

Russia ups rhetoric on US missiles, Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia's Foreign Ministry warned Thursday that if the United States confirms reports that it plans to deliver sophisticated air defense missiles to Ukraine, it would be "another provocative move by the U.S." that could prompt a response from Moscow.

Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said in a weekly briefing Thursday that "the U.S. has effectively become a party" to the war in Ukraine, following reports that it will provide Kyiv with Patriot surface-to-air missiles, the most advanced the West has yet provided to help Ukraine's military repel Russian aerial attacks.

Zakharova added that growing amounts of U.S. military assistance, including the transfer of such sophisticated weapons, "would mean even broader in-

volvement of military personnel in the hostilities and could entail possible consequences." She did not specify what the consequences might be.

U.S. officials said Tuesday that Washington was poised to approve sending a Patriot missile battery to Ukraine, finally agreeing to an urgent request from Ukrainian leaders desperate for more robust weapons to shoot down incoming Russian missiles that have crippled much of the country's vital infrastructure. An official announcement is expected soon.

A Patriot battery can need as many as 90 troops to operate and maintain it, and for months the U.S. was reluctant to provide the complex system because sending forces into Ukraine to operate it is a nonstarter for the administration of President Joe Biden.

Yet concerns remain that

even without the presence of U.S. service members to train Ukrainians on how to use the system, deployment of the missiles could provoke Russia or risk that a fired projectile could end up hitting inside Russia, further escalating the conflict.

Even before reports emerged on the delivery of Patriot systems, Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of Russia's Security Council that is chaired by President Vladimir Putin, warned that if Patriots enter Ukraine "along with NATO personnel, they will immediately become a legitimate target for our armed forces."

Asked Wednesday whether the Kremlin backs that threat, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov answered yes, but added in a conference call with reporters that he would refrain from more detailed comment until the U.S. officially announces the

Patriot delivery to Ukraine.

Ukraine has so far been cautious in reacting to the reports. Hanna Maliar, Ukraine's deputy defense minister, told reporters in Kyiv on Thursday that the delivery of weaponry like Patriots remains "sensitive not only for Ukraine, but for our partners," and that only President Volodymyr Zelenskyy or Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov would make any official announcement on such an agreement.

White House and Pentagon leaders have said consistently that providing Ukraine with additional air defenses is a priority, and Patriot missiles have been under consideration for some time. Officials said that as the winter closed in and the Russian bombardment of civilian infrastructure escalated, that consideration took on increased priority.

White House aims to stifle bill ending support for Yemen war

The Washington Post

The White House has mobilized to derail a Senate resolution that would end U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, creating an unusual rift among Democratic allies and forcing the bill's sponsor to pull the bill before a scheduled vote earlier this week.

The legislation, led by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., would have ended some U.S. support for the Saudi-led war effort in Yemen, which has gone on for more than seven years. Forces from a Saudi-led coalition have bombed and killed hundreds of thousands of Yemeni civilians and blocked crucial ports, helping fuel a nationwide famine.

Similar resolutions passed the Senate in 2018 and 2019, during

the Trump administration, with support of all Democratic senators. In 2019, the measure won the support of both chambers of Congress, but not enough to override a veto by President Donald Trump. Now those efforts have been renewed. President Joe Biden's White House also opposes the measure, putting the president in the unusual position of standing against an effort to punish a Saudi regime that has been anything but friendly to him.

But Biden aides say the president is opposing the resolution for different reasons than Trump did. The current version of Sanders' measure differs from the previous versions, particularly in defining intelligence-sharing and support operations as "hostilities." That could have dire conse-

quences for U.S. operations globally, some congressional aides say, including in Ukraine.

"It really has made us nervous," said one senior Democratic aide, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. The changes "could have real ramifications for our support for Ukraine right now, or our support for Israel," the aide said. "This is the first time that the Congress is being asked to vote on defining hostility as intelligence-sharing, and it's dangerous."

The White House is concerned enough that it distributed talking points to senators ahead of a scheduled vote Tuesday night, arguing that the resolution would endanger a fragile pause in the hostilities between the Saudi-led

faction in Yemen and the country's Houthi rebels. The talking points acknowledged that senators might be reluctant to switch their positions after taking a forceful stance in favor of the resolution just three years ago.

"We know that it is a difficult decision to change a vote, but the circumstances are fundamentally different than they were in 2019, and a vote would undermine the possibility that we can finally bring an end to this war and the humanitarian suffering of the people of Yemen," the documents said.

Sanders, while nominally an independent, is allied with the Democratic Party, and he had expressed confidence in recent days that the measure would secure enough votes to pass.

Marine marksmen set sights on contest

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HANSEN, Okinawa — Staff Sgt. John Tetrault, an avionics technician, hasn't fired the Marine Corps' infantry rifle in seven years but he signed up anyway to compete in a showcase marksmanship competition on Okinawa.

Tetrault, 28, who works on F-35B Lightning II fighters at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, was one of 158 Marines from Japan and South Korea in the Far East Marksmanship Competition, a 10-day event that concluded Thursday.

"We don't get to shoot guns as much in the air wing as we would like to, so I wanted to come down here and get some training," he said just prior to running through a pistol event Tuesday.

The Far East contest is one of five around the world in which Marines test their skills each year with pistols and rifles, as individuals and in teams, in precision shooting and shooting on the move, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Bryan Hagan, the officer-in-charge of Hansen's marksmanship training center, told *Stars and Stripes* on Dec. 7.

Competing Marines may qualify for marksmanship badges and earn individual awards. The top 10% of shooters by score are invited to the Marine Corps Champion-

ships from March 28 to April 7 at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., Hagan said.

Tetrault, of Scandia, Minn., ranked early in the Far East competition as a sharpshooter, the middle of three tiers of Marine Corps shooting proficiency. After more than a week of instruction and daylong, complex shooting events, he reached the expert level, what the Corps considers its best shooters.

"Before I showed up, I just wanted to not be the bottom guy," he said. "I think now I'm hoping to finish overall in the top third."

Maj. Zachary Leuthardt, spokesman for Marine Corps Installations Pacific, provided a list of top scorers Thursday, but it did not include the winners' ranks or units.

In the rifle competition, Samuel Nelson and Alexis Santiago were one and two, respectively, and scored gold medals.

Nelson finished with an overall average score of 92.4%, while Santiago finished with 89.1%.

Nelson also topped the field in pistol shooting with a 100% top score. Austin Hill and Kenneth Swarts also won gold medals with scores of 89.5% and 87.7% scores, respectively.

The individual portion of Tuesday's competition was spread over four Hansen ranges, said Marine Corps Shooting Team assis-

tant officer-in-charge 1st Lt. John Bodzioch, who oversaw the event.

During the most complex pistol event, Tetrault leaned left around one barrier and with his SIG Sauer M18 pistol shot a silhouette target in the head, avoiding the simulated body armor.

He then rushed to an open corridor and fired on several more targets, some in body armor, at varied distances. He concluded the event by leaning around another wall, this time to his right, to hit another stationary target.

The event lasted about 10 seconds. Tetrault emerged smiling from his performance.

Meanwhile, Staff Sgt. Jonathan Birkeland, 32, from Albany, Ore., a 2019 Far East bronze medalist in rifle and a trophy winner at this year's Marine Corps Championships, said his performance on the action rifle course fell short.

He wondered aloud if luck had played a role in his previous successes.

"I don't think I'm going to place again this year," said Birkeland, an air traffic controller at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Okinawa. "I would like to, but my goal is to not embarrass myself because everyone seems to have high expectations of what I'm going to do."

Housing allowances to rise for many troops in the US

By ALEXANDER RIEDEL
Stars and Stripes

Financial assistance for housing is on the way in the new year for the vast majority of service members stationed in the United States.

Nearly 97% of stateside military families are going to see a boost to their Basic Allowance for Housing, with an average increase of 12.1%, the Pentagon announced Wednesday.

The new rates take effect Jan. 1 and reflect the largest year-over-year jump to housing allowances in many years. Housing allowance payments total-

ing an estimated \$26.8 billion will be paid to roughly 1 million service members next year, according to the statement.

Basic housing allowance rates are calculated based on recipients' rank, location and number of dependents. The payments aim to allow service members to afford housing on par with that of civilians earning comparable incomes in the local area.

In October, the DOD temporarily increased housing allowances in 28 locations where home prices exceeded 20% of the area's BAH rate.

Airman proves to be perfect in German military skills challenge

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — Airman Emma Gantner felt like the underdog when she and 24 other service members recently competed in a three-day test of physical and mental toughness.

A postal clerk, Gantner, 20, was the only woman in the group vying for the German Armed Forces Badge for Military Proficiency. It is one of the few foreign military badges authorized to be worn by U.S. Air Force, Army and Space Force members.

Airmen must show their

stamina on land and in water, shoot with precision and display all manner of speed, strength and agility.

When the test ended, Gantner ended up on top with a perfect score.

Gantner developed blisters and a sore back on a 7.5-mile ruck march, which she said was the hardest event. She ran parts of it to keep pace with the group, her small frame shouldering a 33-pound pack.

"When I finished the ruck and they told me I was the top performer, it was so motivating," Gantner said Wednesday. "(The pain) was worth it."

House passes short-term spending bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Democratic-led House passed a short-term spending bill Wednesday to keep government agencies funded at current levels through Dec. 23, giving lawmakers more time to craft a roughly \$1.7 trillion appropriations package that would cover the full fiscal year.

Congress faces a deadline of midnight Friday to pass the extension or allow for a partial government shutdown. The bill would give Congress an additional week to reach a compromise and now goes to the Senate for a vote before it is sent to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

The one-week extension passed by a vote of 224-201, mainly along party lines.

House Republicans overwhelmingly opposed the extension. Many complained it would allow Congress to pass a massive spending bill before a Republican majority would take charge of the House in January and impose its will on spending.

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, the Republican leader in the House, said Republicans earned the opportunity after the midterm elections to shape the spending legislation early next year. He called for an extension that would last into the first quarter of 2023.

“Allow the American people what they

said a month ago — to change Washington as we know it today,” McCarthy said.

While Republicans will take the majority in the House, Democrats gained one seat in the Senate and will hold a 51-49 majority there in the next session.

McCarthy said the two senators leading the efforts to craft the spending bill won’t be in Congress next year and thus won’t be accountable to voters for their work. Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Richard Shelby, R-Ala., are both retiring. Leahy is the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and Shelby is the lead Republican on the panel.

Louisiana residents are rocked by deadly tornadoes

Associated Press

KEITHVILLE, La. — A storm system that spawned dozens of reported tornadoes from east Texas to the Florida Panhandle was all but done with the South on Thursday after killing at least three people and uprooting families across Louisiana, where some homes were blown into pieces.

Elsewhere, heavy snow and high winds meant more blizzards in the northern Midwest from the Dakotas through Michigan, and more ice and snow causing trouble in places from the Appalachians through New England.

The National Weather Service can take days to confirm whether destructive winds were in fact tornadoes, but the impact was

clear in places like Caddo Parish, La., where a man went out for groceries and returned to discover his mobile home was gone, and with it, his wife and son.

“You go to search a house and the house isn’t even there, so where do you search?” Gov. John Bel Edwards said as he toured the mile-long path of destruction in rural Keithville, south of Shreveport.

The body of 8-year-old Nikolas Little was found in the woods. The body of his mother, Yoshiko A. Smith, 30, was discovered later, under storm debris. “He just went to go shopping for his family, came home and the house was gone,” Caddo Parish Sheriff’s Sgt. Casey Jones said.

Another Keithville man, William Walls,

said a tornado picked up his home and tossed it into his brother’s house next door as he found himself stuck outside on his brother’s back porch. Videos he posted on Facebook show the shredded remains.

“This is my house,” Walls said. “I watched it pick my trailer up and throw it into there.”

An outpouring of support was evident in Union Parish, near the Arkansas line, where a gymnasium was busy with volunteers and survivors going through stacks of donated clothing. Farmerville Mayor John Crow said an apartment complex where 50 families lived was badly damaged, a neighboring trailer park with about 10 homes was wiped out, and about 30 homes were damaged along nearby Lake D’Arbonne.

How Fed rate hikes may affect everyone’s finances

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Federal Reserve’s move Wednesday to raise its key rate by a half-point brought it to a range of 4.25% to 4.5%, the highest level in 14 years.

The Fed’s latest increase — its seventh rate hike this year — will make it even costlier for consumers and businesses to borrow for homes, autos and other purchases. If, on the other hand, you have money to save, you’ll earn a bit more interest on it.

Wednesday’s rate hike, part of the Fed’s drive to curb high inflation, was smaller than its previous four straight three-quarter-point increases. The downshift reflects, in part, the easing of inflation and the cooling of the economy.

As interest rates increase, many economists say they fear that a recession remains

inevitable — and with it, job losses that could cause hardship for households already badly hurt by inflation.

Here’s what to know:

Why the increase?

The short answer: Inflation. Over the past year, consumer inflation in the United States has clocked in at 7.1% — the fifth straight monthly drop but still a painfully high level.

The Fed’s goal is to slow consumer spending, thereby reducing demand for homes, cars and other goods and services, eventually cooling the economy and lowering prices.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell has acknowledged that aggressively raising interest rates would bring “some pain” for house-

holds but that doing so is necessary to crush high inflation.

Who’s affected the most?

Anyone borrowing money to make a large purchase, such as a home, car or large appliance, will take a hit, according to Scott Hoyt, an analyst with Moody’s Analytics.

“The new rate pretty dramatically increases your monthly payments and your cost,” he said. “It also affects consumers who have a lot of credit card debt — that will hit right away.”

That said, Hoyt noted that household debt payments, as a proportion of income, remain relatively low, though they have risen lately. So even as borrowing rates steadily rise, many households might not feel a much heavier debt burden immediately.

US set to give Ukraine smart-bomb kits

The Washington Post

The Biden administration is planning to send Ukraine advanced electronic equipment that converts unguided aerial munitions into “smart bombs” that can target Russian military positions with a high degree of accuracy, according to senior U.S. officials familiar with the matter.

The kits incorporate global positioning devices for precision and can be bolted onto a variety of weapons, creating what the Pentagon has called a Joint Direct Attack Munition, or JDAM. The U.S. military has used the technology on bombs weighing up to 2,000 pounds, usually incorporating it with bomber aircraft and fighter jets.

It was not immediately clear whether President Joe Biden or any of his top national security advisers have approved the proposed JDAMs’ transfer to Ukraine. Those familiar with the matter, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal deliberations, did not say whether

Ukrainian forces would employ the kits on aircraft or ground-based weapons, or what specific systems in Ukraine’s arsenal would be candidates for such augmentation.

The Ukrainian Air Force relies primarily on aging Soviet-era MiG jets, and the Pentagon has sought ways to upgrade them rather than provide newer Western aircraft that would require its pilots and maintainer units to undertake complicated new training.

The Biden administration has previously equipped Ukraine with other advanced weaponry, including air-launched high-speed, antiradiation missiles, or HARMs, to enhance Ukraine’s ability to carry out airstrikes. But those weapons function differently than the GPS-guided JDAM, instead hunting radiation emitted by Russian units and headquarters.

A delivery of JDAMs would mark another significant step by Washington to help Ukraine repel the invading Russian force, providing a new way to target Russian units and

headquarters. Since June, Ukraine has relied heavily on the U.S.-made High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, another precision system, for significant casualties among Russian troops and disruption of supply lines, Ukrainian and U.S. officials have said.

The Kremlin has reacted angrily to the outpouring of Western military aid, making thinly veiled threats to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine and warning of the potential for a broader spillover war with NATO. For that reason, the Biden administration has sought to move cautiously in approving new capabilities that could be viewed by Russia as escalatory.

On Tuesday, senior U.S. officials told *The Washington Post* that the Pentagon was also preparing to provide Ukraine with a Patriot missile system, the U.S. military’s most sophisticated air defense weapon. Biden has yet to approve that move either but could do so imminently, officials said.

Biden tells African leaders US is ‘all in’ on continent

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden told dozens of African leaders gathered in Washington that the United States is “all in on Africa’s future,” laying out billions in promised government funding and private investment Wednesday to help the growing continent in health, infrastructure, business and technology.

“The U.S. is committed to supporting every aspect of Africa’s growth,” Biden told the leaders and others in a big conference hall, presenting his vision at the three-day U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit of how the U.S. can be a critical catalyst.

Biden, who is pitching the U.S. as a reliable partner to promote democratic elections and push critical health and energy growth, told the crowd the \$55 billion in committed investments over the next three years — announced on Monday — was “just the beginning.”

He announced more than \$15 billion in private trade and investment commitments and partnerships.

“There’s so much more we can do together and that we will do together,” Biden said.

The president after his speech spent some time with leaders, including Moroccan Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, watching

Morocco’s World Cup match with France. Morocco lost but made history as the first African team to advance to the tournament’s semifinal round.

The U.S. has fallen well behind China in investment in sub-Saharan Africa, which has become a key battleground in an increasingly fraught competition between the major powers. The White House has insisted this week’s gathering is more a listening session with African leaders than an effort to counter Beijing’s influence, but the president’s central foreign policy tenet looms over all: America is in an era-defining battle to prove democracies can out-deliver autocracies.

Floods in Congo’s capital kill more than 140 people

Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo — The number of people killed by widespread floods and landslides in Congo’s capital, Kinshasa, has climbed to more than 140, the government said Wednesday.

At least 12 others are still missing, but the government is not optimistic anyone will be found alive.

“There is no hope of finding survivors,” Minister of Health Lisa Nembalemba told *The Associated Press* by phone.

The government has announced three days of mourning that started Wednesday.

Some 12 million people live in the 24 neighborhoods of Kinshasa hit by floods and landslides, which were triggered by heavy rains Monday night. The damage flooded nearly 40,000 houses and flattened nearly 300, said local authorities.

Speaking from the United States where he’s attending the U.S.-Africa summit, Congo’s President Felix Tshisekedi said he felt sorrow when he heard about the dam-

age and called on authorities to speed up recovery efforts. “(It is up to) the central and provincial governments to accelerate the work of draining rainwater to avoid this type of disaster,” he said. He instructed the government to help the grieving families.

In addition to people losing their lives and their homes, the rains inflicted damage throughout the city. At least one main road into the capital was cut off and much of the city is still submerged in water.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Court officer killed by muskox outside house

AK JUNEAU — A court services officer with the Alaska State Troopers died Tuesday after being attacked by a muskox outside his home near Nome, the agency said.

Curtis Worland was trying to scare away a group of muskox from near a dog kennel at his home when one of the animals attacked him, according to a statement from the troopers that said Worland was declared dead at the scene.

Court services officers are law enforcement officers that provide prisoner transport services, courthouse security and court document service, troopers spokesperson Austin McDaniel said.

Muskoxen are stocky, long-haired animals with slight shoulder humps and horns and can weigh up to 800 pounds, according to the fish and game department.

Police: Customer shoots KFC worker over no corn

MO ST. LOUIS — A KFC employee in St. Louis has been hospitalized after a customer shot him because he was upset that the restaurant had run out of corn, police said.

The shooting happened Monday evening in the city's Central West End neighborhood. Investigators said the man tried to place an order in the drive-thru lane. He became upset and threatened employees when he was told the business was out of corn, police said.

The man had a handgun when he drove up to the drive-thru window. A 25-year-old employee

who went outside to talk to the driver returned to the restaurant and said he had been shot, police said. The driver fled.

Roswell to host 2nd festival for UFO fans

NM ROSWELL — Roswell, known for its association with extraterrestrial matters, will have two big UFO-themed events next year.

The Roswell Daily Record reported Tuesday that the city has negotiated to host the second annual UFOXPO in the spring.

The three-day event was previously held in Florida. The extraterrestrial extravaganza includes a film festival, cosplay, panels on UFOs and live music. It will be held March 10-12.

This is on top of the city's UFO Festival every summer. In October, an analysis by the city found this year's event had a \$2 million direct economic impact.

Postage stamp to honor civil rights icon Lewis

DC WASHINGTON — The late congressman and civil rights giant John Lewis will be honored with a postage stamp in 2023, the U.S. Postal Service announced Tuesday.

The design for the stamp uses a photograph taken by Marco Grob for a 2013 issue of Time magazine. Lewis, then 73, wears a dark suit and blue tie and looks directly into the camera.

The Postal Service said the stamp "celebrates the life and legacy" of Lewis, who died at age 80 in 2020 from pancreatic cancer. Lewis' bloody beating by Alabama state troopers in Selma in 1965 helped galvanize opposi-

tion to racial segregation.

Other stamps announced Tuesday include ones honoring the Florida Everglades, skateboard art and children's book author and illustrator Tomie dePaola.

Armed man arrested for courthouse standoff

WA EVERETT — A courthouse in Washington state was locked down for several hours on Monday as authorities negotiated with and later arrested an armed man in the building's lobby, law enforcement officials said.

The standoff at the county courthouse in Everett, north of Seattle, began at around 12:30 p.m., The Herald reported. The man was taken into custody about three hours later, the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office said. No one was hurt.

Selena Rios told the newspaper she came to the courthouse with her 5-year-old child around 12:25 p.m. and that the armed man walked in right after them. She said the man appeared to have several rifles and a bullet-proof vest. He refused to put them down when ordered by officers, Rios said by text message.

Fire destroys dairy barn, kills dozens of cows

VT GRAND ISLE — Fire has destroyed a Grand Isle dairy barn and killed about 40 cows trapped inside, Vermont State Police said Tuesday.

A neighbor spotted the flames coming from the north end of the barn Monday evening and called 911. He then went to the barn and tried to get some of the cows out, police said.

When firefighters arrived, they and residents were able to open doors to allow many of the cows out. About 140 cows escaped the flames, police said.

A farm worker had used a propane torch to thaw frozen manure around the door and investigators believe that started a smoldering fire that spread, police said.

Men, dog missing days found on powerless boat

NJ CAPE MAY — Two men and a pet dog were rescued from a sailboat without power or fuel more than 200 miles off Delaware, 10 days after friends and relatives had last heard from them, the U.S. Coast Guard said Tuesday.

Kevin Hyde, 65, and Joe Dito-masso, 76, were sailing from Cape May, N.J., to Marathon, Fla. But they disappeared soon after their *Atrevida II* sailboat left North Carolina's Outer Banks on Dec. 3.

The Coast Guard was notified Sunday that the two sailors were overdue and launched a search that would stretch from Florida to New Jersey, the agency said. Coast Guard cutters and aircraft participated in the search along with ships from the U.S. Navy and commercial and recreational vessels.

On Tuesday, Hyde and Dito-masso waived their arms to draw the attention of the crew of the *Silver Muna* tanker ship off Delaware's coast, the Coast Guard said. The men and the dog were brought aboard the tanker shortly after 4 p.m. An evaluation by the ship's medical staff revealed no immediate concerns, the Coast Guard said.

—From wire reports

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Mbappé, France advance to World Cup final

Associated Press

AL KHOR, Qatar — Kylian Mbappé vs. Lionel Messi.

Soccer's latest superstar against perhaps the sport's greatest player in the World Cup final just about everyone was hoping to see.

France and Mbappé are headed back to the biggest game in soccer, and to a much-anticipated matchup with Argentina, after ending Morocco's historic run at the World Cup on Wednesday.

In front of the country's president, Emmanuel Macron, France beat Africa's first ever semifinalist 2-0, with Mbappé playing a part in goals by Theo Hernandez in the fifth minute and substitute Randal Kolo Muani in the 79th.

Mbappé became a global phenomenon by leading France to the title in Russia in

2018 and has a chance to emulate Brazil great Pele as a champion in his first two World Cups when he comes up against the 35-year-old Messi, who has dominated the game with Cristiano Ronaldo for the past 15 years.

It's the dream final for many, with France looking to become the first team to retain the title since Brazil in 1962 and Argentina on a mission to win the sport's ultimate prize for the third time in what is likely to be Messi's last World Cup.

"We need all our strength, all our energy to face a very competitive team with one of the legends in the sport with Messi," France goalkeeper Hugo Lloris said.

There will be no team from the Arab world in the final of the first World Cup in the Mid-

dle East, a prospect that seemed nigh impossible before the tournament yet nearly happened in Qatar.

Morocco has been widely lauded for breaking ground for Africa and generated an outpouring of pride among Arab nations after topping a group containing Croatia and Belgium and eliminating two more European powers — Spain and Portugal — in the knockout stage. Their players gave France a far-from-easy ride, too, before collapsing on the ground in despair after the final whistle.

"We are disappointed for the Moroccan people — we wanted to keep their dream alive," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said. "We felt we could have gone further, but we have given a good image of Morocco and of African football. That

was important to us."

Remarkably, Hernandez's early goal was the first scored against Morocco by an opposition player in the tournament — the other had been an own-goal in the group stage — but the team responded to that and injury issues in its defense with a fearless performance in front of tens of thousands of fans who dominated the 60,000-seat Al Bayt Stadium.

France was forced into some last-ditch defending at times, but has developed a knack of pulling out victories despite not playing its best. The country will be playing in the final for the fourth time in the last seven World Cups, more than anyone else.

"It wasn't easy," France coach Didier Deschamps said, "and we showed our quality, experience and team spirit."

Probe finds widespread misconduct in women's pro soccer

Associated Press

An investigation commissioned by the National Women's Soccer League and its players union found "widespread misconduct" directed at players dating back to the beginnings of the league nearly a decade ago.

A report detailing the results of the year-long investigation was published Wednesday, a little over two months after the release in October of a report on a separate investigation by former acting U.S. Attorney General Sally Q. Yates that found emotional abuse and sexual misconduct were systemic in the sport, impacting multiple teams, coaches and players.

The second investigation also found instances of sexual abuse and manipulation. The NWSL-commissioned report said club staff in positions of power "made inappropriate sexual remarks to players, mocked players' bodies, pressured players to lose unhealthy amounts of weight, crossed professional boundaries with players and created manipulative working conditions."

"They used derogatory and insulting language toward players, displayed insensitivity toward players' mental health and engaged in retaliation against players who at-

tempted to report or did report concerns," the report said.

"This report clearly reflects how our league systemically failed to protect our players. On behalf of the Board and the league, let me first and foremost sincerely apologize to our players for those failures and missteps. They deserve, at a minimum, a safe and secure environment to participate at the highest level in a sport they love, and they have my unwavering commitment that delivering that change will remain a priority each and every day," NWSL Commissioner Jessica Berman said in a news release.

The joint investigation was launched last year after a pair of former players came forward and accused longtime NWSL coach Paul Riley of sexual harassment and coercion.

Riley, who has denied the allegations, was fired by the North Carolina Courage in the aftermath. He was among five head coaches in the league who were either fired or resigned in 2021 amid claims of misconduct.

The fallout has continued into this year. Portland Thorns owner Merritt Paulson announced on Dec. 1 that he was putting the

team up for sale amid calls for him to do so that began after the Yates report detailed how the Thorns mishandled complaints about Riley when he coached the team in 2014-15. Paulson stepped down from a decision-making role with the team in October and two Thorns executives were fired.

The investigative team for the joint investigation reached out to 780 current and former players, all 12 NWSL teams and 90 current and former club staff, and those from the league office. More than 200 documents were reviewed during the probe, which was conducted by the law firms of Covington & Burling and Weil, Gotshal & Manges.

"This report speaks to the power of the players, the power of the truth and the power of a strong labor union," Meghan Burke, executive director of the NWSL Players Association, said during a video conference that also included Berman. "Players have willed this moment into existence. The NWSL Players Association would like to thank, honor and acknowledge every player, whether known or unknown, identified or not, in this report, for speaking truth to power. Players who have lent their names to this report know that kind of courage is hard to understand."

Indiana holding its own in Eastern Conference

Associated Press

When the season began, it wasn't clear how much longer Myles Turner would be with the Indiana Pacers.

That's still a reasonable question — but now there's another one alongside it: How much longer can those Pacers stay in the playoff race?

After losing 57 games a season ago, the Pacers are a game above .500 at the moment — and that's despite dropping six of their past 10. Coach Rick Carlisle's group can push the tempo, and the Pacers have a 22-year-old standout in point guard Tyrese Haliburton. Indiana should not be taken lightly.

"They beat us the last time and they're ahead of us in the standings," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said Monday when asked about not overlooking opponents. "There is more parity, I think, overall in the league and I think it's good for the league."

The Heat beat Indiana 87-82 on Monday night in what was

easily the Pacers' lowest-scoring game of the season. They've been held under 100 points only one other time. They rebounded to beat Golden State 125-119 on Wednesday.

Indiana is fifth in the NBA in pace after ranking 18th last season.

"I'm not that surprised, seeing Ty ... for two months last year and knowing we'd get (T.J.) McConnell back and he plays pretty fast," Carlisle said. "But it does tell a story of who we are as a team and it tells a story that if we don't come up with rebounds, we're not going to be able to play fast. We love playing fast. It's fun (and) it's gotten interest from the fans in this team."

The Pacers are showing the type of improvement that can easily stay under the radar. They aren't leading their conference like New Orleans, another sub-.500 team from last season. Instead, they're in the middle of the pack in the Eastern Confe-

rence. Joining them there are the New York Knicks, who have won five straight to pull two games above .500 — after going 37-45 in 2021-22.

No matter how the rest of this season unfolds for the Pacers, they have some young talent they can get excited about. Haliburton is averaging a career-best 19.4 points per game in his third season. Bennedict Mathurin is averaging 17.6, and fellow rookie Andrew Nembhard had 31 points and 13 assists in a win over Golden State last week. Nembhard also made a three-pointer at the buzzer to beat the Los Angeles Lakers last month.

That talented trio is one the Pacers can move forward with even if they end up dealing the 26-year-old Turner and 29-year-old Buddy Hield. Although for now, those two are still with Indiana and making their own contributions, averaging about 17 points apiece.

Turner is in the final year of his contract and could bring

back a good haul in a trade. Indiana is still less than a year removed from a major makeover. The Pacers traded star forward Domantas Sabonis to Sacramento in February and received Haliburton in return. Hield also went to Indiana in that deal.

Indiana does have a couple of obvious weaknesses it needs to shore up. The Pacers are allowing opponents to shoot 25.8 free throws a game, the second-most in the NBA. Rebounding is also an issue. The 6-foot-11 Turner is one of the game's top shot blockers, but on the boards, the Pacers are vulnerable.

Indiana ranks 27th in the league in defensive rebounding percentage. The Pacers gave up 29 offensive boards to the Brooklyn Nets in Saturday's loss.

"It's effort really, and that's something we talked about in practice," Carlisle said. "That's something we've got to concentrate on. We need it to be a real wake-up call."

Marquee games fill week in Top 25 basketball

Associated Press

The holiday break is usually a quiet time in college basketball, with many of the top teams playing small-conference schools at home or taking extra time off before conference schedules start in full.

The season isn't quite there yet and this week is loaded with marquee games, including two involving No. 16 UCLA.

The big day is Saturday when No. 4 Alabama faces No. 15 Gonzaga in Birmingham, Ala., No. 6 Tennessee is at No. 9 Arizona and No. 8 Kansas hosts No. 14 Indiana. UCLA also faces No. 13 Kentucky in New York on Saturday after cruising past No. 20 Maryland 87-60 on Wednesday.

The most intriguing game Saturday might be No. 5 Houston at No. 2 Virginia.

The Cougars (9-1) lead the nation in scoring defense (49.7 points per game) and field goal defense (33.8%) despite losing to Alabama last week. The Cavaliers love to grind out possessions and are 13th nationally in scoring defense, allowing 57.9 points per game.

The Alabama game is the Zags' latest against a high-level opponent.

Gonzaga (7-3) has dropped in the AP Top 25 after starting at No. 2 in the preseason, thanks to losses to No. 7 Texas, top-ranked Purdue and No. 11 Baylor. The Zags do have wins over No. 13 Kentucky and Michigan State on their resume.

Alabama (8-1) climbed four spots in this week's poll after joining Oklahoma in 1990 as the only teams to beat two No. 1 teams in the same season. The Crimson Tide outlasted North Carolina in four overtimes on Nov. 27 and proved it was no fluke by topping Houston 71-65 on Saturday.

The Tennessee-Arizona game will be a head-butting of strengths.

The Volunteers (9-1) are one of the nation's best defensive teams, leading the country in three-point defense (20.2%) while in the top six in scoring defense, field goal percentage against and steals.

Meanwhile, Arizona (8-1) leads the nation with 91.2 points and 21 assists per game.

The Hoosiers (8-2) get another massive test playing the Jayhawks at Allen Fieldhouse. Indiana allowed Arizona to go on a 17-0 run in Las Vegas, rallied to make it close and faded down the stretch without stellar freshman guard Jalen Hood-Schifino due to a back injury.

Kansas (9-1) has been solid after winning its fourth national title last season, its only loss coming to Tennessee in the Battle 4 Atlantis title game. The Jayhawks have wins over No. 12 Duke and No. 22 Wisconsin, and they blew out rival Missouri last weekend.

UCLA (9-2) may have the toughest task of all, facing two ranked teams in the same week for the second time this season. They managed to get the best of the Terps in Maryland, but the Bruins might face an even tougher test next.

Kentucky (7-2) has been dominant at times and its only losses were to Michigan State in double overtime and to Gonzaga in Spokane. The Wildcats also figure to get strong support at Madison Square Garden.

Healthy WRs spark Chargers offense

Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — It was a catch that Los Angeles Chargers wide receiver Mike Williams shouldn't have been able to make.

Miami Dolphins cornerback Xavien Howard had denied Williams a free release off the line of scrimmage on third-and-9 in the first quarter before keeping him to the outside on an underthrown ball, only for Williams to climb over the defender to make a juggling 23-yard catch.

"Dude had perfect coverage. Mike just found a way to get the ball," Chargers cornerback Bryce Callahan said Wednesday.

Wide receiver Joshua Palmer was more effusive in his praise.

"It's art, you know," he said of Williams' latest outstanding performance.

There is also the science that comes with having Williams and Keenan Allen back on the field at the same time, the arithmetic of favorable defensive coverages they dictate and the geometry of the space they create.

The Chargers (7-6) believe having both Williams and Allen available for their last four games can make the difference in reaching the playoffs, confidence that comes from how the pair contributed in

Sunday's 23-17 win over the Dolphins. Williams had six receptions for 116 yards and a touchdown, and Allen had 12 catches for 92 yards.

"They are two of the best to ever do it," quarterback Justin Herbert said after the game. "To have guys like that on our team, they bring a different energy, a different vibe to our team. ... Keenan and Mike, they were out there making plays."

The complementary nature of Williams and Allen has been a key piece of Los Angeles' offense over the past four seasons, with Allen moving the chains on crossing routes and other intermediate plays and Williams generating big gains and finding the end zone.

It was just the second time this season they made it through an entire game healthy together. Allen missed time because of a pulled hamstring, and Williams' high ankle sprain kept him out of four of the previous five games and limited him to six snaps in Week 11 against Kansas City.

Palmer said not having Allen and Williams gave opposing defenses more ways to limit Herbert and his remaining targets.

"Any one of us can make plays, so it puts them in a bind because they don't know who

they might want to double," Palmer said. "A good example of that was Vegas (in Week 13). Like imagine if Mike was there, you know what I'm saying. Just having to have us be matched up, you have to be willing to sacrifice something."

That often involves teams playing a safety over the top of Williams to try and eliminate explosive plays. In response, the Chargers used a deep crossing pattern, sending Williams across the field off a play-action fake to free him up for a 55-yard catch against Miami, his 11th play of 40 or more yards over the past two seasons.

Williams also got both feet down for a nifty 10-yard touchdown grab, but it was his catch against Howard that dominated social media. Williams labeled it "pretty good" but not on the short list of his best plays.

To Palmer, it was nothing new.

"Nothing surprises me anymore, honestly, from Mike," he said.

With all the pieces finally together, Palmer expects the passing offense can propel the Chargers into the postseason.

"Felt like we can still make some more plays on top of that," he said. "So it's really exciting, but it was a long time coming for us, to be honest with you."

Done with stingy Jets, Bills put focus on Dolphins

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Before looking ahead to a prime-time showdown against Miami on Saturday — with the top spot in the AFC East hanging in the balance — Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills should be relieved to have the New York Jets off their schedule.

For now, at least.

Barring a playoff meeting, which remains a possibility, no opponent this season has done a better job smothering the Bills high-powered offense than what the Robert Saleh-coached Jets did in splitting their two outings after Buffalo eked out a 20-12 win on Sunday.

It was a win for the Bills that required trickery — Buffalo fooled the Jets into jumping offside on fourth-and-1 to set up its first touchdown — and was keyed by a defense that forced two second-half turnovers before closing the game, forcing Mike White to throw four consecutive incompletions and turn the ball over on downs.

Easy as it might have been to suggest the

Bills offense didn't resemble that of a Super Bowl contender, as was raised to Allen following the game, what's hard to overlook is how Buffalo sputtered in each of its two meetings against Gang Green.

Buffalo managed what had been season lows with 317 yards offense and 19 first downs in a 20-17 loss at New York on Nov. 6. Five weeks later, the Bills set new lows with 232 yards offense and 14 first downs, though this time in a victory.

Take away those two games, and Buffalo is averaging 419 yards offense and 29 points per outing.

Part of the difference Sunday was Allen playing turnover-free football after he threw two interceptions — one in the red zone, and the second inside Buffalo's 25 to set up a Jets touchdown — in the first meeting.

"We're 10-3 and finding ways to win football games," Allen said in response to the offensive struggles Sunday. "I know that's not what you want to hear, but just playing complementary football, not putting ourselves

and our defense in bad positions, and just trying to win football games no matter how it happens."

The Bills won despite top receiver Stefon Diggs being limited to three catches for 37 yards, his fourth-lowest output in three seasons in Buffalo, and an offense that committed six three-and-outs, its most since having that many in a 27-10 win over the Jets in last year's season finale.

What's encouraging is three of Buffalo's four final opponents feature defenses ranked outside the NFL's top 10, with New England (ranked sixth as of Monday) the exception.

On Saturday, the Bills face an altogether different test in hosting Miami (8-5), whose defense has dropped to 20th after allowing a combined 783 yards and 56 points in losing its past two games.

The Dolphins won the first meeting against Buffalo 21-19 in a game played in sweltering conditions in south Florida. This time, the long-range forecast calls for snow and temperatures in the high-20s.