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US braces for Iranian response to strike

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. officials braced for Iran to respond to the killing of its most powerful general, noting heightened military readiness in the country and preparing for a possible “tit-for-tat” attempt on the life of an American military commander. They warned ships across Middle East waterways crucial to global energy supplies about the “possibility of Iranian action” against U.S. maritime interests in the region.

President Donald Trump ordered the Jan. 2 strike against Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran’s elite Quds Force, after the death of an American contractor in Iraq. Now, amid massive demonstrations of Iran’s public mourning period for Soleimani and a state TV report of a deadly stampede at his funeral, officials believe the next steps by America’s longtime foe will determine the ultimate course of the latest crisis.

While officials say American intelligence isn’t clear on whether Iran’s latest military moves are designed to bolster Tehran’s defenses or prepare for an offensive strike, the U.S. is continuing to reinforce

its own positions in the region, including repositioning some forces. One official said the U.S. anticipated a “major” attack of some type within the next day or two.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Maritime Administration put out the warning for ships, citing the rising threats after Soleimani’s killing.

Soleimani’s death, which has sparked major protests, further nuclear development and new threats of violence, has raised the prospect of a wide and unpredictable conflict in the Middle East and escalated tensions between Iran and the U.S.

Two U.S. officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal discussions, said targeting Soleimani was not representative of a wholesale shift in American policy toward Iran, despite Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s comments on Sunday that the U.S. was targeting Iran’s “actual decision-makers” rather than its network of proxy allies. Trump has repeatedly contended that he is not seeking “regime change” in Iran, as has been pushed by some of his more hawkish advisers.

Still, Trump’s strike against Soleimani, a revered figure in Iran whose death sparked large displays of anger

and grief, was a risky decision his Republican and Democratic predecessors opted not to take out of concern it would draw the U.S. and Iran closer to conflict.

U.S. officials are also aware that Iran could try to strike a high-level American leader in a “tit-for-tat” move, potentially a military commander.

One official said some Iranian ships have spread out, and while the intent isn’t immediately clear, they could move rapidly to attack.

The U.S. military has increased protection of its forces, particularly in Iraq. Officials said a number of the recently deployed soldiers from the 1st Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division had moved into Iraq from Kuwait to increase security. The U.S. military has stopped all training of Iraqi forces to focus on force protection, officials said.

As of Monday, officials said, there had not been a broadly distributed order or recommendation to increase security at military installations worldwide. Instead, decisions were being left to the commanders.

Meanwhile on Capitol Hill, Democrats prepared largely symbolic resolutions under the War Powers Act to limit the president’s military actions regarding Iran.

Esper: No plans set to take GIs out of Iraq

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon’s top civilian and general said Monday that the U.S. military had no plans to leave Iraq, disavowing an American general’s draft letter mistakenly made public that appeared to indicate an imminent troop withdrawal.

“There has been no decision made to leave Iraq. Period,” Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Monday at the Pentagon. Troops in the country will be repositioned in some cases, he said, to take a more defensive posture as the United States prepares for potential Iranian retaliation after the strike last week that killed Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

The letter from Marine Brig. Gen. William Seely, the chief of the coalition’s Iraq task force, was “an honest mistake,” said Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The letter circulated on Twitter on Monday afternoon and prompted news reports that the United States would leave Iraq. Several unnamed defense officials confirmed the authenticity of the letter, however Milley said it was a draft that should not have been provided to the Iraqis. A defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, fingered the Iraqis for the letter’s leak.

“It’s a draft,” Milley said. “It’s unsigned. People are trying to do the right thing in a highly dynamic situation, and it should not have been sent.”

The errant letter came shortly after Iraqi lawmakers voted to approve a nonbinding resolution calling for the government to begin the process of expelling the U.S.-led coalition from the country in response to the killing of Soleimani, head of the elite Quds Force, alongside Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the Iraqi leader of Kataeb Hezbollah, a Shiite militia aligned with the Iraqi security forces.

That killing, in a U.S. drone strike, drew threats of retaliation from Iran and calls for American troops to be expelled from the country for violating Iraq’s sovereignty.

Also on Monday, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi met with U.S. Ambassador Matthew Tueller, stressing the need for “joint action” to begin the withdrawal and saying that Iraq was making every effort to prevent the situation from sliding into “open war,” his office said in a statement posted to Twitter.

But Esper was adamant that American troops would remain in Iraq to fight the remnants of ISIS, which retains an underground presence in the country. The United States has paused its counter-ISIS mission, including training Iraqi forces, as it bolsters security in case of Iranian attacks.

Pentagon rejects striking Iranian cultural sites

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon on Monday distanced itself from President Donald Trump's assertions that he would bomb Iranian cultural sites despite international prohibitions on such attacks.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said the U.S. will "follow the laws of armed conflict." When asked if that ruled out targeting cultural sites, Esper said pointedly, "That's the laws of armed conflict."

The split between the president and his Pentagon chief came amid heightened tensions with Tehran following a U.S. drone strike that killed Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force. Trump had twice warned that he would hit Iranian cultural sites if Tehran retaliates against the U.S.

Esper's public comments reflected the private concerns of other defense and military officials, who cited legal prohibitions on attacks on civilian, cultural and religious sites, except under certain, threatening circumstances.

Trump first raised the prospect of targeting cultural sites in a tweet on Saturday and reiterated that view to reporters the next day.

"We have targeted 52 Iranian sites (representing the 52 American hostages taken by Iran many years ago), some at a very high level & important to Iran & Iranian culture, and those targets, and Iran itself, WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD," he

tweeted.

His Twitter message caught administration officials off-guard and prompted an immediate outcry from legal scholars, national security experts and Democratic lawmakers. But the president stood by his threat the following day.

"They're allowed to kill our people. They're allowed to torture and maim our people. They're allowed to use roadside bombs and blow up our people," he told reporters traveling with him on Air Force One. "And we're not allowed to touch their cultural sites? It doesn't work that way."

By international law, however, it does.

Specifically, the 1954 Hague Convention says nations must "take all possible steps" to protect cultural property and shall refrain "from any act of hostility, directed against such property." It also says nations must not use cultural sites for any threatening purposes that would make such locations a military target.

The Pentagon has long had a list of potential targets both inside Iran as well as those associated with Iran throughout the Middle East. Those targets and war plans are routinely updated, including during the recent uptick in hostilities.

Any targets would go through a lengthy vetting process within the military and the Pentagon to determine that they are legal, appropriate and proportionate to any Iranian action. Only after that process is complete would a list of potential sites go before the president for approval.

Dozens die in funeral stampede

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — A stampede broke out Tuesday at a funeral for a top Iranian general slain in a U.S. airstrike, and at least 56 people were killed and more than 200 were injured as thousands thronged the procession, Iranian news reports said.

The stampede took place in Kerman, the hometown of Revolutionary Guard Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, as the procession began, said Pirhossein Koulivand, head of Iran's emergency medical services.

There was no information about what set off the crush. Online videos showed people lying apparently lifeless, their faces covered by clothing. Emergency crews performed CPR on others as people wailed in the background, crying out to God.

"Unfortunately as a result of the stampede, some of our compatriots have been injured and some have been killed during the funeral processions," Koulivand said.

State TV reported the death toll of 56, with 213 injured, citing Koulivand.

Soleimani's burial was delayed, with no new time given, because of concerns about the massive crowd that had gathered, the semi-official ISNA news agency said.

A procession in Tehran on Monday drew over 1 million people in the Iranian capital.

Soleimani's death in a drone strike Friday has sparked calls across Iran for revenge against America, drastically raising tensions across the Middle East.

Earlier Tuesday, Hossein Salami, the new leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, vowed to avenge Soleimani's death as he addressed a crowd of supporters gathered at the coffin in a central square in Kerman.

Report: 6 B-52s heading to Diego Garcia amid Iran tensions

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon on Monday ordered six B-52 bombers deployed to Diego Garcia, a British-controlled island in the Indian Ocean, for possible operations against Iran, CNN reported Monday.

The bombers are being sent to Diego Garcia because the island is out of range of Iranian missiles, CNN said, citing an unidentified Pentagon source.

America's B-52 bomber wings are based at Minot Air

Force Base, N.D., and Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

The deployment does not signal the Pentagon has ordered operations, CNN said.

"The Pentagon has traditionally deployed long-range bombers and other aircraft as a sign of U.S. force presence capability," the report said.

A Pentagon spokesman told Stars and Stripes on Monday he was unable to comment on potential movements of U.S. forces.

Tensions rose during the holidays between the two na-

tions after an Iran-backed militia fired rockets at a coalition base in northern Iraq, killing a U.S. contractor and wounding American and Iraqi troops.

The U.S. retaliated with airstrikes in Iraq and Syria on Dec. 29 that killed 25 fighters with the Iran-backed Kataeb Hezbollah. That militia and its supporters attacked the U.S. Green Zone in Baghdad on Dec. 31.

On Friday, a U.S. airstrike near Baghdad airport killed Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, head of Iran's elite Quds mili-

tary force and the mastermind of attacks against American forces over two decades.

Iranian leaders have vowed revenge for the assassination, which the White House said was warranted because of an "imminent" attack planned by Soleimani.

Shortly after the killing, the State Department advised all U.S. citizens to depart Iraq.

The U.S. has long employed Diego Garcia in military affairs involving the Middle East.

GI blood drive goals raised after Americans attacked

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — The Armed Services Blood Program-Europe has issued an urgent call for blood donations for U.S. service members deployed to Africa and elsewhere, days after an attack in Kenya killed three Americans.

“In light of recent events in the news, we need types O and A as soon as possible!” the program posted on its Facebook site Tuesday. The drive began Monday and continues Wednesday, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the blood donor center at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center.

It was to be a routine, post-holiday blood drive, program spokeswoman Stacy Sanning said.

“Then we got quite a few calls for blood products, more than normal, so we went ahead and increased it from a routine to

critical need.”

Sanning said she can’t disclose which units are requesting the blood or whether it’s related to the aftermath of the attack. But it involves “a specific request from people who need to take it with them somewhere pretty quick,” Sanning said.

Some of the donated blood will go to service members deployed to Africa and to help a patient at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Rota, Spain.

It’s unclear whether the need is tied to the recent attack by al-Shabab on the Kenyan airfield in Manda Bay. A U.S. soldier and two Defense Department contractors were killed, and two other Americans were injured in the Sunday attack by the al-Qaida-aligned militants.

U.S. Africa Command’s East Africa Response Force deployed to Manda Bay later Sunday to secure the airfield.

The blood program took

the unusual step to specify on Facebook which blood types are especially needed: 46 Type O, 20 Type A and four Type B-positive.

Type O and A blood can come from donors with either positive or negative types, Sanning said.

The Armed Services Blood Program-Europe collects blood from the U.S. military community for active-duty service members, NATO forces, families, retirees and Defense Department civilians overseas.

“The blood that we collect is the only source of blood products for our U.S. military in Africa ... because the local blood supply there doesn’t meet the minimum [Food and Drug Administration] standards,” Sanning said.

Additional routine blood drives are scheduled at various military bases in Europe throughout January.

Pilot from Ariz. among those killed in Kenya

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — An Arizona man contracted to fly aircraft for the U.S. military was among those killed Sunday when Somali militants attacked a base in Kenya, a local television station reported.

Dustin Harrison’s wife, Hope, told Tucson’s KOLD News 13 that she and their daughter were flying to an unnamed Air Force base to receive his body. “My silent hero,” Hope Harrison wrote in a Facebook post.

Harrison told the network that she was meeting with her husband’s co-workers to learn more about the attack.

“My world is completely a nightmare at the moment. My worst fear is now my reality. The pain is unbearable. Please keep myself and our family in your prayers,” she wrote on Facebook.

Harrison was one of three people killed when their base was overrun by insurgents.

Army Spc. Henry Mayfield Jr., 23, from the Chicago suburb of Hazel Crest, also died in the attack. A third victim, a Defense Department contractor, hasn’t been publicly named.

U.S. Africa Command dispatched a quick reaction force based out of Djibouti to Kenya in the wake of the attack to bolster security there.

Early on Sunday morning, al-Shabab fighters stormed the Kenyan compound with indirect and small-arms fire, U.S. Africa Command said. Five U.S. aircraft were destroyed and one was damaged during the attack. Six contractor-operated civilian aircraft were also damaged, AFRICOM said.

U.S. and Kenyan forces eventually repelled the attack from the al-Shabab militants, who are aligned with al-Qaida.

Report: South Korea moves anti-missile battery to Seoul

BY KIM GAMEL AND YOO KYONG CHANG
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has moved a Patriot anti-missile battery to the center of Seoul in a bid to beef up its defense against the growing threat from the North, a local news agency reported Tuesday.

The Patriot unit was transferred earlier this month from a southeastern region to a military base in the mountainous area behind the presidential palace known as the Blue House, according to Yonhap News Agency.

The move came as the North has threatened to unveil a new strategic weapon “in the near future” as tensions rise over stalled nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un also announced that he no longer feels bound by his self-imposed moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests.

The Patriot battery was believed to be equipped with PAC-2 and PAC-3 missiles designed to intercept incoming aircraft and missiles at altitudes of around 12-25 miles, Yonhap said.

South Korea’s Defense Ministry said it couldn’t comment on military positioning due to security concerns. A South Korean air force official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed that a Patriot unit had been moved to Seoul recently but declined to provide more details.

North Korea conducted 15 weapons tests last year that stopped short of violating its pledge not to fire long-range missiles but showed progress in developing short-range rockets that could target South Korea, Japan and U.S. forces stationed in those countries.

South Korea and the United States both have Patriot units stationed on the divided peninsula. Washington also has deployed an advanced anti-missile system known as THAAD in the south-east to intercept threats at a higher altitude.

Earthquakes rattle Puerto Rico

Associated Press

PONCE, Puerto Rico — A 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck Puerto Rico before dawn on Tuesday, killing one man, injuring at least eight other people and collapsing buildings.

The quake was followed by a series of strong aftershocks, part of a 10-day series of tremors spawned by the grinding of tectonic plates along three faults beneath southern Puerto Rico. Seismologists say it's impossible to predict when the

quakes will stop or whether they will get stronger.

The 6.4-magnitude quake cut power to the island as power plants shut down to protect themselves. Authorities said two plants suffered light damage and they expected power to be restored later Tuesday. Puerto Rico's main airport was operating normally, using generator power.

"I've never been so scared in my life," said Nelson Rivera, 70, a resident who fled his home in the city of Ponce, near the epi-

center of the quake. "I didn't think we would get out. I said: 'We'll be buried here.'"

Teacher Rey Gonzalez told The Associated Press that his uncle was killed when a wall collapsed on him at the home they shared in Ponce. He said 73-year-old Nelson Martinez was disabled and that he and his father cared for him.

Eight people were injured in Ponce, Mayor Mayita Melendez told WAPA television. Hundreds of people sat in the streets of the city, some cooking food

on barbecue grills, afraid to return home for fear of structural damage and aftershocks.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake hit at 4:24 a.m. just south of the island at a shallow depth of six miles. It initially gave the magnitude as 6.6 but later adjusted it. At 7:18 a.m., a magnitude-6.0 aftershock hit the same area. People reported strong shaking and staff at a local radio station said live on air that they were leaving their building

Pork: Impossible meat debuts at gadget show

Associated Press

After a big year for its plant-based burger, Impossible Foods has something new on its plate.

The California-based company unveiled Impossible Pork and Impossible Sausage on Monday evening at the CES gadget show in Las Vegas.

It's Impossible Food's first foray beyond fake beef. The Impossible Burger, which went on sale in 2016, has been a key player in the growing category of vegan meats. Like the burger, Impossible Food's pork and sausage are made from soy but mimic the taste and texture of ground meat.

Impossible Pork will be rolled out to restaurants first. The company isn't yet saying when it will come to grocery stores. Impossible Foods only recently began selling its burgers in grocery stores, although they're available at more than 17,000 restaurants in the U.S., Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau.

Burger King will give consumers their first taste of Impossible Sausage. Later this month, 139 Burger King restaurants in five U.S. cities will offer the Impossible Croissan'wich, made with plant-based sausage coupled with the traditional

egg and cheese. Burger King did a similar test of the Impossible Whopper last year before expanding sales nationwide.

The pork products and the Impossible Burger are made in a similar way.

Impossible Foods gets heme — the protein that gives meat its flavor and texture — from soy leghemoglobin, which is found in the roots of soy plants. To make heme in high volume, it inserts the DNA from soy into yeast and ferments it. That mixture is then combined with other ingredients, like coconut oil.

The company tweaked the ingredients to mimic pork's springy texture and mild flavor. For the sausage it added spices.

Impossible Pork has 220 calories in a four-ounce serving. That's not much less than a serving of Smithfield 80% lean ground pork, which has 260 calories. Smithfield's animal-derived pork has more total fat, at 20 grams, than Impossible Pork, which has 13 grams. But Impossible Pork has far more sodium, at 420 milligrams. Smithfield has 70 milligrams.

Bolton is willing to testify if called

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former White House national security adviser John Bolton said he is "prepared to testify" if he is subpoenaed by the Senate in its impeachment trial of President Donald Trump, a surprise statement that bolstered Democrats in their push for new witnesses.

Bolton, who left the White House in September, said Monday that he has weighed the issues of executive privilege and after "careful consideration and study" decided that he would comply with any Senate subpoena.

If Bolton were to appear, he could provide a first-hand account of events central to the impeachment case against the president. As a senior adviser, he was present for key moments that were investigated in the House's impeachment inquiry, including meetings with Ukrainian officials.

His willingness to comply with a subpoena could complicate the strategy of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who has expressed resistance to calling new witnesses. Bolton left a message for McConnell

before he issued his statement on Monday morning, a person familiar with the matter confirmed to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because he or she wasn't authorized to speak publicly.

McConnell has called for a swift impeachment trial, with a possible final vote after opening arguments. He has repeatedly referred to President Bill Clinton's impeachment, when leaders decided how to proceed after the trial had started. In that case, witnesses gave closed-door depositions and some excerpts of those interviews were played on the Senate floor.

First, though, the Senate must receive the articles of impeachment. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has stalled the transmission of House-passed articles against Trump in a bid for the witness testimony that Democrats are seeking.

Pelosi did not provide any clues about her next steps Monday. But in a tweet she said Trump and McConnell have "run out of excuses" for not calling witnesses or producing documents that Trump has blocked.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police respond to cries of 'Let me out!'

FL LAKE WORTH BEACH — When someone in a Florida neighborhood heard chilling cries and the words "Let me out!" they dialed 911.

Little did they know the cries were that of a 40-year-old parrot named Rambo.

After the call, four Palm Beach County Sheriff's deputies pulled up and questioned a man who appeared to be repairing a car in his driveway. The Palm Beach Post reported that when the deputies explained their concerns, the man smiled, then told deputies he'd introduce them to the perpetrator. When he returned with the parrot, the deputies burst out laughing.

The man told officers that he taught Rambo to scream "Let me out!" when he was a kid and Rambo lived in a cage.

Work starts on new vets' monument

MS PHILADELPHIA— Eight months after a tornado destroyed a monument memorializing fallen soldiers of Neshoba County, site work started Monday at Deweese Park for a new monument.

The work in Philadelphia is happening eight months after a tornado destroyed a monument to the fallen soldiers of Neshoba County.

Col. Ray Crocker, vice chairman of the Fallen Soldiers Monument Committee, told the Meridian Star that the prep work in Deweese Park included removing the old monument and tree stumps.

Organizers are hoping to raise \$100,000 for the new monument.

Delta plane slides off taxiway at airport

WI GREEN BAY — A Delta Air Lines plane slid off a taxiway amid icy conditions at an airport in Green Bay.

Airport Director Marty Plette told the Green Bay Press-Gazette that he wasn't sure if the icy conditions caused the plane to slide off the taxiway.

The 107 passengers were bused back to the airport for rebooking on other flights and were given meal vouchers.

Woman sues over fall off runaway camel

MA DEDHAM — A woman sued TripAdvisor after a runaway camel tossed her to the ground during a tour in Morocco.

Breanne Ayala, 24, is accusing Massachusetts-based TripAdvisor and its subsidiary Viator of negligence and breach of contract for failing to ensure the camel tour company was operating safely, The Boston Globe reported, citing the lawsuit.

Ayala, who is from New Jersey, and her family booked a sunset camel tour in Marrakech, Morocco, through Viator. Ayala claims she and her family did not receive a safety briefing before the tour in January 2018.

Man held for alleged theft of big rig

CA MANTECA — A California man was arrested for allegedly stealing a big rig with a 53-foot trailer containing the belongings of military families, the California Highway Patrol reported.

Michael Travis Forward was arrested after the stolen rig

was found in the Central Valley city of Manteca and about 90% of the stolen cargo was found in Forward's home in nearby Livingston, the Stockton office of the CHP said in a Facebook post.

However, 14 stolen guns are still missing, the CHP said.

Man rescued after 3 days in the cold

NY NEW SCOTLAND — A New York man was found alive after vanishing on New Year's Eve at Thacher Park.

Zachary Barrantes survived three days of temperatures in the 20s, according to Albany County Sheriff Craig Apple.

Apple said rescue teams had to retrieve him from beneath the state park's escarpment, which required careful planning.

It took several hours to lift Barrantes up the cliff face.

Man arrested at airport after text

CO DENVER — A man was arrested at Denver International Airport after a fellow passenger on a flight preparing to depart reported he sent a threatening text message, police said.

Richard Porter, 48, was removed from the Frontier Airlines flight and arrested for investigation of endangering public transportation, police said.

Big rig driver charged after crash

GA NORCROSS — Authorities charged the driver of a tractor-trailer that crashed into multiple vehicles and overturned at a Georgia gas station.

In a statement, Georgia State Patrol said Andrel Tremaine Meadows, 42, faced multiple charges, including driving too fast for conditions, following too close and having an unsecured load, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported.

Ten vehicles were damaged in the crash. No life-threatening injuries were reported.

Graffiti tagger faces 581 separate counts

NV RENO — Reno police arrested a 28-year-old graffiti tagger accused of causing more than \$70,000 worth of property damage.

Sabastian Dulong faces 581 separate graffiti counts for damaging public and private property.

He was arrested on New Year's Day following a lengthy investigation by the department's full-time detective dedicated to graffiti cases.

Police said Nevada law now allows for separate graffiti incidents to be consolidated, which elevates the crime from a misdemeanor to a felony.

Teacher admits to defecating in park

WI WHITEWATER — A retiring Wisconsin English teacher cited for defecating in a public park for two years told authorities he was "being an idiot" and that he did it for convenience and to be disrespectful.

Jeffrey S. Churchwell, who is retiring from Milton School District this month, will have to pay \$365 in fines plus \$5,705 in restitution to the Public Works Department, which cleaned up after him.

From wire reports

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Parity producing lots of early upsets

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — The season was barely a week old when Michigan State lost to Kentucky in the Champions Classic, a defeat of the nation's No. 1 team that could be written off easily as a high-profile battle of heavyweights on a neutral court early in the season that didn't go the Spartans' way.

Then the Wildcats rose to No. 1 and lost to Evansville. Duke took over and lost to Stephen F. Austin. Louisville climbed to No. 1 and fell to Texas Tech. Kansas ascended to the top spot and lost at Villanova.

Good luck finding excuses for all those losses, other than perhaps this one: There is a parity party in college basketball this season unlike any in recent memory, and not even the bluest of the blue bloods is safe.

"Yeah, I hesitate to talk about 'best team' right now," said Ohio State coach Chris Holtmann, whose own team climbed to No. 3 before losing three of its last five, including back-to-back games last week. "Who really knows?"

Indeed, who knows?

The Buckeyes' loss to unranked Wisconsin on Friday night was merely one eyebrow raiser in a week that showed

that those early losses by No. 1 teams were merely the start of season-long upheaval. Fourth-ranked Oregon lost to Colorado, while Saturday brought losses by No. 9 Memphis and No. 10 Villanova — all to unranked opponents.

Asked whether the Buffaloes' win in their Pac-12 opener meant more because of the Ducks' lofty perch in the Top 25, coach Tad Boyle eschewed coach talk for a more candid response: "I think it does to our team."

"But again, we're 1-0 in league play. We're not 2-0. We're not 1-and-a-half-and-0. We're 1-0. It's one game," Boyle added. "I know the national ranking and the Ducks have a lot of respect nationally, so I knew our players would be ready for that. These are the games you don't have to get your guys up for and ready."

That might offer a starting point in explaining an avalanche of upsets this season. But the quaint notion of the plucky underdog rising to the challenge has existed since the earliest of time — think David striking down Goliath, or the fall of the Roman Empire. And such upsets always left a mark on college basketball, whether it was North Carolina State winning the 1983 national title or UMBC pulling off the first

16-1 upset in the NCAA Tournament by beating Virginia.

So what else could be behind the rise of the unranked? The stumbles of the superpowers?

For one thing, talent is spread more evenly across college basketball. The top three prospects in last year's recruiting class committed not to Duke, Kentucky and North Carolina but to Memphis (James Wiseman), Washington (Isaiah Stewart) and Georgia (Anthony Edwards). Other off-the-radar programs that landed top-100 recruits included LSU (Trendon Watford), DePaul (Romeo Weems), Massachusetts (Tre Mitchell) and even Harvard (Chris Ledlum).

There are reasons for that, too. But the biggest may be that while playing at Cameron Indoor Stadium, Rupp Arena or Allen Fieldhouse will always have cachet, and big-name programs typically have better facilities, larger fan bases and far more resources, many prospects would rather play major minutes right away than enjoy other baubles.

The depth of talent also is greater than ever before.

Even if the best of the best — the top guns, if you will — still gravitate toward big-name programs, their ceiling isn't a whole lot higher than prospects ranked well outside the top 100.

Luke Garza picked Iowa over dozens of mid-major offers and has turned into arguably the Big Ten's best center, and Dayton's Obi Toppin has gone from a three-star prospect known only by a select few hardcore recruiting insiders to an All-America candidate and likely NBA lottery pick.

Rule changes also have impacted the way teams play, and the biggest this season may be the extension of the three-point line to the FIBA distance of 22.15 feet. The shot has been a game-changer ever since it was introduced in 1987, allowing smaller and often less-talented teams an opportunity to hang with the heavyweights simply by making shots. And while moving the line back was supposed to make it a more difficult shot and open up the clogged lane for big bodies, it also has created a bigger risk-reward situation where hot-shooting teams can soar and cold-shooting teams will sink.

When then-No. 1 Kentucky lost to Evansville, the Wildcats were 4-for-17 from beyond the arc. Villanova was 9-for-38 from the three-point line when it lost to Marquette. Gonzaga was just 5-for-18 against lowly Pepperdine on Saturday, a big reason the nation's current No. 1 barely eked out a 75-70 victory over a 7-9 team.

No. 17 West Virginia stifles, shuts down Oklahoma St.

Associated Press

STILLWATER, Okla. — It was a night where the ball just wasn't falling for either team, but in the end, West Virginia's defense was more stifling and that was the difference.

Offensively, Oscar Tshiebwe scored 12 points and Derek Culver had nine points and 12 rebounds to help lead No. 17 West Virginia to a 55-41 victory over Oklahoma State on Monday night.

Tshiebwe also had eight rebounds, while Miles McBride added 10 points for West Virginia (12-2, 1-1 Big 12), which is

now 5-1 in its last six outings.

Despite shooting just 38.8% (19-for-49) from the floor, and just 55% (11-for-20) from the free-throw line, the Mountaineers were able to maintain at least a double-digit lead for virtually the entire second half. They also won the rebounding battle 40-36.

"I thought we did a pretty good job of staying in front of them, we didn't turn them loose much," said West Virginia coach Bob Huggins. "And we rebounded. Pretty much, it was one and done, which really helps, not giving them extra

shots."

After defeating then-No. 5 Ohio State 67-59 on Dec. 29, the Mountaineers fell 60-53 to No. 3 Kansas on Saturday, but bounced back in a big way in this one, especially defensively.

They held Oklahoma State to just 29.2% (14-for-48), including just 27.3% (6-for-22) in the first half. They also limited the Cowboys, a team that entered the day averaging 31.3% on three-pointers, to just 5% (1-for-20) from three-point range, including 0-for-10 in the first half.

"We tried to fix a couple of

things from Saturday, where we did a better job of containing people," Huggins said of the West Virginia defense. "But they had a bad day. We had a bad day, too. It was hard for me to watch sometimes. It was neither one of our better games."

Lindy Waters had 12 points for Oklahoma State (9-5, 0-2), which is 2-5 in its last seven after starting the season 7-0. Despite shooting just 4-for-16 from the floor, including 1-for-9 from beyond the arc, Waters became the 42nd player in OSU history to reach the 1,000-point milestone.

NBA roundup

Spurs hit 19 threes to top NBA-best Bucks

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Known as a mid-range shooting team for the past few seasons, the Spurs are starting to comprehend why coach Gregg Popovich has implored them to shoot more three-pointers.

DeMar DeRozan had 25 points and San Antonio had a season-high 19 three-pointers to beat Milwaukee 126-104 on Monday night, snapping the Bucks' five-game winning streak.

"It's big, confidence building," DeRozan said. "Letting us know we could compete with the best teams in this league."

San Antonio finished 19-for-35 on three-pointers in handing Milwaukee its largest defeat of the season.

Patty Mills added 21 points, including 6-for-10 on three-pointers. LaMarcus Aldridge and Rudy Gay added 18 points each, going a combined 4-for-5 on three-pointers.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 24 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists for Milwaukee and Donte DiVincenzo added 16 points.

Four games after setting a season-high with 18 three-pointers against Detroit, the Spurs bested that mark when

Gay hit the team's 19th against Milwaukee.

Aldridge has keyed that run, going 16-for-23 on three-pointers in his past five games.

Aldridge has shot so well on threes that the Bucks almost overlooked DeRozan's mid-range game.

"We have a ton of respect for (DeRozan)," Milwaukee coach Mike Budenholzer said. "I think the way Aldridge has been shooting the three-point shot over the last five, six, seven games, a lot of talk was about, 'Could we reduce those.' He had a huge first quarter, first half on Saturday. I don't want to say live with DeRozan's twos, but to some degree [we did], but I still think it's the three-point line where they beat us."

76ers 120, Thunder 113: Joel Embiid scored 18 points while playing with a dislocated left ring finger, Ben Simmons had 17 points and 15 rebounds, and host Philadelphia ended a four-game losing streak by beating Oklahoma City.

They usually last in the post-season as long as a healthy Embiid can take them. The All-Star center dislocated his left ring finger in the first quarter, an injury so gnarly that the bent finger stretched across his pin-

kie. Embiid made a brief stop in the locker room, got the finger taped and returned to start the second period.

Jazz 128, Pelicans 126: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 35 points, Joe Ingles added 22 and visiting Utah extended its winning streak to six games by holding off New Orleans.

Brandon Ingram had 35 points for the Pelicans but could not convert a driving layup attempt at the horn while being defended by Rudy Gobert. The Utah center was chasing Ingram down the right side of the lane and appeared to make body-to-body contact that forced Ingram over the baseline as he attempted to take the final shot.

Wizards 99, Celtics 94: Missing star guard Kemba Walker, visiting Boston became the latest NBA contender to surprisingly come up short against one of the league's worst teams, losing to Washington as Ish Smith scored 27 points to lead a depleted lineup.

Walker sat out his third game in a row with the flu.

One game after pouring in a career-high 32 points as a reserve, Smith again came off the bench to pace the Wizards.

Mavericks 118, Bulls 110:

Luka Doncic scored 21 of his 38 points in the third quarter and had his NBA-leading 11th triple-double of the season to lead host Dallas past Chicago.

Doncic scored 17 of the Mavericks' 19 points in the final 5:35 of the third to break open what had been a tie game. His three-pointer gave Dallas a 72-69 lead it did not relinquish.

Nuggets 123, Hawks 115: Nikola Jokic scored a career-high 47 points, Will Barton added a season-best 28 and visiting Denver held on to beat Atlanta.

Magic 101, Nets 89: Markelle Fultz scored a career-high 25 points, including seven straight during a 15-1 run in the fourth quarter that sent host Orlando past slumping Brooklyn.

Nikola Vucevic had 24 rebounds and 11 points for his 300th career double-double.

Pacers 115, Hornets 104: T.J. Warren scored 30 of his season-high 36 points in the second half and visiting Indiana topped Charlotte to halt a two-game skid.

Kings 111, Warriors 98: De'Aaron Fox had 21 points and seven assists, Buddy Hield also scored 21 and host Sacramento thumped Golden State.

Panthers completing coaching deal with Rhule

BY STEVE REED

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The Carolina Panthers are completing a contract to hire Baylor's Matt Rhule as their coach, according to a person familiar with the situation.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on Tuesday on condition of anonymity because the deal is not done. The Panthers have not spoken publicly about the coaching search.

The person says Panthers owner David Tepper visited Rhule at his home in Waco,

Texas, and decided he wanted the Baylor coach to succeed Ron Rivera, who was fired with four games remaining in the season. Rivera was the winningest coach in franchise history and was twice named AP NFL Coach of the Year.

The 44-year-old Rhule was scheduled to visit with the New York Giants this week and was believed to be a strong candidate there.

Rhule was named Baylor's coach on Dec. 6, 2016 after a scandal hit the program. He went 1-11 his first season there in 2017, then improved to 7-6 in

2018. The Bears went 11-1 in the regular season this past season, although they lost to Oklahoma in the Big 12 Championship and Georgia in the Sugar Bowl.

Rhule was a combined 19-20 in his three seasons at Baylor. This marks the first time the Panthers have gone with a college coach as their head coach. Previous coaches were Dom Capers, George Seifert, John Fox and Rivera. Perry Fewell was the interim coach the final four games this season, going 0-4.

Before coaching at Baylor, Rhule worked at Temple and

revived the Owls. After a 2-11 season his first year, he wound up leading the school to back-to-back 10-win seasons.

Rhule began his college coaching career in 1998 and his only experience in the NFL is having spent one season as an assistant offensive line coach with the Giants in 2012.

The team interviewed former Packers coach Mike McCarthy and had planned to talk to Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels and Vikings offensive coordinator Kevin Stefanski. But the decision was made to take Rhule.

NHL roundup

McDavid leads Oilers past Maple Leafs

Associated Press

TORONTO — Connor McDavid had a night to remember, giving the Toronto Maple Leafs one to forget.

McDavid scored a highlight-reel goal and added three assists as the Edmonton Oilers snapped the Maple Leafs' point streak at 10 games with a 6-4 victory on Monday night.

Oilers forward Alex Chiasson called McDavid's goal the "best he's ever seen," and coach Dave Tippett said it was "unbelievable. Connor being Connor."

McDavid, however, chose to downplay how he cleanly beat Leafs defenseman Morgan Rielly for his 24th goal of the season.

"Just tried to make a play. That was it," McDavid said. "I'm not going to give up any of my secrets."

The goal gave the Oilers a 6-3 lead, and left Scotiabank Arena in amazement at what they had just seen.

"Obviously a good player," said a sombre Morgan Rielly, who wouldn't elaborate on what he saw on the play.

"You could tell tonight (McDavid) was playing with an edge and that might have been the nicest goal I've seen," said Chiasson, who also scored for

Edmonton. "Pure skill. We're lucky to have him."

Oscar Klefbom, Darnell Nurse, Kailer Yamamoto and Leon Draisaitl also scored for the Oilers, who were making their third stop on a five-game road trip.

Jason Spezza, Frederik Gauthier, Pierre Engvall and Auston Matthews scored for the Maple Leafs, who were 9-0-1 in their last 10 games.

McDavid got the puck at Toronto's blue line and used his speed to cleanly beat Morgan Rielly with a fake to the inside before going wide and snapping the puck into the top corner on Michael Hutchinson with 8:34 to go in regulation. The goal gave the Oilers a 6-3 lead.

Mike Smith made 31 saves in the victory. Frederik Andersen, who entered the night 12-0-1 in his career against Edmonton, allowed three goals on 19 shots before getting replaced by Hutchinson less than two minutes into the second period. Hutchinson finished with 13 saves and was tagged with the loss.

"I don't think we came out too strong and they really dictated the play the first 10 minutes and it was back on our heels," said Toronto's Auston Matthews.

Klefbom opened the scoring 7:51 in when he wristed a shot from the point that went through traffic and beat a screened Andersen.

Andersen made 16 saves in a period mostly dominated by McDavid and the Oilers. Edmonton didn't need much time to take a three-goal lead early in the second, ending Andersen's night in the process.

McDavid found a streaking Nurse, who snapped it over Andersen's right shoulder 34 seconds into the period. Then Draisaitl set up Yamamoto with a cross-ice feed only 1:11 later, and the Maple Leafs turned to Hutchinson.

Spezza put Toronto on the board 39 seconds after Yamamoto's goal, taking a pass from Engvall on a 3-on-2 and firing it past Smith.

Islanders 1, Avalanche 0: Semyon Varlamov stopped 32 shots against his former team, earning his second shutout of the season and leading host New York past Colorado.

Anders Lee scored for the Islanders, who had lost five of seven overall and four straight at Nassau Coliseum.

Varlamov got his 27th career shutout in his first matchup with the Avalanche since signing a four-year deal with the

Islanders last summer.

Philipp Francouz had 32 saves for Colorado, which had won two in a row.

Jets 3, Canadiens 2: Nikolaj Ehlers had a goal and an assist, powering visiting Winnipeg to the victory over Montreal.

Andrew Copp and Josh Morrissey also scored for the Jets, who had dropped five of six. Captain Blake Wheeler had two assists, and Connor Hellebuyck made 29 saves.

Ilya Kovalchuk picked up an assist in his Canadiens debut. He agreed to a one-year, two-way contract on Friday.

Defenseman Ben Chiarot scored twice for Montreal, which has lost six in a row. Carey Price stopped 24 shots.

Blue Jackets 4, Kings 2: Scott Harrington and Nathan Gerbe scored in the second period and visiting Columbus went on to beat Los Angeles.

Kevin Stenlund and Gustav Nyquist also scored, and Elvis Merzlikins made 35 saves for the Blue Jackets, who are 5-0-3 in their past eight road games.

Alex Iafallo scored to extend his point streak to seven games but the Kings lost for the third time in four games. Sean Walker had a goal and an assist, and Jonathan Quick made 20 saves.

Struggling to stay in playoff race, Preds fire Laviolette

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Nashville general manager David Poile thought he made the key moves to win the Stanley Cup. With the Predators struggling to keep pace in the playoff chase, he fired coach Peter Laviolette on Monday despite winning a Presidents' Trophy and back-to-back Central Division titles.

Assistant coach Kevin McCarthy also was dismissed. The Predators (19-15-7) have dropped four of five heading into Tuesday night's game

against the Boston Bruins. They are 11th in the Western Conference standings with 45 points.

There was no word on a replacement for either coach, but the Predators scheduled a news conference for Tuesday morning. Poile praised their work in a release.

"Under the leadership of Peter and Kevin, our organization reached unprecedented heights — from our franchise-altering run to the Stanley Cup Final to a Presidents' Trophy and our first two Central Di-

vision titles," he said. "Their passion for the game, ability to motivate a team and drive to be the best makes this a difficult decision."

The 55-year-old Laviolette went 248-143-60 in 5½ seasons with Nashville, reaching the playoffs each of his first five seasons. The Predators lost to Pittsburgh in six games in the 2017 Stanley Cup Final. They won the Presidents' Trophy and made it to the second round of the playoffs in 2018. They were eliminated in the first round a year ago.

Poile traded away defenseman P.K. Subban, Nashville's highest-paid player, and signed free-agent forward Matt Duchene to a \$56 million, seven-year contract on July 1. But the Predators sputtered through the first half of this season. They hadn't won more than two straight games since a four-game streak in late October.

This marks the sixth NHL coaching change of the season.

Laviolette was just the second coach in Predators history. Barry Trotz was coach for the organization's first 15 seasons.