

US seizes oil tanker off Venezuela coast

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Wednesday that the United States has seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela as tensions mount with the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

Using U.S. forces to take control of a merchant ship is incredibly unusual and marks the Trump administration's latest push to increase pressure on Maduro, who has been charged with narcoterrorism in the United States. The U.S. has built up the largest military presence in the region in decades and launched a series of deadly strikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean. The campaign is facing growing scrutiny from Congress.

"We've just seized a tanker on the coast of Venezuela, a large tanker, very large, largest one ever seized, actually," Trump told reporters at the White

House, later adding that "it was seized for a very good reason."

Trump did not offer additional details. When asked what would happen to the oil aboard the tanker, Trump said, "Well, we keep it, I guess."

The seizure was led by the U.S. Coast Guard and supported by the Navy, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity. The official added that it was conducted under U.S. law enforcement authority.

The Coast Guard members were taken to the oil tanker by helicopter from the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, the official said. The Ford is in the Caribbean Sea after arriving last month in a major show of force, joining a fleet of other warships.

Video posted to social media by Attorney General Pam Bondi shows people fast-roping from one of the helicopters involved in the operation as it hovers just

feet from the deck.

The Coast Guard members can be seen later in the video moving throughout the superstructure of the ship with weapons drawn.

Bondi wrote that "for multiple years, the oil tanker has been sanctioned by the United States due to its involvement in an illicit oil shipping network supporting foreign terrorist organizations."

Venezuela's government said in a statement that the seizure "constitutes a blatant theft and an act of international piracy."

"Under these circumstances, the true reasons for the prolonged aggression against Venezuela have finally been revealed. ... It has always been about our natural resources, our oil, our energy, the resources that belong exclusively to the Venezuelan people," the statement said.

The U.S. official identified the seized tanker as the Skipper.

The ship departed Venezuela around Dec. 2 with about 2 million barrels of heavy crude, roughly half of it belonging to a Cuban state-run oil importer, according to documents from the state-owned company Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., commonly known as PDVSA, that were provided on the condition of anonymity because the person did not have permission to share them.

The Skipper was previously known as the M/T Adisa, according to ship tracking data. The Adisa was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2022 over accusations of belonging to a sophisticated network of shadow tankers that smuggled crude oil on behalf of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group.

The network was reportedly run by a Switzerland-based Ukrainian oil trader, the U.S. Treasury Department said at the time.

Services eyes ways to hold recruit momentum, keep troops

BY GARY WARNER

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military is coming off a big recruiting win in 2025, surpassing the 146,473 new enlistees from 2024.

Now top military and political leaders want to determine how to keep the trend going and retain those who have signed up.

"This is a barometer of the health of the nation, the willingness of young people to serve," said Anthony Tata, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, speaking at the Reagan National Defense Forum in Simi Valley, Calif., last weekend.

The Army recruited 61,000 new soldiers, the Navy signed up 44,096 future sailors, the Marines counted 32,328 added to its ranks and the combined Air and Space forces total topped 30,000.

Tata said the first hurdle to getting young men and women to consider military life is to just get the idea on most teenagers' radar.

"Only about half of our 17-, 18-, 19-year-olds in the country are even aware of a military option," he said.

Sen. Jim Banks, R-Ind., said the main source of recruits is the children of service members.

"About 80% of military recruits come from a home where mom or dad served in the military," said Banks, a former Navy Reserve officer. "At the end of the day it's about patriotism, it's about teaching children in school that America is great, that America is worth serving and fighting and dying for."

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., agreed with Banks that patriotism was often the primary motivation of new recruits.

"That really is the through line, the foundation of why people join," Panetta said. "What can you do for your country?"

But Panetta added that retain-

ing recruits beyond their initial service commitment often flips the question on its head.

"The pragmatism aspect of it is 'what can the country' do for me as well," Panetta said. "We in Congress have to ask, what else are we doing to keep these people in the military?"

If pay, housing, food and health care are seen as deficient compared to civilian life, the original motivation to join can be undermined when deciding whether to reenlist or leave the service.

"Once you lose them, you'll never get them back," Smith said.

US, Japan demonstrate joint airpower

BY JOSEPH DITZLER
AND HANA KUSUMOTO

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Japanese fighters and United States strategic bombers made a show of force together Wednesday, a day after 11 Chinese and Russian aircraft flew routes close to Japan and South Korea.

Japan also lodged “grave national security concerns” through diplomatic channels about ongoing activities around Japan by the Russian and Chinese militaries, including their Tuesday flights, according to Japan’s Chief Cab-

net Secretary Minoru Kihara.

“We intend to continue to take all possible measures to ensure vigilance and surveillance and to take measures against airspace intrusions in order to resolutely protect our country’s land, waters and airspace,” Kihara said at a news conference Wednesday.

The Japan Joint Staff posted photographs Thursday on social media platform X of Japanese F-15 Eagles in formation over the Sea of Japan with two U.S. B-52 Stratofortress bombers.

“[Japan Self-Defense Force] and the U.S. Armed Forces con-

ducted a bilateral exercise amid an increasingly severe security environment surrounding Japan,” the joint staff said in the post.

The Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning, operating close to Okinawa since Dec. 5, had launched and recovered as many as 50 fighters Sunday, according to public broadcaster NHK on Monday.

Japan on Sunday alleged that a Chinese J-15 launched from the Liaoning intermittently locked radar on two Japan Air Self-Defense Force F-15s, which had

scrambled in response to potential airspace violations near Okinawa.

The joint staff post on X about Wednesday’s airpower demonstration alluded to recent events.

“This bilateral exercise reaffirms the strong will between Japan and U.S. not to tolerate unilateral changes to the status quo by force,” it said.

Three F-35 Lightning II multi-role fighters from Japan’s 3rd Air Wing and three F-15s from the 6th Air Wing took part, along with two B-52s, according to a news release from the joint staff.

George Washington wraps 1st deployment since return to Japan

BY ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The bellow of a ship’s horn coupled with the cheers of about 100 people waiting pier-side signaled the arrival Thursday morning of the USS George Washington and the conclusion of its annual deployment.

Scores of sailors in dress blues manned the aircraft carrier’s rails as it steamed through Tokyo Bay toward its usual pier at the home of the U.S. 7th Fleet. Waiting friends and families held welcoming signs and flow-

ers for their loved ones.

Sarah Hoopengardner, of Washington, D.C., and her children Tripp, 11, and Lily, 10, were on the pier to greet their husband and father, Cmdr. David Hoopengardner, a planning officer with Carrier Strike Group 5.

“We are excited that he gets to come home for Christmas and celebrate the holidays,” she told Stars and Stripes before the ship arrived.

The family plans to mark the occasion with a steak dinner and by decorating their Christ-

mas tree.

The carrier’s arrival closed out its first annual deployment since its return to Japan in November 2024.

Previously homeported in Yokosuka from 2008 to 2015, the George Washington subsequently spent nearly six years in the United States for midlife nuclear refueling and maintenance.

During its six-month journey this year the ship traveled approximately 56,000 miles, with port stops in Guam, the Philippines and South Korea, ship

spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Mark Langford told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

Rear Adm. Eric “Pappy” Anduze, commander of Carrier Strike Group 5, and Capt. Timothy Waits, the George Washington’s skipper, delivered brief pierside remarks to media Thursday but took no questions.

“Through every operation, every exercise and every milestone, our sailors performed with professionalism and pride, living up to our Navy’s core values of honor, courage and commitment,” Anduze said.

House OKs NDAA with raise, Europe and S. Korea troop stability

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House passed a sprawling annual defense policy bill on Wednesday raising troop pay, restricting the Trump administration’s ability to reduce U.S. troop levels in Europe and South Korea, providing aid for Ukraine and repealing decades-old laws authorizing military force in the Middle East.

Lawmakers voted 312-112 for the legislation, which authorizes a

record \$901 billion in national security spending for 2026 — \$8 billion more than President Donald Trump had requested. The Senate is expected to take up the 3,000-page bill, known as the National Defense Authorization Act, next week.

The legislation reflected bipartisan efforts to push back against the Trump administration’s moves to disengage from Europe and Ukraine as well as mounting lawmaker frustration with the

Pentagon’s campaign against suspected drug boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

The bill blocks the Pentagon from reducing the number of troops in Europe below 76,000 or relinquishing the role of NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander until Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth certifies to Congress that the decision was made in consultation with NATO allies and is in the best national security interests of the U.S. It places similar limita-

tions on reducing troop levels in South Korea below 28,500. Trump has repeatedly stated his desire to remove U.S. troops from South Korea and force Europe to become more self-reliant.

Service members will see a 3.8% pay raise under the legislation as lawmakers seek to build on last year’s initiatives to improve troop quality of life. The bill also increases the family separation allowance for deployed service members from \$250 to \$300.

Military leaders defend Guard deployments

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Military leaders under congressional questioning on Thursday defended the deployment of the National Guard to American cities, saying the mobilization was lawful and troops were thoroughly trained to understand the limits of their authorities.

Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, the commander of U.S. troops in North America, said military personnel have detained one civilian since being deployed as part of President Donald Trump's stated campaign to use troops to support federal law enforcement, protect facilities and combat crime.

The person detained in June in Los Angeles was promptly handed over to proper law enforcement personnel, Guillot

told the Senate Armed Services Committee, noting that National Guard troops are instructed not to perform law enforcement activities such as make arrests.

"It is essential that everyone involved in this mission understands precisely what they are authorized to do, but perhaps more importantly, what they are authorized not to do," he said.

Guillot acknowledged that troops do not receive any specific training on how to deal with people with mental health issues but are trained to de-escalate tense situations. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said police in Washington, D.C., often interact with people experiencing mental health episodes.

Trump started calling up troops to Democrat-led cities in June amid protests in Los Angeles over his administration's

crackdown on illegal immigration. He has since ordered deployments to Washington; Chicago; Memphis, Tenn.; and Portland, Ore., over the objections of local leaders.

Democrats have questioned the legality of the moves, arguing they put troops in jeopardy and detracted from readiness amid growing threats from foreign adversaries. Two West Virginia National Guard members were shot — one fatally — last month as they patrolled near the White House.

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, of Illinois, a combat veteran who served in that state's Army National Guard, said she called for the Senate Armed Services Committee to hold a hearing because troops were being mobilized under false pretenses.

"The power to deploy troops

domestically must remain exceptional, accountable and rooted in law — not in one man's judgment about what constitutes disorder," she said.

She said the administration has spent more than \$340 million on deployments to Illinois, Oregon, Washington and Tennessee. A report released by Democrats on Wednesday found the Pentagon had committed at least \$258 million to support Trump's orders to deploy troops, not including to Washington.

Mark Ditlevson, the Pentagon official overseeing the policies and plans related to the missions, said Thursday that the deployments are a "modest burden" on the Defense Department and most of the incurred costs are reimbursable by the Department of Homeland Security.

Fed cuts key interest rate, hopeful of economy in 2026

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve reduced its key interest rate by a quarter-point for the third time in a row Wednesday but signaled that it may leave rates unchanged in the coming months.

The cut decreased the Fed's rate to about 3.6%, the lowest it has been in nearly three years. Lower rates from the Fed can bring down borrowing costs for mortgages, auto loans and credit cards over time, though market forces can also affect rates.

Chair Jerome Powell suggested at a news conference that after six rate cuts in the past two years, the central bank can step back and see how hiring and inflation develop. In a set of quarterly economic projections, Fed officials signaled they expect to lower rates just once next year.

Fed officials "will carefully evaluate the incoming data," Po-

well said, adding that the Fed is "well positioned to wait to see how the economy evolves."

The chair also said that the Fed's key rate was close to a level that neither restricts nor stimulates the economy, a shift from earlier this year, when he described the rate as high enough to slow the economy and quell inflation. With rates closer to a more neutral level, the bar for further cuts is likely higher than this fall.

"We believe the labor market will have to noticeably weaken to warrant another rate cut soon," Ryan Sweet, global chief economist at Oxford Economics, said.

Powell was optimistic about the economy's growth next year, and said that consumer spending remains resilient while companies are still investing in artificial intelligence infrastructure. He also suggested growing worker efficiency could contribute to faster growth without more inflation.

Trump's 'gold card' \$1M visa program goes live

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump announced Wednesday that his long-promised "gold card" was officially going on sale, offering legal status and an eventual pathway to U.S. citizenship for individuals paying \$1 million and corporations ponying up twice that per foreign-born employee.

A website accepting applications went live as Trump revealed the start of the program while surrounded by business leaders in the White House's Roosevelt Room.

The program is meant to replace EB-5 visas, which Congress created in 1990 to generate foreign investment and had been available to people who spend about \$1 million on a company that employs at least 10 people.

Trump sees the new version as a way for the U.S. to attract

and retain top talent, all while generating revenue for federal coffers.

He's been promoting the gold card program for months and once suggested that each card would cost \$5 million, though he more recently revised that to the \$1 million and \$2 million pricing scheme.

The president said all funds taken in as part of the program will "go to the U.S. government" and predicted that billions would flow into an account run by the Treasury Department.

The new program is actually a green card, effectively offering permanent legal residency with the possibility for citizenship.

The president made no mention of requirements for job creation for applying corporations or on overall caps on the program, which exist under the current EB-5 program.

Official: NATO is Russia's 'next target'

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Time to prepare for a potential war with Russia is running out, NATO's top official said Thursday in a warning that chastised some allies for moving too slowly when it comes to ramping up defense spending.

"We are Russia's next target, and we are already in harm's way," Secretary-General Mark Rutte said during a speech in Berlin, where he was joined by German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul.

Both faced questions about the new American national security strategy, which was un-

veiled last week and has since caused a stir in Europe. While the strategy emphasized that Europe is "strategically and culturally vital" to the United States, it also took sharp aim at the European Union, which the U.S. says has weakened the Continent with lax immigration rules and top-down bureaucracy.

Europe faces the "stark prospect of civilizational erasure," the strategy states.

Rutte and Wadephul downplayed the notion that the new strategy signals a division between Europe and the United States. Still, it has caused panic

in some quarters, with various officials and security analysts warning of a looming rupture in a trans-Atlantic alliance that has been the cornerstone of U.S. security strategy since World War II.

One concern that has emerged is that the American commitment to providing NATO with its nuclear deterrent against Russia may not be reliable.

"It is obvious the United States is no longer willing to risk their lives for Europe like they were in the old days," Danish lawmaker Rasmus Jarlov said during a television appearance

Wednesday. "The only credible response against that is to have your own nuclear weapons. Now that American weapons no longer back us up, we need other weapons that can."

Rutte, however, said Thursday that there was no indication of the U.S. backing away from any of its commitments to NATO.

Though he didn't single out any countries, he said some complacency remains in the 32-nation bloc, despite ongoing hostilities in Ukraine and various acts of gray-zone warfare around Europe that have been blamed on Russia.

Bulgaria's government resigns after mass protests

Associated Press

SOFIA, Bulgaria — Bulgaria's government resigned on Thursday after mass protests gripped the country and just weeks before the European Union nation is due to join the eurozone.

The resignation of the minority coalition, led by the center-right GERB party, was announced minutes before parliament was scheduled to vote on a no-confidence motion tabled by the opposition over economic mismanagement and supported

by growing public anger with widespread corruption.

"Ahead of today's vote of no confidence, the government is resigning," Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov told reporters in parliament.

The demonstrations on Wednesday came after last week's protests that were sparked by the government's budget plans for higher taxes, increased social security contributions and spending increases. The government later withdrew the contentious 2026 budget

plan.

The protesters' demands had expanded to include calls for the center-right government to step down.

"The decisions of the National Assembly are meaningful when they reflect the will of the people," Zhelyazkov said, referring to the anti-government protests. "We want to be where society expects us to be."

Students from Sofia's universities had joined the protests, which organizers said outnumbered last week's rallies that

drew more than 50,000 people. Media estimates based on drone visuals put the number of protesters at over 100,000.

At the core of the protesters' frustrations is the role of Bulgarian politician and oligarch Delyan Peevski, who has been sanctioned by both the United States and the United Kingdom, and whose MRF New Beginning party backs the government. Peevski has been accused by opponents of helping shape government policy in line with oligarchic interests.

Venezuelan Nobel laureate vows to return to country

Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado said Thursday that "decisive" actions by the United States, including the seizure of an oil tanker, have left the repressive government of President Nicolás Maduro at its weakest point, and she vowed to return to the country to keep fighting for democracy.

Machado's statements to reporters came hours after she appeared in public for the first time

in 11 months, following her arrival in Norway's capital, Oslo, where her daughter received the Nobel Peace Prize award on her behalf on Wednesday.

"I think that the actions of President Trump have been decisive to reach where we are now, where the regime is significantly weaker," she told reporters. "Because before, the regime thought it had impunity.... Now they start to understand that this is serious, and that the world is watching."

Machado sidestepped ques-

tions on whether a U.S. military intervention is necessary to remove Maduro from power. She told reporters that she would return to Venezuela "when we believe the security conditions are right, and it won't depend on whether or not the regime leaves."

Machado arrived in Oslo hours after Wednesday's prize ceremony and made her first public appearance early Thursday, emerging from a hotel balcony and waving to an emotional crowd of sup-

porters. She had been in hiding since Jan. 9, when she was briefly detained after joining supporters during a protest in Caracas.

Machado left Venezuela at a critical point in the country's protracted crisis, with the Trump administration carrying out a deadly military operations in the Caribbean and threatening repeatedly to strike Venezuelan soil. The White House has said the operations, which have killed 80 people, is meant to stop the flow of drugs into the U.S.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man wants prosecutor removed after long delay

NC RUTHERFORD-TON — A man who says members of a secretive North Carolina religious group held him down and beat him wants the prosecutor kicked off his case, accusing the district attorney of siding with a church that dozens of former congregants have said abused them.

Matthew Fenner said in court documents that he has waited more than eight years for a retrial in the kidnapping and assault case involving Word of Faith Fellowship only for District Attorney Ted Bell to schedule the second trial for a church leader during the week Fenner had interviews for a medical residency. Fenner said Bell has refused to delay it.

In a sworn statement, Fenner said Bell wants to stay on Word of Faith's good side because he supports the locally influential church and its hundreds of members in the small county who could stay in his favor for his reelection bid in 2026.

Bell said the allegations about how he has handled the case are all false and that he will respond in court.

A leader of Word of Faith, Brooke Covington, was scheduled to stand trial this week on second-degree kidnapping and simple assault charges, but that has been delayed to consider Fenner's request. Covington's previous trial ended in a mistrial.

Fenner joined Word of Faith as a teenager in 2010 with his mother. He was at a service at the church's compound in Spindale, N.C., when members including Covington started what

the church called a "blasting" session on him, according to Fenner. Members held him down and choked and beat him for two hours while others prayed to expel "homosexual demons," Fenner said.

True crime TV producer now on Most Wanted list

CA SANTA ANA — The former head of a California company that produced true crime TV shows has been added to the FBI's Most Wanted list, years after being charged with portraying herself as an heiress to get millions of dollars from lenders.

Mary Carole McDonnell, 73, is believed to be in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, the FBI said on Dec. 5. She is the former chief executive at Bellum Entertainment LLC, based in Burbank, Calif., which produced shows such as "It Takes a Killer" and "I Married a Murderer."

Bellum was having financial problems in 2017. McDonnell was able to get a \$14.7 million loan from a bank after falsely claiming she was related to the founders of aviation and aerospace company McDonnell Douglas and had \$28 million in a trust account, according to court documents.

A grand jury indicted McDonnell in 2018 on charges of fraud and identity theft.

Rescue team sees more calls amid online videos

VT STOWE — A rescue team that covers Vermont's tallest mountain has seen a rise in calls from inexperienced skiers who end up getting lost and in dangerous locations after being influenced by

videos on social media.

After seeing footage online of skiers chasing fresh powder tracks in the backcountry, people are increasingly skiing out of bounds, finding themselves lost in the woods and in need of rescue.

On Nov. 29, Stowe Mountain Rescue responded to a 911 call from a skier and snowboarder lost in the woods on Mount Mansfield. The two 19-year-olds drove up from New York to ski in the backcountry outside Stowe Mountain Resort after seeing videos of others doing so on social media, according to the rescue team.

"They referenced a TikTok video which had influenced them," Stowe Mountain Rescue chief Jon Wehse said. "These people are unprepared, they're ill-equipped, they're not in the right shape and they have no spatial awareness of where they are on the mountain, so it causes a problem very quickly."

Stowe Mountain Rescue now sees around eight missions to help groups of lost skiers per season, up from around three such calls only five years ago.

8 African penguin chicks hatch at zoo, officials say

MD BALTIMORE — Eight African penguins recently hatched at the Maryland Zoo, a success that experts said could raise awareness of the critically endangered species and possibly help boost their population in the wild.

Keepers at the zoo in Baltimore on Monday announced the birth of the chicks. Officials said their experts began breeding their African penguins in mid-September and continued

through the end of February to mimic the spring-to-summer breeding season for these birds in their native South Africa and Namibia.

The chicks were born in late October and early November, and are the offspring of four sets of parents, zoo experts said. Two of them have been dubbed Cayenne and Kiwi. Zoo officials said they would reveal the names of the other six chicks in coming weeks.

The wild population of African penguins, known by the scientific name *Spheniscus demersus*, has plummeted due to overfishing and habitat loss even though they're a protected species, according to Maryland Zoo bird curator Jen Kottyan.

Suspect in custody in fatal shooting on campus

KY FRANKFORT — One student was killed and another was critically wounded in a shooting at a residence hall at Kentucky State University on Tuesday, and a suspect who is not a student at the school has been arrested, officials said.

The shooting happened around 3 p.m. and was an "isolated incident," Scott Tracy, assistant chief of police for Frankfort, said Tuesday evening.

Authorities haven't publicly addressed a motive.

Frankfort police said Jacob Lee Bard was booked into jail on murder and first-degree assault charges in connection with the shooting.

Classes, final exams and campus activities at the university have been canceled for the rest of the week, according to the school.

— From wire reports

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Moore arrested after dismissal from Michigan

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Sherone Moore was being held in jail Thursday while police investigate the situation that led to his arrest hours after the once-promising coach was fired at Michigan for what the school said was an inappropriate relationship with a staff member.

Authorities have yet to release details on Moore's arrest, other than to say he has been held since Wednesday night in the Washtenaw County Jail and remains under investigation.

Pittsfield Township police had issued a statement that said officers were called to investigate an alleged assault and took a person into custody, without mentioning anyone by name. The statement, however, was released in response to media inquiries about Moore.

The police department updated its statement in the morning to say the suspect is scheduled for arraignment on Friday.

Moore, 39, was fired by Michigan, college football's winningest program that has been

mired in scandal, after the school verified evidence of his relationship with the staffer.

Athletic director Warde Manuel said the behavior "constitutes a clear violation of university policy."

The announcement did not include details of the alleged relationship. Moore, who is married with three young daughters, did not return a message from the AP seeking comment.

He led 18th-ranked Michigan to a 9-3 record this year after going 8-5 in his debut season.

Moore signed a five-year contract with a base annual salary of \$5.5 million last year. According to the terms of his deal, the university will not have to buy out the remaining years of his contract because he was fired for cause.

The Wolverines are set to play No. 14 Texas on Dec. 31 in the Citrus Bowl. Biff Poggi, who filled in for Moore when he was suspended earlier this season in relation to the Jim Harbaugh-era sign-stealing scandal, will serve as interim coach. Moore

was suspended for two games as part of self-imposed sanctions for NCAA violations related to the scandal.

The NCAA added a third game to the suspension, which would have kept Moore off the sideline for next year's opener against Western Michigan.

His firing leaves Michigan suddenly looking for a third coach in four years, shortly after a busy cycle that included Lane Kiffin leaving playoff-bound Mississippi for LSU.

Moore, the team's former offensive coordinator, was promoted to lead the Wolverines after they won the national title in January 2024. He succeeded Harbaugh, who returned to the NFL to lead the Los Angeles Chargers.

Moore previously deleted an entire 52-message text thread with former staffer Connor Stalions, who was at the center of the team's sign-stealing operation. The texts were later recovered and shared with the NCAA.

Moore, who is from Derby,

Kansas, didn't start playing football until his junior year of high school. He played for Butler County Community College in Kansas and as an offensive lineman for coach Bob Stoops at Oklahoma during the 2006 and 2007 seasons.

His coaching career began as a graduate assistant at Louisville before moving on to Central Michigan, where he caught Harbaugh's attention. Harbaugh hired him in 2018 as tight ends coach.

Moore was promoted to offensive line coach and co-offensive coordinator in 2021, when Michigan bounced back from a 2-4, pandemic-shortened season and began a three-year run of excellence that culminated in the school's first national title in 26 years.

He worked his way up within the Wolverines' staff and filled in as interim coach for four games during the 2023 championship season while Harbaugh served two suspensions for potential NCAA rules violations.

Indiana QB Mendoza named AP player of the year

Associated Press

Fernando Mendoza was named Associated Press player of the year on Thursday after leading unbeaten and top-ranked Indiana to its first Big Ten championship since 1967 and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff.

The redshirt junior quarterback was the overwhelming choice over fellow Heisman Trophy finalists Diego Pavia of Vanderbilt, Jeremiah Love of Notre Dame and Julian Sayin of Ohio State. Mendoza received 32 of 51 first-place votes from a nationwide panel of media members who cover college football. Pavia got nine to lead the rest of the group, which also included Jacob Rodriguez of Texas Tech.

"I'm shining now but only because there are so many stars around me," Mendoza said, describing his rise from lightly recruited high school prospect in 2021 to a candidate for the sport's most prestigious awards. "There's an analogy that the only

reason we're able to see stars in the sky is because the light reflects from all different types of stars. I have so many stars around myself — whether it's my teammates, my coaches, my family, support staff — that I'm able to shine now in this light, and I'm so happy for everyone to be a part of this."

Mendoza, the Hoosiers' first-year starter after transferring from California, is the triggerman for an offense that has surpassed program records for touchdowns and points set during last season's surprise run to the CFP.

Mendoza has thrown for a Bowl Subdivision-leading 33 touchdowns and run for six, giving him a school-record 39 TDs accounted for.

He was the first Big Ten quarterback since 2000 with three straight games with at least four TD passes and no interceptions. Mendoza's 21-of-23, 267-yard, five-touchdown passing day in a 63-10 win at Illinois in the conference opener established him as a

serious contender for national honors.

Mendoza is among 10 FBS quarterbacks who have completed better than 70% of their passes. He ranks among the most accurate passers on attempts of at least 20 yards, hitting on 23 of 43 (53.5%), and when under pressure (52.1%), according to Pro Football Focus.

Ranked the No. 72 quarterback prospect by ESPN when he was a senior at Christopher Columbus High School in Miami, Mendoza was pledged to Yale for almost six months before he decommitted and signed with California.

He sat out as a redshirt in 2022 and won the starting job for the final eight games in 2023. Mendoza was 10th in the nation in passing in 2024 and ranked among the top transfer prospects after the season. He landed at Indiana, where his brother Alberto was the No. 3 quarterback last year. This year, Alberto is the top backup to his big brother.

NASCAR settles federal antitrust case

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — A federal antitrust case accusing NASCAR of being a monopolistic bully was settled Thursday after the stock car racing series agreed to make the charters at the heart of its business model permanent for its teams.

The lawsuit filed by Michael Jordan's 23XI Racing and Front Row Motorsports had shadowed NASCAR for more than a year. The retired NBA great pushed ahead, telling the jury he felt he was one of the few who could challenge the series.

Jordan, 23XI co-owner Denny Hamlin and Front Row owner Bob Jenkins joined NASCAR Chairman Jim France as they stood together outside the courthouse. The group announced that that charters — at the heart of NASCAR's revenue model — will be made permanent for all Cup Series teams. Both 23XI and

Front Row Motorsports, the two plaintiffs, will get them back after racing uncharted most of this past season.

"Today's a good day," Jordan said.

The financial terms were not disclosed. An economist earlier testified 23XI and Front Row were owed over \$300 million in damages.

The settlement came on the ninth day of the trial before U.S. District Judge Kenneth Bell, who set aside motions hearing for an hour-long sidebar. Jeffrey Kessler, attorney for 23XI Racing and Front Row, emerged from a conference room at the end of the hour to inform a court clerk "we're ready." Kessler then led Jordan, Hamlin and Bob Jenkins to another room for more talks.

23XI and Front Row filed their lawsuit last year after refusing to sign agreements on the new

charter offers NASCAR presented in September 2024. Teams had just one day to sign the 112-page document, which guarantees access to top-level Cup Series races and a revenue stream, and 13 of 15 organizations reluctantly agreed. Jordan and Jenkins sued instead and raced most of the 2025 season uncharted.

Both teams said a loss in the case would have put them out of business.

"What all parties have always agreed on is a deep love for the sport and a desire to see it fulfill its full potential," NASCAR and the plaintiffs said in a joint statement. "This is a landmark moment, one that ensures NASCAR's foundation is stronger, its future is brighter and its possibilities are greater."

Bell told the jury that sometimes parties at trial have to see how the evidence unfolds to come to the wisdom of a settle-

ment.

"I wish we could've done this a few months ago," Bell said in court. "I believe this is great for NASCAR. Great for the future of NASCAR. Great for the entity of NASCAR. Great for the teams and ultimately great for the fans."

All teams felt the previous revenue-sharing agreement was unfair and two-plus years of bitter negotiations led to NASCAR's final offer, which was described by the teams as "take-it-or-leave-it." The teams believed the new agreement lacked all four of their key demands, most importantly the charters becoming permanent instead of renewable.

The settlement followed eight days of testimony in which the France family, the founders and private owners of NASCAR, were shown to be inflexible in making the charters permanent.

No. 7 Houston routs Jackson State for third straight win

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Emanuel Sharp scored 23 points, Isaiah Harwell added 20 points and No. 7 Houston won its third straight game, routing Jackson State, 80-38 on Wednesday night.

Sharp had 19 points in the first half on 6 of 7 shooting, including 5 of 6 on 3-pointers, as the Cougars (9-1) built a 40-16 lead at the half.

Sharp and Harwell combined to shoot 16 of 25 from the field and were 9 of 17 on 3-pointers for the game. Sharp had his second straight game scoring at least 20 points as he had 27 points on six 3-pointers in the Cougars' 82-67 win over Florida State on Saturday night.

Houston shot 48% and was 11 of 33 on 3-pointers. The Cougars forced 25 turnovers and converted them into 30 points. Houston also held dominant advantages in bench points (40-

11), points in the paint (24-4) and second chance points (25-3).

Jayme Mitchell Jr. scored 12 points to lead Jackson State (1-8). The Tigers shot 29.5% and were 9 of 28 on 3-pointers.

Jackson State connected on 5 of its first 6 3-point attempts and trailed 21-16 with 10½ minutes remaining in the first half after a 3-pointer by Mike Williams. Houston finished the half on a 19-0 run, with Sharp scoring 11 points. The Tigers missed their last 13 field goal attempts of the half.

No. 6 Purdue 85, Minnesota 57: Braden Smith had 15 points, 12 assists and six rebounds, and Trey Kaufman-Renn added 14 points and 10 rebounds before departing early as host Purdue blew out Minnesota.

The Boilermakers (9-1, 2-0 Big Ten) sent a resounding statement in their first game since tying the record for the

largest home loss by a No. 1 ranked team. Purdue lost by 23 points to then No. 10 Iowa State on Saturday.

Jaylen Crocker-Johnson led Minnesota with 17 points. Cade Tyson scored 15 as Minnesota shot a dismal 35.7% from the field and was even worse, 6 of 25, on 3-pointers. Purdue also had a 46-23 rebounding advantage.

Purdue sealed the victory by starting the second half on a 31-4 run while limiting Minnesota (5-5, 1-1) to just two baskets over a span of nearly 11 minutes. The spurt left the Golden Gophers facing an insurmountable 66-36 deficit.

No. 23 Nebraska 90, Wisconsin 60: Rienk Mast had 17 points and 10 rebounds, and Nebraska took over the game midway through the first half and cruised to a home win over Wisconsin.

Ranked in the AP Top 25 for the first time since 2018, Nebraska (10-0, 1-0 Big Ten) matched its best start in school history. Nebraska also opened the 1977-78 season with 10 straight wins.

Wisconsin (7-3, 1-1) lost its second straight road game, scoring its fewest points of the season.

Tied at 21 midway through the first half, Nebraska outscored Wisconsin 26-10 in the last 10 minutes and shut out the Badgers in the final 3:50, closing out the half on a 10-0 run and going up 47-31.

Wisconsin hit just 33% of its first-half shots and just 21% from 3-point range. Nebraska hit 55% percent of its shots, 40% from 3. Wisconsin was just 7 for 32 on 3-point attempts and finished just 34% from the field for the game. Nebraska hit 54% of its shots and was 11 for 30 from 3.

Lundell's last-minute goal lifts Panthers

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Anton Lundell scored with 50.8 seconds left, batting a loose puck in front of the net home to lift the Florida Panthers to a 4-3 win over the Utah Mammoth on Wednesday night.

Sam Bennett had two goals and an assist, giving him seven points in his last three games for Florida, which was opening a four-game road trip and improved to 3-0-1 in its last four games. Carter Verhaeghe also stayed hot, with a goal and an assist — giving him seven goals and six assists in a seven-game point streak.

Dylan Guenther had two goals for Utah, pushing him to 13 for the season, and Jack McBain also scored. John Marino had two assists for Utah, which has dropped three straight.

Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 27 shots for the Panthers and Karel Vejmelka made 32 saves for the Mammoth.

Momentum shifted back and forth throughout the night, with

Utah scoring the first goal — Guenther at 11:23 of the first — and then the Panthers scoring the next three. Verhaeghe tied it for Florida with 43 seconds left in the opening period, then Bennett scored twice in a span of 104 seconds to push the Panthers' lead to 3-1 with 16:36 left in the middle period.

Back came the Mammoth. Guenther made it 3-2 just 13 seconds after Bennett's second goal and McBain scored to knot the game at 3-3 with 5:23 left in the second.

It stayed that way until Lundell got the game-winner, with Sam Reinhart and Eetu Luostarinen getting the assists.

Blackhawks 3, Rangers 0: Connor Bedard scored his 19th goal, Spencer Knight made 21 saves for his second shutout this season, and host Chicago beat New York.

Bedard scored in the second period off a centering pass from Andre Burakovsky to make it 2-0 and assisted on Tyler Betuzzi's third-period goal. The 20-year-old, third-year star

has 42 points this season, including 17 in his last 11 home games.

Igor Shesterkin made 22 saves for the Rangers, who were coming off back-to-back overtime losses. New York lost in regulation for the second time in its past nine games.

The Blackhawks have scored first in 12 of 15 home games, which leads the NHL. Chicago has also allowed just four first-period goals, the fewest in the league.

Knight's shutout was the seventh of his career. He's never had more than two in a season.

Rangers center Mika Zibanejad's seven-game points streak ended.

Red Wings 4, Flames 3: Alex DeBrincat extended his points streak to five games with two goals and an assist, and visiting Detroit held off Calgary.

Axel Sandin Pellikka and Dylan Larkin also scored for Detroit, which won its fourth straight and moved past Boston and Tampa Bay for first place in the Atlantic Division.

Joel Farabee, Matt Coronato and MacKenzie Weegar scored for Calgary, which had its three-game winning streak snapped.

Making his third straight start, John Gibson made 34 saves for the Red Wings. Devin Cooley stopped 23 shots for the Flames.

The Red Wings have won seven consecutive games against the Flames, their longest active winning streak against any team.

Kraken 3, Kings 2 (OT): Vince Dunn scored on the power play 1:21 into overtime and host Seattle snapped a five-game losing streak by beating Los Angeles Kings.

Matty Beniers tied the game for the Kraken with a power-play goal with 25.3 seconds left in regulation. Jared McCann also scored for Seattle, which had been winless in its previous six outings (0-5-1) since Nov. 23. Eeli Tolvanen assisted on the tying and winning goals. Dunn added two assists.

Joey Daccord made 24 saves.

Thunder defeat Suns to extend run in quarterfinals

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 28 points, and the Oklahoma City Thunder matched the best 25-game start to an NBA season by dominating the Phoenix Suns 138-89 in an NBA Cup quarterfinal on Wednesday.

The Thunder's 24-1 mark ties the 2015-16 Golden State Warriors, who won their first 24 games before finally losing.

Chet Holmgren added 24 points and eight rebounds for the Thunder, who set a franchise record with their 16th straight win. They advanced to the semifinals on Saturday against the San Antonio Spurs.

It seemed this could be a tough one for the Thunder. Oklahoma City's 123-119 win over

the Suns in NBA Cup group play on Nov. 28 was its closest game during its win streak.

But Phoenix star Devin Booker missed his third straight game with a strained right groin. Booker scored 21 points in the previous matchup and said in the postgame that the "secret is out" about the Thunder's league-leading defense.

It appears the Suns have more to learn. They shot 39.3% from the field and scored a season-low point total in the most lopsided loss in franchise history. Dillon Brooks led the Suns with 16 points, but he made just 4 of 16 shots. It was the fewest points Oklahoma City has allowed this season.

Jalen Williams hit a 3-point-

er at the halftime buzzer to give the Thunder a 74-48 lead. Gilgeous-Alexander scored 17 points in the first half despite just eight shot attempts.

It was Gilgeous-Alexander's 96th straight game with at least 20 points. He reached the total on a breakaway dunk that put the Thunder up 84-50 with 9:15 left in the third quarter.

Phoenix guard Grayson Allen was ejected after he shoved Holmgren and knocked him to the floor. The Thunder led 94-58 with 5:18 left in the third quarter when the two collided while Holmgren appeared to be setting a screen. Allen extended both arms, knocking Holmgren off balance, and was called for a Flagrant 2.

Spurs 132, Lakers 119: Ste-

phon Castle scored 21 of his 30 points in the second half, and De'Aaron Fox added 20 points in San Antonio's road victory over Los Angeles in an NBA Cup quarterfinal.

Luka Dončić scored 35 points and LeBron James had 19 points, 15 rebounds and eight assists for the Lakers, who lost for only the third time in 12 games. Los Angeles trimmed its deficit to eight points late in the fourth quarter, but couldn't get closer.

San Antonio has won nine of 12 overall after steadily controlling this meeting of two Western Conference teams hoping to challenge the defending champion Thunder, both this week and in the postseason.