

Drone strike kills militia commander

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. drone strike in Baghdad on Wednesday killed three members of the Kataib Hezbollah militia, including a high-ranking commander, responsible for planning and participating in attacks against American forces in the region, military officials said.

“There are no indications of collateral damage or civilian casualties at this time,” according to U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for American military operations in the Middle East. “The United States will continue to take necessary action to protect our people. We will not hesitate to hold responsible all those who threaten our forces’ safety.”

The attack occurred at about 9:30 p.m. local time. The three Kataib Hezbollah members were in a car when the strike occurred. Two officials

with Iran-backed militias in Iraq said one of the three killed was Wissam Mohammed “Abu Bakr” al-Saadi, the commander in charge of Kataib Hezbollah’s operations in Syria.

The strike follows a barrage of U.S. strikes in Syria and Iraq on Friday in response to a Jan. 28 militant drone attack on a U.S. base in Jordan that killed three American soldiers.

The retaliatory U.S. strikes attacked three facilities in Iraq and four in Syria hitting more than 85 targets, U.S. officials said.

U.S. and British forces on Saturday also conducted strikes against 36 militia targets in Yemen in a continued effort to stop attacks on the shipping lanes in the Red Sea by Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said last week that the U.S. be-

lieves the attack on Tower 22 — the U.S. base in Jordan — was planned, resourced and facilitated by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group that includes Kataib Hezbollah.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq has regularly claimed strikes on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria since the Israel-Hamas war started in October, saying they are in retaliation for American support of Israel, according to the Health Ministry in Gaza, the Hamas-run territory. Kataib Hezbollah had said in a statement that it was suspending attacks on American troops to avoid “embarrassing the Iraqi government” after the strike in Jordan, but others have vowed to continue fighting.

On Sunday, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed a drone attack on a base housing U.S. troops in eastern Syria

that killed six fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led group allied with the United States.

U.S. officials, including Kirby and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, said last week before the U.S. airstrikes on Friday that there will be a multi-tiered response to the attack that killed the three U.S. soldiers.

Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon’s top spokesman, said Monday that the Defense Department assessed the strikes had “good effects,” but few details have been provided, citing ongoing battle-damage assessments.

“Our responses are not complete,” Ryder said. “I’m not going to telegraph, or discuss, what that may be other than we’ll come back to that at a time of our choosing.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Marines to inspect all barracks for problems

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Every U.S. Marine Corps barracks will be inspected in the next few weeks as the service attempts to address complaints about substandard living conditions that have rippled across the military.

Gen. Christopher Mahoney, the assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, said Wednesday in a video statement posted online that the inspections must be wrapped up before March 15.

“None of this is going to happen overnight, but this inspection is one of many first steps,”

Mahoney said. “Commanders and senior enlisted leaders, if your barracks have issues, if there are problems, get out there and own it.”

The review is intended to give leaders a one-time, complete assessment of each barracks, enabling them to understand the totality of issues and allocate resources accordingly, the Corps said.

The effort coincides with widespread quality-of-life complaints in the military, especially regarding the treatment of junior enlisted troops.

In September, a Government Accountability Office report sparked outrage when it highlighted some of the unsafe conditions in U.S. military barracks. Issues uncovered included sewage overflows, gas leaks and infestations of mold and rodents.

Among the problems the GAO found was a rating system that gives passing grades to facilities that are clearly substandard.

The bad rap over base housing conditions comes as military branches are struggling to at-

tract new recruits. The Marine Corps did meet its recruiting goals last year, while the other Defense Department services fell short.

Lawmakers in recent weeks have held hearings focused on pressing the services to move faster on improving living conditions and quality of life for troops.

The inspections “are about setting the conditions for the kinds of changes we’re getting after” in the broader effort to upgrade housing over the next several years, Mahoney said.

2 new strikes made on Houthi missiles

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

U.S. forces carried out two more preemptive strikes on missiles that Houthi militants in Yemen were preparing to launch in their ongoing campaign of attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, according to U.S. Central Command.

At 9 p.m. Wednesday, U.S. strikes targeted two mobile anti-ship cruise missiles in Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen, CENTCOM said in a statement Thursday.

Another strike at 11:30 p.m. was made against a mobile land-attack cruise missile, which was determined to be “an imminent threat to U.S. Navy ships and merchant vessels,” CENTCOM said, without specifying what forces were involved.

The U.S. has launched at least seven strikes in recent days that CENTCOM has described as self-defense. They include targeting 11 anti-ship cruise missiles and one land-attack missile last weekend.

On Monday, U.S. forces also preemptively destroyed two

Houthi explosive surface drones, CENTCOM said Tuesday.

The Houthi fighters have said they are attacking commercial and military shipping in the Red Sea as a show of support for Gaza, where war between Israel and Hamas has raged since Oct. 7.

Between Nov. 19 and Feb. 2, the Iran-backed proxy group had attacked or threatened at least 41 commercial vessels in the Red Sea, a Pentagon spokeswoman said Tuesday.

That assessment didn't include three Houthi attacks Tuesday with anti-ship ballistic missiles that targeted a Marshall Islands-flagged, Greek-owned bulk carrier in the Gulf of Aden, CENTCOM said Wednesday.

The first missile exploded near the vessel and caused minor damage but no injuries, military officials said. A subsequent missile landed harmlessly in the water near the ship and the third was shot down by the destroyer USS Laboon, which was nearby, according to CENTCOM.

5 Marines confirmed dead in helicopter crash

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Five U.S. Marines aboard a helicopter that went down during stormy weather in the mountains outside of San Diego are confirmed dead, the military said Thursday.

Authorities say the CH-53E Super Stallion vanished late Tuesday night while returning to Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego after training at Creech Air Force Base, northwest of Las Vegas.

“It is with a heavy heart and profound sadness that I share the loss of five outstanding Marines from 3d Marine Aircraft Wing and the “Flying Tigers,” Maj. Gen. Michael J. Borgschulte, commander of 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, said in a statement.

The names of the Marines were not immediately released.

“To the families of our fallen Marines, we send our deepest condolences and commit to ensuring your support and care during this incredibly difficult time,” Borgschulte said. “Though we understand the inherent risks of military service, any loss of life is always difficult.”

Efforts to recover the re-

mains of the five have begun and an investigation into the crash is underway, according to the statement.

Capt. Stephanie Leguizamon, spokesperson for the wing, said she had little information beyond the statement.

“I do know that it's cold ... I know that's been a contentious issue” for searchers in reaching the crash site.

President Joe Biden said in a statement that he and first lady Jill Biden are “heartbroken” to learn of the Marines' deaths.

“Our service members represent the very best of our nation — and these five Marines were no exception,” Biden said. “As the Department of Defense continues to assess what occurred, we extend our deepest condolences to their families, their squadron, and the U.S. Marine Corps as we grieve the loss of five of our nation's finest warriors.”

The last known contact with the helicopter was at about 11:30 p.m. Tuesday, Mike Cornette of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection told CBS 8 news. That location was based on a “ping” reported to a Cal Fire dispatch center.

More public-private partnerships urged for housing

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers said Wednesday that they wanted to see more public-private partnerships in military housing to address poor living conditions and allow service members to focus on war-fighting rather than maintaining aging barracks.

Members of the House Armed Services Committee's readiness subpanel suggested such changes could help fix a military housing system that continues to grapple with mold, cockroach and rodent infestations,

sewage overflow, broken air conditioning and other issues.

Rep. Mike Waltz, R-Fla., the chairman of the panel, said he was put off by conversations with service leaders that discussed how Marines, for example, could be better trained to oversee heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

“I want those Marines better trained to do bad things to bad people and not managing buildings,” Waltz, a former Green Beret, said Wednesday during a hearing on military infrastructure. “We have entities in the United States of America that can do this in-

credibly well.”

The Army intends to lead the way in lessening the burden on service members by creating a “robust workforce” of trained civilian barracks managers, according to Rachel Jacobson, the service's assistant secretary for installations, energy and environment.

The Navy is building on its ongoing privatization efforts with a pilot housing program for unaccompanied sailors in San Diego and Norfolk, Va., said Meredith Berger, the service's assistant secretary for installations, energy and environment.

High court unsure of Trump ballot removal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court seems poised to reject attempts to kick former President Donald Trump off the 2024 ballot.

A definitive ruling for Trump, the leading Republican candidate for president, would largely end efforts in Colorado, Maine and elsewhere to prevent his name from appearing on the ballot.

Conservative and liberal justices alike questioned during arguments Thursday whether Trump can be disqualified from being president again because of his efforts to undo his loss in the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden, ending with the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Their main concern was whether Congress must act before states can invoke a constitutional provision that was adopted after the Civil War to prevent former officeholders who “engaged

in insurrection” from holding office again. There also were questions about whether the president is covered by the provision.

Without such congressional legislation, Justice Elena Kagan was among several justices who wanted to know “why a single state should decide who gets to be president of the United States.”

The outcome could come quickly. Eight of the nine justices suggested that they were open to at least some of the arguments made by Jonathan Mitchell, Trump’s lawyer at the Supreme Court. Trump could win his case if the court finds just one of those arguments persuasive.

Only Justice Sonia Sotomayor sounded like she might vote to uphold the Colorado Supreme Court ruling that found that Trump “engaged in insurrection” and is ineligible to be president. The state court ruled Trump should not be on the ballot for the

Republican primary on March 5.

In another sign of trouble for the Colorado voters who sued to remove Trump from the ballot, the justices spent almost no time talking about whether Trump actually “engaged in insurrection” following the 2020 election.

Lawyer Jason Murray, representing the voters, pressed the point that Trump incited the Capitol attack to prevent the peaceful handover of power “for the first time in history.”

Trump, speaking to reporters after the proceedings, called the Supreme Court argument “a beautiful thing to watch in many respects,” even as he complained about the case being brought in the first place. “I hope that democracy in this country will continue,” he told reporters at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida.

The justices heard more than two hours of arguments in their first case considering Section 3 of

the 14th Amendment.

Trump’s lawyers argue that the amendment can’t be used to keep Trump off the ballot. They contend the Jan. 6 riot wasn’t an insurrection, and even if it was, Trump did not participate. The wording of the amendment also excludes the presidency and candidates running for president, they say. Even if they are wrong about all of that, they argue that Congress must pass legislation to reinvigorate Section 3.

The lawyers for Republican and independent voters who sued to remove Trump’s name from the Colorado ballot counter that there is ample evidence that the events of Jan. 6 constituted an insurrection and that Trump incited it. They say it would be absurd to apply Section 3 to everything but the presidency or that Trump is somehow exempt. And the provision needs no enabling legislation, they argue.

Probe on Biden’s handling of classified papers completed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department special counsel investigating President Joe Biden’s handling of classified documents has completed his inquiry and a report is expected to be released soon to Congress and the public, Attorney General Merrick Garland told lawmakers in a letter Wednesday.

Garland did not detail the conclusions of the report from special counsel Robert Hur, but said he was committed to disclosing as much of the document as possible once the White House completes a review for potential executive privilege concerns. That process is expected to be completed by the end of the week, said Ian Sams, a spokesman for the White House counsel’s office.

The yearlong investigation centered on the improper retention of classified documents by Biden from his time as a U.S. sen-

ator and as vice president. Biden is seeking reelection this year.

Though the probe’s outcome is expected to lift a legal cloud over Biden, criticism of his handling of classified records could blunt his ability to attack Donald Trump — his presumptive opponent in November — over a pending indictment charging the former president with hoarding top-secret files at his Mar-a-Lago estate and obstructing FBI efforts to get them back.

While the Trump investigation resulted in dozens of felony charges against the ex-president, the outcome of the Biden probe is expected to be different. Justice Department policy prohibits the indictment of a sitting president and, unlike in the Trump investigation, no evidence has emerged to suggest that Biden engaged in comparable conduct or willfully held onto records he wasn’t supposed to have.

After California mudslides, some need to steady nerves

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Jesus Barron answered his wife’s panicked phone call warning him that a mudslide was smashing into their bedroom in the hills of eastern Los Angeles County. Then, the line went dead.

“She called me and told me the mountain was coming down,” he recalled Wednesday. “I thought the worst.”

Wendy Barron escaped their Hacienda Heights home during Tuesday’s historic downpours in Southern California, but it was seriously damaged when mud flowed down the hillside and blasted through the two retaining walls the family built when they moved in seven years ago.

The storm fueled by the second of back-to-back atmospheric rivers to hit California in days came ashore last weekend in the state’s north before it moved down the

coast and parked itself over the south for days, turning roads into rivers, causing hundreds of landslides and killing at least nine people.

The final punch came Wednesday as heavy rain drenched the region. The forecast was for a potential dump of an additional 1 to 3 inches of rain in parts of Los Angeles and San Diego counties and snow and thunderstorms at higher elevations.

The Barrons’ home is too damaged for them to live in for the next few months, though the couple was able to retrieve some belongings. Now, they need to decide whether they want to return once it’s repaired.

“We love it here,” Jesus Barron said. “However, it wouldn’t be easy to go through this again.”

Atmospheric rivers also pummeled the state last year and caused at least 20 deaths.

Zelenskyy replaces top Ukrainian general

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's president replaced his top general Thursday in a shake-up aimed at reigniting momentum in the deadlocked war with Russia, which is grinding into its third year as the country grapples with shortages of ammunition and personnel and struggles to maintain support from the West.

After days of speculation that change was coming, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on social media that he was thankful for the service of the outgoing Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi — a military leader popular with troops and the general public. "The time for ... a renewal is

now," Zelenskyy said on X.

Zelenskyy appointed the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, to lead the army, which needs a morale boost at a time when the conflict with Russia has been at a near stalemate for months. Syrskyi, 58, has been involved since 2013 in the Ukrainian army's effort to adopt NATO standards.

Zaluzhnyi said in a Telegram message that "everyone must change and adapt to new realities" and he agreed there is a "need to change approaches and strategy" in the war.

Neither Zelenskyy nor Zaluzhnyi provided any detail about

what the new strategy might entail.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Zelenskyy, said Ukraine needed a rethink of its tactics, "which did not fully ensure proper results last year."

Ukraine needs to "prevent stagnation on the front line, which negatively affects public sentiment, to find new functional and high-tech solutions that will allow (Ukraine) to retain and develop the initiative," he said on X.

Ukraine's struggles with ammunition and personnel come on the heels of a failed counteroffensive last summer and as European allies try to bump up their military production. At the same

time, a political standoff in the United States is holding up further aid from Ukraine's main supplier.

Zelenskyy's announcement came as the Kremlin's forces have pushed harder to take the eastern Ukraine city of Avdiivka, throwing more troops into the four-month battle and bombarding Ukrainian defenses, as they stretch Kyiv's resources.

Before Thursday's announcement, local media had speculated for days that Zelenskyy would sack Zaluzhnyi. It is the most significant shake-up of military leadership since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022.

Israel strikes town in south where Gazans sought aid

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli airstrikes killed over a dozen people overnight and into Thursday in Rafah in the Gaza Strip, hours after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected Hamas' cease-fire terms and vowed to expand the offensive into the southern Gaza town.

More than half of the strip's population has fled to Rafah, on the mostly sealed border with Egypt, which is also the main entry point for humanitarian aid. Egypt has warned that any ground operation there or mass

displacement across the border would undermine its four-decade-old peace treaty with Israel.

The overnight strikes killed at least 13 people, including two women and five children, according to the Kuwaiti Hospital, which received the bodies. At the scene of one of the strikes, residents used their cellphone flashlights as they dug through the rubble with pick-axes and their bare hands.

Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken left the Middle East on Thursday with

public divisions between the United States and Israel at perhaps their worst level since Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza began in October.

Wrapping up a four-nation Mideast trip — his fifth to the region since the conflict erupted — Blinken was returning to Washington after getting a virtual slap in the face from Netanyahu, who said the war would continue until Israel is completely victorious and appeared to outright reject a response from Hamas to a proposed cease-fire plan.

Israel's 4-month-old air and ground offensive — among the most destructive in recent history — has killed over 27,000 Palestinians, driven most people from their homes and pushed a quarter of the population toward starvation.

Netanyahu has said the offensive will continue and expand until "total victory" over Hamas, which started the war by launching a wide-ranging attack into southern Israel on Oct. 7 in which militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took around 250 hostage.

FCC outlaws robocalls that have AI-generated voices

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Federal Communications Commission on Thursday outlawed robocalls that contain voices generated by artificial intelligence, a decision that sends a clear message that exploiting the technology to scam people and mislead voters won't be tolerated.

The unanimous ruling targets robocalls made with AI voice-cloning tools under the Tele-

phone Consumer Protection Act, a 1991 law restricting junk calls that use artificial and pre-recorded voice messages.

The announcement comes as New Hampshire authorities are advancing their investigation into AI-generated robocalls that mimicked President Joe Biden's voice to discourage people from voting in the state's first-in-the-nation primary last month.

Effective immediately, the

regulation empowers the FCC to fine companies that use AI voices in their calls or block the service providers that carry them. It also opens the door for call recipients to file lawsuits and gives state attorneys general a new mechanism to crack down on violators, according to the FCC.

The agency's chairwoman, Jessica Rosenworcel, said bad actors have been using AI-generated voices in robocalls to mis-

inform voters, impersonate celebrities and extort family members.

"It seems like something from the far-off future, but this threat is already here," Rosenworcel told The Associated Press on Wednesday as the commission was considering the regulations. "All of us could be on the receiving end of these faked calls, so that's why we felt the time to act was now."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Gun shop, former owner to pay \$3M in settlement

WA OLYMPIA — A suburban Seattle gun shop and its former owner will pay \$3 million for selling high-capacity ammunition magazines despite a state ban, the Washington attorney general said Tuesday.

Attorney General Bob Ferguson announced the settlement with Federal Way Discount Guns and Mohammed Baghai after a King County judge found last year that the store and former owner were in violation of Washington’s Consumer Protection Act.

The store and Baghai sold thousands of the magazines that can hold more than 10 rounds of ammunition, after the state law banning them went into effect in 2022, Ferguson has said.

Ferguson said the former owner kept selling them even after the state filed a lawsuit.

Authorities target 2 firms in probe of robocalls

NH CONCORD — Authorities issued cease-and-desist orders Tuesday against two Texas companies they believe were connected to robocalls that used artificial intelligence to mimic President Joe Biden’s voice and discourage people from voting in New Hampshire’s first-in-the-nation primary last month.

New Hampshire Attorney General John Formella said investigators have identified the source of the calls as Life Corp. and said they were transmitted by a company called Lingo Telecom. New Hampshire issued cease-and-desist orders and subpoenas to both companies,

Formella said.

Formella described the calls as the clearest and possibly first known attempt to use AI to interfere with an election in the U.S.

The recorded message was sent to between 5,000 and 25,000 voters two days before the Jan. 23 primary. It used a voice similar to Biden’s, employed his often-used phrase, “What a bunch of malarkey” and falsely suggested that voting in the primary would preclude voters from casting a ballot in November’s general election.

Listeria outbreak linked to cheese, dairy products

CA MODESTO — A California cheese and dairy company is the source of a decade-long outbreak of listeria food poisoning that killed two people and sickened more than two dozen, federal health officials said Tuesday.

New lab and inspection evidence linked soft cheeses and other dairy products made by Rizo-Lopez Foods of Modesto, Calif., to the outbreak, which was first detected in June 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Since then, at least 26 people in 11 states have been sickened. They include a person who died in California in 2017 and one who died in Texas in 2020, CDC officials said.

On Monday, the company recalled more than 60 soft cheeses, yogurt and sour cream sold under the brands Tio Francisco, Don Francisco, Rizo Bros, Rio Grande, Food City, El Huache, La Ordena, San Carlos, Campesino, Santa Maria, Dos Ranchitos, Casa Cardenas, and

365 Whole Foods Market.

New illnesses were reported in December, prompting CDC to reopen the investigation. The strain of listeria linked to the outbreak was found in a cheese sample from Rizo-Lopez Foods.

Zoo welcomes baby Hoffman’s two-toed sloth

FL WEST PALM BEACH — An adorable, furry baby Hoffman’s two-toed sloth has made its debut at zoo in Florida.

Zookeepers at the Palm Beach Zoo & Conservation Society have been monitoring the baby sloth and its mother, Wilbur, since witnessing the birth early in the morning of Jan. 23.

“This happened right in front of my eyes as we were on a 24-hour watch,” said Kelly Fad, the zoo’s general curator who also witnessed the birth. “The hanging mom literally scoops down and helps baby come up onto her body. She starts cleaning and the nursing started within just a couple of hours.”

Wilbur, who was the last sloth born at the Palm Beach Zoo 21 years ago, and her mate Dustin are part of a professional scientific breeding program called the Species Survival Plan.

Proposals intertwine religion, school

NE LINCOLN — Conservative lawmakers who want to intertwine religion with school curriculum in Republican-dominated Nebraska presented a slew of bills Monday to the state Legislature’s education committee.

The list includes a bill that would give parents more control over their local school’s li-

brary books and curriculum and another that would allow public school students to receive school credit for attending religious classes outside school.

Another measure would change school funding to loop in private school tuition while forbidding the state from interfering in private schools’ curriculum or beliefs.

Sen. Dave Murman, the conservative chairman of the Nebraska Legislature’s Education Committee, has revived his so-called parents rights bill that would make it easier for parents to object to curriculum and remove books from school libraries. Murman, a farmer from Glenvil, took over as chairman of the committee last year.

Panel advances bill to limit phone use in class

KY FRANKFORT — Kentucky lawmakers advanced a bill Tuesday aimed at ending cellphone distractions in classrooms.

The measure would require local school boards across the Bluegrass State to adopt a policy that, at a minimum, forbids students from using cellphones during instructional time.

“We can’t teach kids that are distracted,” said Republican Rep. Josh Bray, the bill’s lead sponsor.

Exceptions to the ban would include times of emergency or if a teacher allows cellphone use for instructional purposes. Disciplinary action for violating the ban would be decided by local school boards.

The bill cleared the House Education Committee with bipartisan support and now heads to the full House.

— From wire reports



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Super Bowl goes to Vegas for 1st time

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The first Super Bowl in Las Vegas has everything the imaginary NFL script writers could've wanted.

There's Patrick Mahomes and the underdog Kansas City Chiefs (14-6) aiming to become the first repeat champions in 19 years and trying to solidify their claim to a dynasty with a third Super Bowl title in five years.

There's Brock Purdy returning from a significant injury after rising from "Mr. Irrelevant" to now lead the San Francisco 49ers (14-5) to the brink of a record-tying sixth Super Bowl title that would etch his name alongside Pro Football Hall of Famers Joe Montana and Steve Young.

Of course, there's the glitz and glamour of America's showcase city and the irony of playing a Super Bowl in this gambling capital, an idea that

used to be taboo for the NFL.

Did we mention Taylor Swift yet?

Make room for the Grammy-winning superstar to jet into town just in time to see her boyfriend, Travis Kelce, try to win another ring. Swift is expected to fly in for Sunday's game at Allegiant Stadium from Japan after her concert on Saturday.

Kelce, the four-time All-Pro tight end, is focused on limiting the distractions despite fielding numerous questions this week about their relationship that has captivated millions and attracted a new audience of football fans.

"Show up every day thinking about the now and not too much the future," Kelce said. "Obviously, you gotta prepare for what's ahead but not harp on the past is the biggest thing ... I think we would never try and tie in what we did last year to

this year. Every single year is really its own journey."

For the Chiefs, nothing less than hoisting another Vince Lombardi trophy is acceptable, so they have the most pressure.

Mahomes, the two-time NFL and Super Bowl MVP, is already drawing comparisons to Tom Brady, who won seven Super Bowl rings. Brady won three in his first four seasons as a starter. Mahomes is going for No. 3 in his sixth season.

Even if he wins, it's too early to have the conversation.

"I'm not even close to halfway, so I haven't put a lot of thought into it," Mahomes said. "I mean, your goal is to be the best player that you can be. I know I'm blessed to be around a lot of great players. And so, right now, it's doing whatever I can to beat a great 49ers team and try to get that third ring. And then if you ask me that

question in 15 years, and I'll see if I can get close to seven. But seven seems like a long ways away still."

This is a rematch of the game the Chiefs won four years ago to give coach Andy Reid his first championship. Niners coach Kyle Shanahan has been close to winning twice before only to see his teams blow big leads.

He was Atlanta's offensive coordinator when Brady and the Patriots rallied from a 28-3 second-half deficit to win the Super Bowl in 2017. His 49ers team led the Chiefs 20-10 entering the fourth quarter only to watch Mahomes rally Kansas City to a 31-20 win in Miami in 2020.

"Both of them are heart-breaking," Shanahan said. "Those things last a while. But it's all about getting back there again, and that's what I'm excited for."

49ers All-Pro Williams savors first trip to big game

Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — Trent Williams' accomplishments are already worthy of a Hall of Fame career with 11 Pro Bowl bids, three first-team All-Pro selections and near universal recognition as the best left tackle of his generation.

All that was missing for the San Francisco 49ers star was something he never envisioned would be possible as he spent the first decade of his career mired in the dysfunction and ineptitude in Washington — the opportunity to play in the Super Bowl.

"This is the pinnacle," Williams said about playing the Kansas City Chiefs for a championship on Sunday.

"You work to get here. It's incredibly disheartening when you don't feel like you have a chance to be here. For the first

10 years of my career, this seemed like it would be out of reach. The way these last four years went for me, I'm super grateful."

Williams' career has been revitalized since he arrived in San Francisco in 2020, after sitting out the previous season in Washington. He was at odds with the organization when he refused to play because he said he distrusted the medical staff and front office because of a botched cancer diagnosis.

The Niners acquired Williams from Washington during the 2020 draft for a fifth-round pick and future third-rounder — a small price to pay for such a valuable player.

Williams shook off some rust his first year with the Niners before taking his game to even new heights starting in 2021 after signing a six-year, \$138.1 million contract in free agency

after nearly leaving for Kansas City.

"He's a different human being. He's a different player," San Francisco general manager John Lynch said. "I don't like talking about Hall of Fame-type stuff with players. But he's a guy I'm not shy doing that about because he'll be there and he should be there first ballot. Nothing would help to cement that more than a win in this game."

Williams has made a strong case for the Hall. He was picked as a first-team All-Pro the past three seasons, when he has allowed just two sacks on 1,663 pass-blocking snaps, according to Pro Football Focus.

He is also the key to San Francisco's running game, with the Niners averaging 5.9 yards per carry when they run to the left side.

"He might be the best player

I've ever seen," All-Pro running back Christian McCaffrey said. "When he's out there, he gives everybody a little boost of confidence."

At 35, Williams knows he's far closer to the end of his career than the beginning, but he's not quite ready to hang it up and retire.

He has three years left on his contract and the Niners are hoping he can finish this deal as the anchor to the team's offensive line.

"I don't even like to speculate on it," Williams said. "I'm not even worried about the expiration date at this point. I've been so blessed to this point to be 14 years in and still playing at a high level. The last thing I'm worrying about is how many I got left. I think I'm gonna approach it every year the same. And when I'm not the same, I know I can hang it up."

Virginia back to playing like contender

Associated Press

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — Some numbers still identify Virginia as one of the elite teams in college basketball, especially on the defensive end — long its calling card under coach Tony Bennett.

Except, that is, for the ones that put a Top 25 number before their names.

But in a season that certainly qualifies as a rebuilding one, the Cavaliers finally seem to be all on the same page, and are playing like a team to be reckoned with again.

Virginia (18-5, 9-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) has virtually lived in the top 10 for several years, but the two times they've played their way into the poll this year, they quickly followed with blowout losses, first 65-41 against No. 6 Wisconsin, then 77-54 at Memphis. Their five losses have come by an average of 20.8 points.

But things are getting better.

Their 60-38 victory over Miami on Monday was their seventh

in a row and 23rd straight at home, the longest active home winning streak in the nation. The Cavaliers improved to 114-2 when allowing 50 points or fewer in the Bennett era.

They hope to continue their resurgence on Saturday when they play at Florida State.

"I think we're improving. Still have a ways to go," Bennett said after a 65-53 victory over Notre Dame last week, which avenged a 76-54 loss in South Bend on Dec. 30. "Early, you could see, trying to find our identity. ... We just kept chipping away, simplifying some things on both ends and really demanding more, quite honestly. But also being more patient, if that makes sense."

The need for patience mostly came from having to incorporate an influx of transfers and freshmen after the program lost seven players following last season. Three of them, groomed for expanded roles this year, opted to transfer instead.

The losses could have been

harsher, but point guard Reece Beekman decided to return after testing the NBA waters, giving Bennett some much-needed leadership.

"That's kind of a reason I came back to school was to lead these guys and have another opportunity to have Virginia in the top of the standings," Beekman said. "It's still a long season. We've got much to improve, but I like how we're trending in the right direction."

The reigning ACC defensive player of the year, Beekman eclipsed 1,000 for his career when he scored 14 against Clemson on Saturday and leads the ACC in assists and steals.

A fellow starter, sophomore Isaac McKneely, ranks among leaders nationally in 3-point percentage (46.6) and arrived last year as West Virginia's Mr. Basketball with the benefit of having played a version of the Pack-Line defense in high school.

Learning the defense is essential at Virginia, and as trans-

fers Jordan Minor (Merri-mack), Jacob Groves (Oklahoma) and Andrew Rohde (St. Thomas, Minn.) have picked it up, it's made them bigger factors, greatly expanding Bennett's options.

"The sign of a good team, which they are, and a well-coached team, is they are starting to hit their stride right now," Irish coach Micah Shrewsberry said.

Perhaps the clearest sign that things are coming together is that only two of the Cavaliers' last eight opponents have reached 60 points. They haven't finished lower than sixth in scoring defense nationally in the past 13 seasons — they've been first six times — and rank among the leaders in field goal percentage defense, too.

The benefits come at both ends.

"Why we've been a better team as of late is we've been better defensively," Bennett said. "And I think that helps a lot of things. We've just simplified."

Dominoes of coaching changes affect Signing Day

Associated Press

College football's busy recruiting calendar created a particularly hectic first few weeks on the job for all the head coaches who switched schools over the last month.

When Nick Saban announced his retirement last month, it set off a chain reaction that resulted in head coaching changes at Arizona, Washington and San Jose State as well as Alabama. That doesn't even factor in Jim Harbaugh leaving Michigan for the NFL's Los Angeles Chargers or Jeff Hafley exiting Boston College to become the Green Bay Packers' defensive coordinator.

All those late coaching moves added some intrigue to the first Wednesday of February, a day that once highlighted the

recruiting calendar but has been anti-climactic ever since the 2017 launch of a December signing period. New coaches had to re-recruit prospects who had signed to play for a different staff and now were free to look elsewhere.

Washington coach Jedd Fisch, who was hired away from Arizona last month, was giving his Signing Day news conference at his new school Wednesday when he described the varied challenges he faced the last few weeks in keeping a roster together.

"You've got the group that wants to get to know you because they've committed to you, but they're in the portal to go look somewhere else," Fisch said. "Then you've got the next

group that has signed with you, but they want to consider getting out of their national letter of intent because they chose a different staff. And then you have your own team who you have to figure out the guys who aren't in the portal to make sure they don't go in it."

Kalen DeBoer, who preceded Fisch as Washington's coach before deciding to replace Saban at Alabama, faced similar obstacles. So did Brent Brennan, who left San Jose State to take over for Fisch at Arizona.

The game of musical chairs between coaches carried over to the recruiting world.

Alabama announced on Wednesday the addition of edge rusher Noah Carter, who had signed with Washington in De-

cember but will now follow DeBoer to Tuscaloosa. Other players who had signed with the Huskies or committed to them but altered their plans after the coaching change included defensive linemen Ratumana Bulabalavu (who chose Southern California) and Dominic Kirks (Ohio State) as well as edge rusher Keona Wilhite (Nebraska).

Washington refortified its class by adding several players who originally had signed to play for Fisch at Arizona.

Alabama had its own recruiting issues after Saban's departure.

Julian Sayin, the nation's No. 1 quarterback and No. 6 overall prospect was along those to depart.

Embiid's injury opens door for NBA MVP

Associated Press

DENVER — The NBA MVP race just became a little more wide open now that Joel Embiid's chances at a repeat have ended.

The Philadelphia 76ers big man was the odds-on favorite at the midway mark of the season, before the announcement that he would need surgery to repair the lateral meniscus in his left knee.

Embiid had surgery Tuesday. The Sixers did not release any kind of timetable on his return. There's still a chance he could return for the postseason — there's just no chance he can extend his MVP reign given the league's new rules on minimum games necessary to be eligible for awards.

Nikola Jokic, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Giannis Antetokounmpo slide into the MVP driver's seat.

Jokic, in particular, has the inside track to earn a third MVP title in four seasons for the defending champion Denver Nuggets. Close behind is Gilgeous-Alexander, the rising standout for Oklahoma City, and never count out the "Greek Freak."

Really, though, this could end up being the year of the dark horse as someone not named Embiid, Jokic or Antetokounmpo attempts to claim the NBA MVP trophy for the first time

since 2017-18.

The odds favor Jokic, improving to minus-150 according to FanDuel Sportsbook. Gilgeous-Alexander is at plus-230 and Antetokounmpo, a two-time MVP winner, checks in at plus-650.

There are a few long shots to keep an eye on, including Jalen Brunson. His MVP stock continues to rise as the New York Knicks remain near the top of the Eastern Conference despite missing Julius Randle. Don't forget about Kawhi Leonard, either, a catalyst for the resurgent Los Angeles Clippers. Or Dallas standout guard Luka Doncic, who erupted for 73 points on Jan. 26 — the top mark this season (Embiid had 70 four days prior). Or Boston do-everything forward Jayson Tatum. Or even Anthony Edwards, who's at plus-50,000 to win an MVP as he's guided the Minnesota Timberwolves to a tie for the top spot of the Western Conference with the Thunder.

The misfortune of Embiid has opened the door not only for the MVP race, but criticism about the game-minimum standards that went into effect this season to discourage what's become known as "load management" (resting healthy players). The new collective bargaining agreement requires players, in most instances, to play in 65 regular-season games to be eligible for

awards such as MVP or the All-NBA teams.

It's a slippery slope.

Embiid hurt his left knee last week in a loss to the Golden State Warriors. But he had already been bothered by knee injuries this season that cost him considerable playing time. He sat out the game in Denver and another in Portland before suffering an injury that requires surgery.

"Health is something that we just cannot take for granted," said Monica McNutt, an NBA, WNBA and college basketball analyst for ESPN. "I was even at the point of like, 'OK, well, if (Embiid) misses MVP, he's already been able to accomplish that.' You just want him healthy in the postseason. ... I mean, our league is at its best when the stars are available and doing what they do best brightly on the biggest stages."

Jokic has been doing that for quite some time, and is soaring again this season in averaging 26.3 points per game, 12.2 rebounds and nine assists. Those are stats right in line with what he posted in his MVP seasons of 2020-21 and '21-22.

"He's the best passer I have ever seen in any position," said Trail Blazers coach Chauncey Billups, who won a title with the Detroit Pistons in 2004. "He's really unique. There's just nothing

like it. He brings the ball up the floor and he just does it all. He puts you in a lot of tough spots defensively."

No argument from Jokic's coach, Michael Malone, who's seen his versatile center record 15 triple-doubles this season. Jokic also was the NBA Finals MVP last season as the Nuggets won their first title.

"Just his ability to be great for himself, but more importantly, his ability to make everyone around him better," Malone said. "That truly is the definition of greatness."

"We have been spoiled, I'm sure. Some of us do find ourselves maybe taking it for granted. But just remind yourself that there are not many guys like Nikola Jokic that walk through those doors and appreciate every opportunity that you have to watch him play."

There's some great basketball being played in Oklahoma City by Gilgeous-Alexander, too. The sixth-year player just keeps improving and leads the league in overall points, steals and free throws this season.

Antetokounmpo stays in the MVP conversation season after season after season. He's been flourishing in a new system and averaging 34.3 points in four games since Doc Rivers took over as coach.

Source: 76ers acquire Hield in trade with Pacers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The slumping Philadelphia 76ers have acquired guard Buddy Hield from the Indiana Pacers for Marcus Morris Jr., Furkan Korkmaz and three second-round draft picks, a person familiar with the decision told The Associated Press on Thursday.

The Sixers also sent Daniel House as well as a 2024 second-round pick to the Detroit Pistons, the person said. The House trade creates \$4.3 million in cap space as part of the traded player exception. The trades have opened salary cap and roster space for Philadelphia to pursue a player

on the buyout market.

The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the trades were not yet official.

Sixers president Daryl Morey made the moves hours ahead of the NBA trade deadline with the Sixers tumbling down the East standings without injured All-Star Joel Embiid.

The 76ers are 4-12 without Embiid and will be without the reigning MVP for at least a month — if not much longer — following knee surgery this week.

Hield will earn \$19.2 million this season in the final year of a four-year contract. He av-

eraged just 12 points this year in 52 games with the Pacers. He is a career 40% 3-point shooter. Hield made just 28 starts this year, but should see an expanded role on a Sixers team hit hard by injuries and illness.

Indiana's desire to move Hield was not much of a surprise. Hield, who finished sixth in the league with 3.6 3s per game last season, had been the subject of trade rumors since last year's trade deadline. An expiring contract and his ability to score made him a likely addition for a team trying to make a deep playoff run — which the 76ers still believe they can do if Embiid is healthy and can return in time for the playoffs.