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TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2024 | A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas | stripes.com

Russia's Syria setbacks may boost US

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Russia's sudden loss of operations at its bases in Syria could deliver a gut punch to the Kremlin's ambitions in the Middle East and Africa while offering the U.S. and its allies opportunities to extend their influence.

It's uncertain how much success Russia is having while negotiating with Syria's dominant forces to retain its naval and air bases in the country. Russian officials have said they are communicating with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the main group that led the toppling of former Syrian President Bashar Assad.

On Monday, recent satellite images showed that naval piers home to Russia's Mediterranean task force in Tartus remained empty. The location of at least three warships and a Kilo-class submarine that had languished off the coast of Syria since the fall of Damascus wasn't clear.

They may have a new homeport in Libya, where Russia has begun moving its naval assets, CNN reported Monday, citing unidentified U.S. officials. Moscow is pressuring Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar for space at a Benghazi port, CNN said.

The Russian withdrawal from Tartus and its air base 52 miles north of the naval docks appeared to be large-scale and significant. But it remains unclear whether the move is permanent.

The Kremlin's maritime presence in the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea is dependent on Tartus, and the airfield is a critical refueling point for operations in Africa, said Michael Petersen, a principal research scientist in the Russian studies program for the Arlington, Va.-based think tank CNA.

The bases "are crucial for Russia's larger global and regional aspirations," Petersen said. "If Russia does not have access to these bases, then it will be a major strategic blow."

That loss, even if temporary, could offer opportunity for the U.S. and NATO, Petersen and other analysts said.

"Removing the Russian navy from NATO's southern flank would remove one irritant, as would removing it from Israel's western flank and from proximity to the Suez Canal," said James Holmes, chair of the maritime strategy program at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. "The fall of Syria is a setback for Russian and 'axis' geopolitics in more ways than one."

The Mediterranean is home to the Naples-based U.S. 6th Fleet. The Navy's only air operations in Europe, including P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft and an MQ-4C Triton drone detachment, are at Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. The fleet also has operations at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay in Crete.

The destroyers USS Bulkeley and USS Oscar Austin are on duty in the Mediterranean, USNI News reported Monday.

U.S. forces could work the situation to their advantage if the Russian fleet feels compelled to shadow them, as it often does. It would stress Russian ships that now have limited resources for replenishment, repair or rest, Petersen said.

He added that as of last week, it appeared the Russian fleet, distracted by its problems in Syria, wasn't inclined to follow U.S. ships.

"That tells me that the U.S. has a maritime security advantage at this point," Petersen said.

American warships can operate more freely, potentially allowing the U.S. to focus more on security problems beyond the Mediterranean, such as the Red Sea, he said.

That advantage also could be exploited in Africa, where the U.S. has struggled to make and retain relationships with countries, particularly in the Sahel region, which was once considered the centerpiece of Washington's security strategy.

Without a navy base in the Mediterranean, Russia would have difficulty supplying its troops in the Middle East and Africa, making it a challenge to maintain its influence in those regions.

"But whether or not the U.S. and NATO are going to be able to exploit those windows of opportunity is another question," Petersen said. He noted Russia's deep, institutional relationships with many African countries and waning U.S. influence on the continent.

Russia could look to locations other than Libya, such as Sudan or Algeria, to reestablish its Mediterranean operations.

US forces strike Houthi command facility in Yemen

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

U.S. forces in the Middle East launched an airstrike this week against a Houthi militant facility in Yemen that facilitated the Iran-backed group's armed assaults on shipping in the region, U.S. Central Command said.

Monday's strike targeted "a hub for coordinating Houthi operations, such as attacks against U.S. Navy warships and merchant vessels in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden," CENTCOM said in a statement the same day.

The statement didn't identify the specific forces used in the strike, but the Pentagon has beefed up its presence in the region with additional Air Force bombers, fighter jets and refueling aircraft.

In November, a series of U.S. airstrikes against Houthi militants targeted weapons bunkers in Yemen. Those strikes included Air Force and Navy assets, such as F-35C stealth fighter jets.

Monday's action came on the heels of entrance into the Red Sea on Saturday by the USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group. The group is made up of the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman, the destroyers USS Stout and USS Jason Dunham and the cruiser USS Gettysburg. It also includes Carrier Air Wing 1 with nine embarked aviation squadrons, CENTCOM said.

Truman's arrival in the Middle East follows the departure of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, which left the region about a month ago.

Houthi militants have conducted at least two attacks on Navy ships in the Gulf of Aden this month.

Russian aircraft over Baltic prompt intercepts

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — NATO fighters scrambled seven times during the past week to track down Russian military aircraft violating international aviation regulations over the Baltic Sea, allied defense officials said.

The most recent incident occurred Sunday when NATO planes intercepted a Russian AN-72 transport aircraft, which was flying from the Russian mainland to its military exclave of Kaliningrad, the Lithuanian Defense Ministry reported Monday.

The Russian aircraft, like several other intercepts over a six-day span, was flying with its transponder switched off, making it invisible to commercial radar, the ministry said in a statement.

The flurry of intercepts over the Baltic Sea comes amid heightened tensions in that region.

In recent weeks, undersea communication cables in the Baltics have been severed, prompting investigations by authorities in Sweden and elsewhere. Allies have also accused Russia of disrupting sea navigation systems used by commercial vessels on the Baltic Sea, a tactic possibly aimed at concealing Russian maritime movements.

"We are talking about aggressive behavior by Russia. They are trying to disrupt our lives," Vice Adm. Krzysztof Jaworski, commander of Poland's Naval Operations Center, told Reuters in an interview published Monday. "They are also testing us … as an alliance (to see) how far they can go."

In the air, Russian pilots frequently cross the Baltic Sea without flight plans and have a history of not transmitting a transponder code indicating their position, which NATO has said creates safety hazards for civilian air traffic control.

In Europe, encounters between allied and Russian aircraft are relatively commonplace. Intercepts occur often without incident.

Close encounters have risked potential escalation between Russia and the U.S. military, however, such as when a Russian fighter in March 2023 collided with a U.S. drone over the Black Sea, sending the unmanned aircraft crashing into international waters.

While most encounters happen in international air space, there have been instances of Russian jets crossing into alliance territory. In June, Finland said four Russian military aircraft spent several minutes inside its airspace.

US approves $300M in upgrades for S. Korean destroyers

By David Choi
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. State Department on Monday approved the sale of approximately $300 million worth of upgrades and technical support for guided-missile destroyers in the South Korean navy.

The potential sale, which awaits final approval by Congress, includes several upgrades to South Korea's six Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin-class destroyers, according to a news release from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency on Tuesday. The warships are equipped with 32 vertical launch system canisters for surface-to-air missiles and a RIM-116 rolling airframe missile defense system.

The improvements include $300 million worth of upgrades to the destroyer's fire control system, software updates, personnel training and logistical services, according to the agency.

South Korea is a "major ally" and the potential sale "will support the foreign policy goals and national security objectives of the United States," the release said.

The upgrades do not provide additional capabilities to the destroyers but ensure they are "operationally viable in light of obsolescence issues," the agency said.

The agency is responsible for the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program, which allows for the sale or transfer of defense equipment, training and technology to other countries. Congressional approval is required for sales of more than $25 million to NATO members and five other countries, including South Korea.

Arrests made in Mideast drone strike that killed 3 US troops

Associated Press

BOSTON — Two men, including a dual Iranian American citizen, have been charged with conspiring to export sensitive technology to Iran that was used in a drone attack in Jordan that killed three American troops early this year and injured dozens of other service members, the Justice Department said Monday.

The pair were arrested after FBI specialists who analyzed the drone traced its navigation system to an Iranian company operated by one of the defendants, who relied on parts and technology funneled into the country by his alleged co-conspirator, prosecutors said.

"We often cite hypothetical risk when we talk about the dangers of American technology getting into dangerous hands," U.S. Attorney Joshua Levy, the top federal prosecutor in Massachusetts, said at a news conference announcing the charges. "Unfortunately, in this situation, we are not speculating."

The defendants were identified as Mahdi Mohammad Sadeghi, who prosecutors said works at a Massachusetts-based semiconductor company, and Mohammad Abedininajafabadi, who was arrested Monday in Italy as the Justice Department seeks his extradition to Massachusetts.

Prosecutors alleged that Abedininajafabadi, who was also called Adedini in court documents, has deep connections to the Iranian government. They said his Tehran-based company manufactures navigation systems for the military drone program of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard and that he conspired with Sadeghi to circumvent American export control laws, including through the creation of a front company in Switzerland, and procure sensitive technology into Iran.

Stars and Stripes digest is produced by the news desk at our central office in Washington, D.C. The internet address is: http://slite.dma.mil. You may contact us by calling (202) 886-0003 or by sending an email to SSCcopydesk@stripes.osd.mil. Visit Stars and Stripes online at stripes.com.

Motive probed in fatal school shooting

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — Investigators on Tuesday are focused on trying to determine a motive in a Wisconsin school shooting that left a teacher and a student dead and two other children in critical condition.

Shon Barnes, the police chief in Madison, said investigators were aware of a "manifesto, if you want to call it that, or some type of letter" posted by someone who might have known the shooter, 15-year-old student Natalie Rupnow.

"We haven't been able to locate that person yet, but that's something we're going to work on today," Barnes told CNN. "We'll also be looking through (Rupnow's) effects, if she had a computer or cell phone, to see if there are any transmissions between her and someone else, and that will give us an idea of what type planning."

Police responding to the shooting Monday at Abundant Life Christian School found Rupnow had a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The shooter died on the way to a hospital.

Police said the shooting occurred in a study hall. Besides the deaths, six people were wounded, including two students who remain in critical condition.

Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school — prekindergarten through high school — with approximately 420 students in Madison, the state capital.

Barbara Wiers, the school's director of elementary and school relations, said when they practice safety routines, leaders always announce that it's a drill. That didn't happen Monday, the last week before Christmas break.

"When they heard, 'lockdown, lockdown,' they knew it was real," she said.

Wiers said the school does not have metal detectors but uses cameras and other security measures.

Barnes said police were talking with the shooter's father and other family members, who were cooperating, and searching the shooter's home.

"He lost someone as well," Barnes said of the father. "And so we're not going to rush the information. We'll take our time and make sure we do our due diligence."

The shooter's parents, who are divorced, jointly shared custody of their child, but the shooter primarily lived with her 42-year-old father, according to court documents.

At the school, the first 911 call to report an active shooter came in shortly before 11 a.m. Monday. First responders who were in training just 3 miles away dashed to the school for an actual emergency, Barnes said.

Investigators believe the shooter used a 9 mm pistol, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the ongoing investigation.

Children and families were reunited at a health clinic about a mile from the school.

Abundant Life asked for prayers in a brief Facebook post.

Bethany Highman, the mother of a student, rushed to the school and learned over FaceTime that her daughter was OK.

"As soon as it happened, your world stops for a minute. Nothing else matters," Highman said. "There's nobody around you. You just bolt for the door and try to do everything you can as a parent to be with your kids."

Ex-informant guilty of lying about anti-Biden scheme

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A former FBI informant pleaded guilty on Monday to lying about a phony bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden and his son Hunter that became central to the Republican impeachment inquiry in Congress.

Alexander Smirnov entered his plea to a felony charge in connection with the bogus story, along with a tax evasion charge stemming from a separate indictment accusing him of concealing millions of dollars of income.

An attorney for Smirnov, 44, declined to comment after the hearing in Los Angeles federal court.

Prosecutors and the defense have agreed to recommend a sentence of between four and six years in prison when he's sentenced next month.

Smirnov will get credit for the time he has served since his February arrest on charges that he told his FBI handler that executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma had paid President Biden and Hunter Biden $5 million each around 2015.

Smirnov had been an informant for more than a decade when he made the explosive allegations about the Bidens in June 2020, after "expressing bias" about Joe Biden as a presidential candidate, prosecutors said. But Smirnov had only routine business dealings with Burisma starting in 2017, according to court documents. An FBI field office investigated the allegations and recommended the case be closed in August 2020, according to charging documents.

No evidence has emerged that Joe Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes as president or in his previous office as vice president.

Trump's bid to toss ruling in hush money case denied

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A judge Monday refused to throw out President-elect Donald Trump's hush money conviction because of the U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling on presidential immunity. But the overall future of the historic case remains unclear.

Manhattan Judge Juan M. Merchan's decision blocks one potential off-ramp from the case ahead of the former and future president's return to office next month. His lawyers have raised other arguments for dismissal, however. It's unclear when — or whether — a sentencing date might be set.

Prosecutors have said there should be some accommodation for his upcoming presidency, but that the conviction should stand.

A jury convicted Trump in May of 34 counts of falsifying business records related to a $130,000 hush money payment to porn actor Stormy Daniels in 2016. Trump denies wrongdoing.

The allegations involved a scheme to hide the payout to Daniels during the final days of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign to keep her from publicizing — and keep voters from hearing — her claim of a sexual encounter with the married then-businessman years earlier. He says nothing sexual happened between them.

A month after the verdict, the Supreme Court ruled that ex-presidents can't be prosecuted for official acts — things they did in the course of running the country — and that prosecutors can't cite those actions to bolster a case centered on purely personal, unofficial conduct. In Monday's ruling, Merchan denied the bulk of Trump's claims that some of prosecutors' evidence related to official acts and implicated immunity protections.

Weakened Hamas starts to bargain amid public anger

The Washington Post

RAMALLAH, West Bank — With its military power depleted and its political influence on the wane, Hamas is under growing public pressure to help bring the war in Gaza to an end.

Palestinians in the besieged enclave are desperate for a ceasefire after 14 months of conflict, and many residents said they are increasingly fed up with the militant group as they struggle to survive hunger, displacement and Israeli attacks. Last week, Hamas publicly softened its negotiating position with Israel.

A new proposal for a 60-day pause in hostilities and the exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners includes key concessions from Hamas, which relented on its demands for a complete halt to the war and the full withdrawal of Israeli forces, a Hamas official said. The group is still insisting that displaced Palestinians be allowed to return to northern Gaza, the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

As diplomats shuttle back and forth between Cairo and Doha, Qatar's capital, to discuss the proposal, Egypt has been working separately to broker a postwar Gaza governance agreement between Hamas and its rival Fatah party, which controls the Palestinian Authority in the occupied West Bank.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, under his own domestic pressures, has refused to put forward a "day-after" plan and has ruled out the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, a key U.S. and Palestinian request. He has also rejected any role for the remnants of Hamas, saying Israel will keep fighting in Gaza until the Islamist movement has been eradicated. In the meantime, powerful members of Netanyahu's far-right coalition are pushing to annex and resettle the enclave, and some have proposed expelling Palestinians by "encouraging voluntary immigration."

Hamas, which has ruled Gaza for 17 years, is at its weakest point, according to residents, Palestinian officials and analysts, reduced to pockets of guerrilla fighters and increasingly incapable of governing. Even among supporters, anger is rising.

"There is a noticeable shift in public opinion," said Rami, a Hamas member and government employee, speaking by phone on the condition that his last name and position be withheld for fear of retribution, both from Israel and Hamas, which has brutally suppressed dissent. "There is now a strong desire to end the war at any cost."

Even so, he said, "it is impossible to eliminate all of Hamas, as there is no viable alternative."

"Hamas's [military] capabilities have been depleted," said Tahani Mustafa, senior Palestine analyst at the International Crisis Group, but it "has shown that it has the capacity to maintain a long-term insurgency." Even in its weakened state, Hamas has continued to ambush Israeli soldiers and launch occasional homemade projectiles into southern Israel.

Top Russian general killed in blast claimed by Ukraine

Associated Press

A senior Russian general was killed Tuesday by a bomb hidden in a scooter outside his apartment building in Moscow, a day after Ukraine's security service leveled criminal charges against him. A Ukrainian official said the service carried out the attack.

Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed as he left for his office. Kirillov's assistant also died in the attack.

Kirillov, 54, was under sanctions from several countries, including the U.K. and Canada, for his actions in Moscow's war in Ukraine.

On Monday, Ukraine's Security Service, or SBU, opened a criminal investigation against him, accusing him of directing the use of banned chemical weapons.

An official with the SBU said the agency was behind the attack. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information, described Kirillov as a "war criminal and an entirely legitimate target."

The SBU has said it recorded more than 4,800 occasions when Russia used chemical weapons on the battlefield since its full-scale invasion in February 2022. In May, the U.S. State Department said that it had recorded the use of chloropicrin, a poison gas first deployed in World War I, against Ukrainian troops.

Russia has denied using any chemical weapons in Ukraine and, in turn, has accused Kyiv of using toxic agents in combat.

Kirillov, who took his current job in 2017, was one of the most high-profile figures to level those accusations. He held numerous briefings to accuse the Ukrainian military of using toxic agents and planning to launch attacks with radioactive substances — claims that Ukraine and its Western allies rejected as propaganda.

Ukraine says N. Koreans are making easy targets

The Washington Post

KYIV, Ukraine — At least 30 North Korean troops, deployed to bolster Russian forces in their war in Ukraine, have been wounded or killed in Russia's Kursk region, Ukrainian authorities said Monday, a significant turning point after months of speculation over what role Pyongyang's troops might play in the war.

Ukraine's military intelligence agency, known as GUR, announced the casualty number Monday. The Pentagon later said it has "indications" that North Korean troops "have suffered casualties, both killed and wounded."

Three Ukrainian soldiers fighting in the Kursk region, where Kyiv seized a swath of territory in August, described waves of what appeared to be North Korean troops flooding the battlefield in full view of Ukrainian drones and other weaponry in recent days.

The Ukrainians knew the troops moving across battlefields in Kursk weren't Russians because the groups were too large, soldiers said. Russian troops typically move in smaller formations and stick close to tree lines to reduce their chances of being struck by Ukrainian firepower. But these troops, seemingly unafraid of enemy weapons hovering just overhead, moved in the open.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Bird strike leads plane to an emergency landing

NY NEW YORK — A bird strike took out one of an American Airlines jet's two engines after takeoff from New York's LaGuardia Airport and forced the the plane to turn around and land at John F. Kennedy International Airport, authorities said.

"Mayday mayday mayday American 1722 engine failure," the pilot of the Charlotte, N.C.-bound aircraft radioed to the control tower during the emergency, according to a recording of air traffic control communications.

"It appears we have an engine failure but we're still kind of working through to figure out what's going on. We hit birds on the way out," the pilot said, according to the recording archived by the aviation site LiveATC.net.

Airline officials said no one was injured in the incident involving the Airbus A321, which took off from LaGuardia at 7:43 p.m. with 190 passengers and six crew members on board.

Man sentenced for helping women reach US to give birth

CA LOS ANGELES — A California man was sentenced Monday to nearly 3½ years in prison for running an extensive business that helped pregnant Chinese women travel to the United States to deliver babies who would automatically have American citizenship.

U.S. authorities had sought a more than five-year prison term for Michael Wei Yueh Liu, 59, who was convicted in September of conspiracy and money laundering for running a company known as USA Happy Baby. Phoebe Dong, Liu's wife — though the couple have since separated — was also convicted in connection with the scheme and is expected to be sentenced early next year.

In court, Liu said his family has suffered deeply for nearly a decade since a 2015 raid on his business.

U.S. authorities said USA Happy Baby helped several hundred women travel from China to give birth to U.S.-citizen babies between 2012 and 2015. The tourists paid as much as $40,000 for services including apartment rentals during their stays in Southern California and worked with overseas entities that coached women on what to say during visa interviews and upon arriving in U.S. airports, advising them to wear loose clothing to hide their pregnancies.

Federal judge denies man bail on sex assault charge

FL MIAMI — A federal judge ordered that a prominent real estate broker be held without bond on sexual assault and trafficking charges, saying he is a flight risk as she rejected his family's pledge of $115 million in real estate holdings to secure his release.

Magistrate Judge Lisette Reid's ruling likely means that Tal Alexander's brothers, twins Oren and Alon Alexander, will also be denied bail when they appear in Miami's federal court this week as the proposed security package would have covered all three.

A Florida judge had granted Oren a $3 million bond and his twin $2 million on state charges stemming from the same investigation but they were ordered held pending their own federal hearing. Reid agreed with the prosecution's argument that Tal Alexander, because of the family's wealth, would be a flight risk if released.

Homicide probe launched after bodies discovered

OH COLUMBUS — Authorities in Ohio launched a homicide investigation after the bodies of three women were found Saturday inside a home in Columbus.

Officers were called to a home on the city's south side just before 4 p.m. Saturday for what a 911 caller described as a medical event. Police found three women who were pronounced dead at the scene, according to police spokesman Sgt. James Fuqua.

He said the killings were considered homicides, but he did not have further details, including what led up to the killings.

"Unfortunately, this is a very complex scene with the amount of victims that we have," he told reporters. "It's going to take a little bit longer to make sure that we're very careful in going through the scene meticulously so we do not miss any key piece of evidence."

He said investigators were interviewing witnesses and looking for video evidence.

Fuqua said that no suspects had been taken into custody.

Man gets 100 years in prison for 2020 shootings

NV LAS VEGAS — A judge in Las Vegas sentenced a Texas man to 100 years in prison for his role in a two-state shooting rampage on Thanksgiving 2020 that included the killing of a man in Nevada and a shootout with authorities in Arizona.

Christopher McDonnell, 32, pleaded guilty in October to more than 20 felonies including murder, attempted murder, murder conspiracy, weapon charges and being a felon illegally in possession of a firearm.

Clark County District Judge Tierra Jones sentenced him on Friday to a minimum of 100 years in prison, KLAS-TV reported. If he's still alive, he would be eligible for parole in 2120 with credit for time served.

Court will take up case on emissions standards

DC WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court said it would take up a business-backed appeal that could make it easier to challenge federal regulations, acting in a dispute related to California's nation-leading standards for vehicle emissions.

The justices agreed to hear an appeal filed by fuel producers who object to a waiver granted to California in 2022 by the Environmental Protection Agency during Joe Biden's presidency. The waiver allows California to set more stringent emissions limits than the national standard.

The case won't be argued until the spring, when the Trump administration is certain to take a more industry-friendly approach to the issue. President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to boost production of fossil fuels such as oil, natural gas and coal and repeal key parts of a landmark 2022 climate law.

— From wire reports

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Vikings top Bears, tie Lions atop NFC North

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Aaron Jones and Cam Akers had touchdown runs in the second half to complement a smothering performance by the Minnesota defense, and the Vikings moved into a tie for first place in the NFC North on Monday night by beating the Chicago Bears 30-12 for their seventh consecutive victory.

Justin Jefferson had seven catches for 73 yards, among them a touchdown from Sam Darnold in the first quarter that was set up by Jonathan Greenard's sack and forced fumble on Caleb Williams.

Williams managed to keep alive his NFL rookie record streak of 286 straight passes without an interception for the eighth straight game, but the Bears (4-10) have lost all of those. The first overall pick in the 2024 draft went 18 for 31 for 191 yards and threw a late touchdown pass to Keenan Allen after a blocked punt gave Chicago the ball at the Minnesota 27.

The Bears went 1-for-12 on third down and 1-for-3 on fourth down.

Darnold went 24-for-40 for 231 yards and threw his first interception in five games for the Vikings (12-2), who clinched a spot in the playoffs with Seattle's loss to Green Bay the night before. They've got the division title squarely on their radar after Detroit's 11-game winning streak was stopped by Buffalo on Sunday.

Wearing white helmets for the first time in franchise history to top the snow-like jerseys and pants in their now-annual winter-themed home game — comfortably staged indoors — Minnesota had an energized crowd behind it after former wide receivers Cris Carter and Jake Reed took a Randy Moss jersey to midfield for the coin flip in honor of their ex-teammate, who is being treated for cancer. Jefferson shouted, "We love you, Randy!" after his touchdown catch.

D'Andre Swift rushed 19 times for 79 yards for Chicago, which has been outscored 53-0 in the first half over the last three games. According to Sportradar, they're the first team with three consecutive scoreless first halves since Jacksonville in 2018.

The Bears have been reeling not simply because of the losing streak, but their 2-6 record in games decided by a touchdown or less. The firings last month of offensive coordinator Shane Waldron and later coach Matt Eberflus prompted a change in play-callers on both side of the ball, too.

Once again, Chicago produced a handful of can't-happen plays that ultimately doomed them. Swift was stuffed for no gain on a toss sweep on fourth-and-1 from the Bears' 39 on the opening possession and again on a fourth-and-1 run at the Vikings' 29 in the second quarter.

In the third quarter, Swift had a short touchdown run negated by a penalty when backup center Doug Kramer neglected to report as an eligible receiver when he'd entered the game as an extra blocker at the goal line.

After that, rookie Kiran Amegadjie, who took three penalties in his first NFL start and was beaten badly by Greenard on the strip-sack, was called for holding. Chicago settled for a short field goal.

The Bears won't get a break anytime soon, as they next host the Lions on Sunday, while Minnesota visits Seattle.

Falcons do enough to beat Raiders, stay close to Bucs

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Ahead most of the game, including by double digits in the fourth quarter, the Atlanta Falcons were just trying to hold on at the end.

The Raiders had two passes into the end zone. Two passes to steal a victory and hand the Falcons a considerable setback to their playoff hopes.

Desmond Ridder's first attempt was incomplete and his second was intercepted by Jessie Bates III, allowing Atlanta to escape Las Vegas with a 15-9 victory Monday night and keep pace in the NFC South.

The Falcons (7-7) ended a four-game losing streak to remain a game behind the first-place Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Atlanta owns the head-to-head tiebreaker in a close race with three games remaining.

"That's where you want to be, and that's exactly where we're at," Falcons coach Raheem Morris said. "We've got a short week. We've got to get back in the lab. We've got to find ways to fix what we did wrong tonight and come out and get another win."

Atlanta has a favorable remaining schedule, facing two teams with a combined five wins that sandwich a trip to Washington (9-5). Tampa Bay has a similar finishing stretch.

A potential No. 1 overall draft pick rather than playoff scenarios make up most of the conversation regarding the Raiders (2-12). Las Vegas lost its 10th consecutive game, the NFL's longest active skid, and are tied with the New York Giants for the league's worst record. It is the fifth-longest losing streak in Raiders history, and worst since dropping 16 straight a decade ago.

Kirk Cousins entered with no touchdown passes and eight interceptions over his previous four starts, raising questions about whether rookie Michael Penix Jr. would take over at quarterback for the Falcons. Morris stuck by Cousins — who signed a four-year, $180 million contract this year — over the eighth pick in the draft.

Cousins did little to assuage concerns about his play, passing for just 112 yards with an interception. His 30-yard pass to a wide-open Drake London with 14 seconds left in the first quarter to put Atlanta ahead 7-0 was his first touchdown toss since firing three of them Nov. 3 in a 27-21 victory over the Dallas Cowboys.

"He's got to play better," Morris said.

Cousins didn't disagree.

"It's stating the obvious," he said.

The Falcons got the rest of their points on two field goals from Younghoe Koo and a safety by defensive lineman Zach Harrison.

Bijan Robinson rushed for 125 yards and London caught three passes for 53 yards to give him 219 career receptions. He passed Calvin Ridley's 217 catches for most in Atlanta history over a player's first three seasons.

The Falcons prevented Ridder from putting a dent in their playoff plans. Ridder, who started 13 games for Atlanta last season before he was traded to Arizona, was stymied most of the night in his first start this season. In replacing Aidan O'Connell, inactive because of a bruised left knee, Ridder passed for 208 yards with a touchdown and two interceptions.

Ridder again downplayed the emotions of playing against his former team, emphasizing this was more about Las Vegas than him.

"We were never able to find a rhythm until late in the game," he said. "By then, it's too little, too late."

The injury-riddled Raiders gained just 249 yards, and they have trailed by double digits in all 14 games this season.

Hardaway, Pistons snap Heat's streak

Associated Press

DETROIT — Tim Hardaway Jr. hit three 3-pointers in overtime to help the Detroit Pistons end the Miami Heat's four-game winning streak with a 125-124 victory on Monday night.

The Pistons' Cade Cunningham had 20 points, a career-high 18 assists and 11 rebounds, his sixth triple-double of the season. Jimmy Butler had 35 points, 19 rebounds and 10 assists for Miami.

Malik Beasley led the Pistons with 28 points and hit 7 of 13 3-point attempts.

Miami trailed by 19 points in the second half, but finished regulation on an 18-2 run before scoring the first eight points of overtime.

Hardaway's first two 3s pulled Detroit within 122-120 with 1:35 left in OT. After Tyler Herro missed an off-balance jumper, Hardaway hit another 3 to put the Pistons ahead 123-122.

Butler and Cunningham traded baskets before Herro missed again with 19 seconds to play. A turnover gave Miami one more chance, but Herro missed a 3 at the buzzer.

76ers 121, Hornets 108: Tyrese Maxey scored 40 points, Paul George added 33 points and Philadelphia spoiled LaMelo Ball's return to the floor with a victory over host Charlotte.

Maxey and George were combined for 12-for-21 on 3-pointers.

Kelly Oubre Jr. had 19 points, while Andre Drummond, starting in place of the injured Joel Embiid, chipped in with 15 rebounds for the 76ers.

Miles Bridges had 24 points and Nick Richards added 19 off the bench to lead the Hornets.

Ball returned to action after missing seven games with a strained calf, finishing with 15 points and 11 assists in nearly 26 minutes.

Cavaliers 130, Nets 101: Evan Mobley scored 21 points, Caris LeVert added 19 and Cleveland rolled to a victory at Brooklyn.

Donovan Mitchell had 18 points and five assists, and Georges Niang had 17 points and nine rebounds for Cleveland (23-4), which won its second straight and for the sixth time in seven games.

Cameron Johnson led Brooklyn with 22 points and five assists, and Day'Ron Sharpe had 15 points and seven rebounds. The Nets (10-16) lost their third straight and fell for the sixth time in seven games.

Kenny Atkinson returned as a head coach to Brooklyn with the Cavaliers. The 57-year-old led the Nets for four seasons.

Bulls 122, Raptors 121: Nikola Vucevic scored 24 points, Coby White added 19 and visiting Chicago held on to beat Toronto for its fourth win in six games.

Talen Horton-Tucker scored 15 points and Ayo Dosunmu had 12 as seven Bulls players reached double figures.

Chicago's Lonzo Ball missed six of his first seven 3-point attempts before making a key shot from long distance late in the fourth.

RJ Barrett scored 32 points and Gradey Dick had 27 as Toronto almost erased a 16-point deficit in the fourth quarter.

Nuggets 130, Kings 129: Jamal Murray made a 16-foot jumper with 8.6 seconds remaining as Denver held off host Sacramento.

Nikola Jokic had his NBA-leading 10th triple-double with 20 points, 14 rebounds and 13 assists as the Nuggets ended Sacramento's three-game winning streak. Murray scored 28 points, while Russell Westbrook had 18 points, nine rebounds and 10 assists.

Domantas Sabonis had 28 points, 14 rebounds and six assists for the Kings. De'Aaron Fox added 29 points and seven assists. Malik Monk scored 25.

Clippers 144, Jazz 107: James Harden scored 24 of his 41 points in the first quarter and Los Angeles rolled to a victory over visiting Utah while reaching a season-high scoring total.

Norman Powell had 29 points, Ivica Zubac added 19 points with 12 rebounds and Amir Coffey scored 16 points for the Clippers.

Jordan Clarkson scored 20 points, Lauri Markkanen added 17 and Collin Sexton had 15 for the Jazz, who lost their third consecutive game and fell for the eighth game in their last nine. Utah dropped to 3-10 on the road.

Spurs coach Popovich intends to return from stroke

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich intends to return to coaching, he said Monday in his first public comments since suffering a stroke in early November.

Popovich, the NBA's career wins leader, released a statement through the Spurs expressing gratitude for the support he has received. He had what the Spurs said was a mild stroke about 2½ hours prior to the team's home game against Minnesota on Nov. 2.

There is no timetable for his return to coaching, although the Spurs have said doctors expect Popovich to make a full recovery.

"This has certainly been an unexpected six weeks for my family and me," Popovich said in the statement. "As we work together on my recovery, I want to take a moment to share that the outpouring of support we've received during this time has been truly overwhelming in the best possible way.

"While I wish I could get back to each one of you, for now, let me say that my family and I are forever grateful. We're thankful for our wonderful community, the entire Spurs organization, and our family and friends."

Popovich, 75, has led the Spurs to five championships and guided the United States to a gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. He is in his 29th season as coach of the Spurs.

The stroke happened at the team's arena, and since rescue workers were there, Popovich was able to start receiving treatment almost immediately. He was transported to a nearby hospital.

It has not been revealed what lingering effects of the stroke Popovich is dealing with, and how long his rehabilitation process may take. Longtime assistant Mitch Johnson has served as acting coach in Popovich's absence.

Popovich is one of three coaches to win the NBA coach of the year award three times, Don Nelson and Pat Riley being the others. He's one of five coaches with at least five NBA titles; Phil Jackson (11), Red Auerbach (nine), John Kundla (five) and Riley (five) are the others.

Popovich has been part of the Spurs for nearly 35 years. He was an assistant coach from 1988-92, then returned to the club on May 31, 1994, as its executive vice president for basketball operations and general manager. He fired coach Bob Hill and appointed himself coach on Dec. 10, 1996.

He's been the Spurs' coach ever since.

Hunter, Watts repeat choices on AP All-American first team

Associated Press

Heisman Trophy winner Travis Hunter of Colorado was a first-team selection at two spots and a second-team pick at another on The Associated Press All-America team announced Monday.

Hunter and Notre Dame safety Xavier Watts were repeat first-team selections, and Boise State's Ashton Jeanty was the only unanimous pick after he posted one of the highest single-season rushing totals in college football history.

A total of 24 schools are represented on the first team, selected by a panel of AP Top 25 voters. Texas and Miami had two players apiece on the first team.

Hunter, named the AP player of the year last week, is regarded as one of the greatest two-way college athletes since football shifted away from such players in the 1940s. He was named first-team cornerback, first-team all-purpose player and second-team receiver.

The junior from Suwanee, Ga., has totaled 1,443 snaps on offense, defense and special teams in 12 games, according to Pro Football Focus. He played at least 120 snaps in 10 games, including a season-high 170 against Texas Tech on Nov. 9.

Hunter, who announced last month that he would enter the 2025 NFL Draft, said he would play in Colorado's game against BYU in the Alamo Bowl on Dec. 28.

As a receiver, Hunter finished the regular season ranking among the national leaders with 92 catches for 1,152 yards and 14 touchdowns. His 21 catches that went 20-plus yards lead the country.

As a cornerback, he made 31 tackles and was among the national leaders with 11 pass breakups and four interceptions. His biggest defensive play came in the Buffaloes' overtime win over Baylor when his hard hit on Dominic Richardson near the goal line forced a fumble on the final play.

Notre Dame's Watts has five interceptions, tied for most among safeties, and he's responsible for six of the Irish's nation-leading 28 takeaways. Against Southern California, he became the first Notre Dame player to return an interception 100 yards. His 12 career picks are most by a Notre Dame player since 1996.

Boise State's Jeanty has run for 2,497 yards, the fourth-most ever in the Football Bowl Subdivision, and he went over 200 yards in six games. His 29 rushing touchdowns are tied for the national lead.

Hintz scores twice as Stars slow Caps

Associated Press

DALLAS — Roope Hintz had his first two-goal game of the season and Jake Oettinger stopped 25 shots as the Dallas Stars beat the surging Washington Capitals 3-1 on Monday night.

Rookie defenseman Lian Bichsel also scored for the Stars, his second goal in three NHL games.

Ryan Strome scored in the first period for the Capitals, who had a franchise-record 10-game road winning streak snapped.

Dallas is 13-3-0 at American Airlines Center, the best home points percentage (.813) in the NHL. Washington went in best in the league in both overall record (21-6-2) and road mark (12-2-0).

Oettinger has 16 wins, second-most in the NHL. He won a battle of goalies who attended the same high school (Lakeville North, Minn.) and share the same birthdate (Dec. 18). Charlie Lindgren, who made 21 saves, will turn 31 on Wednesday, Oettinger will be 26.

Hintz tied the score 1-1 with a second-period power-play goal and provided an insurance goal with 5:02 left in the third. He's tied for the club lead with 13 goals.

Jason Robertson had two assists.

Panthers 6, Oilers 5: Carter Verhaeghe scored the tiebreaking goal in the third period and defending champion Florida beat host Edmonton in a rematch of the Stanley Cup Final.

Niko Mikkola, Sam Reinhart, Jesper Boqvist, Matthew Tkachuk and Gustav Forsling also scored for the Panthers. Florida won despite star forward Aleksander Barkov missing his second consecutive game with an illness. Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 25 shots.

Zach Hyman scored twice, Leon Draisaitl had a goal and an assist, and Kasperi Kapanen and Connor Brown also scored for the Oilers, who had won five consecutive games. Connor McDavid had three assists and Stuart Skinner finished with 22 saves.

Canucks 3, Avalanche 1: Kiefer Sherwood had his first NHL hat trick as host Vancouver beat Colorado.

Thatcher Demko stopped 30 shots as the Canucks won for the second time in five games.

Valeri Nichushkin scored with 46 seconds left for the Avalanche, and Mackenzie Blackwood finished with 22 saves.

AP selects Cignetti as top coach

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS When Curt Cignetti took the Indiana job last fall, he promised immediate success.

It wasn't boastful bluster.

After daring the doubters to Google his winning pedigree, the son of a Hall of Fame football coach delivered on his word by leading the Hoosiers to a school-record 11 wins, a top-10 ranking and an improbable first playoff berth that set up a Friday night playoff game at No. 3 Notre Dame.

Cignetti was named The Associated Press Coach of the Year on Tuesday, collecting 30 of 45 votes from AP Top 25 voters. Arizona State coach Kenny Dillingham finished second with eight votes, Oregon coach Dan Lanning received five and SMU coach Rhett Lashlee got two.

"Thank you to The Associated Press for this tremendous team honor," Cignetti said. "Our program has had a great season and we look forward to opening the College Football Playoff against Notre Dame on Friday."

Few thought such a season was possible at Indiana, much less in his first season. Cignetti authored an eight-win turnaround that captivated the nation at a school with the most losses in Football Bowl Subdivision history.

Then again, all the 60-year-old Cignetti does is win.

He's never had a losing record in 14 seasons as a head coach and has a reputation for making quick turnarounds everywhere he goes — Alabama, where he served as Nick Saban's first recruiting coordinator and won a national title, following his father to Indiana University of Pennsylvania or at FCS school Elon and James Madison, where he presided over the most successful transition from the FCS to FBS in NCAA history.