

Iran: Nuclear talks so far 'very intense'

Bloomberg News

Iran said nuclear talks with the United States have progressed "very intensely and very seriously" as the two sides continued negotiations over a deal into the early evening in Switzerland.

With days to go until President Donald Trump's deadline to reach an agreement, the two countries started their third round of Omani-mediated discussions in Geneva on Thursday morning. Trump has threatened military action against Iran unless its leaders agree to an accord, sparking fears of a new Middle East war embroiling Gulf Arab oil producers and Israel.

"We hope that going forward, the discussion will focus on lifting sanctions and the nuclear issue," Esmail Baghaei, a spokesman for Iran's Ministry of For-

eign Affairs, told Iranian state TV. Diplomats resumed talks later in the day, The Associated Press reported.

The U.S. team is led by Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. Iran Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi is heading the talks for the Islamic Republic.

Iranian state media said parts of the talks were conducted directly, suggesting the lead delegates met instead of dealing only via Omani officials. Iran stated it won't allow any of its highly enriched uranium to be moved out the country, Press TV said, citing Baghaei.

U.S. officials are yet to comment, though have previously signaled Iran would have to send such stocks of uranium to another nation or dilute them.

The U.S. and Iran have been locked in a tense standoff over

the Islamic Republic's atomic activities and have traded threats as Trump ordered a substantial military build-up in the Middle East, sending two carrier strike groups to the region as a warning to Iran. Trump had given the Islamic Republic a deadline of March 1-6 to reach a deal.

Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi, who's mediating the talks, said "creative and positive ideas" had been exchanged earlier Thursday and there is "hope to make more progress."

Global markets are watching closely, with any prolonged conflict in the energy-rich Persian Gulf likely to elevate oil prices and stoke inflation. Benchmark Brent was steady Thursday at around \$71 a barrel as of 3:15 p.m. in London. But it's up more than 16% this year, largely because of the U.S.-Iran standoff.

Energy traders are focused on signs of disruption to shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway off Iran's southern coast that connects key oil producers in the region to world markets. Iran has threatened to retaliate forcefully against any U.S. attack.

America's vast military build-up in the region, the biggest since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, is set get a boost in coming days when a second aircraft carrier arrives that could join in any potential attack or help defend against Iranian counter-strikes. A member of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security Cabinet, Avi Dichter, confirmed media reports Thursday that the U.S. had stationed F-22 fighter jets as well as refueling planes in Israel. It's rare for Israel to host other countries' aircraft.

IG: US troops at Djibouti base faced health risks

By JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

U.S. military officials put potentially thousands of deployed service members at risk to toxic exposure from an open-air burn pit near a remote Air Force base in east Africa, a Defense Department investigation concluded.

The inspector general probe validated a hotline complaint that personnel at Chabelley Airfield near Djibouti were routinely exposed to "a thick fog of smoke" from trash burning, which caused breathing difficulties and other symptoms, the report stated.

The complaint was prompted by an IG report released in December 2024 on air quality con-

cerns at the Navy's Camp Lemonnier, which didn't consider the nearby airfield, the report said.

The IG's final report, which was published Feb. 20, did not say how many service members were potentially affected.

But the Air Force, which operates the airfield, told the audit team that most deployments to Chabelley are six months long and consist of about 120 airmen, a number that does not include personnel that may deploy from other services, according to the report.

Last fall, Air Force officials announced the opening of a new medical care facility at Chabelley and said at the time that the base supports nearly

1,000 personnel.

Used for drone operations and other Air Force missions, Chabelley has evolved from a small commuter airstrip into a more permanent installation and is poised to grow as threats in the region increase, officials said in October.

An eight-month IG review which included an April 2025 visit to the airfield found that U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa officials did not properly manage the effects of poor air quality at Chabelley.

DOD contractors transport products such as petroleum and metals from Lemonnier and the air base to the Chabelley dump, where they are often burned

despite a prohibition on incineration of those items, the IG said.

The visiting inspection team saw the open burning of solid waste at the dump, and service members living and working at the airfield described symptoms such as eye and throat irritation, difficulty breathing and nausea, according to the report.

AFRICOM said it was working with Djibouti to reduce the amount of solid waste sent to Chabelley and would request an exemption from the Pentagon as required by DOD policy.

The AFRICOM chief of staff, however, did not agree that the open-air burning at Chabelley met the exemption criteria, according to the report.

Ex-pilot accused of illegal training in China

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**
Stars and Stripes

A former Air Force pilot who worked with nuclear weapons delivery systems on U.S. fighter jets was arrested Wednesday on suspicion of providing defense secrets to China.

Gerald Eddie Brown Jr., 65, was scheduled to appear Thursday in federal court in Indiana over charges that he violated the Arms Export Control Act, the Justice Department said in a statement Wednesday. He was arrested in Jeffersonville, Ind.

He served as a fighter pilot instructor and simulator instructor on such aircraft as the F-35 Lightning II, F-4, F-15, F-16 and A-10. During his military career, he commanded sensitive

units responsible for nuclear weapons delivery systems and led combat missions, the statement said.

“As an Air Force officer, Brown took an oath to defend our nation against all enemies foreign and domestic,” U.S. Attorney Jeanine Pirro said in the statement. “He broke that oath and betrayed the country, jeopardizing the safety of our service members and allies.”

Also known by his callsign, “Runner,” Brown spent 24 years in the Air Force before leaving active duty as a major in 1996, the statement said.

Prosecutors say that in August 2023, Brown began negotiating a contract through a co-conspirator with Stephen Su

Bin, a Chinese national who was sentenced to nearly four years in prison.

Su Bin pleaded guilty in 2016 to conspiring to hack into the computer systems of U.S. defense contractors on behalf of China.

Brown arrived in China in December 2023, the statement said. The training prosecutors say he provided is considered a defense service covered under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations. A State Department license is required to provide training to foreign persons or foreign military units.

Brown listed his objective on the application as “instructor fighter pilot,” prosecutors said.

On his first day there, Brown

answered questions about the U.S. Air Force for three hours, the statement said. He remained in China until this month, when he returned to the U.S. for reasons that remain unknown.

U.S. allies and partners are likely to have some tough questions for the Pentagon as a result of Brown’s arrest, aviation analyst and former Australian air force officer Peter Layton told CNN.

“If I was an allied nation flying the F-35, I would be very strongly requesting what the U.S. finds has been passed on to the Chinese and what changes to tactics and procedures the U.S. now suggests should be made,” Layton said.

Philippines identifies US military plane that hit road barrier, injuring 5

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Philippine military has identified the U.S. military aircraft that crashed during a Tuesday roadway exercise as an Air Force C-146 Wolfhound special operations plane, an incident that injured five crew members.

The short takeoff-and-landing aircraft struck a concrete barrier while attempting to depart from a roadway, The Associated Press reported Wednesday.

Two service members were treated at a local medical facility, according to an unsigned email Thursday from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

“One of the individuals has been discharged, while the other remains in medical care and

is in stable condition,” the command said.

The Wolfhound crashed during a joint roadway landing exercise in Laoac, Pangasinan, according to a Wednesday report by the state-run Philippine News Agency, citing the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The area is slightly more than an hour’s drive north of Clark Air Base, a former Air Force installation that continues to host U.S. training in the Philippines.

The exercise was coordinated with Philippine authorities to practice operations in cases where airports and runways are inaccessible, such as during typhoons or earthquakes, the AP reported.

No civilians were injured, and the incident remains under investigation.

North Korea warns it could destroy South if threatened

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un claimed his nuclear-armed country could “completely destroy” South Korea if its security were threatened, reiterating his refusal to engage with Seoul, state media said Thursday.

However, he left the door open to dialogue with Washington as he concluded a ruling party congress outlining his policy goals for the next five years.

Kim in recent years has sharpened his rhetoric toward Seoul and underscored his rejection of inter-Korean diplomacy.

Experts say that most likely doesn’t presage military clashes but is intended as a broader effort to assert a more forceful regional role backed by North Korea’s nuclear arsenal and relations with China and Russia.

South Korea’s Unification Ministry said it was regrettable

that the North continues to define inter-Korean relations as hostile and that Seoul will “patiently” pursue any efforts to stabilize peace.

Kim has issued increasingly hard-line views toward South Korea since 2024, when he discarded the North’s long-standing goal of a peaceful reunification between the war-divided Koreas and declared the South as a permanent enemy.

Kim has recently been prioritizing Russia in his foreign policy, sending thousands of troops and large amounts of military equipment to support Moscow’s war in Ukraine, possibly in exchange for aid and military technology.

But it would make sense to keep his options open as the war in Ukraine could wind down, potentially making North Korea less valuable to Moscow, experts say.

Vance: Minn. Medicaid funds paused

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Vice President JD Vance announced Wednesday that the Trump administration would “temporarily halt” some Medicaid funding to Minnesota over fraud concerns, as part of what he described as an aggressive crackdown on misuse of public funds.

Vance, who made the announcement with Dr. Mehmet Oz, the administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said the administration was taking the action “in order to ensure that the state of Minnesota takes its obligations seriously to be good stewards of the American people’s tax money.”

Oz, who referred to people committing fraud as “self-serving scoundrels,” said the federal government would hold off on paying \$259.5 million to Minnesota in funding for Medicaid, the health care safety net for low-income Americans.

Wednesday’s move is part of a larger Trump administration effort to spotlight fraud around the country. That effort comes after allegations of fraud involving day care centers run by Somali residents in Minneapolis prompted a massive immigration crackdown in the Midwestern city, resulting in widespread protests. President Donald Trump, in his State of the Union address on Tuesday, announced

Vance would spearhead a national “war on fraud.”

Oz said the administration was simultaneously notifying Minnesota’s Democratic Gov. Tim Walz.

Walz, former Vice President Kamala Harris’ 2024 running mate, said in a pair of social media posts that the administration’s move had nothing to do with fraud.

“This is a campaign of retribution. Trump is weaponizing the entirety of the federal government to punish blue states like Minnesota,” Walz said. “These cuts will be devastating for veterans, families with young kids, folks with disabilities and working people across our state.”

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison said in a statement that his team has secured over 300 Medicaid fraud convictions since he took office in 2019. And he noted that he called on the Legislature earlier Wednesday to give him more staff and new legal tools to combat Medicaid fraud.

The Office of the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found last year that Medicare improperly paid suppliers nearly \$23 million for durable medical equipment from 2018 through 2024. But it found that most of that was before January 2020, when changes to the system were implemented.

Hillary Clinton: I don’t recall meeting Epstein

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told U.S. House lawmakers in New York on Thursday that she had no knowledge of Jeffrey Epstein’s or Ghislaine Maxwell’s crimes, starting off two days of depositions that will also include former President Bill Clinton.

“I had no idea about their criminal activities. I do not recall ever encountering Mr. Epstein,” Hillary Clinton said in an opening statement she shared on social

media.

The closed-door depositions in the Clintons’ hometown of Chappaqua, a typically quiet hamlet north of New York City, come after months of tense back-and-forth between the former high-powered Democratic couple and the Republican-controlled House Oversight Committee. It will be the first time that a former president has been forced to testify before Congress.

President Donald Trump, a Republican who has expressed re-

gret that the Clintons are being forced to testify, bowed last year to pressure to release case files on Epstein, who killed himself in a New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial.

“Like every decent person,” Hillary Clinton added in her opening statement, “I have been horrified by what we have learned about their crimes.”

She had said that her husband had flown with Epstein for charitable trips but that she did not recall meeting Epstein. She had in-

teracted with Maxwell, Epstein’s former girlfriend and confidant, at conferences hosted by the Clinton Foundation.

Maxwell, a British socialite, also attended the 2010 wedding of their daughter, Chelsea Clinton.

Hillary Clinton accused Comer of running a one-sided investigation that has failed to hold Trump and other Republican officials to account. “This institutional failure is designed to protect one political party and one public official,” she said.

DHS official says ICE agents won’t be at polling places

Associated Press

DENVER — A Department of Homeland Security official on Wednesday told state election administrators that immigration agents will not be stationed at the polls during November’s mid-term elections, trying to swat down one of Democrats’ greatest fears about possible election interference from the Trump administration.

Heather Honey, who serves as

deputy assistant secretary for election integrity, told the group of secretaries of state that “any suggestion that ICE will be present at any polling location is simply not true,” according to a statement from Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes, a Democrat.

A spokeswoman for Oregon Secretary of State Tobias Read also said Honey made the pledge, and Kentucky Secretary of State Michael Adams, a Republican,

posted on X that the promise came from “DHS.”

Honey, an election conspiracy theorist who has backed false claims that President Donald Trump did not lose the 2020 election, was on the call along with representatives of the FBI, U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Postal Service and other federal agencies to talk about coordination for the midterms.

Such a call normally would be

routine, but this year several moves by the Trump administration have unnerved Democratic secretaries of state.

His Department of Justice has been filing lawsuits to get detailed voter data, without explaining why it wants the information. Trump also has been renewing his false claims that widespread fraud marred the 2020 election and has urged his administration to investigate.

Ukraine: Russia struck ahead of US talks

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia launched a barrage of 420 drones and 39 missiles at Ukraine overnight, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday, as U.S. and Ukrainian envoys prepared to hold more talks in Geneva on ending the war that is now in its fifth year.

The bombardment, which included 11 ballistic missiles, targeted critical infrastructure and residential areas across eight regions of Ukraine, Zelenskyy said.

Dozens of people, including children, were injured, officials said, though authorities did not immediately publish a confirmed total.

Zelenskyy said late Wednesday

he had spoken by phone with President Donald Trump and thanked him for his “efforts and engagement” in pursuing peace negotiations.

The U.S.-brokered talks between Moscow and Kyiv are continuing but are deadlocked on the issue of the future of Ukrainian territory that Russia claims as its own.

Zelenskyy has pushed for a summit with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, saying a face-to-face meeting could be decisive in unlocking an agreement, but the Kremlin has rebuffed that proposal beyond inviting the Ukrainian president to Moscow, which Zelenskyy refused.

Trump representatives Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner,

who were also discussing nuclear negotiations with Iran in Geneva before turning to the war in Europe, were due to meet with Rustem Umerov, the head of Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council. They also joined Trump’s call with Zelenskyy.

Ukrainian and European officials have accused Putin of feigning interest in peace negotiations, hoping to avoid punitive U.S. measures such as additional sanctions while pressing forward with the invasion.

Thursday’s talks between the American and Ukrainian envoys were to address details of a possible postwar recovery plan for Ukraine and discuss preparations for an upcoming trilateral

meeting with Moscow officials, perhaps next week, according to Zelenskyy.

He said he has also tasked Umerov with discussing a possible prisoner exchange.

Russia struck gas infrastructure in the Poltava region and electrical substations in the Kyiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions, Zelenskyy said.

Emergency crews responded in five other regions, as well as in the capital.

Ukraine’s air defenses shot down most of the Russian missiles, Zelenskyy said, crediting Western partners for timely delivery of additional air defense interceptors. Ukraine needs foreign help to sustain its fight against Russia’s bigger forces.

Instagram to notify parents of suicide-related searches

Associated Press

Instagram said Thursday it will start alerting parents if their kids repeatedly search for terms clearly associated with suicide or self-harm. The alerts will only go to parents who are enrolled in Instagram’s parental supervision program.

Instagram says it already blocks such content from showing up in teen accounts’ search results and directs people to help-lines instead.

The announcement comes as Meta is in the midst of two trials over harms to children. A trial underway in Los Angeles questions whether Meta’s platforms deliberately addict and harm minors. Another, in New Mexico, seeks to determine whether Meta failed to protect kids from sexual exploitation on its platforms. Thousands of families — along with school districts and government entities — have sued Meta and other social media companies claiming they deliberately design their platforms to be addictive and fail to protect kids from content that

can lead to depression, eating disorders and suicide.

Meta executives including CEO Mark Zuckerberg have disputed that the platforms cause addiction. During questioning by the plaintiff’s lawyer, in Los Angeles, Zuckerberg said he still agrees with a previous statement he made that the existing body of scientific work has not proved that social media causes mental health harms.

“Our goal is to empower parents to step in if their teen’s searches suggest they may need support. We also want to avoid sending these notifications unnecessarily, which, if done too much, could make the notifications less useful overall,” Meta said in a blog post.

Meta said it is also working on similar notifications to parents about their kids’ interactions with artificial intelligence.

“These will notify parents if a teen attempts to engage in certain types of conversations related to suicide or self-harm with our AI,” Meta said.

Cuba: 4 killed in speedboat were attempting to infiltrate

Associated Press

HAVANA — Cuba’s government said late Wednesday that the 10 passengers on a boat that opened fire on its soldiers were armed Cubans living in the U.S. who were trying to infiltrate the island and unleash terrorism.

The announcement came hours after Cuba said its soldiers killed four people and wounded six others aboard a Florida-registered speed boat that had entered Cuban waters and opened fire on the soldiers first, injuring one Cuban officer.

Cuba’s government said the majority of the 10 people on the boat “have a known history of criminal and violent activity.”

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio had told reporters earlier that he was made aware of the incident and that the U.S. is now gathering its own information to determine if the victims were American citizens or permanent residents.

“We have various different elements of the U.S. government that are trying to identify elements of

the story that may not be provided to us now,” Rubio said while at the airport in Basseterre, St. Kitts.

The Cuban government identified two of the boat passengers as Amijail Sánchez González and Leordan Enrique Cruz Gómez, who are wanted by Cuban authorities “based on their involvement in the promotion, planning, organization, financing, support or commission of actions carried out in the national territory or in other countries, in connection with acts of terrorism.”

The government said it also had arrested Duniel Hernández Santos.

Cuba’s government said it obtained the details about the passengers aboard the boat from the suspects detained following the shootout. It identified seven of the 10 passengers, including Conrado Galindo Sariol, José Manuel Rodríguez Castelló, Cristian Ernesto Acosta Guevara and Roberto Azcorra Guevara.

Cuba’s government said that one of the four killed was Michel Ortega Casanova.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Drivers seeking CDL must take test in English

DC WASHINGTON — All truckers and bus drivers will have to take their commercial driver's license tests in English as the Trump administration expands its aggressive campaign to improve safety in the industry and get unqualified drivers off the road.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy announced the latest effort Friday to ensure that drivers meet the federal requirements to understand English well enough to read road signs and communicate with law enforcement officers. Florida already started administering its tests in English.

Currently, many states allow drivers to take their license tests in other languages even though they are required to demonstrate English proficiency. California offered tests in 20 other languages. Duffy said that a number of states have hired other companies to administer commercial driver's licenses tests, and those companies aren't enforcing the standards that drivers are supposed to meet to demonstrate their driving and English skills.

The Transportation Department has been aggressively going after states that gave commercial driver's licenses to immigrants who shouldn't have qualified for them ever since a fatal crash in Florida in August.

Lawmakers seek \$1.5B for transportation work

WA SEATTLE — The state Senate's top Democratic and Republican transportation leaders joined

hands Monday to propose \$1.5 billion in new spending, mainly for safety and maintenance.

State Sens. Marko Liias, D-Edmonds, and Curtis King, R-Yakima, described the work as necessary, and stressed that their proposed transportation budget could create tens of thousands of jobs.

Most of the new money — \$1.38 billion over six years — is slated for preservation work as well as projects aimed at recovering from December's destructive floods.

Liias said he was "confident and hopeful" the federal government will eventually help pay for that work, but the state couldn't wait.

Schools blocked from enforcing anti-DEI law

TX DALLAS — A federal judge temporarily blocked three school districts, including Plano Independent School District, from implementing parts of a new Texas law restricting diversity, equity and inclusion programming in public schools last week.

Judge Charles Eskridge with the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas in Houston barred the districts — Houston, Katy and Plano ISDs — on Friday from enforcing portions of Senate Bill 12. The law, which took effect Sept. 1, prohibits public schools from sponsoring gender and sexuality alliance clubs and rolls back programming related to race, gender and sexual orientation.

The temporary block only applies to those three districts. Plano ISD did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The federal judge's ruling applies to four sections of the law: the bans on gender and sexuality alliance clubs; "diversity, equity and inclusion duties"; assistance with students' "social transitioning"; and instruction, guidance and activities related to sexual orientation or gender identity.

Eskridge ordered Plano, Houston and Katy ISDs to state their positions on the law within the next two weeks and whether they plan to seek representation from Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office.

Bridge owner donates to MAGA before threat

MI DETROIT — Matthew Moroun, whose family owns the Ambassador Bridge, gave \$1 million to a political action committee that supports Republican President Donald Trump less than a month before Trump threatened to block the opening of a new, competing span between Detroit and Canada.

The \$1 million receipt for the super PAC MAGA Inc. was revealed in a monthly campaign finance disclosure covering January and submitted to the Federal Election Commission last week.

Brendan Fischer, director of strategic investigations for the nonprofit Campaign Legal Center, identified the receipt in a post on X.

Moroun gave the money on Jan. 16, according to the disclosure. Twenty-four days later, on Feb. 9, Trump used a social media post to threaten to prevent the new Gordie Howe International Bridge between Detroit and Windsor from opening

until Canada treats the United States with what he described as "fairness and respect."

The Gordie Howe bridge, which was expected to open in the coming months, is co-owned by Canada and Michigan and is the result of a \$4.7 billion project financed by Canada. It has been under construction since 2018 and would directly compete with the Moroun-owned Ambassador Bridge.

Police K-9 discovered shackled up with goats

NC THOMASVILLE — A potentially "aggressive" police dog defied stereotypes when he escaped his kennel and joined up with a gang of goats, according to investigators in North Carolina.

The dog, named K-9 Macho, went on the run after high winds seriously damaged his kennel in the Lexington area, the Thomasville Police Department reported in a Feb. 23 news release.

"While he is not believed to be aggressive without cause, he is a working police dog and may be cautious or defensive if approached," police said. "For your safety, do not attempt to approach, capture, or call out to him. If you see K-9 Macho: Call 911 immediately."

Tips from the community led to the dog being found about a mile from home, and the circumstances were unusual.

"Macho had made friends with a resident's goats and stayed warm in her barn," police said. "He is safe, unharmed, and back with his K-9 handler."

Police did not release details of how the goats reacted to Macho's arrival.

— From wire reports

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Texas Tech D-linemen head to combine

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Texas Tech had the best college defensive line money could buy last season.

Ends David Bailey and Romello Height each had double-digit sacks totals and were ranked among the top 15 in the Football Bowl Subdivision. Tackles Lee Hunter and Skyler Gill-Howard each relished their opportunities to take on blockers and let teammates fill in the gaps.

The immediate payoff came with the Red Raiders celebrating their first outright league title since 1955, their first Big 12 crown and their first College Football Playoff appearance.

Four of the five transfers who helped transform Texas Tech into a national power received a different reward — appearing at the NFL's annual scouting combine in Indianapolis.

"All five of those guys we had come in, they're really good football players, tremendous

football players, and pretty much they're all here getting ready for the combine," former teammate Jacob Rodriguez said Wednesday.

Playing behind the speedy pass rushers and big, beefy interior linemen, the linebacker had the best season of his college career — 128 tackles, seven forced fumbles, four interceptions and two fumble recoveries. His draft prospects soared and Rodriguez finished fifth in Heisman Trophy balloting.

Still, it was a costly proposition for Texas Tech, which paid an estimated \$7 million to get the five game-changing linemen. Nearly half of that total reportedly went to Bailey, who some dubbed the highest-paid defensive player in college football's NIL era.

Bailey, of course, insists he was worth every penny and few at Texas Tech would quibble with him given the results.

"They should have paid the inside linebackers a little bit

more," he said. "They were the leaders of the defense, everything ran through them."

For combine observers, this is life in a new world — one where more than 300 invitees no longer arrive dreaming of big paydays and joking about how some players might pocket less cash after turning pro.

"I never had to deal with that," 53-year-old New York Jets coach Aaron Glenn said, discussing the absence of NIL deals during his college days in the early 1990s. "I do know it's a real thing and a lot of these players are taking pay cuts (to play in the NFL). But I will say this is what they deserve, probably, because of the amount of money they bring to the college."

Wednesday's interview room could have doubled as an entrepreneurs roundtable.

At one point, defensive tackle Cam Ball explained why he spent all five seasons at Arkansas and how he's attempting to

honor his late father's passion for barbecuing. Ball grew up moving grills for his father's Atlanta-based catering company and once his NIL deals kicked in, he continued to help his father though no longer needed need the paycheck.

Today, eight months after his father, Charles, died, Ball and his girlfriend are still cooking. Ball continues to perfect his secret, vinegar-based sauce with seasonings and trimmings his father taught him, while his girlfriend takes care of things such as baked beans and macaroni and cheese.

And Hunter explained how he'd used his NIL money to buy his mother a house and a car, to care for his 5-year-old daughter, Kaylee, and to help his brother start a trucking business by purchasing two 18-wheelers.

Texas Tech gave Hunter that opportunity last season and he and the school both cashed in. Now the question is will that continue in the NFL?

Extra thin draft class will impact QB market options

Associated Press

Kirk Cousins will be available to sign with any team in two weeks once he's released by the Atlanta Falcons. Tua Tagovailoa could be on the move from the Miami Dolphins. Kyler Murray might not be in the Arizona Cardinals' plans.

Reliable quarterbacks have been of utmost importance for decades in the NFL, but long-term satisfaction with the position across the league is becoming increasingly elusive. Just because a team has paid top dollar for a franchise quarterback doesn't mean that decision won't be reconsidered the following year for cost, injuries, performance or all of the above.

For the handful of clubs either at a crossroad or committed to starting over this offseason, the timing is hardly ideal.

Cousins will again be the most certain option on the market next month, when the Falcons plan to cut him and fully pivot toward 2024 first-round draft pick Michael Penix Jr., whose knee injury last year gave Cousins the job back.

After Indiana national champion and Heisman Trophy winner Fernando Mendoza, who's widely expected to be the first-overall pick in the draft by the Las Vegas Raiders, the rookie class thins quickly.

Finding a new starter on the open market is always tricky, and the bargain options are as scant as ever. Green Bay Packers backup Malik Willis will be sought after in free agency, but he has only six career starts. Still, depending on how much a team is willing to pay, either against the salary cap or in trade

currency with players and draft picks, there should be at least some viable upgrades available.

The Minnesota Vikings have found themselves in these predicaments as frequently as any franchise this century, entering this year with more uncertainty following an erratic and injury-filled debut by J.J. McCarthy.

Tua Tagovailoa: With a salary cap charge of about \$56 million and new leadership in the front office and on the coaching staff, Tagovailoa's future with the Dolphins is unclear despite the extension he signed less than two years ago. After six seasons of injuries and inconsistency, including a career-most 15 interceptions in 2025, the fifth-overall pick in the 2020 draft is young enough at age 27 to attract attention from other teams.

Kyler Murray: Limited to five

games by a foot injury last season as the Cardinals slumped to 3-14, Murray is carrying a salary cap hit of about \$52 million for a team that also has a new coaching staff. General manager Monti Ossenfort uttered the familiar refrain at the NFL combine this week: "All options are on the table."

Daniel Jones: After signing a prove-it contract last season with the Indianapolis Colts, Jones was on his way to mirroring the success Sam Darnold — the biggest prize on the market last year — had with the Seattle Seahawks until Jones tore his Achilles tendon in December. Jones is still rehabilitating from the injury, lessening the league-wide interest, and general manager Chris Ballard said he's trying to re-sign the sixth-overall pick in the 2019 draft.

Kucherov, Lightning top Maple Leafs

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Nikita Kucherov scored to give him his ninth 30-goal season and added two assists for 701 in his career and the Tampa Bay Lightning defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 4-2 on Wednesday night for their sixth straight victory.

Brayden Point had two goals and an assist, Gage Goncalves had a goal and two assists and Andrei Vasilevskiy made 32 saves for the Lightning, who are 20-1-1 in their past 22 games. Vasilevskiy is 17-0-1 since Dec. 20.

Tampa Bay won in its first game back from the Olympic break without coach Jon Cooper on the bench. Cooper, who led Canada to the silver medal at the Milan Cortina Games, will miss two games after the death of his father, Robert.

Assistant Rob Zettler stepped in for Cooper and the Lightning ended the Maple Leafs' three-game winning streak.

The Russian-born Kucherov got his 700th assist in his 855th NHL game, becoming the second-fastest player born outside of North America to reach the mark and trailing only Peter Stastny (784 games). The milestone assist came on Goncalves' goal at 7:58 of the second period that gave the Lightning a 2-0 lead.

Kucherov's 30th goal came at 2:59 of the third and made it 3-0. His nine 30-goal seasons tie him with Steven Stamkos for the most in team history.

John Tavares and Matthew Knies scored and Anthony Stolarz made 32 saves for the Maple Leafs, whose five-game winning streak against the Lightning was stopped.

Capitals 3, Flyers 1: Defensemen Trevor van Riemsdyk and Rasmus Sandin ended long goal droughts and host Washington beat Philadelphia, its fifth win in their last six games.

The Capitals now have 42 goals from defensemen this season, the second most in the NHL be-

hind Columbus.

Aliaksei Protas scored an empty-netter for Washington with 26 seconds to play when the Flyers had a six-on-four for his 20th goal of the season, and Logan Thompson made 23 saves. Protas also had an assist.

The Capitals are the only team in the NHL with four players with 20 or more goals this season: Tom Wilson, Alex Ovechkin, Jakob Chychrun and Protas.

Noah Cates scored for Philadelphia 29 seconds into the third period, his first goal in 19 games, and Dan Vladar made 26 stops as the Flyers lost for the sixth time in their last seven games to fall further out of playoff position.

After a scoreless first period, Sandin scored his third goal of the season and his first since Nov. 13 with 6:08 to play in the second. With an assist on the goal, Chychrun now has 11 points (3 goals, 8 assists) in his last eight games.

Sabres 2, Devils 1: U.S. Olympian Tage Thompson scored his 31st goal of the season and added an assist to help visiting Buffalo beat New Jersey in the NHL's return to action.

The Sabres have won seven of 10 to improve to 33-19-6.

Buffalo is looking to make the playoffs for the first time in 14 seasons. The Sabres entered Wednesday night in the top wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

Thompson scored in the second period, and Peyton Krebs made it 2-0 midway through the third. Timo Meier scored for New Jersey with 2:30 to play.

U.S. Olympic hero Jack Hughes was honored by the Devils before the game, and assisted on Meier's goal. The Devils showed video of Hughes' overtime goal in the United States' 2-1 victory over Canada on Sunday in the gold-medal game.

Stars 4, Kraken 1: Wyatt Johnston scored his 30th and 31st goals of the season as host Dallas beat Seattle.

Matt Duchene had a goal and

an assist, and Sam Steel also scored for the Stars, who have won seven consecutive games for the first time since last March 22 to April 3.

Johnston scored his 19th power-play goal — the most in the NHL this season and setting a Dallas season record — for a 4-0 lead. He has three consecutive 30-goal seasons and five multi-goal games this season. Hitting pipes twice in the third period kept him from a fifth career regular-season hat trick.

Defenseman Ryker Evans scored a third-period goal, and Joey Daccord stopped 28 shots for the Kraken.

Avalanche 4, Mammoth 2: U.S. Olympian Brock Nelson scored his 30th goal of the season in Colorado's four-goal second period and the NHL-leading Avalanche beat Utah for a road win.

Parker Kelly, Victor Olofsson and Martin Necas also scored and Scott Wedgewood made 28 saves for Colorado in the first game for both teams following the three-week break for the Olympics.

Nelson scored on a slap shot to make it 3-1 with 7:40 left in the second. With Canadian Olympian Nathan MacKinnon sitting out for the Avs, Nelson moved up to center the top line with Necas and Gabriel Landeskog.

Dylan Guenther scored twice in the second for Utah. Karel Vejmelka stopped 21 shots for the Mammoth.

Golden Knights 6, Kings 4: Pavel Dorofeyev had two goals and Vegas spoiled Artemi Panarin's Los Angeles debut by scoring five third-period goals to rally for a home win.

Colton Sissons, Brandon Saad and Reilly Smith scored three goals in a span of 4:14 midway through the third and the short-handed Golden Knights overcame the absence of five players who participated in the gold medal game at the Milan Cortina Olympics on Sunday. Ivan Bar-

bashev added a late empty-netter, and Adin Hill made 15 saves.

Vegas played without United States center Jack Eichel and defenseman Noah Hanifin and Canada forwards Mark Stone and Mitch Marner and defenseman Shea Theodore, all of whom are expected to be available when their five-game road trip continues against the Capitals in Washington on Friday night.

Jets 3, Canucks 2 (OT): Cole Perfetti scored off a rebound at 1:37 of overtime to give Winnipeg a road victory over Vancouver.

Kyle Connor, returning to the Jets after helping the United States win the Olympics on Sunday, and Gabriel Vilardi also scored, Mark Scheifele had two assists.

Eric Comrie stopped 21 shots. Connor Hellebucyk, who backstopped the United States to the Olympic gold medal, is scheduled to join the team in Anaheim on Friday.

Drew O'Connor and Evander Kane scored for Vancouver, and Nikita Tolopilo made 25 saves.

Ducks 6, Oilers 5: Joel Quenneville became the second coach in NHL history to win 1,000 games with Anaheim's comeback home victory over Edmonton.

Quenneville joined Scotty Bowman in an exclusive hockey club with a milestone win in the Ducks' first game back from the Olympic break.

Cutter Gauthier scored the tie-breaking goal with 1:14 to play for the Ducks, who erased a pair of two-goal deficits.

Zach Hyman and Evan Bouchard scored late in the second period to put the Oilers ahead, but Leo Carlsson and Olen Zellweger scored early in the third to even it again for Anaheim.

Rookie Matt Savoie then converted a rebound late in a power play for his 10th career goal, but Beckett Sennecke answered 46 seconds later with a slick wrist shot for his 19th goal — tops among NHL rookies.

Reed powers UConn to rout vs. St. John's

Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — Tarris Reed Jr. had 20 points, 11 rebounds and six blocks, and No. 6 UConn held 15th-ranked St. John's to 20% shooting in a 72-40 blowout Wednesday night that snapped the Red Storm's 13-game winning streak.

Alex Karaban added 14 points and five rebounds for the Huskies, who moved back into first place in the Big East by avenging an 81-72 loss to St. John's at Madison Square Garden on Feb. 6.

The Red Storm missed 12 consecutive shots in the first half and then their final 24 field goal attempts of the game as UConn (26-3, 16-2) romped to its most lopsided victory in series history.

Jason Sanon scored all 10 of his points in the first half for St. John's (22-6, 15-2), which finished 11 of 56 from the field and fell a half-game behind the Huskies in the conference standings. The team's 13-game winning streak was its longest in 41 years.

No. 7 Florida, 84, Texas 71: Alex Condon scored 23 points,

Boogie Fland had 22 and the visiting Gators beat the Longhorns for their eighth consecutive victory.

The 6-foot-11 Condon converted 10 of 12 shots from the field. He had five points and an assist during a 14-1 run gave Florida (22-6, 13-2 Southeastern Conference) a 75-65 lead with 4:16 remaining. Fland hit 7 of 10 shots and scored seven during the game-changing burst. Xavian Lee scored 10 of his 12 points in the second half.

Texas (17-11, 8-7) has lost two in a row after winning its previous five. Dailyn Swain led the Longhorns with 21 points, including 15 in the second half. Tramon Mark scored 15 points and Jordan Pope had 14.

No. 9 Gonzaga 89, Portland 48: Graham Ike scored 19 points and matched a school record with seven steals as the host Bulldogs routed the Pilots to clinch their first West Coast Conference regular-season championship in three years.

Braeden Smith added 15 points for Gonzaga (28-2, 16-1), which avenged its 87-80 loss at Portland on Feb. 4. Mario Saint-

Supery and Tyon Grant-Foster each scored 12, and Ike grabbed eight rebounds.

Joel Foxwell led the Pilots (12-18, 5-12) with 12 points. Portland shot 34.7% from the field and committed 22 turnovers.

No. 12 Nebraska 74, Maryland 61: Braden Frager scored 21 points off the bench to lead four Cornhuskers players in double figures and host Nebraska beat the Terrapins.

The Huskers (24-4) improved to 13-4 in Big Ten play, matching their program record for conference wins and moving them into a tie for second place with Illinois.

Andre Mills had 16 of his 19 points in the second half for Maryland (11-17, 4-13) and Elijah Saunders scored all 15 of his points on a career-high five 3s. Solomon Washington added 13 points for the Terrapins.

No. 17 Alabama 100, Mississippi State 75: Amari Allen scored 23 points, Latrell Wrightsell Jr. added 18, and the host Crimson Tide cruised to a win over the Bulldogs.

Aden Holloway had 16 for Alabama (21-7, 11-4 Southeastern

Conference), which started the game with five 3-pointers in a 15-2 run on their way to a season-high 16 3s in the first half. It was the Tide's ninth straight game with at least 10 made 3-pointers.

No. 20 Arkansas 99, Texas A&M 84: Billy Richmond III scored 23 points and the host Razorbacks took advantage of the Aggies' miscues to beat Texas A&M.

Richmond, who shot 8 of 13 from the floor and has scored 20 points or more in the last four games, had 15 points in the first half as Arkansas (21-7, 11-4 Southeastern Conference) took a 37-28 lead into halftime.

No. 25 Vanderbilt 88, Georgia 80: Devin McGlockton had 17 points and 10 rebounds for his fourth double-double this season as the host Commodores held off the Bulldogs.

After Georgia tied the game midway through the second half, two free throws by McGlockton with 3½ minutes left made it a two-possession game. The Bulldogs then went scoreless from the field over the final 4:24.

Duren, Cunningham lead Pistons over short-handed Thunder

Associated Press

DETROIT — Jalen Duren had 29 points and 15 rebounds, Cade Cunningham added 29 points and 13 assists and the Detroit Pistons beat the short-handed Oklahoma City Thunder 124-116 on Wednesday night in a matchup of conference leaders.

Oklahoma City started the game without five of its six leading scorers — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (abdomen), Isaiah Hartenstein (calf), Chet Holmgren (back), Ajay Mitchell (abdomen) and Jalen Williams (hamstring). The only one of the top six to start was Isaiah Joe, and he left at halftime because of a bruised hip.

Duncan Robinson added 16 points for East-leading Detroit. The Pistons have won six of seven to improve to 43-14.

Warriors 132, Grizzlies 112: Will Richard scored 21 points, Brandin Podziemski and Gary Payton II added 19 apiece and visiting Golden State routed Memphis.

Gui Santos added 17 points as eight of the nine Warriors players who saw action reached double figures. The ninth player, Malevy Leons, had nine points.

Spurs 110, Raptors 107: Devin Vassell scored 21 points, De'Aaron Fox added 20 and visiting San Antonio overcame Victor Wembanyama's rough night to beat Toronto, extending its season-best win streak to 10 games.

Wembanyama scored 12 points on 3-of-12 shooting. He went 1 for 6 from 3-point range and 5 for 6 at the free-throw line, where his lone miss came with 8.7 seconds left in regulation and his team ahead by three.

Rockets 128, Kings 97: Reed Sheppard made a career-high seven 3-pointers and scored 28 points, Alperen Sengun had 26 points, 13 rebounds and 11 assists, and host Houston beat Sacramento.

Kevin Durant added 21 points for the Rockets in their most-lopsided victory of

the season. Houston has won two in row since blowing an 18-point lead in the fourth quarter at New York on Saturday.

Bucks 118, Cavaliers 116: Kevin Porter Jr. had 20 points, Ryan Rollins added 18 and host Milwaukee held off Cleveland for its fifth victory in six games.

The Cavaliers appeared to tie it on Jarrett Allen's basket underneath at the buzzer, but it was ruled that time had expired. Allen had 27 points and 11 rebounds.

Nuggets 103, Celtics 84: Nikola Jokic had 30 points and 12 rebounds on a rough shooting night to help host Denver beat Boston.

Tim Hardaway Jr. added 14 points as the Nuggets bounced back from a 1-2 trip out of the All-Star break, which included a loss at Golden State on Sunday. They kept pace with Houston in the tight Western Conference standings. Denver is percentage points behind the Rockets for third place.