

China-Russia ties concerning to Aquilino

Associated Press

TOKYO — The head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said Monday that he is “very concerned” about increased joint military actions by China and Russia in the region.

Adm. John C. Aquilino spoke in Tokyo as another regional concern, North Korea, conducted its latest intercontinental ballistic missile test, underscoring the advancement of its capabilities.

Aquilino is meeting with Japanese defense officials ahead of a joint exercise, Keen Edge 24, early next year.

He urged China to stop escalating maritime confrontations with its neighbors, and said its increasing military activity with Russia is a serious concern during Moscow’s war in Ukraine.

“I view it as far beyond the marriage of convenience at this point in time” he said. “If you tied DPRK (North Korea) into that, the Russia-DPRK cooperation, and the fact that the only partner of the DPRK prior to that was (China), that’s just a bad neighborhood and bad group to be in,” Aquilino said.

North Korea has been pushing to expand cooperation with Russia and China. There have been concerns that the North has supplied missiles and other ammunition to Russia to support its war in Ukraine, in exchange for obtaining Russian missile technology.

Chinese and Russian bombers had a joint flight last week over the East China Sea to the waters between Japan and the Korean Peninsula, causing Japanese fighter jets to scramble

against them, according to Japan’s Defense Ministry.

Japan has territorial disputes with China over the Japanese-controlled East China Sea islands which Beijing also claims. It considers China a threat to national security and is in the process of a rapid military buildup.

Japan is particularly concerned about China’s increased joint activity with Russia’s military around the Japanese coast.

China has growing tensions with other neighbors.

Standoffs between China and the Philippines over a number of disputed offshore areas in the South China Sea have escalated this year. The United States has warned China that it is obligated to defend the Philippines, its treaty ally, if Filipino forces come under attack. China has

warned the U.S. to stay away from what it calls a purely Asian dispute.

China also activated sonar in waters where an Australian ship had divers working.

But China’s flight and maritime close encounters with U.S. warplanes and ships have stopped since U.S. President Joe Biden and China’s Xi Jinping agreed in November to stabilize their relationship and re-establish military communication.

But Aquilino’s requested talks with his Chinese counterpart have been pending for three years, and he is waiting for China to respond to his renewed request.

“No reply yet,” he said, other than the Chinese embassy saying they have to work out the technology to set up the call.

N. Korea launches long-range ballistic missile

BY DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

SUWON, South Korea — North Korea fired a long-range ballistic missile off its eastern coast at 8:34 a.m. Monday, hours after it fired a short-range missile the previous night, according to the South Korean military.

The long-range ballistic missile was launched at a lofted angle from the Pyongyang area toward the East Sea, or Sea of Japan, the Ministry of National Defense said in a text message to news reporters. It said the missile traveled over 620 miles.

South Korea’s military can “overwhelmingly respond to any provocation” and “keep a close eye on North Korea’s various activities,” the ministry said in its message.

Monday’s launch followed about 10 hours after North Korea fired a short-range ballistic missile from the same area toward the East Sea at 10:38 p.m. Sunday. That missile flew 354 miles before splashing down.

The missile launch Sunday was “immediately captured, tracked and monitored” by South Korea, which shared the information with the United States and Japan, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement the same day.

The Joint Chiefs said the launch was “a clear provocation” that violated U.N. Security Council resolutions. North Korea has been banned by the Security Council from all ballistic missile activity since 2006.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in a statement said Sunday’s short-range missile “does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies.”

The Monday launch marks the 24th ballistic missile fired by North Korea in 17 separate days of testing so far this year.

An unidentified North Korean Defense Ministry spokesman on Sunday described the U.S. and South Korea as “hostile forces” that have destabilized the Korean Peninsula with their joint military drills, according to a statement in the state-run Ko-

rean Central News Agency.

Washington and Seoul “have aggravated the situation in the Korean Peninsula with their reckless military provocations” and “are going to finish the end of the year with a preview of a nuclear war,” the statement said.

The launches also follow the arrival Sunday of a U.S. submarine arrived in South Korea. The USS Missouri docked in Busan, becoming the third American submarine to visit the Korean Peninsula this year, according to a news release from the South Korean navy on Sunday.

The Missouri is a Virginia-class fast-attack sub whose mission includes anti-submarine warfare, intelligence gathering, special operations and strike warfare, according to the Navy.

The USS Kentucky, an Ohio-class ballistic missile sub capable of launching nuclear weapons, arrived in Busan in July; the USS Santa Fe, a Los Angeles-class attack sub, docked four months later.

Analysts: Carrier near Israel adds strain

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy's decision to keep two aircraft carriers near Israel will make it difficult to meet maintenance schedules unless one returns home by early next year, analysts say.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has ordered USS Gerald R. Ford and the cruiser USS Normandy to remain in the region for several more weeks, The Associated Press reported Friday.

Ford deployed from Norfolk, Va., in May, but had its November homecoming delayed following the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel. The USS Dwight D. Eisenhower arrived in the region in October for its scheduled deployment.

Beyond their immense combat and surveillance capabilities, the aircraft carriers serve as a potent political symbol of support for Israel, which has been criticized for civilian casualties and the displacement of most of Gaza's population during its war to annihilate Hamas.

But while the aircraft carriers have kept busy, they haven't pushed their limits.

Ford conducted 2,489 sorties, or flights, from Oct. 9 through Dec. 7, Cmdr. Richlyn Ivey, a

spokesperson for U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet, said in an Dec. 12 email. Eisenhower tallied 2,051 sorties from Oct. 24 through Dec. 7, she said.

That's a daily average of about 41 for Ford and 45 for Eisenhower. The carriers are designed to surge to as many as 270 and 240 sorties, respectively, over a 24-hour period, according to the Navy.

The service didn't offer additional details about the carriers' activities or operations. Besides flights, the carrier strike groups' myriad capabilities include long-range missile tracking and intelligence gathering.

But the flight activity suggests Ford could return state-side for needed maintenance and crew rest without undercutting U.S. efforts to keep Iran-backed proxies from broadening the war into a regional conflict, analysts say.

"The strategic signaling has fulfilled its purpose," said Johannes Peters, department manager of the Center for Maritime Strategy and Security at Kiel University in Germany.

Pro-Iran groups have launched dozens of drone and missile attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria since the war began, while the Iran-backed

Houthis in Yemen have launched missiles at shipping in the Red Sea. However, Iran's national forces haven't publicly entered the fray.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah has skirmished with Israel from the Lebanon border. But Peters noted they aren't heavily engaged in the fighting. At current levels of conflict, two carriers aren't necessary, Peters said.

Ford's continued deployment could have future impacts upon the larger fleet, according to naval analysts. Maintenance backlogs, crew fatigue and shortages, and shipyard decay were among contributing factors found to be hurting Navy readiness, according to a Government Accountability Office report released in May.

"If we try to do it all, everywhere, we will strain the fleet once again and weaken ourselves should a hot war erupt that directly involves the U.S. as a combatant," said James Holmes, who chairs the maritime strategy program at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.

The Navy is still working through a maintenance backlog left over from the last time the U.S. kept a constant one- or two-carrier presence in the Middle East at the height of the Iraq and

Afghanistan wars, Holmes said.

The Navy did not answer Stars and Stripes questions last week about the impact of an extended deployment on Ford's maintenance schedule.

While the dual-carrier operations are a strain on the service, the flexibility to take action is important, said Sebastian Bruns, a naval security expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank.

For example, there is still the possibility of a noncombatant evacuation operation from Lebanon.

And while a carrier deployment sends a political signal to a region, its departure sends one as well, Bruns said.

The service has 11 aircraft carriers, of which five are underway or deployed, according to a USNI News report Dec. 11.

Two are in various stages of maintenance, according to posts on official social media pages for USS John C. Stennis and USS George H.W. Bush, while USS Harry S. Truman ended its maintenance period Sunday.

USS Abraham Lincoln and USS George Washington appear to be readying for future deployment. USS Nimitz is undergoing planned maintenance.

Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria plan to clear Black Sea mines

Bloomberg News

Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria plan a joint force to clear mines drifting into their areas of the Black Sea as part of the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The agreement, expected to be signed next month, would be the first major joint action of Black Sea nations since President Vladimir Putin started the

war on Ukraine in February 2022.

The defense ministers of the three countries are planning to hold a signing ceremony in Istanbul on Jan. 11, Turkish Defense Minister Yasar Guler said Saturday.

The coalition will try to tackle a threat to a major trade route, especially for grains, and to protect energy-exploration vessels

in the area. Turkey has detected an increasing number of Ukrainian and Russian mines drifting toward the Turkish straits, Guler said.

While all three countries in the joint force are NATO allies, it wouldn't be considered a NATO operation, he said. Turkey opposes the presence of naval assets in the Black Sea from other NATO countries, including

the US, arguing they could further fuel tensions in the region.

"The Black Sea can be managed by the countries that have a coast to the Black Sea, because we know that if someone from outside enters, the peace of this place will be disturbed," Guler said.

"But of course we will ask for help from our allies if we need it."

GAO to study care for DOD civilians in Japan

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — American civilians working on U.S. bases in Japan are celebrating plans for a probe into health care available to those supporting U.S. forces in that country and in the Northern Mariana Islands.

The Government Accountability Office study is required by the National Defense Authorization Act, an annual bill detailing defense policy, which was passed by the House on Thursday and is awaiting President Joe Biden's signature.

American civilians working on military bases in Japan had complained when the Defense Health Agency, under a congressional mandate, on Jan. 1 limited chronic care at base hospitals to only beneficiaries under Tricare Prime, the military's top-tier

medical plan, which includes active-duty service members, their families and eligible retirees.

Department of Defense civilian workers, including agency employees, contractors, schoolteachers, analysts and others, were limited to space-available appointments only for sudden-onset, or acute ailments.

Two months later the DHA reversed itself and said DOD civilian employees in the Indo-Pacific region could seek treatment again at base hospitals for chronic health conditions like diabetes or high-blood pressure. But they may only schedule appointments on a space-available basis.

An earlier version of the defense legislation had required that the U.S. Indo-Pacific command study medical manning requirements and access to health care in the U.S. Forces Japan and

Joint Region Marianas areas of responsibilities.

However, the law that was ultimately passed requires the study be conducted by the Comptroller General of the United States, who is the director of the GAO.

The office must submit an interim briefing to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees within 180 days of the bill's enactment, with a final report to be submitted on a date agreed by the comptroller general and the committees.

The Japan Medical Advocacy group, which links civilians affected by changes to health care access on U.S. bases and has 1,500 followers, celebrated plans for the study in a Facebook post Saturday.

"After countless hours of tireless advocacy from our dedicated volunteers, Congress has official-

ly taken a stand," the post read. "They've called in the big guns — the Government Accountability Office — for an in-depth, independent study on healthcare access issues for both military and civilians stationed in Japan."

"Why does this matter? Because it's about ensuring our total force receives the care they deserve," the post states.

One advocacy group follower, Jorgi Stever, left her job as a Department of Navy comptroller at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on Friday for a position in the U.S., she said Monday. She had recently extended her stay in Japan for another two years. But recent health issues, including arthritis and a thyroid condition, became an issue, she said.

"The medical situation was 70% of the reason I left," she said by phone.

Border security-war aid talks grind on in Senate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Time slipping, White House and Senate negotiators struggled Sunday to reach a U.S. border security deal that would unlock President Joe Biden's request for billions of dollars worth of military aid for Ukraine and other national security needs before senators leave town for the holiday recess.

The Biden administration, which is becoming more deeply involved in the talks, is facing pressure from all sides over any deal. Negotiators insist they are making progress, but a hoped-for framework did not emerge. Republican leaders signaled that without bill text, an upcoming procedural would likely fail.

The talks come as Donald Trump, the Republican presidential front-runner in 2024, delivered anti-immigrant remarks about "blood" purity over the weekend, echoing Nazi slogans of World War II at a political rally.

"They're poisoning the blood of our country," Trump said about the record numbers of immigrants coming to the U.S. without immediate legal status.

Speaking in the early-voting state of New Hampshire, Trump drew on words similar to Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" as the former president berated Biden's team over the flow of migrants. "All over the world they're pouring into our country," Trump said.

Throughout the weekend, senators and top Biden officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, have been working intently behind closed doors at the Capitol to strike a border deal, which Republicans in Congress are demanding in exchange for any help for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said senators don't want to be "jammed" by a last-minute compromise reached by negotiators.

Haley slams DeSantis for event with holdout Massie

Associated Press

ALTOONA, Iowa — Nikki Haley denounced Republican presidential rival Ron DeSantis in Iowa on Sunday for campaigning in the state with Kentucky Rep. Thomas Massie, the lone House Republican who voted last week against a GOP resolution condemning antisemitism on university campuses.

"You can't be pro-Israel and bring the most anti-Israel Republican into this state, who voted against fighting antisemitism on college campuses," Haley said. "And that's who he brought to your state."

Coming at the end of a campaign event in suburban Des Moines, Haley's criticism of DeSantis for campaigning with Massie on Saturday marks the increased pressure for the two to emerge from Iowa as the stronger alternative to former President Donald Trump. Trump is the heavy favorite to win Iowa's lead-

off caucuses on Jan. 15. Last week at a campaign event in eastern Iowa, Trump stressed that an Iowa blowout would help him rally the party early in the 2024 voting.

DeSantis and Haley have increasingly sparred publicly, as they have during debates, while ads by groups supporting each have sought to stall the other's movement in Iowa with less than a month until the caucuses.

DeSantis campaigned in Iowa with Massie when the two headlined a town hall-style event geared toward gun rights policy in Johnston, a Des Moines suburb. Massie has previously critiqued antisemitism-related legislation as restricting free speech, voting against related GOP-sponsored resolutions since the Israel-Hamas war began.

Support for Israel is a top priority for most Republicans, especially evangelical Christians who form an influential bloc in the Iowa GOP.

'Not here to dictate timelines,' Austin tells Israeli counterpart

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed with Israeli leaders Monday ways to scale back major combat operations in Gaza, but said Washington was not imposing a timetable despite international calls for a cease-fire.

Austin and other U.S. officials have repeatedly expressed concern about the large number of civilian deaths in Gaza, even while underscoring American backing for Israel's campaign aimed at crushing Hamas. Neither side elaborated Monday on what needed to change on the ground for a shift to more precise operations after weeks of devastating bombardment and a ground offensive.

At a press conference alongside Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, Austin said, "This is Israel's operation. I'm not here to dictate timelines or terms." The United States has vetoed calls for a cease-fire at the U.N. and rushed munitions to Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Israel will keep fighting until it ends

Hamas rule in Gaza, crushes its formidable military capabilities and frees the dozens of hostages still held in Gaza since the deadly Oct. 7 attack inside Israel that ignited the war.

Israeli protesters have demanded the government relaunch talks with Hamas on releasing more hostages after three were mistakenly killed by Israeli troops.

Talks were underway Monday to broker freedom for more hostages, as CIA Director William Burns met in Warsaw, Poland, with the head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency and the prime minister of Qatar, a U.S. official said. It was the first known meeting of the three since the end of a weeklong cease-fire in late November, during which some 100 hostages were freed in exchange for about 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

More than 100 people were killed in Israeli strikes on residential buildings in northern Gaza on Sunday, a Health Ministry official in the Hamas-run territory said.

The 10-week-old war has killed more than 19,000 Palestinians and transformed much of the north into a moonscape. About 1.9 million Palestinians — nearly 85% of Gaza's population — have fled their homes, with most packing into U.N.-run shelters and tent camps in the southern part of the territory.

Austin, who arrived in Israel with Air Force Gen. CQ Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said he and Israeli officials exchanged "thoughts on how to transition from high intensity operations" and how to increase the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza. American officials have called for targeted operations aimed at killing Hamas leaders, destroying tunnels and rescuing hostages. Those calls came after President Joe Biden warned that Israel is losing international support because of its "indiscriminate bombing."

Speaking alongside Austin, Gallant said only that "the war will take time." Last week, Gallant said Israel would continue major combat operations for several more months.

Pope OKs same-sex blessings

Associated Press

ROME — Pope Francis has formally approved allowing priests to bless same-sex couples, with a new document explaining a radical change in Vatican policy by insisting that people seeking God's love and mercy shouldn't be subject to "an exhaustive moral analysis" to receive it.

The document from the Vatican's doctrine office, released Monday, elaborates on a letter Francis sent to two conservative cardinals that was published in October. In that preliminary response, Francis suggested such blessings could be offered under some circumstances if they didn't confuse the ritual with the sacrament of marriage.

The new document repeats that rationale and elaborates on it, reaffirming that marriage is a lifelong sacrament between a man and a woman.

And it stresses that blessings should not be conferred at the same time as a civil union, using set rituals or even with the clothing and gestures that belong in a wedding.

But it says requests for such blessings should not be denied full stop. It offers an extensive definition of the term "blessing" in Scripture to insist that people seeking a transcendent relationship with God and looking for his love and mercy should not be subject to "an exhaustive moral analysis" as a precondition for receiving it.

"Ultimately, a blessing offers people a means to increase their trust in God," the document said. "The request for a blessing, thus, expresses and nurtures openness to the transcendence, mercy and closeness to God in a thousand concrete circumstances of life, which is no small thing in the world in which we live."

Study: Severe obesity in children up

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A new study adds to evidence that severe obesity is becoming more common in young U.S. children.

There was some hope that children in a government food program might be bucking a trend in obesity rates — earlier research found rates were dropping a little about a decade ago for those kids. But an update released Monday in the journal *Pediatrics* shows the rate bounced back up a bit by 2020.

The increase echoes other national data, which suggests around 2.5% of all preschool-

aged children were severely obese during the same period.

"We were doing well and now we see this upward trend," said one of the study's authors, Heidi Blanck of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "We are dismayed at seeing these findings."

The study looked at children ages 2 to 4 enrolled in the Women, Infants and Children program, which provides healthy foods and other services to preschool-aged children in low-income families. The children were weighed and measured.

The researchers found that

2.1% of kids in the program were severely obese in 2010. Six years later, the rate had dipped to 1.8%. But by 2020, it was 2%. That translates to about 33,000 of more than 1.6 million kids in the WIC program.

Significant increases were seen in 20 states, with the highest rate in California at 2.8%. There were also notable rises in some racial and ethnic groups. The highest rate, about 2.8%, was in Hispanic kids.

Experts have said severe obesity at a very early age is nearly irreversible, and is associated with chronic health problems.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man pleads not guilty in \$99M wine fraud case

NY NEW YORK — A British man pleaded not guilty in a New York courtroom Saturday in connection with an alleged \$99 million, Ponzi-like fraud involving high-priced fine wine and duped investors.

Stephen Burton, 58, was extradited Friday to New York from Morocco, where he was arrested in 2022 after using a bogus Zimbabwean passport to enter that country, U.S. Attorney Breon Peace's office said.

Burton pleaded not guilty to charges of wire fraud, wire fraud conspiracy and money laundering conspiracy.

Prosecutors said Burton and another British man, James Wellesley, 56, ran a company called Bordeaux Cellars, which they said brokered loans between investors and wealthy wine collectors that were secured by their wine collections. They solicited \$99 million in investments from residents of New York and other areas from 2017 to 2019, telling them they would profit from interest on the loans, authorities said.

But prosecutors alleged the operation was a scam. They said the wealthy wine collectors did not exist, no loans were made, and Bordeaux Cellars did not have custody of the wine securing the loans.

Judge vacates man's murder conviction

IL CHICAGO — A Chicago man who spent 35 years behind bars for a murder he didn't commit has been freed after a judge vacated his conviction and dismissed all charges.

Brian Beals, 57, struggled to find the right words to describe his feelings as he stood outside Robinson Correctional Center in Crawford County, some 210 miles south of Chicago, and embraced his sister and niece.

Beals was convicted in the 1988 murder of 6-year-old Demetrius Campbell. At the time, Beals, a 22-year-old student at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, was home in Chicago during Thanksgiving break. He was approached by a drug dealer and they argued, according to news accounts at the time. Attorneys say Beals got in his car and drove off. Bullets fired in Beals' direction hit two bystanders, the boy and his mother, Valerie Campbell.

Despite three witnesses describing a different offender, Beals was convicted, namely on Campbell's testimony. She said she saw Beals in the argument and believed he fired the shots.

Ex-Jaguars staffer pleads guilty to stealing \$22M

FL JACKSONVILLE — A 31-year-old former Jacksonville Jaguars financial manager accused of stealing more than \$22 million from the NFL franchise through its virtual credit card program pleaded guilty to federal charges and faces up to 30 years in prison.

Amit Patel pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud and one count of engaging in an illegal monetary transaction in U.S. District Court in Jacksonville. As part of his plea agreement, he will forfeit property and assets funded with the money he admitted to stealing from the NFL franchise between 2019 and 2023. He also will be required to provide restitution to

the team.

Patel's lawyer said last week that Patel had gambled away "approximately 99%" of the misappropriated money. Patel said in court he is undergoing weekly treatment for a gambling addiction.

Doctor, wife charged in fake prescription scheme

NY NEW YORK — A doctor and his wife who appeared on the Bravo reality series "Below Deck" were arraigned in New York on Thursday on charges that they filled out bogus opioid prescriptions using the names of cast members from the show.

Urologist Francis Martinis and his wife, Jessica Martinis, of Fort Salonga, N.Y., were each charged with criminal sale of a prescription for a controlled substance by a practitioner and falsifying business records.

Both pleaded not guilty, according to their attorney.

"Below Deck," which premiered on Bravo in 2013, follows crew members and the passengers they cater to aboard a luxury yacht. The Martinises appeared on the spinoff "Below Deck Mediterranean" in 2019. Francis Martinis also appeared on "Below Deck Sailing Yacht" the following year.

Air Jordans made for filmmaker up for auction

OR PORTLAND — The shiny, gold Nike sneakers were hard to miss in the donation pile at a shelter in Portland, Ore., earlier this year.

They were Air Jordan 3s, size 12½, and one of just a few custom pairs that had been made for filmmaker Spike Lee. Now they're up for auction, where

they could fetch \$20,000 to benefit the shelter.

The shoes were anonymously dropped in the donation chute at the Portland Rescue Mission in the spring. A formerly homeless man in the mission's long-term shelter program found them while sorting through donations and brought them to the attention of the staff, according to a blog post on the mission's website.

Nike designer Tinker Hatfield designed the kicks in 2019 for Lee, who wore his pair to the Academy Awards that year when he accepted an Oscar for his "BlacKkKlansmen" screenplay. The donated sneakers weren't Lee's personal pair, but were among a few made for him to give out to his inner circle, the Portland Rescue Mission said.

Hatfield visited the shelter and authenticated the shoes.

Small plane crashes, catches fire on highway

NC ASHEVILLE — A small plane crashed on a western North Carolina highway and caught fire Thursday night, but the two people on board escaped life-threatening injuries, authorities said.

A single-engine Diamond DA-40 crashed on Interstate 26 near Asheville Regional Airport around 8:15 p.m. with two people on board, the Federal Aviation Administration reported.

The North Carolina State Highway Patrol said the plane hit power lines that cross I-26 and one wing hit a tractor-trailer, WLOS-TV reported. The plane was engulfed in flames.

The truck was damaged, but the driver was not injured, the highway patrol said.

— From wire reports

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Cook leads way as Bills trample Cowboys

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — The Bills' offense has found its legs in time to make a playoff push.

Josh Allen played the role of happy spectator by standing back and watching James Cook run left, right and up the middle as Buffalo ran away with a 31-10 win over the Dallas Cowboys on Sunday.

"I felt like the kid that didn't do anything in a class project but got an A," Allen said after he threw for just 94 yards, with a touchdown passing and one rushing. "But I'll do this 10 times out of 10 times, man. Like,

keep going."

A matchup of two of the NFL's top-scoring quarterbacks — Allen entered the week with 35 total touchdowns, and Dak Prescott was first in passing TDs with 28 — turned into a Buffalo stampede. Cook finished with 179 yards rushing and 221 yards from scrimmage, both career bests, while scoring on an 18-yard catch and a 24-yard run as the Cowboys' five-game winning streak was snapped.

"I just let it rip when I get my opportunity," said Cook, a second-year player who is the younger brother of New York Jets running back Dalvin Cook. "My

O-linemen, they were opening it up and I was hitting it. Finding that rhythm."

The Bills (8-6) won consecutive games for the first time since a three-game winning streak ended on Oct. 1 and gained ground in the AFC playoff race, moving one game ahead of Denver and Pittsburgh.

The Cowboys (10-4) clinched their third straight playoff berth before kickoff thanks to losses by Green Bay and Atlanta on Sunday and Detroit beating Denver on Saturday. But nothing else went right for Dallas, which fell a game behind NFC-best San Francisco.

Buffalo rushed for 266 yards, held the ball for 10 minutes longer than Dallas and had 28 first downs to the Cowboys' 14.

The NFL's top-scoring offense was limited to a field goal through 57 minutes. Dallas is 7-0 at home, where it has outscored opponents 279-108, but fell to 3-4 on the road, where it has been outscored 156-152.

"It's a gap. That's part of my message. We play so well at home, and there's just too big of a gap in our road games," coach Mike McCarthy said. "We are conscious of it. We have a long flight home to continue to talk about, think about (it)."

Ravens top Jaguars to win 4th straight, clinch playoff spot

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Lamar Jackson was sacked, or so it seemed.

Jacksonville Jaguars pass rusher Dawuane Smoot had Jackson in his grasp — until he didn't. The Baltimore Ravens star quarterback spun away from Smoot, rolled right and lofted a pass toward the goal line. Tight end Isaiah Likely outmaneuvered two defenders to bring down the ball — and bring home a win.

The play of the game propelled the Ravens to a 23-7 victory at Jacksonville that clinched a postseason berth Sunday night.

"I just had to make a play, make something happen," Jackson said. "I just made something happen."

Baltimore won its fourth in a row and moved a step closer to securing the No. 1 seed and home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs.

The Jaguars lost their third straight — all against AFC North teams — and fell into a tie with Houston and Indianapolis atop the AFC South. Self-inflicted woes have been a common thread in Jacksonville's skid.

"That's the head-scratcher," Jaguars coach Doug Pederson said. "That's the frustrating part. We can't get out of our own way and that's the frustrating part."

Trevor Lawrence fumbled twice in the latest letdown, including one in the fourth quarter that essentially sealed Baltimore's eighth victory in its last nine games. He was placed in the NFL's concussion protocol after the game and not allowed to speak to the media.

Browns 20, Bears 17: Joe Flacco passed

for 374 yards and led his team to 13 points in the fourth quarter, including Dustin Hopkins' go-ahead 34-yard field goal with 32 seconds left, and host Cleveland withstood a Hail Mary on the final play to beat Chicago.

Flacco was intercepted three times but made some brilliant throws in the closing minutes to rally the Browns, including a 51-yard touchdown pass to Amari Cooper with 3:08 left that tied it at 17-all.

Texans 19, Titans 16 (OT): Ka'imi Fairbairn kicked a 54-yard field goal as time expired in overtime, and visiting Houston rallied from a 13-point deficit without C.J. Stroud to beat Tennessee.

The Texans (8-6) entered the day one spot outside of the AFC's seven-team playoff field. They kept pace by winning without several key players, including Stroud — their stand-out rookie quarterback — and top receiver Nico Collins, right tackle George Fant and a pair of defensive starters.

49ers 45, Cardinals 29: Visiting San Francisco clinched its second straight NFC West title, getting three touchdowns from Christian McCaffrey to beat Arizona for its sixth straight win.

Charvarius Ward had two interceptions, including a pick-6, for the 49ers (11-3). Brock Purdy went 16-for-25 for 242 yards and tied a career high with four touchdown passes.

Rams 28, Commanders 20: Matthew Stafford passed for 258 yards and hit Cooper Kupp and Demarcus Robinson for touchdowns, leading host Los Angeles past free-falling Washington.

Kupp's eight receptions for 111 yards were highlighted by a 62-yard TD catch right after halftime for the Rams (7-7), who have won four of five to push their way into one of the three NFC wild-card playoff positions alongside New Orleans and Minnesota.

Buccaneers 34, Packers 20: Baker Mayfield threw for 381 yards and four touchdowns, and visiting Tampa Bay beat Green Bay for its third straight win.

Mayfield went 22-for-28 and threw touchdown passes to Mike Evans, Rachaad White, Ko Kieft and David Moore to help the Buccaneers (7-7) keep pace with New Orleans atop the NFC North. The Packers (6-8) lost their second straight to deal their playoff hopes a major blow.

Saints 24, Giants 6: Derek Carr passed for 218 yards and three touchdowns, and host New Orleans sacked Tommy DeVito seven times in a win over New York.

Dolphins 30, Jets 0: Raheem Mostert scored two touchdowns to set his team's single-season record with 20, Tua Tagovailoa threw for 224 yards and a score, and host Miami blanked New York without star receiver Tyreek Hill.

Chiefs 27, Patriots 17: Running back Jerick McKinnon threw for one touchdown and ran for another, and Patrick Mahomes passed for 305 yards and two scores to help visiting Kansas City beat New England.

Panthers 9, Falcons 7: Eddy Pineiro kicked a 23-yard field goal as time expired, and host Carolina dealt Atlanta's playoff hopes a huge blow in a game played in a steady downpour.

McCord goes from Ohio St. to Syracuse

Associated Press

Quarterback Kyle McCord, who started every game this season for Ohio State, announced Sunday that he is transferring to Syracuse.

McCord passed for 3,170 yards, 24 touchdowns and six interceptions in his third season at Ohio State, but first as a starter for the seventh-ranked Buckeyes (11-1). He was a four-star recruit out of Philadelphia and a high school teammate of Ohio State All-America receiver Marvin Harrison Jr.

McCord is the latest transfer addition for new Syracuse coach Fran Brown. The former Georgia assistant coach has also received transfer commits from former Bulldogs receivers Jackson Meeks and Zeed

Haynes.

Brown is a New Jersey native who previously worked at Temple and Rutgers before spending two seasons with Georgia.

Georgia has had a total of 15 scholarship players enter the transfer portal during the December window, including linebacker Jamon Dumas-Johnson, a finalist for the Butkus Award in 2022, and freshman cornerback A.J. Harris, a former five-star recruit.

Dumas-Johnson's 2023 season was cut short by a forearm injury he suffered during a Nov. 4 victory over Missouri. He finished with 34 tackles, including 5.5 for losses and 3.5 sacks.

CJ Allen stepped into the lineup in place of Dumas-Johnson, recording 24 tackles and

earning a pair of SEC Freshman of the Week awards over the final four games.

Harris was one of the top prospects in the 2023 recruiting class, but decided to move on after seeing action in just seven games.

Mississippi also had a busy weekend in the transfer portal, adding former Florida defensive end Princely Umanmielen and two former Tennessee players, defensive end Tyler Baron and defensive back Tamarrion McDonald.

Other notable transfer commitments announced by the players Sunday include:

■ Former Toledo quarterback Dequan Finn, who was the Mid-American Conference player of the year after throw-

ing for 2,657 yards and 22 touchdowns and running for 563 yards and seven scores, committed to Baylor.

■ Former Utah quarterback Nate Johnson, who played in eight games as a freshman this past season, committed to Vanderbilt. Johnson threw for 499 yards and three scores and ran 235 and four.

■ All-Ivy League defensive lineman Joey Slackman from Penn said he is heading to Florida.

■ FCS All-America receiver Dymere Miller from Monmouth committed to Rutgers.

■ Former Illinois running back Reggie Love III committed to Purdue. Love led the Illini in rushing with 567 yards in eight games.

Kuznetsov lifts Capitals over Hurricanes in shootout

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Evgeny Kuznetsov scored the deciding goal in the shootout to lead the Washington Capitals to a 2-1 win over the Carolina Hurricanes on Sunday night.

Martin Fehervary scored for the Capitals while Darcy Kuemper made 28 saves and stopped all three attempts in the shootout.

Washington improved to 5-0 on the season in the second game of back-to-back sets.

"We've been in a few of these now of just grinding our way through where you can tell fatigue is a factor," Washington coach Spencer Carbery said. "The penalty kill stepped up big. (Kuemper) was excellent. He made some massive saves for us and we found a way to win."

The Capitals have earned at least a point in five of their past six games. They've been able to piece together points without a lot of production from star Alex Ovechkin, who hasn't scored since Nov. 18.

Sebastian Aho scored for the Hurricanes, who lost their second straight game. Carolina goalie Pyotr Kochetkov made 20 saves.

Ducks 5, Devils 1: Adam Henrique scored three goals for his first career hat trick and visiting Anaheim snapped a five-game losing streak.

Alex Killorn had a goal and two assists, Troy Terry had a goal and an assist, and defensemen Pavel Mintyukov and Cam Fowler each had two assists for the Ducks, who were 1-13-0 since their last regulation win on Nov. 14.

John Gibson had 18 saves through two periods and Lukas Dostal stopped all 10 shots he faced in the third. The Ducks announced Gibson was pulled because he was feeling "under the weather."

Michael McLeod scored for New Jersey, and Akira Schmid finished with 22 saves. The Devils had won two straight and five of six.

Canucks 4, Blackhawks 3: Brock Boeser, Ilya Mikheyev

and Dakota Joshua scored in the middle period, and visiting Vancouver beat depleted Chicago.

Elias Pettersson also scored as the Canucks shook off a slow start. J.T. Miller and Tyler Myers each had two assists, and Thatcher Demko made 25 saves. Vancouver improved to 6-1-1 in the last eight games.

Nick Foligno had two goals for Chicago, and Connor Bedard had two assists against his hometown team. Cole Guttman scored in the third period, and Petr Mrazek made 22 saves. The last-place Blackhawks lost their fourth straight game and dropped to 4-13-1 in their last 18.

Golden Knights 6, Senators 3: Jack Eichel and Ivan Barbashev each had a goal and an assist, and Logan Thompson came off the bench to make 20 saves as host Vegas beat Ottawa.

Jonathan Marchessault, Nicolas Roy, Chandler Stephenson and William Karlsson also scored for the Golden Knights. Adin Hill gave up one goal on

three shots in his return to the net for the first time since Nov. 30 before leaving with an apparent injury 6:25 into the game.

Josh Norris, Ridly Greig and Brady Tkachuk each scored for the Senators and Joonas Korpi-salo made 25 saves.

Avalanche 6, Sharks 2: Nathan MacKinnon had two goals and two assists to extend his point streak to 15 games, and host Colorado beat San Jose.

Mikko Rantanen, Ryan Johansen, Valeri Nichushkin and Miles Wood also had goals for the Avalanche. Alexandar Georgiev had 27 saves in a rebound game from a poor start last Monday.

MacKinnon's streak ties his career high and also gives him at least one point in all 16 home games this season. He is second in the NHL in scoring with 47 points, trailing only Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov (52).

Tomas Hertl scored two goals for the Sharks and MacKenzie Blackwood finished with 23 saves.

Thompson, Warriors hold off Trail Blazers

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Klay Thompson scored 28 points on a night Stephen Curry's NBA-record 3-pointer streak ended at 268 games and the Golden State Warriors held off the Portland Trail Blazers 118-114 on Sunday for their second straight victory.

Curry was 0 for 8 from 3-point range, 2 for 12 overall and scored seven points. He began the streak Dec. 1, 2018, at Detroit.

"We can't rely on Steph to bail us out on every single night," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "It was a tough night for him, but that's what a team is supposed to be about. Everybody filling in for each other, different guys stepping up each night. That's a great sign, because he's carried us for long enough this year. We need to give him more help."

Curry, the NBA career leader who recently made his 3,500th 3-pointer, last went without one in a regular-season game Nov. 8, 2018, when he went 0 for 4 against Milwaukee. He also owns the second-longest NBA streak at 157 games.

Andrew Wiggins, who was recently taken out of Golden State's starting lineup, had 25 points and seven rebounds.

"He did a little bit of everything. Rebounded, hit 3s, played above the rim," Thompson said. "That's the Wigs we love."

Said Kerr: "That looked like vintage Andrew. That's the guy I know."

Rookie Trayce Jackson-Davis had 14 points and eight rebounds to help the Warriors win consecutive games for the first time since the end of a five-game winning streak in early November.

Portland cut it to 113-111 with 39 seconds left. Chris Paul's jumper with 20.9 seconds left pushed the Warriors' lead to 115-11, and Anfernee Simons' 3-point play made it a 115-114 with 14.7 seconds to go.

"Chris Paul, what a gamer he is to hit those shots at the end," Thompson said about Paul, who scored all four of his points in the final 2:26.

Bucks 128, Rockets 119: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 26 points and 17 rebounds, breaking Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's Milwaukee rebounding record, and Damian Lillard scored 39 points in the Bucks' 128-119 victory over the Houston Rockets on Sunday night.

Antetokounmpo's highest rebounding total of the season allowed

him to pass Abdul-Jabbar after he had already moved past the Hall of Famer for the team scoring record. Antetokounmpo broke Abdul-Jabbar's record with a rebound of Tari Eason's missed shot with 7:46 left in the fourth quarter. It was his 14th rebound of the game and gave him 17,162 in 11 seasons with Milwaukee.

Antetokounmpo is also the Bucks' career leader in assists, joining Michael Jordan (Chicago), LeBron James (Cleveland) and Kevin Garnett (Minnesota) as the only players to lead a franchise in all three categories.

The Bucks are 19-7. They won their 13th straight home game and improved to 14-1 at home while snapping the Rockets' five-game winning streak.

Fred VanVleet led the Rockets with 22 points. Dillon Brooks was ejected after picking up two technical fouls with 38.9 seconds left, and Rockets coach Ime Udoka was also whistled for two technicals after coming out on the court.

Pelicans 146, Spurs 110: CJ McCollum scored 29 points, Brandon Ingram added 26 and visiting New Orleans set a franchise record with 22 3-pointers in rolling past Victor Wemba-

nyama and San Antonio.

Wembanyama had 17 points and 13 rebounds in front of former San Antonio All-Star Tony Parker, his childhood idol in France and later mentor. Wembanyama's eighth consecutive double-double surpassed the previous NBA record by a teenager of seven straight set by Dwight Howard with Orlando in 2005.

Celtics 114, Magic 97: Jaylen Brown scored 17 of his 31 points in the fourth quarter and host Boston beat Orlando to improve to 14-0 at home.

Boston is off to its second-best start at home, behind the 1957-58 club that opened with 17 straight wins. The Celtics have won five straight overall to improve to 20-5, a half-game ahead of Minnesota for the NBA lead.

Suns 112, Wizards 108: Devin Booker shook off a subpar shooting night, scoring 11 of his 27 points in the fourth quarter, and host Phoenix overcame a 16-point deficit to beat Washington on Sunday night.

Kevin Durant led the Suns with 28 points, including a dunk on a three-point play in the final minute. Jusuf Nurkic had 17 rebounds. Booker also had eight assists.

Balanced offense leads No. 16 Illinois over Colgate

Associated Press

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Coleman Hawkins scored 16 points and Quincy Guerrier and Marcus Domask each scored 15 to help Illinois lead from start to finish in a 74-57 victory over Colgate on Sunday.

Terrance Shannon Jr. had 14 points despite not scoring in the second half for the 16th-ranked Fighting Illini (8-2). The Big Ten's second-leading scorer had 20 or more points in six of his last seven games.

"We don't need Terrance to score 30 points in every game," said Illinois coach Brad Underwood. "He can help us in multiple ways."

The Raiders (6-5), who have qualified for the NCAA Tournament four times in five years, were led by Jeff Woodward with 14

points. Keegan Records, the preseason Patriot League Player and Defensive Player of the Year, was held to nine points.

Down by as many as 22 points in the second half (51-29), Colgate made eight straight field goals late in the half as part of a run that drew the Raiders within 62-53 with 3:35 left.

"We had a bad start. Against a team the caliber of Illinois, that makes for a long afternoon," said Colgate coach Matt Langel. "But we responded like I knew we would in the second half."

Underwood said the Illini's start set the tone for the game.

"You don't want to play from behind against Colgate because of their size and their pace. And they know how to win," he said.

No. 17 Colorado State 86, CSU-Pueblo 54: Isaiah Stevens had 18 points to move closer to taking over as the program's all-time leading scorer and the host Rams shook off a sluggish start to roll past the Division II Thunderwolves.

Nique Clifford, Taviontae Jackson and Patrick Cartier each finished with 13 points. Clifford also had nine rebounds. Colorado State (10-1) held a 36-12 advantage in points in the paint.

Armon Muldrew led CSU-Pueblo (6-5) with 16 points, while Brevin Walter contributed 13.

The Thunderwolves held the lead for 26 seconds in the first half. But the Rams used their size and speed to pull away. Colorado State led by as many as 24 in the first half.