

UN: More than 500K starving in Gaza

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — More than half a million people in Gaza — a quarter of the population — are starving due to “woefully insufficient” quantities of food entering the territory ever since Israel’s military responded to Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack, according to a report released Thursday by the United Nations and other agencies.

The report highlighted the humanitarian crisis in Gaza after more than 10 weeks of relentless bombardment and fighting. The extent of the population’s hunger eclipsed even the near-famines in Afghanistan and Yemen of recent years, according to figures in the report.

“It doesn’t get any worse,” said Arif Husain, chief econo-

mist for the U.N.’s World Food Program. “I have never seen something at the scale that is happening in Gaza.”

Israel has said it is in the final stages of clearing out Hamas militants from northern Gaza, but that months of fighting lie ahead in the south. The war sparked by Hamas’ deadly Oct. 7 rampage and hostage-taking in Israel has killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians. Some 1.9 million Gaza residents — more than 80% of the population — have been driven from their homes, with more than a million now cramming into U.N. shelters.

The war has also pushed Gaza’s health sector into collapse. Only nine of its 36 health facilities are still partially functioning — and all are located in the south, the World Health Organi-

zation said. WHO relief workers on Thursday reported “unbearable” scenes in two hospitals they visited in northern Gaza: bedridden patients with untreated wounds cry out for water, the few remaining doctors and nurses have no supplies, and bodies are lined up in the courtyard.

Bombardment and fighting continued Thursday, but with Gaza’s internet and other communications cut off for a second straight day, details on the latest violence could largely not be confirmed.

U.N. Security Council members are negotiating an Arab-sponsored resolution to halt the fighting in some way to allow for an increase in desperately needed humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza.

A vote on the resolution, first scheduled for Monday, was pushed back again Wednesday in the hopes of getting the United States to support it or allow it to pass after it vetoed an earlier cease-fire call.

This week, Israel began allowing aid to be delivered through its Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza.

But a blast Thursday morning hit the Palestinian side of the crossing, forcing the U.N. to stop its pickups of aid there, according to Juliette Touma, spokesperson of UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. At least four people were killed, the nearby hospital reported.

Palestinian authorities blamed Israel for the blast, but its cause could not immediately be confirmed.

Venezuela hands over ‘Fat Leonard,’ bribery mastermind

The Washington Post

Leonard Glenn Francis, the fugitive defense contractor who admitted to a \$35 million bribery scheme in the largest corruption scandal in U.S. military history, has been arrested and returned by Venezuela to the United States as part of a major prisoner swap between the estranged countries, President Biden said Wednesday.

Venezuela is also releasing 10 Americans detained by the government of Nicolás Maduro, Biden said.

Biden, in exchange, has agreed to grant clemency to Alex Saab, a close Maduro ally who was awaiting trial in Miami on federal money laundering charges, senior administration officials said. The busi-

nessman, whom federal prosecutors consider a corrupt enabler of Venezuela’s authoritarian socialist government, is accused of siphoning off hundreds of millions of dollars in state contracts.

Saab, 51, was arrested last year during a stopover in Cape Verde en route to Iran. His detention has been a key sticking point in negotiations between Washington and Caracas.

Francis, known as “Fat Leonard,” was apprehended by Venezuelan authorities in Caracas last year after escaping U.S. sentencing. He was expected to board a plane “very soon” to the U.S., where he is to be transferred to a federal detention facility, a senior administration official said, speaking

on the condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing developments.

The prisoner swap, the largest yet between the Biden administration and the Maduro government, comes amid months of negotiations on a range of concerns. The U.S. agreed in October to ease sanctions on Venezuela’s oil and gas industry for six months in exchange for promises from Maduro to hold freer presidential elections in 2024.

In addition to the 10 Americans, Maduro is releasing 20 Venezuelan political prisoners as part of an agreement reached in October between the Venezuelan government and opposition leaders.

The senior administration of-

ficial said Biden made the “extremely difficult decision” to grant clemency to Saab to bring Americans home and to “ensure that one of the most notorious fugitives from justice, Fat Leonard, is returned and held to account for his crimes.”

The 10 Americans included “all six wrongfully detained Americans” in Venezuela, Biden said. He told reporters Wednesday that all 10 were on an aircraft on their way home.

Biden said the U.S. would hold Maduro’s government accountable for holding fair elections next year.

“Not over yet,” Biden said. “They’ve made detailed commitments. We’ll see if they hold them.”

Aegis Ashore nears integration into NATO

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Navy's missile defense mission in Poland is on the cusp of being added to a broader NATO effort to defend Europe from attack, marking a major step forward for an initiative hampered by repeated delays.

The Navy this week said it had taken official control of the Aegis Ashore missile defense system at its base in the northern Polish city of Redzikowo.

The system is getting final technical upgrades and will be fully functional as early as the spring, when it will operate under NATO command and control, U.S. Naval Forces Europe said in a statement Monday.

It incorporates land-based interceptors in Romania and Poland, along with Navy Aegis destroyers out of Rota, Spain, and a sophisticated early-warning U.S. Army radar positioned on a mountain in Kurecik, Turkey.

"The acceptance of the Aegis Ashore site in Poland, like its sister site in Romania, is an important step in our efforts to get (the system) ready to protect against the growing threat posed by ballistic missiles launched from Iran," NAVEUR said.

The site in Deveselu, Romania, has been operating since 2016.

The initiative is part of a missile defense effort known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach, which was established

in 2009 to counter Iranian ballistic missile threats.

The Poland part of the project was supposed to be ready around 2018, but repeated technical and construction problems at the site delayed the mission.

Rear Adm. Douglas Williams, acting director of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, said during Dec. 7 testimony before the House armed services subcommittee on strategic forces that the Aegis system was delivered to the Navy on Oct. 1 for operational use and maintenance. The Navy formally accepted the equipment into their inventory Dec. 15, he said.

The Navy missions in Romania and Poland involve about 200 military personnel each.

"The Aegis Ashore is defensive in nature and designed to shoot down threats posed to U.S. forward-deployed forces, or the security of our European allies," NAVEUR said. "The defensive focus of Aegis Ashore is confirmed in the U.S. commitments to NATO and standing NATO policy."

The broader missile defense project has nonetheless angered Russia despite U.S. and NATO statements that the system isn't equipped for offensive strikes.

Russia has asserted over the years that the system could eventually be modified to counter its intercontinental ballistic missiles, with an aim of neutralizing Moscow's nuclear deterrent capability.

Navy signs deal to clean up fire-damaged hangar site

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Navy has agreed to pay more than \$6 million to demolish and remove remnants of a World War II-era blimp hangar in Southern California that was destroyed last month in a fire, service officials said Wednesday.

The fire destroyed one of two historic hangars, and concerns over environmental contamination forced some schools, parks and businesses near the former Marine Corps Air Station in Tustin to close. The base was shut down in 1999.

The Navy said ECC Environmental LCC, an international company with its headquarters in Burlingame, Calif., was awarded the \$6.03 million to handle the cleanup. The company has 14 offices worldwide and has been contracted frequently to build or dismantle military structures.

The Navy will manage the \$6 million contract for the site that

the military has owned since 1942, the service said. The funds will come primarily through the federal Base Realignment and Closure Commission, which is responsible for selecting, closing, and monitoring the later uses of military installations shuttered primarily in the 1990s.

"The Navy cares about the health and safety of residents," said Gregory Preston, director of the Department of the Navy Base Realignment and Closure Program Management Office. "We continue to work closely with local officials and other agencies to safely and effectively manage the cleanup of the community and the hangar site."

Orange County officials have been critical of the pace and funding of Navy efforts to clean up the remnants of the hangar and mitigate environmental damage. The Navy initially committed \$1 million to local government efforts within days of the fire.

Australia to send 11 troops to aid Red Sea cargo ships

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — Australia will send 11 military personnel to support a U.S.-led mission to protect cargo shipping in the Red Sea, but it won't send a warship or plane, the defense minister said Thursday.

Defense Minister Richard Marles said that Australia's military needs to keep focused on the Pacific region.

The U.S. announced this week that several nations are creating a force to protect commercial shipping from attacks by drones and ballistic missiles fired from Houthi-controlled Yemen.

Marles said that 11 military personnel would be sent in January to Operation Prosperity Guardian's headquarters in Bahrain, where five Australians are already posted.

"We won't be sending a ship or a plane," he told Sky News television. "That said, we will be almost tripling our contribution to the

combined maritime force."

"We need to be really clear around our strategic focus, and our strategic focus is our region: the northeast Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Pacific," Marles added.

The U.S. and its allies are concerned by China's growing assertiveness in the region.

Australia is one of the United States' closest military allies. Last week, Congress passed legislation allowing the sale of Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines to Australia under a security pact that includes Britain.

Marles rejected opposition lawmakers' criticism that a failure to send a warship as the U.S. had requested made Australia a less reliable partner and ally.

"That's patently ridiculous," Marles said.

The U.S. is aware of the scale of the Australian defense force and the need to maintain its focus on the Asia-Pacific region, he said.

Texas sends over 120 migrants from border to Chicago

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas sent a plane with more than 120 migrants from the U.S.-Mexico border to Chicago in an escalation of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's busing operation that has given more than 80,000 migrants free rides to Democratic-led cities across the country since last year.

The first flight, which Abbott's office said left from El Paso and arrived Tuesday, was arranged a week after Chicago's city council took new action over the busloads of migrants that have drawn sharp criticism from Mayor Brandon Johnson. The city has said bus operators began trying to drop off people in neighboring cities to avoid penalties that include fines, towing or impoundment.

Bus operators could now face tougher penalties in Chicago for not unloading new arrivals at a designated location or failing to fill out city paperwork. Abbott spokesman Andrew Mahaleris said that the flights were the result of Johnson "targeting migrant buses" from Texas.

The flight took off a day after Abbott signed a new law this week that would allow police in Texas to arrest migrants who il-

legally cross the border, ratcheting up a series of aggressive measures the state has taken in protest of President Joe Biden's immigration policies.

"Until President Biden steps up and does his job to secure the border, Texas will continue taking historic action to help our local partners respond to this Biden-made crisis," Mahaleris said.

The White House criticized the flight and accused Abbott of using migrants for politics.

"Yet again, Governor Abbott is showing how little regard or respect he has for human beings," White House spokesperson Angelo Fernández Hernández said in a statement. "This latest political stunt just adds to his tally of extreme policies which seek to demonize and dehumanize people."

More than 23,000 migrants have been sent to Chicago on buses as part of Abbott's border mission known as Operation Lone Star, according to the governor's office.

The multibillion-dollar operation has also included stringing razor wire along the frontier, installing buoy barriers in the Rio Grande and deploying more officers.

Power still out for many in soaked New England

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Megan Michaud and her family of five lost power for three days after a powerful storm throttled her home state of Maine, and a new challenge is creeping up on her: It's almost time for Christmas.

"This morning, my second grader told me, 'It's five days until Christmas' and I told myself that can't be right," said Michaud, 42, of Kennebunkport. "But it turns out the calendar keeps moving even when you're in the middle of something."

Michaud has had to toss all of the family's food. She has not wrapped a single gift and hasn't been able to start prepping Christmas dinner because of the chaos the storm has unleashed in Maine. She spent three days heating her home with a gas fireplace, shuffling back and forth from her parents' house and waiting patiently for power before it was finally restored Wednesday afternoon.

It's a scene playing out all over northern New England, where the havoc wrought by an unexpectedly strong storm has made the festive season anything but.

The heavy pre-Christmas storm that hit Monday has brought dangerous flooding and widespread power outages to Maine. The aftermath of the storm has left hundreds of thousands in the dark, closed

ski resorts, washed out roads, closed bridges and caused families to throw away spoiled holiday food.

It's unclear when everyone will have power back, but officials and utilities in the state have said some will have to wait until the holiday.

People across the northeastern U.S. were still mopping up Wednesday after the storm dumped torrential rains and brought damaging winds from Pennsylvania to Maine, as some rivers in the region rose even higher. Some of the worst damage was in Vermont and Maine. Others, such as Ellen Briggs of Portland, were tending to the thousands of downed trees that fell in the storm.

"Now there's a lot of debris to clean up," said Briggs, who had a 60-foot white pine collapse in her yard.

At least five people in East Coast states were killed in the storms with deaths reported in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts and Maine.

On Wednesday morning, a 61-year-old woman was found dead inside a truck that had been swept away Monday night and overturned while trying to cross the flooded Swift River in Mexico, Maine. A 20-year-old woman remained missing, authorities said.

Also Wednesday morning, nine people, including a 2-year-old child, were rescued along the swollen Crooked River in the Naples and Casco area.

Confederate Memorial at Arlington cemetery removed

The Washington Post

As dawn broke at a frigid Arlington National Cemetery on Wednesday morning, workers using a crane and harnesses began to take down a controversial statue that had stood there for more than a century.

Hours earlier, a federal judge

had ruled an effort to halt the removal of the towering Confederate Memorial had no merit, and the contractors hired by the cemetery moved quickly to get the statue down and into custom-built wooden crates.

Soon all that remained was the base and foundation. Work

continued into the evening to remove the remaining bronze elements of the memorial, a cemetery spokesperson said in an email.

The 32-foot bronze statue commissioned by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and unveiled at a ceremony

presided over by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914 had been ordered removed by the end of the year, making it the culmination of a sweeping effort by Congress to wipe Confederate names and legacies from the country's military bases and assets.

Analysts: Ukraine pivoting to defense

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's armed forces are taking up a more defensive posture, a military analysis said Wednesday, after their summer counteroffensive failed to achieve a major breakthrough against Russia's army and as winter weather sets in after almost 22 months of the war.

"In recent weeks, Ukraine has mobilized a concerted effort to improve field fortifications as its forces pivot to a more defensive posture along much of the front line," the U.K. Ministry of Defense said in an assessment.

The Kremlin's deep defenses held firm against Ukraine's monthslong assault, which employed Western-supplied weapons but did not have essential air cover along a front line that extends for around 600 miles.

Most fighting in recent weeks has focused

on artillery, missile and drone strikes as mud and snow hinder troop movements.

"Russia continues local offensive options in several sectors, but individual attacks are rarely above platoon size," the U.K. analysis said. "A major Russian breakthrough is unlikely and overall, the front is characterized by stasis."

Russian President Vladimir Putin is hopeful that Kyiv's Western allies will grow weary of financing the costly Ukrainian war effort, allowing the Kremlin's forces to make a new offensive push next year against a weaker foe. He has put the Russian economy on a war footing to prepare for that.

But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Tuesday that he's certain the United States will make good on its promise to provide billions of dollars in further aid for Kyiv to continue its fight. Congress has

broken for vacation without a deal to send around \$61 billion to Ukraine.

Zelenskyy also noted that next year Ukraine plans to produce 1 million drones, which have become a key battlefield weapon.

The relatively cheap drones can be used to destroy expensive military hardware.

Oleksandr Kamyshin, Ukraine's Minister of Strategic Industries, said the million new drones will be so-called first-person view, or FPV, drones, which have a real-time video function.

In addition, he said in a Telegram post, Ukraine can manufacture next year more than 10,000 midrange strike drones that can travel hundreds of miles as well as more than 1,000 drones with a range of more than 600 miles.

They will allow Ukraine to hit targets well behind the front line and in Russia.

North Korea's Kim again threatens use of nukes

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said his country has a policy of not hesitating to launch a nuclear strike on its rivals if provoked, as he praised troops involved in its recent intercontinental ballistic missile test, state media reported Thursday.

Since adopting an escalatory nuclear doctrine last year, Kim has repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons preemptively. But many foreign experts say North Korea has yet to

obtain functioning nuclear missiles and is also unlikely to use its nukes first because it's outgunned by the U.S. and its allied forces.

North Korea on Monday conducted its first intercontinental ballistic missile test in five months, calling the drill a warning over confrontational U.S. and South Korean moves. North Korea cited a recent U.S.-South Korean meeting on boosting their nuclear deterrence plans.

The North's Korean Central News Agency said Kim met

troops from the General Missile Bureau on Wednesday to congratulate them on the launch of the developmental solid-fueled Hwasong-18 missile, the North's newest and most powerful ICBM.

During the meeting, Kim said the launch demonstrated the evolution of the North's nuclear doctrine and strategy "not to hesitate even with a nuclear attack when the enemy provokes it with nukes," KCNA said.

Kim said peace is guaranteed by a war posture of being will-

ing to launch preemptive strikes on the enemy anywhere to make it feel fear, KCNA said.

Last year, North Korea adopted a law that stipulates a broad range of situations in which it can use nuclear weapons.

Since the beginning of 2022, it has also test-fired about 100 ballistic missiles, many of them nuclear-capable weapons targeting the U.S. and South Korea. Monday's Hwasong-18 launch was the weapon's third test-flight this year.

Judge blocks law that bans guns in public places

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A federal judge on Wednesday blocked a California law that would have banned carrying firearms in most public places, ruling that it violates the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and deprives people of their ability to defend themselves and their loved ones.

The law signed by Gov. Gavin

Newsom in September was set to take effect Jan. 1. It would have prohibited people from carrying concealed guns in 26 places including public parks and playgrounds, churches, banks and zoos. The ban would apply whether the person has a permit to carry a concealed weapon or not. One exception would be for privately owned businesses that put up signs

saying people are allowed to bring guns on their premises.

U.S. District Judge Cormac Carney granted a preliminary injunction blocking the law.

The court case against the law will proceed while the law is blocked. The decision is a victory for the California Rifle and Pistol Association, which sued to block the law.

The measure overhauled the

state's rules for concealed carry permits in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. Bruen*, which set several states scrambling to react with their own laws. That decision said the constitutionality of gun laws must be assessed by whether they are "consistent with the nation's historical tradition of firearm regulation."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

City to evaluate arsenic issues for zoo displays

SD SIOUX FALLS — The city of Sioux Falls has decided to spend \$55,000 to evaluate a menagerie of taxidermy animals contaminated by arsenic that fill a now-closed natural history museum at the state's largest zoo.

The contract was approved Monday by a working group that was created after a backlash to the Delbridge Museum's closure, The Argus Leader reported.

Issues arose in August when nearly 80% of the museum's specimens tested positive for detectable levels of arsenic.

The contract with A.M. Art Conservation will bring a project team of five people, described by Great Plains Zoo CEO Becky Dewitz as "experts from the natural history museum world," to Sioux Falls to assess the condition of the museum and its specimens.

Costs force halt to work on PFAS standards

WI MADISON — Excessive compliance costs have forced Wisconsin regulators to stop developing standards limiting so-called forever chemicals in groundwater, Gov. Tony Evers said Tuesday.

The Department of Natural Resources has been working on groundwater standards for PFAS chemicals for the past year. Groundwater is the source of drinking water for about two-thirds of Wisconsin residents.

But Evers said that the agency had to stop because economic impact projections put the cost of compliance for industrial facilities and wastewater treat-

ment plants that discharge to groundwater at \$33 million over the first two years the standards would be in effect.

Then-Republican Gov. Scott Walker signed a law in 2017 that requires state agencies to obtain permission from legislators to continue working on regulations with compliance costs of at least \$10 million over any two-year period.

Republicans currently control the Legislature. Their relationship with Evers is strained — they rarely communicate with his administration — making it unlikely Evers could coax them into allowing the DNR to continue its work.

IRS to waive penalties for back taxes for 2020, '21

DC WASHINGTON — The IRS said Tuesday it is going to waive penalty fees for people who failed to pay back taxes that total less than \$100,000 per year for tax years 2020 and 2021.

Nearly 5 million people, businesses and tax-exempt organizations — most making under \$400,000 per year — will be eligible for the relief starting this week, which totals about \$1 billion, the agency said.

The IRS temporarily suspended mailing automated reminders to pay overdue tax bills during the pandemic, beginning in February 2022, and agency leadership says the pause in automated reminders is a reason behind the decision to forgive the failure-to-pay penalties.

Taxpayers are eligible for automatic relief if they filed a Form 1040, 1041, 1120 series or Form 990-T tax return for years 2020 or 2021, owe less than \$100,000 per year in back taxes,

and received an initial balance-due notice between Feb. 5, 2022 and Dec. 7, 2023.

Plane breaks through thin ice 2 days after rescues

MN WASHKISH — A light plane carrying ice anglers broke through thin ice as it tried to land on a large lake in northwestern Minnesota on Tuesday, the same lake where authorities had to rescue dozens of anglers who became trapped on an ice floe two days earlier.

Upper Red Lake is considered one of Minnesota's premier ice fishing lakes, but the ice remains thin amid higher-than-normal temperatures.

In Tuesday morning's incident, according to the Beltrami County Sheriff's Office, the pilot of the Cessna 172 identified what he believed was a safe landing area. But he had difficulty slowing down because of the lack of snow. The plane slid onto thin ice, and its nose broke through into open water.

On Sunday evening, emergency responders used an airboat to rescue 35 people after they became stranded on a piece of ice that broke away from shore due to strong winds.

Heroin dealers who used 'taco' as code sentenced

CA SANTA ANA — Two Southern California brothers who ran a heroin-delivery operation — taking telephone orders from customers using code words like "taco" — have been sentenced to 24 years each in federal prison, prosecutors announced.

Julio Cesar Martinez, 45, of Riverside, and Victor Martinez, 46, of Hemet, parts of Califor-

nia's sprawling Inland Empire, were sentenced Monday. Both pleaded guilty in August to conspiracy to distribute heroin and acknowledged distributing at least 29 kilograms of the drug, according to a statement from the U.S. attorney's office.

Call centers run out of workers' homes handled orders from buyers who used the names of Mexican foods to buy drugs. A gram of heroin was a "taco" and an ounce was an "enchilada," authorities said.

Health Network to pay \$345M to settle charges

IN INDIANAPOLIS — An Indianapolis-based health network has agreed to pay the government \$345 million to resolve charges it defrauded Medicare by overpaying doctors who referred patients to its facilities, prosecutors said Tuesday.

The agreement settles allegations that senior management at Community Health Network recruited hundreds of doctors beginning in 2008 and paid them salaries that were significantly higher than what they received in their own private practices, the U.S. Department of Justice said. Community Health submitted claims to Medicare for services that resulted from the unlawful referrals, the department said. That violated a federal statute which prohibits hospitals from billing for certain services referred by physicians with whom the hospital has a financial relationship unless the doctors' compensation is consistent with fair market value and not based on the value or volume of their referrals to the hospital.

— From wire reports

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Timberwolves believe they're contenders

Associated Press

Mike Conley remembers exactly how many games it took him to realize that these Minnesota Timberwolves might be a real contender this season.

That would be zero.

It was back at the first team meeting in the fall — before any games — when Conley told the Timberwolves what he thought they were capable of doing. So far, Conley is looking prophetic: The Wolves woke up Thursday at 20-6, just behind Boston's 21-6 for the NBA's best record.

It's the first time a Wolves team has ever been at or near the top of the league 25 games into a season. That's not the ultimate goal, of course, but it speaks to that potential Conley saw months ago.

"I'm not going to lie: I told these guys at our first team meeting that, man, I'm blessed to be around a team like this," said Conley, the Wolves' oldest player at 36 and still chasing what would be a first champion-

ship in his 17th year in the league. "I said before we played a game this year, 'You guys, you don't understand how good we can be. We can be a championship team. You've got to believe it.'"

His teammates seem like believers.

Minnesota won 42 games last season; the team is already one win shy of being halfway to that total this season. The 20-6 start is the best Minnesota has ever had; it's one win away from matching the best 25-game span, regardless of when it falls on the season calendar, in team history.

"They're formidable, that's for sure," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said.

And they're doing it the old-fashioned way — instead of playing go-go-go on offense in a league that's seeing its highest scoring average since 1969-70 at 115 points per game, the Wolves are giving up fewer points and a lower field-goal

percentage than anyone else this season. They have a bona fide scoring star in Anthony Edwards, one elite big man in Karl-Anthony Towns and a perennial defensive player of the year candidate in Rudy Gobert, yet Minnesota's secret isn't much of a secret: have all five guys on the floor involved on both ends of the court at all times.

"Most guys don't guard their way to the NBA. They're scorers by nature when they get here," Timberwolves coach Chris Finch said. "Obviously, if you want to be a good team, you want as many two-way guys as you possibly can. What happens, and we're seeing it, is when you commit to defense you don't want to let your teammate down. The pride in that kind of grows."

The seeds to this start got planted last spring, after Minnesota — which needed two play-in games just to make the playoffs — lost 4-1 to Denver in

the opening round.

The Wolves got walloped in Game 1 and trailed Game 2 by 21 points, before actually taking the lead going into the fourth. Minnesota was outscored by 44 points in the first six quarters of that series; the score between the Wolves and the eventual NBA champions was completely even — 398-398 — in the final 14 quarters.

From that loss came belief.

"This was never a doubt about the talent of this team," Gobert said. "The only thing we had to do was build an identity and build championship habits."

The job, Gobert quickly pointed out, is not finished.

"We knew if this is who we are every night, we can put ourselves in position to play in June," Gobert said. "It's very early in the season, but we're having a lot of fun, we still have a lot of room to grow, but we're starting to look like a pretty good team."

Early college football signing period opens with a bang

Associated Press

The early signing period in college football opened Wednesday with some five-star drama.

Georgia likely locked up the top recruiting class by flipping an in-state blue-chip player away from Florida State. The consensus No. 1 recruit in the country had Ohio State's Ryan Day literally sighing with relief, and then made the coach wait hours before officially becoming a Buckeye. Florida managed to hold on to a couple of five-stars amid a flurry of late de-commits.

Meanwhile, the long and winding recruitment of Dylan Raiola ended bright and early with the highly touted quarterback signing a national letter of intent with Nebraska, the school where his father was an All-American offensive lineman.

College football's early signing period, jammed into what has become an overloaded December calendar with postseason games and players transferring, has become the signing period.

"The schedule is not good. It's chaotic," Penn State coach James Franklin told reporters.

The big schools sign the bulk of their recruiting classes on the first day of the three-day early signing period. The traditional signing period in February is now more for schools lagging behind, maybe because of a coaching change, or those looking to add some finishing touches.

Almost all the best recruits will be off the board by the end of the week, most signing with schools they have been committed to for months — like Jere-

miah Smith, a receiver from Florida considered the top recruit in this class. Smith was a long-time Ohio State commit, but that didn't stop in-state programs from continuing to pursue him.

Not until Smith slipped on an Ohio State cap at a signing day ceremony at his high school did he put an end to any doubt he might flip to a college closer to home, like Miami.

"I'll be taking my talents to THE Ohio State University," Smith said.

Day was holding his signing day news conference at the time. When he was told Smith had stayed true to the Buckeyes, the coach asked "Really?" and pretended as if his knees were buckling before letting out a deep breath.

Day was cautious about

speaking about Smith before his signed NLI was officially in hand and it turned out he was right to be so. Almost 10 hours later, Ohio State announced Smith had signed.

There was nothing but reasons to smile on signing day at Nebraska, which started the day by announcing it had received Raiola's signed NLI. A consensus top-10 recruit, Dylan was first verbally committed to Ohio State and then Georgia. His family even moved to the Atlanta suburbs for his final high school season.

Now Raiola will be part of a top-20 signing class under coach Matt Rhule that Nebraska fans hope can finally revive the once-great program. The Cornhuskers claim five national titles, but have not even played in a bowl game since 2016.

Tagovailoa takes outside criticism in stride

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Tua Tagovailoa has never liked to make things about himself.

Somehow, the Miami Dolphins quarterback is always a topic of discussion.

Tagovailoa has been one of the NFL's most-discussed quarterbacks since the Dolphins selected him with the No. 5 pick in 2020, from debates about his health and work ethic to criticism about his arm strength and ability to lead the Dolphins for years to come.

Tagovailoa has insisted that he doesn't care about those outside discussions, but on Wednesday, he made it clear that he hears it.

"I understand that my platform and who I am in this league as a quarterback makes me, if you want, polarizing," Tagovailoa said. "Whether I'm the best, whether I'm the worst, I could care less."

He added: "I keep receipts. We all have a way of how we do things."

Tagovailoa entered the NFL with high expectations after leading Alabama to a national championship in college.

But his first two NFL seasons were wrapped in turmoil as Miami's offense struggled and rumors swirled of a strained relationship between Tagovailoa and then-Miami coach Brian Flores.

Tagovailoa is having one of the best seasons of his career in 2023: He leads the NFL with 3,921 yards and is on pace to become Miami's first 4,000-yard passer since Dan Marino threw for 4,116 yards in 1992. Tagovailoa also ranks second in passer rating (106.0), is tied for fifth in passing touchdowns (25) and is second in yards per pass attempt (8.6).

He and Tyreek Hill are one of the best quarterback-receiver duos in the NFL. Hill has caught 97 passes and 12 touchdowns and leads the league in receiving yards (1,542) even though he missed last week's win over the New York Jets with an ankle injury.

Despite his gaudy stats, some pundits and fans have questioned if Tagovailoa's performance this season is more about the pieces around him than his actual improvement. The Dolphins have one of the NFL's most creative play-callers in coach

Mike McDaniel, are first in scoring and top five in the league in rushing, red zone efficiency, run defense and sacks.

Hill entered Week 15 on pace for the first 2,000-yard receiving season in NFL history, and running back Raheem Mostert has boosted Miami's running game with a league-high 20 total touchdowns and 966 yards rushing, which is third in the NFL.

Tagovailoa has given his teammates praise for the success of the AFC-East leading Dolphins, but he's also taken notice of the outside noise.

On Wednesday, as the Dolphins prepared to host the Cowboys in Week 16, a game that could clinch Miami a playoff berth with a win, Tagovailoa was candid about some of the "narratives" he's seen about himself.

"Yeah, sure, I am only good with Tyreek in," Tagovailoa said sarcastically. "You're right. That is the only time I am at my best. You're right, I'm only good when Jaylen's (Waddle) in. Like, I could care less about it. Like sure, if Jaylen and those guys aren't out (there), I'm only as good as Raheem Mostert allows me to be.

"If that's what the narrative needs to be, and we're able to win games and we're able to go where we want to go as a team, I am the worst football player, if that's what you want. Like I don't care. Whatever it is, whatever you need on your show, take clips out of what I just said. Do what you need to do. I'm just here to do my job, and my job is to help our guys win games."

McDaniel has lauded Tagovailoa's growth from the beginning of last season to now, pointing out his growth both on the field and as a leader in the locker room.

"What he's doing is he's learning from everything because he's not pointing a finger or hiding from it," McDaniel said. "He's really holding himself fairly accountable for everything, but not backing down from anything. You're seeing a guy develop as we've seen him develop really since I've been here. So should it surprise us that he continues to improve his game? Well, if we're blindfolded with earplugs, it should surprise us. That's what you know about Tua. His hunger is deep within himself and that will continue."

Raiders' defense changes course under Graham

Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — Raiders interim coach Antonio Pierce called it the "less is more" approach that defensive coordinator Patrick Graham has adopted this season, and so far it's working.

A year after Las Vegas had one of the NFL's weakest defenses, it's now more of an asset than a liability, more of a reason why some games are won rather than lost.

Players have said Graham is a big reason for that turnaround.

"He's letting us play," cornerback Amik Robertson said. "He's confident in the plays he's calling because he's confident in the players. He's letting us be us and he's letting it loose. I think last season he was kind overthinking, but that was our first year with him.

"So now he's more comfortable with his guys, and as you can see, he's calling some great plays and putting his playmakers in posi-

tion to make plays."

The Raiders are tied with the Pittsburgh Steelers for ninth in the NFL in scoring defense, allowing an even 20 points per game. That's quite a jump from the 24.6-point average Las Vegas allowed last season, which put its defense 26th.

Since Pierce took over as the interim coach six games ago, the Raiders have allowed a 15.5-point average. That includes giving up 31 points to Monday's opponent, the Kansas City Chiefs, and holding the Miami Dolphins 11.5 points below their league-leading scoring average.

The Raiders allowed 21 points in their most recent game, Dec. 14 against the Los Angeles Chargers, but that is deceiving. Las Vegas held the Chargers to seven points through three quarters before LA scored twice in the fourth against reserves.

"I feel like for (Graham), I think it was defi-

nately a point to make things simple, so we can play as fast as possible," defensive end Malcolm Koonce said.

Rookie defensive end Tyree Wilson embodies the defense's improvement. The No. 7 overall draft pick was considered a disappointment for most of the season as he worked his way back from a foot injury he sustained at Texas Tech last season and that cost him much of the offseason work for the Raiders.

Wilson has shown flashes recently of what the Raiders expected when they chose him. He had a sack, tackle for a loss and quarterback hit two weeks ago against the Minnesota Vikings and recovered a fumble against the Chargers.

"Part of confidence starts with getting reps," Graham said. "We talk about it all the time, self-confidence over self-esteem. Self-esteem a lot of time is the talk. Self-confidence comes from the preparation you put in, the work you put in. He's constantly getting better at practice."

Sabres coach under fire as season slips away

Associated Press

The highlight for the Buffalo Sabres came 30 seconds in, when a festive but small holiday crowd rose to its feet to cheer defenseman Rasmus Dahlin for scoring the opening goal.

Some two hours later, the few who remained were left chanting "Fire Donnie," in reference to Sabres coach Don Granato following a 9-4 loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets on Tuesday night.

In a season already filled with low points before Christmas' arrival, the floundering Sabres reached a new depth. A team that's won consecutive games just once this year, and sits 14th in the Eastern Conference standings, gave up seven consecutive goals in 21 minutes and 52 seconds, spanning the first and second periods to the East's 15th-place team.

"It's an unforgiving league. If you are off at all, it is gonna get shoved down your throat really hard and that's exactly what happened tonight," captain Kyle Okposo said. "That's on everybody in this room. Every-

body. Probably myself more, and I'll take the blame for not having the group ready. Put it all on me. That's fine. I'll take that."

The frustrations are boiling over because this season was supposed to be different. Okposo opened training camp proclaiming the Sabres had no more excuses for missing the playoffs after a young, developing group fell two points short last year.

Instead, a Sabres roster that returned mostly intact, while remaining the league's youngest, is having difficulty providing answers for what's gone wrong. At 13-17-3, Buffalo is already in jeopardy of extending its NHL-record postseason drought to a 13th year.

"If I knew the answer, it wouldn't be happening," forward Tage Thompson said. "It's actions. We can say all the things we want to say in the locker room, we got to go out and do it. It's as simple as that."

Nothing has come simply for the Sabres, who have dealt with a rash of injuries, an inconsistent trio of goalies and a slow-starting offense that is 3-15-2

when allowing the first goal.

The focus of blame is now falling on Granato, who is in his third full season behind the bench. After he was credited for developing Thompson and Dahlin, among others, into NHL stars, and instilling a mantra of his team playing without fear of making mistakes, the Sabres have suddenly hit a wall.

"Let's just stick to tonight," Granato said, a familiar refrain from a coach who is more focused on dealing with immediate issues rather than the big picture.

"It wasn't good enough. We know that. And we'll go right to work tomorrow," he added. "We were off and and we have to own that. And we do. And it has to make us better."

The trouble is, the Sabres have shown more signs of regression than growth this year. The power-play unit, once their strength, entered Tuesday ranking 27th in the NHL in converting just 12 of 90 chances. Buffalo's playmaking defensemen are more liable to turn over the puck than join the rush.

And Devon Levi, the rookie goalie who wowed Buffalo with a 5-2 record in closing last season after completing his junior college season at Northeastern, dropped to 6-5-2 this year, has already spent a stint in the minors and was yanked after allowing four goals on 18 shots against Columbus.

Granato has maintained the backing of general manager Kevin Adams, but for how long in a league where Edmonton, Minnesota, St. Louis and most recently Ottawa have already made coaching changes? Adams, meanwhile, is being second-guessed for over-valuing his young talent and being slow to shake up a roster that needs a spark.

The players have said they have Granato's back.

"Listen, I'm not gonna sit here and bash the coaches," Okposo said. "I'm not gonna talk about us quitting. I'm not gonna talk about Donnie and us not listening. That's not right. Donnie has our full support. We are gonna play hard for Donnie and that's it."

Tigers sign RHP Flaherty to 1-year, \$14M deal

Associated Press

DETROIT — Right-hander Jack Flaherty and the Detroit Tigers have finalized a \$14 million, one-year contract in a deal that allows the 28-year-old right-hander to earn an additional \$1 million in performance bonuses with a franchise that has invested a lot in improving next season.

"There's a lot of belief in this team," Flaherty said Wednesday. "That's one of the things that excited me about the opportunity."

Detroit finished second in the AL Central at 78-84 this year, its seventh straight losing season, and recently signed manager A.J. Hinch to what the team called a long-term contract extension.

"It's no secret Jack is betting on himself with this contract, and we are very supportive of him coming here and bet-

ting on himself," Tigers president of baseball operations Scott Harris said.

Early in an active offseason, the Tigers exercised Mark Canha's \$11.5 million option after the 34-year-old outfielder was acquired from the Milwaukee Brewers for minor league pitcher Blake Holub.

The Tigers also signed 35-year-old Japanese right-hander Kenta Maeda to a \$24 million, two-year contract and left-hander Andrew Chafin to a \$4.75 million, one-year deal.

"The ballpark helps us from a pitching standpoint," Harris said. "I think we have started to demonstrate that our pitching group and our manager have a way to reach pitchers and help them get a little bit more out of their ability."

Flaherty said the team is ready to win, an opinion formed from talking with its leadership.

"You could feel it," he said. "You could

see it."

Flaherty, who had a \$5.4 million salary last season, has had an ERA over 4.00 in three of the past four seasons. He would earn \$250,000 each for 26 and 28 starts and \$500,000 for 30.

Flaherty went 8-9 with a 4.99 ERA in 27 starts and two relief appearances, including 1-3 with a 6.75 ERA in seven starts and two relief outings with the Orioles. Baltimore acquired him in an Aug. 1 trade with St. Louis for infielder César Prieto, left-hander Drew Rom and right-hander Zack Showalter.

"Despite the top-line performance that he showed in Baltimore, we noticed that he started to recapture the fastball shape and playability that he had earlier in his career," Harris said. "That pitch started to play better in Baltimore, and we think that planted a seed that we can hopefully continue to grow here in Detroit."