

Experts: Iran likely to step up reply to US

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

When Iran retaliated for American strikes on its nuclear sites last year, it launched a relatively modest counterattack, even going so far as to give the U.S. a heads-up before firing missiles at al Udeid Air Base in Qatar.

But if the once-again simmering tensions between the countries produce another U.S. strike, Tehran has signaled that it's ready to take the gloves off this time, experts say.

"I think now we're moving towards a world in which the regime is at least publicly signaling ... that it will be fighting in a much less constrained manner than before," said Behnam Ben Taleblu, senior director of the Iran program at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Stalling diplomacy and a military buildup have put the Middle East and American allies on edge. President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to use force if a deal over Iran's nu-

clear enrichment program is not made. He said Thursday that he would give Tehran 10 to 15 days to meet U.S. terms.

The U.S. has sent dozens of fighter jets and refueling aircraft toward the Middle East, along with an armada of warships that now includes the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group, which entered the Mediterranean Sea on Friday.

Iranian leaders believe that at this point they must inflict serious harm to stop further U.S. attacks, said Ali Vaez, director of the Iran program at the International Crisis Group.

"They've come to the conclusion that the only way to stop this cycle of bombing Iran every few months really requires that they draw blood and they inflict significant harm on the U.S. and Israel," he said.

The U.S. still enjoys military dominance over Iran, which has been weakened in recent months by near-collapse of its economy, internal protests and the loss of allies like ousted Syr-

ian dictator Bashar Assad and former Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, who was captured in a U.S. military raid last month.

Iran likely would seek to widen a war with the U.S. to deter prolonged American military involvement, analysts say, adding that it has the tools to do so.

Among the strongest are short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, which can carry nuclear or chemical weapons and have a range of up to 1,864 miles, according to the Congressional Research Service.

Iran has the largest stockpiles of missiles and drone systems in the Middle East, a March 2025 report from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency said. Tehran launched hundreds of ballistic missiles at Israel in June 2025, though Israeli reports said they inflicted minimal damage.

Tehran also has other long-range strike systems in place, including cruise missiles and anti-ship missiles that could threaten U.S. assets and mari-

time shipping.

Those weapons could more broadly affect energy infrastructure in the Persian Gulf, Taleblu said.

Iran's previous responses to U.S. strikes have not succeeded in preventing more threats from the U.S., Vaez said.

After Trump ordered the killing of top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani in early 2020, Tehran responded by firing a dozen ballistic missiles at Iraqi bases housing U.S. troops. The attacks did not kill any service members, but later U.S. reports showed many suffered from traumatic brain injuries.

Iran's response to Operation Midnight Hammer in June was notably restrained. The only damage from it was to one geodesic dome housing communication equipment used by American troops in Qatar.

Iran has spent the past three decades designing weapons specifically to target the U.S. military, especially its naval assets, Vaez said.

Trump's hospital ship plan provokes Greenland

Associated Press

President Donald Trump said he would deploy a hospital ship to Greenland, alleging that many people there are sick and not receiving care, even though both of the U.S. Navy's hospital ships are currently docked at a shipyard in Alabama.

Trump's announcement prompted a defense on Sunday of Denmark and Greenland's health care system from their leaders, and it was the latest point of friction with the American leader who has frequently talked about seizing the massive

Arctic territory.

"It's a no thank you from here," said Greenlandic Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen.

Trump's social media post about a hospital ship came after Denmark's military said its Arctic command forces on Saturday evacuated a crew member of a U.S. submarine off the coast of Greenland for urgent medical treatment.

The Danish Joint Arctic Command, on its Facebook page, said the crew member was evacuated about 8 miles off Nuuk — the capital of the vast, ice-

covered territory — and transferred to a hospital in the city. The crew member was retrieved by a Danish Seahawk helicopter that had been deployed on an inspection ship.

Trump, in a post on his Truth Social platform on Saturday night, referred to his special envoy for Greenland and said, "Working with the fantastic Governor of Louisiana, Jeff Landry, we are going to send a great hospital boat to Greenland to take care of the many people who are sick, and not being taken care of there. It's on the

way!!!"

Nielsen said it wasn't necessary.

"We have a public health care system where treatment is free for citizens. That is a deliberate choice — and a fundamental part of our society," Nielsen said. "That is not how it works in the USA, where it costs money to see a doctor."

Danish Defense Minister Troels Lund Poulsen, speaking to public broadcaster DR, said Danish authorities had not been informed that the U.S. ship was on its way.

Future ‘Golden Fleet’ faces stormy seas

Trump-led Navy project, with few details, is target of commendation, condemnation

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump’s plan for a “Golden Fleet” has been short on details so far — its official website says “Webpage currently under construction. Check back soon for updates.”

But the lack of specifics hasn’t stopped the project from drawing praise and scorn from politicians and military analysts.

Trump announced the concept Dec. 22 during an event at his Mar-a-Lago residence in Palm Beach, Fla., highlighting a proposal for a new “battleship” that would field firepower he said was “100 times more than anything built.”

The battleships, as currently planned, would be armed with 128 MK-41 vertical launch system cells, 12 Conventional Prompt Strike long-range hypersonic missiles, an electromagnetic railgun, conventional five-inch guns, and be protected by AN/SPY-6 radar.

Initial schematics of the first battleship — which Trump said should be named USS Defiant — include an array of weapons, including yet-to-be-developed energy weapons, and anti-drone defensive systems.

Trump’s proposed 20 or more Golden Fleet BBG(X) battleships would cost \$15 billion to \$22 billion for the lead ship, according to a Congressional Budget Office report. Later ships would cost more than \$9 billion each once production is well underway.

The battleship is projected to have a displacement of about 35,000 tons. The last battleships built by the United States, the Iowa-class, launched near the end of World War II, weighed about 57,000 tons. The new battleship would be significantly smaller than the Navy’s largest ships, including the new Ford-class aircraft carriers, with a displacement of

100,000 tons.

The design is similar to the DDG(X) — the Navy’s previously planned next-generation destroyer. But the Trump-class battleships are larger.

Navy Secretary John Phelan has recently attempted to flesh out the Golden Fleet plan, saying it is an umbrella term for an overhaul of the size and mix of ships the Navy will have in the future, including uncrewed ships operating in concert with manned vessels. The profile would include the Ford-class carriers, new Virginia-class attack submarines and Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines already joining the fleet.

Phelan touted the Golden Fleet as putting more “hulls in the water” at a faster pace, during a speech Feb. 13 at the West 2026 conference on naval defense in San Diego.

“High-end platforms — Next-generation battleships, continued production of destroyers, carriers, and submarines that deliver survivability, magazine depth, and sustained fires,” he said. Phelan said the “low-end mix” would include the new class of frigates based on a Coast Guard cutter design, as well as unmanned surface and submersible vessels.

While warships are the center of debate, Phelan said the Golden Fleet would also be the proving ground for what he called upgraded Navy’s logistics and auxiliaries, “sustaining power across distance.” He touted a streamlined procurement system and the use of artificial intelligence for planning and design.

Phelan reiterated his support for a possible \$1.5 trillion defense budget, which Trump has suggested he will request for the 2027 fiscal year.

That figure, at least 50% higher than the 2026 budget, is likely to face significant oppo-

sition from many Democrats and Republican fiscal hawks in Congress. But Phelan promised to push on with the plan.

The Golden Fleet garnered early support from some experts who said naval strategy has been too rooted in the Cold War and the post-9/11 wars against terrorism.

Brent Sadler, Senior Research Fellow for Naval Warfare and Advanced Technology in the Allison Center for National Security, wrote an article for the conservative Heritage Foundation titled “The U.S. Navy Must Build the ‘Golden Fleet.’” While lamenting a lack of details so far, Sadler said an overhaul of the Navy’s ship types and purposes was long overdue. He listed several types that he believes the Golden Fleet will bring to American power projection at sea.

But for some analysts, the “Golden Fleet” is less a boon to Navy planning than a boondoggle that will lead to more planning U-turns, pushing several surface fleet proposals farther into the future.

Ronald O’Rourke, who recently retired after 42 years with the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, including as lead defense analyst, spoke this month at a panel on shipbuilding at the West 2026 conference.

O’Rourke said the Navy can ill afford another major course change in ship production, another reversal for the Navy that has left in its wake discontinued programs and abandoned ship types.

“They’re all well intentioned,” O’Rourke said. “But in some cases, it’s resulted in people learning just enough about shipbuilding to get things wrong. And the discussion about shipbuilding has suffered from bad information, magical thinking, hand waving, arguments and confusion about causes, effects and solutions.”

USS Truxtun commander relieved after collision with oiler

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Cmdr. James Koffi, commanding officer of the destroyer USS Truxtun, was relieved of his command on Sunday.

Rear Adm. Carlos Sardiello, the commander of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/4th Fleet, made the decision, which he said was “due to a loss of confidence in Koffi’s ability to com-

mand.”

Koffi has commanded the Truxtun since Jan. 9, 2025.

The action occurred after Truxtun was involved in a collision with the oiler USNS Supply during a replenishment at sea in the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility, the Navy said.

SOUTHCOM said two personnel reported minor injuries, and the cause of

the collision is under investigation.

Koffi has been temporarily reassigned to Naval Surface Group Middle Atlantic.

Cmdr. Taylor Auclair, most recently assigned to U.S. Fleet Forces Command, will serve as commanding officer.

The Navy said the Truxtun is currently in port at Ponce, Puerto Rico, in support of the SOUTHCOM mission to disrupt illicit drug trafficking.

Tokyo: Nothing has changed in Futenma plan

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

A recent Pentagon statement that it will not return Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to Japan until it provides an alternate runway of similar length is not a change from the original agreement, according to Japan's defense minister.

The Department of Defense included the statement in its fiscal 2026 budget report, responding to a 2017 Government Accountability Office recommendation that the Pentagon identify "other runways that would support mission requirements" before vacating Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

A replacement facility for MCAS Futenma is under construction at Camp Schwab on the northern end of Okinawa.

"Pursuant to the terms of our arrangement, finalizing the selection of that alternative runway is the responsibility of the Government of Japan, and the Futenma facility will not be returned to Japan until it makes that selection," the budget report states.

The 2013 Consolidated Plan for U.S. Forces Facilities and Area in Okinawa also allows for "improved emergency use of civilian facilities" by the U.S. military.

"The necessary legal framework is already in place" for civilian facilities to be used by the Marine Corps in an emergency, Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi wrote Friday on X. "We do not envision a situation in which MCAS Futenma is not returned even after the relocation to Henoko is complete because this

condition is not met."

The Okinawa Times reported Feb. 15 that the language marked "the first time that an official document mentions that Futenma will not be returned if the conditions are not met."

However, similar wording appeared in documentation accompanying the Pentagon's fiscal 2025 budget.

Koizumi wrote Friday that "although this is being brought up as a new point of contention, nothing has changed from before."

The DOD's response "simply restates the American position on the relocation of Futenma," David Layfield, a professor of history and government at the University of Maryland Global Campus, told Stars and Stripes by email Sunday.

"Construction of the new fa-

cilities at Camp Schwab has been more difficult and is taking a lot longer than the 2013 agreement envisaged," he wrote.

The United States and Japan agreed in 1996 to relocate the airfield from densely populated Ginowan to rural Henoko. Construction is expected to continue until at least 2033.

"The Marine Corps continues to implement the conditions-based realignment of U.S. forces in accordance with bilateral agreements, including the construction of the Futenma Replacement Facility and the return of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma," Headquarters Marine Corps spokesman Capt. Steven Keenan said Thursday.

The GAO concluded in 2017 that the runway under construction at Schwab would be too short.

US withdraws forces, gear from Syria base

Associated Press

QAMISHLI, Syria — U.S. forces are withdrawing from a key base in northeastern Syria, officials said Monday, in what appears to be part of a larger drawdown of U.S. forces in Syria.

Iraqi and Syrian security officials said that the U.S. military had begun moving its forces and equipment from the Qasrak base in Syria to Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region.

Associated Press journalists in the city of Qamishli in northeast Syria saw a convoy of dozens of trucks carrying military vehicles and equipment Monday, with military helicopters circling overhead, moving toward the Iraqi border.

The U.S. military's Central Command did not respond to a request for comment, nor did the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which controls

the area around the Qasrak base.

A senior Iraqi security official said evacuation of the base had begun Sunday and that on Monday, U.S. forces and military equipment coming from the base crossed into Iraq's semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region.

A Syrian security official said about 200 soldiers remained at the base Monday and that work was underway to dismantle military jamming and air defense systems and the engineering section at the base.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly.

Earlier this month, CENTCOM and Syria's defense ministry announced that U.S. troops had left another base, the al-Tanf base in eastern Syria near the border with Jordan.

NASA sends moon rocket to hangar for more repairs

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Grounded until at least April, NASA's giant moon rocket is headed back to the hangar this week for more repairs before astronauts are able to climb aboard.

The space agency said Sunday it's targeting Tuesday for the slow, 4-mile trek across Kennedy Space Center, weather permitting.

NASA had barely finished a repeat fueling test Thursday, to ensure dangerous hydrogen fuel leaks were plugged, when another problem cropped up.

This time, the rocket's helium system malfunctioned, further delaying astronauts' first trip to the moon in more than half a century.

Engineers had just tamed the hydrogen leaks and settled on a March 6 launch date — already a month late — when the helium issue arose.

The helium flow to the rocket's upper stage was disrupted; helium is needed to purge the engines and pressurize the fuel tanks.

"Returning to the Vehicle Assembly Building at Kennedy is required to determine the cause of the issue and fix it," NASA said in a statement.

NASA said the quick rollback preps preserve an April launch attempt, but stressed that will depend on how the repairs go.

The space agency has only a handful of possible days any given month to launch the crew of four around the moon and back.

The three Americans and one Canadian assigned to the Artemis II mission remain on standby in Houston.

They will become the first people to fly to the moon since NASA's Apollo program that sent 24 astronauts there from 1968 through 1972.

DHS suspends Global Entry amid shutdown

Associated Press

DALLAS — The Department of Homeland Security said Sunday that the Global Entry program would be shut down as long as the partial government shutdown remains in effect.

The announcement comes after the department said Saturday night that it planned to shut down both Global Entry and the Transportation Security Administration's PreCheck program as well, but DHS canceled the PreCheck closure.

"As staffing constraints arise, TSA will evaluate on a case-by-case basis and adjust operations accordingly," the agency said.

The turmoil at security and customs lanes is tied to a partial

government shutdown that began Feb. 14 after Democrats and the White House were unable to reach a deal on legislation to fund the Department of Homeland Security. Democrats have been demanding changes to immigration operations that are core to President Donald Trump's deportation campaign.

The security disruptions come at a time where a major winter storm hit the East Coast on Sunday. Nine out of 10 flights going out of John F. Kennedy International Airport, LaGuardia Airport and Boston Logan Airport have been canceled for Monday.

Global Entry is a U.S. Customs and Border Protection program that allows pre-approved, low-

risk travelers to use expedited kiosks when entering the United States from abroad. There's no specific government data that shows how much time passengers save at airports or other ports of entry from Global Entry but travel industry experts estimate that Global Entry cuts the amount of time passengers getting through customs from an average of 30 to 90 minutes for regular customs lines to 5 to 10 minutes in Global Entry lines.

Those who have Global Entry also receive TSA PreCheck. The Department of Homeland Security said in 2024 that more than 20 million Americans had TSA PreCheck, and millions of those Americans have overlapping

Global Entry memberships.

Airport lines seemed largely unaffected through midday Sunday, with security check line wait times listed as under 15 minutes for most international airports, according to TSA's mobile app.

Blair Perkins, 39, of Dallas, left Cancun, Mexico, to return home Sunday morning. After she and her friends arrived at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport that the regular line was long but moved fairly fast.

"We went around about four or five different corners to get to the end of the U.S. line," she said.

With Global Entry, it usually takes less than five minutes to get through customs, she said. Sunday, it took about 30 minutes.

Intense snowfall blankets Northeast; many lose power

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A massive snowstorm pummeled the northeast United States on Monday, forcing millions of people to stay home amid strong wind and blizzard warnings, transportation shutdowns, and school and business closures.

The storm hit the metropolitan northeast as accumulations from an earlier snowfall had just melted away — except for gray mountainous piles in parking lots and along the side of roads. Officials declared emergencies from Delaware to Massachusetts, and hundreds of thousands of people grappled with power failure from downed electrical lines.

Even as digging out began, the National Weather Service warned Monday that perilous conditions could persist.

"The combination of heavy snowfall and strong winds will continue to produce blizzard conditions along the Northeastern Seaboard," the weather service said Monday. "Sharply reduced visibility will make travel extremely treacherous across these

areas."

The weather service referred to the storm as a "classic bomb cyclone/nor'easter off the Northeast coast." A bomb cyclone happens when a storm's pressure falls by a certain amount within a 24-hour period, occurring mainly in the fall and winter when frigid Arctic air can reach the south and clash with warmer temperatures.

New York City and Boston canceled school for Monday, while Philadelphia switched to online learning. New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani called it the "first old-school snow day since 2019."

New York, Philadelphia and other cities, as well as several states, declared emergencies.

More than 5,000 flights in and out of the U.S. were canceled for Monday, according to the flight tracking website FlightAware. Most were canceled in New York, New Jersey and Boston.

Storm-related power outages plunged more than 500,000 customers into darkness along the East Coast early Monday, according to PowerOutage.us, which tracks outages nationwide.

25 Mexican troops are slain after cartel leader's killing

Associated Press

GUADALAJARA, Mexico — Twenty-five members of the Mexican National Guard died in six separate attacks after special forces killed the notorious leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, the country's security secretary said Monday as much of Mexico feared more violence.

Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, called "El Mencho," was the boss of one of the fastest-growing criminal networks in Mexico, known for trafficking fentanyl, methamphetamine and cocaine to the United States and staging brazen attacks against government officials who challenged the cartel. The organization responded to his death by blocking roads and setting fire to vehicles.

Oseguera Cervantes died after a shootout in his home state of Jalisco as the Mexican military attempted to capture him. Mexican Defense Secretary Ricardo Trevilla said Monday that authorities had followed one of Oseguera Cervantes' romantic partners to his hideout in Tapalpa.

Army and National Guard spe-

cial forces moved in Sunday morning and immediately came under heavy fire. Eight gunmen were killed there. Oseguera Cervantes and two bodyguards fled into a wooded area where they were seriously wounded in a fire-fight. They were taken into custody and died on the way to Mexico City, Trevilla said.

In a different location in Jalisco, soldiers also killed another high-ranking cartel member who Trevilla said was coordinating violence and offering more than \$1,000 for every soldier killed.

Also killed Sunday were a prison guard, an agent from the state prosecutor's office and a woman who was not identified by authorities. Security Secretary Omar García Harfuch said some 30 criminal suspects were killed in Jalisco and four others were killed in neighboring Michoacan.

In all, at least 73 people were dead, according to a body count taken by security officials after the operation and the ensuing violence. That figure includes security forces, suspected cartel members and others.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ex-singing contestant charged in wife's death

OH TIPP CITY — Authorities in Ohio have arrested and charged a former contestant on “American Idol” with shooting and killing his wife and staging the crime scene to mislead investigators.

Caleb Flynn, 39, pleaded not guilty Friday to charges of murder, assault and tampering with evidence.

Ashley Flynn, 37, was found dead after officers received a report of a burglary and shooting at a Tipp City home, according to a news release by Tipp City Police. Her husband and two children were inside the home when officers arrived.

In a 911 call released by authorities, a frantic Caleb Flynn tells a dispatcher someone broke into his home and killed his wife.

Driver who tore up National Mall sentenced

DC WASHINGTON — A man who drove a black SUV onto the National Mall last year, frightening pedestrians and damaging the grass as a barbecue battle raged nearby, was sentenced Friday to a year and a half in jail.

The driver, Curtis Lear, was also ordered to repay more than \$9,000 to cover damage to the lawn from the nighttime romp, which was captured by surveillance cameras and bystanders' videos on social media.

According to court records, the 30-year-old said he was “in the midst of a mental health episode” on the night of June 21 as he drove a Jeep down D.C. side-

walks, ran a red light, steered onto the Mall near Seventh Street Southwest and “drove erratically in circles at a high rate of speed in close proximity to pedestrians.”

Remains mishandled at crematorium, police say

MD CHARLES COUNTY — Maryland State Police issued arrest warrants for the operators of Heaven Bound Cremation Services, alleging that they mishandled the remains of seven fetuses and a 2-month-old infant, according to a statement by Charles County State’s Attorney Tony Covington.

Brandon Williams, 50, and his wife, Rosa Williams, 48, were each charged with eight counts of improper disposal of human remains, Covington said.

Heaven Bound was forced to stop operating in January 2025 after investigators found a broken cremation chamber and a pile of decomposing bodies in its White Plains location. Documents showed that 18 of the bodies were not kept at the right temperature, and at least three of them were “visibly decomposing.”

Large supplier of wine faces layoffs, closure

CA LOS ANGELES — California wine giant Gallo is laying off more than 90 employees and closing a Napa Valley wine-making facility.

The Modesto company said the cuts are necessary to adapt to market dynamics and changing customer demands.

In total, 93 employees across five sites will lose their jobs, according to a Worker Adjustment

and Retraining Notice the company filed with the state last week.

The “operational adjustments” will not “materially impact” the company’s tasting rooms in Napa, Sonoma and Paso Robles, a company spokesperson said. Gallo plans to permanently close its Ranch Winery in St. Helena.

University cuts ties with students of color aid

IL CHICAGO — The University of Chicago is among 31 universities nationwide to cut ties with The Ph.D. Project, an organization known for helping students of color attain professional degrees, amid an investigation by the U.S. Department of Education.

The organization, founded in 1994 to increase diversity among business school faculty, provides students of color access to job and mentorship opportunities to help them earn doctoral degrees.

The department’s Office for Civil Rights’ investigation into 45 university agreements with the organization started nearly a year ago as part of the Trump administration’s goal to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion policies in higher education.

The OCR concluded that institutions violated the federal Civil Rights Act by partnering with a program that “limits eligibility based on the race of its participants.”

But the University of Chicago told the Tribune on Friday that it discontinued its engagement with the organization prior to receiving the notice of investigation from the Office for Civil Rights and “takes seriously its

obligation to prohibit unlawful discrimination,” UChicago’s Director of Public Affairs Gerald McSwiggan said in a statement.

State OKs teaching of Venezuelan leader's fall

FL TAMPA — Florida’s students will learn about the fall of former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as part of their history of communism lessons to be implemented next year.

The State Board of Education on Friday unanimously approved adding the information into social studies standards.

Education commissioner Anastasios Kamoutsas, who pushed for the addition, said time was of the essence.

“It’s important we do this because we’re about ready to do bids for textbooks,” Kamoutsas said. Students should know from those books “oppressive regimes that have torn so many families apart can be toppled.”

Airport to be renamed after President Trump

FL PALM BEACH — The Palm Beach airport will soon be renamed after Donald Trump, making it the latest institution to bear the name of the president.

Florida’s Republican-led legislature on Thursday approved a bill renaming the airport in Trump’s adopted hometown as President Donald J. Trump International Airport. Gov. Ron DeSantis is expected to sign it into law.

The airport is one of several high-profile places in Palm Beach and beyond that now carry Trump’s imprint.

— From wire reports

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Verona closing ceremony marks end of Olympics

Associated Press

VERONA, Italy — The Milan Cortina Olympics ended Sunday as the twin flames in co-host cities Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo were extinguished during a closing ceremony inside the ancient Verona Arena, roughly mid-distance between the far-flung mountain, valley and city venues that made these the most spread-out Winter Games ever.

In declaring the 2026 Games over, International Olympic Committee President Kirsty Coventry told local organizers that they “delivered a new kind of winter games and you set a new, very high standard for the future.”

The next Winter Games will be held in neighboring France, which received the Olympic flag in the official handover earlier in the ceremony. Following the same spread-out model, the 2030 Winter Games will stage events in the Alps and Nice, on the Mediterranean Sea, while speedskating will be held either in Italy or the Netherlands.

A total of 116 medal events were held in eight Olympic sports across 16 disciplines, including the debut of ski mountaineering this year, over the course of 17 days of competition.

With the final events wrapping up just hours before the ceremony, the 50-kilometer (just over 31-mile) mass start men's and women's cross country medals were awarded by Coventry inside the Arena.

Host Italy won its highest Winter Olympic tally ever with 30 medals — 10 gold, six silver and 14 bronze, crushing the previous record of 20 set at the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994.

“Your outstanding performance united Italians everywhere and played a fundamental role in the success of the games,” Giovanni Malagò, the president of the Milan Cortina Foundation told the Italian athletes sitting behind him wearing headbands emblazoned with “Italia.”

The closing ceremony paid tribute to Italian dance and music — from lyric opera to Italian pop of the 20th century to the DJ beat of Gabry Ponte, who got the 1,500 athletes on their feet and dancing while color confetti exploded on stage. Italian Achille Lauro delivered the last word with the song “Incoscienti Giovani,” or “reckless young people,” just before athletes who so aptly harnessed their youthful energy for these Games filed out.

The 2½-hour ceremony opened with a whimsical tribute to Italian lyric opera, with the stage director rousing not only the closing ceremony cast, including Lauro, but also long-dormant opera characters tucked away in crates within the amphitheater's tunnels.

On stage, Madama Butterfly in a bright pink and green costume and Aida in golden tiers were unpacked from mirrored crates while 17th century musicians played the joyous “Libiamo ne' lieti calici” from La Traviata, a nod to the Arena's long history as the venue for a summer opera festival.

The opera characters, led by the jester Rigoletto, spilled out into the piazza outside, mixing with the bemused athletes who were flag-bearers for their countries, some of whom pulled out their phones to film.

In a later sequence, internationally acclaimed ballet dancer Roberto Bolle made his first-ever aerial performance inside a blazing ring meant to represent the sun. He was lowered to the stage that mimicked the Venetian lagoon, replete with gondolas, where he danced to a haunting song by Italian singer Joan Thiele.

In a key moment, the Olympic flame encased in a Venetian glass vessel was carried into the Arena by Italian gold medalists from the 1994 Lillehammer Games. The Olympic rings illuminated in white appeared high on the stone stairs behind the stage, flanked by national flags, when one raised the flame in the center of the stage.

This was the first Olympics for Coventry, a two-time Olympic champion in swimming, who watched much of the ceremony alongside Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

Some 12,000 spectators joined the athletes and officials for the closing ceremony, which was a much more intimate affair than the opening ceremony starring Mariah Carey and Andrea Bocelli inside Milan's San Siro soccer stadium, attended by over 60,000 people.

The Milan Cortina Games spanned an area of 8,500 square miles, from ice sports in Milan to biathlon in Anterselva on the Austrian border, snowboarding and men's downhill in Valtellina on the Swiss border, cross-country skiing in the Val di Fiemme north of Verona and women's downhill, curling and sliding sports in co-host Cortina d'Ampezzo.

No. 24 Wisconsin pulls away late to beat Iowa

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — Nick Boyd scored 27 points and Nolan Winter added 18 as No. 24 Wisconsin pulled away late for an 84-71 victory over Iowa on Sunday.

Bennett Stirtz's layup trimmed the Hawkeyes' deficit to 68-65, but Austin Rapp hit a pair of 3-pointers to fuel a 10-point Badgers run. Boyd's layup put Wisconsin ahead 78-65 with just under four minutes remaining.

John Blackwell hit four free throws after a deadball technical foul to extend the lead to 82-69 with 1:02 left.

Rapp scored 14 points and Blackwell had 13 for the Badgers (19-8, 11-5 Big Ten), who bounced back from an 86-69 loss at Ohio State.

Stirtz had 23 points for Iowa (19-8, 9-7),

which was coming off a 57-52 win at home over No. 9 Nebraska. He opened the second half with a 3 to put the Hawkeyes up 44-41, but Wisconsin answered with an 11-0 run, going in front 51-44 on Boyd's driving layup.

The Badgers hit 18 of 20 free throws, including 14 of 15 in the second half. Boyd shot 9-for-16 and Winter 8-for-11.

Andrew Rohde's 3-pointer put Wisconsin in front 64-57, but Stirtz hit a jumper and followed with a steal and layup to make it 64-61.

The Badgers, who trailed by nine early, were within 41-40 at halftime despite Blackwell being limited to 10 scoreless minutes with two fouls.

No. 15 Michigan State 66, Ohio State 60: Carson Cooper scored a career-high 20 points and grabbed 11 rebounds to lead the

host Spartans over the Buckeyes.

Jeremy Fears added 11 points and eight assists for Michigan State (22-5, 12-4 Big Ten), which has won three of four, moving into a third-place tie in the Big Ten with No. 9 Nebraska and No. 7 Purdue.

Ohio State (17-10, 9-7) fell to 0-9 against Quadrant 1 teams, which may hurt its chances of earning an NCAA Tournament bid next month.

The Buckeyes had an opportunity to earn an impressive win, playing without the ill Devin Royal and injured John Mobley.

Bruce Thornton tried to make up for it, scoring 32 points, but didn't get much help from a teammate other than Christoph Tilly, who scored 10 points and missed only one shot.

Celtics sweep season series vs. Lakers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Jaylen Brown had 32 points, eight rebounds and seven assists, and the Boston Celtics swept the season series in the NBA's most storied rivalry with a 111-89 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Sunday night.

Payton Pritchard scored 30 points with six 3-pointers and eight assists for Boston, which has won three straight and eight of nine as it attempts to close the gap on Detroit atop the Eastern Conference standings.

Brown and Pritchard scored 19 points apiece in the second half, and Pritchard wrapped up the win on a step-back 3-pointer with 3:24 to play, prompting Los Angeles to empty its bench amid scattered boos.

Luka Dončić had 25 points and LeBron James got the 43,000th point of his career while scoring 20 for the Lakers, who fell short at home against a probable NBA title contender for the third time in two weeks. LA was held to its second-lowest point total of the season.

Warriors 128, Nuggets 117: Brandin Podziemski scored 12 of his 18 points in the final five minutes of the fourth quarter and host Golden State beat Denver.

Podziemski shot 7 of 16 and added 15 rebounds and nine assists. Al Horford hit six 3-pointers and finished with 22 points and seven assists as the Warriors ended a two-game losing streak despite being without Stephen Curry (knee), Kristaps Porzingis (sick) and Jimmy Butler (torn right ACL). Draymond Green (back) was also a late scratch.

Nikola Jokić had 25 points, 20 rebounds and 12 assists for the Nuggets. It's Jokić's fifth triple-double in seven games, 19th of the season and the 183rd of his career.

76ers 135, Timberwolves 108: Tyrese Maxey had 39 points and eight assists, VJ Edgcombe made a career-high

six 3-pointers and finished with 24 points, and visiting Philadelphia beat Minnesota to snap a four-game losing streak — all by double figures.

Maxey made 16 of 28 shots from the field and hit four of the 76ers' 21 3-pointers. Quentin Grimes had 19 points, which included five 3s, and seven assists. Kelly Oubre Jr. added 18 points and four steals.

The Timberwolves had their three-game win streak snapped. Anthony Edwards scored 19 of his 28 points in the first half for Minnesota. Jaden McDaniels added 19 and Julius Randle scored 18.

Thunder 121, Cavaliers 113: Isaiah Joe scored 22 points and Cason Wallace added 20 points and 10 assists to help short-handed Oklahoma City beat visiting Cleveland.

Chet Holmgren had 17 points, 15 rebounds and three blocks for the Thunder (44-14), who made 21 of 41 3-point attempts (51.2%), including six by Joe, and converted 17 turnovers into 31 points.

OKC played without injured starters Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (abdominal strain) and Jalen Williams (strained right hamstring), and key contributors Ajay Mitchell (abdominal strain) and Alex Caruso (sprained left ankle).

Raptors 122, Bucks 94: Immanuel Quickley scored 32 points and visiting Toronto snapped Milwaukee's three-game win streak with a victory.

The Raptors' Brandon Ingram had 22 points, and Sandro Mamukelashvili added 19. Quickley was 5-for-11 on 3-point attempts and had nine assists and three rebounds.

Ryan Rollins and Kevin Porter Jr. led the Bucks with 21 points each. Cam Thomas scored 15 off the bench. Milwaukee lost for just the second time in its last eight games.

Hawks 115, Nets 104: Jalen Johnson had 26 points and 12 rebounds and host Atlanta rallied from an 11-point fourth-quarter

deficit to beat Brooklyn for the Nets' fourth straight loss.

CJ McCollum added 16 points and eight rebounds in his first start since joining the Hawks as part of a trade that sent Trae Young to Washington. Jock Landale had 17 points in 16 minutes off the bench, knocking down all three of his 3-point shots. Onyeka Okongwu threw down a thunderous slam over Nic Claxton in the third quarter and finished with 13 points, 11 rebounds and two blocks.

Michael Porter Jr. led Brooklyn with 18 points, seven rebounds and six assists. Claxton returned after missing three games with ankle and hip injuries to finish with 15 points, eight rebounds and five assists.

Mavericks 134, Pacers 130: Khris Middleton scored 25 points and P.J. Washington added 23 to lead visiting Dallas over Indiana, snapping a 10-game losing streak.

Middleton also had seven rebounds and seven assists and was one of six Mavericks players to score in double figures. Washington grabbed nine boards, and Marvin Bagley III had 12 points and 11 rebounds. Dallas ended its longest slide since skids of 10 and 15 games in 1997-98, and won for the first time since Jan. 22.

All-Star forward Pascal Siakam returned from a three-game absence and led the Pacers with 30 points while grabbing eight rebounds. Andrew Nembhard had 22 points and 11 assists. Jarace Walker added 18 points, nine rebounds and six assists.

Hornets 129, Wizards 112: LaMelo Ball made a career-high 10 3-pointers and scored 37 points to help visiting Charlotte rout Washington for a four-game season sweep.

Ball attempted 15 3-pointers. Kon Knueppel added 28 points, and Brandon Miller had 22. The Hornets made 12 of 14 3-pointers in the third quarter to blow open the game, and finished 25 of 46 from long range.

Washington dropped to 16-40, missing a chance for its first three-game winning streak since February 2025.

Trail Blazers 92, Suns 77: Donovan Clingan had 23 points, 13 rebounds and four blocked shots to lead visiting Portland past short-handed Phoenix.

Jerami Grant also scored 23 points on 9-of-13 shooting. The Trail Blazers bounced back from an ugly 157-103 loss to Denver on Friday and have won five of their past seven.

Gillespie led the Suns with 18 points, and Jalen Green had 13.

Knicks 105, Bulls 99: Karl-Anthony Towns had 28 points and 11 rebounds for his NBA-leading 39th double-double and visiting New York outlasted sliding Chicago for its second straight victory.

Towns scored six straight points — on a 3-pointer, a layup and free throw — after the Bulls took a 95-94 lead with 3:52 left in regulation on Matas Buzelis' 3. Mikal Bridges hit another 3-pointer with 27 seconds left, and Jalen Brunson iced it with two free throws.

Buzelis finished with 15 points for Chicago. Jalen Smith had 12 before leaving the in the third quarter with right calf tightness, and Isaac Okoro had 12. Guerschon Yabusele had 11 points and 13 rebounds.

Magic 111, Clippers 109: Desmond Bane scored 36 points and Paolo Banchero added 16 points and eight assists as visiting Orlando held on for a victory over Los Angeles.

Wendell Carter Jr. had 15 points and 14 rebounds and Tristan da Silva scored 13 for the Magic, who improved to 5-2 since Feb. 5.

Kawhi Leonard shrugged off an ankle injury to score 37 points and Benedict Mathurin added 21 points and nine rebounds off the bench for the Clippers, who are 4-5 since Feb. 2. Mathurin missed a 3-point attempt to win the game at the buzzer.

Reddick, Jordan get 2nd straight NASCAR win

Associated Press

HAMPTON, Ga. — Whether on or off the racetrack, all Michael Jordan does is win in NASCAR.

For the second consecutive Sunday to open the season, the basketball great and co-owner of 23XI Racing celebrated in victory lane with driver Tyler Reddick. This time after a thriller at Echo Park Speedway.

Jordan's team now has the top two drivers in the Cup Series points standings with Reddick and Bubba Wallace. The six-time NBA champion already added a ring last week with Reddick in the Daytona 500, the crown jewel of stock-car racing.

Oh, and Jordan also settled a federal antitrust lawsuit with NASCAR in December, a major legal victory that secured a permanent franchise-style model and ensured his team would remain in business for the long term.

"The guys worked hard all summer, and I know we had our little ordeal," Jordan said after Reddick's victory Sunday, referring to the bruising court battle that ended with him making peace with NASCAR CEO and chairman Jim France. "They kept working hard and this is the fruit of their labor. They put forth the effort, and for us to come out and win the first two races says a lot about our whole team."

This time, Reddick led a race-high 53 laps on the 1.54-mile oval south of Atlanta — including the final two in a double-overtime restart. He snatched the lead from Wallace despite the right-front fender of his No. 45 Toyota being damaged in a nine-car crash on the 224th of a scheduled 260 laps. Reddick fell two laps down for repairs, but came roaring back from 27th for his 10th career victory.

"I mean, that's crazy, ain't it?" said Reddick, who became the

first driver since Matt Kenseth in 2009 to win the first two NASCAR Cup Series races of the season. "I just found a way to get back in the top five, and I tried to stay committed to somebody."

He got a helpful push from runner-up Chase Briscoe. Ross Chastain finished third, followed by the Spire Motorsports tandem of Carson Hocevar and Daniel Suarez.

Green turns to yellow

Austin Cindric took advantage of a stretch of 61 green-flag laps to open the race, winning the first stage after starting 30th.

It was the second consecutive year that the first stage in the February race was completed without a yellow flag — an oddity for a track known for chaos since its 2022 reconfiguration into a high-banked drafting oval.

The cautions quickly picked up pace in the second stage with three yellow flags in 40 laps that

collected 16 cars and eliminated notable drivers Ty Gibbs, Josh Berry, Ricky Stenhouse Jr. and Kyle Busch. The 160-lap middle segment ended under another yellow when defending Cup Series champion Kyle Larson slammed the outside wall after a collision with Shane van Gisbergen.

No Vegas love lost

Busch was perturbed after his No. 8 Chevrolet "got rammed" exiting Turn 2 by the No. 4 Ford of Noah Gragson on the 125th lap. Though both drivers hail from Las Vegas the 40-year-old Busch felt little kinship in taking issue with the aggressive style of Gragson, who is 13 years younger.

"He didn't give me an opportunity to make sure I was straight before hitting me or get into me gently to try and get the momentum back," said Busch, who finished 33rd. "He just drove right through me."

Bridgeman holds on at Riviera for first PGA Tour title

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Jacob Bridgeman allowed himself to imagine winning the Genesis Invitational, the massive crowd filling the amphitheater around the 18th green at Riviera, the trophy presentation with Tiger Woods. Almost all of it came true Sunday except for one small detail.

"I pictured myself walking up that hole with a four-shot lead knowing that I'd won," Bridgeman said. "Unfortunately for me, it was only a one-shot lead and it became a lot more nervous."

Bridgeman started with a six-shot lead. He stretched it to seven with 12 holes to play. And as the lead began to shrink with superb finishes by Adam Scott (63), Kurt Kitayama (64) and finally Rory McIlroy (67), he lost feeling in his hands on the putter.

Bridgeman pulled it together with one last par, making a nervy 3-footer on the 18th for a 1-over 72

and a one-shot victory over McIlroy and Kitayama for his first PGA Tour title.

"This is way, way better than I've ever dreamt it," said Bridgeman, the first player since Scott in 2005 to play Riviera for the first time and leave with the trophy.

Woods met him atop the steps overlooking the 18th green, and as they walked toward the trophy presentation, Bridgeman said the tournament host told him how cool it was to win at Riviera, the one place Woods could never master.

"He said, 'You've got one on me.' So I guess he's never won yet," Bridgeman said. "I got one thing. He's got all the other ones."

It all felt so easy for Bridgeman until it wasn't. McIlroy needed to apply pressure in the final group and was even par for the round through 10 holes.

"Because I wasn't putting pressure on him it probably felt to him like he didn't need to do that much, but he played very well," McIlroy said. "But it's hard to close out big tournaments. Even though he was a little shaky coming down the stretch, he held it together when he needed to."

Bridgeman finished at 18-under 266 and didn't make a birdie over the final 15 holes. He heard constant cheers for McIlroy, one of golf's most popular figures who was never a threat until he holed a bunker shot for birdie on the 12th and finished birdie-birdie for a 67.

More cheers rang out across Riviera — Max Greyserman with a hole-in-one on the 14th, Tommy Fleetwood jarring one for eagle from the fairway on the 15th, and Kitayama stuffing his tee shot on the par-3 16th and then barely clearing the bunker

to set up a two-putt birdie on the par-5 17th.

Bridgeman, after a marvelous approach to 12 feet for birdie on the third hole that received only a smattering of applause from the LA crowd, didn't play poorly. He hit a strong chip on the fourth that led to bogey. The rest of the way was a steady diet of 20-foot birdie chances.

But he found the bunker on the 16th and had to make a 5-foot bogey putt to stay in the lead. His birdie chances on the 17th and 18th were woefully short on greens where short putts can be scary.

The last par putt brought a mixture of joy and relief.

"I couldn't even feel my hands on the last couple greens," Bridgeman said. "I just hit the putt hoping it would get somewhere near the hole, and both of them I left a mile short. But I'm glad it's done now."