’s story in a podcast of the same name and has teamed up with ABC News to bring it to TV. The series begins airing Thursday on ABC and also streams on Hulu next day.

— Alicia Rancilio

Lively, Baldoni get trial date for her ‘It Ends With Us’ lawsuit

Associated Press

A New York judge set a March 2026 trial date on Monday and moved an initial conference from mid-February to next week as the public feud between Blake Lively and her “It Ends With Us” costar and director Justin Baldoni continued to grow and accelerate.

And in a new and separate front in the series of legal battles surrounding the film that became a surprise hit last summer, Lively in



Baldoni



Lively

a Texas court filed a request for a deposition of a man she says was central to turning online sentiment against her during its re-

lease and promotion.

The New York federal judge, Lewis J. Liman, told both sides in an order late Monday to prepare for a March 9, 2026, trial.

He also moved an initial conference from mid-February to next week and told lawyers to be prepared to address complaints about pretrial publicity and attorney conduct.

Liman took the actions after Lively’s lawyers claimed in a fil-

ing on Monday that an attorney for Baldoni was trying to taint potential jurors over lawsuits the actors have filed against each other.

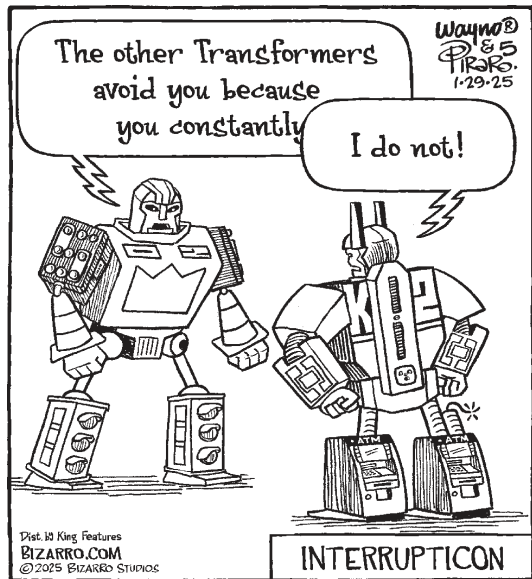
The lawyers said Baldoni’s attorney was trying to wreck Lively’s career and turn potential New York jurors against her by creating a website to release selected documents and communications between Lively and Baldoni.

The lawyers said attorney Bryan Freedman, representing

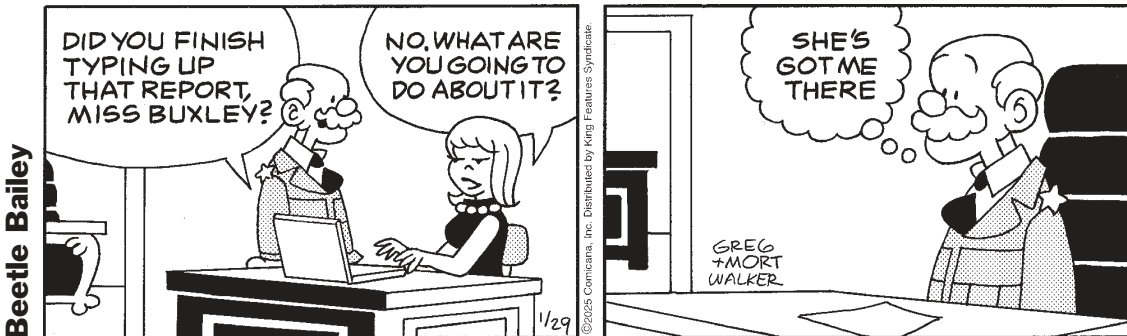
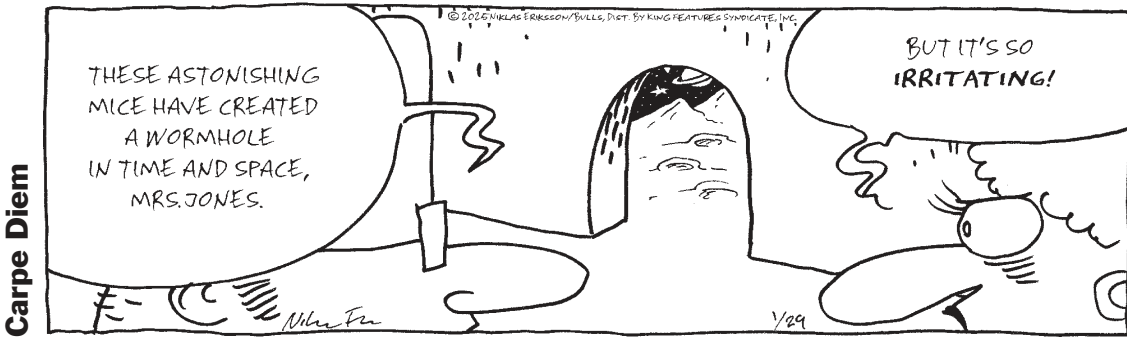
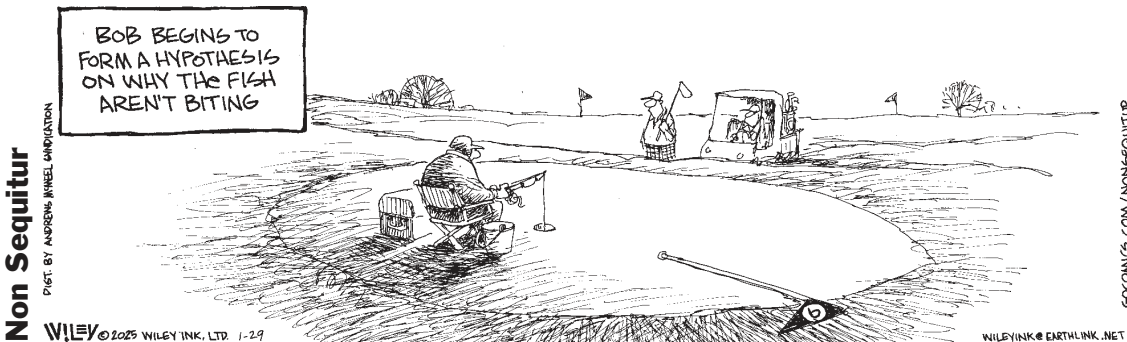
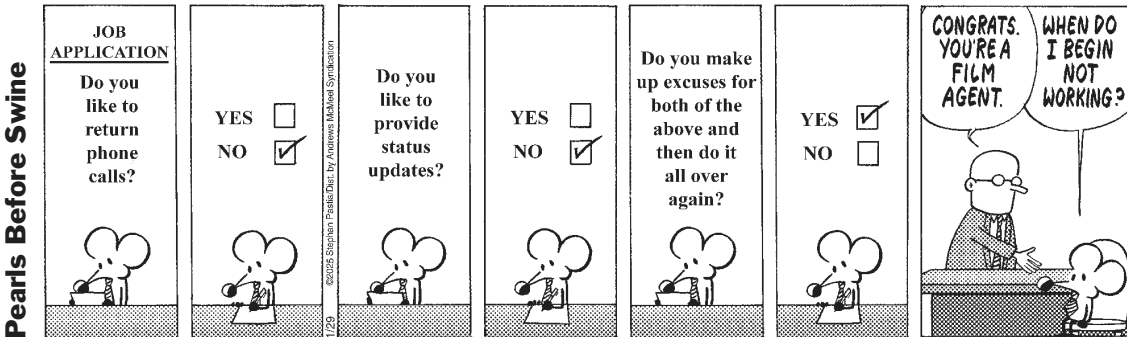
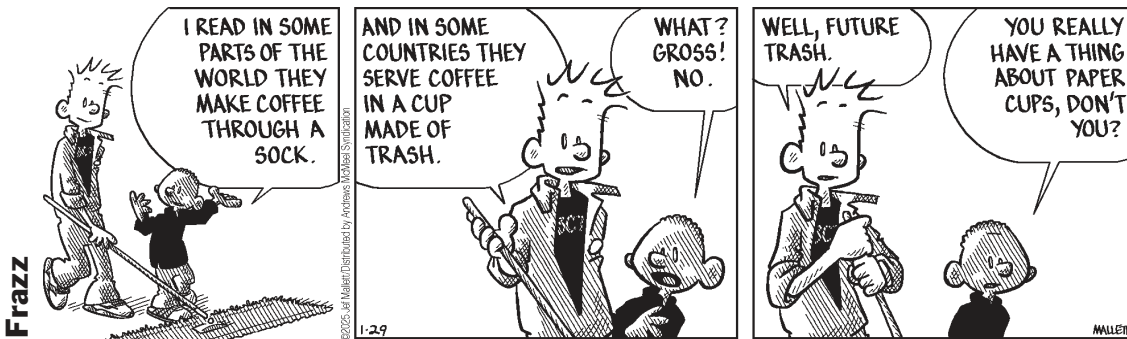
Baldoni, was “engaging in this extrajudicial campaign to influence these proceedings and the public perception of legal filings to this Court, and there already is a serious risk that his misconduct is tainting the jury pool.”

Freedman said in a statement in response to Monday’s assertions that the “irony is not lost on anyone that Ms. Lively is so petrified of the truth that she has moved to gag it.”

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
15				16					17			
18			19				20					
			21		22	23		24		25	26	27
28	29	30					31		32			
33				34				35		36		
37			38		39				40			
41				42		43						
			44		45			46		47	48	49
50	51	52					53	54			55	
56					57					58		
59					60					61		

ACROSS

- 1 Efron of "Parkland"
- 4 "For — the Bell Tolls"
- 8 Maui's — Highway
- 12 Rock's Brian
- 13 Continental coin
- 14 Petri dish gel
- 15 Scrape (out)
- 16 Shakable paperweight
- 18 Egypt's Anwar
- 20 Quibble
- 21 Composer Bartok
- 24 Informative
- 28 Hall & Oates ballad of 1976
- 32 Scarce
- 33 Galley item
- 34 Must, casually
- 36 Plant seeds
- 37 Radar dot
- 39 "Gems" found on a beach
- 41 "Bye!"
- 43 Poetry contest
- 44 Vat
- 46 Foolish
- 50 Scott Evil actor in the Austin Powers films
- 55 Blue bird
- 56 Saab model
- 57 Nest egg choices

- 58 Broad st.
- 59 Wee songbird
- 60 Lacking slack
- 61 Wine choice

DOWN

- 1 Dazzling duo?
- 2 "Diana" singer
- 3 Not single-sex
- 4 Locale in "The Great Gatsby"
- 5 Attila, e.g.
- 6 Acapulco gold
- 7 Cut, as a lawn
- 8 Summer top
- 9 Previously
- 10 Collar
- 11 Common verb
- 17 Tonic's mixer
- 19 Six-pack muscles
- 22 Novelist Anita
- 23 Poker pot starters
- 25 "That — close one!"
- 26 "No seats" signs
- 27 Evergreens
- 28 Weeps
- 29 Robust
- 30 Buffalo's lake
- 31 List-ending abbr.
- 35 Not for
- 38 Large constrictor
- 40 Run after K
- 42 Summer mo.
- 45 Telly watcher
- 47 Slightly open
- 48 Cathedral area
- 49 Kept tabs on
- 50 Cutting tool
- 51 Chariot trailer
- 52 Three, in Rome
- 53 Notable time
- 54 Vichy water

Answer to Previous Puzzle

D	A	L	E		M	O	B	S		G	P	A			
A	P	E	X		A	P	O	P		L	A	B			
S	T	I	C	K	W	I	T	H		U	R	I			
					E	I	R	E		E	B	E	R	T	
E	N	D	E	D						E	R	O	S		
L	O	R	D		P	A	R	E	N	T	E	D			
L	I	U			O	A	S	I	S		I	T	A		
A	R	M	E	N	I	A	N			S	C	A	N		
					S	P	A	R			A	N	K	L	E
P	I	T	A	S		M	I	S	O						
S	R	I			S	T	I	C	K	B	A	L	L		
S	A	C			I	S	L	A		B	R	I	E		
T	S	K			S	E	A	N		Y	A	L	E		

1-29

CRYPTOQUIP

TSMP WNOMCZ MVPYZMVP GWYYMR
 WTWF, V TAPRMC VB GMAGNM
 MUMCFTSMCM AOYMCUMR W
 JAJMPZ AB YLVMLM.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF I SPOKE TO A BELUGA OR HUMPBACK FACE TO FACE, I MIGHT START WITH "WHALE, HELLO THERE!"

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: G equals P

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OPINION

Imaginary emergencies power Trump's agenda

By KAREN TUMULTY

The Washington Post

The U.S. oil and gas industry is booming, with production at record levels, while renewable sources of energy are expanding at a healthy clip and gasoline prices are at their lowest level in more than three years.

To President Donald Trump, all this good news amounts to a “national emergency.” Or so he claimed in one of the flurry of executive orders signed on his first day in office.

Dire, too, is the situation at the southern border, where, in another emergency declaration, Trump deemed there to be an “invasion” taking place, which is causing “widespread chaos.”

Never mind Border Patrol statistics saying that, thanks to stronger enforcement, the number of people crossing illegally has dropped sharply, and is lower than it was at the end of Trump's first term.

By invoking the powers that come with the declaration of a national emergency, a president gains the ability, usually with just a signature on an executive order, to bypass laws and regulations. But at times, these proclamations are not tools for dealing with an actual crisis. Instead, they are used to sweep away impediments to a chief executive's political agenda.

A president's emergency powers are vast. In all, according to a tally by the New York University Law School's Brennan Center for Justice, they stretch across 150 provisions in laws whose reach includes health and the environment, public land use, troop deployments, military construction, seizure of private property, even the dumping of garbage at sea.

Trump's border declaration, for instance, opened the way for him to unlock billions in funding that Congress had denied for building a wall there — a rerun of what he did as president in 2019, when he cited a law permitting

the executive to use military construction funds in a declared national emergency. Various laws have emergency provisions that would allow Trump to both deploy the 10,000 troops that he is thinking of dispatching to assist Border Patrol agents and shut down applications for asylum by migrants.

In his announcement Sunday that he was hitting Colombia with tariffs and sanctions in retaliation for its refusal to accept U.S. military planes carrying deported migrants, Trump cited his authority under the expansive International Emergency Economic Powers Act. Late Sunday, Colombian President Gustavo Petro backed down and agreed to accept the flights.

On energy, declaring a national emergency could allow him to loosen permitting requirements as he opens up more federal land for drilling, quash incentives for producing electric vehicles, and do away with requirements for more energy-efficient lightbulbs, appliances, toilets and shower heads.

That a president needs flexibility to take dramatic measures in the face of a crisis has been acknowledged since the dawn of U.S. history. In 1794, George Washington issued an emergency proclamation calling out militias to put down violent protests by farmers enraged by an excise tax on whiskey.

More recently, however, presidents have gotten creative in using these declarations to bend the law during times that are not genuine emergencies — the dictionary definition of which is an unforeseen set of circumstances that require immediate, and presumably temporary, action.

Former President Joe Biden claimed the COVID-19 pandemic gave him power to cancel \$400 billion in student debt. He cited authority under the 2003 Heroes Act, which allows the education secretary to rewrite rules that apply to student loans during times of war

or national emergencies, and was meant to help military serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. (The Supreme Court blocked that move.)

The concern that presidents can abuse their emergency powers has long worried members of both parties. In 1976, Congress passed the National Emergencies Act setting up more formalized procedures for such moments. It requires the president to specify which statutes give him the powers he intends to use, to report regularly to Congress on what he is doing, and sets a one-year expiration date for emergency actions — though the president may renew them by simply publishing an extension in the Federal Register, and it can take a veto-proof majority in Congress to terminate an emergency declaration.

Most of which both the president and Congress have ignored. There are currently more than 40 national emergencies in effect, the oldest of which dates back to the Carter administration.

The last Congress saw a bipartisan push to put some teeth in that law, but the measure never made it to Biden's desk. “This kind of lawmaking-by-proclamation runs directly counter to the vision of our founders and undermines the safeguards protecting our freedom,” Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, said when he introduced the bill. “It's high time that Congress reclaimed its legislative power and restored constitutional balance to our Republic.”

Given Trump's hold over the GOP, it is hard to imagine that a Congress where both chambers are in Republican hands will do much to constrain him.

So, expect to hear more manufactured emergencies coming from the Trump White House — each one chipping at the guardrails that limit presidential power.

Karen Tumulty is a Washington Post associate editor and columnist covering national politics.

Large-scale national service could help America unite

By JOHN M. BRIDGELAND

AND ALAN KHAZEI

Special to The Washington Post

As the United States approaches its 250th birthday in 2026, it faces a host of civic challenges in search of a solution:

Devastating fires in Los Angeles and floods in Florida and North Carolina, historically low levels of trust among Americans and in our institutions, spikes in hate-fueled violence, a decline in civic organizations, and learning loss and isolation from the pandemic are pulling us apart. Our military is not attracting enough recruits, with 77% of those who apply ineligible for service because of poor health, behavioral issues or low academic performance.

What could help address all these challenges? Large-scale national service — or what we call “big citizenship.”

It's not a stretch to think this could actually happen. When one of us spoke with now-Vice President JD Vance some years ago, he remarked that “national service is the best idea in America that never happens.” On the presidential campaign trail in 2016, Donald Trump called national service “a beautiful thing” to expand. With Trump, Vance and Congress in office, they can rebuild our devastated communities, our social trust and our military recruiting through national service.

History shows that presidential leadership is essential. Look at the Civilian Conservation Corps of 3 million young men improving our

public lands; the Peace Corps of 240,000 Americans serving in 144 countries; VISTA fighting poverty; Senior Corps for older Americans; Points of Light to expand volunteering; AmeriCorps that strengthens Habitat for Humanity, Teach for America, YouthBuild and other nonprofits; and Freedom Corps, which expanded these programs and created disaster-response service efforts after 9/11. These programs would never have come about without leadership from Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively. Jimmy Carter, for his part, embodied a lifetime of service himself.

But national service opportunities are a small fraction of what they were after 9/11, even though many Americans want to serve and both Republicans and Democrats support investments in large-scale civilian national service. Trump could create the most comprehensive national service program in U.S. history, linking civilian and military service for the first time and establishing a legacy that inspires young and old alike. He could create a White House Council for Military and National Service, with a dozen departments and agencies creating service corps to meet their missions at lower cost to the taxpayer. Trump's national security adviser, former congressman Mike Waltz, who served as a Green Beret and sponsored bipartisan legislation advancing recommendations of the Na-

tional Commission on Military, National and Public Service, could lead it.

The president and Congress could build on existing programs while establishing new ones, with a goal of 1 million Americans in civilian national service every year — representing 25% of young people who turn 18 each year. Such a move would create a culture in which serving community and country is both an expectation and an opportunity, and it would provide a bridge year to increase the number of qualified applicants for the military.

A living stipend and a post-service award, similar to a civilian GI Bill, for education or transition to work, could ensure that service is a pathway to prosperity. Conservative estimates show that at a public cost of \$10 billion a year, matched by philanthropic contributions, there would be about a four-to-one return on investment — with a service year leading to more productive workers and taxpaying citizens, as well as reduced welfare costs.

This approach would be “big citizenship,” not “big government.” What better way to celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation's birth than to reignite a revolution of service and ingenuity to help solve our public challenges, bring Americans of all backgrounds together — and heal a divided nation.

John M. Bridgeland, former director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, and Alan Khazei, co-founder of the education nonprofit City Year, co-chair More Perfect, working to advance national service.

SCOREBOARD/SOCCER

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

AP Men's Top 25

The top 25 teams in The Associated Press' college basketball poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote and previous ranking.

	Record	Pts	Prv
1. Auburn (62)	18-1	1550	1
2. Duke	17-2	1484	2
3. Iowa St.	17-2	1404	3
4. Alabama	17-3	1342	4
5. Florida	18-2	1278	5
6. Houston	16-3	1242	7
7. Michigan St.	17-2	1170	8
8. Tennessee	17-3	1149	6
9. Marquette	17-3	1068	10
10. Purdue	16-5	892	11
11. Kansas	14-5	877	12
12. Kentucky	14-5	858	9
13. Texas A&M	15-5	775	13
14. Mississippi St.	16-4	715	14
15. St. John's	17-3	588	20
16. Oregon	16-4	448	15
17. Wisconsin	16-4	440	18
18. Illinois	14-6	384	17
19. Memphis	16-4	383	24
20. Missouri	16-4	352	22
21. Louisville	15-5	346	25
22. Texas Tech	15-4	308	-
23. Mississippi	15-5	215	16
24. Vanderbilt	16-4	132	-
25. UConn	14-6	131	19

Others receiving votes: Michigan 129, Maryland 116, Utah St. 99, Clemson 92, Arizona 47, Saint Mary's 45, Gonzaga 34, Texas 22, Creighton 12, Baylor 8, New Mexico 4, VCU 4, West Virginia 3, Oklahoma 2, Bradley 1, UCLA 1.

USA Today Men's Top 25

The USA TODAY Sports Top 25 men's basketball poll, with team's RECORDS THROUGH SUNDAY in parentheses, total points based on 25 for first place through one point for 25th, ranking in last week's poll and first-place votes received.

	Pts	Prv	1st
1 Auburn (18-1)	775	1	31
2 Duke (17-2)	741	2	0
3 Iowa State (17-2)	689	4	0
4 Alabama (17-3)	676	3	0
5 Houston (16-3)	635	5	0
6 Florida (18-2)	634	6	0
7 Michigan St. (17-2)	583	8	0
8 Tennessee (17-3)	564	7	0
9 Marquette (17-3)	536	10	0
10 Purdue (16-5)	476	12	0
11 Kansas (14-5)	429	11	0
12 Kentucky (14-5)	399	9	0
13 Mississippi St. (16-4)	324	14	0
14 St. John's (17-3)	318	21	0
15 Texas A&M (15-5)	310	13	0
16 Memphis (16-4)	242	22	0
17 Wisconsin (16-4)	214	19	0
18 Oregon (16-4)	201	15	0
19 Texas Tech (15-4)	169	25	0
20 Illinois (14-6)	166	17	0
21 Missouri (16-4)	163	24	0
22 Louisville (15-5)	162	NR	0
23 Mississippi (15-5)	104	16	0
24 Connecticut (14-6)	100	18	0
25 Clemson (17-4)	96	NR	0

Dropped out: No. 20 Michigan (14-5); No. 23 West Virginia (13-6).

Others receiving votes: Michigan (14-5) 67; Gonzaga (15-6) 55; Maryland (16-5) 50; Vanderbilt (16-4) 44; Arizona (13-6) 41; Saint Mary's (18-3) 41; Utah State (18-2) 22; Creighton (14-6) 18; West Virginia (13-6) 17; Georgia (14-6) 6; Baylor (13-6) 4; New Mexico (17-4) 3; UC Irvine (18-3) 1.

Monday's men's scores

EAST
Boston U. 69, Holy Cross 59
Towson 75, Northeastern 65

SOUTH
Alabama A&M 98, Prairie View 82
Alcorn St. 70, Bethune-Cookman 61
Duke 74, NC State 64
Florida A&M 72, Jackson St. 62
Houston Christian 70, SE Louisiana 62
Incarnate Word 74, New Orleans 58
Louisiana-Monroe 77, South Alabama 66
Southern U. 63, MVSU 42
Texas Southern 80, Alabama St. 69
Troy 70, Southern Miss. 61

MIDWEST
E. Illinois 56, UALR 54
Michigan 76, Penn St. 72
Ohio St. 82, Iowa 65

SOUTHWEST
Grambling St. 81, Ark.-Pine Bluff 77
Lamar 69, Northwestern St. 59
McNeese St. 74, Texas A&M-CC 73
Stephen F. Austin 79, East Texas A&M 72

FAR WEST
Arizona 86, Iowa St. 75, OT
Nicholls 82, Texas Rio Grande Valley 75
UCLA 82, Southern Cal 76

Men's Top 25 schedule

Tuesday's games
No. 7 Michigan St. (17-2) vs. Minnesota (11-9)
No. 8 Tennessee (17-3) vs. No. 12 Kentucky (14-5)
No. 9 Marquette (17-3) at Butler (9-11)
No. 11 Kansas (14-5) vs. UCF (13-6)
No. 13 Texas A&M (15-5) vs. Oklahoma (15-4)
No. 15 St. John's (17-3) at Georgetown (13-7)
No. 21 Louisville (15-5) vs. Wake Forest (15-5)

Wednesday's games
No. 1 Auburn (18-1) at LSU (12-7)
No. 4 Alabama (17-3) at No. 14 Mississippi St. (16-4)
No. 6 Houston (16-3) at West Virginia (13-6)
No. 17 Wisconsin (16-4) at Maryland (16-5)
No. 22 Texas Tech (15-4) vs. TCU (10-9)
No. 23 Mississippi (15-5) vs. Texas (14-6)
No. 25 UConn (14-6) vs. DePaul (10-11)

Thursday's games
No. 16 Oregon (16-4) at UCLA (14-6)
No. 18 Illinois (14-6) at Nebraska (12-8)
No. 19 Memphis (16-4) at Tulane (11-9)

Friday's games
No. 10 Purdue (16-5) vs. Indiana (14-7)

Saturday's games
No. 1 Auburn (18-1) at No. 23 Mississippi (13-8)
No. 2 Duke (17-2) vs. North Carolina (13-8)
No. 3 Iowa St. (17-2) vs. Kansas St. (8-11)
No. 4 Alabama (17-3) vs. Georgia (14-6)
No. 5 Florida (18-2) at No. 8 Tennessee (17-3)
No. 6 Houston (16-3) vs. No. 22 Texas Tech (15-4)
No. 7 Michigan St. (17-2) at Southern Cal (12-7)
No. 9 Marquette (17-3) vs. No. 25 UConn (14-6)
No. 11 Kansas (14-5) at Baylor (13-6)
No. 12 Kentucky (14-5) vs. Arkansas (12-8)
No. 13 Texas A&M (15-5) at South Carolina (10-10)
No. 14 Mississippi St. (16-4) vs. No. 20 Missouri (16-4)
No. 15 St. John's (17-3) vs. Providence (10-10)
No. 17 Wisconsin (16-4) at Northwestern (12-8)
No. 21 Louisville (15-5) at Georgia Tech (9-11)
No. 24 Vanderbilt (16-4) at Oklahoma (15-4)

Sunday's games
No. 16 Oregon (16-4) vs. Nebraska (12-8)
No. 18 Illinois (14-6) vs. Ohio St. (11-8)
No. 19 Memphis (16-4) at Rice (11-9)

Monday's women's scores

The top 25 teams in The Associated Press' women's college basketball poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote and previous ranking.

	Record	Pts	Prv
1. UCLA (31)	20-0	799	1
2. South Carolina (1)	19-1	767	2
3. Notre Dame	17-2	732	3
4. Southern Cal	18-1	709	4
5. Texas	20-2	650	7
6. UConn	19-2	642	6
7. LSU	21-1	624	5
8. Ohio St.	19-1	573	12
9. TCU	20-2	516	9
10. Duke	17-4	492	14
11. Kansas St.	19-2	448	10
12. Kentucky	17-2	417	11
13. Oklahoma	16-4	405	15
14. Maryland	16-4	404	8
15. North Carolina	18-4	356	13
16. Michigan St.	17-3	292	21
17. NC State	16-4	283	20
18. Tennessee	15-4	251	17
19. California	18-3	211	22
20. Georgia Tech	17-4	184	18
21. West Virginia	16-4	179	16
22. Alabama	17-4	117	19
23. Vanderbilt	17-4	109	-
24. Oklahoma St.	17-3	57	-
25. Florida St.	16-4	41	-

Others receiving votes: Michigan 30, Nebraska 26, Minnesota 25, Creighton 21, Baylor 12, Utah 11, Mississippi 8, Harvard 7, South Dakota St. 2.

Monday's women's scores

EAST
Boston U. 52, Holy Cross 49

SOUTH
Alabama A&M 68, Prairie View 59
Alcorn St. 68, Bethune-Cookman 58
Incarnate Word 58, New Orleans 55
SE Louisiana 65, Houston Christian 41
South Carolina 70, Tennessee 63
Southern U. 71, MVSU 51
Texas Southern 69, Alabama St. 67

MIDWEST
Illinois 74, Purdue 38
Missouri 78, Mississippi St. 77
Nicholls 58, Texas Rio Grande Valley 50

SOUTHWEST
Lamar 59, Northwestern St. 55
McNeese St. 59, Texas A&M-CC 54
Stephen F. Austin 92, East Texas A&M 65

FAR WEST
Indiana 73, Washington 70
Washington St. 65, Oregon St. 57

Women's Top 25 schedule

Wednesday's games
No. 6 UConn (19-2) at DePaul (11-11)
No. 14 Maryland (16-4) at Penn St. (10-11)
No. 24 Oklahoma St. (17-3) vs. Arizona St. (8-13)

Thursday's games
No. 3 Notre Dame (17-2) at Virginia Tech (14-6)
No. 4 Southern Cal (18-1) vs. Minnesota (18-3)
No. 5 Texas (20-2) vs. Missouri (11-10)
No. 7 LSU (21-1) vs. No. 13 Oklahoma (16-4)
No. 11 Kansas St. (19-2) vs. Iowa St. (15-7)
No. 12 Kentucky (17-2) vs. No. 22 Alabama (17-4)
No. 15 North Carolina (18-4) at No. 19 California (18-3)
No. 16 Michigan St. (17-3) vs. Oregon (15-5)
No. 17 NC State (16-4) at Wake Forest (8-12)
No. 23 Vanderbilt (17-4) at Florida (11-10)
No. 25 Florida St. (16-4) at Boston College (12-10)

DEALS

Monday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball American League
BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Agreed to terms with Dylan Carlson on a one-year contract. Designated SS Jacob Amaya for assignment. Named Adam Jones special advisor to the general manager and community ambassador.
TEXAS RANGERS — Agreed to terms with RHP Jesse Chavez on a minor league contract.

National League
PITTSBURGH PIRATES — Sent 3B Tristan Gray outright to Indianapolis (IL).

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

DALLAS MAVERICKS — Signed D Kylor Kelley to a two-way contract. Ended their two-way contract with G Jazian Gortman.

DETROIT PISTONS — Recalled F Bobi Klinton from the Motor City Cruise of the G League.
MIAMI HEAT — Suspended F Jimmy Butler indefinitely. Recalled F Keshad Johnson from the Sioux Falls Skyforce of the G League.
MILWAUKEE BUCKS — Recalled F Chris Livingston from the Wisconsin Herd of the G League.
WASHINGTON WIZARDS — Recalled G Patrick Baldwin, Jr. from the Capital City Go-Go of the G League.

FOOTBALL
National Football League
BUFFALO BILLS — Announced the retirement of S Micah Hyde. Re-signed OT Ryan Van Demark to a contract. Signed CBs Te' Cory Couch and Daequan Hardy, OL Mike Edwards, RB Frank Gore Jr., OT Richard Gougeon, WR KJ Hamler and DT Zion Logue to reserve/futures contracts.
CINCINNATI BENGALS — Hired Jerry Montgomery as defensive line coach and run game coordinator and Mike Hodges as linebackers coach.
GREEN BAY PACKERS — Re-signed special teams coordinator Rich Bisaccia to a contract extension.
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Hired Doug Marrone as offensive line coach and Thomas Brown as tight end coach and pass game coordinator.
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Hired Brant Boyer as special teams coordinator.
TENNESSEE TITANS — Promoted Luke Stocker to tight end coach. Hired John Fassel as special teams coordinator and Tony Oden as pass game coordinator and cornerbacks coach. Released cornerbacks coach Chris Harris, tight end coach Justin Outten, assistant special teams coach Anthony Levine, defensive assistant Clint McMillan and special teams coach Colt Anderson.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League
NHL — Suspended D Emil Lilleberg for two games for interference in a Jan. 25 game against Detroit.
BUFFALO SABRES — Placed RW Nicolas Aube-Kubel on waivers.
CALGARY FLAMES — Sent C Rory Kerins to Calgary (AHL).
DETROIT RED WINGS — Signed Dominik Shine to a two-year contract. Placed Patrick Kane on injured reserve.
NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Reassigned D Spencer Stastney to Milwaukee (AHL).
NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Recalled LW Brian Halonen from Utica (AHL).
NEW YORK ISLANDERS — Acquired D Scott Perunovich from St. Louis in exchange for a conditional fifth-round pick in the 2026 draft. Placed D Ryan Pullock on injured reserve. Designated G Marcus Hogberg for injured reserve. Recalled G Jakub Skarek from Bridgeport (AHL).
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Placed C Evgeni Malkin on injured reserve. Recalled RW Jessu Puuljarvi from Wilkes-Barre Scranton (AHL).
TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Recalled C Gage Gougeon and D Declan Carville from Syracuse (AHL).
WASHINGTON CAPITALS — Agreed to terms with G Logan Thompson on a six-year contract.
WINNIPEG JETS — Recalled C Brad Lambert from Manitoba (AHL).

SOCCER
Major League Soccer
COLUMBUS CREW — Transferred M Marino Hines to Atletico Nacional (Columbia's Liga BetPlay).
NASHVILLE SOCCER CLUB — Loaned F Woobens Pacius to Tampa Bay (USL Championship).
National Women's Soccer League
HOUSTON DASH — Acquired F Messiah Bright from Angel City FC in exchange for \$100,000 of intra-league transfer funds.

TENNIS

WTA Generali Ladies Linz

Tuesday
At Linz, Austria
Purse: Euro925,661
Seedings in parentheses
Women's Singles
Round of 32
Clara Tauson (8), Denmark, def. Anhelina Kalinina, Ukraine, 6-3, 6-3.
Antonia Ruzic, Croatia, def. Maier Sherif Ahmed Abdelaziz, Egypt, 6-3, 6-4.
Sara Sorribes Tormo, Spain, def. Lulu Sun, New Zealand, 6-3, 6-3.



Neymar and Saudi club Al-Hilal have reached an agreement to terminate his contract.

Neymar leaving Saudi club

BY MAURICIO SAVARESE
Associated Press

RIODE JANEIRO — Neymar is leaving the Saudi Arabian league after playing just seven games in 17 months following his big-money move to the oil-rich kingdom. Now he could be heading back to boyhood Brazilian club Santos.

Saudi Arabian club Al-Hilal said Monday it reached an agreement with Neymar to terminate his contract by mutual consent, marking the end of an injury-plagued stint in the Middle East.

The 32-year-old Brazilian, once hailed as one of the world's best players, was sidelined for a year after an ACL injury and produced only one goal and two assists for the club.

"I gave everything to play and I wish we enjoyed better times on the pitch together," Neymar said in a message on social media. "To Saudi, thank you for giving me and my family a new home and new experiences. I now know the real Saudi and have friends for life."

Despite Neymar's injury, Al-Hilal still managed to win last season's Saudi league. The Brazilian's contract was due to expire after this year's FIFA Club World Cup, which will be played between June 15 and July 13 in the United States.

The club said in a statement published on its social media channels that it "expresses its thanks and appreciation to Neymar for what he has provided throughout his career with Al-Hilal."

The striker joined the Saudi club from Paris Saint-Germain in August 2023 for 90 million euros (\$94 million), in one of many transactions that placed the Arab country as one of the new big soccer markets in the world.

But Neymar suffered his ACL injury, the most serious of his career, playing for Brazil only months after he joined Al-Hilal.

AP SPOTLIGHT

Jan. 29

1950 — In an Associated Press poll of sports writers and broadcasters, Jack Dempsey is voted the greatest fighter of the past 50 years. Dempsey received 251 votes to 104 for Joe Louis.

1958 — The St. Louis Cardinals give Stan Musial a contract for \$100,000, making him the highest paid player in the National League.

1963 — Eleven players and six officials are elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Jim Thorpe, Red Grange, Bronco Nagurski, Sammy Baugh, Dutch Clark, Johnny McNally, Ernie Nevers, Mel Hein, Pete Henry, Cal Hubbard and Don Hutson are the players. The six officials are Bert Bell, Joe Carr, George Halas, Curly Lambeau, Tim Mara and George Preston.

1971 — Hal Greer of Philadelphia becomes the sixth player in NBA history to score 20,000 points as the 76ers lose to Milwaukee 142-118.

1985 — Bryan Trottier of the New York Islanders scores his 1,000th point with a

goal in a 4-4 tie with the Minnesota North Stars.

1994 — Julio Cesar Chavez suffers his first loss in 91 fights when Frankie Randall knocks him down in the 11th round and wins the WBC super lightweight championship on a split decision.

2000 — Utah's Karl Malone becomes the third player in NBA history to score 30,000 points when he makes a layup with 8:53 left in the third quarter of a 96-94 loss to Minnesota.

2005 — Serena Williams fends off six break points in the fifth game of the second set, then wills herself to overcome an aching back in a 2-6, 6-3, 6-0 victory over Lindsay Davenport in the Australian Open final.

2005 — Irina Slutskaya joins the elite company of Katarina Witt and Sonja Henie by winning a sixth title at the European Figure Skating Championships.

2006 — Roger Federer wins his seventh Grand Slam title, overcoming an early challenge from unseeded Marcos Baghdatis to win the Australian Open 5-7, 7-5,

6-0, 6-2.

2012 — Lydia Ko becomes the youngest person ever to win a professional golf tour event by winning the Bing Lee/Samsung Women's NSW Open on the LPGA Tour. She is 14 and 8 months, one year younger than the previous youngest person ever to win a professional golf tour event, Japan's Ryo Ishikawa.

2012 — Novak Djokovic outlasts Rafael Nadal to defend his Australian Open title in the longest ever Grand Slam final and becomes the fifth man to win three straight majors in the Open Era. Djokovic completes a 5-hour, 53-minute 5-7, 6-4, 6-2, 6-7 (5), 7-5 victory over Nadal at 1:37 a.m.

2017 — Roger Federer wins his 18th major title by beating Rafael Nadal 6-4, 3-6, 6-1, 3-6, 6-3 to capture the Australian Open.
2018 — Australian Open Men's Tennis: Roger Federer beats Marin Cilic 6-2, 6-7, 6-3, 3-6, 6-1 to win his record 20th Grand Slam title.

2018 — Cleveland Indians announce they will remove "Chief Wahoo" caricature logo from uniforms in 2019.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Love's heave helps Arizona upset Iowa St.

By JOHN MARSHALL

Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. — Caleb Love trotted back, his head down, shoulders slumped after the latest of his missed 3-pointers clanged the back rim. This was not his night — until it was.

Known for taking and making big shots, Love hit one of the biggest of his career — and Arizona's season — with a tying heave from beyond half-court at the end of regulation. He wasn't done, adding two more 3s in overtime to send Arizona to an improbable 86-75 win over No. 3 Iowa State on Monday.

"Best moment of my life," said Love, who finished with 22 points. "Obviously, it wasn't going our way throughout the game, but you've got to trust your work, to stay confident."

Tobe Awaka finished with 17 points and 12 rebounds for the Wildcats (14-6, 8-1).

Tamin Lipsey scored 18 points and Keshon Gilbert added 17 to lead the Cyclones.

Love was 1-for-10 on 3s before the shot at the end of regulation.

Love has never lacked moxie.

The 6-foot-4 senior made a name for himself for making big shots in three seasons at North Carolina. He led the Tar Heels to the 2022 national title game by scoring 30 points against UCLA in the Sweet 16, then scored 22 of his 28 in the second half against Duke in the Final Four.

Love fit into coach Tommy Lloyd's system seamlessly last season, earning Pac-12 player of the year honors while picking his moments to shoot. He opted to return for his senior season in the desert but has been up and down through most of it, leading the team in scoring but also struggling with his shot at times.

Love didn't love the night he was having against the Cyclones (17-3, 7-2 Big 12), missing several open shots while going 1 for 10



RICK SCUTERI/AP

Arizona guard Caleb Love and coach Tommy Lloyd react after Love hit a three-pointer against Iowa State on Monday. Love's heave at the buzzer of regulation forced OT.

from the arc.

One thing about Love is that he will keep shooting.

Arizona appeared to be headed to another difficult defeat, down 70-67 after Iowa State's Curtis Jones hit two free throws with 20 seconds left. Arizona's Henri Veesaar hit one free throw to make it a two-point game

and Iowa State grabbed the rebound when he intentionally missed the second.

The Wildcats immediately fouled Joshua Jefferson, and Iowa State's big man went 1-for-2 from the line, leaving Arizona 2.2 seconds to get up a final shot.

It turned out to be plenty of time for Love. With no one open down the court, Antho-

ny Dell'orso passed the ball into Love near the free-throw line. Arizona's preseason All-American took a couple of dribbles and let fly from near the midcourt logo, banking in a shot that sent a roar through McKale Center.

"We actually practice half-courters in practice for fun and he's decent at it, but I'm probably a little better," Arizona coach Tommy Lloyd said. "He let it go, it was on line — all you can do is get it on line and don't leave it short. When it went in, it was pretty amazing."

A streaky shooter, Love rode the momentum of his midcourt miracle, hitting two corner 3s in overtime to send Arizona to its first win over a top-five opponent as an unranked team since beating No. 3 UCLA in 1979.

"You hit a shot like that, you've got to win in overtime," said Love, who finished 4-for-13 from 3.

Love's teammates loved that he hit the shot.

A team leader, Love is willing to take the praise when he and the team play well and accept blame when his shots aren't falling.

Love has gone through some difficult shooting games this season, going a combined 1 for 15 from 3 in two games and another two-game stretch when he was 1-for-11. He's also been superb at times, scoring 33 against TCU, 27 at Oklahoma State.

No matter if his shots are falling, Love keeps firing and his teammates keep telling him to pull the trigger, knowing big ones are right around the corner.

"He's a guy who goes through a lot, has a lot of pressure on his back," Awaka said. "Just seeing him rise to the occasion through all the ups and downs ... to see that ball go in for him was just a blessing."

On a night when he couldn't seem to make anything, Love came through with the biggest shot of his life.

Flagg's big 2nd half helps Duke hold off NC State

By AARON BEARD

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Star freshman Cooper Flagg scored 23 of his 28 points after halftime to help No. 2 Duke hold off North Carolina State 74-64 on Monday night.

Fellow rookie Kon Knueppel had 19 points for the Blue Devils (18-2, 10-0 Atlantic Coast Conference), who have won 14 straight games. And they had to fight the entire way to get there.

That's because the Wolfpack (9-11, 2-7) played loose and fearlessly to build a 13-point first-half lead and then stay within reach of Duke every time the Blue Devils tried to push free in the final 10 minutes.

Dontrez Styles scored 18 points for N.C. State, which shot just 32% after halftime but matched its season high with 10 3-pointers.

This was a rematch of an NCAA Tournament Elite Eight game won by the Wolfpack during the program's improbable Final Four run last year.

The game also had a pair of stoppages in the last 4½ minutes for health reasons, first when Duke freshman center Khaman Maluach vomited on the baseline during play

and then when one of the "Cameron Cra-zies" fans apparently fainted and had to be carried out of the bleachers.

Takeaways

N.C. State: The Wolfpack entered having lost four straight league games by a combined margin of 14 points, and coach Kevin Keatts' club gave Duke fits all night in this one.

Duke: The Blue Devils were coming off their closest call in league play, a 63-56 win Saturday at Wake Forest. This one was another test.

Key moment

Duke ran off 19 consecutive points spanning halftime, first with the final seven points of the first half and then the first 12 of the second. Flagg scored eight in that run, which erased Duke's big first-half deficit.

Key stat

Marcus Hill, the Wolfpack's leading scorer at 13.2 points per game, finished with four on 1-for-10 shooting. His lone basket came on a whistle-drawing layup at the 4:40 mark.



BEN MCKEOWN/AP

Duke's Cooper Flagg, right, celebrates ahead of North Carolina State's Trey Parker, left, and Jayden Taylor late in the second half of the Blue Devils' victory on Monday.

NHL

ROUNDUP

McDavid, Perry lead Oilers past Kraken

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Connor McDavid and Corey Perry scored in the second period and the Edmonton Oilers rallied to beat the Seattle Kraken 4-2 on Monday night for their third straight victory.

Mattias Ekholm had a goal and an assist, and Mattias Janmark also scored for the Oilers, who have won 11 of 14 and moved back into first place in the Pacific Division — one point ahead of idle Vegas. Calvin Pickard had 26 saves.

Eeli Tolvanen and Vince Dunn scored for the Kraken, who led 2-1 after one period but lost for the second time in three games. Joey Daccord stopped 27 shots.

McDavid, back in the Oilers’ lineup after a three-game suspension for cross-checking Vancouver’s Conor Garland, tied the score 2-2 at 1:57 of the second. Perry gave Edmonton the lead for good at 9:38.

Ekholm had an empty-netter with 58 seconds left to seal the win.

Red Wings 5, Kings 2: Marco Kasper scored twice, Lucas Raymond had a goal and three assists, and Detroit rallied to beat visiting Los Angeles.

Elmer Soderblom scored his first goal of the season and Alex DeBrincat also scored as Detroit erased a 2-0 first-period deficit. Cam Talbot made 23 saves to improve to 8-1 in January.

Quinton Byfield and Kevill Fiala scored for the Kings, and Darcy Kuemper had 23 saves.

Flyers 4, Devils 2: Bobby Brink, Joel Farabee and Garnet Hathaway scored to help Philadelphia build a three-goal lead and it held on to beat visiting New Jersey.

Scott Laughton had a goal and an assist to help the Flyers snap a two-game losing streak and win the opener of a home-and-home set. Travis Konecny and Rasmus Ristolainen each had two assists, and Samuel Ersson stopped 31 shots in Philadelphia’s fourth straight home victory.

Dougie Hamilton and Timo Meier scored for New Jersey, which has lost both meetings with Philadelphia this season. The teams meet again in New Jersey on Wednesday.

Canucks 5, Blues 2: Conor Garland had two



JASON FRANSON, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

Seattle’s Adam Larsson (6) and the Oilers’ Connor McDavid battle for the puck Monday night in Edmonton, Alberta. McDavid, back from a three-game suspension for cross-checking Vancouver’s Conor Garland, scored a goal in the Oilers’ 4-2 victory over the Kraken.

goals, and J.T. Miller and Pius Suter also scored to help Vancouver win at St. Louis.

Tyler Myers added an empty-net goal, and Kevin Lankinen made 24 saves for the Canucks.

Dylan Holloway and Colton Parayko scored for St. Louis, which has lost three straight for the third time this season. Jordan Binnington gave up three goals on 18 shots before being pulled midway through the second period. Joel Hofer made 10 saves in relief.

Sharks 2, Penguins 1: Macklin Celebrini scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third period, Yaroslav Askarov stopped a penalty shot and host San Jose beat Pittsburgh to snap

a six-game losing streak.

Celebrini received a pass from Tyler Toffoli in the slot and converted for his 16th goal of the season to give the Sharks the lead in the third. Askarov then stopped Drew O’Connor on a penalty shot for the most important of his 32 saves, delivering San Jose a much-needed win.

Mikael Granlund scored in the first period for the Sharks.

Sidney Crosby, who was the No. 1 overall pick in the draft 19 years before Celebrini went first to San Jose, had scored for Pittsburgh just 24 seconds into the third period to tie the game.

Alex Nedeljkovic made 26 saves for the Penguins.

GM thinks help is on the way for struggling Chicago

Associated Press

CHICAGO — In the middle of another losing season, Chicago Blackhawks general manager Kyle Davidson is preaching patience.

Chicago is 3-10-3 in past 16 games after losing 4-2 to Minnesota on Sunday night. At 15-29-5, it is once again among the NHL’s worst teams — in the running for a top-three draft pick for the third consecutive year.

“This takes time. We knew it would take time,” Davidson said Monday. “There’s nothing that’s gone on in our prospect group or the development of our young players that’s causing me concern. ... We are in the process of a rebuild here, and it’s going to be on the backs of our young players and prospects.”

But Davidson had expected the Blackhawks to be more competitive after they went 23-53-6 last season. The team was active in free agency, signing Tyler Bertuzzi, Teuvo Teravainen, T.J. Brodie and Alec Martinez.

Even with the additions, it has been mostly more of the same. Chicago had a 14-33-2 record after 49 games last season. Luke Richardson was fired on Dec. 5, and Anders Sorensen took



Davidson

over as the interim coach.

“For his group at the NHL level, I did expect a little more and we made a coaching change because of that,” Davidson said. “That’s a pretty big indicator that I didn’t feel the group was where they needed to be. So, that in itself is disappointing but a macro level and much higher level view, I’m really excited and really happy with where things are headed.”

One of the reasons for Davidson’s optimism is the play of Connor Bedard, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2023 draft. Shaking off a slow start, the 19-year-old center is up to 13 goals and a team-high 30 assists — more in line with his first season, when he had 22 goals and 39 assists and won the Calder Memorial Trophy as NHL rookie of the year.

While Bedard has expressed frustration at times with his play and all the losing, Davidson didn’t sound concerned with the development of the franchise’s most important player.

“You know his words get taken much further

than everyone else and everything’s read into a little bit more,” Davidson said. “I think you’re starting to see that offensive creativity just I think blossom over the last little while here and he’s got some confidence. He’s got some swagger back, and it’s really exciting to see. I think he’s playing really, really well.”

Chicago also has nine more selections in the 2025 draft after it reacquired its third-rounder in a three-team trade on Friday. The bounty includes two first-round picks after it drafted a total of eight players in the first round alone over the previous three years.

The Blackhawks sent Taylor Hall to Carolina as part of last week’s deal. It also retained 50% of Mikko Rantanen’s salary cap hit in exchange for the third-round pick the team had dealt to the Hurricanes.

As for the runup to the March 7 NHL trade deadline, Davidson said the team is listening.

“We’ve got a lot of assets,” he said. “We’re not necessarily in that asset-build stage like we were a little while ago. And so we’ve got the luxury of being patient and just seeing what comes our way.”

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Table with columns: Atlantic Division, GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Toronto, Florida, Ottawa, Boston, Tampa Bay, Montreal, Detroit, Buffalo.

Metropolitan Division

Table with columns: GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Washington, Carolina, New Jersey, Columbus, N.Y. Rangers, Philadelphia, N.Y. Islanders, Pittsburgh.

Western Conference

Central Division

Table with columns: GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Winnipeg, Dallas, Minnesota, Colorado, St. Louis, Utah, Nashville, Chicago.

Pacific Division

Table with columns: GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Edmonton, Vegas, Los Angeles, Calgary, Vancouver, Seattle, Anaheim, San Jose.

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

Philadelphia 4, New Jersey 2
Detroit 5, Los Angeles 2
Vancouver 5, St. Louis 2
Edmonton 4, Seattle 2
San Jose 2, Pittsburgh 1

Tuesday’s games

Boston at Buffalo
Carolina at N.Y. Rangers
Chicago at Tampa Bay
Winnipeg at Montreal
Colorado at N.Y. Islanders
Washington at Calgary
Anaheim at Seattle
Dallas at Vegas

Wednesday’s games

Los Angeles at Florida
Minnesota at Toronto
Philadelphia at New Jersey
Vancouver at Nashville
Pittsburgh at Utah

Thursday’s games

Chicago at Carolina
Los Angeles at Tampa Bay
Minnesota at Montreal
Washington at Ottawa
Winnipeg at Boston
N.Y. Islanders at Philadelphia
Anaheim at Calgary
Detroit at Edmonton
Columbus at Vegas
San Jose at Seattle

Friday’s games

Nashville at Buffalo
Vancouver at Dallas
Columbus at Utah
St. Louis at Colorado

Scoring leaders

Through Monday

Table with columns: Name, Team, GP, G, A, PTS. Rows include Nathan MacKinnon, Leon Draisaitl, Nikita Kucherov, Mitch Marner, Connor McDavid, Mikko Rantanen, Kyle Connor, Jack Eichel, David Pastrnak, Jack Hughes, Travis Konecny, Martin Necas.

NFL PLAYOFFS



PETER AIKEN/AP

Buffalo had many successes this season, and quarterback Josh Allen could win the NFL MVP award, but for the fourth time in five years the Bills were eliminated from the playoffs by the Kansas City Chiefs.

Allen ponders what-ifs after Bills bounced again

By JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Josh Allen could take plenty of satisfaction from a season in which he became the betting favorite for MVP and the Buffalo Bills defied the doubters who predicted a down year.

Instead, Allen and the Bills again fell short of their goal of winning the Super Bowl, and on Monday, the star quarterback was second-guessing himself about what more he could have done in a 32-29 loss to the two-time defending champion Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC championship game a day earlier.

Allen took responsibility. He had the ball with an opportunity to tie the game or put the Bills ahead in the closing minutes — only to come up empty on a desperation fourth-down heave that fell through the arms of diving tight end Dalton Kincaid.

“Yeah, it sucks. You keep going back and thinking about what you could have done differently, plays even throughout the game,” said Allen, who was stopped earlier in the fourth quarter on fourth-and-1.

“Any time you lose, you’re going to have those thoughts in your head and just understanding that you’re not promised opportunities like that all the time,” Allen added. “You can’t just knock on the door, you got to kick it down.”

Try as they might, the Bills and Allen once again will be spectators on Super Bowl Sunday. This marked the fourth time in five years they’ve been eliminated by the Chiefs, and the second time in the conference title game.

Winners of five consecutive AFC East titles, the Bills became the first team to win 11 or more games over five straight seasons that didn’t reach the Super Bowl at least once over that span.

Fairly or not, the narrative remains unchanged. Al-

len, coach Sean McDermott and the Bills enter another offseason being remembered more for their shortcomings than their successes.

“It’s hard to win Super Bowls in this league. We understand that,” Allen said. “And when you’re playing a team that’s now been to three in a row, you gotta go out there and you gotta beat them. You gotta take it from them, and we didn’t do that.”

Buffalo matched a franchise record with 13 regular-season wins and ran away with the division, clinching the title in Week 13. The Bills became the first team to finish with 30 touchdowns passing and rushing and matched an NFL record by having 13 players catch a TD pass.

Buffalo did all that following an offseason salary-cap purge that cost them six of eight team captains, including receiver Stefon Diggs, who was traded to Houston.

Using a spread-the-wealth approach on offense, the Bills became the only team to beat each conference’s top seed — Kansas City and Detroit — in the regular

season. Then they eliminated Bo Nix and the Broncos and Lamar Jackson and the Ravens in the first two playoff rounds, only to have Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs again block their path in a game that featured four lead changes.

Allen’s teammates had his back.

“I can’t even begin to fathom what that dude has to put on his shoulders every single week,” tight end Dawson Knox said.

“He’s got the whole city on his back and he carries it with grace and better than anybody that I could possibly imagine carrying it, what he has to go through, the plays he made last night,” he added. “The game could’ve easily gone our way. And then we’d be having different conversations now.”

Until next year, perhaps.

Despite title-game loss, Washington made this best season in decades

By STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

After his Washington Commanders got blown out by Philadelphia in the NFC championship game, coach Dan Quinn told his players there would be plenty of time later to discuss missed opportunities and what went wrong.

“I just wanted them to recognize the brotherhood they created together,” Quinn said.

Quinn and the Commanders created Washington’s best season in more than three decades, exceeding all expectations by winning 14 games, including two in the playoffs. A thud of a 55-23 loss to the Eagles ended things on a sour note, but the future seems bright with a franchise quarterback in Jayden Daniels still on his rookie contract and plenty of salary-cap space at general manager Adam Peters’ disposal to build a perennial contender.

“Just the culture that DQ and Adam set here, we know the standard,” Daniels said. “Next year, we’re obviously going to have new guys come in and stuff like that, so we have to teach them the standard and uphold it to that.”

Daniels is the biggest reason for optimism about an organization that has not had much success for longer than the 24 years he has been alive. The second pick in the draft and an overwhelming favorite to be AP Offensive Rookie of the Year, Daniels has a playoff-high 822 yards passing and consistently showed that he could thrive in pressure situations.

After completing 29 of 48 passes with one touchdown and an interception Sunday, Daniels said he and his teammates would be plenty motivated by how this season ended.

“I don’t want to have a feeling like this again,” Daniels said. “But you have to deal with it, move on from it.”

The Commanders have some big decisions to make in the coming months, with only 34 players under contract for 2025 and some key contributors set to be free agents. That group includes six-time All-Pro linebacker Bobby Wagner and tight end Zach Ertz, each of whom is 34.

Ertz, who had a game-high 11 catches and 104 yards against the Eagles, was drawn to Washington by Quinn and offensive coordinator Kliff Kingsbury and believes the coaching staff is a big reason for the team fast-forwarding what many thought was the start of a rebuild.

“It’s a testament to DQ, the environment that he’s created in a short amount of time,” Ertz said. “He brings energy every day. He’s got good people on his staff, good people that push us every day to be at our best.”

According to Over the Cap, which tracks NFL teams’ cap space and contracts, the Commanders have more than \$87 million in room — the third most in the league. Now they might not need to overpay to attract talent.

In a series of social media posts Monday, team co-owner Magic Johnson said, “With a revitalized spirit in the locker room, transformative play on the field and the resurgence of this brand, the Commanders are a team that players want to be a part of.”

Running back Austin Ekeler, who is signed through next season, believes this season built a strong foundation for what is to come, even given how it ended.

“I’m proud of the development that we’ve had this year and the culture setting that’s definitely step one,” Ekeler said. “So, we have that down, and now it’s a feeling of disappointment but also proud of the guys and what we’ve been able to accomplish this year.”



JOHN McDONNELL/For The Washington Post

Jayden Daniels, who is likely to win AP Offensive Rookie of the Year, gives the Commanders reason to be optimistic about the future.

NBA

Heat suspend Butler for 3rd time this month

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

MIAMI — Jimmy Butler was back from suspension. Again.

And then Butler got suspended by the Miami Heat. Again.

Butler has been suspended for the third time this month by the Heat, this one starting basically just as the second one was ending. The team said Butler left Monday's morning shootaround practice early, in advance of a game against the Orlando Magic — something the team called “intentionally withholding services.” The suspension is without pay and indefinite for now, with the team saying it will last at least five games.

Butler was expected to come back from his second suspension Monday, only to be suspended for

a third time. Butler, according to a person with knowledge of the situation, was told during the shootaround that he was not going to be back in the starting lineup for that night's game. He left the shootaround not long afterward, said the person, who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because the team did not release that detail publicly.

“The Miami Heat are suspending Jimmy Butler without pay effective immediately for an indefinite period to last no fewer than five games,” read the team statement. “The suspension is due to a continued pattern of disregard of team rules, engaging in conduct detrimental to the team and intentionally withholding services. This includes walking out of practice earlier today.”



LYNNE SLADKY/AP

Miami Heat forward Jimmy Butler (22) is fouled by Philadelphia 76ers center Andre Drummond during the second half Nov. 18 in Miami. Butler's latest suspension is without pay and will last at least five games.

Without Butler, Miami rallied from a 14-point deficit in the fourth quarter and beat Orlando 125-119 in double overtime.

“What it means right now is just we proved to ourselves that we have a tremendous amount of

grit,” Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. “You know, and you gain confidence from that.”

Butler was suspended for Miami's most recent two games after missing a team flight to Milwaukee last week. He has now missed

15 of the Heat's last 20 games, including 10 of the last 13 because of the suspensions — the first a seven-game ban for conduct that the team deemed detrimental, followed by the two-game suspension, and now the indefinite one.

Shining: Wembanyama leading surprise resurgence for Spurs

FROM PAGE 24

And no, he's not getting overpowered. Quite the contrary.

Likely All-Star

The sky is evidently not even the limit for Wembanyama, who came into the league as the most highly touted prospect since LeBron James and has exceeded probably even the loftiest expectations. He'll almost certainly be picked as an All-Star for the first time later this week. He's the Defensive Player of the Year frontrunner. He'll get MVP votes. All this, in just his second season.

And he is still learning.

“We see something, every day, new on the court that he's building,” Spurs CEO R.C. Buford said. “I've watched him since he was 15 years old and what's been fascinating is how important that it is to him to continue to grow as a player. And now we're getting to see it every day.”

Wembanyama can make a steal at one end of the floor, then crossover dribble past a defender and let 3-pointers fly from the logo. His passes are pinpoint. He's the best shot-blocker in the league. He'll reverse-pivot, Eurostep, spin toward the baseline, spin away from the baseline, right-hand, left-hand, whatever it takes to get a shot off.

San Antonio signed Chris Paul — in his 20th NBA season — to be someone that Wembanyama



DARREN ABATE/AP

The Spurs signed 20-year veteran Chris Paul to be a mentor for Victor Wembanyama, and Paul has learned from Wembanyama as well.

could learn from. And that is indeed happening; Paul and Wembanyama have said they talk constantly about matters both on- and off-the-court, the wise sage on one end, the young star on the other.

Thing is, Paul is learning from Wembanyama as well.

Conventional basketball wisdom says the 6-foot point guard would be quarterbacking the pick-and-roll with the towering center. Not anymore. Paul has found himself at times to be the one setting the pick and doing the rolling, something he can't really remember doing before now. Such is the advantage of having a 7-foot-4 teammate with guard skills.

“Vic is so unique,” Paul said. “I think everybody just expects him

to dunk because he's tall and that is not him by any means. He can dribble, he can pass, he can shoot. He does a little bit of everything. And that's why it's been so fun to play with Vic.”

Another example: Paul is about to pass Jason Kidd for No. 2 on the league's all-time steals list. It's what Paul does. He goes for steals. Wembanyama has tried to get him to think differently.

“I just don't know how to not go for steals,” Paul said. “To play with Vic now, guys will dribble into the lane and I'll reach and get a foul and Vic will just tap me on the shoulder and remind me that he's back there. His awareness on both ends of the court offensively and defensively is something that

you just don't see all the time.”

Playoffs within reach

After splitting their two games in Paris, the Spurs 20-23. San Antonio is on the outside looking into the Western Conference playoff picture, but the play-in tournament — and maybe even a top-six seed — are far from out of reach. They're in the mix.

It's a far cry from where they've been in recent years, and it all reminds Buford of how lucky the Spurs are to have Wembanyama.

“Even as a kid, he's had the attention, the cameras, the microphones, the spotlight on him,” said Mitch Johnson, the acting San Antonio coach while Gregg Popovich recovers from a November stroke. “He's very clear about what he wants and where he wants this to go. He's very grounded in that.”

Back in May 2019, a few weeks before that year's NBA draft, Buford was on a scouting trip in France and planning to see a prospect named Sekou Doumbouya. Someone then proposed a different idea. That was the start of Wembanyama's journey to the Spurs.

The story, as Buford tells it, goes like this: Claudio Crippa, an international scout for San Antonio, proposed going to see a youth game before checking out Doumbouya. Buford saw Wembanyama play for the first time that day. And the seeds for the Spurs' new

master plan were planted.

“We came to watch Victor, and that had a big influence on the way that our leadership and our front office developed a strategy to rebuild our program,” Buford said. “The lottery luck (and) the hoop gods were very good to us. But the vision of a prospect like that was clearly impactful in the strategy of our rebuild.”

The strategy included trading DeMar DeRozan in 2021, Derrick White and Dejounte Murray in 2022, then Jakob Poeltl in 2023. Those were not trades that resulted in team improvement. San Antonio suffered through four consecutive losing seasons before getting its biggest win in almost a decade — the May 2023 NBA draft lottery, when the ping-pong ball combination of 14, 5, 8 and 2 gave it the right to pick No. 1 overall.

The Spurs are not a playoff team yet and there is no timeline for Popovich's return. But in Wembanyama's second season, they have legitimate hope of getting to the postseason. And the vision that became so clear to Buford on that day in 2019 is a reality.

“He shows phenomenal maturity for a player that age, not to mention all his skills,” Indiana coach Rick Carlisle said. “I mean, he's a four-level scorer. And defensively, if he's not defensive player of the year this year I know I'll be surprised. He's averaging four blocks a game. So, what a player.”

NBA

Scoreboard

ROUNDUP

Rockets keep rolling against Celts

Eastern Conference				
Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	32	15	.681	—
New York	31	16	.660	1
Philadelphia	17	27	.386	13½
Toronto	14	32	.304	17½
Brooklyn	14	33	.298	18
Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	23	22	.511	—
Orlando	24	24	.500	½
Atlanta	22	24	.478	1½
Charlotte	12	31	.279	10
Washington	6	39	.133	17
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	37	9	.804	—
Milwaukee	26	18	.591	10
Indiana	25	20	.556	11½
Detroit	23	23	.500	14
Chicago	20	27	.426	17½
Western Conference				
Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	31	14	.689	—
Memphis	31	16	.660	1
Dallas	25	22	.532	7
San Antonio	20	23	.465	10
New Orleans	12	35	.255	20
Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	37	8	.822	—
Denver	28	18	.609	9½
Minnesota	25	21	.543	12½
Portland	17	29	.370	20½
Utah	10	34	.227	26½
Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	26	18	.591	—
L.A. Clippers	26	20	.565	1
Phoenix	24	21	.533	2½
Sacramento	24	22	.522	3
Golden State	22	23	.489	4½

Sunday's game					
Oklahoma City 118, Portland 108					
Monday's games					
Cleveland 110, Detroit 91					
L.A. Lakers 112, Charlotte 107					
New York 143, Memphis 106					
Toronto 113, New Orleans 104					
Sacramento 110, Brooklyn 96					
Houston 114, Boston 112					
Chicago 129, Denver 121					
Miami 125, Orlando 119, 2OT					
Minnesota 100, Atlanta 92					
Dallas 130, Washington 108					
Milwaukee 125, Utah 110					
Phoenix 111, L.A. Clippers 109					
Tuesday's games					
Houston at Atlanta					
L.A. Lakers at Philadelphia					
Milwaukee at Portland					
Utah at Golden State					
Wednesday's games					
Brooklyn at Charlotte					
Detroit at Indiana					
Toronto at Washington					
Chicago at Boston					
Cleveland at Miami					
Denver at New York					
Sacramento at Philadelphia					
Dallas at New Orleans					
L.A. Clippers at San Antonio					
Minnesota at Phoenix					
Oklahoma City at Golden State					
Thursday's games					
Atlanta at Cleveland					
L.A. Lakers at Washington					
Minnesota at Utah					
Houston at Memphis					
Orlando at Portland					
Scoring leaders					
Through Monday					
G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG	
Gil-Alexander, OKC	44	497	329	1411	32.1
Antetokoun., MIL	38	477	240	1198	31.5
Jokic, DEN	40	458	203	1200	30.0
Ball, CHA	31	302	141	873	28.2
Durant, PHO	35	343	183	949	27.1
Tatum, BOS	44	397	233	1184	26.9
Maxey, PHI	37	341	182	985	26.6
Davis, LAL	41	398	253	1077	26.3
Edwards, MIN	46	412	195	1208	26.3
Brunson, NY	46	410	257	1187	25.8
Booker, PHO	40	333	246	1019	25.5
Lillard, MIL	37	291	233	943	25.5

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Houston Rockets have been one of the NBA's more surprising teams this season. After their past three games, they shouldn't shock anyone.

Houston beat the Eastern Conference-leading Cleveland Cavaliers twice last week before pulling out a 114-112 victory over the defending champion Celtics on Monday night in Boston.

"We're over halfway through now and our record is what it is, so it's not just a fluke or anything," Houston coach Ime Udoka said. "People watch film and see the physicality and the way that we play, it's a little different than the rest of the league, maybe that catches people off guard initially, but I wouldn't say we're sneaking up on anybody anymore at this point in the season."

Houston (31-14), which is second in the Western Conference, posted its ninth win in 11 games on Monday. Its record is a few percentage points better than that of the defending NBA champion Celtics (32-15).

The Cavs and Celtics were a combined 104-28 (.788) entering their games against Houston. The Rockets became the first team in NBA history to win three consecutive games against teams with that high of a winning percentage, with a minimum of 40 games for each opponent, according to OptaSTATS.

Amen Thompson hit a floater over Jaylen Brown with 0.7 seconds left to give the Rockets the victory at Boston.

Led by a balanced lineup featuring Jalen Green, Alperen Sengun, veteran Fred VanVleet, Thompson and Dillon Brooks, the Rockets have been rolling since their 23-point home loss to the Celtics on Jan. 3.

"We're just playing hard, playing together," said Brooks, who finished with a 36 points against Boston, including a 10-for-15 performance from 3-point range.

"We have trust in one another," Brooks said.

The Rockets are plenty confident, but they understand big wins mean nothing if they can't follow them up. They'll get that chance Tuesday night at Atlanta.

"Playing some of the top teams obviously gives us some confidence," Udoka said.

Lakers 112, Hornets 107: Anthony Davis had 42 points and 23 rebounds, and Los Angeles used a huge first quarter from the All-Star center to build a 23-point lead before beating host Charlotte for its fourth consecutive victory.

LeBron James had 22 points and Austin Reaves chipped in 17 for the Lakers, who never trailed.



CHARLES KRUPA/AP

Houston forward Dillon Brooks (9) celebrates after making a basket against the Celtics on Monday night in Boston. After beating the East-leading Cavaliers twice last week, the Rockets beat the Celtics 114-112.

Miles Bridges had 26 points for the Hornets, who lost LaMelo Ball in the second quarter to a left ankle injury.

Davis scored 21 points in the first quarter on 9-for-12 shooting to go along with 11 rebounds as the Lakers bolted to a 39-19 lead.

Cavaliers 110, Pistons 91: Darius Garland scored 22 points, Donovan Mitchell added 21 and Cleveland snapped a season-high, three-game losing streak with a victory over visiting Detroit.

Cleveland, which has led the Eastern Conference all season, ended its slump with an 11th straight victory over Detroit. The Cavs are 22-3 at home.

Cade Cunningham scored 22 points and Malik Beasley 19 for Detroit.

Kings 110, Nets 96: Domantas Sabonis had 21 points, 22 rebounds and 10 assists in his seventh triple-double of the season, De'Aaron Fox scored 30 points and Sacramento won at Brooklyn.

DeMar DeRozan added 17 points and Malik Monk finished with 16 for the Kings, who snapped a two-game losing streak.

Heat 125, Magic 119 (2OT): Tyler Herro scored 30 points, Bam Adebayo finished with 26 and Miami erased a 14-point deficit in the fourth quarter before beating visiting Orlando in double overtime.

Adebayo had 10 rebounds and nine assists, Herro had 12 assists and eight rebounds, and Kel'el Ware finished with 19 points and 10 rebounds for Miami — which played hours after Jimmy Butler

was suspended yet again.

Franz Wagner had 29 points for Orlando, which got 17 apiece from Paolo Banchero and Tristan da Silva. The Magic were outscored 9-3 in the second overtime.

Knicks 143, Grizzlies 106: Mikal Bridges had 28 points, six assists and five rebounds, and New York snapped visiting Memphis' six-game winning streak.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 24 points and 11 rebounds, and Jalen Brunson had 20 points and six assists for the Knicks, who scored 143 for the second straight game and won their fourth in a row.

Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 21 points for Memphis, and Desmond Bane chipped in 16.

Raptors 113, Pelicans 104: Jakob Poeltl had 21 points and 14 rebounds, Scottie Barnes had 21 points and 11 rebounds, and Toronto beat visiting New Orleans for its first four-game winning streak in almost two years.

Zion Williamson led the Pelicans with 31 points and CJ McCollum added 22 as New Orleans dropped to 4-19 on the road.

Bulls 129, Nuggets 121: Nikola Vucevic had 20 points, 10 rebounds and six assists, and Chicago handed visiting Denver its second straight loss with a victory.

Zach LaVine scored 21 points and Lonzo Ball had 18 for Chicago, which had lost seven of eight. Ayo Dosunmu added 17 points.

Denver wasted another impressive performance by Nikola Jokic, who had 33 points, 14 assists and 12 rebounds in his sixth triple-double in his past seven games.

The three-time MVP has an NBA-best 21 triple-doubles this season.

Timberwolves 100, Hawks 92: Anthony Edwards scored 23 points and Julius Randle added 20 to help host Minnesota hold off short-handed Atlanta.

DeAndre Hunter had a career-high 35 points and Keaton Wallace added 13 for the Hawks, who played without leading scorer and NBA assist leader Trae Young (hamstring) and starters Dyson Daniels (ankle) and Jalen Johnson (shoulder).

Mavericks 130, Wizards 108: Klay Thompson scored 21 of his 23 points in the first quarter, matching a Dallas record by hitting seven 3-pointers in the period, and the Mavericks breezed past visiting Washington.

Bilal Coulibaly scored 16 points for the Wizards (6-39), who finished a six-game trip with their 14th consecutive loss.

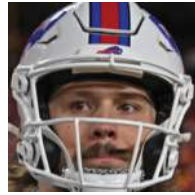
Bucks 125, Jazz 110: Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard each scored 35 points to lead visiting Milwaukee to a victory over Utah.

Lauri Markkanen led the Jazz with 19 points and nine rebounds. Collin Sexton scored 19 and Brice Sensabaugh finished with 17, including five 3-pointers.

Suns 111, Clippers 109: Devin Booker scored 26 points, Kevin Durant added 24 and surging Phoenix survived a late scare for a win over visiting Los Angeles.

Ivica Zubac had 25 points and 16 rebounds for the Clippers. James Harden added 24 points and 10 assists, while Powell scored 23.

SPORTS



What could have been

Allen, Bills left disappointed again after another strong season » **NFL playoffs, Page 21**



THIBAUT CAMUS/AP

San Antonio Spurs center Victor Wembanyama has followed up a unanimous Rookie of the Year season with a strong sophomore outing that should earn him an All-Star nod.

Shining on and off court

Fans don't always see Spurs' Wembanyama work behind the scenes

By **TIM REYNOLDS**
Associated Press

PARIS — For all the glowing things said in Paris the past few days about San Antonio phenom Victor Wembanyama, Hall of Famer Tony Parker probably summed matters up more succinctly than anyone.

Asked what the 7-foot-4 Wembanyama can become, Parker

didn't hesitate.

"He can be whatever he wants," said Parker, part of four of the Spurs' five championship teams. "He can be the best. He can be the best player in the NBA."

Many can see why Parker believes that. It goes beyond the numbers. Parker gets to see what fans can't see, that being how much work Wembanyama puts

in behind the scenes.

These are Wembanyama's stats so far this season: 24.5 points, 10.8 rebounds, 3.9 blocks and 3.7 assists per game. The last player to finish a season with those numbers was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a half-century ago.

Now throw in 3-point shooting, which didn't exist 50 years ago, and Wembanyama — who just

turned 21 — is putting up stats this season like nobody else in the history of basketball. Unprecedented numbers.

But what should thrill San Antonio fans and be on the radar of fans in every other NBA city: Wembanyama is his own biggest critic and has said he will get better.

"I'm not there yet," Wembanyama said. "I'm still working on it."

When he entered the league, the big question was about whether his slim frame would be overpowered by heavier NBA defenders. He knows still has to get stronger, but based on what he was listed at originally and where he is now — 209 to 235 — that's a 26-pound bulk-up already.

SEE SHINING ON PAGE 22

Oilers rally past Kraken, win third straight » **NHL, Page 20**

