

Omicron surges across US, increasing fears

Associated Press

BOSTON — The nation's second-largest city called off its New Year's Eve celebration Monday, and its smallest state re-imposed an indoor mask mandate as the omicron variant leaped ahead of other variants to become the dominant version of the coronavirus in the United States.

The moves in Los Angeles and Rhode Island reflected widening fears of a potentially devastating winter COVID-19 surge. Much of the concern is being driven by omicron, which federal health officials announced accounted for 73% of new infections last week, a nearly sixfold increase in only seven days.

Omicron's prevalence is even higher in some parts of the U.S. It's responsible for an estimated 90% of new infections in the New York area, the Southeast, the industrial Midwest and the Pacific Northwest, federal officials said.

The announcement underscored the variant's remarkable ability to race across oceans and continents. It was

first reported in southern Africa less than a month ago.

Scientists have said omicron spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta, though many details about it remain unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. But even if it is milder, the new variant could still overwhelm health systems because of the sheer number of infections.

Organizers of the New Year's Eve party planned for Grand Park in downtown LA nixed plans for an in-person audience, saying the event will be livestreamed instead, as it was last year. In Rhode Island, which has the most new cases per capita over the last two weeks, masks or proof of vaccination will be required in most indoor establishments for at least the next 30 days.

And in Boston, the city's new Democratic mayor announced to howls of protests that anyone entering a restaurant, bar or other indoor business will need to show proof of vaccination, starting next month. City employees will also be re-

quired to get vaccinated.

"There is nothing more American than coming together to ensure that we're taking care of each other," Mayor Michelle Wu said at City Hall as protesters loudly blew whistles and shouted "Shame on Wu."

Erika Rusley, 44, a Providence, R.I., resident, said recent events prompted her family to pump the brakes on everyday activities.

The elementary school teacher and her physician husband pulled their two young daughters from swim lessons this week, limited their play dates and canceled medical appointments, even though the whole family is fully vaccinated.

"The past week or so we've really just shut things down. It's just not worth it," Rusley said. "We're back to where we were pre-summer, pre-vaccine. It's square one, almost."

In New York City, where a spike in infections is already scuttling Broadway shows and causing long lines at testing centers, Mayor Bill de Blasio is expected to decide this week

whether the city's famous New Year's Eve bash in Times Square will come back "full strength" as he promised in November.

President Joe Biden planned to address the nation on the latest variant on Tuesday, less than a year after he suggested that the country would essentially be back to normal by Christmas.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said that the president would issue a "stark warning" and make clear that unvaccinated individuals "will continue to drive hospitalizations and deaths," she said.

U.S. vaccine maker Moderna announced Monday that lab tests suggested that a booster dose of its vaccine should offer protection against omicron.

Similar testing by Pfizer on its vaccine also found that a booster triggered a big jump in omicron-fighting antibodies.

The country is averaging nearly 130,500 new COVID-19 cases a day, up from about 122,000 a day two weeks ago, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

Navy SEALs fight mandate in Fort Worth federal court

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

FORT WORTH — Two Navy SEALs and a Navy explosive ordnance disposal technician testified Monday that they have been refused to be granted religious exemptions for the COVID-19 vaccine mandate imposed by the Biden administration and the Department of Defense.

The three enlisted service members told U.S. District Judge Reed O'Connor they have suffered consequences for seek-

ing the exemptions.

Their testimony came Monday morning in a Fort Worth federal courtroom as 35 U.S. Navy SEALs and other Naval special warfare personnel filed a lawsuit last month for a preliminary injunction against the policy.

O'Connor did not make a ruling Monday following the almost four-hour hearing on the lawsuit.

"The plaintiffs need relief," said Heather Hacker, one of the attorneys representing the ser-

vice members, in closing statements Monday morning. "This mandate takes their ability to be Navy SEALs."

The three enlisted service members testified Monday that they have been reassigned positions in the Navy as consequences for seeking the exemptions.

The enlisted service members object to the vaccine mandate based on their religious beliefs as the plaintiffs are members of various denominations.

The lawsuit states the service

members are unable to receive any of the vaccines due to what they believe and understand is a connection between the vaccines and their testing, development or production using aborted fetal cell lines.

The lawsuit noted that military officials have the discretion in granting religious accommodations, but in the past seven years, no religious exemptions from vaccination waivers had been approved for any other vaccine.

DOD guidance on extremism focused on acts

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Service members who overtly support extremist groups or ideas, attempt to recruit others into such ideology, or train, organize or demonstrate in support of an extremist view are to face punishment under new guidance published by the Pentagon on Monday.

The guidance leaves entirely to commanders decisions about punishments for those found to be “actively participating” in extremist activity. Commanders may charge violators criminally, dole out a lesser administrative punishment or simply counsel them on what they did wrong, the guidance states.

Earlier this year, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin instructed the Pentagon to better define extremism, as the Pentagon worked to understand how rampant such

ideologies were in the wake of the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol by some supporters of then-President Donald Trump. Those involved included some members of the armed forces and dozens of veterans.

“The overwhelming majority of the men and women of the Department of Defense serve this country with honor and integrity,” Austin wrote in a memorandum dated Monday, which was released alongside the updated rules on extremism and a new report on extremist activity in DOD. “We believe only a very few violate [their] oath by participating in extremist activities, but even the actions of a few can have an outsized impact on unit cohesion, morale and readiness — and the physical harm some of these activities can engender can undermine the safety of our people.”

The Countering Extremist Ac-

tivity Working Group that Austin stood up in April found fewer than 100 service members had likely “participated in some prohibited extremist activities” in the last year, John Kirby, the Pentagon’s top spokesman, told reporters Monday.

Some activity barred by the new rules may be simpler to root out than others, he acknowledged. For example, the rules ban service members from sporting clothing, tattoos or other paraphernalia promoting extremism, financially supporting an extremist cause or distributing extremist literature or materials.

However, service members could also be punished for their online actions, including posting, sharing or “liking” materials that “promote or otherwise endorse extremist activities” on the internet.

That is where a commander’s

discretion will be most important, Kirby said, noting that a service member, perhaps, could “like” a social media post by accident.

In a six-part definition, the new Pentagon guidance labels extremist activity as any advocating or committing violence against the United States or its people, including plotting for or supporting the overthrow of the government or terrorism against the nation. It also labels any advocacy for “widespread unlawful discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy), gender identity, or sexual orientation” as extremist activity.

The guidance does not include specific examples of extremist groups or organizations nor does it ban personnel from any specific groups. The guidance, Kirby said, is based solely on actual acts and not membership in a group.

Navy begins flush of military water system in Hawaii

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Nearly 4,000 residents of military housing for Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam are facing the holidays in hotels or in homes without potable water as the Navy flushes contaminated water lines, a job that may stretch into late January.

The Navy planned to start flushing water lines at the Pearl City Peninsula military housing neighborhood on Monday, the first of 17 system purges in military communities, according to a news release Sunday from the joint base. The Pearl City flush was expected to take one day.

Individual homes at Pearl City will also be flushed between Monday and Jan. 4, according to a plan to purge the contaminated water system announced Friday. Pearl City is first to be flushed due to its

proximity to the Waiawa well, the Navy’s source of drinking water after two other wells were shut down Nov. 28 and Dec. 3.

The last communities, McGrew Point and Halawa, may be completed Jan. 20, according to a Sunday update of the base’s plan to flush the water system.

Residents of military housing complained in late November of an odor and oily sheen in their tap water. Tests confirmed the presence of petroleum products in the base water supply, and the Navy tracked the contamination to a Nov. 20 jet fuel spill at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility.

By Friday, more than 1,600 individuals had moved temporarily to hotels, while nearly 2,200 people are staying home without clean water, according to a fact-sheet on the water emergency compiled by the base.

Another Okinawa worker tests positive for omicron as Marines’ cluster grows

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa—A third employee at Camp Hansen, a Marine Corps base on Okinawa, tested positive for the omicron variant of the coronavirus as new cases on the installation approached 200 since Friday.

The worker, a resident of Uruma city in her 40s, was a close contact of the first positive case, though the genetic code of the virus infecting her differed from the first patient, Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki said at a press conference in Naha on Monday night.

The number of new COVID-19 cases at Camp Hansen has risen to “about 200,” up 20 from the pre-

vious day, Japan’s Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Seiji Kihara told reporters in Tokyo on Tuesday morning. Kihara said the Japanese government understands the concerns of Okinawans.

“U.S. Forces Japan is taking stricter measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19,” he said. “Considering the possibility of omicron variant cases, they are testing actively, tracing the close contacts, and isolating those who might be infected.”

A cluster of new cases emerged among newly arrived Marines in a rotational unit, according to Marine Corps Installations Pacific on Friday. The installations command on Friday said the infected Marines had no contact with the population outside the base.

Putin pushes demands on NATO moves

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday reiterated his demand for guarantees from the U.S. and its allies that NATO will not expand eastward, blaming the West for “tensions that are building up in Europe.”

Putin’s speech at a meeting with Russia’s top military brass came just days after Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance’s military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The demands — contained in a proposed Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between Moscow and NATO — were drafted amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion. Russia has denied it has plans to attack its neighbor but pressed for legal guarantees that would rule out NATO expansion and weapons deployment there.

Putin charged Tuesday that if U.S. and NA-

TO missile systems appear in Ukraine, it will take those missiles only minutes to reach Moscow.

“For us, it is the most serious challenge — a challenge to our security,” he said, adding that this is why the Kremlin needs “long-term, legally binding guarantees” from the West, as opposed to “verbal assurances, words and promises” that Moscow can’t trust.

Putin noted that NATO has expanded eastward since the late 1990s while giving assurances that Russia’s worries were groundless.

“What is happening now, tensions that are building up in Europe, is their (U.S. and NATO’s) fault every step of the way,” the Russian leader said. “Russia has been forced to respond at every step. The situation kept worsening and worsening, deteriorating and deteriorating. And here we are today, in a situation when we’re forced to resolve it somehow.”

Russia’s relations with the U.S. sank to post-Cold War lows after it annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 and backed a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine that still controls territory there. Tensions reignited

in recent weeks after Moscow massed tens of thousands of troops near Ukraine’s border.

Putin has pressed the West for guarantees that NATO will not expand to Ukraine or deploy its forces there and raised the issue during a video call with U.S. President Joe Biden two weeks ago. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu charged Tuesday that more than 120 staff of U.S. private military companies are currently operating in two villages in war-torn eastern Ukraine, training Ukrainian troops and setting up firing positions in residential buildings and different facilities.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried, the top U.S. diplomat for Europe, said at a briefing Tuesday that Washington is “prepared to discuss those proposals that Russia put on the table.”

“There are some things we’re prepared to work on, and we do believe there is merit in having discussion,” Donfried told reporters after a visit to Kyiv, Moscow and Brussels.

“There are other things in those documents that the Russians know will be unacceptable,” she added, without specifying which ones.

Biden boosts vehicle fuel-economy standards to fight climate change

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a major step to fight climate change, the Biden administration is raising vehicle mileage standards to significantly reduce emissions of planet-warming greenhouse gases, reversing a Trump-era rollback that loosened fuel efficiency standards.

A final rule issued Monday would raise mileage standards starting in the 2023 model year, reaching a projected industry-wide target of 40 miles per gallon by 2026. The new standard is 25% higher than a rule finalized by the Trump administration last year and 5% higher than a proposal by the Environmental Protection Agency in August.

“We are setting robust and rigorous standards that will aggressively reduce the pollution that is harming people and our planet — and save families money at the same time,” EPA Administrator Michael Regan said. He called the rule “a giant step forward” in delivering on President Joe Biden’s agenda.

The move comes a day after Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin delivered a potentially fatal blow to Biden’s \$2 trillion social and environmental policy bill, jeopardizing Democrats’

agenda and infuriating the White House. The West Virginia senator said he would not support the sweeping bill, which includes a host of climate proposals, saying it was too expensive and could spark inflation and expand the growing federal debt. The now-stalled bill includes a \$7,500 tax credit to buyers to lower the cost of electric vehicles.

The administration will continue to fight for the EV tax credits and other incentives in the Build Back Better bill, Regan said, but even without them, “we believe that we proposed a rule that is doable, it’s affordable, it’s achievable, and we’re excited about it.”

The new mileage rules are the most ambitious tailpipe pollution standards ever set for passenger cars and light trucks. The standards raise mileage goals set by the Trump administration that would achieve only 32 miles per gallon in 2026. Biden had set a goal of 38 miles per gallon in August. The standards will also help expand the market share of zero emissions vehicles, the administration said, with a goal of battery electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles reaching 17% of new vehicles sold in 2026. EVs and plug-in hybrids are expected to have about 7% market share in 2023.

Navy relieves Ohio Reserve center leader

BY FRANK ANDREWS

Stars and Stripes

The officer in charge of the Navy Reserve Center in Toledo, Ohio, was relieved of command Monday due to a loss of confidence in her ability to perform her duties, according to a statement from Navy Reserve Forces.

Cmdr. Jennifer Reid was relieved by Capt. Billy Franklin, the commander of the Navy Region Mid-Atlantic Reserve Component Command Great Lakes. A spokesman for the Navy Reserve Forces did not respond to an email from Stars and Stripes seeking further comment after business hours Monday in Ohio.

Cmdr. Lee Ann Singleton was assigned to replace Reid until a permanent replacement is identified, according to the statement. Reid will be reassigned within the Great Lakes command.

Navy Reserve Centers, formerly known as Navy Operational Support Centers, ensure Reserve sailors are ready to deploy at a moment’s notice.

Dems try to 'build back' after bill tanked

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats are struggling to pick up the pieces after Sen. Joe Manchin effectively crushed President Joe Biden's big domestic policy bill. But they face serious questions whether the \$2 trillion initiative can be refashioned to win his crucial vote or if the party will be saddled with a devastating defeat.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer vowed on Monday that the chamber would vote early in the new year on Biden's "Build Back Better Act" as it now stands so every senator "has the opportunity to make their position known on the Senate floor, not just on television." That was a biting reference to Manchin's sudden TV announcement against the bill on Sun-

day.

Biden and Manchin spoke later Sunday, according to a person familiar with the call, first reported by Politico. It was cordial and respectful, said the person who spoke only on condition of anonymity.

But the conservative West Virginia Democrat and his party are so far apart, his relationships so bruised after months of failed talks, it's unclear how they even get back to the negotiating table, let alone revive the sprawling more than 2,100-page social services and climate change bill.

"We're going to work like hell to get it done," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki, repeating the phrase several times at a briefing but never saying how.

The setback throws Biden's signature legislative effort into deep doubt at a critical time, closing out the end of the president's first year and ahead of congressional midterm elections when the Democrats' slim hold on Congress is at risk.

Coupled with solid Republican opposition, Manchin's vote is vital in the 50-50 split Senate on this and other initiatives, including the Democrats' priority voting rights legislation that Schumer also promised would come to an early vote.

From the White House, Psaki struck a more conciliatory tone than her weekend hardball reaction to Manchin, saying Biden is a "longtime friend" of the senator and the president is focused on moving forward.

Vice President Kamala Har-

ris told CBS News "the stakes are too high" for this to be about "any specific individual." She said, "This is about let's get the job done."

In a radio interview Monday, Manchin reiterated his position that the social and environment bill has far too much government spending — on child care, health care and other programs — without enough restrictions on incomes or work requirements.

But the lifelong Democrat was less clear when asked if the party still has room for him — describing himself as "fiscally responsible and socially compassionate."

Manchin said: "Now, if there's no Democrats like that, then they have to push me wherever they want."

Bill grants memorial for war on terrorism

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A new Global War on Terrorism Memorial would get a sought-after location on the National Mall under a measure included in the annual defense bill that President Joe Biden is expected to sign.

Organizers behind the effort have been working for about seven years to establish a national memorial that would honor service members who fought in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as their families.

They're adamant about giving the memorial a place of prominence on the National Mall, but roadblocks in Congress the last two years almost jeopardized those plans.

Now, a measure included in the National Defense Authorization Act would clear the way.

"People will be able to come

reflect, mourn and understand the sacrifice of our men and women over the last 20 years," said Rep. Jason Crow, D-Colo., one of the sponsors of the measure.

In addition to Crow, the measure was led by Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis.; Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa; and Sen. Maggie Hassan, D-N.H. It would exempt the Global War on Terrorism Memorial from a 2003 law that prohibits any more development in a section of the National Mall described as the "reserve."

The reserve encompasses the central area of the National Mall, from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and from the White House to the Jefferson Memorial, as well as from the Tidal Basin to the Potomac River.

Congress acted in 2003 to prevent any more development in the area out of concerns over a loss of open space on the mall.

Iran's Guard fires 5 cruise missiles in military exercise

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard on Tuesday fired cruise missiles during a major military exercise across the country's south, media reported.

The semiofficial Tasnim news agency, believed to be close to the Guard, did not specify the type and range of the missiles. But it said five cruise missiles and an unspecified number of attack drones successfully hit their targets.

Later, state TV showed the launch of the missiles, flight of drones and a ship that was exploded after frogmen planted mines on it.

The Guard's navy chief, Gen. Ali Reza Tangsiri told state TV that his forces managed a coordinated war game across the coasts of Iran, from near the borders of Iraq to the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow gateway for 20% of the world's traded oil.

He said the drill has a message of "security, peace and friendship" to the regional nations.

The Guard in the past has said it has cruise missiles with ranges of 620 miles. It also has missiles that range up to 1,250 miles, more than enough to reach archenemy Israel and U.S. military bases in the region.

The five-day annual exercise that began on Monday came days after the breakup of talks to revive Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers. Iran has accelerated its nuclear advances as negotiations to return to the accord struggle to make headway.

In 2018, former President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the nuclear deal and re-imposed crushing sanctions on Iran. Tehran has since started enriching uranium up to 60% purity — a short technical step from the 90% needed to make an atomic bomb.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man with Santa hat and beard robs credit union

MO BRIDGETON — A man with a Santa hat and a white beard robbed a credit union in a St. Louis suburb.

Court documents said a 58-year-old man stole \$1,000 from the First Community Credit Union in Bridgeton while threatening to blow up the building. He was arrested with the cash later, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

A spokesman for the St. Louis County prosecutor's office said the man has been charged with first-degree robbery and making a terrorist threat. He was being held in lieu of a \$100,000 cash bond.

Distracted driver caused deadly crash with bus

SC BELTON— The driver of an SUV in South Carolina was distracted by her cellphone when she crossed the center line of a South Carolina highway and crashed into a bus carrying people with disabilities and special needs, causing two deaths, the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board has found.

The SUV driver “was distracted by the actions of talking, placing and receiving calls on her cellphone while driving,” according to a report from the board.

The phone use caused the driver to cross into the opposite lane and hit the medium-sized bus with a driver and seven passengers in it. The SUV driver, who was not wearing a seat belt, was ejected and died.

One bus passenger died, and

other occupants of the bus sustained minor to serious injuries, according to the agency.

Drawing bought for \$30 believed to be rare work

MA CONCORD — A drawing purchased at an estate sale in Massachusetts for \$30 is believed to be a rare work by a Renaissance artist worth tens of millions of dollars.

International art experts said the previously unknown drawing by Albrecht Dürer could be one of the most significant art discoveries in recent memory, The Boston Globe reported.

The pen-and-ink drawing is about the size of a children's book and depicts a seated Mary holding the newborn Jesus. Titled “The Virgin and Child with a Flower on a grassy Bench,” it was last sold around 2016 in Concord, a Boston suburb.

Christof Metzger, chief curator at the Albertina Museum in Vienna, which houses a trove of Dürer's works, told the Globe he has “absolutely no doubt” it is an original work from the German master dating to the early 1500s. But Fritz Koreny, a former Albertina curator, suggests it likely the work of the artist's star pupil, Hans Baldung Grien.

State offers new autism designator for licenses

LA BATON ROUGE — People with autism can now get that designation added to their Louisiana driver's license.

Customers can request to have an “autism” indicator added to their licenses if they have documentation to prove that a quali-

fied medical or mental health professional has diagnosed them with autism, the Louisiana Office of Motor Vehicles said.

The autism indicator will appear under the license photo and can also be displayed through the LA Wallet app.

But those who get a driver's license with an autism designation cannot also seek to add the “veteran” or “I'm a Cajun indicators,” according to the motor vehicles agency. The autism designation can only be combined with the “needs accommodation” indicator.

Vintage subway cars getting last rides

NY NEW YORK — A class of vintage subway cars is being retired from the New York subway system, after one last hurrah.

The cars, nicknamed the Brightliners, date back to the mid-1960s and were the first large fleet of mass-produced stainless-steel cars purchased by the MTA. They're also the last class of subway cars with a front window passengers can look out, and they have been seen in numerous movies including “Spider-Man: Homecoming” and “Joker.”

Many were taken out of service beginning in the late 2000s, and most were sunk in the Atlantic Ocean as part of an artificial reef program, according to the MTA.

Agents find men who dug up sea turtle nests

SC FOLLY BEACH — Three young men on vacation at a South Carolina beach dug up a marked logger-

head turtle nest causing 71 of the 90 eggs not to hatch, wildlife officials said.

The men posted video of themselves digging up a nest marked with orange tape and signs on Folly Beach to Snapchat in September, and the Department of Natural Resources said agents were able to track them down.

The three men, all under age 21, met with wildlife agents and admitted what they did. In exchange, the agency said it won't charge them with a count of unlawful taking of loggerhead turtle eggs for each egg, instead agreeing to two counts for each man who was seen digging up the nest and one count for the person who filmed it.

The men will face a fine of up to \$2,000 on each charge and community service, the agency said in a statement.

Dog warns family of carbon monoxide leak

IA ANKENY — Roxy the dog is more than a beloved family pet — she's a life-saver.

WHO-TV reported that an Ankeny, Iowa, family is crediting Roxy with alerting them when the odorless gas carbon monoxide leaked into their home.

Brad Harbert said Roxy is normally mild-mannered, but last Monday night she was unusually active, jumping up and down on the bed. Harbert then heard the home's carbon monoxide detector go off. He jumped out of bed, gathered his son, father and the dog and left the home.

An investigation found that the leak came from the home's electric and gas fireplace.

— From wire reports



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NFL could show way with COVID policy

Associated Press

The NFL's decision to reduce COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic, vaccinated players could signal a trend for pro sports leagues and provide an example for society to follow heading into 2022.

Despite a rising number of positive cases that forced three games to be rescheduled over the weekend, the NFL, in cooperation with the players' union, agreed Saturday to scale back testing for vaccinated players. The move aligns with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC recommends "diagnostic testing" only for symptomatic or close-contact vaccinated people, and "screening tests" only for unvaccinated people.

The NFL previously required vaccinated players to get tested weekly before

amending the protocols. The NFLPA had advocated for daily testing for vaccinated players but eventually agreed to "target" testing.

The NBA didn't require vaccinated players to get tested during the season but revised its policy to increase testing for a two-week period starting Dec. 26.

The NHL tested players every third day but returned to daily testing through at least Jan. 7.

"I think the NFL is actually going to be a really interesting and I think really safe real-world experiment on what our new normal is likely going to look like," Dr. Vin Gupta, a pulmonologist and professor at the University of Washington, said in an interview with the AP. "And, it's safe to say that the NFL is obviously a large vaccine

bubble, sans a few high-profile exceptions.

"We can't continue the status quo, ad infinitum, where we are testing regularly people that are otherwise healthy, asymptomatic, triple-vaccinated, just to detect the asymptomatic individual who might be positive ... because then you're going to quarantine that individual who might be asymptomatic or having mild symptoms, who is triple-vaccinated, who might for a small period of time, be infectious to others who presumably are also vaccinated."

Almost 95% of NFL players and nearly all coaching staffs are vaccinated.

Gupta, an informal consultant for the Seattle Seahawks on COVID-19 issues and an adviser for baseball's Seattle Mariners, says the NFL is "ahead of the curve" with target and voluntary testing.

NHL shuts down early for holidays

Associated Press

The NHL is beginning a leaguewide shutdown Wednesday amid a rise in positive COVID-19 test results among players, and with 10 of the league's 32 teams' schedules already paused and their facilities closed.

The league announced Monday night that it will open its annual holiday break two days earlier than scheduled and have it run through Saturday. The decision, reached in coordination with the NHL Players' Association, means five additional games scheduled for Thursday will be postponed, bringing the total this season to 49.

Two games slated for Tuesday are still set to go on as scheduled. Teams will then report back for COVID-19 testing and practice on Sunday, a day before games are set to resume. Players and members of each team's traveling party will be required to test negative before being allowed back in their respective facilities.

The decision to begin the break early comes a day after the NHL and NHLPA issued a joint statement announcing they were attempting to avoid a leaguewide shutdown by making decisions on a team-by-team basis. The holiday break was previously supposed to run from Friday to Sunday.

Of the 49 games postponed, 44 have occurred over the past two weeks with the delta and omicron variants spreading across North America.

More than 15% of the league's 700-plus

players are in virus protocol, and the resulting schedule disruption almost certainly has doomed the possibility of Olympic participation. A final decision on the Beijing Games is expected this week, and the odds of NHL players returning to the Olympics for the first time since 2014 have cratered.

The Columbus Blue Jackets, Montreal Canadiens, Edmonton Oilers and Ottawa Senators on Monday became the latest teams to pause all activities because of positive COVID-19 tests. The Boston Bruins, Colorado Avalanche, Detroit Red Wings, Florida Panthers, Nashville Predators and Toronto Maple Leafs also have their facilities closed, and the Calgary Flames just reopened theirs to players, coaches and staff not in protocol.

The U.S. and Canadian women's hockey teams were set to play a pre-Olympic game Monday night in St. Paul, Minn., but that was canceled because of COVID-19 concerns.

Much about the omicron coronavirus variant remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Scientists say omicron spreads easier than other coronavirus strains, including delta, and it is expected to become dominant in the U.S. by early next year. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a booster shot for the best chance at preventing an omicron infection but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

Stars use early goals to top Wild

Associated Press

DALLAS — Joe Pavelski and Esa Lindell scored on the first two Dallas shots on goal, and the Stars never trailed in defeating the Minnesota Wild 7-4 on Monday night.

Pavelski put in a backhand 1:31 into the game. Lindell scored short-handed and unassisted with a shot between Cam Talbot's legs 1:53 later after Lindell intercepted Talbot's pass intended to move the Minnesota offense out of the defensive zone.

"I was a bit surprised he actually passed it," Lindell said, "because I wasn't that far from the guy that was on the blue line. I saw a chance to jump there. I like shooting 5-hole."

"That goal gets the whole team going, the crowd."

Talbot took responsibility for the early deficit.

"First two shots of the game go in, that's not a recipe for success. I gave away that one on the power play, thought I could catch a few of their guys changing."

Dallas' season-high seven goals came from seven different players as the Stars improved to 11-1-0 in the last 12 home games.

Miro Heiskanen had a goal and an assist for Dallas, and Tyler Seguin, Roope Hintz, Jacob Peterson and Jamie Benn also scored. Jason Robertson and Denis Gurianov each had two assists and Jake Oettinger stopped 19 shots.

Raiders' FG tops COVID-ravaged Browns

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — The Raiders didn't appreciate the NFL postponing their trip. They made sure their postseason chances weren't canceled as well.

Daniel Carlson's 48-yard field goal as time expired sent Las Vegas to a 16-14 win on Monday night over the COVID-19-depleted Cleveland Browns in a game pushed back two days by the NFL amid an uptick of virus cases across the league.

Down by a point, quarterback Derek Carr patiently drove the Raiders (7-7) into Cleveland territory in the final two minutes.

Then Carlson shrugged off being iced by the Browns to boot his winner, keeping Las Vegas in the playoff mix. The Raiders had been upset with the league's decision to delay the game from Saturday until Monday, with owner Mark Davis saying the delay was a "competitive disadvantage" for his team.

That all seemed to be forgotten as Las Vegas danced off its sideline when Carlson's kick went through at the Dawg Pound end of FirstEnergy Stadium.

"It's been a long time coming to win a game like that in the end," said Raiders interim coach Rich Bisaccia, who has led the team through a turbulent season. "We understand the situation we're in and what the playoff race looks like."

The loss was devastating for Cleveland

(7-7), who would have vaulted into first place in the AFC North with a win. Instead, it fell into last place in the tightly packed division with three games remaining.

Due to a virus outbreak, the Browns were without quarterback Baker Mayfield, coach Kevin Stefanski and several other prominent players, including top receiver Jarvis Landry and edge rusher Jadeveon Clowney.

Cleveland third-string quarterback Nick Mullens had brought the Browns back from a 10-0 deficit in the third quarter and given them a 14-13 lead by throwing a 6-yard touchdown pass on fourth down to Harrison Bryant with 3:45 left.

And after Greedy Williams intercepted Carr, it appeared Cleveland was on its way to taking its roller-coaster season to new heights. But the Browns couldn't come up with a first down and gave the ball back to Carr with 1:50 left.

"After that interception, I told the guys 'Please, I promise we'll win it, just get the ball back,'" Carr said.

He then led a 51-yard drive, completing two long passes to Zay Jones to set up Carlson's kick that kicked new life into a team that has dealt with adversity and drama all season, including the resignation of coach Jon Gruden in October.

Carr understood why his teammates were so upset with the league's decision to

move the game.

"I wanted to play because I have a routine," Carr said. "But life's going to throw us curveballs. Whether I agree or don't, it doesn't matter."

Cleveland was ravaged by positive COVID-19 cases last week. Despite the league postponing the game for two days, an asymptomatic Mayfield was unable to produce a negative test in time to play. The Browns were without a dozen regulars.

Cleveland was also without Stefanski, forced to miss his second big game in less than a year after he tested positive.

"That locker room right now is hurting," said acting Browns coach Mike Priefer. "That's the most I've seen it in that kind of pain. You're upset when you lose. Obviously you're joyous when you win. But when you lose that type of game, that was tough."

"They're pretty down right now."

Nick Chubb's 4-yard TD run came shortly after the Browns got a turnover they desperately needed. They jarred the ball loose from Carr, who fumbled near midfield and appeared to injure his leg while being taken down by Sheldon Day and others.

Carr was checked by trainers before limping to the sideline. He came back for the Raiders' next possession and finished 25-for-38 for 236 yards and a touchdown to Bryan Edwards.

Cousins, Vikings top short-handed Bears

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Minnesota Vikings have little margin for error and plenty of room to improve as they try to secure a playoff spot.

Not that Kirk Cousins needed a reminder. Or, for that matter, coach Mike Zimmer.

Cousins threw two touchdown passes, and Minnesota beat the struggling and short-handed Chicago Bears 17-9 on Monday night.

The Vikings (7-7), part of a tight pack of teams vying for one of the NFC's seven playoff spots, were in line for their most lopsided win before Justin Fields threw a touchdown pass to Jesper Horsted on the game's final play.

That score aside, Minnesota withstood several scoring threats by Chicago down the stretch coming off a win over Pittsburgh in which the Vikings nearly blew a 29-0 lead.

"I think we have work," Cousins said. "I think there is a lot to improve upon. We're playing three really good opponents up ahead. We're probably going to need everyone, so there is not a lot of room for error and we have to tighten the screws here and play our best football down the stretch."

Minnesota's final three games are at home against the Los Angeles Rams and at NFC North champion Green Bay before it hosts Chicago in the finale. The result in this one was hardly a

surprise given the state of the Bears (4-10).

Chicago lost for the eighth time in nine games, and with 14 players on the reserve/COVID-19 list, that seemed inevitable. Receiver Allen Robinson was on it, as was the starting secondary.

The health issues also hit the coaching staff, with all three coordinators testing positive for the coronavirus during the week. Defensive coordinator Sean Desai was cleared to return hours before kickoff. Offensive coordinator Bill Lazor was not cleared, so Matt Nagy called plays.

Cousins, who struggled last week, didn't exactly dominate in this one. He was 12 of 24 for 87 yards with an interception and

got sacked four times. The two-time Pro Bowler also connected with Justin Jefferson for a 12-yard touchdown in the first quarter and threw a 7-yarder to Iahmir Smith-Marsette in the third.

Dalvin Cook ran for 89 yards, after going for 205 against Pittsburgh in a sooner-than-expected return from a dislocated shoulder.

D.J. Wonnum had a career-high three sacks and the Vikings recovered three fumbles on the way to their second straight win after back-to-back losses.

"It's not just playing better, it's getting better," Zimmer said. "It's getting better in the run defense, getting better in the pass coverage, it's getting better in protection."

Embiid powers 76ers past Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — Joel Embiid scored 17 of his 41 points in the fourth quarter, hitting three jumpers in the final minutes and three free throws in the last four seconds to ice it as the Philadelphia 76ers beat the Boston Celtics 108-103 on Monday night.

With both teams fighting COVID-19 outbreaks, Embiid also had 10 rebounds and a steal on the Celtics' last-chance inbound pass while playing 40 minutes, 14 seconds — a season high for a game that didn't go to overtime.

Seth Curry scored 26 points and Tobias Harris had 25 for the 76ers.

Jaylen Brown scored 30 points, Jayson Tatum had 17 and Enes Kanter Freedom had 15 points and 11 rebounds for Boston, which had seven players in COVID-19 protocol, with Robert Williams III a late scratch for personal reasons.

Warriors 113, Kings 98: Stephen Curry scored 30 points as host Golden State held off Sacramento in a matchup of short-handed rivals.

Draymond Green notched his franchise-leading 31st career triple-double and first this season with 16 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists.

Tyrese Haliburton had 24 points and 11 assists to lead the Kings, who were down six players plus interim head coach Alvin Gentry. Assistant Doug Christie stepped in as

acting coach.

Thunder 102, Grizzlies 99: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 23 points, Josh Giddey added 19 points and 11 assists, and visiting Oklahoma City beat Ja Morant and Memphis.

Morant returned from injury and the league's COVID-19 protocols after a 12-game absence and finished with 16 points. Desmond Bane led the Grizzlies with 25 points and Dillon Brooks scored 19.

The Thunder overcame an 89-84 deficit in the final 4:36 and took the lead for good at 96-95 on Giddey's layup with 50 seconds remaining.

The last time these teams met, Memphis set an NBA record for margin of victory in a 152-79 thrashing.

Bulls 133, Rockets 118: DeMar DeRozan scored 26 points and host Chicago beat Houston.

DeRozan, who scored 38 points in Sunday's win over the Lakers after missing three games due to the NBA's COVID-19 protocols, received help from five teammates who scored in double figures.

The Bulls never trailed and led by 25 points during the first half. They have won two consecutive games and six of their last eight.

Christian Wood had 23 points and 11 rebounds, but the Rockets lost for the fifth time in seven games. Jae'Sean Tate added

16 points.

Jazz 112, Hornets 102: Rudy Gobert had 23 points and 21 rebounds to lead host Utah over Charlotte.

Bojan Bogdanovic added 23 points for the Jazz, who blew a 22-point lead but finished strong to snap a two-game home losing streak. Donovan Mitchell chipped in 21.

LaMelo Ball led Charlotte with 21 points and 11 assists before fouling out in the final minute. Miles Bridges added 21 points and 10 rebounds.

Terry Rozier chipped in 20 points but the Hornets could not fully overcome another dismal start and dropped their third straight on the road.

Spurs 116, Clippers 92: Dejounte Murray delivered his third triple-double in five games with 24 points, 12 rebounds and 13 assists, and San Antonio won at Los Angeles.

Jakob Poeltl added 17 points and 11 rebounds, while Doug McDermott scored 16 points as the Spurs improved to 2-1 on their four-game road trip. Murray also had a triple-double in a victory Friday at Utah and now has six triple-doubles on the season.

Paul George had 25 points for the Clippers after missing the previous five games with a sprained right elbow. Ivica Zubac added 12 points and 12 rebounds for Los Angeles, while Terance Mann had 11 points as Los Angeles lost for the third consecutive time.

Top-ranked Baylor cruises to win over Alcorn State

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — If top-ranked Baylor had any ill effects from a quick turnaround, it didn't show.

The Bears were back in action on their home floor Monday night against Alcorn State, less than 48 hours after a road game at Oregon on Saturday.

Kendall Brown, Jonathan Tchamwa Tchatchoua and Flo Thamba scored 16 points apiece to lead five players in double figures, and No. 1 Baylor romped to a 94-57 victory against the overmatched Braves.

"In the first half, we wanted to be more aggressive and gamble because we felt like

they were trying to shorten the game," Bears coach Scott Drew said. "We were able to get separation. There was a short turnaround coming from Oregon, and I thought they did a great job handling it."

Baylor (11-0) took a 10-point lead on a three-pointer by James Akinjo with 14:31 left in the first half and never led by less than 10 after Akinjo's layup made it 22-11 at the 11:58 mark.

Dominic Brewton led Alcorn State (1-10) with 19 points and Darrious Agnew added 12. The Braves lost their fifth straight and have yet to play a home game this season.

No. 3 Purdue 79, Incarnate

Word 59: Zach Edey and Trevion Williams combined for 25 points and 17 rebounds, helping host Purdue rout Incarnate Word.

The Boilermakers have won three straight since their only loss of the season — the last two victories coming by a total of 49 points. Edey had 13 points and nine rebounds, Williams added 12 and eight, and Jaden Ivey wound up with 12 points and five boards.

Benjamin Griscti made four three-pointers and finished with 14 points to lead the Cardinals (2-10).

No. 4 Gonzaga 95, Northern Arizona 49: Chet Holmgren had 20 points and nine

rebounds, Anton Watson scored 17 and the Bulldogs beat the Lumberjacks to extend the nation's longest home winning streak to 58 games.

Drew Timme added 14 points for Gonzaga (10-2), which was coming off a victory over No. 25 Texas Tech in Phoenix last weekend. The Bulldogs opened the season as the nation's top-ranked team.

Jalen Cone scored 19 points for Northern Arizona (4-8), which has lost six of seven. The Lumberjacks have never beaten a ranked opponent and were undone in this one by 32% shooting and 20 turnovers.

Gonzaga shot 55% and committed only five turnovers.