

NDAA would increase border reports

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Pentagon officials under a provision in the defense policy bill would be required to report every three months to lawmakers about its mission along the U.S.-Mexico border to improve oversight and understanding of the work that troops are doing to help secure the region.

The new initiative is meant to increase attention on border security as the number of migrants crossing into the U.S. and encountered by Customs and Border Protection remains high, said Sen. James Inhofe, of Oklahoma, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Inhofe said Republicans pushed for the provision to be included in the fiscal 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, an annual bill that outlines defense priorities and spending, and they blame the increase in migration from Mexico on President Joe Biden's administration.

"Many of my Republican colleagues and I believe that this lax approach to border security must end — now. The NDAA's provision for quarterly briefings on border security will ensure that the highest levels of the Department of Defense are focused on the crisis at the southwest border, and com-

pels them to brief Congress every three months on its plans for supporting border security operations," Inhofe said in a statement.

In October, Border Patrol agents encountered more than 230,000 migrants, either detaining them or returning them to Mexico, which is about 66,000 more than were encountered the previous October, according to the agency's data.

This replaces a previous requirement for an annual briefing, according to a news release from the House Armed Services Committee.

"This ensures Congress continues to have oversight on support provided at the southern land border," the House committee said in a statement.

The briefings should include how defense officials are incorporating border mission requirements into plans, ongoing support and the risk assessment that was conducted for that support, and any efforts or updates to cooperate with Mexico for border security.

Briefings should be unclassified unless a classified briefing is necessary. The first should be held in January with the others following within 90 days until Dec. 31, 2024.

The Pentagon began deploying troops to

the U.S. border with Mexico in April 2018 following then-President Donald Trump's declaration of an emergency at the border caused by migrants crossing illegally into the United States. When Biden took office in January 2021, he rescinded the emergency declaration, but left the troops at the border.

At one point in 2019, the Defense Department had nearly 8,000 troops deployed to the border, which included about 5,800 active-duty service members. However, a Government Accountability Office report released in February 2021 found the deployments had a negative impact on those units, and the military has phased out using active-duty troops at the border with Mexico.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin most recently approved up to 2,500 troops to assist CBP agents through September 2023, the end of the fiscal year. There are about 2,400 National Guard troops now serving on the mission, said Bill Lewis, spokesman for U.S. Northern Command, the Defense Department combatant command that is leading the effort.

"NORTHCOM provides information to the various defense committees, about our assigned missions, as required," he said.

Japan military finds over 100 sex abuse cases; 5 fired

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan's army on Thursday fired five servicemen and punished four others in a sexual assault case brought by a former soldier, prompting a rare investigation across the Defense Ministry that found over 100 other complaints of harassment, officials said.

Rina Gonoi filed a sexual harassment case with the Defense Ministry last year, saying she had suffered multiple assaults by several male colleagues, causing her to give up her military career.

Of the five servicemen who were dismissed from the army, four had admitted their assaults and apologized to her in October. A fifth was found to be a mastermind of the four.

Additionally, the ministry punished four others. The then-commander of the company in Fukushima that Gonoi belonged to was suspended for six months for not carrying out a proper investigation, while another one was reprimanded for verbal sexual harassment and two others were reprimanded for overlooking the problem.

Army chief Yoshihide Yoshida repeated his apology to Gonoi and said, "As head of this organization, I feel a strong sense of responsibility over (Gonoi's) sorrow and pain." He said he takes the problem seriously and is determined to "eradicate harassment."

In one incident in August 2021, the senior male colleagues pressed the lower part of their bodies against her in a dorm at a training ground, forcing her to spread her legs, as more than 10 other male colleagues watched and laughed, but none tried to

stop them, Gonoi said.

"I hope the four assailants, regardless of the seriousness of their punishment, sincerely take their responsibility," Gonoi tweeted in response to the measure taken by the ministry Thursday.

The investigation into her case was dropped in May. After she quit the army and disclosed her allegations on social media, Gonoi submitted a petition signed by more than 100,000 people to the Defense Ministry seeking a reinvestigation by a third party.

Air Force training leader fired over lack of trust

BY DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force has made a change of leadership at the 81st Training Wing in Mississippi due to a loss of confidence in the commander, a top service official announced this week.

The change removed Col. William Hunter as the wing's training commander at Keesler Air Force Base, which is located on Mississippi's Gulf Coast just west of Biloxi.

The 81st Training Wing is home to the Air Force's largest technical training group and trains nearly 30,000 airmen each year. It's also a joint training unit, meaning it also develops troops from the other service branches and civilian federal employees. The wing is the single largest employer on the Mississippi coast and hosts the Second Air Force and 403rd Wing of the Air Force Reserve.

Hunter was introduced as the wing's

training commander in June 2021. At the time, he called the assignment at Keesler "awesome" and he said he was excited to "shape young minds" there. Maj. Gen Michele Edmondson, commander of the Second Air Force, removed Hunter from the position Tuesday.

"Commanders must uphold the highest personal and professional standards and maintain a healthy, inclusive command climate in their unit," Edmondson said. "The training mission at Keesler Air Force Base builds airmen who are foundational to the future of the Air Force. We remain committed to the success of Keesler's mission."

No specific reason for Hunter's removal was given, but Edmondson noted a "loss of trust and confidence in his ability to effectively command" the training wing.

Col. Jason Allen — the wing's vice commander — succeeded Hunter as interim leader.

One of last famed Merrill's Marauders passes away at 101

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Gabriel Kinney, who joined the Army at 21 in 1942 and later fought behind Japanese enemy lines in Burma as one of the famed Merrill's Marauders, died Sunday in Hanceville, Ala.

He was 101.

With his death, only one veteran of Merrill's Marauders remains living, 98-year-old Russell Hamler, who lives in Pennsylvania, according to Jonnie Melillo Clasen, who in recent years has served as an informal liaison to the still-living Marauders and their families as the veterans grew too old for reunions.

"Kinney's daughter, Carol Crawford, said her father was unresponsive after slumping over while sitting," Clasen said in a notice emailed Monday. "Despite his age, this was unexpected. Carol said her father attended a Christmas party Friday and was dancing, and that he had a good weekend."

Kinney was among only a handful of the roughly 3,000 original Marauders still living earlier this year when the unit was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

Three surviving Marauders died within a month's span this spring.

Kinney was inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame in July. The Army Rangers trace their lineage to the Marauders, named after their commander, Brig. Gen. Frank Merrill.

Kinney was born Feb. 2, 1921, one of 12 children, in rural Alabama. He briefly worked at U.S. Steel in Birmingham after graduating before enlisting in November 1942.

He served first with F Company, 35th Regiment, 25th Infantry, in the South Pacific before volunteering to join what was formally known as the 5307th Composite Unit Provisional, later dubbed the Marauders.

The Marauders' ultimate mission was to move behind enemy lines and capture the Myitkyna airfield in northern Burma, which was considered key to keeping China supplied with weapons and other war supplies.

The Marauders succeeded in that on May 17, 1944, but at a huge cost. Only a few hundred soldiers of the unit were still standing after staggering losses from disease, malnutrition, wounds and death.

Experts: Long-range missiles on Okinawa should have local buy-in

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A reported plan by Japan to base long-range missiles in Okinawa prefecture without first gaining local acceptance could erode confidence in the U.S.-Japan alliance, an American professor in Tokyo said recently.

The Japanese Ministry of Defense by 2026 plans to base Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles at three Japan Self-Defense Force bases in the Ryukyu Island chain: Vice Camp Katsuren adjacent to the Navy's White Beach Naval Facility on Okinawa; Camp Miyako on Miyako, an island 175 miles southwest of Okinawa; and Ishigaki, an island about 150 miles east of Taiwan, according to an Okinawa Times report Sunday that cited unnamed officials.

"Not consulting locals raises the issue of legitimacy," Jeff Kingston, professor of Asian studies at Temple University's Tokyo

campus, told Stars and Stripes in an email Wednesday. "Yet again the nation is outsourcing its defense to Okinawa and Okinawans remain marginalized from the decision-making."

An upgraded version of the high-speed, truck-mounted Type 12 is under development and would extend its range from 62 to 620 miles. That puts them in reach of potential targets around the Senkaku Islands and parts of China and North Korea.

"The missiles must be deployed at Okinawa," Toshiyuki Shikata, a former lieutenant general in the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, told Stars and Stripes by phone Monday. "Shooting long-range missiles from Tokyo or Kyushu is too far to reach enemy bases. I know that the Okinawans won't like it, but it is necessary."

The central government needs to explain to the people of Okinawa why the missiles must be placed where they can reach potential targets, Shikata said.

Judge blocks bid to end ‘Remain in Mexico’

Associated Press

AMARILLO, Texas — A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked the Biden administration from ending a Trump-era policy requiring asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court.

U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk in Texas stayed the termination until legal challenges by Texas and Missouri are settled but didn't order the policy reinstated. The impact on the program wasn't immediately clear.

"It's a common sense policy to prevent people from entering our country illegally," Texas Gov. Greg Abbott tweeted after the ruling. "Texas wins again, for now."

The decision comes as El Paso, Texas, and other border cities face a daily influx of migrants that could grow larger if separate asylum restrictions enacted under President Donald Trump end next week as

scheduled.

Thursday's ruling could prove to be a temporary setback for the Biden administration, which may appeal.

The Department of Homeland Security said in a statement that it disagreed with the ruling and was considering its next steps. It said the government was well within its authority to end the policy.

Under Trump, about 70,000 asylum-seekers were forced to wait in Mexico for U.S. hearings under the policy introduced in January 2019. President Joe Biden — who said it "goes against everything we stand for as a nation of immigrants" — suspended the policy on his first day in office.

That sparked a long and tortured legal and administrative path.

Kacsmaryk, a Trump appointee in Amarillo, ordered that the policy be reinstated in 2021. The Biden administration complied with the order after agreeing to changes and

additions demanded by Mexico. But it didn't enforce the policy widely and only a few thousand people were sent back to wait in Mexico.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in June that Biden had the ability to end what technically are known as Migrant Protection Protocols. But it threw back to Kacsmaryk one main issue: determining whether the administration's action was "arbitrary and capricious" and thus violated federal law for crafting regulations.

In his 35-page ruling, the judge said it was likely an October 2021 memo that was the administration's latest effort to nail down termination of the policy did indeed appear to violate the law.

Among other things, the administration failed to consider the benefits of the policy, including reducing illegal immigration and "unmeritorious asylum claims," the ruling said.

Satellite launched to map oceans, lakes and rivers

Associated Press

A U.S.-French satellite that will map almost all of the world's oceans, lakes and rivers rocketed into orbit Friday.

The predawn launch aboard a SpaceX rocket from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California capped a highly successful year for NASA.

Nicknamed SWOT — short for Surface Water and Ocean Topography — the satellite is needed more than ever as climate change worsens droughts, flooding and coastal erosion, according to scientists. Cheers erupted at control centers in California and France as the spacecraft started its mission.

"It is a pivotal moment, and I'm very excited about it," said NASA program scientist Nadya Vinogradova-Shiffer. "We're going to see Earth's water like we've never before."

About the size of a SUV, the satellite will measure the height of water on more than 90% of Earth's surface, allowing scientists to track the flow and identi-

fy potential high-risk areas. It will also survey millions of lakes as well as 1.3 million miles of rivers.

The satellite will shoot radar pulses at Earth, with the signals bouncing back to be received by a pair of antennas, one on each end of a 33-foot boom.

It should be able to make out currents and eddies less than 13 miles across, as well as areas of the ocean where water of varying temperatures merge.

NASA's current fleet of nearly 30 Earth-observing satellites cannot make out such slight features. And while these older satellites can map the extent of lakes and rivers, their measurements are not as detailed, said the University of North Carolina's Tamlin Pavelsky, who is part of the mission.

Perhaps most importantly, the satellite will reveal the location and speed of rising sea levels and the shift of coastlines, key to saving lives and property. The mission is expected to last three years.

Twitter suspends journalists who wrote about Musk policy

Associated Press

Twitter suspended the accounts of several journalists who cover the social media platform, the latest battle over what can and cannot be said on the site since billionaire Elon Musk took control of it.

Accounts of reporters with The New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, Voice of America and other publications, went dark Thursday.

The company hasn't explained to the journalists why it took down the accounts and made their profiles and past tweets disappear. But Musk took to Twitter on Thursday night to accuse journalists of sharing private information about his whereabouts that he described as "basically assassination coordinates." He provided no evidence for that claim.

The sudden suspension of news reporters followed Musk's decision Wednesday to permanently ban an account that automatically tracked the flights of his private jet using publicly available data. That also led

Twitter to change its rules for all users to prohibit the sharing of another person's current location without their consent.

Several of the reporters suspended Thursday night had been writing about the new policy and Musk's rationale for imposing it, which involved his allegations about a stalking incident he said affected his family on Tuesday night in Los Angeles.

The official account for Mastodon, a decentralized social network billed as an alternative to Twitter, was also banned. The reason was unclear, though it had tweeted about the jet tracking account.

"Same doxxing rules apply to 'journalists' as to everyone else," Musk tweeted Thursday. He later added: "Criticizing me all day long is totally fine, but doxxing my real-time location and endangering my family is not."

"Doxxing" refers to disclosing online someone's identity, address, or other personal details.

Kyiv hit with another major missile attack

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's capital came under one of the biggest attacks of the war Friday as Russia's invading forces fired dozens of missiles across the country, Ukrainian officials said. Strikes were reported in at least four cities, triggering widespread emergency power outages.

Gunfire from air defense systems and thudding explosions combined with the wail of air-raid sirens as the barrage targeted critical infrastructure in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kryvyi Rih and Zaporizhzhia. The head of the Ukrainian armed forces said they intercepted 60 of 76 missiles launched.

Russian strikes on electricity and water systems have occurred intermittently since mid-October, increasing the suffering of the population as winter approaches. But the Ukrainian military has reported increasing success in shooting down incoming rockets and explosive drones.

Friday's attack took place after the United States this week agreed to give a Patriot missile battery to Ukraine to boost the coun-

try's defense. Russia's Foreign Ministry warned Thursday that the sophisticated system and any crews accompanying it would be a legitimate target for the Russian military.

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Friday, "We are going to remain undeterred in helping Ukraine defend itself."

The U.S. also pledged last month to send \$53 million in energy-related equipment to help Ukraine withstand the attacks on its infrastructure. Kirby said the first tranche of that equipment and technical support had arrived in the country.

More than half of the Russian missiles fired Friday targeted Ukraine's capital. The city administration said Kyiv withstood "one of the biggest rocket attacks" it has faced since Russia invaded Ukraine nearly 10 months ago. Ukrainian air-defense forces shot down 37 of about 40 missiles that entered the city's airspace, and one person was injured, it said.

Ukraine's air force said Russian forces

had fired cruise missiles from the Admiral Makarov frigate in the Black Sea, while Kh-22 cruise missiles were fired from long-range Tu-22M3 bombers over the Sea of Azov, and tactical aircraft-fired guided missiles.

In Kryvyi Rih in central Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hometown, a missile slammed into a four-story residential building and left a gaping hole in its upper floors. Two people were killed and at least 13 were taken to the hospital, said Igor Karelin, deputy head of the city's emergency services.

Rescue teams with sniffer dogs searched through the debris for a missing mother and her 18-month-old child.

Also at Kryvyi Rih, nearly 600 miners were stuck underground because of the missile strikes, and were being rescued, Mayor Oleksandr Vilkul said on state TV. Vilkul said about 250 of them had been rescued and the operation was continuing.

He said "several energy infrastructure facilities were completely destroyed."

Landslide tears through Malaysian campground

Associated Press

BATANG KALI, Malaysia — A thunderous crush of soil and debris killed 21 people at a campground in Malaysia on Friday, and rescuers dug through the mud in the night for another 12 who were feared buried in the landslide.

More than 90 people were sleeping on an organic farm when the dirt tumbled from a road about 100 feet above the site and covered about 3 acres. Two of the dead were found locked in an embrace, according to the state fire department chief.

Authorities told local media that the landowners did not have a license to run a campground. At least seven people were hospitalized and dozens more were rescued unharmed, said district police chief Suffian Abdullah.

Leong Jim Meng told the New Straits Times English-language

daily that he and his family were awakened by a loud bang and felt the earth move at the campsite in Batang Kali, around 30 miles north of the capital of Kuala Lumpur.

"My family and I were trapped as soil covered our tent. We managed to escape to a car-park area and heard a second landslide happening," the 57-year-old was quoted as saying. He said it was surprising because there was no heavy rain in recent days, only light drizzles.

It is currently the season for monsoon rains in Malaysia, and the country's government development minister, Nga Kor Ming, said all campsites that are near rivers, waterfalls and hillsides would be closed for a week to assess their safety.

After visiting the site late Friday, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim announced a special payment to the families of those killed as well as survivors.

Whelan's fate could hinge on exchange for assassin

The Washington Post

Vadim Krasikov does not have the world-spanning reputation of Victor Bout. But there are signs that Russia wants him back just as much — if not more.

The United States swapped Bout, a notorious Russian arms dealer immortalized as a Hollywood villain, for basketball star Brittney Griner this month. But Paul Whelan — a former Marine, arrested in Moscow in 2018 — remains in Russia, and the chances of his return may be bound up in Russia's desire to free Krasikov, 57, convicted last year in Germany for the broad daylight slaying of a former Chechen leader in 2019, in a bicycle drive-by in a Berlin park.

No master criminal or global "merchant of death," Krasikov, who investigators say did dirty work for Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB, apparently bungled the escape. He was arrested after police found

him removing a disguise.

For their differences, Krasikov and Bout have a key fact in common: Convicted of high-profile crimes connected to the interests of the Russian state and held abroad, they both became bargaining chips in talks to free Americans.

U.S. officials are set to meet with their Russian counterparts this week to discuss Whelan, whom a Russian court convicted of espionage in 2019 in a case that his family and the U.S. government say was politically motivated, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters Monday. The White House maintains that efforts to include him in the swap that freed Griner were unsuccessful.

The push for a swap could be a nonstarter: German media outlets report that German officials have refused requests to release the convicted assassin.

Inflation slowdown eases some pressure

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Inflation in the United States slowed again last month in the latest sign that price increases are cooling despite the pressures they continue to inflict on American households.

Consumer prices rose 7.1% in November from those a year ago, the government said Tuesday. That was down sharply from 7.7% in October and a recent peak of 9.1% in June. It was the fifth straight decline.

Measured from month to month, which gives a more up-to-date snapshot, the consumer price index inched up just 0.1%. And so-called core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy costs and which the Federal Reserve tracks closely, slowed to 6%, compared with that of a year earlier. From October to November, core prices rose 0.2% — the mildest increase since August 2021.

All told, the latest figures provided the strongest evidence to date that inflation in the United States is steadily slowing from

the price acceleration that first struck about 18 months ago and reached a four-decade high earlier this year.

Gas prices have tumbled from their summer peak. The costs of used cars, health care, airline fares and hotel rooms also dropped in November. So did furniture and electricity prices. Housing costs jumped, though much of that data doesn't yet reflect real-time measures that show declines in home prices and apartment rents.

Grocery prices remain a trouble spot. They surged 0.5% from October to November and are up 12%, compared with grocery prices a year ago.

Those price spikes have left many Americans struggling to afford food. In Phoenix, there are long lines at St. Mary's Food Bank, which provided Thanksgiving meals to a record 19,000 families across Arizona last month.

"They're eating snacks and granola all day long," Rosa Davila, an unemployed single mother, said of her three teenagers while

waiting in line for a package Tuesday. "The food bank really resolves things for us."

Alma Quintera, also waiting in her car, said that even with her husband working full time as a house painter, they have to visit the food bank two or three times a month to adequately feed their three school-age children.

"The high prices have really affected us — the rent, the bills and especially the food," she said.

Jerry Brown, a spokesman for St. Mary's, said the food bank's main Phoenix location last week distributed packages to 4,717 families, up 63% from the same week a year ago.

Economists say the latest inflation figures, though, suggest the likelihood of some relief in the coming months.

"Inflation was terrible in 2022, but the outlook for 2023 is much better," said Bill Adams, chief economist for Comerica Bank. "Supply chains are working better, business inventories are higher, ending most of the shortages that fueled inflation in 2020."

Work holiday parties are back — but with some restraint

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Say goodbye to virtual wine tastings, and bust out the karaoke. Love them or hate them, company holiday parties are back — in a toned-down kind of way.

After more than two years of working in pajama bottoms and clinking glasses over Zoom, many office workers seem to be yearning for a bit of glamour. The same is true for some front-line workers who saw festivities canceled even as they showed up to work every day during the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It just always makes me feel special," said Shobha Surya, who missed treating herself to a new dress every year for the

dinner and karaoke party thrown by Ajinomoto Health and Nutrition North America, a Japanese-owned company based in the Chicago area. She was so excited the party was back for the first time in two years that she picked out her black-and-white cocktail dress two months in advance.

"Everybody let loose," she said, smiling the Monday after the party, where she accepted a recognition award for 15 years at the company. "It gets you into the holiday season."

More than 57% of companies are planning in-person holiday celebrations this year, according to a survey of 252 U.S.-based companies conducted by Challenger, Gray & Christmas,

a hiring firm. While that's still notably fewer than the 75% that threw parties in 2019, it's a big leap from 26% in 2021 and 5% in 2020.

Still, not everyone is ready to party like it's 2019.

Many parties will be more intimate, as companies try to accommodate workers who are increasingly remote and far-flung. Some businesses are opting for spas, juggling shows and even private movie theater showings to lure out employees who have relished working from home. And a few are sticking to the bonuses or extra time off that they offered instead of parties during the pandemic.

Cari Snaveley's team of 20 opted for an afternoon of pick-

leball when her Boston-based software company gave them a budget to decide on their own how to celebrate.

It's a far cry from the giant bashes she remembers from her days just a few years ago working at Coca-Cola Co. in Atlanta, but Snaveley said it's a better way to break the ice for people who haven't worked together in person much. Besides, she said, many of her teammates wanted the chance to leave work and get home early.

"We really wanted to make sure that as many people as possible could go," said Snaveley, who works in finance. "People have home commitments, kids."

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Purdy leads Niners to NFC West title

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Rookie quarterback Brock Purdy never doubted he'd take the field for the 49ers with a chance at winning a division title.

But how long Purdy would be able to play through his oblique injury lingered all night in the mind of San Francisco coach Kyle Shanahan.

"We were going to see how long he'd last and we were ready to go with (backup) Josh (Johnson)," Shanahan said. "But he just got comfortable and got better as the game went on. It's pretty unbelievable."

Purdy threw two touchdown passes to George Kittle, and the 49ers won their first NFC West title since 2019, beating the Seattle Seahawks 21-13 on Thursday night.

Despite using their third starting quarterback this season, the 49ers (10-4) continued to show they might be the class of the NFC alongside the Philadelphia Eagles. San Francisco won its seventh straight, using its stifling defense to frustrate Seattle into countless mistakes.

The Niners got a handful of big plays from their rookie quarterback, who didn't make any throws during the limited practice time leading into the game.

"My mindset was I was coming into this place to play and start. That was that," Purdy said.

Playing on the road for the first time in his career, Purdy connected on his first 11 pass attempts, including a 28-yard TD to Kittle in the first quarter when Purdy executed two fakes before hitting his wide-open tight end.

The play was called "Hollywood" and was flawless in its execution.

"Whenever Kyle dials something up that you know you're gonna get the ball, you try to speak it into existence. So you got to say

'touchdown' and visualize it, and it was actually perfect," Kittle said.

Purdy and Kittle connected again early in the second half as Seattle's defense blew a coverage and left Kittle open for a 54-yard TD and a 21-3 San Francisco lead. Purdy finished 17 of 26 for 217 yards, joining Aaron Rodgers as the only QBs since at least 1950 to have a passer rating of at least 115 in each of their first two starts.

"Honestly my mindset was even though I haven't thrown a ball, I played four days ago," Purdy said. "So I know where guys are supposed to be. I know what it's like to rip a ball on rhythm and in tight on time."

Kittle had four catches for 93 yards and Christian McCaffrey rushed for 108 yards, including a 1-yard TD run in the final minute of the first half following a Seattle turnover.

Seattle (7-7) lost for the fourth time in five games and its playoff hopes took another hit. Geno Smith threw for 238 yards and Seattle's first offensive TD this season against the 49ers, but was under constant pressure.

Seattle pulled within one score late in the fourth quarter after Robbie Gould missed a 43-yard field goal and the Seahawks went 67 yards in 1:25. Smith hit Noah Fant on a 10-yard TD with 3:35 remaining. But Purdy converted a third-and-1 with a scramble before the 2-minute warning, and Jordan Mason sealed the victory with a 55-yard rush with 1:02 remaining.

"I don't know if I have all the right words. But man, I just hate losing and gotta figure it out," Smith said.

Smith was sacked three times and hit nine times. When he did have time to throw, open windows for his pass catchers were small. Seattle had one play longer than 20 yards,

and wide receiver Tyler Lockett suffered a broken bone in his hand late in the game.

Seattle missed taking advantage of a 49ers mistake late in the first half.

Seattle scored its first offensive points in two games against the 49ers midway through the second quarter on Jason Myers' 38-yard field goal. Seattle's only points in the first matchup in Week 2 came on a blocked field goal returned for a touchdown.

But the Seahawks followed with a pair of critical mistakes. Quandre Diggs dropped a potential interception that would have given Seattle the ball on San Francisco's side of the field. And Travis Homer fumbled on a big hit by Dre Greenlaw at the Seattle 41 with 1:08 left in the second quarter. The fumble was returned 35 yards by Charvarius Ward, and two plays later, McCaffrey scored to give the 49ers a 14-3 lead.

Triumphant in Seattle

Shanahan also won his first division title at Seattle when San Francisco won the final game of the 2019 regular season.

Greedy Greenlaw

Greenlaw had either a forced fumble, fumble recovery or interception in five straight games. He had eight tackles.

Injuries

Seattle was without starting defensive tackle Al Woods due to an Achilles tendon injury and lost his backup Bryan Mone to a knee injury in the first quarter. ... San Francisco CB Ambry Thomas suffered an ankle injury. ... Seattle LB Jordyn Brooks (neck) didn't play in the fourth quarter. ... 49ers DE Samsom Ebukam limped off in the fourth quarter.

Massachusetts governor to be next NCAA president

Associated Press

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker will be the next president of the NCAA, stepping in to lead an organization with diminished power amid sweeping change across college sports.

The NCAA announced Thursday that Baker will replace Mark Emmert as the head of the largest college sports governing body in the country, with some 500,000 athletes at more than 1,100 schools.

Baker, a Republican, has been governor

of Massachusetts since 2015. He announced a year ago he would not seek reelection. His second term ends in January and he will start his new job in March.

He has never worked in college sports.

"I must say that when I was first approached about this, my initial reaction was that I was not exactly what you would call a traditional candidate," Baker said on a videoconference call with reporters.

Some of the traits that have made Baker a successful governor — including his ability

to negotiate with a Democrat-controlled Legislature and his more moderate stand on many social issues — have been seen as closing off a pursuit of higher office in a GOP that has turned sharply to the right.

Baker said his time in state government, building consensus among various constituencies, coalitions and factions, should help in leading a diverse association with a wide range of priorities.

"I certainly think the challenges here are significant," Baker said.

Herro hits 10 3s, scores 41 to lead Heat

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Tyler Herro matched the Miami record with 10 three-pointers and scored a career-high 41 points to help the Heat beat the Houston Rockets 111-108 on Thursday night.

A night after making nine three-pointers and scoring 35 points in a victory at Oklahoma City, Herro became the fourth Heat player to hit 10 threes in a game — a feat most recently accomplished by Duncan Robinson on Dec. 10, 2019.

Herro was 10 of 15 from three-point range. He also had six rebounds. Jimmy Butler added 20 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists, and Caleb Martin had 13 points. Miami has won three straight to improve to 15-15.

Jalen Green led Houston with 22 points on 8-of-21 shooting. Kevin Porter Jr. added 21, Jabari Smith Jr. had 15 points and 11 rebounds, and Alperen Sengun finished with 12 points.

Suns 111, Clippers 95: Mikal Bridges scored 27 points, Chris Paul added 15 points and 13 assists and visiting Phoenix snapped a five-game losing streak by beating Los Angeles.

Terance Mann scored a season-high 22 for the Clippers.

Jazz 132, Pelicans 129 (OT): Jordan Clarkson scored a season-high 39 points in Utah's overtime victory over visiting New Orleans.

Zion Williamson had 31 points, eight rebounds, eight assists and two blocks for New Orleans. C.J. McCollum added 28 points, and Nate Marshall and Larry Nance, Jr. each had 13.

Grizzlies 142, Bucks 101: Ja Morant had 25 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists as host Memphis pounded Milwaukee.

Dillon Brooks added 18 points and Tyus Jones had 16 for the Grizzlies. Memphis opened a 50-point lead in the fourth quarter for the NBA's largest advantage this season.

Oettinger makes 45 saves, Stars deny Ovechkin, Caps

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Jake Oettinger made 45 saves to lead the Dallas Stars to a 2-1 comeback victory over the Washington Capitals on Thursday night and deny Alex Ovechkin another milestone goal.

Washington's winning streak ended at five, and Ovechkin's run of four consecutive games with a goal came to an end. Ovechkin remains at 800, one back of tying Gordie Howe for second on the NHL career list.

"Obviously I don't want that to happen — not against us," Oettinger said. "They can do that stuff another night. It's always fun playing one of the best to ever do it, and it was a fun challenge and we stepped up."

Jamie Benn tied it early in the third period, and Colin Miller scored the go-ahead goal on a fluky carom less than 90 seconds later.

The Stars won for the fourth time in five games.

Ovechkin did get on the scoresheet, setting up Conor Sheary's tally in the second period for his 645th assist. That pulled Ovechkin even with a different Hockey Hall of Famer, Bobby Orr, for 70th all-time in assists and generated faint "Ovi! Ovi!" chants from fans in attendance looking to see a different kind of history.

Rangers 3, Maple Leafs 1: Jimmy Vesey had two goals, Igor Shesterkin made 22 saves and host New York earned its fifth straight victory.

Toronto lost in regulation for the first time since Nov. 11. It went 12-0-3 in its previous 15 games. The Maple Leafs also had recorded a point in nine straight road games, including seven wins.

Penguins 4, Panthers 2: Pittsburgh got a goal from defenseman Kris Letang, playing

in his third game since having a stroke, in a victory over host Florida.

Jake Guentzel scored twice and Evgeni Malkin added a power-play goal for the Penguins, who earned their seventh straight victory. Tristan Jarry made 32 saves.

Kings 3, Bruins 2 (SO): Adrian Kempe scored twice in the third period to rally Los Angeles from a two-goal deficit, and Trevor Moore scored for the Kings in the seventh round of the shootout.

It was just the second loss at home for the Bruins all season.

Pheonix Copley stopped 33 shots in regulation and overtime and another five in the shootout for the Kings, who had lost two in a row and 10 of their previous 15 games.

Sabres 4, Avalanche 2: Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 40 saves for Buffalo, and Tage Thompson had a goal and two assists.

Tyson Jost had an assist in his first game in Denver against his former team. Jost, who was dealt to Minnesota at the trade deadline last season, got an ovation from the fans after a scoreboard video highlighted his five-plus years with the Avalanche.

Lightning 4, Blue Jackets 1: Brayden Point extended his goal streak to five games, and host Tampa Bay's Brian Elliott made 24 saves in his seventh straight victory.

Lightning captain Steve Stamkos had his 14-game point streak stopped. He holds the team record with an 18-game run in 2009-10.

Golden Knights 4, Blackhawks 1: Reilly Smith scored twice and rookie Logan Thompson made 23 saves to lead visiting Vegas to the victory.

The Blackhawks have scored

a total of five goals during a five-game slide. Chicago is 1-12-1 in its past 14.

Flyers 2, Devils 1: Carter Hart matched his career high with 48 saves and Travis Konecny scored the tiebreaking goal with 8:14 to play as Philadelphia extended host New Jersey's season-high skid to four games.

Scott Laughton also scored as the Flyers snapped a four-game winless streak (0-2-2) and beat the Devils for the second time in three meetings.

Hurricanes 3, Kraken 2: Goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov's scoreless streak ended, but host Carolina held on after building an early lead.

Kochetkov, who went more than 151 minutes without allowing a goal, made 15 saves for his sixth win in the team's past seven games.

Blues 4, Oilers 3 (SO): Jordan Kyrrou scored the shootout winner as visiting St. Louis earned its second straight win.

Kyrrou also had a goal and two assists in regulation. Robert Thomas and Vladimir Tarasenko also scored for St. Louis.

Jets 2, Predators 1 (OT): Kyle Connor scored 3:31 into overtime, lifting host Winnipeg to the victory.

Dylan DeMelo also scored for the Jets, and Connor Hellebuyck made 25 saves. The Jets snapped a two-game skid while improving to 19-9-1.

Ducks 5, Canadiens 2: John Klingberg scored twice and visiting Anaheim won in regulation for only the second time this season.

Troy Terry also scored for Anaheim. Adam Henrique and Frank Vatrano added empty-netters, and Lukas Dostal made 23 saves. The Ducks improved to 8-20-3, ending a three-game skid.

Messi carries the weight of Argentina

Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — As Lionel Messi approaches his second and likely last World Cup final, the stakes could hardly be higher.

The same goes for Argentina after more than 30 years of disappointment since it last won soccer's ultimate prize.

For Messi, victory against France at Lusail Stadium on Sunday is a chance to finally get his hands on the one major trophy that has eluded him in his storied career.

In doing so, he would push ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo, who has never won a World Cup, in the long-running rivalry between the greatest players of their generation.

Ronaldo, 37, exited the tournament in the quarterfinals, benched by Portugal and in tears in the likely recognition that his last chance had passed. Messi is summoning some of his finest moments in an Argentina shirt to inspire his country's run to the final.

"Each time we see him play, he makes us and the players feel something special," Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said. "There's something about him that people like, not only Argentines.

"We feel lucky and privileged to have him wear our shirt."

Messi's place alongside Diego Maradona as one of Argentina's two most iconic soccer stars has been secure for some time now. But he is yet to emulate Maradona's greatest achievement by leading his national team to a World Cup title.

Maradona did that in Mexico in 1986 and Messi has lived with the expectation of repeating the feat since he emerged as a prodigy at Barcelona nearly 20 years ago.

There have been numerous false hopes during that time.

There was the potential "dream team" of Maradona as coach and Messi as star player in South Africa in 2010. Argentina went out in the quarterfinals, losing 4-0 to Germany.

In 2014, with Messi approaching his peak years, Argentina reached the final in Brazil. Again it faced Germany. Again Messi was on the losing side, beaten 1-0 through extra time.

At the age of 35, he knew this was probably his last shot at the World Cup and he has risen to the occasion as the tournament's co-leading scorer with France forward Kylian Mbappé with five goals.

Perhaps more notable have been his assists, such as the disguised pass for Nahuel Molina's goal against the Netherlands in the quarterfinals. Then there was his mesmerizing run, turning Croatia defender Joško

5 storylines for the World Cup final

Lionel Messi's last chance. Kylian Mbappé's shot at emulating Pelé. A third World Cup title for either Argentina or France.

Sunday's final is rich with storylines as the 22nd edition of the World Cup ends with a title match fit for the occasion.

Here are five things to know about the final:

Messi's moment

Is Lionel Messi the greatest soccer player of all time? The debate will rage forever because there can never be a definitive answer. Some — especially younger soccer fans — think so, while others will point to Pelé and Diego Maradona, particularly because they won the World Cup — the sport's ultimate prize. It is why, to many, Messi needs to win the World Cup to join Pelé and Maradona in the pantheon of the greatest ever players, even if deciding who is Nos. 1, 2 and 3 comes down to individual choice. Argentines would still be split between Maradona and Messi. And there have been striking similarities between them as Messi displays the kind of relentless brilliance and fighting spirit shown by Maradona when leading the team to the title in 1986. Messi is heading into his second World Cup final, having been on the losing team in 2014 when he was contained well by Germany except for one chance that he dragged wide in the second half. Can he seize his chance this time in likely his final appearance on soccer's biggest stage?

Mbappé's double?

Mbappé might not have won the biggest prize in club soccer — the Champions League — but he is taking the international game by storm and is one victory away from winning back-to-back World Cups by the age of 23. He can emulate Pelé's achievement in winning his first two World Cups — not just that but leading the team as its star player. Mbappé is soccer's latest superstar, leading the new wave of talent in the game after 15 years of domination from Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. It will be regarded as a real baton-passing moment if Mbappé wins the World Cup at the expense of the 35-year-old Messi.

Third title

Both Argentina and France are looking to win the World Cup for the third time. It would leave the winning team in outright fourth place on the all-time list,

behind Brazil (five), Germany and Italy (both four). Three of Germany's titles were won by West Germany (1954, 1974 and 1990). A victory for France would rubber-stamp its status as the dominant national team of this generation, with its previous titles coming in 1998 and 2018. Argentina won its titles in 1978 and 1986. Both of the countries won their first World Cup title when hosting the tournament.

Deschamps' treble

France coach Didier Deschamps has won the World Cup as a player (1998) and a coach (2018), like Brazil's Mario Zagallo and Germany's Franz Beckenbauer. Neither Zagallo nor Beckenbauer won it twice as a coach, though Zagallo did it twice as a player to make him a three-time career champion. History beckons, then, for Deschamps, who was an industrious, deep-lying midfielder as a player — once referred to as "The Water Carrier" by French player Eric Cantona because of his ability to stifle attacks from opponents and then pass the ball simply to more creative players around him. Pragmatism is the key to his coaching style as well, with France renowned at both the 2018 and 2022 World Cups for defending compactly, hitting teams on the break and being clinical with its finishing. In Russia four years ago, France averaged 48% possession in matches and averaged six shots on goal per match — the second lowest at the tournament. In Qatar, France — hurt by injuries to key players — might not have been the best team but it is the most efficient. "I'm not the most important person," Deschamps said. "It's the French team."

Golden Boot

Four players are in realistic contention to win the Golden Boot, the award given to the top scorer at the World Cup. Of course, Messi and Mbappé are among them. They each have five goals so far, one more than Argentina striker Julián Álvarez and France center forward Olivier Giroud. According to tournament regulations, if two or more players are tied on goals and have played the same number of games, the one with the most assists takes the prize. FIFA's technical study group will decide what counts as an assist. Of the four players in contention, Messi currently leads the way with three assists, one more than Mbappé. No player has scored more than six goals at a World Cup since Brazil striker Ronaldo had eight in 2002.

— Associated Press

Gvardiol inside out, before setting up Julián Álvarez for Argentina's third in the semis.

"It's at least something I can talk (about) with my kids one day that I guarded this great, great player," Gvardiol said Thursday.

If this is his farewell tour, he has given his supporters a wild ride along the way.

And with or without a World Cup, Scaloni has no doubt about Messi's status as the greatest of all time.

"It seems like we say that just because we're Argentinians and we fall into the trap of being selfish because it is very Argentinian to say that," he said. "But I think there are no doubts."