

## Senate passes Ukraine, Israel aid bill

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Tuesday approved a long-languishing foreign aid package for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, sending the \$95 billion bill to an uncertain fate in the House as Republicans vowed to quash the legislation.

Senators voted 70-29 in favor of the bill, with a coalition of Republicans breaking with their party to support giving \$60 billion to Ukraine to fend off Russian invaders, \$14 billion to Israel for its war in the Gaza Strip and nearly \$5 billion to Taiwan and other partners in the Indo-Pacific region to deter China.

“These are the enormously high stakes of the supplemental package: our security, our values, our democracy,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. “It is a down payment for the survival of Western democracy and the survival of American values.”

Opponents of the bill spoke on the Senate floor overnight to postpone passage of the legislation, pushing a final vote to about 5 a.m.

The aid had already been delayed for months after Senate Republicans forced Democrats to pair foreign assistance with

measures to curb migration at the U.S.-Mexico border. The resulting bipartisan deal collapsed last week under pressure from former President Donald Trump, who urged Republicans to reject it.

Some Republicans who voted against the deal on border security said they would also not vote for a standalone foreign aid package without a crackdown on immigration.

“I have been saying for months that helping Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan are extremely important national security imperatives for the United States,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. “However, as I have been consistently saying, we must deal with our border first. The border is a national security nightmare.”

He proposed giving the aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan as loans “as suggested by President Trump,” the Republican Party’s presumptive nominee for president.

Much of the bill allocates funds to be spent on replenishing weapons already sent to those countries and purchasing additional equipment from U.S. companies.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said Monday night that he would not put the foreign aid legislation to a vote without immigration provisions.

He indicated the House would continue

“its own work” on the issue.

“The Senate did the right thing last week by rejecting the Ukraine-Taiwan-Gaza-Israel-Immigration legislation due to its insufficient border provisions and it should have gone back to the drawing board to amend the current bill to include real border security provisions that would actually help end the ongoing catastrophe,” he said.

The Senate’s original bill, negotiated by Democrats and Republicans, would have restricted asylum laws, increased detention capacity and accelerated deportations. It was endorsed by a union representing more than 18,000 border agents.

The House narrowly passed its own immigration bill last year to resume construction of a border wall initiated by Trump, increase funding for border agents and border technology and place new restrictions on asylum seekers. The Senate refused to take up the measure and the White House threatened to veto it.

The political standoff over immigration has left Ukraine with diminished weapons and resources as Russia presses an offensive to capture more Ukrainian territory. The U.S. last announced new military aid for Ukrainian forces at the end of December.

## Cease-fire progress is touted as Israel attacks Rafah

*Associated Press*

CAIRO — Israel and Hamas are making progress toward another cease-fire and hostage-release deal, officials said Tuesday, as negotiations went on and Israel threatened to expand its offensive to Gaza’s southern edge, where some 1.4 million Palestinians have sought refuge.

The talks continued in Egypt a day after Israeli forces rescued two captives in Rafah, the packed southern town along the Egyptian border, in a raid that killed at least 74 Palestinians, according to local health officials, and caused heavy destruction. The operation of-

fered a glimpse of what a full-blown ground advance might look like.

A cease-fire deal, on the other hand, would give people in Gaza a desperately needed respite from the war, now in its fifth month, and offer freedom for at least some of the estimated 100 people still held captive in Gaza. Qatar, the United States and Egypt have sought to broker a deal in the face of starkly disparate positions expressed publicly by both Israel and Hamas.

Israel has made destroying Hamas’ governing and military capabilities and freeing the host-

ages the main goals of its war, which was launched after thousands of Hamas-led militants rampaged through southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking roughly 250 people captive. Tens of thousands of Israelis were displaced from destroyed communities.

The war has brought unprecedented destruction to the Gaza Strip, with more than 28,000 people killed, more than 70% of them women and children, according to local health officials. Vast swaths of the territory have been flattened by Israel’s offensive,

with about 80% of the population displaced and a humanitarian catastrophe has pushed more than a quarter of the population toward starvation.

In other developments, South Africa, which has lodged genocide allegations against Israel at the International Court of Justice, said Tuesday that it filed an “urgent request” with the court to consider whether Israel’s military operations in Rafah constitute a breach of provisional orders handed down by the justices last month. Those orders called on Israel to take greater measures to spare civilians.

# Training preceded Manila's call-out of China

By ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. and Philippine warships trained together in the South China Sea on Friday, two days before Manila accused Beijing of dangerous maneuvers by vessels there.

The littoral combat ship USS Gabrielle Giffords joined the Philippine patrol vessel BRP Gregorio Del Pilar for drills in communication, coordination and tactics, 7th Fleet spokeswoman Lt. Kristina Wiedemann told Stars and Stripes by email Tuesday.

The exercise — what the Navy calls a Maritime Cooperative Activity — was the third of its kind, the 7th Fleet said in a Friday

news release.

“The MCA has become a routine activity for both militaries to continuously enhance interoperability through the conduct of maritime security and maritime domain awareness operations,” Wiedemann said.

Interoperability is a military term used to describe the ability of a country's armed forces to use another's training methods and military equipment.

The two ships, along with MH-60S Seahawk and Philippine AW109 helicopters, drilled division-level tactics, said Wiedemann, who did not specify an exact location for the training.

Beijing claims nearly all the South China Sea as its territorial

waters, and the region often plays a part in China's attempts to assert its claims against other claimants, including the Philippines.

On Sunday, the Philippine coast guard accused Chinese vessels of dangerous maneuvers near Scarborough Shoal, according to a Monday report from AFP-JIJI.

The shoal, a low-tide feature occupied by a Philippine garrison, has remained a point of tension between the two nations. Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels squared off in 2023 over access to the shoal.

The Philippine coast guard said Chinese vessels performed “dangerous and blocking ma-

neuvres” toward a Philippine patrol ship and later shadowed that vessel more than 40 times over a nine-day patrol, the report said.

Friday's exercise happened a day after the Gabrielle Giffords and the guided-missile destroyer USS John Finn joined the Japanese destroyer JS Sazanami and the Australian frigate HMAS Warramunga for two days of drills, also in the South China Sea.

The two exercises were not related, Wiedemann said.

“Every day, U.S. Navy forces operate with allies and partners, defending the rules-based international order and ensuring the Indo-Pacific remains free and open for all,” she said.

## Austin undergoes ‘non-surgical procedures’ at Walter Reed

*The Washington Post*

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin underwent new medical procedures under general anesthesia on Monday to address a bladder problem that landed him back in the hospital over the weekend, the Pentagon said, as officials forecast he would resume his job duties soon.

Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary, told reporters that doctors had performed “non-surgical procedures” on Austin, 70, related to an “emergent bladder issue.”

Ryder declined to provide more information about what was entailed or what symptoms the defense chief had experienced before returning to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., on Sunday, his third admission there since having surgery to treat prostate cancer in late December.

In an update shared by the Pentagon, physicians John Maddox and Gregory Chesnut said they would monitor Austin closely

overnight. They described his cancer prognosis as “excellent” but did not say what caused the bladder problem.

“We anticipate a successful recovery,” they said.

Ryder, speaking at the Pentagon, said Austin was expected to remain in intensive care for the duration of his stay at Walter Reed, but did not say how long that would last.

Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks has been serving as acting defense secretary since Sunday afternoon. Ryder said Austin was expected to resume those duties on Tuesday.

The former Army general was criticized after news broke in early January that he had initially failed to notify the public, many of his top Pentagon aides and even the White House about his prostate cancer diagnosis, a subsequent prostatectomy and a later hospitalization for related complications that were severe enough to warrant a two-week stay at Walter Reed.

## Deployable voting machine prototype using CAC shown

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The prototype of a deployable voting machine unveiled last week could one day allow service members around the world to transmit a signed, encrypted digital ballot to their home precinct for tallying on Election Day.

The machine was presented during the National Association of Secretaries of State and the National Association of State Election Directors conference in Washington, D.C., according to a Defense Department news release Monday.

The prototype was developed as part of a research project funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency that seeks methods to make voting easier for troops stationed away from their districts.

The team hopes to conduct a pilot program from the prototype as early as next year.

“Compared to the civilian population, a lower percentage of ac-

tive duty military have voted in recent federal elections,” the Federal Voting Assistance Program states on its website. Among the problems that impede service members from voting is the speed at which voters receive and transmit election materials, such as voter registration forms, ballot requests or the ballots themselves, the website states.

Researchers from VotingWorks, a nonprofit election technology company, displayed the early-stage prototype at the conference on Wednesday. The research team developed the prototype with several goals in mind. It wants military voters to be able to cast privacy-protected ballots, receive paper ballots for verifiability and have their vote counted as part of election-night results.

The prototype voting machine relies on the Common Access Card that is issued to each military member and includes digital-signature capability for authentication.

# US inflation slows as prices gradually come under control

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Annual inflation in the United States cooled last month yet remained elevated in the latest sign that the pandemic-fueled price surge is only gradually and fitfully coming under control.

Tuesday's report from the Labor Department showed that the consumer price index rose 0.3% from December to January, up from a 0.2% increase the previous month. Compared with a year ago, prices are up 3.1%.

That is less than the 3.4% figure in December and far below the 9.1% inflation peak in mid-2022. Yet the latest reading is still well above the Federal Reserve's 2% target level at a time when public frustration with inflation has become a pivotal issue in President Joe Biden's bid for re-election.

Excluding the volatile food and energy categories, so-called core prices climbed 0.4% last

month, up from 0.3% in December and 3.9% over the past 12 months. Core inflation is watched especially closely because it typically provides a better read of where inflation is likely headed. The annual figure is the same as it was in December.

Biden administration officials note that inflation has plummeted since pandemic-related supply disruptions and significant government aid sent it soaring three years ago. And a raft of forward-looking data suggests that inflation will continue to cool. Still, even as it nears the Fed's target level, many Americans remain exasperated that average prices are still about 19% higher than they were when Biden took office.

The mixed data released Tuesday could reinforce the caution of Fed officials, who have said they're pleased with the progress in sharply reducing inflation but want to see fur-

ther evidence before feeling confident that it's sustainably headed back to their 2% target. Most economists think the central bank will want to wait until May or June to begin cutting its benchmark rate from its 22-year-high of roughly 5.4.

The Fed raised its key rate 11 times, from March 2022 to July of last year, in a concerted drive to defeat high inflation. The result has been much higher borrowing rates for businesses and consumers, including for mortgages and auto loans. Rate cuts, whenever they happen, would eventually lead to lower borrowing costs for many categories of loans.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell noted during a recent news conference that most of the decline in inflation so far has stemmed from lower prices for goods, including used cars, furniture and appliances, which have dropped in six of the past seven months.

# Biden forms task force to avoid docs mishandling

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Monday launched a task force aimed at addressing the "systemic" problem of mishandling classified information during presidential transitions, days after a Justice Department special counsel's sharply critical report said he had done just that.

The Presidential Records Transition Task Force will study past transitions to determine best practices for safeguarding classified information from an outgoing administration, the White House said.

It will also assess the need for changes to existing policies and procedures to prevent the removal of sensitive information that by law should be kept with the National Archives and Records Administration.

The report from special counsel Robert Hur listed dozens of sensitive documents found at Biden's home in Wilmington, Del., and at his former Washington office.

The papers were marked as classified or later assessed to contain classified information.

The majority of the documents, Hur's report stated, appeared to have been mistakenly removed from government offices, though he also detailed some items that Biden appeared to knowingly retain. He concluded that criminal charges were not warranted in the matter.

"I take responsibility for not having seen exactly what my staff was doing," Biden said last week after Hur's report was released.

He added that "things that appeared in my garage, things that came out of my home, things that were moved were moved not by me but my staff."

# Trump wants to install new RNC leadership including daughter-in-law

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump wants a leadership change at the Republican National Committee in an attempt to install a new slate of loyalists — including his daughter-in-law — atop the GOP's political machine even before the former president formally secures the party's next presidential nomination. Current RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel says she has no plans to leave the committee until at least after South Carolina's Feb. 24 primary election.

Still, Trump on Monday night called for McDaniel to be replaced by Michael Whatley, the North Carolina GOP chairman.

The new co-chair, Trump said, should be his daughter-in-law Lara Trump.

Trump's move to push out McDaniel — days after the two met at his Mar-a-Lago residence and agreed to delay a decision on her future — reflects his urgency to force Republicans to unite behind him in a likely rematch against President Joe Biden. While Trump has not come close to gathering sufficient delegates to secure the nomination, he is eying a potential knockout blow against Nikki Haley, his last major primary rival, in her home state of South Carolina next week.

Central to Trump's demands

are his false theories of voter fraud. Trump has long complained that the RNC is not focused enough on preventing voter fraud, which he continues to falsely insist cost him the 2020 election, even though his own election officials, Justice Department and numerous courts found no evidence to support his claims.

Trump, in his statement, noted Whatley is "committed to election integrity, which we must have to keep fraud out of our election so it can't be stolen."

RNC spokesman Keith Schipper said McDaniel had no immediate plans to step down.

# Woman pleads guilty in US tech scheme to assist Russia in war

BY ALEXANDER RIEDEL  
*Stars and Stripes*

A Canadian woman who talked of getting rich from a scheme to funnel millions of dollars of electronics to Russia for its war in Ukraine is instead facing up to 20 years in prison, according to federal authorities.

Kristina Puzyreva, of Montreal, pleaded guilty Monday in federal court in New York to money laundering conspiracy, a Justice Department statement said. She had been charged with wire fraud and conspiring to violate U.S. sanctions.

“The defendant was a necessary player in a scheme to evade export controls and sanctions,” Breon Peace, a federal attorney in Brooklyn, said in the statement. “Without the defendant laundering the proceeds ... the export scheme would not have worked.”

Together with her husband, Nikolay Goltsev, and New York resident Salimdzhon Nasriddinov, Puzyreva supplied \$7 million in dual-use electronic components to the Russian military, prosecutors said.

Goltsev and Nasriddinov were also indicted in the scheme, which began in 2022, and their prosecution is pending, the Justice Department said Monday.

The components were later found in helicopters, missiles, tanks and other Russian weapons and signal intelligence equipment used in Ukraine, according to a DOJ statement in November.

The three defendants worked with contacts at electronics companies that supply components to the Russian

military and created multiple accounts to evade sanctions and ship parts used in drones, guided missile systems and other weapons, according to U.S. investigators.

They received orders from Russian entities and then used two front companies registered in Brooklyn to unlawfully purchase American electronic parts for the Russian military over several years.

Over two years, Puzyreva and Goltsev were directly linked to 298 shipments of restricted technology valued at \$7 million, the DOJ statement Monday said.

Puzyreva conducted transactions via Simatech Group, an electronics firm in Montreal that acquired dual-use technology, electronics and mechanical parts for both civilian and military applications, prosecutors said.

The couple then shipped the parts through intermediaries in Turkey, Hong Kong, India, China and the United Arab Emirates for rerouting to Russia, according to the Justice Department.

They also made several trips to New York to meet with Nasriddinov and, during these visits, Puzyreva used various bank accounts that showed large, structured cash deposits, which were transferred to the couple's accounts in Canada, the DOJ said.

Approximately \$1.7 million was seized by authorities in connection with the export scheme, including \$20,000 in cash from the Manhattan hotel room where the couple was arrested in late October, the Justice Department said.

Puzyreva's sentencing date hasn't been set.

# Russia, West clash over Ukraine at UN meeting

*Associated Press*

UNITED NATIONS—Russia accused the West on Monday of sabotaging agreements that would have prevented the war in Ukraine—but the United States and its allies put the blame squarely on Moscow, saying there is no escaping that President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of its smaller neighbor.

Days before the second anniversary of Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, 2022, Russia's U.N. Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia again put the cause of the war down to the failure to implement the 2015 Minsk agreements, which he blamed on “Kyiv's sabotage” supported by the West.

The agreements aimed to resolve the conflict between Ukraine and Russia-backed separatists that flared in April 2014 after Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for the separatists in the mostly Russian-speaking industrial east called Donbas.

At Monday's Security Council meeting that Russia called on the seventh anniversary of the signing of the Minsk peace plan brokered by France and Germa-

ny, Nebenzia called claims by Ukraine and Western nations that Russia refused to implement the agreements “absolutely baseless.”

Had the Minsk agreements been implemented, Nebenzia said, “the tragedy that has taken place in Ukraine today would not have happened, a tragedy in which the U.S. and the collective West are complicit as they try to achieve their geopolitical aims at the cost of Ukraine and the lives of its citizens.”

U.S. deputy ambassador Robert Wood accused Russia of putting forward “significant myths and disinformation” in its efforts to rewrite history after it invaded a sovereign nation in violation of the U.N. Charter.

“Moscow has called us together today to lament the very violence it began, fueled and it continues to perpetrate daily,” he said.

Britain's deputy U.N. ambassador James Kariuki said Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed the world that Putin “was never interested in peace.”

He accused Russia of using the council meeting “in another attempt to distort history.”

# Russia puts Estonia PM on wanted list over monuments

*Associated Press*

TALLINN, Estonia — Estonia's prime minister has been put on a wanted list in Russia because of her efforts to remove Soviet-era World War II monuments in the Baltic nation, officials said Tuesday as tensions between Russia and the West soar amid the war in Ukraine.

The name of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas appeared on the Russian Interior Ministry's list of people wanted on unspecified criminal charges, although it was unclear when she was added, according to Mediazona, an

independent Russian news outlet.

The list includes scores of officials and lawmakers from other Baltic nations.

The move was related to her efforts to remove World War II monuments, other Russian officials said. There was no immediate reaction from Estonian authorities.

Estonia and fellow NATO members Latvia and Lithuania have pulled down monuments that are widely seen as an unwanted legacy of the Soviet occupation of those countries.

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Migrant shelter curfews up after violent incidents**

**NY** NEW YORK — New York is expanding a curfew to additional migrant shelters after violent incidents attributed to migrant shelter residents gained national attention in recent weeks.

Mayor Eric Adams' administration will impose an 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew at 20 migrant shelters starting Monday, after initially placing the restrictions at four other locations, spokesperson Kayla Mamelak said Sunday.

The curfew impacts about 3,600 migrants, with the largest of the emergency centers housing nearly 1,000 migrants in Long Island City, Queens, according to a listing provided by the mayor's office.

City officials initially placed a curfew on four shelters last month in response to neighborhood complaints.

Mamelak said the curfews are in line with restrictions already in place at NYC's traditional homeless shelters and allow for "more efficient capacity management" of migrants in the city's care.

**Late Bush's speedboat set to go up for auction**

**ME** KENNEBUNKPORT — It seems former President George H.W. Bush felt the need for speed in the waters off Maine, where he kept a nearly 1,000 horsepower speedboat. And for the right price, someone else can experience its excitement.

The vessel is set to go up for auction on Thursday during the 2024 Presidential Salute auction

in Houston, said Hutton Higgins, a spokesperson for the George & Barbara Bush Foundation.

Proceeds from selling the 38-foot speedboat "Fidelity V" will be used to expand offerings at the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum and The Bush School of Government & Public Service at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas.

Bush purchased the 2011-model Fountain 38CC after both he and his son, former President George W. Bush, had left office.

**Church pastor allegedly sold meth out of rectory**

**CT** WOODBURY — A Connecticut pastor has been arrested on allegations that he sold crystal meth out of his church's rectory, police said.

The reverend of a United Methodist Church in Woodbury was taken into custody Friday after police received a tip about the drugs, authorities said.

The pastor was charged with possession of narcotics with intent to sell, possession of a controlled substance and use of drug paraphernalia, among other charges.

State police said in a news release that the pastor was found in possession of crystal methamphetamine in both rock form and that had been liquefied into a hypodermic needle.

**Guilty plea over wildfire caused by gender reveal**

**CA** SAN BERNARDINO — A man whose family's gender reveal photo shoot sparked a Southern California wildfire that killed a firefighter

in 2020 has pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter, prosecutors said Friday.

The El Dorado Fire erupted on Sept. 5, 2020, when Refugio Jimenez Jr. and Angelina Jimenez and their young children staged a photo shoot for their baby gender reveal at El Dorado Ranch Park in Yucaipa, at the foot of the San Bernardino Mountains.

A smoke-generating pyrotechnic device was set off in a field and quickly ignited dry grass on a scorching day. The couple frantically tried to use bottled water to douse the flames and called 911, authorities said.

On Friday, the San Bernardino County district attorney announced that Refugio Jimenez Jr. had pleaded guilty to one count of involuntary manslaughter and two counts of recklessly causing a fire to an inhabited structure. He will be taken into custody on Feb. 23 to serve a year in jail. His sentence also includes two years of felony probation and 200 hours of community service.

Angelina Jimenez pleaded guilty to three misdemeanor counts of recklessly causing fire to property of another. She was sentenced to a year of summary probation and 400 hours of community service. The couple was also ordered to pay \$1,789,972 in restitution.

**Mummified monkeys found stored in luggage**

**MA** BOSTON — A U.S. Customs and Border Protection dog sniffed out something unusual in luggage from a traveler returning from Africa — mummified monkeys.

The passenger returning from a visit to the Democratic Repu-

blic of Congo reported that the luggage contained dried fish, but an inspection at Boston Logan Airport revealed dead and dehydrated bodies of four monkeys, agents said. The traveler said he brought the monkeys into the United States for his own consumption, Ryan Bisette, a CBP spokesperson, said Sunday.

The incident happened last month but was made public on Friday.

Bisette said Sunday that no charges were filed but all of the luggage was seized and the nearly 9 pounds of meat were marked for destruction by U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**Officials probe killing of desert bighorn sheep**

**AZ** GILA BEND — State wildlife officials are investigating the illegal killing of a desert bighorn sheep in southwest Arizona and teaming up with local hunting and conservation groups to post a \$6,500 reward for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of anyone responsible.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department said Friday that the carcass of the adult ram was found not far from a farm field near Gila Bend, about 70 miles southwest of Phoenix. It had apparently been shot and left for dead around the weekend of Jan. 13, investigators said.

The Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society, Arizona Deer Association and Arizona Antelope Foundation are contributing a combined \$6,000 to the reward and the state department's Operation Game Thief another \$500, authorities said.

— From wire reports



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# Ovechkin seems to be finding his groove

Associated Press

Maybe all it took was riding a camel for Alex Ovechkin to get over the hump after a rough first half of the NHL season.

Fresh off a family trip to Dubai during the Washington Capitals' bye week and the All-Star break, Ovechkin has scored in all four games to extend his streak to five, his longest in nearly three years. After just eight goals through his first 43 games, the Russian superstar, captain and face of the franchise has heated up just in time to revive the possibility of breaking Wayne Gretzky's career record that long seemed unapproachable.

Ovechkin now has 13 goals this season to give him 835 — 60 back of passing Gretzky.

"Certainly not surprised by it," said Vancouver defenseman Ian Cole, who has played dozens of games trying to contain Ovechkin over the past decade. "He is the gold standard for goal scoring in NHL history, in my mind. Obviously Wayne Gretzky, he's the 'Great One,' he's the best, but what Ovi's done in the time period that he's played is absolutely remarkable. ...

"His ability to continue to be a force in this league in more

than one sense, but certainly the goal-scoring one, is amazing. His longevity, it's incredible."

Now 38, Ovechkin is back to producing like previous years. Last spring, he became the first player in NHL history to record 40 goals in a season 13 times and was scoring in his mid- and late-30s like no one since Phil Esposito in the 1970s.

"He's playing at a real high level," coach Spencer Carbery said. "I feel like he's even skating a little bit more. I feel like there's a little bit more jump in his step."

Some of that jump seemed to be lacking before the break. As other elite athletes have found out, time remains undefeated, and hockey players rarely age gracefully.

With production not easy to come by from team-wide, the Capitals averaged just 2.3 goals through 46 games — the third-lowest in the league. Since Ovechkin's goal streak started, they're scoring 3.6 a game.

"It's a positive, positive step because we need him," Carbery said. "These are positive things, and you can feel him gaining more confidence as each one goes in and as he gets on a little bit of a roll."

After an attempted pass from Ovechkin to him ended in a goal Sunday, longtime teammate T.J. Oshie smiled and said, "It's nice to see the big man rolling." He then pointed out that this run isn't about good fortune as much as Ovechkin playing a well-rounded style and reaping the benefits on the scoresheet.

"He's also doing a lot of little things that I think are helping us out defensively that are leading to offense and odd-man rushes," Oshie said. "He's coming back in the D-zone and stopping in a good area. It just sets our team up for success when all five guys are doing that. It's honestly the stuff he's doing away from the puck that letting his natural, phenomenal ability take over and start putting some points on the board."

Ovechkin, who last season passed Gordie Howe for second on the career NHL goals list, said "it's a good thing" when he can put the puck in the net. That's happening a lot, as this is his first five-game goal streak since March 2021.

The rest is just playing smart hockey.

"I try to do my job and just play the right style of game and be out there and help the team to win," Ovechkin said.

Even with Ovechkin scoring, the Capitals are scuffling. Facing a brutal post-All-Star-break schedule — including games against the league's current top four teams — they've lost six of seven and could become sellers ahead of the March 8 trade deadline.

But the return of vintage Ovechkin has provided some hope of going on a run and contending for a return to the playoffs.

"He's hot right now," goaltender Darcy Kuemper said. "We know he scores goals. To have him on the streak he's on is really helping us. We're all happy to see it."

Perhaps it's all thanks to Ovechkin going from the ice to the desert during the break. Carbery sure thinks that's possible.

"Traditionally, he's played well in the second half of seasons," the first-year coach said. "This is no different for him to get a mental (break) away from the game, not think about the NHL, not think about the Washington Capitals, not think about hockey and be able come back refreshed and ready for the stretch run, and that looks like right now exactly what's taking place."

## Shesterkin makes 30 saves as Rangers blank Flames

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The New York Rangers needed a top-flight performance from their starting goalie and Igor Shesterkin gave them one from start to finish against the Calgary Flames.

Shesterkin stopped 30 shots for his first shutout of the season and the Rangers beat the Flames 2-0 on Monday night for their fifth straight win.

Will Cuyllé and Jimmy Vesey scored for the first-place Rangers, who are 6-1-1 in their last eight games. Shesterkin

recorded his 12th career shutout and second straight win to improve to 21-12-1 on the season.

Jacob Markstrom finished with 29 saves as the Flames had a four-game winning streak snapped.

**Flyers 5, Coyotes 3:** Travis Konecny had a goal and two assists, Scott Laughton added a goal and an assist and host Philadelphia rallied to beat Arizona for its fourth straight win.

Matt Dumba, Matias Maccelli and Alex Kerfoot scored for Arizona, which has lost six in a

row, including three straight since the All-Star break. The Coyotes' last win came on Jan. 22. Karel Vejmelka finished with 29 saves.

**Devils 3, Kraken 1:** All-Star Jack Hughes had a goal and an assist for his first points since being injured in early January, Nico Daws made 27 saves and host New Jersey handed Seattle its third straight loss.

Tyler Toffoli and Dawson Mercer also scored as the Devils swept the two-game season series with the Kraken.

Defenseman Will Borgen

scored halfway through the third period to deny Daws his first career shutout and the Devils' first of the season.

**Wild 5, Golden Knights 3:** Joel Eriksson Ek scored twice and visiting Minnesota got its third straight win.

Mats Zuccarello, Marco Rossi and Matt Boldy also scored to help the Wild get their sixth victory in eight games. Filip Gustavsson made 27 saves.

Jonathan Marchessault, Michael Amadio and Mark Stone scored for Vegas, while Adin Hill stopped 24 shots.

# Spurs rout Raptors, end 7-game slide

Associated Press

TORONTO — Victor Wembanyama had 27 points, 14 rebounds and a career-high 10 blocks in his second triple-double, Devin Vassell added 25 points and the San Antonio Spurs snapped a seven-game losing streak by routing the Toronto Raptors 122-99 on Monday night.

Wembanyama made 10 of 14 attempts and had five assists and a pair of steals in 29 minutes as the Spurs won for the first time since Jan. 27 against Minnesota.

"I felt great today," Wembanyama said. "Great rhythm, started the game strong. I guess it's just the NBA, you know. We've got ups and downs in terms of shape, and today was an up day."

Wembanyama's previous career high for blocks was eight, set against Memphis on Nov. 18. He leads the NBA in that category.

"He did a little bit of everything," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said. "Obviously he's an all-around, talented player. He's got a great feel for the game and it shows in a variety of ways, whether it's passing or making decisions, blocking shots."

It was the first triple-double

with blocks since Clint Capela had 13 points, 19 rebounds and 10 blocks for Atlanta against Minnesota on Jan. 22, 2021. That had also been the last time anyone in the NBA blocked 10 shots in a game.

**Timberwolves 121, Clippers 100:** Karl-Anthony Towns scored 24 points, Anthony Edwards added 23 and visiting Minnesota pulled away in the second half to beat Los Angeles in a matchup of two of the top teams in the Western Conference.

Paul George and Kawhi Leonard led the Clippers (35-17) with 18 points apiece and James Harden added 17.

**76ers 123, Cavaliers 121:** Buddy Hield scored 24 points in his third game with his new team, Kelly Oubre Jr. also had 24 and visiting Philadelphia ended Cleveland's nine-game winning streak.

The Cavs nearly rallied from a 10-point deficit in the final 1:25. They had a chance to win at the buzzer, but Darius Garland missed a 3-pointer from the right corner.

All-Star Tyrese Maxey added 22 points for the Sixers.

**Bucks 112, Nuggets 95:** Giannis Antetokounmpo had 36 points, 18 rebounds and five as-

sists as host Milwaukee showcased its improved defense in beating Denver.

After losing five of their first six games under new coach Doc Rivers, the Bucks have won two straight by a combined margin of 53 points and allowed fewer than 100 points in back-to-back games for the first time this season.

Nikola Jokic had 29 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists for the Nuggets.

**Warriors 129, Jazz 107:** Klay Thompson scored 26 points, Stephen Curry made five 3-pointers in the fourth quarter and had 25 and visiting Golden State beat Utah without coach Steve Kerr.

Kerr was in Serbia for the funeral service for Golden State assistant coach Dejan Milojevic, who had a heart attack at a team dinner in Salt Lake City on Jan. 16 and died the next day.

**Mavericks 112, Wizards 104:** Luka Doncic had his 10th triple-double of the season despite missing five minutes of action after taking a charge and helped rally host Dallas past Washington.

Doncic finished with 26 points, 15 assists and 11 rebounds. Kyrie Irving scored 26 points for the Mavericks, who

have a season-best five-game winning streak.

**Rockets 105, Knicks 103:** Aaron Holiday had 18 points, capped by two free throws with less than a second remaining after a disputed foul by Jalen Brunson behind the 3-point line, and host Houston dealt New York its third straight loss.

Dillon Brooks scored 23 points, Jabari Smith Jr. added 20 and Alperen Sengun had 18 to help the Rockets snap a four-game skid.

**Bulls 136, Hawks 126:** Ayo Dosunmu had a career-high 29 points and seven assists as visiting Chicago scored a season-best point total.

DeMar DeRozan scored 29 points and Nikola Vucevic added 24 points and 11 rebounds. Coby White added 20 points and seven assists.

**Hornets 111, Pacers 102:** Miles Bridges had 20 points and 10 rebounds and host Charlotte won its second straight game since adding five new players via trade.

**Pelicans 96, Grizzlies 87:** Herbert Jones scored 17 points and Brandon Ingram added 16 points, including a pair of late buckets, as visiting New Orleans sent Memphis to its ninth straight loss.

# Williams scores 30 as Texas Tech drubs No. 6 Kansas

Associated Press

LUBBOCK, Texas — Darrion Williams had a perfect night for Texas Tech, and the Red Raiders never trailed in a lopsided victory over sixth-ranked Kansas.

Williams scored a career-high 30 points on 12-for-12 shooting, including four 3-pointers. He also made both of his free throws and had 11 rebounds in Texas Tech's 79-50 win Monday night.

"Give him credit because (of) his work habits and his belief in this team. ... I do believe the

game rewards those people that play it to win," Red Raiders coach Grant McCasland said. "What an awesome combination he was tonight of scoring and facilitating and rebounding and just winning."

The 12 field goals without a miss were the most ever for a Texas Tech player. Williams, a sophomore transfer from Nevada, was also the first NCAA player in the last 25 seasons with 30 points, 10 rebounds and a perfect shooting percentage against a ranked opponent, according to ESPN Stats.

Williams hit a 3 on the first shot of the game for the Red Raiders (18-6, 7-4 Big 12). They made 8 of 12 from long range in the first 13 minutes to jump ahead 27-14.

It was a frustrating night for Kansas (19-6, 7-5), which played its second game in a row without Big 12 leading scorer Kevin McCullar Jr., and with guard Dajuan Harris not at full strength after rolling his left ankle late in a 64-61 home win over 12th-ranked Baylor two days earlier.

"We're beat up and tired right

now," said Jayhawks coach Bill Self, who got his first ejection in 21 seasons at Kansas with 5:49 remaining.

**No. 9 Duke 77, Wake Forest 69:** Mark Mitchell scored 23 points while star big man Kyle Filipowski posted his first double-double in nearly three weeks as the host Blue Devils fought off the Demon Deacons.

Filipowski had 21 points and 10 rebounds for Duke (19-5, 10-3 Atlantic Coast Conference), which escaped Wake Forest (16-8, 8-5) despite never pulling away.

# Messi-Mbappé rematch possible at Olympics

Associated Press

GENEVA — The stars are starting to align for another Lionel Messi vs. Kylian Mbappé showdown on a global soccer stage to follow their epic World Cup final in 2022.

The men's soccer tournament at the Paris Olympics starts July 24, and Argentina has now joined host France in the 16-nation lineup.

After Argentina earned its Olympic place late Sunday, beating two-time defending champion Brazil, talk turned toward luring Messi to compete for a second gold medal 16 years after his first.

"The door is open for a player like him to join us," said Argentina coach Javier Mascherano, Messi's close friend and title-winning teammate at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. "Then it depends on him and his commitments."

Mbappé has often said he wants to represent France at his hometown Olympics where the men's soccer final on Aug. 9 is at the Parc des Princes stadium of his club, Paris Saint-Germain.

Mbappé and Messi were PSG teammates when they went to the World Cup in Qatar and starred in perhaps the greatest final of all that ended with the Argentina icon lifting the trophy.

Messi scored twice, Mbappé got three in a sensational 3-3 draw as France rallied to first force extra time, then a penalty shootout that Argentina won.

Mbappé in an interview last month talked about wanting to "write my name in the history of the French team as a player who mattered."

"For every athlete, the Olympics hold a special place," he told GQ magazine.

It is not so simple for a great player just to say he wants to play at an Olympics tournament played in late-July and early-August.

FIFA-written tournament rules do allow for each Olympic squad to include three over-age players in what is an Under-23 event for the men. There is no age restriction in the women's event.

The complication is that each player's club — Inter Miami for Messi, currently PSG for Mbappé though that could change — is not compelled by FIFA rules to let him go to the Olympics.

The Olympic tournament is not included on FIFA's calendar of men's international match dates which dictate when clubs must release players to their national teams.

Messi and Mbappé also have major tournament commit-

ments ahead of the Olympics.

Argentina is the defending champion at the 16-nation Copa América hosted by the United States, and France is at the 24-nation European Championship in Germany. Both finals are July 14 — just 10 days before Olympic men's soccer starts with France playing in Marseille that day.

Playing a continental championship and Olympics back-to-back is a severe physical commitment, especially for players with European clubs.

The coach of France's Olympic team Thierry Henry, a national-team great who was in the 1998 World Cup-winning squad, cannot be sure yet who he can select for a tournament that also includes Spain, Ukraine, the U.S. and Israel.

"If I'm asked, I'd love to go," Mbappé told GQ, "but if that's not possible, I'll understand."

## How Chiefs shape roster will be a top story of NFL offseason

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The Kansas City Chiefs are a dynasty and already are looking to become the first team to three-peat in the Super Bowl era.

They're underdogs to do it.

Getting to New Orleans to play for the Vince Lombardi Trophy next February will be difficult for Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs. There's no guarantee Travis Kelce isn't retiring, Chris Jones is set to become a free agent and even coach Andy Reid could ride off into the sunset.

Perhaps that's why the Chiefs are not the betting favorite to win the Super Bowl next year. The San Francisco 49ers are plus-450 to win it all, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. The Chiefs have the second-best odds at plus-750, followed by Baltimore (plus-900). Detroit and Buffalo are tied at plus-1,200 to close out the top five.

The NFL wrapped up its 2023 season when Kansas City overcame another 10-point deficit in a Super Bowl and rallied to beat the 49ers 25-22 in overtime Sunday to become the first repeat champions since the New England Patriots 19 years ago.

Now, it's onto 2024 with the first Super Bowl in Las Vegas in the books.

One of the biggest offseason storylines will

be how the Chiefs shape their roster. Kelce didn't commit to returning, though he is excited about going for three in a row. There's no word how his relationship with pop star Taylor Swift will affect his decision, if at all.

The league is certainly pulling for Kelce to stick around so Swift can keep showing up to Kansas City's games.

"We'll go ahead and enjoy this and everything that just happened," Kelce said. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I've been able to go through three times now, man, and so it gets sweeter every time."

Jones, the All-Pro defensive tackle, is due for a new contract, and it's unlikely the Chiefs will use the franchise tag on him, so they have to make a tough decision.

The 49ers had their best shot at a record-setting sixth Super Bowl but beat themselves. Still, oddsmakers favor them to finish the job next season. At least they won't have a question mark at quarterback like they did last offseason when Brock Purdy was returning from major elbow surgery.

"If I'm going to lose with a group of guys, I'd do it with those guys any time, and we'll get over this and come back next year ready to go," Niners coach Kyle Shanahan said.

There's no time off in the NFL, so vacations will be short.

The league's annual scouting combine is only two weeks away and free agency follows on March 13. Jones, Vikings quarterback Kirk Cousins, Jaguars edge rusher Josh Allen and Bengals receiver Tee Higgins headline the list of players who could be available.

The draft goes to Detroit on April 25 for three days, and there could be new rules in place by the time rookies show up for training camp.

The NFL plans to address the hip-drop tackle, but the players' union has adamantly opposed banning it.

"Hip-drop tackles cause injuries at 25 times the rate of any other tackle," NFL executive Jeff Miller told The Associated Press. "There are major time loss injuries. We're talking about high-ankle sprains. We're talking about knee injuries. We're talking about broken bones, so we know it's a risk to the game. And we know that players are missing time as a result. And when you identify something like that, in the past we've gotten rid of blindside blocks because we saw it as unnecessarily risky behavior that we wanted to get rid of. That led to fewer injuries when we took that play out. Similarly with hip drop, this is something that we've identified as an issue."