

## Hegseth seeks 8% cut in DOD spending

*Bloomberg News*

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's plan to reduce projected U.S. military spending by 8% over the next five years would spare southwest border enforcement, the Air Force's newest drone program, nuclear weapons modernization and preparations for a clean audit, according to a new memo he sent to the services.

The Feb. 18 memo instructs "senior Pentagon leadership," combat commands, Defense Department agencies, the service branches and civilian agencies to propose 8% cuts to their spending estimates for each of the five fiscal years starting with 2026. "I will conduct a relook" of what's been prepared to date, Hegseth wrote, setting a Monday dead-

line for responses.

Hegseth listed 17 areas that "may not be included by the services and components in their 8% decrease." In addition to border enforcement, the exempt list includes the Virginia-class submarine, what it terms "executable surface ship programs," homeland missile defense, the Air Force's new Collaborative Combat Aircraft, one-way attack drones, "priority critical cybersecurity, munitions and Indo-Pacom construction projects" and private sector medical care.

In keeping with favorite themes of President Donald Trump and Hegseth, the memo calls for targeting excessive bureaucracy and spending on programs linked to cli-

mate change and diversity, equity and inclusion, which Hegseth characterized as "low impact" and "wasteful."

Like previous administrations, Hegseth's team is reviewing and revising the previous administration's notional spending blueprint, which projected expenditures of \$876.8 billion for fiscal year 2026, up from \$849 billion this year.

The review is Hegseth's first foray into the nuts and bolts of running the largest U.S. department.

His memo doesn't address the future of some of the Defense Department's major programs, including the costliest — the F-35 built by Lockheed Martin. Although billionaire Elon Musk, a top Trump

adviser, has said the fighter jet should be canceled in an era of drone warfare, Trump has talked of selling F-35s to India, which would require their continued production.

The Pentagon in a statement Wednesday night said that about \$50 billion will be reduced from the planned fiscal 2026 budget and those dollars wouldn't be lost to the military but instead "will then be spent on programs aligned with President Trump's priorities."

"The department will develop a list of potential offsets that could be used to fund these priorities, as well as to refocus the department on its core mission of deterring and winning wars," the department added in the statement.

## Emails threaten blasts at Okinawa installations

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Japanese police are investigating email threats that targeted 32 U.S. military installations on the island, warning of planned explosions unless a ransom is paid.

The threats were sent through the Okinawa prefectural and Naha city websites on Tuesday evening, according to spokesmen from both offices.

The identical emails, written in Japanese, warned that U.S. military facilities would be bombed Sunday and that "a large number of Americans" would be killed unless approximately \$120,860 is transferred to multiple bank accounts.

A prefectural government spokesman declined by phone Thursday to identify who signed the emails.

The prefectural government and Naha city officials alerted the Okinawa Prefectural Police Department and the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan's Ministry of Defense, which then informed U.S. military officials.

Kadena Air Base and Marine Corps Air Station Futenma were among the installations named in the threats, according to the prefectural government spokesman. However, officials declined to provide a full list of the targeted sites.

The U.S. military operates 31 bases on Okinawa and

shares another with Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

Marine Corps Installations Pacific is aware of the threat and is working with Japanese authorities, spokesman 1st Lt. Grant Hoel said in an email Thursday.

"At this time, we do not perceive a credible threat" to U.S. personnel covered under the status of forces agreement, Hoel wrote, referring to the pact that governs the rights and responsibilities of U.S. military personnel and their families in Japan.

Navy installations on Okinawa did not receive any direct threats, spokeswoman Candice Barber wrote in an email Thursday.

The Air Force's 18th Wing at

Kadena acknowledged questions about the threat but did not immediately provide a response Thursday.

A spokesman for Okinawa Prefectural Police said authorities are considering whether to investigate the case as "forcible obstruction of business," a criminal offense under Japan's penal code.

"We will decide that after collecting and checking all of the evidence," he said.

A spokesman for the Okinawa Defense Bureau declined to comment, citing police concerns over potential copycat incidents.

Some government spokespeople in Japan may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

# Navy on track to meet 2025 recruiting goal

By CAITLYN BURCHETT  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Navy is on track to meet its recruiting goal for the second consecutive year, the service announced Tuesday, just four months into fiscal 2025.

The sea service has contracted about 14,000 recruits since October, according to a post shared by the Navy to the social media site X.

Of those, more than 12,700 have shipped out to Great Lakes, Ill., for the service's basic training program, according to an official.

The recruits mark significant progress in the service's effort

to recruit 40,600 new sailors by Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year.

If the Navy achieves the goal, it would be the second consecutive year that the service has met its highest recruiting goal in 20 years.

"Bravo Zulu to [the Navy] for their continued improvement in recruiting numbers and welcoming the next generation of warfighters serving with honor, courage and commitment," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a message shared Wednesday to X.

Typically, the service begins sharing its recruiting data closer to the end of the fiscal year —

in late summer or early fall. But the Navy took to social media this week to tout the near 35% milestone.

In August, Navy officials said they were seeing significant results in recruiting after years of loosening requirements to combat missed enlistment goals.

The Navy ultimately contracted 40,978 recruits from October 2023 to September 2024, surpassing its goal of 40,600.

The service set its recruiting goal of active-duty sailors for fiscal 2024 to attempt to make up for shortfalls from previous years. In 2022 and 2023, the Navy only contracted 22,000 and 30,000 sailors, respectively.

Those same years, the Navy also emptied its delayed-entry pool, a program that allows people to sign up for the armed forces up to one year before they start basic training.

The Navy's announcement comes about one month after the Army touted its recruiting success.

Then-Army Secretary Christine Wormuth told The Associated Press in January that the Army is on pace to bring in 61,000 recruits by the end of the fiscal year in September.

In total, by Sept. 30, the services recruited about 225,000 new troops — about 25,000 more than the previous year.

## Bombers fly over S. Korea in show of force against North

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The U.S. and South Korean air forces demonstrated their combined air power with American bombers over South Korean airspace Thursday to "deter and respond to North Korea's threats," the South's military said that day.

Two B-1B Lancers out of Andersen Air Force Base, Guam,

flew alongside three U.S. F-16 Fighting Falcons from Osan Air Base, South Korea, four Marine Corps F-35Bs from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, and four South Korean F-35As and F-15K Slam Eagles, according to news releases Thursday from the U.S. 7th Air Force and South Korean Ministry of National Defense.

The bomber escort and air interdiction drill showcased the

two countries' ability to "deter and respond to North Korea's nuclear and missile threats," the ministry said.

Seventh Air Force commander Lt. Gen. David Iverson said the drill "ensures we're able to maintain the high levels of readiness necessary for our combined defense posture."

Thursday's drill marks the year's first aerial demonstration by the two allied militaries.

Last month, a pair of Lancers were escorted by two Japanese Mitsubishi F-2s and two South Korean F-15K Slam Eagles over the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.

North Korea has continued to levy threats against South Korea and the United States. The state-run Korean Central News Agency on Saturday reported the North will continue "bolstering" its nuclear capabilities.

## Study links migraines to fuel-tainted tap water in Hawaii

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

Individuals exposed to jet-fuel tainted tap water near Pearl Harbor in late 2021 were more likely to experience new migraines and esophagus inflammation than others living nearby but not exposed to the water, according to a Defense Department study released last month.

The study examined condi-

tions reported to Defense Health Agency Public Health following JP-5 jet fuel contamination in November 2021 of the Navy's water distribution system that supplied military communities on and near Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii.

The fuel was traced to the World War II-era Red Hill underground fuel storage facility, which was ordered emptied and permanently closed four

months after the spill.

The study compared individuals exposed to the tainted water with "DoD-affiliated individuals living on Oahu at the time" who were not exposed.

The Red Hill group was more likely to experience new cases of migraines and esophagus inflammation than the comparison group.

In addition, the study analyzed new cases of bloody urine,

irritable bowel syndrome, nerve pain called peripheral neuropathy and Raynaud's syndrome, a condition in which the body's extremities are deprived of blood. No significant differences were found in those conditions, according to the study.

Hundreds of individuals who were exposed to the contamination have joined a lawsuit seeking compensation for damages arising from the spill.

# Claims filed by wife of aircraft crash victim

Associated Press

The wife of a Connecticut man who died in last month's collision between a passenger jet and a military helicopter near Washington, D.C.'s Ronald Reagan National Airport has filed what are believed to be the first legal claims over the crash that killed 67 people.

The claims by Rachel Crafton were filed Tuesday against the Federal Aviation Administration and the U.S. Army, with each seeking \$250 million for alleged wrongdoing that led to the collision and death of Casey Crafton, 40, of Salem, Conn., according to her Chicago-based lawyer, Robert Clifford.

The filings were made under the Federal Tort Claims Act and are a required precursor to a lawsuit. If the FAA and Army either reject or do not act on the claims within six months, a civil wrong-

ful death lawsuit can be filed in federal court.

"The families are filing this to achieve their goal of taking the first step towards what the whole world knows will be eventual litigation against the FAA for its air traffic control and the U.S. Army relative to the operations of the helicopter," Clifford said in an interview Wednesday.

Clifford, who said he represents other crash victims' families, said the claims were based on public comments federal officials have made about the crash, including alleged understaffing at the air traffic control tower, the helicopter pilot flying above the 200-foot limit near the airport and communication lapses between air traffic control and the aircraft.

Clifford also sent letters to American Airlines, Sikorsky Aircraft and Collins Aerospace demanding that they preserve any

evidence relating to the crash.

In a statement, the Army declined to comment on the filing Wednesday.

"Out of respect for the deceased, their families, and the ongoing investigation, it is inappropriate for the Army to comment on any speculation regarding claims or potential litigation," Army spokesperson Maj. Montrell Russell said. "Our primary focus is on supporting the families and ensuring the safety of our Soldiers and the public."

The FAA said Wednesday that it does not comment on potential litigation.

On Jan. 29, American Airlines Flight 5342 was coming in from Wichita, Kan., carrying 60 passengers and four crew members, as it approached Reagan National to land on a clear Wednesday night. At the same time, an Army Black Hawk, made by Sikorsky,

was on a training exercise with three soldiers aboard. The two aircraft collided and plunged into the Potomac River, killing everyone on board the jet and helicopter.

Investigators have said the helicopter may have had inaccurate altitude readings in the moments before the crash, and the crew may not have heard key instructions from air traffic controllers. The collision likely occurred at an altitude just under 300 feet, as the plane descended toward the helicopter, which was well above its 200-foot limit for that location.

Casey Crafton was a technical support manager for an aviation consulting firm who was returning from a business trip to Wichita when he died. He and Rachel Crafton had three young sons, ages 7, 10 and 12, and he coached their youth soccer and baseball teams.

## AP source: IRS to lay off 7K probationary workers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The IRS will lay off roughly 7,000 workers in Washington and around the country beginning Thursday, a person familiar with the plans told The Associated Press.

The layoffs affect probationary employees with roughly one year or less of service at the agency and largely include workers in compliance departments, according to the person, who was not authorized to disclose the plans and spoke on condition of anonymity Wednesday. Compliance work includes ensuring that taxpayers are abiding by the tax code, filing their returns and paying their taxes, among other duties.

The layoffs are part of the Trump administration's intensified efforts to shrink the size of the federal workforce through the Department of Government Efficiency by ordering agencies to lay off nearly all probationary em-

ployees who have not yet gained civil service protection. They come despite IRS employees involved in the 2025 tax season being told earlier this month that they would not be allowed to accept a buyout offer from the Trump administration until mid-May, after the taxpayer filing deadline.

It's unclear how the layoffs may affect tax collection services this year. As the nation's revenue collector, the IRS was tasked during the Biden administration with targeting high-wealth tax evaders for an additional stream of income to the U.S., which is \$36 trillion in debt. By the end of 2024, the IRS collected over \$1.3 billion in back taxes from rich tax dodgers.

The IRS has roughly 90,000 employees total across the United States, according to the latest IRS data. Racial minorities make up 56% of the IRS workforce, and women represent 65%.

## Another winter storm hits weary East Coast

Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. — Officials urged people to stay off the roads Wednesday in portions of Virginia and North Carolina where a storm dropped heavy snow and caused hundreds of accidents in places unaccustomed to significant accumulations.

The storm that already dropped snow in the Midwest spread across the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys and into places that are just starting to clean up after a weekend of deadly floods.

Up to 10 inches of snow was possible through Thursday along the Atlantic Coast in Virginia, and major ice accumulations were forecast in eastern North Carolina.

The National Weather Service said snowfall of up to 2 inches per hour was seen in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia and in northeastern North Carolina.

Meteorologist Alec Butner said additional accumulations were likely Thursday morning. While Butner said the snowfall in Norfolk won't approach the 1892 record of 18.6 inches, it's still "fairly infrequent" to reach snowfall totals of about 8 to 9 inches.

Virginia State Police reported 275 accidents by Wednesday afternoon; at least two dozen involved injuries. Accidents also closed portions of Interstate 95 and I-85 near Raleigh, N.C.

Elsewhere, a polar vortex sent temperatures plunging from Montana to southern Texas.

Weekend storms that pummeled the eastern U.S. killed at least 19 people, including 14 in Kentucky.

"This is a snowstorm in the middle of a natural disaster," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said.



# Canceled event deepens US-Ukraine rift

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — A planned news conference after talks between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump's Ukraine envoy was canceled Thursday as political tensions deepened between the two countries over how to end the almost three-year war with Russia.

The format of the press event, which was to include comments to the media by Zelenskyy and retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, was changed at the last minute so that the two did not deliver statements or field questions from journalists. The change was requested by the U.S. side, Ukrainian presidential spokesman Serhii Nikiforov said.

Kellogg's trip to Kyiv coinci-

ded with recent feuding between Trump and Zelenskyy that has bruised their personal relations and cast further doubt on the future of U.S. support for Ukraine's war effort.

Nikiforov gave no other reason other than that the cancellation was in accordance with U.S. wishes.

The U.S. delegation made no immediate comment. The White House did not immediately respond to questions about why the news conference was called off.

When the meeting began, photographers and video journalists were allowed into a room where the two men shook hands before sitting across from each other at a table at the presidential office in Kyiv.

The two men were due to speak about Trump's efforts to

end the war. Zelenskyy had previously said he looked forward to explaining what was happening in Ukraine and showing it to Kellogg.

Kellogg, one of the architects of a policy book laying out an "America First" national security agenda, has long been Trump's top adviser on defense issues.

Zelenskyy and Trump have traded rebukes in recent days.

The spat erupted after Russia and the U.S. agreed Tuesday to start working toward ending the war in Ukraine and improving their diplomatic and economic ties. With that, Trump abruptly reversed the three-year U.S. policy of isolating Russia.

Zelenskyy was unhappy that a U.S. team opened the talks without inviting him or European

governments that have backed Kyiv.

When Trump claimed Zelenskyy was deeply unpopular in Ukraine, the president said Trump was living in a Russian-made "disinformation space," suggesting he had been duped by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But Zelenskyy "retains a fairly high level of public trust" — about 57% — according to a report released Wednesday by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.

Trump accused Zelenskyy of being "A Dictator without Elections!!" Due to the war, Ukraine did delay elections that were scheduled for April 2024.

Trump also suggested that Ukraine was to blame for the war.

## President Yoon appears in 2 South Korean courts

*Associated Press*

SEOUL, South Korea — Traveling around Seoul in a prison transport vehicle, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared in two different courts on Thursday, contesting his arrest on rebellion charges in one and fighting an effort to remove him from office in the other.

Both cases — one on criminal charges, one an impeachment — are related to his brief imposition of martial law in December.

Security was heightened at the Seoul Central District Court as the motorcade transporting Yoon arrived for a preliminary hearing that involved discussions of witnesses, proposed evidence and other preparations for his criminal trial.

Yoon next traveled across the capital to the Constitutional Court, which is nearing a decision on whether to formally remove him from office after he was impeached by the National

Assembly. During the hearing on Thursday, the court said it will hold final arguments on the case on Tuesday, which possibly sets up a decision sometime in March.

Yoon was indicted Jan. 26 on rebellion charges, which carry a potential punishment of death or life in prison. In South Korea, presidents have immunity from most criminal prosecutions, but not on charges of rebellion or treason.

The indictment alleges his imposition of martial law was an illegal attempt to shut down the National Assembly and arrest politicians and election authorities. The conservative Yoon has said his martial law declaration was intended as a temporary warning to the liberal opposition.

Yoon's presidential powers were suspended when he was impeached Dec. 14, leaving him to fight for his political life at the Constitutional Court.

## Hamas returns bodies of four kidnapped Israelis

*Associated Press*

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Hamas on Thursday released the bodies of four Israeli hostages, said to include a mother and her two children who have long been feared dead and had come to embody the nation's agony following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack.

The remains were presumed to be of Shiri Bibas and her two children, Ariel and Kfir, as well as Oded Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted. Kfir, who was 9 months old when he was taken, was the youngest captive.

Hamas has said all four were killed along with their guards in Israeli airstrikes.

The militants displayed four black coffins on a stage in the Gaza Strip surrounded by banners, including a large one depicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a vampire.

Thousands of people, including large numbers of masked

and armed militants, looked on as the coffins were loaded onto Red Cross vehicles before being driven to Israeli forces.

The military held a small funeral ceremony, at the request of the families, before transferring the bodies to a laboratory in Israel for formal identification using DNA, a process that could take up to two days.

Lifshitz' family later said his remains had been officially identified.

Israelis have celebrated the return of 24 living hostages in recent weeks under a tenuous ceasefire that paused over 15 months of war. But the handover on Thursday was a grim reminder of those who died in captivity as the talks leading up to the truce dragged on for over a year.

It could also provide impetus for negotiations on the second stage of the ceasefire that have hardly begun. The first phase is set to end at the beginning of March.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

**Governor taps brother for university board post**

**NM** LAS VEGAS — The governor of New Mexico has appointed her brother to the board of regents at New Mexico Highlands University, as concerns about wasteful spending and cronyism roil the state's regional university system.

Greg Lujan — the 64-year-old brother of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham — has been appointed as the student regent to the five-member board at Las Vegas, N.M.-based Highlands University, pending state Senate confirmation, the governor's office confirmed Tuesday. Jodi McGinnis Porter, a spokesperson for the governor, said Lujan, a mortgage loan officer, returned to college last year to pursue a degree in business and applied sciences.

Republican state Sen. James Townsend of Artesia told the Albuquerque Journal that the appointment of a sibling will be met with skepticism in the confirmation process.

**Yum Brands moves KFC corporate office to Texas**

**KY** LOUISVILLE — Kentucky Fried Chicken is being uprooted from its ancestral home state in a shake-up announced Tuesday by its parent company that will relocate the chain's U.S. corporate office to Texas.

The food chain now known as KFC — launched by Colonel Harland Sanders and his secret blend of 11 herbs and spices — will be based in Plano, Texas, and about 100 KFC corporate employees will be relocated in the next six months, said Yum

Brands, which owns KFC, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut.

Yum said the move is part of its broader plans to designate two brand headquarters in the U.S. — in Plano and Irvine, Calif. KFC and Pizza Hut will be headquartered in Plano, while Taco Bell and Habit Burger & Grill will remain based in Irvine, the company said.

**Advocates defend texts on Toni Morrison Day**

**OH** COLUMBUS — Lawmakers and literacy advocates in Ohio used the birthday of one of America's most frequently banned authors on Tuesday to defend difficult texts that they fear could be impacted by new pushes against diversity initiatives and the teaching of "controversial" topics.

Ohio established Toni Morrison Day — named for the late Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author born and raised in northeast Ohio — in a nearly unanimous bipartisan vote in 2020. Her books include "The Bluest Eye," "Song of Solomon" and "Beloved."

During a news conference, children's author Elisa Stone Leahy, of Right to Read Ohio and Authors Against Book Bans, said that Morrison's "powerful, incredible stories" may be difficult but they also change lives. She said they serve as an inspiration to current authors, many of whom are concerned.

Protect Ohio Children Coalition has worked in recent years to gather information on schools and school boards that it says are pushing "dangerous and radical materials" on Ohio students, and it posts to its website

an "indoctrination map" targeting districts.

**Airbnb sues city over short-term rental rules**

**LA** NEW ORLEANS — Airbnb is suing the City of New Orleans for requiring the company and short-term rental platforms to ensure properties they market are in compliance with city laws.

"What we're looking at now due to Airbnb's lawsuit is that they do not want to be regulated," City Council President J.P. Morrell said in a statement.

Airbnb said its lawsuit comes "after exhausting all available paths toward sensible solutions."

For years, New Orleans leaders have struggled with how to manage the influx of illegal short-term rentals while managing a lack of affordable housing. Last year, the city council adopted regulations set to go into effect in June requiring Airbnb and other companies verify that all New Orleans properties listed on their platform have city permits.

**Grocery workers end strike; talks to resume**

**CO** DENVER — More than 10,000 King Soopers grocery workers across the Denver area ended their 12-day strike late Monday after union leaders said they secured some basic protections for returning workers and agreed to resume bargaining with the Kroger-owned chain.

Employees and management had hit a wall in contract negotiations over staffing and health care, but it was the Kroger-owned supermarket chain's allegedly unfair negotiating prac-

tices that pushed workers to go on strike at 77 stores in Denver and its suburbs earlier this month.

Kim Cordova, president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7, said the union will return to negotiations with an agreement that Kroger can't implement any offer for at least 100 days and can't lock out workers out during that time.

King Soopers has denied all of the allegations, saying it acted in full compliance with the law and its collective bargaining obligations.

**Governor vetoes bill to speed counting of ballots**

**AZ** PHOENIX — When Arizona was among the last states to finish tallying ballots cast in the 2024 general election, state Republicans dubbed it the laughingstock of the nation and reignited their push to get faster results.

They fast-tracked legislation aimed at speeding up the counting of ballots by moving up the deadline for voters to drop off early ballots, but Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs on Tuesday vetoed the measure over concerns that it would make it harder for people to vote.

Arizona voters can currently drop off their mail ballots at polling places until 7 p.m. on Election Day. In recent elections, the state has taken close to two weeks to report its results.

Republican Senate President Warren Petersen was among those who called for moving up the mail ballot drop-off deadline by four days. The Arizona Association of Counties said the majority of the state's county recorders supported the bill.

— From wire reports

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# Wembanyama likely out rest of season

Associated Press

San Antonio star Victor Wembanyama is not expected to play again this season after a blood clot condition was found in his right shoulder, a massive blow to the league and the second major health-related hit for the Spurs this season.

Wembanyama's condition — deep vein thrombosis — was diagnosed this week after he returned from the All-Star Game, the Spurs said Thursday. It is almost always treated with blood-thinning medication, which typically precludes a player from participating in a

contact sport such as basketball.

Athletes who are involved with contact sports are typically advised to avoid using such medication because of the heightened chance of bleeding.

Wembanyama's issue comes about 3½ months after Spurs coach Gregg Popovich had a stroke and was forced to take a leave from the sideline.

The 7-foot-3 Wembanyama was the league's rookie of the year last season and the front-runner to be defensive player of the year this season. He has already taken 403 3-pointers

and blocked 176 shots this season — no player in NBA history has ever finished a season with those numbers, and Wembanyama did it this year by the All-Star break.

He is averaging 24.3 points, 11 rebounds, 3.8 blocks and 3.7 assists; the only other player to finish a season averaging all that was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in 1975-76. The Spurs open their post-All-Star schedule later Thursday in Austin, Texas, against the Phoenix Suns. Wembanyama was doubtful for that game because of illness.

"I'm in shock," Miami for-

ward Kevin Love said when told of the news shortly after the Spurs announced Wembanyama's condition. "Absolute shock."

Such cases have affected NBA players before, including now-retired Hall of Famer Chris Bosh — whose career was cut short after he was diagnosed with blood clots.

Serena Williams was diagnosed with the problem known as a pulmonary embolism — a clot on the lung — in 2011, and was the dominant women's tennis player in the world again when she returned.

# Lakers believe Doncic will soon shake off rust

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Luka Doncic couldn't find his shot in his third game with the Los Angeles Lakers, and LeBron James couldn't make up for it.

Yet the Lakers all say they aren't worried after their embarrassing 100-97 loss to the Charlotte Hornets on Wednesday night.

Doncic scored 14 points on 5-of-18 shooting, including a 1-for-9 performance on 3-point attempts. The Slovenian superstar added 11 rebounds and eight assists, but also committed six turnovers and five personal fouls while playing 33 minutes in his longest performance since joining the Lakers in a blockbuster trade with Dallas.

"Obviously, it's going to take a little time," Doncic said. "Today, a lot of rustiness from my part. Started the game with like four or five turnovers. That can't happen. Just got to play basketball the right way."

The evening was clearly frustrating to Doncic, who was playing only his third NBA game following a 6½-week absence due to a calf strain incurred on Christmas. On a couple of occasions when this normally elec-

trifying scorer managed to make a shot against the Hornets, Doncic reacted with a visible mix of relief and frustration.

Doncic is 16 for 45 from the field in his three games with the Lakers, but just 5 for 24 on 3-point attempts — including 2 for 16 in his two home games, where fans have buzzed with anticipation of each shot and then groaned at each clank.

Back-to-back losses to cellar-dwelling Utah and Charlotte are grim results for a team that had won 10 of 11, but the 40-year-old James also isn't concerned about Doncic's start in purple and gold.

"It's his third game since Christmas, and it's his third game with us," James said. "He still doesn't know all the plays. He doesn't know all the defensive coverages, all the signals and things that we've built up since September. Obviously, we're trying to fast-track it on the fly. He's coming back from his injury. He's getting back into form, so we're working through it together."

Not everything was grim about Doncic's performance against Charlotte, his first in which he didn't have a minutes

restriction since his injury return. He led Los Angeles in rebounds, and his plus-13 rating was the Lakers' best number despite his turnovers.

"He's got to be comfortable being himself, because he's one of the best players in the world," said Austin Reaves, whose third-quarter ejection was swiftly followed by the Hornets' 22-1 run. "We need him to be him, and it's just going to take a couple of games, a couple of weeks to figure out what that best looks like. But we can figure it out fairly quickly."

With the game on the line in the final seconds, Doncic was the one inbound to James, who missed two 3-point attempts in the final six seconds. Doncic had no problem with not being in the late-game spotlight.

"He had it going, so obviously we're going to go to him," Doncic said. "I think it'll go both ways. One time it's going to be him, and one time me. I think it depends on how the game is going."

The Lakers acquired Doncic from the Mavs on Feb. 2 in a seismic trade that sent Anthony Davis to Dallas.

Doncic played in both of the Lakers' final two games before

the All-Star break, but he logged only 47 total minutes while the Lakers eased him back into competition. Doncic then got several days of recovery and reset while the rest of the NBA's top players convened in San Francisco for the All-Star Game.

"Honestly, I was getting my mind off basketball a little bit," Doncic said. "I'm just excited to come back and play. I missed a lot of time. I've never missed this much time, so it was something new to me. Now I'm just excited to get back to play."

Doncic won't have time to dwell on this slow start: The Lakers jumped on a plane to Portland after their loss, and they'll face the Trail Blazers on Thursday before visiting Denver on Saturday.

And the Lakers' next home game? It's against the Mavericks on Tuesday.

With the shock of the midseason trade fading more each day, Doncic is eager to look to the future.

"This is one of the greatest clubs in the world, and I'm just happy to be here," Doncic said. "Obviously, I'm going to need some time, but I'm happy to represent the Lakers."



# Opposing players laud Dodgers' spending push

Associated Press

GLENDAL, Ariz. — Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred shared conflicting feelings about the big-spending Los Angeles Dodgers this week, praising the franchise's competitive spirit in one breath before worrying about the financial disparity they've created in the next.

Players elsewhere around the league don't seem nearly as conflicted.

"Teams spending money is never bad for baseball and never bad for players. Ever. In any situation," Athletics slugger Brent Rooker said.

If Manfred is looking to find some sympathy from Major League Baseball's rank-and-file regarding his worry over the sport's financial health, it's probably not going to come from the guys on the field.

MLB is the only major professional sport in America that doesn't have a salary cap, though there are luxury tax penalties for passing certain spending thresh-

olds. Last season, Los Angeles had a \$353 million luxury tax payroll and had to pay a \$103 million tax. The Athletics had the lowest luxury tax payroll at just under \$84 million.

The Dodgers' spending didn't slow this offseason. Los Angeles signed two-time Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell to a \$182 million, five-year deal and also made sizable investments in players like Teoscar Hernández, Michael Conforto, Tanner Scott, Kirby Yates and Roki Sasaki.

That came one year after the organization splurged on more than \$1 billion in commitments to Japanese stars Shohei Ohtani and Yoshinobu Yamamoto.

The Dodgers' spending has dwarfed all but a few franchises. Opposing players might be envious of those fat paychecks, but it's hard to find them complaining.

Even Manfred — who said he's received emails from fans worried about competitive balance — can't fault LA's approach.

"The Dodgers have gone out

and done everything possible, always within the rules that currently exist, to put the best possible team on the field and that's a great thing for the game," Manfred said on Tuesday. "That type of competitive spirit is what people want to see."

Walker Buehler threw the final pitch of the 2024 season, recording the last out for Los Angeles in its World Series-clinching Game 5 victory. He left the Dodgers to sign a \$21.05 million, one-year deal with the Boston Red Sox during the winter, but the right-hander isn't about to talk smack about his former employer.

The 30-year-old knows exactly why players are flocking to Chavez Ravine.

"I don't think it's odd," he said. "It's a first-class organization and obviously coming off a huge World Series and, I think on top of that, you layer in that on a team right now where there's probably four or five Hall of Famers, I think it's an attractive place to play."

That doesn't mean there isn't

some awe from players about the formidable roster LA has built thanks to its deep pockets.

"I worked out with some guys that ended up signing with the Dodgers and was like, at a certain point, 'I didn't know they had room on the 40-man (roster),' " Red Sox pitcher Patrick Sandoval said.

The Arizona Diamondbacks are one of the teams trying to keep pace with Los Angeles in the NL West. They signed ace right-hander Corbin Burnes to a \$210 million, six-year deal in December, but they are still projected to have a payroll that will be roughly half the size of the Dodgers.

"I don't think it's unfair at all," D-backs manager Torey Lovullo said. "They're within the rules, they're doing what they have to do to get the best players on the field. When I was a kid, it was the Yankees, remember? George Steinbrenner was going crazy with his spending and it yielded World Championships. That's what we're all chasing."

## Klavzar steps up for No. 2 Florida, becoming indispensable

Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Urban Klavzar was an afterthought when the season began, the fifth guard on Florida's talented roster. He even missed the first three games while awaiting NCAA clearance.

Once he did play — getting on the court in mop-up duty — he looked more like a walk-on than a starter-in-waiting. He missed 23 of 33 shots, hitting just 3 of 16 from 3-point range, and had coaches and teammates wondering what was going on with a guy who had been so difficult to defend in practice.

Klavzar wasn't sure, either.

But he kept working — and waiting. He finally got a chance when starting guards Walter Clayton Jr. (ankle) and Alijah Martin (hip pointer) missed time. And Klavzar has since made him himself indispensable for the second-ranked Gators (23-3, 10-3 Southeastern Conference).

He has hit 11 of 18 shots during Florida's five-game winning streak, including 9 of 13 from behind the arc. He drained consecutive 3s in a win against Vanderbilt in early February and then went 3-for-3 from distance at top-

ranked Auburn four days later, including two in a 13-second span that helped the Gators pull off one of the biggest upsets of the season.

On Tuesday night against Oklahoma, his coast-to-coast drive in the final seconds of the first half was as impressive a play as any of the ones made by Florida's Big Three: Clayton, Martin and Will Richard.

"He's really raised his level," Gators coach Todd Golden said. "We just have a deep team, and we've had a bunch of guys step up when their numbers are called."

Klavzar finished with a career-high 10 points in 22 minutes in an 85-63 romp over the Sooners. His 3-pointer from the corner in the first half started a 17-3 run that turned a six-point game into a rout and left Oklahoma coach Porter Moser shaking his head the rest of the night.

"They have the pieces to win it all," Moser said. "They defend very hard. They protect the rim. They shoot it. They have really good positional size. They've got five guys who have great range. I think they're one of about five or six teams that could be playing on that last weekend, without a doubt.

"Your head just explodes with the level of (talent) with a handful of these teams, and Florida is absolutely right there with the best of this league."

No one should be stunned to see the Gators with their highest ranking since entering the NCAA Tournament at No. 1 in 2014. Florida's starting backcourt — Clayton, Martin and Richard — has played a combined 400 collegiate games. And big men Alex Condon, Thomas Haugh and Rueben Chinyelu provide plenty of punch in the paint.

But Florida's depth has been the shocker. Backup guard Denzel Aberdeen has made huge strides in three years under Golden. Center Micah Handlogten, after weeks of waffling, chose to give up a medical redshirt and play 11 months after gruesomely breaking his left leg — and is showing flashes of returning to form.

"You always got to be ready and patient, even if you can't hit shots or if you're not getting a lot of minutes, I think you always got to stay ready," Klavzar said. "Got to be professional, and I think patience is one of the most important things in basketball."

# SEC, Big Ten prepare for CFP changes

*Associated Press*

NEW ORLEANS — The Big Ten and Southeastern Conference commissioners said Wednesday they will push for something closer to “straight seeding” in the College Football Playoff next season to give less of a break to lesser-ranked conference champs and better reflect how teams are ranked by the playoff selection committee.

“I’m prepared to vote for seeding change,” SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said. “But it has to be unanimous.”

At least for next season, anyway.

Sankey and Big Ten commissioner Tony Petitti, speaking after joint meetings in New Orleans with their conferences’ 34 athletic directors, acknowledged that their leagues ultimately

will be driving changes in the CFP format after the 2025 season.

However, they declined to address details of anything related to 2026 or beyond that might have been discussed — topics that likely include expansion of the playoffs and more automatic bids for their own conferences.

Sankey said those negotiations should include leaders of all the conferences, who meet next week in Dallas at a CFP gathering, but that the SEC and Big Ten can certainly be trusted to keep everyone’s interests in mind.

“If I was just representing the SEC, we’d still have a four-team playoff,” said Sankey, whose own conference’s addition last year of Texas and Oklahoma was part of a nationwide shift

that added uncertainty to college sports. “It was neither our idea, nor was it our commentary, nor was it our need — even post-expansion.

“My view is the 12-team playoff last year helped everybody’s regular season, or brought people into the conversation. From my seat, we’ve deployed leadership in a responsible way.”

Last college football season was the first under the expanded 12-team CFP format.

While it was largely viewed as a success, a provision that rewarded byes to the four highest-ranked major conference champions drew scrutiny after all four of those teams — Arizona State, Boise State, Georgia and Oregon — lost their CFP openers in the quarterfinals.

Ohio State and Notre Dame each won three playoff games before the Buckeyes knocked off the Fighting Irish in the title game.

Petitti said both conferences are in favor of going to “straight seeding,” so that “there’s no difference between rankings and seedings.”

“The committee just puts in for the 12 teams next year — just says, ‘These are the 12 teams in the order that they fall,’ based on their judgment and the criteria they’re given in the selection room,” Petitti said.

An exception still would occur when one of the five highest-ranked conference champions is ranked outside the top 12. That team would get in next season, as Clemson (No. 16 CFP) did last season.

## MLS players, coaches favor shift to global calendar

*Associated Press*

As Major League Soccer readies to open its 30th season, some players and coaches are advocating for a fall-to-spring calendar, a major move that would align the league with its international counterparts.

Such a shift would give MLS a more competitive position for player transfers, while also freeing up players for club duty during the summer, when many major global tournaments take place.

But there are obvious challenges, like the weather during a season that begins in late February and runs through the playoffs to December.

Teams like Minnesota United and the Chicago Fire already face downright hostile weather during the winter months. On Tuesday night, when the Colorado Rapids beat LAFC in a CONCACAF Champions Cup match in Denver, temperatures hovered in the single digits. Frigid temperatures also greeted

the Champions Cup match on Wednesday in Kansas between Lionel Messi’s Inter Miami and Sporting KC.

“We experienced the game in Chicago last year at the beginning where it was 15-10 degrees cold. But I think once the players got going, you still saw a game with intensity and tempo and, you know, I don’t think you see it at the same level in a lot of those summer matchups. I know it’s not (popular) across the board, but I like the idea,” said FC Cincinnati coach Pat Noonan.

With a warming climate, some of those midsummer games in places like Texas become difficult, too. Last season, a match in Austin was pushed back because of extreme heat.

MLS opens its new season Saturday, and it certainly won’t be balmy in those northern states. But the current schedule allows the league to mostly avoid the months when the NFL and the college football postsea-

son rule.

“MLS has done a great job of understanding what the United States is like,” Seattle Sounders coach Brian Schmetzer said. “It’s just bigger and it’s got more diversity and climate and all of those things. And you have to take all that into consideration, because we won’t be able to play in some markets during those winter months.”

If MLS aligned with Europe, the season would probably open in mid-August with a break in mid-December before resuming in February. The championship would likely be in May.

Noonan and Houston Dynamo general manager Pat Onstad both said aligning with international leagues would make it easier for teams to bring in top talent.

“This is a difficult time of year to go get players. As our league gets better and better, we’re trying to get now the best players from other clubs. And if you do that in the January window,

you’re destroying the other club’s season. So it becomes really difficult until we match up with the rest of the world. So from a recruitment stand, it’ll be a big change if we can do this as a league,” Onstad said at the league’s media day.

Complicating matters is MLS’ already crowded schedule — and top players called in and out of their national teams during the busy summer months.

The U.S. will host the Club World Cup from June 15 to July 13. Inter Miami and the Sounders will represent MLS in the 38-team field, with games to be played across 11 U.S. cities.

St. Louis goalkeeper Roman Bürki said he is in favor of aligning with the European schedule.

“Making those changes is something we’ve got to be very, very thoughtful about. I do think that we are considering, more than ever before, this opportunity to change. But it’s not something that we’re ready to talk about right now,” Garber said.