

New task force to seek safer shipping

By MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. and other nations are creating a new task force to protect shipping from Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Monday.

“This is an international challenge that demands collective action,” Austin said in a statement. “Therefore, today I am announcing the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian, an important new multinational security initiative.”

Operation Prosperity Guardian brings together multiple countries, including the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada,

France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain, “to jointly address security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden,” Austin said.

The new task force is part of Combined Task Force 153 created April 2022. The naval task force is responsible for patrolling some of the world’s most active shipping lanes in and around the Red Sea, where militant attacks and weapons seizures have increased in recent years.

The Iran-aligned Houthis have launched a flurry of attacks targeting Israel and ships in the Red Sea in the past two months since Hamas’ attack on Israel

Oct. 7.

The news comes after reports of the Houthis again attacking a commercial vessel, the M/V Swan Atlantic, in the southern Red Sea on Monday morning and the USS Carney responding.

A defense official said they were aware of the report, and more information would be provided when it becomes available.

A U.S. warship on Saturday shot down 14 suspected attack drones over the Red Sea, and a Royal Navy destroyer downed another drone that was targeting commercial ships.

U.S. Central Command posted on X, formerly Twitter, that the Arleigh Burke-class de-

stroyer USS Carney “successfully engaged 14 unmanned aerial systems” launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen. The drones were shot down with no damage to ships in the area or reported injuries.

The move to set up the expanded operation came after three commercial vessels were struck by missiles fired by Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen on Dec. 3.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters on Dec. 4 the U.S. was in talks with other countries over a maritime task force that would “ensure safe passage of ships in the Red Sea” but gave no further details at the time.

Israel attacks Gaza with renewed support from US

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces raided one of the last functioning hospitals in Gaza’s north and bombarded the south with airstrikes that killed at least 28 Palestinians, pressing ahead with their offensive Tuesday with renewed backing from the United States, despite rising international alarm.

In a hospital in the southern Gaza town of Rafah, Mohammed Zaghroub bid farewell to his two children — a 2-year-old boy, and a girl born two weeks ago — killed in a predawn strike on their home. Wounded in the strike, he winced as he peeled back the shrouds to look at their faces as his wife and mother stood by his bed.

“Just two weeks old. Her name hadn’t even been registered,” said the children’s grandmother, Suzan Zoughroub. Addressing Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, she cried, “Does he think that by killing these children he will achieve something? Have they succeeded now? Has he achieved what he wants?”

The air and ground war, launched in response to Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack into Israel, has killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians, displaced some 1.9 million, demolished much of northern Gaza and sparked attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets across the region.

Assaults on ships in the Red Sea by Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi rebels have led major shipping companies — as well as the oil and gas giant BP — to suspend trade through the vital waterway, prompting the U.S. and its allies to launch a new mission to counter the threat.

After meeting with Israeli officials Monday, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said protect-

ing Palestinian civilians was “both a moral duty and a strategic imperative” for Israel. He also reiterated America’s support for Israel in its war against Hamas, and said he was “not here to dictate timelines or terms.”

Austin’s remarks signaled that the U.S. would continue shielding Israel from growing international calls for a ceasefire as the United Nations Security Council was set to hold another vote Tuesday — and would keep providing aid for one of the 21st century’s deadliest military campaigns.

Suzan Zoughroub said her family was asleep when their home was hit before dawn.

“We found the whole house had collapsed over us.” At least 25 people were killed in the strike, along with at least three others in a separate strike in Rafah, according to Associated Press journalists who saw the

bodies arrive at two local hospitals early Tuesday.

Rafah, which is in the southern part of Gaza where Israel has told Palestinians to seek shelter, has been repeatedly bombarded, often killing large numbers of civilians.

Israel says it is striking militant targets across the territory. The military said Tuesday it had killed a prominent Hamas financier in an airstrike on Rafah, without specifying when it occurred.

Fierce battles also raged in northern Gaza, which has been reduced to a wasteland seven weeks after Israeli tanks and troops stormed in.

Footage online showed a scene of devastation after a strike that hit a local charity in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp, with several torn bodies near a donkey cart on a street filled with rubble and twisted metal.

NDAAs authorize fewer active-duty troops

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The size of the active-duty military authorized in this year's annual defense bill is dropping yet again, bringing it in closer alignment to the actual number of people the services have been able to recruit.

The Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, an annual bill that outlines defense priorities and spending, authorized a total of 1,283,700 troops to serve in the active-duty Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air and Space Forces. That is down nearly 5% from the 1,348,040 authorized for the previous year.

However, because of challenges to recruiting new enlistees to the services, the actual number of troops on active duty hasn't topped 1 million since 2021, according to a Congressional Research Service report on defense spending bills.

The figure in the bill, which won final congressional approval last week, actually is higher than the 951,800 active-duty

troops the Defense Department proposed in its budget request earlier this year. The 2024 bill is awaiting President Joe Biden's signature to become law.

The services collectively missed recruiting goals by 41,000 recruits in fiscal year 2023, which ended Sept. 30, Ashish Vazirani, acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, told the House Armed Services Committee subpanel on military personnel last week.

"That number understates the challenge before us as the services lowered in strength goals in recent years, in part because of the difficult recruiting environment," he said.

Only the Marine Corps and Space Force met recruiting goals last year, according to service officials. The Army, which is the largest of the service branches, had the most difficult time recruiting and fell short 15,000 recruits in 2023.

The military has been restructuring and reducing troop levels

since ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet the ongoing struggle to recruit enough people to fill its ranks has brought those levels lower than leaders would like, said Mark Cancian, a retired Marine colonel and senior adviser at Center for Strategic International Studies, a Washington-based bipartisan think tank.

"The military's problem is the economy. If I had to pick one problem, that's it. The better the economy is — particularly, the lower the unemployment rate — the harder it is to recruit people," Cancian said.

Congress authorized 445,000 active-duty troops for the Army; 337,000 for the Navy; 320,000 for the Air Force; 172,300 for the Marine Corps; and 9,400 for the Space Force. That is a drop in numbers for each service except the Space Force, which is the newest service branch and still growing its ranks.

While the Marine Corps, which dropped by 4,700, and Space Force are on track, the Air

Force and Navy are only slightly veering from each service's overall strategy, Cancian said.

The Navy reduced its authorized strength by 17,000 active-duty sailors, and the Air Force dropped by 5,344.

"That's part of their plan, too. ... They're retiring a lot of ships early with the idea being that they'll invest in new capabilities. But, of course, it'll take years for those to come online," Cancian said. "They would prefer to be at a higher level, maybe in the 340,000 [range] at least, but because they are divesting to invest that makes it easier for them to take a personnel cut."

All of the services may need to wrestle with moving some jobs to contractors or reservists, Cancian said.

"To be fair to the military, they've done a lot of that over the last half century since the end of the draft," he said. "There's still arguably more you could do. Maybe it's not comfortable but I think I think they're going to have to sort of wrestle with that."

Senate aims to confirm 4-star military nominees

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Congress is continuing work to remedy the effects of Sen. Tommy Tuberville's months-long hold on military nominees, moving along a bill that would provide back pay to affected officers.

The Senate late last week approved legislation that would give more than 400 general and flag officers pay they missed out on as Tuberville, R-Ala., held up their promotions. A companion bill in the House will likely be voted on when the chamber returns from recess in January.

Senators unanimously passed

the bill days after Tuberville largely lifted the blockade he put in place on hundreds of general and flag officer nominees to protest a Pentagon abortion travel policy. He continues to delay the promotion of 11 four-star generals and admirals.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Monday that he wants to confirm the remaining officers before the Senate leaves for holiday break this week.

Officers who are not confirmed before the end of the year would need to be renominated unless senators agree to roll the nominations into the new year.

Turkey links Sweden's NATO bid to US F-16 deal

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Ratification of Sweden's NATO membership by Turkey's parliament hinges on the U.S. Congress' approval of Turkey's request to purchase F-16 fighter jets, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said, calling on the two legislatures to act "simultaneously."

In comments reported by the state-run Anadolu Agency on Tuesday, Erdogan also said Canada and other NATO allies must lift arms embargoes imposed on Turkey.

"Positive developments from the United States regarding the F-16 issue and Canada keeping its

promises will accelerate our parliament's positive view on (Sweden's membership)," Erdogan said. "All of these are linked."

He made the comments late Monday while returning from a visit to Hungary. Hungary and Turkey are the only two NATO members not to have formally approved Sweden's bid to join the trans-Atlantic military alliance.

Erdogan submitted a protocol on Sweden's admission to parliament in October, but the ratification process has stalled. He has since linked the matter to Congress approving Turkey's request to purchase 40 F-16s and kits to modernize its existing fleet.

Texas makes illegal crossings a state crime

Associated Press

BROWNSVILLE, Texas — Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Monday approved sweeping new powers that allow police to arrest migrants who illegally cross the U.S. border and give local judges authority to order them to leave the country, testing the limits of how far a state can go to enforce immigration laws.

Opponents have called the measure the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immi-

gration since a 2010 Arizona law — denounced by critics as the “Show Me Your Papers” bill — that was largely struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court. Immigration enforcement is a federal responsibility, and Texas’ law is also likely to face swift legal challenges.

The law, which takes effect in March, allows Texas law enforcement officers to arrest people who are suspected of entering the country illegally. Once in custody, they could agree to a

Texas judge’s order to leave the United States or be prosecuted on misdemeanor charges of illegal entry. Migrants who don’t leave could face arrest again under more serious felony charges.

Abbott, who signed the law in front of a section of border fence in Brownsville, predicted the number of people crossing illegally into Texas would drop by “well over 50%, maybe 75%.” He did not offer evidence for that estimate.

“The consequences of it are so extreme that the people being smuggled by the cartels, they will not want to be coming into the state of Texas,” he said.

The law adds another tension point over immigration amid a struggle between the White House and Senate negotiators to reach a deal on border security. Republicans in Congress are demanding changes to the immigration system in exchange for any help for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs.

Biden’s push for more aid to Ukraine stalls in Senate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden’s push to have Congress replenish wartime aid for Ukraine as part of a deal on border and immigration policy changes will almost certainly drag into next year.

The Senate, which had postponed its holiday recess, returned to Washington on Monday after negotiators worked through the weekend on the border legislation, trying to reach an agreement that could unlock the Republican votes for Biden’s \$110 billion package of aid for Ukraine, Israel and other security priorities.

But senators said they still had plenty of work ahead, and it remained uncertain how many more days the Senate will remain in session this week. Barely half of the senators returned for a Monday evening vote.

“Obviously we need time,” said Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, the top Democratic negotiator.

The delay heaps more uncertainty on the future of the Biden administration’s priority of providing support against Russia’s invasion. It also puts a potential pause on politically fraught negotiations over immigration and border security policy, though

Senate negotiators planned to continue working on the package.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the negotiations were “among the most difficult things we’ve done in recent memory.”

“Everyone knows that something should be done to fix our broken immigration system,” he said in a Senate floor speech to start the week. “But we can’t do so by compromising our values. Finding the middle ground is exceptionally hard.”

The House has already departed for the year as Congress settles into a long winter’s break. Lawmakers aren’t scheduled to return until the second week of January, and they will then need to tend to other matters besides the Ukraine funding, including facing a partial shutdown in mid-January if Congress can’t pass a government funding package.

But as the Senate undertook the first substantial rewrite of immigration and border security law in decades, Republicans insisted they would not agree to rushing legislation.

“Getting this agreement right and producing legislative text is going to require some time,” Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor.

Judge: Confederate memorial to stay at Arlington for now

Associated Press

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — A federal judge on Monday issued a temporary restraining order barring removal of a memorial to Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

A group called Defend Arlington, affiliated with a group called Save Southern Heritage Florida, filed a lawsuit Sunday in federal court in Alexandria, Va., seeking the restraining order. A hearing has been scheduled for Wednesday.

Work to remove the memorial had begun Monday before the restraining order was issued, but the memorial remains in place on cemetery grounds.

A cemetery spokesperson said Monday that Arlington is complying with the restraining order, but referred all other questions to the Justice Department.

The cemetery had said Friday that it expected to complete the removal this week. It said the removal was required by Congress, and that it was complying with environmental and historic-preservation regulations. But the lawsuit accused the Army, which runs the cemetery, of violating regulations in seeking a hasty removal of the memorial.

“The removal will desecrate, damage and likely destroy the Memorial longstanding at ANC

as a grave marker and impede the Memorial’s eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places,” the lawsuit accuses.

The temporary restraining order issued Monday by U.S. District Judge Rossie Alston said that a lawyer for the plaintiffs represented to the court that the work at the memorial involves the disturbance of gravesites.

On Friday, the cemetery had said in its statement that “the area around the Memorial will be protected to ensure no impact to the surrounding landscape and grave markers.”

Last week, a federal judge in the District of Columbia dismissed a lawsuit seeking to block removal of the memorial filed by the same plaintiffs. Alston, in his order issued Monday, told the parties to be prepared to discuss how that case affects his decision whether to extend his temporary restraining order beyond Wednesday.

David McCallister, a spokesman for the Florida heritage group, welcomed the judge’s order while acknowledging it is only temporary. He said the current case differs from the one that was dismissed because they now have evidence that the work is being done in a way that disturbs grave sites.

Storm cleanup starts in East

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Utility crews worked Tuesday to restore power to hundreds of thousands of customers in Maine and some rivers continued to rise following a powerful storm that hit the northeastern U.S., drenching communities and bringing windspeeds over 60 mph in some areas. At least five people were killed.

“It was pretty loud, the wind was pretty strong, branches are breaking, things are flapping outside,” said Drew Landry of Hallowell, Maine, who lost power and was looking at a street that was under water Tuesday. “All the basements are pretty much flooded.”

Many communities were saturated, with some getting well over 3 inches of rain during the storm. Some towns in Vermont, which suffered major flooding from a storm in July, were seeing more flood damage. Some school districts remained closed Tuesday.

More than 5 inches of rain fell in parts of New Jersey and northeastern Pennsylvania, and

parts of several other states got more than 4 inches, according to the National Weather Service. Streets were flooded in some communities. Wind gusts reached nearly 70 mph along the southern New England shoreline.

In New Jersey, a house surrounded by floodwaters caught fire Tuesday morning in Lincoln Park and was engulfed by flames.

Firefighters were unable to get to it. Police said the house was unoccupied.

Maine Gov. Janet Mills closed state offices Tuesday to allow time for power restoration and cleanup efforts from the storm, which took down many trees and closed roads.

Pete Chagnon, 75, in Oxford, Maine, helped a couple of people remove a tree that was blocking a road, one of many that had fallen in his neighborhood.

He moved there in 2015 from Burlington, Vt.

“Since moving here, I have seen some wicked storms but yesterday took the cake,” said

Chagnon.

Some rivers in the region crested. The Androscoggin River in Rumford, Maine, reached a maximum stage of 22 feet in a 24-hour period ending early Tuesday, the National Weather Service said. Flood stage is 15 feet. The river was expected to fall below flood stage Tuesday afternoon.

The Kennebec River at Augusta was at 20 feet and rising. It was expected to reach a crest of 25 feet Thursday evening, the weather service said. Flood stage is 12 feet.

Five months after flooding inundated Vermont’s capital city of Montpelier, water entered the basements of some downtown businesses as the city monitored the level of the Winooski River, officials said.

Three people were rescued from a home in Jamaica and another in Waterbury when that person’s vehicle was swept away by floodwaters, said Vermont Public Safety Commissioner Jennifer Morrison at a news conference with the governor.

Tesla’s EV chargers get key backing

Associated Press

The White House is lending its support to an auto industry effort to standardize Tesla’s electric vehicle charging plugs for all EVs in the United States, part of a broad effort to stimulate their sales to help combat climate change.

More than 1 million EVs have been sold in the United States in 2023, a record, but that pace still lags behind sales in China and Germany. One key reason is that the limited availability of charging infrastructure across the country has been a widespread concern for many would-be buyers of EVs and has held back their sales in the United States.

Tesla, the leader in the EV market, operates the largest network of fast-chargers. And many of its Supercharger stations are in prime locations along highly traveled corridors, where other charging stations are sparse.

On Tuesday, SAE International, formerly the Society of Automotive Engineers, confirmed as a new standard Tesla’s North American Charging Standard connector. That connector, known as NACS, links Tesla’s EVs to the company’s network. In June, the automotive organization had said it would set standards for Tesla’s EV charging plug to try to allow it to work with all EVs.

The new standard “ensures that any vehicle or charging equipment supplier or manufacturer will be able to use, manufacture, or deploy the connector and expands charging access for current and future EV drivers across the country,” the U.S. Joint Office of Energy and Transportation said in a statement Tuesday.

Database to track records of misconduct by all federal law enforcement officers

Associated Press

The U.S. Justice Department has created a database to track records of misconduct by federal law enforcement officers that is aimed at preventing agencies from unknowingly hiring problem officers, officials said on Monday.

The federal move is a step toward accountability amid growing calls to close loopholes that allow law enforcement officers to be rehired by other agencies after losing their jobs or resigning after misconduct allegations. The creation of the database was part of President Joe Biden’s May 2022 executive or-

der on policing, which included dozens of measures aimed at increasing accountability for federal law enforcement officers.

“This database will ensure that records of serious misconduct by federal law enforcement officers are readily available to agencies considering hiring those officers,” Biden said in a statement.

But the database, which will only contain records for federal officers and not be open to the public, falls short of the national misconduct database called for by some police reform advocates.

The National Law Enforce-

ment Accountability Database currently includes only former and current Justice Department officers who have records of serious misconduct over the last seven years. It will be expanded in the next two months to capture other federal law enforcement agencies such as the Secret Service and United States Park Police, a Justice Department official said.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said it will give federal agencies “an important new tool for vetting and hiring officers and agents that will help strengthen our efforts” to build and retain the public’s trust.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Plan to let pharmacies sell medical pot quashed

GA ATLANTA — Federal drug officials are warning Georgia to shelve its plans to be the first state to allow pharmacies to dispense medical marijuana products.

News outlets reported that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration warned pharmacies that dispensing medical marijuana violates federal law.

The Georgia Board of Pharmacy began accepting applications to dispense the products in October. Licenses have already been issued to 23 Georgia independent pharmacies, the board said.

The Georgia Access to Medical Cannabis Commission, which oversees Georgia's fledgling medical marijuana industry, said it can't override the federal directive, even though pharmacies are allowed to dispense the products under state law.

In a memo to pharmacies, the DEA said none of them can lawfully possess, handle or dispense marijuana or related products containing more than 0.3% tetrahydrocannabinol — the psychoactive chemical known as THC that gives users a high.

Nuclear plant to continue operations through 2030

CA SAN LUIS OBISPO — California energy regulators voted last week to allow the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant to operate for an additional five years, despite calls from environmental groups to shut it down.

The California Public Utili-

ties Commission agreed to extend the shutdown date for the state's last functioning nuclear power facility through 2030 instead of closing it in 2025 as previously agreed.

Separately, the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission will consider whether to extend the plant's operating licenses.

The twin reactors, located midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, began operating in the mid-1980s. They supply up to 9% of the state's electricity on any given day.

'Destructive devices' blamed in home explosion

NE HASTINGS — A body was found early Sunday after a Nebraska house explosion that authorities say was likely caused by "destructive devices."

Police in Hastings said in a news release that emergency crews rushed to the home around 3:15 a.m. after a 911 caller reported the explosion. Police and firefighters encountered secondary explosions upon arriving.

Within the debris of the destroyed home, they found the victim, the release said. The person's name wasn't immediately released.

The release said crews have been working to locate additional explosives, and the Nebraska State Patrol Bomb Squad is helping with testing.

TB investigation opened in dozens of schools

NV LAS VEGAS — A tuberculosis investigation is underway involving a person with an active infection

who was on dozens of elementary and high school campuses in Nevada's most populous county, according to authorities.

The person, who has not been publicly identified, was on 26 Clark County School District campuses and one training site before learning of the TB diagnosis, the Las Vegas Review Journal reported.

According to the newspaper, the Southern Nevada Health District released a list of affected schools Friday and people identified as close contacts of the person were being notified.

The district said individual notifications were happening at 17 campuses for possible exposures, but no exposures had been identified at eight campuses so far.

Suit claims 'modern day slavery' in state prisons

AL MONTGOMERY — Current and former inmates announced a lawsuit last week challenging Alabama's prison labor program as a type of "modern day slavery," saying prisoners are forced to work for little pay — and sometimes no pay — in jobs that benefit government entities or private companies.

The class-action lawsuit also accuses the state of maintaining a discriminatory parole system with a low release rate that ensures a supply of laborers while also generating money for the state.

"The forced labor scheme that currently exists in the Alabama prison system is the modern reincarnation of the notorious convict leasing system that replaced slavery after the

Civil War," Janet Herold, the legal director of Justice Catalyst Law, said last week.

The Alabama Department of Corrections and the Alabama attorney general's office declined to comment on the lawsuit.

The lawsuit accuses the state of violating the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution, anti-human trafficking laws and the Alabama Constitution.

Quaker Oats recalls granola products

IL CHICAGO — Quaker Oats on Friday recalled several of its granola products, including granola bars and cereals, saying the foods could be contaminated with salmonella.

Salmonella infections can cause fever, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and stomach pain, according to the Food and Drug Administration. In rare cases, the bacterial disease can be fatal.

Quaker, which is owned by PepsiCo, said in a news release that it has not received any reports of salmonella infections related to the recalled granola products. The full list of recalled foods includes granola oats cereals and Quaker Chewy Bars, which are also sold in PepsiCo's snack mixes.

The affected products have been sold in all 50 U.S. states, as well as U.S. territories, Quaker said. The company is asking customers with recalled products to throw them away and contact its customer support line or visit the recall website for more information and reimbursement.

— From wire reports



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Late heroics lift Seahawks over Eagles

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Amid the flood of emotions that continued long after he walked off the field a winner, Drew Lock paused briefly to reflect.

Rare is the chance to have a moment like the Seattle Seahawks' backup quarterback experienced on Monday night.

"I think it was just the over-the-top of feeling of you don't get very many moments, you don't very many opportunities in this league," Lock said. "And with every opportunity you get, you need to be as ready as you can be."

Lock threw a 29-yard touchdown pass to Jaxon Smith-Njigba with 28 seconds left to cap a 92-yard drive, and the Seahawks stunned the Philadelphia Eagles 20-17, ending a four-game skid and getting back into NFC playoff contention.

Seattle (7-7) rallied behind Lock, who moved the team the length of the field for its

longest touchdown drive this season and found the Seahawks' rookie first-round pick for the biggest catch of his young career.

On third-and-10, Smith-Njigba beat James Bradberry off the line and Lock's throw was perfect to cap an unlikely comeback from an early 10-0 deficit. Lock, who made his second straight start in place of the injured Geno Smith, connected with DK Metcalf three times on the decisive drive, including much-needed chunk plays of 18 and 34 yards.

Seattle moved into a logjam with four teams currently at .500 that are battling for the NFC's last two playoff spots, while Philadelphia (10-4) lost its third straight and wasted a chance to move a game ahead of Dallas in the NFC East. The defending NFC champion Eagles have already secured a playoff spot.

Philadelphia had one last opportunity, but Julian Love made his second intercep-

tion of the fourth quarter, picking off Jalen Hurts' deep pass intended for A.J. Brown and just getting his feet down inbounds.

"I was watching (Brown) that entire play. I was in the post, I saw a double move, I just took off. I saw the ball floating and I must be living right because I got my feet in, thankfully," Love said.

Love also picked off Hurts in the end zone on a deep shot for Quez Watkins with 8:08 remaining to prevent the Eagles from extending their 17-13 lead.

Lock's touchdown pass to Smith-Njigba was a play Seattle ran earlier, and Lock knew if he got single coverage again, the throw was headed to the rookie.

"Sure enough, they gave us one-on-one. It was kind of the perfect look," said Lock, who finished 22-for-33 for 208 yards.

It was the second game-winning touchdown in the fourth quarter for Smith-Njigba, who had one against Cleveland.

Clemson's Mukuba headed to hometown team Texas

Associated Press

Former Clemson safety Andrew Mukuba announced Monday that he is transferring to Texas, his hometown school, cornerback Decamerion Richardson said he is leaving Mississippi State for rival Mississippi and quarterback Dante Moore committed to Oregon after spending his freshman year at UCLA.

Entering the portal officially were Arkansas quarterback KJ Jefferson, a three-year starter, TCU quarterback Chandler Morris, and two former five-star recruits from USC in freshman quarterback Malachi Nelson and sophomore cornerback Domani Jackson.

"That part's difficult because the old-school in all of us had all the great memories of the guys that we coached that maybe weren't ready in the beginning and they progressed and got better and you got to see the end of that," USC coach Lincoln Riley told reporters. "It's just part of the world of college football in this current time."

Moore, a former five-star recruit from Michigan, played nine games and started five for the Bruins. He completed 53.6% of his passes for 11 touchdowns and nine interceptions.

He is the second high-profile quarterback to choose Oregon as a transfer destination this month, joining Dillon Gabriel. Moore, who originally committed to Oregon as a high school recruit before flipping to UCLA, made his announcement with an Instagram post.

Gabriel, who played the last two seasons at Oklahoma, will play a sixth season at Oregon.

Florida State received a commitment from the son of a former Seminole star when edge rusher Marvin Jones Jr. posted on social media that he was transferring from Georgia to Tallahassee.

The elder Jones was an All-America linebacker from Florida State in the early 1990s who went on to play 10 seasons for the New York Jets. Jones Jr. was a five-star recruit who played sparingly for Georgia in two seasons.

A busy day for defensive backs exiting the portal also included two Mid-American Conference starters announcing they were headed to Power Five schools.

Former Buffalo safety Devin Grant, who had five interceptions this season, committed to Syracuse, the day after the Orange and new coach Fran Brown landed former Ohio State quarterback Kyle McCord.

Texas A&M got a commitment from Central Michigan safety Trey Jones.

Mukuba is an Austin, Texas, native and former four-star recruit who has started 31 games over three seasons for the Tigers.

Richardson left one side of the Egg Bowl rivalry for the other, becoming the latest portal addition to Ole Miss.

The Rebels have also added former Florida defensive end Princely Umanmielen and two former Tennessee players, defensive end Tyler Baron and defensive back Tamarion McDonald, and former South

Carolina receiver Juice Wells in the past few days.

■ Former Duke running back Jordan Waters is staying in the same area code, moving over to North Carolina State about 20 miles away in Raleigh. He ran for 753 yards and 12 touchdowns this year for the Blue Devils, hitting the 100-yard rushing mark three times while also having four multi-touchdown showings.

■ Washington added former San Diego State offensive tackle Drew Azzopardi, who started six games this season as a red-shirt freshman. He was the fourth addition in recent days for the Huskies, joining former Mississippi State quarterback Will Rogers, former Vanderbilt linebacker Ethan Barr and former Arizona State edge rusher B.J. Green.

■ Colorado lost a transfer when former Indiana offensive lineman Matthew Bedford flipped his commitment to Oregon, but gained one when former Houston defensive lineman Chidozie Nwankwo committed to the Buffaloes.

Veltkamp rallies Hilltoppers past ODU

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Western Kentucky redshirt freshman quarterback Caden Veltkamp decided to enter the transfer portal earlier this year after being told by the coaching staff he'd be converted to tight end if he came back next season.

The Hilltoppers may want to reconsider that plan.

Veltkamp came off the bench to throw for 383 yards and five touchdowns, Lucas Carneiro made a winning 29-yard field goal in overtime and Western Kentucky erased a 28-point deficit to beat Old Dominion 38-35 on Monday at the Famous Toastery Bowl.

Veltkamp, the Hilltoppers' third-string quarterback this season who had thrown just six passes in his college career, threw a 15-yard touchdown pass on fourth-and-goal with 19 seconds left in regulation to push the game into an extra period.

The Hilltoppers (8-5) blocked a short field-goal attempt in the extra period — their second blocked kick of the game — be-

fore Carneiro drilled his.

"I knew I could do it; I knew it was in me," Veltkamp said. "But it's all credit to these guys around me. I love these guys. I love this team and I would do anything for this team."

As for his future, he said, "they told me if I come back I'm a tight end. So we will see if they still want to do that. We'll see."

Western Kentucky's Dalvin Smith had nine receptions for 77 yards and three touchdown catches, two of which he speared with one hand.

"I wasn't throwing great balls, but these guys were making plays," Veltkamp said.

The Hilltoppers (8-5) played without starting quarterback Austin Reed, who opted out of the game to prepare for the NFL Draft. The plan was to turn the reigns of the offense over to Turner Helton, the nephew of head coach Tyson Helton.

But Helton was benched midway through the first quarter after he fumbled on his first possession and threw a pick-6 on his next.

The coach said he planned to rotate his two QBs, but stuck

with Veltkamp after he developed the hot hand.

"Caden was ready when it was his turn," Helton said. "He has a warrior spirit and a competitive spirit."

The Hilltoppers mounted a comeback with Smith snaring a pass out of the air with one hand on a crossing route and taking it 17 yards for a touchdown to cut the lead to 28-14 with 10:24 left in the third quarter.

After ODU quarterback Grant Wilson scored on a 21-yard scramble to make it a 21-point game, Veltkamp responded with two more touchdown passes — a 37-yard strike to Elijah Young and his third scoring toss to Smith — to cut the lead to 35-28.

Old Dominion tried to make it a two-possession game, but Ethan Sanchez's 47-yard field goal was blocked, giving the Hilltoppers one last chance with 2:53 left.

Western Kentucky quickly reached the Monarchs' 5 behind a 30-yard reception by Jimmy Holiday and a penalty on ODU staff for interfering with an official near the side-

line. Still, it looked like ODU might hold on and win after Wayne Matthews sacked Veltkamp on third down at the 15.

But Veltkamp responded with a 15-yard TD pass on fourth-and-goal to Hutchinson near the left pylon to send the game into overtime.

The takeaway

Western Kentucky: The Hilltoppers were in a tough position playing without Austin Reed, who started every game this season at quarterback. Helton clearly wasn't ready for the spotlight but Veltkamp was terrific and showed great poise in the pocket. Now the big question will be if he returns next season.

Old Dominion: It's a devastating loss for the Monarchs, who finished the season strong with three wins, including beating both Georgia Southern and Georgia State on the final play to become bowl eligible. It was only ODU's third bowl game, but the future is looking bright in the underrated Sun Belt Conference with Wilson under center.

Hollins, Corum, Dobbs named top comeback players

Associated Press

Virginia running back Mike Hollins, who survived a shooting that left three of his teammates dead and returned to play for the Cavaliers less than a year later, was one of three recipients of college football's Comeback Player of the Year Award announced Monday.

Michigan running back Blake Corum, who came back from a major knee injury to lead the top-ranked Wolverines in rushing and touchdowns, and Holy Cross linebacker Jacob Dobbs, who returned from a devastating arm injury to win conference defensive player of the year, are

the other comeback players of the year for 2023.

The Comeback Player of the Year Award is voted on by AP Top 25 voters and sports information directors from around the country.

The players will be honored at the Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 1 in Glendale, Ariz.

Hollins, from Baton Rouge, La., was one of two survivors of a shooting last November. Another Virginia student shot and killed Virginia football players D'Sean Perry, Lavel Davis Jr. and Devin Chandler. Hollins was shot in the back, needed several surgeries and spent a week in the hospital

before beginning a long rehabilitation.

Hollins returned to the team in time for preseason practice and went on to play 11 games this season. His best performance came in Virginia's upset of North Carolina, running for 66 yards and three touchdowns against the then-10th-ranked Tar Heels.

Hollins finished with eight touchdowns and 274 yards rushing this season.

Corum tore ligaments in his left knee in the second-to-last game of the 2022 regular season and missed Michigan's final three games, including the College Football Playoff loss to

TCU. He returned this season and remained the focal point of Michigan's run-heavy offense.

Corum ran for 1,028 yards and scored 24 touchdowns, most in the nation.

Dobbs was the Patriot League player of the year in 2021, but in the fourth game of the 2022 season he tore a ligament in his right elbow, a triceps tendon and a forearm muscle.

He was back on the field in 2023, playing nine games, leading the Patriot League in tackles at 13.7 per game and winning conference defensive player of the year for the second time in his career.

Hawks hand Pistons 24th consecutive loss

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Trae Young extended his recent hot streak with another double-double, scoring 31 points with 15 assists, as the Atlanta Hawks beat Detroit 130-124 on Monday night, handing the Pistons their 24th consecutive loss.

“I was not going to let them break their streak against us,” Young said.

The Pistons’ last win came on Oct. 28 against Chicago. Detroit is two losses away from matching the NBA’s longest losing streak in one season.

“I want to win. We all do,” said Cade Cunningham, who led the Pistons with a career-high 43 points.

“We’ve got a young team. We need these moments to learn and get better,” he said.

Bojan Bogdanovic had 25 points for Detroit.

Young scored at least 30 points with at least 10 assists for the fourth consecutive game with his team-leading 16th double-double against the Pistons.

The Hawks made 9 of 12 3s in the first quarter, including two by Young, as they claimed an early lead they never lost despite repeated comeback at-

tempts by the Pistons. Overall, Atlanta made 16 of 36 3s.

Clippers 151, Pacers 127: James Harden scored 21 of his season-best 35 points in the fourth quarter and had nine assists as visiting Los Angeles extended the league’s longest active winning streak to eight games by routing Indiana.

Kawhi Leonard added 28 points for Los Angeles and Paul George added 27 against his former team. Facing the league’s second-worst defense, the Clippers matched their season-high point total for a half with 77 in the first on the way to their highest-scoring game of the season.

Benedict Mathurin had a season-high 34 points to lead Indiana. Isaiah Jackson scored 15 points while starting in place of injured two-time NBA blocks champion Myles Turner.

Knicks 114, Lakers 109: Jalen Brunson scored 11 of his 29 points in the fourth quarter, and visiting New York overcame LeBron James’ 109th career triple-double for a victory over Los Angeles.

Julius Randle had 27 points and 14 rebounds, and Immanuel Quickley scored 20 points

while the Knicks hung tough in the fourth quarter and survived a rally led by James to earn their second road win over the Lakers in 2023.

Timberwolves 112, Heat 108: Anthony Edwards scored 32 points, Karl-Anthony Towns added 18 and visiting Minnesota clamped down in the second half to beat Miami.

Minnesota improved to 20-5, tying idle Boston for the NBA’s best record. The Timberwolves gave up just 42 points in the second half, after trailing by as many as 17 points in the early going.

Bulls 108, 76ers 104: Coby White scored 24 points and visiting Chicago held on to snap Philadelphia’s six-game winning streak.

Former Sixer Nikola Vucevic chipped in 23 points while DeMar DeRozan added 15 for the Bulls.

Cavaliers 135, Rockets 130 (OT): Donovan Mitchell scored 37 points, Sam Merrill had a career-high 19 off the bench and host Cleveland earned its 11th consecutive overtime victory by beating Houston.

Merrill had five points and Max Strus added four in the ex-

tra period, when Cleveland outscored Houston 13-8 to match the second-longest OT winning streak in NBA history. New Orleans owns the record with 13 victories in a row from 2006-08.

Thunder 116, Grizzlies 97: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 30 points and nine rebounds in three quarters to help host Oklahoma City win in Memphis’ final game before Ja Morant returns from his suspension.

Nuggets 130, Mavericks 104: Jamal Murray finished with 22 points, going 4-for-4 from 3-point range, to help host Denver race past Dallas.

Kings 143, Wizards 131: Domantas Sabonis had his 35th career triple-double with 28 points, 13 rebounds and 12 assists as host Sacramento beat Washington.

Raptors 114, Hornets 99: Pascal Siakam scored eight of his 27 points in the fourth quarter, Gary Trent Jr. had season highs of 22 points and 10 rebounds, and host Toronto rallied past Charlotte.

Jazz 125, Nets 108: Collin Sexton and Talen Horton-Tucker scored 27 points apiece to lead host Utah over Brooklyn.

Henrique’s 4th goal in 2 games lifts Ducks over Red Wings

Associated Press

DETROIT — Adam Henrique scored his fourth goal in two games and the Anaheim Ducks held off the Detroit Red Wings 4-3 on Monday night.

Henrique was coming off his first career hat trick Sunday against New Jersey.

Radko Gudas, Pavel Mintyukov and Troy Terry also scored for the Ducks, who have won two straight after a five-game losing streak. Lukas Dostal made 30 saves.

“I think we all did a heck of job,” Dostal said. “We simplified our game and the guys were blocking shots. We played as a unit and it worked for us.”

Alex DeBrincat surpassed 400 career points with two power-play goals in the third period for Detroit. Jeff Petry scored his first goal this season and Patrick Kane

added two assists. The slumping Red Wings have lost six of seven.

Detroit captain Dylan Larkin had an assist in his return to the lineup, nine days after getting knocked unconscious when he was hit from behind by Ottawa’s Mathieu Joseph. Larkin missed four games.

Canadiens 3, Jets 2 (OT): Justin Barron scored a power-play goal 1:09 into overtime to lift visiting Montreal over Winnipeg.

Josh Anderson and Christian Dvorak also scored for the Canadiens. Jake Allen made 30 saves for his first win in eight games.

Stars 4, Kraken 3 (OT): Matt Duchene scored twice and assisted on Thomas Harley’s goal 2:16 into overtime that gave host Dallas a victory over Seattle.

Jason Robertson also scored for the

Stars, who improved to 3-0-1 in their past four games.

Flames 3, Panthers 1: Mikael Backlund scored a tiebreaking short-handed goal early in the third period, and Jacob Markstrom stopped 34 shots as host Calgary beat Florida.

Martin Pospisil and Blake Coleman also scored to help Calgary improve to 2-0-2 in their last four games.

Penguins 4, Wild 3: Sidney Crosby’s 18th goal of the season broke a third-period tie as host Pittsburgh edged Minnesota.

The Penguins blew a three-goal lead but recovered to win for the third time in four games behind Crosby, who added an assist to move past Mark Recchi and into 13th place on the NHL’s all-time scoring list with 1,535 points.