

US strikes Iran-backed militia groups

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden ordered the United States military to carry out retaliatory airstrikes against Iranian-backed militia groups after three U.S. service members were injured in a drone attack in northern Iraq.

National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said one of the U.S. troops suffered critical injuries in the attack that occurred earlier Monday. The Iranian-backed militia Kataib Hezbollah and affiliated groups, under an umbrella of Iranian-backed militants, claimed credit for the attack that utilized a one-way attack drone.

Iraqi officials said U.S. strikes targeting militia sites early Tuesday killed one militant and injured 18. They came at a time of heightened fears of a regional

spillover of the Israel-Hamas war.

Iran announced Monday that an Israeli strike on the outskirts of the Syrian capital of Damascus killed one of its top generals, Razi Mousavi, who had been a close companion of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the former head of Iran's elite Quds Force. Soleimani was slain in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in January 2020.

Iranian officials vowed revenge for the killing of Mousavi but did not immediately launch a retaliatory strike. The militia attack Monday in northern Iraq was launched prior to the strike in Syria that killed Mousavi.

Biden, who was spending Christmas at the presidential retreat at Camp David, Md., was alerted about the attack by White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan shortly after it oc-

curred Monday and ordered the Pentagon and his top national security aides to prepare response options to the attack on an air base used by American troops in Irbil.

Sullivan consulted with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Biden's deputy national security adviser, Jon Finer, was with the president at Camp David and convened top aides to review options, according to a U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and requested anonymity.

Within hours, Biden convened his national security team for a call in which Austin and Gen. CQ Brown, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed Biden on the response options. Biden opted to target three locations used by Kataib Hezbollah and affiliated groups, the official said.

The U.S. strikes were carried out at about 4:45 a.m. Tuesday in Iraq, less than 13 hours after the U.S. personnel were attacked. According to U.S. Central Command, the retaliatory strikes on the three sites "destroyed the targeted facilities and likely killed a number of Kataib Hezbollah militants."

"The President places no higher priority than the protection of American personnel serving in harm's way," Watson said. "The United States will act at a time and in a manner of our choosing should these attacks continue."

The latest attack on U.S. troops follows months of escalating threats and actions against American forces in the region since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel that sparked the devastating war in Gaza.

Israel bombards central Gaza as telecom is downed

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces bombarded Palestinian refugee camps in central Gaza and issued orders telling residents to evacuate Tuesday, signs that the military plans to expand its ground offensive into another part of the besieged territory. Gaza's main telecom provider, Paltel, announced another "complete interruption" of services.

A potential new battle zone threatens new destruction in a war that Israel's military has said will last for "many months" as it vows to crush the ruling Hamas militant group after its Oct. 7 attack. Israeli forces have been engaged in heavy urban fighting in northern Gaza and the southern city of Khan Younis, driving

Palestinians into ever-smaller areas in search of refuge.

Despite international pressure for a cease-fire and U.S. calls for fewer civilian casualties, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says the fight "isn't close to finished."

Israel's offensive is one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than 20,900 Palestinians, two-thirds of them women and children, have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, whose count doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants. On Tuesday afternoon, it said 240 people had been killed over the past 24 hours.

"We are gravely concerned about the continued bombardment of Middle Gaza by Israeli

forces, which has claimed more than 100 Palestinian lives since Christmas Eve," the U.N. human rights office said, noting that Israel had ordered some residents to move to the area.

In response to what it has long considered disproportionate criticism from the U.N., Israel said it would no longer grant automatic visas to U.N. employees and accused the world body of being "complicit partners" in Hamas' tactics. Government spokesman Eylon Levy said that Israel would consider visa requests case by case. That could further limit aid efforts in Gaza.

Residents of central Gaza described a night of shelling and airstrikes shaking the Nuseirat, Maghazi and Bureij camps. The camps are built-up towns hous-

ing Palestinians driven from their homes in what is now Israel during the 1948 war, along with their descendants. The camps are now crowded with people who fled the north.

"The bombing was very intense," Radwan Abu Sheitta, a teacher, said by phone from Bureij.

In the afternoon, the Israeli military ordered residents to evacuate a belt of territory the width of central Gaza, including Bureij, urging them to move to nearby Deir al-Balah. Hamas' military arm, the Qassam Brigades, said its fighters struck two Israeli tanks east of Bureij. Its report couldn't be independently confirmed, but it suggested Israeli forces were approaching the camp.

USS Vinson chief of e-warfare unit fired

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The commanding officer of an electronic warfare squadron from Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington deployed to the Western Pacific on the USS Carl Vinson has been relieved of command, the Navy said Friday.

Cmdr. William Coulter was removed as commander of the Electronic Attack Squadron 136 by Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, commander of Carrier Strike Group 1, “due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command,” according to a statement released by the U.S. 7th Fleet in Yokosuka, Japan.

Coulter had commanded the squadron since January 2023. The squadron deployed in October to the Western Pacific on the Carl Vinson, a Nimitz-class, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. The Carl Vinson is in Singapore now. The ship has been taking part in exercises with Japanese and Filipino military forces amid what The Associated Press termed in November were “brushes with China” over the South China Sea.

Cmdr. Paul Ritter, executive officer of the squadron, will take

command effective immediately, the Navy said.

Ritter had been scheduled to take command of the squadron in April 2024, according to the Navy statement.

Coulter is being temporarily reassigned to Electronic Attack Wing Pacific, which is headquartered at Whidbey Island in Oak Harbor, north of Seattle.

“Navy commanding officers are held to high standards of personal and professional conduct. They are expected to uphold the highest standards of responsibility, reliability and leadership, and the Navy holds them accountable when they fall short of those standards,” the Navy said in the Coulter announcement.

The military frequently uses “loss of confidence” as the reason for relieving a commanding officer.

The squadron, nicknamed “Gauntlets,” flies the EF-18G Growler, a variant of the F/A-18F Super Hornet. The two-seat aircraft is used to jam or disrupt enemy radar and other electronics.

The Carl Vinson is the flagship of Carrier Strike Group 1 and is homeported in San Diego.

Japan to OK US Marine’s Okinawa runway permits

BY MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Japanese Cabinet minister is expected to signal a return to work on a Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab on Thursday, three days after Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki ignored a court order to approve construction changes himself.

Japanese Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito notified Okinawa prefecture Tuesday morning that Saito by proxy Thursday will approve 3½-year-old requests for permits for construction changes at the airfield, a spokesman for the ministry’s Water and Disaster Management Bureau told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday.

The runway being built on reclaimed land in Oura Bay in the rural Henoko area of Okinawa is a planned replacement for Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in urban, densely populated Ginowan.

A copy of Saito’s letter was sent via email Tuesday morning; the original letter is expected to arrive at the Okinawa prefectural government offices Wednesday afternoon. The ministry spokesman called Tamaki’s refusal “truly regrettable.”

Some government officials in Japan may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

Tamaki may take the case again to Japan’s Supreme Court, he said in a statement posted Monday on the prefecture’s website. The court in September ruled against him on nearly the same question.

“There are various problems with the judgment, and I decided it was difficult to give the approval as a governor entrusted by many prefectural citizens who oppose the construction of Henoko new base,” he wrote Monday.

The prefecture plans to file another appeal with the Supreme Court by Wednesday, a spokesman for the prefecture’s Henoko Base Construction Countermeasures Division said by phone Tuesday.

Tamaki has argued that the soft seabed in the construction zone poses a hazard and that Tokyo had failed to consider the environmental impact on the endangered dugong, a cousin of the manatee protected by Japanese law.

The Sankei Shinbun, citing unnamed sources at Japan’s Ministry of Defense, reported Tuesday that the reclamation work on Oura Bay will resume Jan. 12.

Logistics Marines set to lead Okinawa-to-Guam move

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

CAMP BLAZ, Guam — Starting late next year, a logistics detachment is expected to kick off a long-awaited, multiyear relocation of Marines from Okinawa to the service’s newest base in the Indo-Pacific.

The main cantonment of Camp Blaz, Guam — named in honor of the late Brig. Gen. Vin-

cente “Ben” Blaz, a Guam native — has been under construction since August 2017 to host about 1,300 members of the III Marine Expeditionary Force. Another 3,700 Marines will be based there as a rotational force.

The first group of Marines to move from Okinawa “will be a small detachment of logistics Marines,” Blaz spokeswoman Maj. Diann Rosenfeld told Stars

and Stripes during a tour of the 4,000-acre base. It’s been operated by a skeleton staff since it officially opened in January.

Rosenfeld didn’t identify the detachment that would make the first move, but said additional detachments will follow to build the foundations to receive more and more Marines.

“We will be at full operational capability in 2028,” she said.

The 50 Marines already assigned to Blaz are working out of newly built offices for Marine aviation units at nearby Andersen Air Force Base on Guam’s northern coast.

Under an agreement with the United States to move Marines off Okinawa, Japan is paying \$3 billion of the estimated \$8.6 billion needed to build Blaz and its surrounding infrastructure.

Russian navy in Crimea hit by Ukrainian strike

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian warplanes damaged a Russian ship moored in the Black Sea off Crimea, both countries said Tuesday, bolstering Ukrainian morale after battlefield disappointments and doubts about the future of Western aid.

The planes fired guided missiles at the landing ship *Novocherkassk*, which is moored at a base in the city of Feodosia, Russia's Defense Ministry said. Video on Russian and Ukrainian social media showed an explosion in the port.

Ukrainian authorities claimed the ship was destroyed. They said it was likely carrying ammunition and possibly drones.

The 360-foot *Novocherkassk* can carry 10 tanks and 225 sailors.

"We saw how powerful the blast and detonation were. It's extremely difficult for a ship to survive something like that," Ukrainian air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said on U.S.-backed Radio Liberty.

"The Russian fleet has become smaller," Ukrainian air force Cmdr. Mykola Oleschuk

said in a mocking message on the Telegram app. He urged Russians to leave Crimea — which Russia annexed in 2014 — "while it's not too late."

Over the last few months, Ukrainian forces have conducted a string of attacks around Crimea, a Black Sea peninsula invaded and illegally annexed by Russia in 2014. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has credited those attacks, mostly with naval drones, with allowing Ukraine to restore navigation in the Black Sea and export of millions of tons of grain.

Osprey crashes may endanger Bell funds

The Dallas Morning News

WASHINGTON—Aerospace manufacturer Bell Textron is developing the Army's next long-range assault aircraft as part of a major defense contract, but that program could face headwinds resulting from recent fatal crashes of the company's V-22 Osprey.

Bell pioneered, along with Boeing, the helicopter-airplane hybrid Osprey, assembled at facilities in Amarillo, Texas.

The company also went with a tilt-rotor design on its proposed V-280 Valor, which the Army chose last year to replace the iconic UH-60 Black Hawk.

The V-280 beat out the compound rotor Defiant X offered by a collaboration of Boeing and Connecticut-based Sikorsky, which is owned by Lockheed Martin.

Members of Connecticut's congressional delegation have raised questions about the award process and the safety of tilt-rotor designs. Those concerns could get new life in the wake of several incidents, including a Nov. 29 crash off the coast of Japan that killed all eight airmen on board. The United States has grounded the Ospreys as it investigates the cause.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., who sits on the Senate Appro-

priations Committee, has raised concerns about tilt-rotor aircraft generally and the Army's selection process won by the V-280.

"I just continue to have real misgivings about shoveling money into a program that is resulting in this kind of fatality rate," Murphy told *The Dallas Morning News*.

Bell has previously defended the Osprey's safety record, but referred all questions to the Air Force following the Nov. 29 crash.

The Government Accountability Office rejected a Sikorsky protest of the contract award, which Murphy said means there's no legal avenue for reversing the award. But he added that Congress — and specifically his committee — will determine how much money flows into the program.

Murphy grilled the Secretary of the Army during a May hearing about the contract award, acknowledging his own parochial interest while emphasizing concerns about safety and costs.

He said the Osprey has fallen short of expectations on mission readiness, procurement costs and per-flight price tag. The Bell bid for the new Army aircraft was significantly higher than Sikorsky's, and costs could keep growing, he said.

Marine decorated for satellite stopgap fix

By MATTHEW M. BURKE

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa—A Marine on Okinawa who repaired a mobile satellite communications terminal with a 3D-printed part earlier this year was recognized by the Marine Corps recently for his effort.

Sgt. Malik Pugh, 24, a digital wideband systems maintainer with Marine Wing Communications Squadron 18, was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal during a Dec. 6 ceremony at Camp Kinser, according to a Marine news release shortly afterward. The award was presented by Brig. Gen. Adam Chalkley, commander of the 3rd Marine Logistics Group.

Pugh, of Fairview Heights, Ill., distinguished himself over the summer, when he was called to work on a mobile communications satellite on wheels, known as a Very Small Aperture Terminal-Large, according to his award recommendation from the Corps. The terminal allows the exchange of high-bandwidth voice, video and data in support of intelligence and logistics missions.

Pugh and other repairmen began to tinker with the terminal to find out what caused the shutdown, the recommendation said. He soon identified the culprit, a faulty WCTRL-11 cable, called a

Whiskey-11 by the Marines.

The cable, which carries data signals, is made up of several parts that must be ordered individually to field a viable replacement, Lt. Col. Matt Bowman, assistant chief of staff for communications and electronics with the 3rd Marine Logistics Group, told *Stars and Stripes* by email Dec. 19.

The part, a \$0.48 plastic housing for pin connectors that plugs directly into the terminal, was on back order, meaning it would take more than a year to arrive.

"I was like, 'OK, I'll be back tomorrow with a cable,'" Pugh recalled Dec. 18 at his home workshop at Camp Foster. "We have the schematics; it's not that hard to build."

Pugh spent dozens of hours at home designing the specialized connector in a computer-aided design file, according to the recommendation. Soon, his LulzBot 3D printer was spinning plastic filament; he also had to perform the tedious task of rewiring the cable.

Armed with a working prototype, Pugh brought the file to Marines of 3rd Maintenance Battalion, the recommendation said. They printed the final product, which was then successfully tested. The terminal was brought back online, and Pugh's plastic connector was deemed a worthy stopgap going forward.

Afghan girls finished with school after 6th grade due to Taliban

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Bahara Rustam, 13, took her last class at Bibi Razia School in Kabul on Dec. 11 knowing it was the end of her education. Under Taliban rule, she is unlikely to step foot in a classroom again.

In September 2021, a month after U.S. and NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan following two decades of war, the Taliban announced that girls were barred from studying beyond sixth grade.

They extended this education ban to universities in December 2022.

The Taliban have defied global condemnation and warnings that the restrictions will make it almost impossible for them to gain recognition as the coun-

try's legitimate rulers.

Last week, U.N. special envoy Roza Otunbayeva expressed concern that a generation of Afghan girls is falling behind with each day that passes.

Last week, an official in the Education Ministry said Afghan girls of all ages are allowed to study in religious schools known as madrassas, which have traditionally been boys-only.

But Otunbayeva said it was unclear if there was a standardized curriculum that allowed modern subjects.

Bahara is holding onto her education and pores over textbooks at home. "Graduating (from sixth grade) means we are going to seventh grade," she said. "But all of our classmates

cried and we were very disappointed."

There was no graduation ceremony for the girls at Bibi Razia School.

In another part of Kabul, 13-year old Setayesh Sahibzada wonders what the future holds for her. She is sad she can't go to school anymore to achieve her dreams.

"I can't stand on my own two feet," she said. "I wanted to be a teacher. But now I can't study, I can't go to school."

Analyst Muhammad Saleem Paigir warned that excluding women and girls from education will be disastrous for Afghanistan.

"We understand that illiterate people can never be free and prosperous," he said.

Russian nuclear shipments completed

Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia — The president of Belarus said Monday that Russia has completed its shipments of tactical nuclear weapons to his country, an initiative that raised strong concerns in neighboring Poland and elsewhere in the region.

President Alexander Lukashenko said at a meeting of a Moscow-led economic bloc in St. Petersburg that the shipments were completed in October, but he did not give details of how many weapons were sent or where they have been deployed.

Tactical nuclear weapons, which are intended for use on the battlefield, have a short range and a low yield compared with much more powerful nuclear warheads fitted to long-range missiles. Russia said it would maintain control over those it sends to Belarus.

Lukashenko has said that hosting Russian nuclear weapons in his country is meant to deter aggression by Poland, a NATO member. Poland is offering neighbor Ukraine military, humanitarian and political backing in its struggle against Russia's invasion and is taking part in international sanctions on Russia and Belarus.

Indians stuck in airport for days due to trafficking probe arrive in India

Associated Press

MUMBAI, India — A charter plane that was grounded in France for a human trafficking investigation arrived in India with 276 Indians aboard Tuesday, authorities said. The passengers had been heading to Nicaragua but were instead blocked inside a rural French airport for four days in an exceptional holiday ordeal.

A total of 303 passengers had originally boarded the Legend Airlines A340 plane last week in Fujairah airport in the United Arab Emirates for a flight to Managua, Nicaragua. When the plane stopped in France's Vatry Airport in Champagne country for refueling Thursday, it was grounded by police based on a tip that it could be carrying human trafficking victims.

The Vatry airport was requisitioned by police for days. Local officials, medics and volunteers installed cots and ensured regular meals and showers for those held inside. Then judges, lawyers and interpreters filled the terminal to carry out emergency hearings to determine the next steps. The plane was authorized to leave Monday and took off for Mumbai.

Report: Iran increasing production of uranium

Associated Press

VIENNA — Iran has increased the rate at which it is producing near weapons grade uranium in recent weeks, reversing a previous slowdown that started in the middle of this year, the International Atomic Energy Agency said in a report

to member states.

Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said in the report that Iran "in recent weeks had increased its production of highly enriched uranium, reversing a previous output reduction from mid-2023," according to an IAEA spokesper-

son Sunday.

Iran had previously slowed down the rate at which it was enriching uranium to 60% purity. Uranium enriched at 60% purity is just a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

The U.N. nuclear watchdog

said its inspectors had verified the increased rate of production since the end of November at facilities in Natanz and Fordow to about 9 kilograms per month, up from 3 kilograms per month since June and representing a return to earlier levels of production.

Dogs, cats won't be sold at pet stores

NV LAS VEGAS — Clark County pet stores can no longer sell dogs, cats, rabbits or potbellied pigs after an ordinance went into place last week.

The Clark County Commission last December voted to ban the sale of the small animals. As part of the ordinance, affected businesses had a year to transition to another business model.

Following the transition period, the ordinance went into place on Dec. 20.

Lawmakers said the ordinance aimed to regulate the sale of the popular pets, take on black market sales and help relieve packed animal shelters, the Review-Journal reported previously. Each illegal sale would incur a \$500 minimum fine, according to the ordinance.

GOP to propose to legalize medical pot

WI MADISON — Wisconsin Republicans plan to unveil a proposal soon to legalize medical marijuana in the state and could vote on it sometime in 2024, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos said.

Republicans have been working behind closed doors for years on a medical marijuana bill. Along the way, they have rejected calls from Gov. Tony Evers and other Democrats to legalize all uses of marijuana, including medical and recreational.

Vos said last week the proposal will be limited and modeled after the medical marijuana law that had been in place in neighboring Minnesota before it moved to full legalization.

"It is not going to be widespread," he said. "We are not going to have dispensaries on

every corner in every city."

He said Assembly Republicans are on board in concept, but no one has seen the actual proposal yet. He expected to unveil it in January.

Convict ruled innocent after 50 years in prison

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — An Oklahoma judge has exonerated a man who spent nearly 50 years in prison for murder, the longest serving inmate to be declared innocent of a crime.

Glynn Simmons, 71, who was released in July after prosecutors agreed that key evidence in his case was not turned over to his defense lawyers, was ruled innocent Tuesday.

"This court finds by clear and convincing evidence that the offense for which Mr. Simmons was convicted, sentenced and imprisoned... was not committed by Mr. Simmons," according to the ruling by Oklahoma County District Judge Amy Palumbo.

Simmons served 48 years, one month and 18 days since his conviction, making him the longest imprisoned U.S. inmate to be exonerated, according to data kept by The National Registry of Exonerations.

Simmons said afterward that he feels vindicated after his time in prison that included initially being sentenced to death row.

"It's a lesson in resilience and tenacity," Simmons said during a brief news conference following the ruling. "Don't let nobody tell you that it (exoneration) can't happen, because it really can."

Simmons has maintained his innocence, saying he was in Louisiana at the time of the 1974 slaying of Carolyn Sue Rogers inside an Edmond liquor store.

Man sentenced over video of monkey torture

WI MADISON — A southwestern Wisconsin man was sentenced Wednesday to a year and a day in prison for causing the creation and distribution of a video of a monkey being tortured.

U.S. District Judge William M. Conley also fined Kenneth Herrera, 40, of Soldiers Grove \$5,000 and ordered him to serve three years of supervised release following his prison sentence.

Herrera pleaded guilty to the charge on Sept. 15.

Herrera was cited under the Preventing Animal Cruelty and Torture Act, which makes it illegal to cause the creation or distribution of depictions of "animal crushing." Animal crushing includes burning, suffocating, impaling or causing the serious bodily injury of animals, prosecutors said.

Federal agents found evidence that Herrera in December 2021 sent money to a videographer in Indonesia in exchange for a video of a monkey being physically abused, prosecutors said. The videographer sent the video to Herrera via an encrypted messaging application.

Wind farm likely to 'adversely affect' whales

NJ ATLANTIC CITY — The lone remaining offshore wind project in New Jersey with preliminary approval is likely to "adversely affect" whales and other marine mammals, but its construction, operation and eventual dismantling will not seriously harm or kill them, a federal scientific agency said.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said

the Atlantic Shores project, to be built off the state's southern coast, is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any species of endangered whales, sea turtles, or fish.

Nor is it anticipated to destroy or adversely modify any designated critical habitat, the agency said.

Recycled wastewater a step closer to faucets

CA SACRAMENTO — When a toilet is flushed in California, the water can end up in a lot of places: An ice skating rink near Disneyland, ski slopes around Lake Tahoe, farmland in the Central Valley.

And — coming soon — kitchen faucets.

California regulators approved new rules to let water agencies recycle wastewater and put it right back into the pipes that carry drinking water to homes, schools and businesses.

It's a big step for a state that has struggled for decades to secure reliable sources of drinking water for its more than 39 million residents.

And it signals a shift in public opinion on a subject that as recently as two decades ago prompted backlash that scuttled similar projects.

Since then, California has been through multiple extreme droughts, including the most recent one that scientists say was the driest three-year period on record.

California's new rules require the wastewater be treated for all pathogens and viruses. The treatment is so stringent it removes all of the minerals that make fresh drinking water taste good — so they have to be added back at the end of the process.

— From Associated Press

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Jackson, Ravens top 49ers in statement game

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — If the rare late-season matchup between the top teams in the NFL was a statement game, Lamar Jackson and the Baltimore Ravens delivered a loud one to the rest of the league.

Jackson threw two touchdown passes in a span of 18 seconds in the third quarter and the Ravens intercepted Brock Purdy four times in a 33-19 victory over the San Francisco 49ers on Monday night.

“Our guys work hard. They compete hard. Everybody wants to be respected,” coach John Harbaugh said. “There’s one way to be respected, and that’s to go out there and earn that.”

Jackson and the Ravens (12-3) turned a highly anticipated matchup between the top two teams in the NFL into a lopsided win with strong performances on both sides of the ball.

Kyle Hamilton and the defense set the tone early by intercepting Purdy on three of the first four drives of the game for the 49ers (11-4) before Jackson

started to take over.

He scrambled 30 yards to set up a field goal on the final play of the first half to give the Ravens a 16-12 lead and then helped put the game away early in the third quarter.

After Baltimore forced a punt on the opening drive of the second half, Jackson capped a drive by throwing a 6-yard touchdown pass to Nelson Agholor.

Purdy was then intercepted by Patrick Queen on the next play from scrimmage. Jackson immediately turned that into another score with a 9-yard TD pass to Zay Flowers that made it 30-12.

“I thought Lamar had an MVP performance tonight,” Harbaugh said. “It takes a team to create a performance like that, but it takes a player to play at that level, to play at an MVP level, it takes a player to play that way. Lamar was all over the field.”

Jackson threw for 252 yards, ran for 45 more and vaulted past Purdy to become the MVP favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. His only real mis-

hap came when he got called for intentional grounding in the end zone after nearly tripping over the umpire, leading to a safety in the first quarter.

“We got the W,” Jackson said. “I don’t really care about performance. I just want to win. That’s what happened tonight. On Christmas, I got my gift.”

Purdy had his roughest game as a pro, becoming the first 49ers quarterback to throw four interceptions in a game since Colin Kaepernick in 2015, adding a few more near interceptions and being unable to generate the big plays that made him the league’s most efficient quarterback coming into the game.

Purdy finished 18 for 32 for 255 yards before getting replaced by Sam Darnold after getting a stinger in the fourth quarter.

“I didn’t mind his demeanor,” coach Kyle Shanahan said about Purdy. “He stayed in there and kept battling. Our whole team struggled there in the second half, so it wasn’t just him.”

San Francisco’s other MVP

candidate fared far better, with running back Christian McCaffrey running for 102 yards and a TD and adding 28 yards receiving. He set a franchise record with his eighth straight game with at least 100 yards from scrimmage.

This marquee matchup marked the second time ever that the teams with sole possession of the best record in each conference played in Week 16 or later.

Both teams remain on top of their conferences. The Niners are in a three-way tie with Philadelphia and Detroit for the best record in the NFC and can still clinch the No. 1 seed and a first-round bye with wins in their final two games.

“The mindset is we can’t let one turn into two,” linebacker Fred Warner said. “We’ve got to wipe this one. Learn from it, of course, watch the tape hard, be honest with yourself, but we’ve got to get right back to work. We can’t let this affect our confidence as a team. We know who we are.”

Eagles overcome sloppiness to top Giants, end 3-game skid

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Yes, of course, Jalen Hurts and coach Nick Sirianni heard the booming chants that echoed throughout the Linc from Eagles fans fed up with the pass-heavy offense that stalled in the second half.

“Run the ball! Run the ball!”

“I think I’d hear that too even if I had a double headset on,” Sirianni cracked.

No, of course, Hurts, Sirianni and offensive coordinator Brian Johnson weren’t going to surrender to the whims of fickle fans and their play-calling proposal from way up in the cheap seats.

So they say.

The Eagles eventually listened, and fans went wild when Kenneth Gainwell ripped off a 22-yard run and D’Andre Swift scored on a 5-yard run — yes, a rushing score that kept their chance of an NFC East title alive.

Hurts scored on the “tush push” that gave him the NFL record for most rushing touchdowns by a quarterback in a season and he threw for 301 yards and a touchdown to lead

the Philadelphia Eagles past the New York Giants 33-25 on Monday night.

They even kept the fans happy — even if the Eagles weren’t too pleased with the home crowd.

“They’re supposed to get loud for the defense,” Hurts said.

The Eagles (11-4) snapped a three-game losing streak that put Philly fans on edge — and led to a shakeup in defensive play calling. The losses to San Francisco, Dallas and Seattle essentially ended Philadelphia’s bid for the No. 1 seed in the NFC.

But the path to a second straight division title is clear. The Eagles need to beat Arizona next week and defeat the Giants again in the season finale to finish atop the NFC East.

After three crushing defeats, it took a visit from the Giants to straighten out the Eagles. The Eagles are 11-0 at the Linc against New York since 2014 and beat the Giants three times last season.

Adoree’ Jackson gave the Giants (5-10) a

late spark when he returned an interception 76 yards for a score and Saquon Barkley converted a 2-point conversion that made it 20-18 late in the third quarter.

Hurts and the Eagles held on thanks to the play calls of the fans, many dressed as Santa Claus.

It was still a largely sloppy effort, the kind that cost the Eagles of late against the more elite teams in the NFL.

“I’d love to say we’re close,” Hurts said. “I think it’s trending in the right direction.”

Turnovers, picks, flags, another untidy effort showed that — even with a win — the Eagles still don’t play like a team primed to make a second straight run at the Super Bowl.

But Hurts said it was time to adjust the expectations.

“When you have the type of guys we have on our team, everybody is going to be eager to grow, everybody is going to be eager for more,” he said. “But when did winning not become the main thing?”

Raiders stun Chiefs with defensive TDs

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The smell of the victory cigars wafted down the tunnel beneath Arrowhead Stadium, straight from the Las Vegas Raiders in the celebratory visiting locker room to the despondent home locker room of the Kansas City Chiefs.

For one, the scent of success. For the other, the stench of a sloppy mess.

Taking advantage of two defensive touchdowns for the second straight week, and riding an aggressive mindset that shut down Patrick Mahomes and the rest of the Kansas City offense, the Raiders held off the Chiefs 20-14 on Monday to not only deny their longtime AFC West rival another division crown, but also keep their postseason hopes alive.

“That was one of our mantras,” Raiders interim coach Antonio Pierce said afterward,

“by any means necessary.”

That meant big defensive tackle Bilal Nichols returning a fumble 8 yards for a touchdown, and Jack Jones taking an interception 33 yards for another score 7 seconds later. It meant Aidan O’Connell never completing a pass after the first quarter, yet also never making the same mistakes that Mahomes made for Kansas City on a soggy Christmas Day.

The Raiders (7-8) became the first NFL team since 2000 to win without completing a pass after the first quarter, and only the fifth team to beat the Chiefs at Arrowhead Stadium without scoring an offensive touchdown.

“Obviously this was a huge game. It’s a rivalry game,” O’Connell said. “We play them twice a year, every year, so to come into Arrowhead Stadium and win a game like this, it’s pretty awesome. It’s pretty spe-

cial for our guys.”

Kansas City (9-6) hardly helped its cause: Along with allowing the two defensive TDs, Harrison Butker missed a chip-shot field goal, penalties and dropped passes were again a problem, and twice they failed to convert on fourth down in the second half.

“They played a better game than we did today,” said Chiefs coach Andy Reid, whose team has lost three of four. “On offense we struggled. That’s my responsibility to make sure we put the guys in the right position to make plays, and that didn’t happen the way we wanted it to. I take full responsibility for the way we played offensively there.”

The Chiefs still had a chance in the closing minutes Monday to clinch their eighth straight AFC West title and keep their hopes alive for the No. 1 seed.

But after Mahomes hit Justin

Watson for a touchdown with 2:42 to go, the Raiders’ Zamir White broke loose for a 43-yard gain, picking up a first down that allowed them to run out the clock.

Mahomes finished 27-for-44 for 235 yards and the interception; he nearly threw a second but it was overturned upon review.

The Raiders, playing without injured running back Josh Jacobs, won despite a dismal day from their offense. White ran for 145 yards, but much of that came on the final possession. O’Connell was just 9-for-21 for 62 yards, the Raiders were 0-for-3 in the red zone and 3-for-12 on third down, and they had seven fewer first downs than Kansas City.

All that mattered was the score, though.

“That’s why it’s a team sport,” O’Connell said. “It was a team win.”

Sanders’ last-second FG lifts Dolphins past Cowboys

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Jason Sanders had waited all season for this moment. On a Miami Dolphins team that scores more touchdowns than any other in the NFL, the former All-Pro kicker hadn’t needed to attempt many field goals.

Sanders entered Sunday’s matchup against the Dallas Cowboys with just 21 field goal attempts on the year, but Miami needed his booming right leg in its biggest game of the season, and he delivered.

Sanders kicked his fifth field goal of the day, a 29-yarder as time expired, and the Dolphins secured a playoff berth with a 22-20 victory over the Cowboys.

“Not every year can be an All-Pro year,” said Sanders, who is 22 of 26 on field goals and 5 of 7 from 50-plus yards. “I think I’m still hitting the kicks. I’m still right where I need to be.”

Tua Tagovailoa threw for 293 yards and a touchdown for the AFC East-leading Dolphins (11-4), who beat a team with a winning record for the first time this season. He connected with Tyreek Hill twice on the decisive drive, which covered 64 yards and took the final 3:27 off the clock.

Lions 30, Vikings 24: Detroit clinched its first division title in 30 years, using two rushing touchdowns from Jahmyr Gibbs and 106 receiving yards and a third-quarter go-ahead score by Amon-Ra St. Brown to beat injured-plagued host Minnesota.

Buccaneers 30, Jaguars 12: Baker Mayfield threw for 283 yards and two touchdowns, and NFC South-leading host Tampa Bay won its fourth straight while extending Jacksonville’s skid to four games.

The Jaguars (8-7) remained in a first-place tie atop the AFC

South with Indianapolis and Houston because both also lost Sunday.

Browns 36, Texans 22: Amari Cooper set a franchise record with 265 yards receiving and scored two touchdowns and a 2-point conversion as visiting Cleveland beat Houston to move closer to a playoff berth.

The Browns (10-5) are all but guaranteed their second post-season appearance since 2002.

Seahawks 20, Titans 17: Geno Smith threw his second touchdown pass of the fourth quarter, a 5-yarder to Colby Parkinson with 57 seconds left, and visiting Seattle beat Tennessee to remain in playoff contention.

Patriots 26, Broncos 23: Chad Ryland made a career-long 56-yard field goal with 2 seconds left, and visiting New England dealt a near-fatal blow to Denver’s playoff hopes.

Falcons 29, Colts 10: Taylor

Heinicke provided turnover-free leadership at quarterback, passing for 229 yards and a touchdown to lead host Atlanta past Indianapolis.

Packers 33, Panthers 30: Jordan Love threw for two touchdowns, ran for one and made two big completions to set up Anders Carlson’s 32-yard field goal with 19 seconds left, and visiting Green Bay survived a fourth-quarter rally by Carolina.

Jets 33, Commanders 30: Greg Zuerlein kicked a 54-yard field goal with 5 seconds left, and host New York beat Washington after blowing a 20-point, third-quarter lead.

Bears 27, Cardinals 16: Justin Fields threw for a touchdown and ran for a score, and host Chicago beat Arizona.

Khalil Herbert ran for a season-high 112 yards and a touchdown.

Knicks snap Bucks' winning streak

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Bucks hadn't just been beating them, they were beating them easily.

So in front of a sold-out home crowd and a national TV audience, the New York Knicks used the Christmas stage to make their stand against Milwaukee.

Jalen Brunson scored 38 points and the Knicks snapped Milwaukee's seven-game winning streak, ending their lengthy skid against the Bucks with a 129-122 victory Monday.

The Knicks had dropped nine straight meetings, including a 130-111 loss on Saturday in the opener of this two-game series. The Bucks had routed New York twice while rolling through their December schedule, but they haven't solved Brunson all season, and the point guard got plenty of help from his teammates this time.

"They're a good team. We feel like we're a good team as well, so just kind of taking that challenge, accepting that challenge that we hadn't got them yet," guard Immanuel Quickley said. "It had been a while, so this was a good one to get."

Julius Randle added 24 points and nine rebounds, RJ Barrett bounced back from a poor game Saturday with 21 points and Quickley came off the bench for

20.

Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard each scored 32 points for the Bucks, who fell to 9-2 this month. Khris Middleton added 24.

The Bucks rang up 146 points against the Knicks in the quarterfinals of the In-Season Tournament on Dec. 5 and didn't cool off much Saturday. But they seemed short on energy Monday in the middle of an extended Christmas stay in New York, with still another game remaining in the city when they visit Brooklyn on Wednesday.

"We knew coming in everything that we were lined up for and it is what it is," Lillard said. "We got the first one, we came in for this one, they got off to a good start, they played a great game and we just got outplayed."

Milwaukee came in averaging 132.4 points in December, but didn't break 40 until less than four minutes remained in the first half. The Bucks trailed by 16 with 4½ minutes remaining in the game before a late flurry that made the score closer than the game felt.

"I thought they out-competed us today for the most part," Bucks coach Adrian Griffin said. "I thought offensively we got some good looks, but we just couldn't knock them down. And

when you're on the road, you get clean looks, you've got to knock them down."

Celtics 126, Lakers 115: Kristaps Porzingis had 28 points and 11 rebounds, Jayson Tatum added 25 points and visiting Boston defeated Los Angeles for the first time in a Christmas Day meeting.

Jaylen Brown had 19 points and Derrick White chipped in with 18 points and 11 rebounds. All five starters had at least 18 points for the Celtics, who have won three straight and 12 of their past 14.

Anthony Davis scored a game-high 40 points with 13 rebounds, LeBron James had 16 points, nine rebounds and eight assists, but the Lakers have dropped six of eight.

Mavericks 128, Suns 114: Luka Dončić scored 50 points to eclipse 10,000 for his career and had 14 assists, lifting visiting Dallas to the win over Phoenix.

Dončić capped a Christmas Day full of NBA games with a stellar performance, hitting 8 of 16 from 3 and all 12 of his free throws. He eclipsed 10,000 career points in the first quarter to reach the milestone in 358 career games, seventh-fastest in NBA history.

Dereck Lively II had 20 points and 10 rebounds after missing the previous four

games with an ankle sprain and Tim Hardaway Jr. added 18 points.

Heat 119, 76ers 113: Rookie Jaime Jaquez Jr. scored 31 points and got his first double-double, Bam Adebayo finished with 26 points and 15 rebounds and host Miami held on to beat Philadelphia.

Heat coach Erik Spoelstra improved to 9-0 on Christmas, the best record in NBA history for head coaches on the holiday.

Tyler Herro scored 22 points, Duncan Robinson added 16 and Kyle Lowry had 12 for the Heat in what became his first Christmas win. Jaquez also grabbed 10 rebounds for Miami, which held a 56-36 edge on the boards.

Reigning MVP and two-time defending scoring champion Joel Embiid missed the game for Philadelphia because of an ankle sprain. Tobias Harris scored 27 points for the 76ers, and Kelly Oubre Jr. added 25.

Nuggets 120, Warriors 114: Jamal Murray scored 28 points, Nikola Jokić overcame an off day from the field by going 18-for-18 from the free throw line and host Denver extended its winning streak to five games by holding off Golden State.

Jokić finished with 26 points despite going 4-for-12 from the floor. He also had 14 rebounds and eight assists.

Seminoles down to 3rd QB after Rodemaker opts out

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Florida State quarterback Tate Rodemaker will not play in the Orange Bowl and Brock Glenn will start against Georgia on Saturday, the Seminoles said Monday.

Earlier in the day, 247Sports and The Athletic reported Rodemaker intends to enter the transfer portal.

Rodemaker participated in open practices leading up to the

Christmas break. The Seminoles (13-0) arrived in Fort Lauderdale on Christmas night to begin final preparations for the matchup with Georgia (12-1) and Florida State coach Mike Norvell spoke of Glenn's looming start after getting off the plane.

Glenn also started the ACC championship game for Florida State.

"Definitely excited to see him take the step from his first start

to his second start," Norvell said. "A lot of confidence in what he'll be able to do, what he'll be able to accomplish. It's part of the new age of college athletics. I know Brock is going to be fired up and excited for the opportunity that he has."

A redshirt junior quarterback, Rodemaker stepped in for injured Jordan Travis on Nov. 18 to guide Florida State to a win over North Alabama. A week later, he led Florida State to a

victory at Florida. In 2023, Rodemaker completed 32 of 56 passes for 510 yards with five touchdowns and no interceptions.

Glenn has completed 10 of 25 passes for 90 yards this season, starting for the Seminoles against Louisville in the ACC championship game. Early enrollee Luke Kromenhoek, who signed on Wednesday, is also set to join the team for bowl practices.