

## US offers Ukraine security guarantee

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — The United States is offering Ukraine security guarantees for a period of 15 years as part of a proposed peace plan, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Monday, though he said he would prefer an American commitment of up to 50 years to deter Russia from further attempts to seize its neighbor's land by force.

President Donald Trump hosted Zelenskyy at his Florida resort on Sunday and insisted that Ukraine and Russia are “closer than ever before” to a peace settlement.

Negotiators are still searching for a breakthrough on key issues, however, including whose

forces withdraw from where in Ukraine and the fate of Ukraine's Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, one of the 10 biggest in the world. Trump noted that the monthslong U.S.-led negotiations could still collapse.

“Without security guarantees, realistically, this war will not end,” Zelenskyy told reporters via WhatsApp.

Ukraine has been fighting Russia since 2014, when it illegally annexed Crimea and Moscow-backed separatists took up arms in the Donbas, a vital industrial region.

Details of the security guarantees have not become public but Zelenskyy said Monday they include how a peace deal

would be monitored as well as the “presence” of partners. He didn't elaborate, but Russia has said it won't accept the deployment in Ukraine of troops from NATO countries.

Trump on Monday had “a positive call” with Putin about the war, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a post on X. The two leaders had also spoken ahead of Trump's talks with Zelenskyy on Sunday as the American president tries to steer the countries toward a settlement.

Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov said that Trump is pushing Ukraine to seek a comprehensive peace agreement and not demand a temporary respite for its military

through a ceasefire. Putin has also insisted on a full settlement before any truce.

Trump said he would consider extending U.S. security guarantees for Ukraine beyond 15 years, according to Zelenskyy.

The guarantees would be approved by the U.S. Congress as well as by parliaments in other countries involved in overseeing any settlement, he said.

Zelenskyy said he wants the 20-point peace plan under discussion to be approved by Ukrainians in a national referendum.

However, holding a ballot requires a ceasefire of at least 60 days, and Moscow has shown no willingness for a truce without a full settlement.

## Navy frequently changes rules for naming submarines

**BY GARY WARNER**

*Stars and Stripes*

This month, a welder at a Virginia shipyard etched the keel plate of the USS Barb, the ceremonial birthing of a new submarine.

The Virginia-class fast attack submarine joins hundreds of Navy subs through history named after sea creatures. So will the next three on the construction list: the USS Tang, USS Wahoo and USS Silver-sides.

The names are throwbacks to an earlier time. Only one Navy submarine has been commissioned with the name of a sea creature since the USS Cavalla, named for a saltwater fish, in 1973.

Since 1862, federal law directs that the Secretary of Navy will choose the names of

new ships, in consultation with the president and Congress. There are longstanding protocols: For decades, battleships were named for states, cruisers for cities and submarines for sea creatures.

But a 2012 congressional report outlining the protocols said one rule was above all others:

“A secretary's discretion to make exceptions to ship-naming conventions is one of the Navy's oldest ship-naming traditions,” the report said.

Nowhere has the naming protocol gone through as many variations as with submarines.

A Revolutionary War-era submersible was called “Turtle.” The Union experimented with a submersible named “Intelligent Whale” during the Civil War. Sea creature names

were applied to submarines through two world wars and the first two decades of the Cold War.

Sailors might serve on a fearsome sea creature, like Barracuda, Stingray or Shark. Others pulled duty on what sounded like entrees on a wharf diner menu: Trout, Bass, Tuna and Cod.

In 1959, the Navy rolled out a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine. Instead of a fish, the first of its class was named the USS George Washington.

By the time the renewed Russian military threat had the U.S. Navy ratcheting up construction of the new Virginia-class attack submarines in the late 1990s, the fish monikers were shelved.

Of the first 30 boats of its

class christened, 28 are named for states. Boats named for former Navy Secretary and U.S. Senator John Warner, and a new submarine named for Rickover, were the exceptions.

At the end of President Donald Trump's first term, the Navy decided it was time bring back the sea creature names.

The switch was short-lived. When President Joe Biden was elected in 2020, new Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro made a U-turn.

Trump's return to the White House has not yet manifested any new trend in submarine names. But with up to two Virginia-class boats to be built each year, Navy Secretary John Phelan will have a chance to make his own mark on the ever-shifting tradition of submarine names.

# Chinese military stages drills near Taiwan

Associated Press

HONG KONG — China's military on Monday dispatched air, navy and rocket troops to conduct joint military drills around the island of Taiwan, a move Beijing called a "stern warning" against separatist and "external interference" forces. Taiwan said it was placing its forces on alert and called the Chinese government "the biggest destroyer of peace."

The first of two days of drills came after Beijing expressed anger at U.S. arms sales to the territory and a statement by Japan's prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, saying its military could get involved if China were to take action against Taiwan, the self-governing island that the world's second-biggest economy says must come under its rule. The Chinese military did not mention the United States

and Japan in its statement.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry said in a post on X that rapid response exercises were underway, with forces on high alert to defend the island. In a separate statement, it said it had deployed appropriate forces in response, conducting combat readiness drills.

"The Chinese Communist Party's targeted military exercises further confirm its nature as an aggressor and the biggest destroyer of peace," the ministry said.

Senior Col. Shi Yi, spokesperson of China's People's Liberation Army's Eastern Theater Command, said the drills would be conducted in the Taiwan Strait and areas to the north, southwest, southeast and east of the island.

Shi said the activities will focus on sea-air combat readiness

patrol, "joint seizure of comprehensive superiority" and blockades on key ports. It was also the first large-scale military drill where the command publicly mentioned one of the goals was "all-dimensional deterrence outside the island chain."

"It is a stern warning against 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces and external interference forces, and it is a legitimate and necessary action to safeguard China's sovereignty and national unity," Shi said.

The command on Monday deployed destroyers, frigates, fighters, bombers and unmanned aerial vehicles, alongside long-range rockets, to the north and southwest of the Taiwan Strait. It carried out live fire exercises against targets in the waters as well. Among other training, drills to test the capabilities of sea-air coordination

and precise target hunting were also conducted in the waters and airspace to the east of the strait.

Hsieh Jih-sheng, deputy chief of the general staff for intelligence of the Taiwanese Defense Ministry, said that as of 3 p.m. Monday, 89 aircraft and drones were operating around the strait, with 67 of them entering the "response zone" — airspace under the force's monitoring and response. In the sea, the ministry detected 14 navy ships around the strait and four other warships in the Western Pacific, in addition to 14 coast guard vessels.

"Conducting live-fire exercises around the Taiwan Strait... does not only mean military pressure on us. It may bring more complex impact and challenges to the international community and neighboring countries," Hsieh told reporters.

## N. Korea displays progress in nuclear-powered submarine

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea on Thursday displayed apparent progress in the construction of a nuclear-powered submarine, with state media photos showing a largely completed hull, as leader Kim Jong Un condemned rival South Korea's push to acquire the technology.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said Kim visited a shipyard to inspect the construction of what the North describes as an 8,700-ton-class nuclear-propelled submarine, which the leader has called a crucial step in the modernization and nuclear armament of North Korea's navy. The North has indicated it plans to arm the submarine with nuclear weapons, calling it a "strategic guided missile submarine" or a "strategic nuclear attack sub-

marine."

During the visit, Kim described South Korea's efforts to acquire its own nuclear-powered submarine, which have been backed by President Donald Trump, as an "offensive act" that severely violates the North's security and maritime sovereignty.

He said that the South Korean plan further underscores the need to advance and nuclear-arm North Korea's navy and claimed that the completion of his nuclear-powered submarine would be an "epoch-making" change in strengthening its nuclear war deterrent against what he called enemy threats.

The agency did not specify when Kim visited the shipyard but released photos showing him inspecting a huge, burgundy-colored vessel, coated with what appears to be anti-corro-

sion paint, under construction inside an assembly hall with senior officials and his daughter. It was the first time North Korean state media had released images of the submarine since March.

It was not immediately clear how close North Korea is to completing the vessel. But because submarines are typically built from the inside out, the release of what appears to be a largely completed hull suggests that many core components, including the engine and possibly the reactor, are already in place, said Moon Keun-sik, a submarine expert at Seoul's Hanyang University.

"Showing the entire vessel now seems to indicate that most of the equipment has already been installed and it is just about ready to be launched into the water," said Moon, a former South Korean submarine offi-

cer, who believes the North Korean submarine could possibly be tested at sea within months.

If North Korea obtains a submarine capable of operating stealthily for extended periods and launching missiles from underwater, it would be a worrying development for its neighbors, as such launches would be difficult to detect in advance. But there have been questions about whether North Korea, a heavily sanctioned and impoverished country, could get resources and technology to build nuclear-powered submarines.

Some experts say North Korea's recent alignment with Russia — including sending thousands of troops along with military equipment to support President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine — may have helped it to receive crucial technologies in return.

# 'Big facility' struck in anti-drug campaign

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

President Donald Trump said U.S. forces struck a large facility last week connected to the drug trafficking boats his administration has targeted in a months-long lethal campaign against alleged Venezuelan drug traffickers.

"We just knocked out — I don't know if you read or you saw — they have a big plant, or a big facility, where the ships come from," Trump said during an impromptu interview Friday with New York's WABC news. "Two nights ago, we knocked that out. So, we hit them very hard."

The brief comment came as Trump spoke about the strikes

against the small Venezuelan boats and other actions he has taken against the country's President Nicolas Maduro, including efforts to blockade and seize sanctioned oil vessels.

Trump did not provide additional details about the apparent Dec. 24 strike, including where it had occurred, the extent of the damage or whether it was indicative of a new phase in the campaign.

The Pentagon declined comment on the strike and referred questions to the White House. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment Monday.

The New York Times reported Monday that the strike destroyed a drug facility in Vene-

zuela, citing unnamed U.S. officials. Those officials declined to provide further information about the attack or its target, according to the Times.

The Venezuelan government had not publicly commented on a strike as of Monday.

Trump has said for weeks that he was considering launching attacks inside Venezuela. He said in October that he had given the CIA authorization to conduct covert actions inside Venezuela.

Last week, Trump said he hoped to see Maduro step down and warned that if the Venezuelan president "plays tough, it'll be the last time he'll ever be able to play tough."

The U.S. had steadily built a

large force of Navy and special operations forces off Venezuela's coast. The force includes the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier and strike group and the USS Iwo Jima amphibious assault ship and thousands of Marines.

U.S. military forces have killed at least 105 people in at least 29 lethal strikes against small boats Trump's administration has claimed were run by "narcoterrorists" ferrying drugs in the Pacific and Caribbean waters off Venezuela's coast. That campaign began Sept. 2.

"Every time we knock out a boat we're saving 25,000 American lives," Trump claimed. "It's very simple."

## US pledges \$2B for UN aid as Trump slashes funds

*Associated Press*

GENEVA — The United States on Monday announced a \$2 billion pledge for U.N. humanitarian aid as President Donald Trump's administration continues to slash U.S. foreign assistance and warns United Nations agencies to "adapt, shrink or die" in a time of new financial realities.

The money is a small fraction of what the U.S. has contributed in the past but reflects what the

administration believes is a generous amount that will maintain the United States' status as the world's largest humanitarian donor.

The pledge creates an umbrella fund from which money will be doled out to individual agencies and priorities, a key part of U.S. demands for drastic changes across the world body that have alarmed many and led to severe reductions in programs and services.

The \$2 billion is only a sliver of traditional U.S. humanitarian funding for U.N.-backed programs, which has run as high as \$17 billion annually in recent years, according to U.N. data. U.S. officials say only \$8-\$10 billion of that has been in voluntary contributions. The United States also pays billions in annual dues for U.N. membership.

Critics say the Western aid cutbacks have been shortsighted, driven millions toward hun-

ger, displacement or disease, and harmed U.S. soft power around the world.

The move caps a crisis year for many U.N. organizations like its refugee, migration and food aid agencies. The Trump administration has already cut billions in U.S. foreign aid, prompting them to slash spending, aid projects and thousands of jobs. Other traditional Western donors have reduced outlays, too.

## Storm brings blizzard conditions, dangerous wind chills

*Associated Press*

A potent winter storm threatened blizzard-like conditions, treacherous travel and power outages in parts of the Upper Midwest as other areas braced Monday for plunging temperatures, strong winds and a mix of snow, ice and rain.

The snow and strengthening winds began spreading Sunday across the northern Plains, where the National Weather Service warned of whiteout con-

ditions and possible blizzard conditions that could make travel impossible in some areas.

Snowfall totals were expected to exceed a foot across parts of the upper Great Lakes and as much as double that along the south shore of Lake Superior.

About 350,000 customers were in the dark Monday morning, with about a third of those outages in Michigan, according to Poweroutage.us. There were more than 1,600 flight delays

and more than 450 cancellations at U.S. airports on Monday.

Blizzard conditions continued in some parts of northern Iowa on Monday morning, especially in open rural areas, according to the weather service's office in Des Moines. Blowing snow was expected to continue through the morning.

The National Weather Service warned of 1 to 3 feet of lake-effect snow from Monday through Thursday and high

winds, with gusts up to 75 mph, in western New York on Monday. Similar conditions were expected along Lake Erie along Ohio and Michigan.

The very strong cold front meant parts of the central U.S. woke up Monday to temperatures up to 50 degrees colder than a day earlier, according to the weather service's Weather Prediction Center. The cold front was accompanied by strong gusty winds.



# Militant groups experiment with AI

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — As the rest of the world rushes to harness the power of artificial intelligence, militant groups also are experimenting with the technology, even if they aren't sure exactly what to do with it.

For extremist organizations, AI could be a powerful tool for recruiting new members, churning out realistic deepfake images and refining their cyberattacks, national security experts and spy agencies have warned.

Someone posting on a pro-Islamic State group website last month urged other IS supporters to make AI part of their operations. "One of the best things about AI is how easy it is to use," the user wrote in English.

"Some intelligence agencies worry that AI will contribute (to) recruiting," the user continued. "So make their nightmares into reality."

IS realized years ago that social media could be a potent tool for recruitment and disinformation, so it's not surprising that the group is testing out AI, national security experts say.

For loose-knit, poorly resourced extremist groups, AI can be used to pump out propaganda or deepfakes at scale, widening their reach and ex-

panding their influence.

"For any adversary, AI really makes it much easier to do things," said John Laliberte, a former vulnerability researcher at the National Security Agency who is now CEO of cybersecurity firm ClearVector. "With AI, even a small group that doesn't have a lot of money is still able to make an impact."

Militant groups began using AI as soon as programs like ChatGPT became widely accessible. In the years since, they have increasingly used generative AI programs to create realistic-looking photos and video.

When strapped to social media algorithms, this fake content can help recruit new believers, confuse or frighten enemies and spread propaganda at a scale unimaginable just a few years ago.

Such groups spread fake images two years ago of the Israel-Hamas war depicting bloodied, abandoned babies in bombed-out buildings. The images spurred outrage and polarization while obscuring the war's actual horrors. Violent groups in the Middle East used photos of the Israel-Hamas war to recruit new members, as did antisemitic hate groups in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Something similar happened

last year after an attack claimed by an IS affiliate killed nearly 140 people at a concert venue in Russia.

In the days after the shooting, AI-crafted propaganda videos circulated widely on discussion boards and social media, seeking new recruits.

IS also has created deepfake audio recordings of its own leaders reciting scripture and used AI to quickly translate messages into multiple languages, according to researchers at SITE Intelligence Group, a firm that tracks extremist activities and has investigated IS' evolving use of AI.

Such groups lag behind China, Russia or Iran and still view the more sophisticated uses of AI as "aspirational," according to Marcus Fowler, a former CIA agent who is now CEO at Darktrace Federal, a cybersecurity firm that works with the federal government.

But the risks are too high to ignore and are likely to grow as the use of cheap, powerful AI expands, he said.

Hackers are already using synthetic audio and video for phishing campaigns, in which they try to impersonate a senior business or government leader to gain access to sensitive networks. They also can use AI to

write malicious code or automate some aspects of cyberattacks.

More concerning is the possibility that militant groups may try to use AI to help produce biological or chemical weapons, making up for a lack of technical expertise. That risk was included in the Department of Homeland Security's updated Homeland Threat Assessment, released earlier this year.

"ISIS got on Twitter early and found ways to use social media to their advantage," Fowler said. "They are always looking for the next thing to add to their arsenal."

Lawmakers have floated several proposals, saying there's an urgent need to act.

During a recent hearing on extremist threats, House lawmakers learned that ISIS and al-Qaida have held training workshops to help supporters learn to use AI.

Legislation that passed the U.S. House last month would require homeland security officials to assess the AI risks posed by such groups each year.

Guarding against the malicious use of AI is no different from preparing for more conventional attacks, said Rep. August Pfluger, R-Texas, the bill's sponsor.

## Interoceanic train derails in Mexico, killing many

*Associated Press*

MEXICO CITY, Mexico — Officials said a train accident in southern Mexico killed at least 13 people and injured dozens, halting traffic along a rail line connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico.

The Interoceanic Train linking the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz went off the rails Sunday as it passed a curve near the town of Nizanda.

"The Mexican Navy has informed me that, tragically, 13

people died in the Interoceanic Train accident," Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum posted on X, adding that 98 people are injured, five of them seriously.

She said she instructed the secretary of the navy and the undersecretary of human rights of the Ministry of the Interior to travel to the site and personally assist the families.

In a message on X Sunday, Oaxaca state Gov. Salomon Jara said several government agen-

cies had reached the site of the accident to assist the injured. Officials said that 241 passengers and nine crew members were on the train when the accident occurred.

The Interoceanic Train was inaugurated in 2023 by then President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The rail service is part of a broader push to boost train travel in southern Mexico and develop infrastructure along the isthmus of Tehuantepec, a nar-

row stretch of land between the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

The Mexican government plans to turn the isthmus into a strategic corridor for international trade, with ports and rail lines that can connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

The Interoceanic train currently runs from the port of Salina Cruz on the Pacific Ocean to Coatzacoalcas, covering a distance of approximately 180 miles.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Christmas Eve winner gets \$1.8B in Powerball

**AR** LITTLE ROCK — A Powerball ticket purchased at a gas station outside Little Rock, Ark., won a \$1.817 billion jackpot in Wednesday's Christmas Eve drawing, ending the lottery game's three-month stretch without a top-prize winner.

The winning numbers were 04, 25, 31, 52 and 59, with the Powerball number being 19. The winning ticket was sold at a Murphy USA in Cabot, lottery officials in Arkansas said Thursday. No one answered the phone Thursday at the location, which was closed for Christmas. The community of roughly 27,000 people is 26 miles north-east of Little Rock.

Final ticket sales pushed the jackpot higher than previous expected, making it the second-largest in U.S. history and the largest Powerball prize of 2025, according to [www.powerball.com](http://www.powerball.com). The jackpot had a lump sum cash payment option of \$834.9 million.

### Subway kills MetroCard, turns to tap-and-go

**NY** NEW YORK — When the MetroCard replaced the New York City subway token in 1994, the swipeable plastic card infused much-needed modernity into one of the world's oldest and largest transit systems.

Now, more than three decades later, the gold-hued fare card and its notoriously finicky magnetic strip are following the token into retirement.

The last day to buy or refill a MetroCard is Dec. 31, 2025, as the transit system fully transi-

tions to OMNY, a contactless payment system that allows riders to tap their credit card, phone or other smart device to pay fares, much like they do for other everyday purchases.

Transit officials say more than 90% of subway and bus trips are now paid using the tap-and-go system, introduced in 2019.

### Woman charged in daughter's death

**CA** SANTA BARBARA — A California woman has been charged with murder after the remains of her missing 9-year-old daughter were found in Utah, authorities said.

Ashlee Buzzard, 40, was arrested after bullet cartridges found near her daughter's body were linked to a used cartridge case found in her home, said Santa Barbara County's Sheriff-Coroner Bill Brown. Authorities found Melodee Buzzard's body Dec. 6 in a rural area of Utah after a man and woman taking photos off of State Route 24 reported they had discovered remains.

Officers could not immediately identify her but concluded she died from gunshot wounds to the head, Brown said. The FBI's DNA analysis of the body found a familial DNA match to Buzzard.

Detectives also found similar ammunition in a car Buzzard had rented, authorities said.

### Probers sift through nursing home ruins

**PA** BRISTOL — Construction crews worked to clear the rubble of a Pennsylvania nursing home Wednesday, a day after a pow-

erful explosion killed two people, hospitalized 20 others, sent flames shooting out and collapsed part of the building.

Searchers accounted for everyone who was thought to be missing, Bristol Police Chief Charles Winik said.

Two had been reported dead, but responders were still trying to locate others in hospitals or the wreckage of the Bristol Health & Rehab Center that exploded hours earlier.

Nineteen people were still hospitalized, one in critical condition, he said. An investigation into the cause and origin was underway with support from federal agencies, he said.

Authorities did not identify the deceased, but said one was a resident and one was an employee. Both were women, they said.

### Shooter dead, 2 police hurt during exchange

**NC** MINT HILL — A man was shot and killed Friday after firing at police in a suburb of Charlotte during a child custody exchange, authorities said.

Two Mint Hill police officers were also wounded in the shooting. Mint Hill Police said in a statement on social media.

Mint Hill officers were called to the exchange at an Edible Arrangement store around 10:45 a.m. Friday. Authorities said the man pulled out a gun and started shooting and officers fired back. Police say he died in the exchange of gunfire.

Employees at Empire Pizza nearby were on a smoke break and saw two officers go inside the store, then saw one of them leading the other outside with blood on their hands and face,

manager Kevin Phayme told reporters at the scene.

Police initially said the officers were in critical condition and a few hours later updated their conditions to stable. They said more information about the shooting will be released later.

### Waterfront burns, boat sinks in Old Port blaze

**ME** PORTLAND — A fire tore through the historic Old Port waterfront in Portland, Maine, the day after Christmas, damaging aging buildings and several boats.

Flames and smoke spread easily through structures along the Custom House Wharf, a 19th- and 20th-century hub for Portland's fishing industry that now includes seafood restaurants, authorities said. The cause of the fire is still under investigation. One firefighter sustained minor injuries.

The Portland Fire Department posted an "incident notification" on Facebook just before 6 p.m. on Friday warning residents to use caution and avoid the area.

First responders deployed a fire boat to spray water from the harbor to help douse the flames due to issues caused by frozen fire hydrants, according to news reports.

Several boats were damaged, and at least one sank along the wharf.

The Porthole Restaurant posted on Facebook Friday thanking the community for its prayers: "Mainers are truly the best kind of people," it read.

"WE ARE SAFE. We want everyone to know that all of our staff, fishermen, and owners are safe," the Porthole posted.

— From Associated Press

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# 49ers edge Bears, eye No. 1 NFC seed

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Brock Purdy and the San Francisco offense did everything they could for the first 58 minutes in a nearly flawless performance. At the end, they were just spectators when the beleaguered defense finally came through with a stop.

Purdy threw a 38-yard touchdown pass to Jauan Jennings with 2:15 left, and the 49ers forced an incomplete pass on the final play from the 2 to beat Chicago 42-38 on Sunday night and set up a Week 18 showdown for the top seed in the NFC.

Caleb Williams drove the Bears (11-5) down the field in the closing seconds and had one last shot for the win. But Bryce Huff forced him out of the pocket and his throw short-hopped Jahdae Walker in the end zone to seal a sixth straight victory for San Francisco (12-4).

"For them to finish out the game like that, I was so happy for them. I was sitting there not being able to do anything but watch," Purdy said. "To be able to celebrate was a cool team win. There's nothing like that. It was pretty special."

That gave the Niners a chance to win the NFC West and get a bye by beating Seattle (13-3) in the season finale Saturday night. A win would give San Francisco home-field advantage and a chance to stay home all postseason, with the Super Bowl set to be played at Levi's Stadium on Feb. 8.

"We've earned this," coach Kyle Shanahan said. "This is the game we want. We love that it's here. We have an opportunity to never leave here again this year."

The loss ends Chicago's hopes of earning the top seed. The Bears have already clinched the NFC North and can earn the No. 2 seed by beating Detroit next Sunday.

Purdy followed his career-high five TD-pass performance

last week against Indianapolis by throwing for three scores and running for two to become the sixth player since the AFL-NFL merger with back-to-back games with at least five touchdowns.

**Eagles 13, Bills 12:** Josh Allen sailed a 2-point conversion attempt wide of open receiver Khalil Shakir in the back of the end zone with 5 seconds remaining, and Philadelphia hung on for a win over Buffalo.

Dallas Goedert caught a 1-yard touchdown pass, Jake Elliott hit field goals of 28 and 47 yards, and the Super Bowl champion Eagles barely avoided squandering a 13-0 fourth-quarter lead.

Allen scored on a tush push on fourth-and-goal to pull the Bills within one point with 5 seconds remaining. The Bills thought they had a touchdown one play earlier, but Dawson Knox was ruled short of the goal line after a replay review.

Rather than playing for overtime, coach Sean McDermott opted to go for 2. Allen dropped back in the pocket and had a defender in his face when he let loose a pass that was about a foot wide of Shakir.

**Browns 13, Steelers 6:** Sheedeur Sanders threw for 186 yards and a touchdown, Cleveland's defense kept visiting Pittsburgh out of the end zone and the Browns held on for a 13-6 victory, preventing the Steelers from clinching the AFC North.

Pittsburgh (9-7) came into the weekend needing either a win or loss by Baltimore for its first division title since 2020.

Instead, the Steelers will host the Ravens to close the regular season with the winner getting the division and the AFC's fourth seed in the playoffs.

Cleveland (4-12) snapped a four-game losing streak. It is the first time since Dec. 10, 2009, that the Browns defeated Pittsburgh and held it without a touchdown.

**Seahawks 27, Panthers 10:** Zach Charbonnet ran for 110 yards and two touchdowns, and visiting Seattle turned two third-quarter Carolina turnovers into TDs to beat the Panthers and remain in contention for the No. 1 seed in the NFC playoffs.

Sam Darnold finished 18-for-27 for 147 yards with a touchdown for the Seahawks, who will play San Francisco next week with the top seed on the line.

Carolina (8-8) had a chance to win the NFC South because Tampa Bay lost at Miami on Sunday. Now the Panthers will likely need to win at the Buccaneers next weekend to win their first division title since 2015 and snap a seven-year playoff drought.

Bryce Young was limited to 54 yards on 14-for-24 passing.

**Bengals 37, Cardinals 14:** Ja'Marr Chase caught two touchdown passes from Joe Burrow, who threw for 305 yards as host Cincinnati beat Arizona.

Chase finished with seven catches for 60 yards and became the first player in NFL history with at least 80 receptions, 1,000 receiving yards and seven TD catches in each of his first five seasons.

Arizona's Trey McBride had 10 catches, giving him 119 this season to break the NFL single-season record for a tight end, topping Zach Ertz's 116 in 2018.

**Dolphins 20, Buccaneers 17:** Rookie quarterback Quinn Ewers threw for 172 yards and two touchdowns, including a 63-yard toss for his first career score, and host Miami beat slumping Tampa Bay.

The Buccaneers (7-9) remained one game behind Carolina (8-8) in the NFC South after the Panthers' 27-10 loss to Seattle on Sunday. Tampa Bay would still clinch its fifth consecutive division title and sixth straight playoff berth by beat-

ing Carolina in next week's regular-season finale.

But the Bucs have lost four straight games, seven of their last eight and have barely looked like a playoff team during that stretch. Tampa Bay's last four losses have all been by one possession.

**Jaguars 23, Colts 17:** Trevor Lawrence ran for two scores, Cam Little kicked a tiebreaking 42-yard field goal with 6:58 left and visiting Jacksonville beat Indianapolis, moving within one victory of its first AFC South title since 2022.

The Jaguars (12-4) won their seventh straight game one day after two-time defending division champ Houston beat the Chargers to remain in contention for the title. The Texans' win eliminated the Colts from playoff contention.

Indianapolis (8-8) has lost six straight and seven of eight to become the sixth team since 1970 — and the first since the 1995 Oakland Raiders — to miss the postseason after starting 7-1.

**Giants 34, Raiders 10:** Host Las Vegas moved into position to snag the top pick in next year's draft after losing to Jaxson Dart and New York in a matchup of teams with the NFL's two worst records.

The Raiders (2-14) would secure the top pick with a loss next week to Kansas City.

Dart, taken by the Giants (3-13) with the No. 25 pick in the 2025 draft, showed his dual-threat ability by passing for 207 yards and rushing for 48 yards and two touchdowns.

**Saints 34, Titans 26:** Tyler Shough threw a 10-yard touchdown pass to Kevin Austin Jr. with 6:22 left to put visiting New Orleans ahead to stay as they rallied from a 13-point deficit to beat Tennessee.

Shough improved to 5-3 as a starter, helping the Saints (6-10) win their fourth straight. He outplayed Cam Ward, the No. 1 overall pick in the draft.



# Patriots QB Maye solidifies MVP case in win

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The chants got louder as Drake Maye jogged off the field after another terrific performance and neared the visitors' tunnel leading to the New England Patriots' locker room.

"MVP! MVP! MVP!" a large group of fired-up fans shouted as they serenaded their second-year quarterback, who again made a strong case Sunday that he might be exactly that this season.

Maye threw a career-high five touchdown passes in less than three quarters as the Patriots dominated the New York Jets 42-10 to improve to 13-3, including 8-0 on the road. New England also won the AFC East title for the first time since 2019 when Buffalo lost to Philadelphia a few hours later.

"They don't give me a vote," coach Mike Vrabel said, "but there is nobody else we want as our quarterback or that I want as our quarterback."

Maye made it look easy

against the Jets, leading the Patriots on touchdown drives on each of their first six possessions.

He was 19 of 21 for 256 yards and a 157.0 quarterback rating with TD tosses to Rhamondre Stevenson, Stefon Diggs, Austin Hooper, Hunter Henry and Efton Chism III before being lifted for Joshua Dobbs with 5:31 left in the third quarter. Maye became the first player in NFL history to complete 90% of his passes while throwing for 250 or more yards and five TDs in a single game.

"Guys getting open, guys running the right routes," said Maye, who got the game ball in the postgame locker room but humbly attributed his success to his teammates. "The guys up front blocking their butts off to give me time to make plays and extend plays and find guys down the field."

The 24-year-old Maye has been capitalizing on those opportunities all season in what has been a breakout year that

followed a promising rookie campaign.

He has already been selected to the Pro Bowl Games twice since being selected with the No. 3 overall draft pick last year out of North Carolina.

"We want to get the ball in his hands as much as we can," safety Jaylinn Hawkins said. "He makes it happen. He's out there just doing what he does, having fun. He's confident, he's playing with swag."

Maye also joined Tom Brady (11 times) and Drew Bledsoe (twice) as the only New England quarterbacks to reach 4,000 yards passing in a season. Maye has 4,203 through 16 games, along with 30 TD passes and just eight interceptions.

"Whatever it takes to win," he said. "That's the most important thing. The only thing I care about is our won-loss record. We still have work to do and some games ahead that should be fun."

Maye made his NFL debut last year at MetLife Stadium last year in Week 3, when he re-

placed Jacoby Brissett in the Patriots' 24-3 loss to New York. He went 4-for-8 for 22 yards in mop-up action, but made his first NFL start three weeks later.

"It's pretty funny looking back," Maye said. "The stadium was pumped for that Thursday night game and it's kind of a full-circle moment just of how far we've come and kind of the flip side of things — this year compared to last and how much fun we're having out there."

New England has bounced back from consecutive 4-13 finishes to return the franchise to its winning ways in Vrabel's first year as coach. Maye has thrived along the way, establishing himself as one of the NFL's best play-making quarterbacks — and perhaps the league's most valuable player.

"He goes out there and shows it every week," cornerback Christian Gonzalez said. "I think that's something he's earned. Him and this team are focused on winning games. If it happens to be him, then it is."

## Ohio State set to start title defense vs. Miami in Cotton Bowl

Associated Press

Defending national champion Ohio State is in the Cotton Bowl for the third year in a row, while Miami is already back in Texas just over a week after being in the state for a win in its College Football Playoff debut.

Both teams arrived in North Texas on Sunday, three days before their New Year's Eve matchup in the first of the four CFP quarterfinal games.

The third-ranked Buckeyes (12-1), whose flight landed Sunday night, are three weeks removed from their 13-10 loss to undefeated No. 1 Indiana in the Big Ten championship game Dec. 6. They still got the second seed and a first-round bye in the 12-team playoff, providing an extended break but also more time to ponder missing out on a conference title.

Now it's win or go home for Ohio State, the only team to appear in five of the last seven CFPs — all since Ryan Day became head coach. It is the Buckeyes' seventh overall, which began by winning the inaugural CFP championship game at the end of

the 2014 season in the same stadium where the Cotton Bowl is played.

"We know the last time we stepped on the field, we left something on the field," said linebacker Sonny Styles, Lorenzo's brother. "So this time, we got to leave everything out there."

CFP first-timer No. 10 Miami (11-2) got an at-large berth even without making the Atlantic Coast Conference championship game, and that league's champ (five-loss Duke) being left out. The Hurricanes had a three-week gap between their regular season-ending win at Pittsburgh and CFP debut, a 10-3 victory at seventh-seeded Texas A&M on Dec. 20.

Now Miami is about 200 miles from College Station to play Ohio State, which will have more time off than the Hurricanes had between their games. Miami coach Mario Cristobal isn't sure if there is any advantage, or disadvantage, for either side.

"The bye weeks and the extra time off, sometimes it's been great for people, and sometimes it hasn't. And then vice versa as

it relates to playing. ... I don't think there's an exact predictor of success or non-success as it relates to time off," Cristobal said.

This will be only the second time the Buckeyes and Hurricanes play in a post-season game.

It comes nearly 23 years after Ohio State's double-overtime win in the Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 3, 2003, which denied Miami a second consecutive national championship. The Hurricanes haven't won the title since.

The Buckeyes won their sixth AP national championship last season, when the Cotton Bowl was a CFP semifinal.

Ohio State didn't have a first-round bye in the first year of the 12-team playoff, and its 28-14 win over Texas in the home of the NFL's Dallas Cowboys was their third win last postseason. The Buckeyes beat Notre Dame for the national title.

The Cotton Bowl wasn't one of the playoff games two years ago, the last in the four-team format. Ohio State lost that one to Missouri.

# Clippers win, Leonard scores career-high 55

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif.—Kawhi Leonard scored a career-high 55 points, James Harden added 28 and the Los Angeles Clippers extended their winning streak to a season-high four games with a 112-99 victory over the Detroit Pistons.

Leonard went 17 of 26 from the floor, including 5 for 10 from 3-point range, and made 16 of 17 free throws, with his only blemish of the game a missed free throw in the third quarter that ended his run of 64 straight from the line, all this month. He scored 26 of his points in the third quarter.

Nicolas Batum scored 12 points, while Leonard added 11 rebounds and five steals for the Clippers, who had lost 10 of 11 games before their four-game run.

Cade Cunningham finished with 27 points for the Eastern Conference-leading Pistons after being held scoreless in the first half while in foul trouble. Jalen Duren had 18 points and 14 re-

bounds, and Jaden Ivey added 11 points for Detroit, which lost back-to-back games for just the second time.

**Raptors 141, Warriors 127 (OT):** Scottie Barnes scored 23 points, matched a Toronto franchise record with a career-high 25 rebounds and added 10 assists for his seventh career triple-double as the host Raptors beat Golden State.

Immanuel Quickley scored 27 points, Brandon Ingram had 26 and Ja'Kobe Walter added a season-high 18 for Toronto, which snapped a five-game home losing streak.

Stephen Curry scored 14 of his 39 points in the third quarter but didn't score in overtime. Draymond Green had 21 and Jimmy Butler added 19, but it wasn't enough for the Warriors.

**Thunder 129, 76ers 104:** Chet Holmgren had 29 points and nine rebounds, and host Oklahoma City pulled away in the second half for a victory over Philadelphia, ending a two-game skid.

The Thunder shot 50 for 87 (57%).

The 76ers committed 23 turnovers leading to 31 Oklahoma City points.

**Wizards 116, Grizzlies 112:** Alex Sarr scored 20 points and blocked a career-best six shots to help host Washington to a victory over Memphis.

The Wizards outrebounded the Grizzlies 54-42 and overcame 19 turnovers — eight alone by Bub Carrington.

Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 31 points and Ja Morant added 21 for Memphis (15-17), which failed to reach the .500 mark for the first time since it was 3-3 following a loss to the Los Angeles Lakers on Oct. 31.

**Trail Blazers 114, Celtics 108:** Shaedon Sharpe scored 26 points including 5 of 8 from 3-point range and host Portland snapped a three-game losing streak with a win over Boston.

Deni Avdija added 24 points, 10 assists and seven rebounds for the Trail Blazers, Toumani Camara scored 20 points, and Dono-

van Clingan had 18 points and 18 rebounds. Caleb Love added 18 points off the bench.

The Celtics, whose four-game winning streak was snapped, were led by Jaylen Brown with 37 points on 14 of 23 shooting. It was Brown's ninth game in a row with 30 or more points, tying Larry Bird for the franchise record of consecutive 30-plus point games. Paul Pierce is third with seven.

**Lakers 125, Kings 101:** Luka Doncic scored 34 points, LeBron James had 24 and host Los Angeles snapped its three-game losing streak with a win over Sacramento.

Nick Smith Jr. had 21 off the bench for the Lakers, who had dropped four of six and all by at least 13 points, including a 23-point demolition at the hands of Houston on Christmas Day in their previous game.

DeMar DeRozan had 22 for the Kings, who have won consecutive games just once this season. Maxime Raynaud finished with 16, as Sacramento had six players in double figures.

## Kucherov, Goncalves power Lightning past Canadiens in SO

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Nikita Kucherov scored twice, Gage Goncalves added two assists and had the deciding goal in the shootout as the Tampa Bay Lightning held off the Montreal Canadiens 5-4 on Sunday.

Oliver Bjorkstrand had two assists for Tampa Bay. Nick Paul and Pontus Holmberg also scored for the Lightning, who won their fourth straight game. Jonas Johansson stopped 32 shots and both attempts in the shootout.

Juraj Slafkovsky scored twice, including the tying goal with 3.8 seconds left, and added an assist as Montreal rallied from deficits of 3-0 and 4-1 in the third period to secure a point. Noah Dobson had a goal and an assist, and Ivan Demidov also scored for the Canadiens. Jacob Fowler finished with 18 saves for Montreal, which played its first game coming out of the Christmas break.

Kucherov scored two of Tampa Bay's three goals in the second period.

Goncalves fed Kucherov for a breakaway goal at 2:28 of the second. Kucherov scored

again at 12:11 when Goncalves missed a 2-on-1 chance wide, but Brayden Point picked up the rebound and quickly fed Kucherov above the crease. Paul made it 3-0 at 14:49.

**Blue Jackets 4, Islanders 2:** Host Columbus scored a pair of third-period goals in just over a minute and rallied to beat New York for its second straight win.

Kirill Marchenko scored his second goal of the night with 3:19 left in the game, just over a minute after Ivan Provorov knotted the score at 2-2. Cole Sillinger added an empty-netter, and Denton Mateychuk and Sean Monahan both had two assists. Jet Greaves stopped 24 shots.

Max Shabanov and Bo Horvat scored for the Islanders, and David Rittich made 31 saves for the Islanders, who seemed to have the win in hand but instead dropped the first game of their two-stop road trip to end 2025.

**Red Wings 3, Maple Leafs 2 (OT):** Simon Edvinsson scored with 3:14 remaining in overtime to give host Detroit a win over Toronto.

Edvinsson skated toward the crease and scored on a backhand, helping the Red

Wings maintain a two-point lead over Tampa Bay atop the Atlantic Division.

Matthew Knies and Nicholas Robertson scored for the Maple Leafs, and John Tavares assisted on both goals. Tavares has 56 points in 43 career games against Detroit. Dennis Hildeby made 33 saves.

**Penguins 7, Blackhawks 3:** Justin Brazeau recorded his first NHL hat trick, Bryan Rust scored twice and visiting Pittsburgh rolled past sliding Chicago.

Anthony Mantha had a goal and assist and Noel Acciari scored as the Penguins won their second game in three, but just their second in the last 11 (2-5-4). Ryan Shea had three assists, and Arturs Silovs made 21 saves.

**Kraken 4, Flyers 1:** Philipp Grubauer stopped 31 shots, Eeli Tolvanen scored twice in the third period and host Seattle defeated Philadelphia.

Jordan Eberle and Chandler Stephenson also scored for the Kraken, who extended their win streak to four games after losing 10 of 11. Tolvanen and Stephenson each added an assist.