

## US tries to stabilize Syria, strikes ISIS

*The Washington Post*

The Biden administration raced to try to help stabilize Syria after the collapse of President Bashar Assad's regime, targeting the Islamic State with dozens of airstrikes and monitoring Syrian stockpiles of chemical weapons.

President Joe Biden announced Sunday that U.S. forces had hit Islamic State camps and operatives in Syria and said the United States was working with its partners to address concerns that extremist groups could capitalize on the power vacuum left by Assad's departure.

"We're clear-eyed about the fact that ISIS will try to take advantage of any vacuum to reestablish its capabilities to create a safe haven," Biden said. "We will not let that happen."

Syria has long been a danger hot spot for U.S. interests. The Biden administration had been tracking ISIS targets that were hit in Sunday's strikes for some time, even before the events of the last few days, and took the

moment to weaken the group's operational capacity, the official said.

To beat back ISIS, forces from the U.S. Central Command, whose area of responsibility includes the Middle East, on Sunday struck over 75 ISIS targets using B-52, F-15 and A-10 warplanes, the command said in a statement.

"Battle damage assessments are underway, and there are no indications of civilian casualties," Central Command said.

"There should be no doubt — we will not allow ISIS to reconstitute and take advantage of the current situation in Syria," said Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla, who leads the command. "All organizations in Syria should know that we will hold them accountable if they partner with or support ISIS in any way."

Biden on Sunday sought to take credit for Assad's fall from power, saying it was the result of the actions his administration took to boost allies amid the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah were

unable to aid the Assad regime like they had in the past because they are "weaker today than they were when I took office," he said.

The rebel groups that toppled the autocrat had their own "grim record of terrorism," he said. "They're saying the right things now. But as they take on greater responsibility, we will assess not just their words, but their actions."

The flurry of activity capped an astonishing turn of events in which rebel forces needed just days to upend a status quo that stretched across the administrations of three U.S. presidents, and as President-elect Donald Trump prepares to steer a very different foreign policy from that of his predecessor.

Biden said he has directed his administration to work to ensure that Syria remains as stable as possible, as many actors inside and outside the country seek to capitalize on the situation to grab power and advantage. With Israel seizing control of border

areas of Syria and Turkish-backed forces skirmishing with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the country's north-east, the situation remains deeply combustible.

With a wide range of regional actors threatened by instability in Syria and seeing an opportunity to seize advantage, Biden administration officials have been reaching out extensively to countries that share borders with Syria. The country's central location makes it a hub for many regional dynamics and rivalries.

Iraq, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan all have stakes in what happens in Syria. Russia and Iran — long Assad's chief backers — also stand to lose from the collapse of his regime.

U.S. officials said the Biden administration is working with Turkey in an attempt to set up a deconfliction mechanism for the northern city of Manbij, where the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have clashed in recent days with Turkish-backed forces.

## Osprey flights paused again after more failures found

*Associated Press*

The Pentagon is temporarily pausing flights again of its V-22 Osprey fleet after weakened metals in a part inside one of the aircraft broke apart in flight in November, causing an engine failure and a near crash in New Mexico, based on an initial investigation of the incident.

The pause was recommended last week by Vice Adm. Carl Chebi, the head of Naval Air Systems Command, and went into effect Monday morning, Navy spokesman Cmdr. Tim

Hawkins said.

Both the Navy and Air Force are adhering to the voluntary operational pause, which is indefinite as the services look at how the safety issue can be mitigated. The Marine Corps did not immediately return a request for comment as to whether its aircraft would also adhere to the operational pause.

It's the latest problem for the military's embattled Osprey aircraft. An investigation into the Osprey by The Associated Press last month found that

safety issues have increased in the past five years, parts are wearing out faster than expected and that the design of the aircraft itself is directly contributing to many of the accidents.

Following that report, lawmakers sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin asking him to regroup the Osprey fleet until solutions can be put in place to address safety and design issues identified by the AP.

The Air Force Special Operations Command is "in close coordination with the V-22 Joint

Program Office and aware of their operational pause recommendation. In concurrence with their recommendation, Lt. Gen. Michael Conley, AFSOC commander, has directed a pause for all CV-22 flight training operations," Lt. Col. Becky Heyse, command spokeswoman, said in a statement.

"A pause in flight training operations allows time and space for us to understand what happened in the most recent event before we accept risk with unknown variables."

# 14.5% raise set for junior enlisted troops

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Junior enlisted service members are set to receive a 14.5% pay raise next year alongside a 4.5% pay hike for all troops under a compromise defense policy bill expected to be voted on this week.

The final version of the National Defense Authorization Act, an annual must-pass bill that outlines priorities and spending for the Defense Department, includes a significant pay bump for E-1 to E-4 troops as part of a wide-ranging effort to improve housing, health care, child care and spousal support for service members and their families.

The quality-of-life improvements were spearheaded by House lawmakers to boost morale and improve recruitment and retention. Pay for junior enlisted troops was of particular concern because it had failed to keep pace with inflation and private-sector compensation, forcing some families to rely on food banks.

“Our service members deserve better than food stamps,” Rep. Mike Garcia, R-Calif., a former Navy pilot, wrote Saturday on X. “This historic raise is how we fix it.”

The House had recommended a 19.5% pay raise for junior enlisted personnel earlier this year while the Senate had countered with a 5.5% raise — slightly above the 4.5% pay increase the White House had requested for all troops.

The White House opposed a large change to junior enlisted pay, warning it would be too costly and permanently alter military pay tables. Funding for the larger paychecks still needs to be negotiated by the appropriations committees in both chambers of Congress.

The defense policy bill unveiled Saturday night authorizes \$895 billion in national defense spending, including \$850 billion for the Pentagon.

Contained in that sum is a \$2 billion investment in new barracks and family housing, the construction of more Defense Department schools and child care centers, expanded bonuses to improve hiring of medical personnel, and higher salaries for child care workers.

The legislation also makes it easier for military spouses to transfer professional licenses between states and gives service members direct access to specialty medical providers by waiving referral requirements.

Many of the divisive culture war issues pushed by Republicans in the House’s version of the defense bill were scrubbed from the final legislation. The provisions would have ended the Pentagon’s abortion travel policy, eliminated diversity, equity and inclusion offices, and barred Tricare health coverage of gender-transition procedures.

However, the final bill maintains a hiring

freeze for diversity-related positions and includes a controversial provision that prohibits Tricare from providing gender dysphoria treatments for military dependents younger than 18 that could result in sterilization.

Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top-ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, on Sunday condemned the ban on gender-affirming treatment for minors and called on House Speaker Mike Johnson to rescind it.

“Blanketly denying health care to people who clearly need it, just because of a biased notion against transgender people, is wrong,” Smith said in a statement. “This provision injected a level of partisanship not traditionally seen in defense bills.”

Johnson, R-La., told the conservative media company The Daily Wire on Saturday that the provision eliminated taxpayer funding for treatments that could permanently harm young people.

The final defense authorization bill also raised some concerns among Republicans. Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, bristled at the omission of his proposal to raise the spending topline by \$25 billion.

The House is expected to vote on the defense policy bill this week, followed by a vote in the Senate by the end of the month.

## Marine Corps activates 1st East Coast F-35C squadron

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Marine Corps activated its first F-35C Lightning II stealth fighter squadron on the East Coast on Thursday, with the reactivation of the legendary Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 251 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point near Camp Lejeune, N.C.

The return of VMFA 251 marked a significant moment in the Corps’ efforts to modernize its fleet to fight a modern, large-scale war against an enemy with similar capabilities to the United States, officials said.

The squadron was inactivat-

ed in April 2020 at its prior base, Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, S.C., after flying the F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet since 1986, including numerous operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The unit, nicknamed the Thunderbolts or T-Bolts, traces its lineage to World War II in which its pilots flew the F4F Wildcat, an aircraft carrier-based fighter. They flew the Wildcat in Pacific campaigns including the battles of Guadalcanal, the southern Solomons, Santa Cruz, Luzon and the southern Philippines, according to a Defense Department history of the squadron. The

unit earned two Presidential Unit Citations “for extraordinary heroism” for its efforts during World War II. VMFA 251 also fought in the Korean War and flew NATO no-fly zone enforcement sorties over Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s.

“The T-Bolts are humbled and honored for the privilege of carrying that proud legacy forward,” Lt. Col. Evan Shockley, the squadron’s commander, said in a statement. “Our immediate focus is working toward initial operational capability, which means that VMFA 251 has enough operational F-35C Lightning II aircraft, trained pi-

lots, maintainers and support equipment to self-sustain its mission essential tasks. Following that, we will turn our attention toward reaching full operational capability to ensure that, when called upon, the T-Bolts will stand ready to serve our great nation.”

The squadron is expected to reach initial operating capability next year, said 1st Lt. Jacob Ballard, 2nd Marine Air Wing spokesman.

It’s expected to be fully operational no later than 2026, which would allow the squadron to deploy globally, Ballard said.

# Defense bill omits Bahrain school choice plan

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

A proposed pilot program that would have provided public funding for private school education to U.S. military families in Bahrain is gone in the final version of this year's defense bill.

The GOP-backed trial was removed during discussions between House and Senate members to finalize the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act.

Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., had sponsored the proposal as part of the House's version of the bill, which was passed in June.

"Because of the deep concern of parents at the Bahrain school, which has been struggling with poor teaching, flooding and even recently celebrated a notorious antisemite, we have developed a pilot program," Banks said during a House Armed Services Committee meeting in May.

The flooding that Banks allud-

ed to occurred in mid-April and resulted from torrential rainfall. Because of extensive damage, the school's 24-acre campus in Juffair was closed for almost three weeks, forcing students to shift to remote learning.

In April, a school social media post promoted Palestinian-American activist Linda Sarsour as someone who has campaigned for civil rights and social justice issues. Sarsour also backs a movement to boycott and divest from Israel and has faced accusations of antisemitism, something she has denied. The school post was later removed.

There are 574 students enrolled at Bahrain Elementary, Middle and High School, located at Naval Support Activity Bahrain. The small but densely populated island country is home to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and 5th Fleet

headquarters.

In a statement Monday, the Department of Defense Education Activity said it does not comment on pending legislation.

DODEA officials said in the spring that standardized test scores at the Bahrain school are above national averages and pointed to a high-performing student body.

The National Education Association, on behalf of the Federal Education Association, blasted the school choice proposal, saying in a statement earlier this year that the "voucher-like program" would "rob schools of resources and students of First Amendment, due process and other constitutional and statutory rights."

The statement also expressed union members' concern that without accountability, diverting funds to non-U.S. schools or institutions could

give rise to fraud and abuse.

In a joint statement over the weekend, lawmakers said the agreement between the House and Senate versions of the NDAA includes an amendment to strike the DODEA Bahrain school choice pilot program.

The U.S. comptroller general was instead directed to submit a report by Dec. 31, 2025 "on the administration of DODEA schools in Bahrain," according to the statement from leaders of the armed services committees in the two chambers of Congress.

The report must include the number of classes with long-term substitutes in the past three school years, by grade and subject matter; the number of Advanced Placement courses offered in person in the past three years; and a comparison of DODEA Bahrain's AP course offerings with those of other overseas DODEA schools.

## TikTok seeks delay on ban to give high court more time

*Associated Press*

TikTok asked a federal appeals court Monday to bar the Biden administration from enforcing a law that could lead to a ban on the popular platform until the Supreme Court reviews its challenge to the statute.

The legal filing was made after a panel of three judges on the same court sided with the government last week and ruled that the law, which requires TikTok to divest from its China-based parent company or face a ban as soon as next month, was constitutional.

If the law is not overturned, both TikTok and its parent ByteDance, which is also a plaintiff in the case, have claimed that the popular app will shut down by Jan. 19, 2025. TikTok has more than 170 million American users.

"Before that happens, the Supreme Court should have an opportunity, as the only court with appellate jurisdiction over this action, to decide whether to review this exceptionally important case," attorneys for the two companies wrote in the legal filing on Monday.

It's not clear if the Supreme Court will take up the case.

President-elect Donald Trump, who tried to ban TikTok the last time he was in the White House, has said he is now against such action.

In their legal filing, the two companies pointed to the political realities, saying that an injunction would provide a "modest delay" that would give "the incoming Administration time to determine its position — which could moot both the impending harms and the need for Supreme Court review."

## Member of Little Rock Nine christens USS Arkansas sub

*Associated Press*

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. — The nuclear submarine USS Arkansas was christened Saturday, almost a decade in the making since the U.S. Navy announced that a Virginia-class submarine would bear the state's name.

Carlotta Walls LaNier, one of the nine Black students who desegregated Little Rock Central High School in 1957, launched a bottle of sparkling wine into the hull of the Virginia-class submarine at Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia.

In 2018, then-Navy Secretary Ray Mabus named the six women of the Little Rock Nine as sponsors of the ship. Besides LaNier, Elizabeth Eckford and Gloria Ray Karlmark also attended the ceremony. All the sponsors had their initials welded into steel plates when the submarine's keel was laid in 2022.

"History is full of groups of

collective people who come together to make something happen," the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reported that LaNier said in a speech before the crowd at the shipyard. "Many people are behind the submarine that we christened today. It's similar to the quote on our currency, E pluribus unum — 'Out of many, one.' We have SSN 800, but many participated in the reality of it being here today."

Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro called the ship "the very best of our submarine force capabilities."

"She will always be propelled by the proud legacy of her namesake, represented here today by three of her courageous sponsors, who overcame tremendous adversity as members of the Little Rock Nine," Del Toro said.

The Arkansas is expected to launch in 2025.



# Zelenskyy open to Western security help

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Monday that he's open to the potential deployment of Western troops in Ukraine to guarantee the country's security as part of a broad effort to end the almost three-year war with Russia.

The deployment would be a step toward Ukraine joining NATO, Zelenskyy said in a post on his Telegram channel.

"But before that, we must have a clear understanding of when Ukraine will be in the European Union and when Ukraine will be in NATO," Zelenskyy said.

His proposals tread a delicate diplomatic path amid international efforts to find a way of ending Europe's biggest conflict since World War II at a time when Russia has gained an upper hand in the fighting.

President-elect Donald Trump is seeking to bring about a ceasefire and met with Zelenskyy in Paris on Saturday. But Zelenskyy said Monday that he would approach outgoing President Joe Biden about Ukraine's possible NATO membership because he's still in office, while Trump doesn't yet have "legal rights" to decide on the matter.

"He wants to have a cease-

fire," Trump said of Zelenskyy in comments to the New York Post published Sunday. "He wants to make peace. We didn't talk about the details."

Putin's forces are taking heavy losses in Ukraine, Trump noted.

"I'm formulating a concept of how to end that ridiculous war," he said.

The possibilities of Ukraine joining the 32-nation NATO military alliance and of Western troops being stationed on its soil have been deeply divisive and contentious issues since Russia's full-scale invasion began Feb. 24, 2022.

At their summit in Washington in July, NATO declared Ukraine on an "irreversible" path to membership, but stopped short of inviting the country in.

The United States and Germany have balked at Ukraine joining NATO while at war with Russia.

One obstacle has been the view that Ukraine's borders would need to be clearly demarcated before it could join so that there can be no mistaking where the alliance's pact of mutual defense would come into effect. Russia's invading army occupies about one-fifth of Ukraine.

## Marine veteran acquitted in subway chokehold death

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A Marine veteran who used a chokehold on an agitated subway rider was acquitted Monday in a death that became a prism for differing views about public safety, valor and vigilantism.

A Manhattan jury delivered the verdict, clearing Daniel Penny of criminally negligent homicide in Jordan Neely's death last year. A more serious manslaughter charge was dismissed earlier in deliberations because the jury deadlocked on that count.

Both charges were felonies and carried the possibility of prison time.

Penny, 26, gripped Jordan

Neely around the neck for about six minutes in a chokehold that other subway passengers partially captured on video.

Penny's lawyers said he was protecting himself and other subway passengers from a volatile, mentally ill man who was making alarming remarks and gestures. The defense also disputed a city medical examiner's finding that the chokehold killed Neely.

Prosecutors said Penny reacted far too forcefully to someone he perceived as a peril, not a person.

The case amplified many American fault lines, among them race, politics, crime, urban life, mental illness and

homelessness. Neely was Black. Penny is white.

The verdict capped a trial that took a tumultuous turn last Friday, when jurors said they couldn't reach a unanimous verdict on the manslaughter charge. The judge then dismissed it at prosecutors' request — a rare one for prosecutors to make in the thick of a trial.

Penny served four years in the Marines and went on to study architecture.

Neely, 30, was a sometime subway performer with a tragic life story: His mother was killed and stuffed in a suitcase when he was a teenager.

As a younger man, Neely did

Michael Jackson tributes — complete with moonwalks — on the city's streets and subways, building a reputation among the artist's fans and impersonators. But Neely also struggled with mental illness after losing his mother, whose boyfriend was convicted of murdering her.

On May 1, 2023, he boarded a subway under Manhattan, hurled his jacket onto the floor, and declared that he was hungry and thirsty and didn't care if he died or went to jail, witnesses said.

Penny, who was on his way from a college class to the gym, came up behind Neely, grabbed his neck, took him to the floor.

## Taiwan: Chinese ships in nearby waters before expected drills

Associated Press

BEIJING — China's military appears to be preparing for widely anticipated drills in response to a recent visit by Taiwan's president to Hawaii and Guam.

Taiwan's defense ministry said Monday that it detected Chinese naval and coast guard ships entering the Taiwan Strait

and the western Pacific, and that China had restricted airspace along its southeast coast through Wednesday.

There was no immediate confirmation from the Chinese side.

It comes as President-elect Donald Trump said he would not commit to defending Taiwan if China were to invade

during his presidency.

China has said Taiwan is part of its territory and opposes American support and military sales to the self-governing island. Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te made stops in Hawaii and Guam during a weeklong tour of the Pacific that ended Friday.

China has maintained that

Taiwan is a province which should not have its own presidential or foreign relations.

Taiwan's defense ministry said it has set up an emergency response center and launched combat readiness exercises in response to Chinese activity in the Taiwan Strait.

It did not say what those exercises entailed.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Influencer faces charge over confrontation

**IL** BERWYN — Far-right influencer Nick Fuentes is due in court after a woman accused him of pepper-spraying her when she showed up at his suburban Chicago home following his “Your body, my choice” post on X.

Court documents said the 57-year-old woman approached Fuentes’ home in Berwyn shortly after his address was leaked following his post, the Chicago Tribune reported. The woman said her friends encouraged her to go to Fuentes’ home to see if rumors were true that he had been receiving prank deliveries after his post on X. She said she made a video of herself on the sidewalk in front of Fuentes’ home. Another woman pulled up in her car and told her to ring the doorbell.

She said Fuentes opened the door before she could ring the bell, pepper-sprayed her, screamed an expletive and took her phone.

Fuentes, 26, faces a battery charge over the incident, the newspaper reported.

## Iconic ‘Wizard of Oz’ slippers sold for \$28M

**MN** MINNEAPOLIS — A pair of ruby slippers that were worn by Judy Garland in “The Wizard of Oz” and stolen from a museum nearly two decades ago sold for a winning bid of \$28 million at auction.

Heritage Auctions had estimated that they would fetch \$3 million or more, but the fast-paced bidding far outpaced that amount within seconds and tripled it within minutes. A few

bidders making offers by phone volleyed back and forth for 15 minutes as the price climbed to the final, eye-popping sum.

Including the Dallas-based auction house’s fee, the unknown buyer will ultimately pay \$32.5 million.

The sparkly red heels were on display at the Judy Garland Museum in her hometown of Grand Rapids, Minn., in 2005 when Terry Jon Martin used a hammer to smash the glass of the museum’s door and display case. Their whereabouts remained a mystery until the FBI recovered them in 2018.

## School choir belts tunes from Christmas tree

**MI** MUSKEGON — A western Michigan community is celebrating the 40th anniversary of its beloved singing Christmas tree.

The Mona Shores Singing Christmas Tree, which features a 180-student high school choir and stands 15 rows tall, belted out 19 holiday tunes at a Muskegon theater and was set to perform two more shows. The 67-foot-tall tree is adorned with 25,000 LED lights and loads of greenery.

“The Singing Christmas Tree is 100% a spectacle,” said Shawn Lawton, who has directed the Mona Shores High School Choir and overseen the annual show for three decades.

The very top, just underneath the star, typically is reserved for the “tree angel,” a student chosen by Lawton who “is not your top singer” but has “all the heart.” This year’s pick is senior Makenzie Aney, who uses a wheelchair and performs at the base of the tree, close to the front of the stage.

## Studio executive dies in small plane crash

**GA** ATLANTA — The president of Atlanta-based Tyler Perry Studios died when the small plane he was piloting crashed on Florida’s Gulf Coast.

The studio confirmed Steve Mensch, 62, president and general manager, had died.

The crash happened in Homosassa, about 60 miles north of Tampa. Photos from the scene showed the plane having come to rest upside down on a road. The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating.

## Deal offers \$9M to nursing home residents

**LA** NEW ORLEANS — Some of the elderly residents of seven Louisiana nursing homes who were sent in 2021 to ride out Hurricane Ida in a crowded, ill-equipped warehouse are being offered shares of a nearly \$9 million settlement after they sued.

Retired state judge William Knight told The Times-Picayune of New Orleans that all the 427 former residents who filed legal claims are being sent letters outlining the proposed settlement. Knight said amounts differ based on patients’ individual circumstances.

People who don’t contest the amount offered can expect to receive money within a few weeks. A hearing for those who want to fight the settlement will be held in January.

“It’s been a longer road getting here than we wanted it to be,” Knight said. “Nobody’s getting what they should, quite

frankly, because there’s not enough money.”

Last month, nursing home owner Bob Dean Jr., 70, agreed to pay \$8.2 million to the federal government to settle allegations that he misused assets and income from four nursing homes whose loans were insured by the Federal Housing Administration. Prosecutors said he funneled nursing home money to his personal bank accounts, using the money to buy antiques, guns and cars.

## Clintons urge voters to remain in public service

**AK** LITTLE ROCK — Voters dejected by the presidential election results need to find a way to give back and remain involved, Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton said as they celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Clinton presidential library.

The former president urged audience members in a packed theater to remain engaged and find ways to communicate with those they disagree with despite a divisive political time.

The two spoke about a month after former President Donald Trump’s win over Vice President Kamala Harris in the presidential election.

“We’re just passing through, and we all need to just calm down and do something that builds people up instead of tears them down,” Bill Clinton said.

Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state who was defeated by Trump in the 2016 election, said she understands the next couple of years are going to be challenging for voters who don’t agree with the decisions being made.

— From Associated Press

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# Source: Soto, Mets reach \$765M deal

Associated Press

DALLAS — Star outfielder Juan Soto and the New York Mets agreed Sunday to a record \$765 million, 15-year contract, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press, a deal that could escalate to \$805 million and is believed to be the largest pact in team sports history.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the agreement, first reported by the New York Post, was subject to a successful physical.

While there are no definitive records in sports beyond the United States, Soto's deal is thought to eclipse those in all other team sports. The deal, spurning the New York Yankees' attempt to retain the star who helped them reach the World Series, was reached on the eve of the first full day of

baseball's annual winter meetings.

He would have the right to opt out of the contract after the 2029 season if the Mets don't at that time increase the average annual value by \$4 million annually. Soto will get a \$75 million signing bonus, payable upon the deal's approval by the commissioner's office.

Soto's agreement is the largest and longest in Major League Baseball history, topping Shohei Ohtani's \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers, a deal signed last December. That agreement included \$680 million in deferred payments and is valued at just under \$46.1 million annually for baseball's luxury tax.

Soto's agreement does not include deferred money, the person said, leaving its average an-

nual value at \$51 million. Its length tops Fernando Tatis Jr.'s \$340 million, 14-year contract with San Diego that runs through 2034.

The Yankees' final offer to Soto was for \$760 million over 16 years, a second person familiar with the talks said, also on condition of anonymity because that detail was not announced. That offer had a \$47.5 million average annual value.

A four-time All-Star at 26, Soto is the most accomplished free agent at that age since Alex Rodriguez agreed to a record \$252 million, 10-year deal with Texas in December 2000 at age 25.

Soto was 19 when he made his major league debut with Washington in 2018 and helped the Nationals win the World Series the following year, when he hit .282 with 34 homers and 110 RBIs.

He turned down Washington's \$440 million, 15-year offer in 2022 and was traded that August to San Diego. Following the death of Padres owner Peter Seidler, Soto was dealt to the Yankees in December 2023 and helped New York reach the World Series for the first time since 2009.

Soto batted .288 with 41 homers, 109 RBIs and 129 walks, hitting second in the batting order ahead of Aaron Judge to power an offense that led the majors with 237 homers. He hit a go-ahead homer in the ALCS opener against Cleveland and a tie-breaking, three-run homer in the 10th inning that won the pennant against the Guardians in Game 5.

Soto has a career .285 batting average with 201 homers, 592 RBIs and 769 walks in his seven major league seasons.

## Bjorkstrand has 4 points, Kraken top reeling Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Oliver Bjorkstrand had two goals and two assists to help Philipp Grubauer and the Seattle Kraken beat the New York Rangers 7-5 on Sunday.

Eeli Tolvanen had a goal and two assists for Seattle, which trailed 3-1 early in the second period. Brandon Tanev, Vince Dunn, Shane Wright and Yanni Gourde also scored, and Grubauer made 32 saves.

K'Andre Miller and Vincent Trocheck each had a goal and an assist for New York, which lost for the seventh time in nine games.

Jonathan Quick made 15 saves for New York while subbing for Igor Shesterkin, who was away from the team because his wife went into labor with their second child. Shesterkin's eight-year contract extension was announced Saturday.

Wright's seventh goal of the

season gave Seattle a 6-3 lead 11:13 into the third period. But New York pulled within one on goals by Miller and Lafreniere.

Gourde's empty-netter at 18:14 helped close it out for the Kraken.

**Lightning 4, Canucks 2:** Brayden Point scored twice and added two assists as Tampa Bay edged host Vancouver.

Nikita Kucherov had a goal and two assists for the Lightning, and Jake Guentzel scored on a power play late in the third period.

Captain Quinn Hughes and Kiefer Sherwood scored for the Canucks.

**Islanders 4, Senators 2:** Ilya Sorokin made 29 saves for New York against host Ottawa, one day after stopping 28 in a win over the Carolina Hurricanes.

Both teams were playing the back half of back-to-backs.

With the game tied 2-2, Kyle Palmieri gave the Islanders the

lead at 13:46 of the third with New York's second power-play goal of the game.

Ottawa pressed hard for the equalizer but Sorokin rose to the occasion and Bo Horvat added an empty-net goal to secure the win.

**Blue Jackets 4, Jets 1:** Kent Johnson scored two third-period goals to help Columbus snap a three-game losing skid with a victory at Winnipeg.

Kyle Connor scored for the Jets. Eric Comrie stopped 24 shots for Winnipeg.

The Jets didn't get their first shot on goal until a power play five minutes into the game.

**Avalanche 4, Devils 0:** Scott Wedgewood stopped 25 shots for his seventh career shutout, leading Colorado to a victory at New Jersey.

Ross Colton, Logan O'Connor, Artturi Lehkonen and Parker Kelly scored for the Avalanche (16-13-0). Casey Mit-

telstadt and Calvin de Haan recorded two assists apiece.

Jake Allen had 19 saves for the Devils (18-10-2).

**Utah 4, Flyers 2:** Logan Cooley broke a tie on power play late in the second period and had an assist to help Utah beat host Philadelphia.

Cooley took a no-look pass from Dylan Guenther and made a slick forehand-to-backhand move in front of the net to beat goalie Sam Ersson.

**Stars 6, Flames 2:** Roope Hintz scored the first in a four-goal third-period for host Dallas, including two from Thomas Harley, in a win over Calgary.

Jake Oettinger made 29 saves to remain perfect in 10 games this season at American Airlines Center for his 14th overall win, second among NHL goaltenders.

Calgary got goals from Jonathan Huberdeau, who scored one minute in, and Connor Zary.



# Darnold leads Vikings to 6th win in row

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Sam Darnold threw for 347 yards and five touchdowns, both career highs, and the Minnesota Vikings pulled away from Kirk Cousins and the Atlanta Falcons 42-21 on Sunday for their sixth straight victory.

Darnold added another highlight to his brilliant first season in Minnesota following the departure of Cousins in free agency to Atlanta with a 22-for-28 performance and no turnover-worthy plays despite heavy first-half pressure.

Darnold passed for 250 yards after halftime to help the Vikings (11-2) break a 21-all tie early in the fourth quarter and stay one game behind NFC North-leading Detroit with a final-week matchup looming with the Lions. Jordan Addison had eight catches for 133 yards and three scores and Justin Jefferson racked up seven receptions for 132 yards and two touchdowns after going the past six games without scoring.

Cousins threw two more interceptions without a touchdown in his return to Minnesota, where he was greeted by loud boos and left with Atlanta's fourth consecutive loss to tumble out of first place in the NFC South and fall one game behind Tampa Bay.

**Chiefs 19, Chargers 17:** Matthew Wright kicked a 31-yard field goal that banked off the left upright as time expired, and host Kansas City survived another close game, beating Los Angeles to win its ninth straight AFC West title.

Patrick Mahomes led the two-time defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs (12-1) on a clock-killing 4½-minute drive to set up Wright's fourth field goal. It looked routine until the ball clanged off the upright in the latest narrow escape for Kansas City, which has won 10 games by a one-score margin.

Kansas City's nine straight division titles are two short of the New England Patriots' NFL rec-

ord of 11.

The Chiefs led 13-0 at halftime after the Chargers (8-5) punted on their first five possessions, but Justin Herbert and LA woke up in the second half, scoring on each of their three drives. Cameron Dicker's 37-yard field goal put the Chargers ahead 17-16 with 4:35 left.

**Rams 44, Bills 42:** Matthew Stafford passed for 320 yards and hit Puka Nacua for a 19-yard touchdown with 1:54 to play, and host Los Angeles overcame Josh Allen's record six-touchdown performance to snap Buffalo's seven-game winning streak.

Allen passed for 342 yards and three touchdowns and rushed for 82 yards and three more scores for the Bills (10-3), who hadn't lost since Oct. 6 in Houston. He became the first player in NFL history with three passing TDs and three rushing TDs in a game.

Allen capped his third long touchdown drive of the fourth quarter by scoring on a 1-yard dive with 1:00 left.

But Ronnie Rivers recovered the onside kick and Los Angeles (7-6) ran out the clock on its first win over Buffalo since 2012 and its first at home since 1983.

**Eagles 22, Panthers 16:** Saquon Barkley rushed for 124 yards to break the Eagles season record, Jalen Hurts threw two touchdown passes and ran for a score, and host Philadelphia won its ninth straight game over Carolina.

The Eagles (11-2) maintained their position as the No. 2 team in the NFC, behind Detroit (12-1), after a mostly lethargic effort against the Panthers (3-10).

Barkley added another milestone in his MVP push when he used a 9-yard run in the fourth quarter to surpass LeSean McCoy's Eagles record of 1,607 yards, set in 2013. Barkley has 1,623 yards with four games left.

**Steelers 27, Browns 14:** Russell Wilson threw for 158 yards and two touchdowns as

host Pittsburgh pulled away from mistake-prone Cleveland.

The Steelers (10-3) beat Cleveland at home during the regular season for the 21st straight time, even with leading receiver George Pickens watching from the sideline while missing the first game of his career due to a groin injury.

While it took Wilson a while to get going with the productive if volatile Pickens out of the mix, he found his footing in the second half by connecting on touchdown passes to Pat Freiermuth and Van Jefferson as the Steelers moved two games ahead of rival Baltimore for the AFC North lead with four weeks to go.

**Buccaneers 28, Raiders 13:** Baker Mayfield threw for 295 yards and three touchdowns, helping host Tampa Bay beat Las Vegas and take over sole possession of first place in the NFC South.

Mayfield tossed scoring passes of 15 yards and 29 yards to rookie Jalen McMillan. RaShaad White scored on a 5-yard reception and a 3-yard run as the Bucs (7-6) won for the third straight week against a last-place opponent to revive their hopes for a fourth consecutive division title.

**Dolphins 32, Jets 26 (OT):** Tua Tagovailoa threw a 10-yard touchdown pass to Jonnu Smith in overtime and host Miami overcame Aaron Rodgers' first 300-yard passing game in nearly three years to beat New York.

After Jason Sanders tied it with 7 seconds left in regulation with a 42-yard field goal, Tagovailoa quickly moved the Dolphins (6-7) down the field and they beat the Jets for the ninth straight time in Miami.

That came after Anders Carlson gave the struggling Jets (3-10) the lead with a 42-yarder with 52 seconds remaining. But Malik Washington put the Dolphins in great position to help set up Sanders' field goal with a 45-yard kickoff return to Miami's 46-yard line.

**Jaguars 10, Titans 6:** Tank Bigsby ran for an 8-yard touchdown with 6:46 left as visiting Jacksonville snapped a five-game skid and ended Tennessee's slim playoff hopes.

Jacksonville (3-10) came in already eliminated with Trevor Lawrence out for the rest of this season. The Jaguars left with only their second victory in the past 11 trips to Music City and second in the past three.

**Saints 14, Giants 11:** Bryan Bresee leaped over the Giants' line to block a potential tying field goal with 11 seconds left, and visiting New Orleans held on for a victory over New York after losing quarterback Derek Carr to an injury late in the fourth quarter.

The Giants lost their eighth straight, one shy of the team record.

**Seahawks 30, Cardinals 18:** Zach Charbonnet ran for a career-high 134 yards and two touchdowns, Geno Smith threw for 233 yards and a score, and visiting Seattle beat Arizona to remain atop the NFC West.

The Seahawks (8-5) won their fourth straight and swept the season series from the Cardinals (6-7).

Seattle shook off an early deficit to take a 24-10 lead by halftime. Charbonnet broke a tackle at midfield and sprinted 51 yards for a touchdown with 2:36 left in the second quarter.

**49ers 38, Bears 13:** Brock Purdy threw for 325 yards and two touchdowns and host San Francisco bounced back from two blowout losses to beat Chicago and spoil interim coach Thomas Brown's debut.

Purdy delivered his third 300-yard passing game of the season with two TDs to Jauan Jennings, fill-in back Isaac Guerendo gained 128 yards from scrimmage and scored on two TD runs and George Kittle had six catches for 151 yards. That helped deliver the highest-scoring game of the season for the 49ers.

# 76ers top Bulls, Embiid scores 31 in return

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Joel Embiid had 31 points and 12 rebounds in his return, Tyrese Maxey got his first career triple-double and the Philadelphia 76ers held on to beat the Chicago Bulls 108-100 on Sunday.

Maxey finished with 25 points, 14 assists and 11 rebounds. Paul George and Kelly Oubre Jr. each scored 12 as the Sixers won for the fourth time in five games.

Zach LaVine led Chicago with 30 points, and Nikola Vucevic and Coby White each had 13 in the Bulls' second straight loss.

Playing in just his fifth game this season, after knee injuries and a three-game suspension for pushing a sports columnist, the 7-foot-0 Embiid started slowly, missing his first seven shots. The two-time NBA scoring champion then connected on eight of his next 10 in the second quarter for his first 19 points, powering Philadelphia to a 62-50 halftime lead.

**Bucks 118, Nets 113:** Giannis Antetokounmpo had 34 points, 11 rebounds and four assists, and visiting Milwaukee snapped a two-game skid with a win over Brooklyn.

Damien Lillard had 15 points and 11 assists and Bobby Portis added 23 points and five rebounds off the bench. The Bucks won for the 10th time in 13 games.

**Hornets 113, Pacers 109:** Brandon Miller hit two free throws in the final seconds and finished with 26 points as visiting Charlotte snapped an eight-game losing streak with a win over Indiana.

Vasa Micic added 18 points and nine assists as the Hornets overcame 24 turnovers by shooting 51% from the field. Cody Martin finished with 14 points and six rebounds and Nick Richards had nine points and 14 rebounds.

**Nuggets 141, Hawks 111:** Nikola Jokic scored 48 points and visiting Denver never trailed in its win over Atlanta.

Jokic kept up his hot shooting against the Hawks and added 14 rebounds and eight assists. Michael Porter Jr. matched his season high with 26 points.

**Heat 122, Cavaliers 113:** Tyler Herro scored 34 points, Duncan Robinson had 23 and host Miami stayed hot by beating Cleveland.

Jimmy Butler scored 18 and

Bam Adebayo had 16 points, 13 rebounds and six assists for the Heat. Terry Rozier added 14 for Miami.

**Magic 115, Suns 110:** Jalen Suggs scored 14 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter, and host Orlando beat Phoenix to remain the NBA's only team unbeaten at home this season.

Magic center Goga Bitadze had 21 points and a career-high 16 rebounds, including a game-clinching tip-in with 13.1 seconds left.

**Grizzlies 140, Wizards 112:** Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 21 points, Scotty Pippen Jr. had 14 points and 12 assists and short-handed Memphis romped to a victory over host Washington.

Santi Aldama added 19 for the Grizzlies, who played without two-time All-Star Ja Morant (back soreness) and swing man Brandon Clarke (toe soreness) after both started in Saturday night's win at Boston.

**Spurs 121, Pelicans 116:** Chris Paul moved into second place on the NBA's career assists list, Victor Wembanyama came back from an injury scare to score 25 points and host San Antonio held on to beat New Orleans.

Paul had 10 assists, giving him 12,099 for his career and moving him past former Phoenix and Dallas star Jason Kidd (12,091).

**Warriors 114, Timberwolves 106:** Stephen Curry sunk a 39-foot jumper from nearly halfcourt to beat the third-quarter buzzer and finished with 30 points and eight assists, leading host Golden State past Minnesota in the teams' second meeting over three days.

Curry found Jonathan Kuminga for a go-ahead dunk with 2:55 to play and hit Buddy Hield for a clutch 3-pointer at the 58-second mark.

**Rockets 117, Clippers 106:** Jalen Green scored 31 points, Amen Thompson added 22 and visiting Houston defeated Los Angeles.

**Kings 141, Jazz 97:** Kevin Huerter had 26 points, including six 3-pointers, and host Sacramento beat Utah.

**Lakers 107, Trail Blazers 98:** Anthony Davis scored 30 points and had 11 rebounds, D'Angelo Russell added 28 points with 14 assists and host Los Angeles beat Portland without LeBron James.

## Bates leads Missouri in upset of top-ranked Kansas

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Tamar Bates had 29 points and five steals to help Missouri beat Hunter Dickinson and No. 1 Kansas 76-67 on Sunday.

Mark Mitchell scored 17 points in the Tigers' first win over the Jayhawks since a 74-71 victory on Feb. 4, 2012. Anthony Robinson II had 11 points and five steals for Missouri (8-1), and Josh Gray grabbed a team-leading 10 rebounds.

Dickinson had 19 points and 14 rebounds, but he also committed seven turnovers. Kansas (7-2) has lost two straight on the road after falling 76-63 against Creighton on Wednesday night.

**No. 2 Auburn 98, Richmond 54:** Miles Kelly and Tahaad Pettiford each scored 15 points as the host Tigers beat the Spiders.

**No. 6 Iowa St. 100, Jackson St. 58:** Curtis Jones scored 19 points off the bench, Milan Momcilovic had 18 and the host Cyclones routed the Tigers.

**No. 8 Purdue 83, Maryland 78:** Braden Smith had 24 points and 10 assists, and the host Boilermakers held off the Terrapins.

**No. 9 Duke 76, Louisville 65:** Cooper Flagg scored 13 of his 20 points in the second half and the visiting Blue Devils came back from a 14-point first-half deficit to beat the Cardinals in the Atlantic Coast Conference opener for both teams.

**UCLA 73, No. 12 Oregon 71:** Dylan Andrews banked in a 3-pointer with 0.4 seconds remaining to give the visiting Bruins a victory over the Ducks.

**No. 14 Cincinnati 84, Howard 67:** Simas Lukosius scored 18 points, Aziz Bandaogo

added 17 and Dillon Mitchell 14 to lead the host Bearcats to a victory over the Bison.

**Arkansas St. 85, No. 16 Memphis 72:** Joseph Pinion had 22 points and eight rebounds, Dyondre Dominguez added 19 points and the visiting Red Wolves built a double-digit first-half lead to beat the Tigers.

**No. 22 Texas A&M 72, Texas Tech 67:** Wade Taylor IV scored 19 points, Zhuric Phelps hit a go-ahead 3-pointer during an 11-0 run and finished with 12 points, and the visiting Aggies won the first meeting of the former conference rivals since 2012.

**No. 25 UConn 76, Texas 65:** Alex Karaban returned to the lineup after missing two games with a concussion, had 21 points and 11 rebounds and led the visiting Huskies past the Longhorns.