

Challenges loom as virus mutations rise

Associated Press

The race against the virus that causes COVID-19 has taken a new turn: Mutations are rapidly popping up, and the longer it takes to vaccinate people, the more likely it is that a variant that can elude current tests, treatments and vaccines could emerge.

The coronavirus is becoming more genetically diverse, and health officials have said that the high rate of new cases is the main reason. Each new infection gives the virus a chance to mutate as it makes copies of itself, threatening to undo the progress made so far to control the pandemic.

On Friday, the World Health Organization urged more effort to detect new variants. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said a new version first identified in the United Kingdom may become dominant in the United States by March. Although it doesn't cause more severe illness, it will lead to more hospitalizations and deaths just because it spreads much more easily, said the CDC, warning of "a new phase of exponential growth."

"We're taking it really very seriously," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious disease expert, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

"We need to do everything we can now ... to get transmission as low as we possibly can," said Harvard University's Dr. Mi-

chael Mina. "The best way to prevent mutant strains from emerging is to slow transmission."

So far, vaccines seem to remain effective, but there are signs that some of the new mutations may undermine tests for the virus and reduce the effectiveness of antibody drugs as treatments.

"We're in a race against time" because the virus "may stumble upon a mutation" that makes it more dangerous, said Dr. Pardis Sabeti, an evolutionary biologist at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard.

It's normal for viruses to acquire small changes or mutations in their genetic alphabet as they reproduce. Ones that help the virus flourish give it a competitive advantage and thus crowd out other versions.

In March, just a couple months after the coronavirus was discovered in China, a mutation called D614G emerged that made it more likely to spread.

It soon became the dominant version in the world.

Now, after months of relative calm, "we've started to see some striking evolution" of the virus, biologist Trevor Bedford of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle wrote on Twitter last week. "The fact that we've observed three variants of concern emerge since September suggests that there are likely

more to come."

Current vaccines induce broad enough immune responses that they should remain effective, many scientists say.

Enough genetic change eventually may require tweaking the vaccine formula, but "it's probably going to be on the order of years if we use the vaccine well rather than months," Dr. Andrew Pavia of the University of Utah said Thursday on a webcast hosted by the Infectious Diseases Society of America.

Health officials also worry that if the virus changes enough, people might get COVID-19 a second time.

"We're seeing a lot of variants, viral diversity, because there's a lot of virus out there," and reducing new infections is the best way to curb it, said Dr. Adam Lauring, an infectious diseases expert at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Loyce Pace, who heads the nonprofit Global Health Council and is a member of President-elect Joe Biden's COVID-19 advisory board, said the same precautions scientists have been advising all along "still work and they still matter."

"We still need people to limit congregating with people outside their household. We still need people to be washing their hands and really being vigilant about those public health practices, especially as these variants emerge," she said.

Afghan officials: Taliban attacks have killed dozens

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — A wave of Taliban attacks and violence has killed dozens across Afghanistan, even as talks are underway between the government and the insurgents in Qatar, officials said Tuesday.

A statement from the defense ministry said four army soldiers were killed late Monday night in Taliban attacks on checkpoints in Kunduz province.

According to the ministry, 15 Taliban fighters were also killed and 12 were wounded. The details were impossible to independently verify as Kunduz is off

limits to journalists and the Taliban hold sway across most of the province's rural areas.

Ghulam Rabani Rabani, a provincial council member in Kunduz, gave a significantly higher casualty toll. At least 25 members of the security forces were killed by the Taliban in separate attacks in the Dasht-e-Archi district, including 13 soldiers and four policemen, he said.

At least eight other soldiers were killed near Kunduz city, the provincial capital, he said.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the insurgents were behind all

the attacks. The Taliban were able to seize weapons and ammunition from the checkpoints, he said.

Meanwhile, in southern Helmand province, Abdul Zahir Haqyar, administration chief in Washir district, was shot and killed by unknown gunmen on Monday night, said Abdul Nabi Elham, the provincial governor of Helmand.

Separately, in southern Uruzgan province, at least 10 people, including women and children, were wounded, when a sticky bomb placed on a motorcycle exploded, according to the provincial governor, Mohammad Omar Sherzad.

AFRICOM airstrikes continue in Somalia

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. Africa Command launched its first airstrike against al-Qaida-aligned militants in Somalia since announcing days ago that it had completed its withdrawal of ground troops from the country.

AFRICOM said it bombed and destroyed an al-Shabab compound in southern Somalia on Monday, which came after attempts by the militants to target Somalia's military leaders.

"We will continue to support our partners and disrupt al-Shabab's efforts," Maj. Gen. Dagvin Anderson, head of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa and leader of the task force that oversaw the recent relocation of about 700 U.S. troops, said in a statement.

AFRICOM said it fulfilled the Pentagon directive to reposition forces by Jan. 15 after several weeks of operations that included the

USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group, the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, and the naval sea bases USS Makin Island and USS Hershel "Woody" Williams.

AFRICOM hasn't detailed exactly where its forces formerly based in Somalia will be moved. But some are expected to go to Djibouti and Kenya, two neighboring countries with U.S. military outposts used for conducting cross-border operations.

The repositioning was completed without serious incident and ahead of schedule, AFRICOM commander Gen. Stephen Townsend said.

"The fact there were no serious injuries or significant loss of equipment, is a testament to the determination, professionalism and skill of our U.S. service members and Department of Defense civilians," he said in a statement.

Townsend was in Somalia over the week-

end and met with the U.S. ambassador there, Don Yamamoto, as well as Somali military officials, to discuss efforts aimed at countering al-Shabab.

AFRICOM regards the guerrilla group as the largest and most violent of al-Qaida's franchises. It "remains a serious threat to the region and the U.S.," Townsend said.

Townsend also met with Marines and sailors aboard the Makin Island, which has been positioned off Somalia's coast for much of the withdrawal operation.

In recent years, the U.S. military presence had quietly grown in Somalia, where U.S. special operations troops worked alongside Somali forces in a long-running battle against militants.

During the past two years, AFRICOM has carried out more than 200 airstrikes in the country, mostly directed at al-Shabab fighters.

US says over 18K contractors still in Afghanistan in report

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Pentagon employs more than seven contractors for every service member in Afghanistan, figures from a U.S. Central Command report this week show.

Over 18,000 Defense Department contractors remain in Afghanistan, the report said, after the Pentagon announced it reduced its troop total in the country to 2,500.

The contractor population decreased by about 4,300 from last October, down about 20%. The drawdown of U.S. troops over the last year "drove reductions in requirements for contracted support," the report said.

About one service member deployed for each contractor a decade ago, at the height of the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan.

The ratio grew as limits on troop levels led to a reliance on contractor and temporary duty personnel, a Congressional Research Service paper in 2019 found.

Concerns about DOD contractor use go back more than a decade. In 2008, Congress established the bipartisan Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanis-

tan to look into the issue.

The commission found in 2011 that the two wars led to an "unhealthy over-reliance" on contractors, which often overwhelmed the U.S. government's ability to effectively oversee or manage them, it said.

About 4,700 of the contractors are Afghans hired locally, but nearly three-quarters come from outside the country, including about a third who are U.S. citizens, the data in this week's report show. Many of the rest are from developing countries such as Uganda and Nepal.

Slightly less than half work in logistics, maintenance or base support, with 16% working as security contractors, the report said. Only 1,575, mostly Americans and other foreigners, are armed security personnel.

Due to coronavirus-related travel restrictions, some foreign contractors were stuck in Afghanistan for months without pay after their jobs were cut, workers told Stars and Stripes in July and August.

The backlog of contractors awaiting repatriation was resolved in December after meetings with the State Department, the Pentagon said in the report.

Iran starts ground forces drill along Gulf of Oman coast

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's military kicked off a ground forces drill Tuesday along the coast of the Gulf of Oman, state TV reported, the latest in a series of snap exercises that the country is holding amid escalating tensions over its nuclear program and Washington's pressure campaign against Tehran.

According to the report, commando units and airborne infantry were participating in the annual exercise, along with fighter jets, helicopters and military transport aircraft. Iran's National Army chief Abdolrahim Mousavi was overseeing the drill.

Iran has recently stepped up military drills as part of a continued effort to pressure President-elect Joe Biden over the nuclear deal that President Donald Trump pulled out of in 2018. Biden has said that the United States could rejoin the multinational accord meant to contain Iran's nuclear program.

Later Tuesday, state TV aired footage of parachuters, armored vehicles and multiple launch rocket systems fired during the drill.

Biden's security picks face Senate tests

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Joe Biden's national security Cabinet may be bare on Day One of his presidency, but an inauguration eve spurt of Senate confirmation hearings suggests that won't be the case for long.

While the nominees to head the State Department, the Pentagon, Homeland Security and the intelligence community are unlikely to be confirmed by the time Biden takes the oath of office at noon Wednesday, some could be in place within days.

The Senate typically confirms some nominees, particularly the secretaries of defense, on Inauguration Day, though raw feelings about President Donald Trump four years ago led to Democratic-caused delays, except for Jim Mattis at the Pentagon. This year, the tension is heightened by Trump's impeachment and an extraordinary military presence in Washington because of fears of extremist violence.

Putting his national security team in place quickly is a high priority for Biden, not only because of his hopes for reversing or modifying Trump administration policy shifts but also because of diplomatic, military and intelligence problems around the world that may create challenges early in his tenure.

The most controversial of the group may be Lloyd Austin, the recently retired Army general whom Biden selected to lead the Pentagon. Austin will need not only a favorable confirmation vote in the Senate but also a waiver by both the House and the Senate because he has been out of uniform only four

years.

Also up for confirmation are Alejandro Mayorkas, Biden's nominee for secretary of the Department of Homeland Security; Biden confidant Antony Blinken to lead the State Department; Avril Haines to be the first woman to serve as director of national intelligence; and Janet Yellen as treasury secretary, another first for a woman.

Austin was testifying Tuesday before the Senate Armed Services Committee, but the panel will not be in position to vote until he gets the waiver.

Austin, who would be the first Black secretary of defense, retired from the military as a four-star general in 2016. The law requires a minimum seven-year waiting period.

Mayorkas, Biden's nominee for secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, would be the first Latino and first immigrant to lead the agency. That's notable because DHS oversees border enforcement and the immigration services agency in addition to missions that include overseeing cybersecurity for critical infrastructure and civilian federal agencies.

Haines, a former CIA deputy director and former deputy national security adviser in the Obama administration, is expected to promise to keep politics out of the intelligence community.

Yellen, the nominee for treasury secretary, is certain to be quizzed by the Senate Finance Committee about the details of Biden's proposed \$1.9 trillion emergency relief plan announced last week.

Biden to propose 8-year US citizenship path

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Joe Biden plans to unveil a sweeping immigration bill on Day One of his administration, hoping to provide an eight-year path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million people living in the United States without legal status, a massive reversal from the Trump administration's harsh immigration policies.

The legislation puts Biden on track to deliver on a major campaign promise important to Latino voters and other immigrant communities after four years of President Donald Trump's restrictive policies and mass deportations. It provides one of the fastest pathways to citizenship for those living without legal status of any measure in recent years, but it fails to include the traditional trade-off of enhanced border security favored by many Republicans, putting passage in a narrowly divided Congress in doubt.

Expected to run hundreds of pages, the bill is set to be introduced after Biden takes the oath of office Wednesday, according to a person familiar with the legislation and granted anonymity to discuss it.

Under the legislation, those living in the U.S. as of Jan. 1, 2021, without legal status would have a five-year path to temporary legal status, or a green card, if they pass background checks, pay taxes and fulfill other basic requirements. From there, it's a three-year path to naturalization, if they decide to pursue citizenship.

Biden is expected to take swift executive actions to reverse other Trump immigration actions, including an end to the prohibition on arrivals from several predominantly Muslim countries.

Biden picks trans woman for assistant health secretary

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Joe Biden has tapped Pennsylvania Health Secretary Rachel Levine to be his assistant secretary of health, leaving her poised to become the first openly transgender federal official to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

A pediatrician and former Pennsylvania physician general, Levine was appointed to her current post by Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf in 2017, making her one of the few transgender people serving in elected or appointed positions nationwide. She won past confirmation by

the Republican-majority Pennsylvania Senate and has emerged as the public face of the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

A graduate of Harvard and of Tulane Medical School, Levine is president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. She's written in the past on the opioid crisis, medical marijuana, adolescent medicine, eating disorders and LGBTQ medicine.

Levine joins Biden's Health and Human Services secretary nominee Xavier Becerra, a Latino politician who rose from humble beginnings to serve in Congress and as California's

attorney general.

Businessman Jeff Zients is Biden's coronavirus response coordinator, while Biden picked infectious-disease specialist Rochelle Walensky to run the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Vivek Murthy as surgeon general and Yale epidemiologist Marcella Nunez-Smith to head a working group to ensure fair and equitable distribution of vaccines and treatments.

The government's top infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, will also work closely with the Biden administration.

Calif. closes in on 3 million virus cases

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — California is closing in on 3 million coronavirus cases as the state tries to smooth the rocky rollout of vaccines during a continuing spike in COVID-19 deaths.

The state reported 432 deaths Sunday, a day after recording the second-highest daily count of 669, according to the Department of Public Health. California's death toll since the start of the pandemic rose to 33,392, while total cases reached 2.94 million.

Hospitalizations and intensive care unit admissions remained on a slight downward trend, but officials have warned that could reverse when the full impact from transmissions during Christmas and New Year's Eve gatherings is felt.

"As case numbers continue to rise in California, the total number of individuals who will have serious outcomes will also increase," the health department said in a statement Sunday.

There have been about 500 deaths and 40,000 new cases daily for the past two weeks.

Lawmakers and public health officials have said the surge won't be flattened without mass vaccinations, but California has trailed the rest of the country when it comes to inoculating its residents. So far, the state has vaccinated just 2,468 people per 100,000, a rate that falls well below the national average of about 3,300, according to federal data cited Saturday by the Sacramento Bee.

Texas

DALLAS — Texas reported more than 10,000 new cases of COVID-19 on Monday and 46 more deaths from the disease caused by the coronavirus.

The number of Texans hospitalized with COVID-19 rose from 13,720 Sunday to 13,858 Monday. Coronavirus hospitalizations remain near their record high and intensive-care units in several regions are at or near capacity, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services.

The department reported 10,110 more confirmed cases of the virus Monday, as well as 695 probable cases.

Over the last week, more than 17% of coronavirus tests have come back positive in Texas, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The state has recorded more than 2 million cases of the virus and more than 32,000 fatalities.

More than 1 million Texans have received a dose of a coronavirus vaccine and more than 166,000 are fully vaccinated, according

to health officials.

Illinois

SPRINGFIELD — Illinois public health officials reported 3,385 fresh cases of the coronavirus Monday and 50 more deaths, as Gov. J.B. Pritzker's administration eased social interaction restrictions in most parts of the state.

Daily diagnoses of new cases of COVID-19 remain well below totals counted in November, the worst month for infections since the virus picked up speed in Illinois in February. Illinois has dodged expected surges in cases following holiday time travel and family celebrations.

Nonetheless, the entire state had been under so-called Tier 3 mitigation rules until late last week. The Illinois Department of Public Health on Monday announced statewide health care contracting to supplement existing hospital staff. That enabled IDPH to loosen restrictions in most areas of the state significantly to at least a level that allows indoor dining to resume.

Only Region 4, which covers the Illinois suburbs of St. Louis, and Region 7, covering Will and Kankakee counties just south of Chicago, remain in Tier 3.

Mississippi

JACKSON — More than 100,000 people in Mississippi have received their first dose of the coronavirus vaccine, and officials are taking further steps to administer the state's supply of shots more efficiently, Gov. Tate Reeves said Monday.

"There is no higher priority and we're acting accordingly," Reeves told a news conference. "We're not where we need to be and we've got a long way to go. With 100,000 Mississippians vaccinated, we've got hundreds of thousands more to do in the coming weeks and months."

Inoculation rates in Mississippi have lagged far behind most of the United States, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But Reeves insisted Monday that health officials are making changes to speed things along.

The state's website for making vaccine appointments has been upgraded to handle increased traffic, and more people are answering calls from those booking by phone, he said.

Meanwhile, state officials are working to free up more shots for the general population aged 65 and older by getting several thousand doses from nursing homes that received more than they need, Reeves said. If individual providers don't use at least 65% of

their weekly dose allocation, their share of the following week's supply will go to others in the state.

Minnesota

MINNEAPOLIS — A federal judge has ordered a Florida company accused of selling counterfeit N95 face masks with 3M's name on them to stop using the Minnesota company's trademarks and representing itself as a distributor or authorized retailer for 3M.

3M sued Nationwide Source Inc. in late December, accusing the company of selling more than 10,000 of the counterfeit respirators to Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis. The hospital allegedly paid more than six times above 3M's standard price for the mask used by medical workers and others to help protect against the coronavirus.

U.S. District Judge Wilhelmina M. Wright on Friday granted 3M's request for a preliminary injunction. Officials with Nationwide Source, located in Delray Beach, Fla., declined to comment, the Star Tribune reported.

3M, based in Maplewood, has tripled production of its N95 respirators since the start of the pandemic. It also has investigated over 10,000 cases of fraudulent N95 sales, leading to 29 lawsuits and numerous injunctions and restraining orders.

Florida

ORLANDO — Looking to buy an annual pass at Disneyland Resort? You're out of luck. The California theme park resort said last week that it's ending its passholder program.

Disneyland Resort in California made the announcement last week after it allowed county health officials to use its parking lot for a large-scale coronavirus vaccination site.

California's Disneyland closed in March and has not reopened since because coronavirus metrics in the county where the park is located have not declined to the levels required by the state.

Existing passholders at the California parks will be given refunds, company officials said.

In Florida, Walt Disney World reopened in July after nearly four months with new rules in place to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, including mandatory masks and social distancing. The Florida resort implemented a moratorium on new annual passes last summer, though it will honor those from existing passholders.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Mayor dog, goat help raise money to a renovate playground

VT FAIR HAVEN — A goat and a dog who were each elected mayor have helped raise money to renovate a Vermont community playground.

The oddball idea of pet mayor elections to raise money to rehabilitate the playground and to help get local kids civically involved came from a local town manager.

Lincoln the goat, former honorary mayor, helped raise about \$10,000 while the current mayor, Murfee, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, has raised \$20,000, Town Manager Joe Gunter told the Rutland Herald. The town chipped in another \$20,000.

Ironically, the honorary mayor is not welcome on the playground. Murfee's owner, Linda Barker said there's a "no dogs allowed" sign.

"Murfee is going to take that up with the town," Barker said with a chuckle. "He's going to contest that."

Man who drove up Capitol steps charged with drunken driving

WI MADISON — Authorities said the actions of an intoxicated man who drove his vehicle up the stairs of the Wisconsin Capitol grounds did not appear to be politically motivated.

Police said Willie Burks, 44, of Madison, drove up the exterior steps on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and around the exterior of the statehouse. He then left the capitol grounds and drove against traffic before parking his vehicle.

Burks was arrested for his third drunken driving offense and taken to the Dane County Jail.

Park Service to burn big debris pile on island, alerts residents

GA CUMBERLAND ISLAND — The National Park Service said coastal Georgia residents shouldn't be alarmed if they soon see smoke rising from Cumberland Island.

The agency that manages Georgia's largest barrier island is preparing to burn a large

pile of dried vegetation that's being cleared as part of Cumberland Island's fire management plan. The Park Service said in a news release that the debris pile covers about 2 acres. It plans to ignite the pile in the coming weeks.

Man charged after serial vandalism in St. Louis suburb

MO JENNINGS — A St. Louis County man was charged in vandalism that occurred at more than a dozen businesses in Jennings, including churches and nonprofits.

David Jackson, 40, was charged with one count of first-degree property damage.

The first incident was reported after video captured someone throwing bricks through the windows of Noah's Ark Church.

Police have investigated at least 15 other incidents in Jennings and at least two in a nearby jurisdiction, police spokesman Sgt. Benjamin Granda said in a news release.

Earlier this month, police said the suspect threw concrete through windows or used a hammer.

Police: Woman crashes stolen mail truck, tries to flee

NY NEW YORK — A woman was arrested after stealing a mail truck in Brooklyn and crashing it into several parked vehicles, police said.

Police said Martha Thaxton, 21, took off in the unoccupied truck down Fulton Street, crashing into several vehicles.

Officers said she attempted to flee the vehicle but was arrested on several charges, including grand larceny and reckless endangerment.

Legislation seeks to make popcorn official state snack

IN INDIANAPOLIS — A state lawmaker wants his colleagues to honor Indiana's big popcorn crop by making the grain the state's official snack.

Legislation sponsored by Republican state Sen. Ron Grooms, of Jeffersonville, would designate Indiana-grown popcorn as the Hoosier State's official snack, adding it

to other state symbols such as the state bird — the cardinal — and the state insect, the firefly, The Journal Gazette reported.

Grooms' bill said Indiana ranks second in the nation — behind Nebraska — in popcorn production, with Hoosier farmers growing nearly 500 million pounds of popcorn every year.

3 prison system workers indicted in payroll scheme

MD BALTIMORE — Three Maryland prison system employees were charged in a bribery and kickback scheme involving unearned pay, according to authorities.

Fiscal technician Shantil Carter and correctional officers Okezie Chidume and Gerald Leon Solomon Jr. were indicted by a Baltimore County grand jury on conspiracy, theft, bribery and other charges.

Prosecutors said Carter was paid by Chidume and Solomon to alter their time cards so they could be paid for hours they did not work. They said Chidume was improperly paid almost \$34,000 while Solomon received \$27,000 for work he did not perform.

Baggage car's trip home costs more than its purchase price

GA GAINESVILLE — Excess baggage: \$10. Cost to carry it home? A lot more.

For \$10, a northeast Georgia event venue is now the owner of a railroad car that had belonged to the city of Gainesville. The Chair Factory was the only bidder on a baggage car now located in Engine 209 Park, which hosts a retired steam locomotive.

Gainesville City Manager Bryan Lackey told WDUN-AM that the city plans to accept the bid and will allow The Chair Factory to relocate the baggage car.

The city required the winning bidder to remove the car, keep it within the city limits, and include it in a commercial development accessible to the public.

Lackey said the business has received a quote from a contractor of \$73,000 for the relocation.

— From wire reports

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Analysis: Bills will have to be sharper

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Quarterback Josh Allen spent the regular season leading the Bills to a franchise record-matching 13 wins and their first AFC East title in 25 years. Buffalo's defense has done its part the past two weeks in getting the team to its first conference championship game appearance since 1994.

Both units will need to be much sharper than in a 26-17 loss to Kansas City in Week 6 if the second-seeded Bills (15-3) stand a chance of upending the top-seeded and defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs (15-2) in the AFC championship game on Sunday.

The outcome three months ago left Bills coach Sean McDermott taking a sobering approach to correcting what went wrong.

"Two good opponents, I know. But the minute losing gets easy, that's not a good deal," McDermott said following the loss, which came on the heels of a 42-16 defeat at Tennessee.

"We take it hard. There's no

moral victories," he added. "We've got to really take a good look at our football team and be truthful with ourselves and say, 'What do we have to get corrected?'"

Buffalo's offense finished with a season-low 206 yards, with Allen managing 122 yards passing — the third-year player's second-lowest total in a game he started and finished.

As for the defense, Buffalo successfully limited Patrick Mahomes to 225 yards passing, his third-lowest total of the season, and two touchdowns. The Bills were instead trampled by rookie Clyde Edwards-Helaire, who finished with a season-best 161 yards rushing.

McDermott defended his team's defensive approach by calling it a "pick your poison" choice between selling out to stop Mahomes or Edwards-Helaire.

He might have to make the same choice this weekend with the running back expected to return after missing three games with an ankle injury. Mahomes' status, however, remains uncertain after he sus-

tained a concussion in a 22-17 win over the Browns on Sunday.

If there is a bright side, the Bills have grown progressively better, particularly on defense, in having won 11 of 12 since the loss and eight straight to match the team's longest run since 1990.

Though Allen led the way with a three-touchdown outing in a playoff-opening 27-24 win over Indianapolis, the defense was the star in a 17-3 win over Baltimore on Saturday.

Aside from holding the Ravens to their lowest scoring output in 12 years, including playoffs, the Bills sealed the victory on cornerback Taron Johnson's NFL playoff record-matching 101-yard interception return in the final minute of the third quarter.

Most important, the Ravens' dynamic QB Lamar Jackson was held in check, going 14-for-24 for 162 yards with just 34 yards rushing before being knocked out of the game with a concussion on the final play of the third quarter.

The outing continued a trend: Buffalo's defense peaking over

the final stretch of the season. After allowing 273 points through a 32-30 loss at Arizona in Week 10, Buffalo has given up just 137 over the past eight games.

Johnson's touchdown was the fifth scored on a return in Buffalo's past six games.

The Bills' defense might have finished 14th in the NFL in yards allowed, after ranking among the top three the previous two seasons, but it remains a prideful unit.

Defensive end Jerry Hughes was thankful Buffalo had the late playoff game on Saturday. That way, he got an opportunity to spend the early afternoon hearing TV analysts dismiss Buffalo's chances of containing Jackson and the Ravens' NFL-best running attack.

"We took it as a challenge," said Hughes, who sacked Jackson twice. "When we see the guys on TV talking about how they don't play defense in Buffalo, we're going to give up 30 points. ... I think we went out there and we played like we had something to prove."

Bring on the Chiefs.

Mets fire general manager for lewd texts in 2016

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York Mets general manager Jared Porter was fired Tuesday after sending graphic, uninvited text messages and images to a female reporter in 2016 when he was working for the Chicago Cubs in their front office.

Mets owner Steve Cohen said Porter was fired Tuesday morning.

"We have terminated Jared Porter this morning," Cohen wrote on Twitter. "In my initial press conference I spoke about the importance of integrity and I meant it. There should be zero tolerance for this type of behavior."

The accusations against Porter were reported by ESPN on Monday night.

Porter sent dozens of unanswered texts to the woman, including a picture of "an erect, naked penis," according to the report. ESPN said it obtained a copy of the text history.

New York hired the 41-year-old Porter last month. He agreed to a four-year contract after spending the past four seasons with the Arizona Diamondbacks as senior vice president and assistant general manager.

"I have spoken directly with Jared Porter regarding events that took place in 2016 of which we were made aware tonight for

the first time. Jared has acknowledged to me his serious error in judgment, has taken responsibility for his conduct, has expressed remorse, and has previously apologized for his actions," Mets president Sandy Alderson said in a statement.

"The Mets take these matters seriously, expect professional and ethical behavior from all of our employees, and certainly do not condone the conduct described in (the ESPN) story. We will follow up as we review the facts regarding this serious issue."

The woman was not identified in the report. ESPN said she recently chose to come forward

only on condition of anonymity because she is afraid of backlash in her home country.

ESPN said the woman was a foreign correspondent who had moved to the United States to cover Major League Baseball. She met Porter at a Yankee Stadium elevator in June 2016, and she said they spoke briefly about international baseball and exchanged business cards. She told ESPN that was the only time they ever spoke.

After text exchanges that began casually, Porter started complimenting her looks, inviting her to meet him in different cities and asking why she was ignoring him, ESPN said.

Nets edge Bucks in East showdown

Associated Press

NEW YORK — James Harden missed a jumper with a chance for the lead, tracked down the rebound and fired it out to a wide-open Kevin Durant.

Plays like that are why the Brooklyn Nets will be such tough opponents after reuniting the multi-time scoring champions. Even when teams stop one superstar, another might be there waiting.

"This is what they do. They wake up, come to the game and they score 30," Giannis Antetokounmpo said. "If you're not aggressive and you're not locked in against them, they're going to score 50."

Durant made the go-ahead three-pointer with 36 seconds left, Harden had 34 points and 12 assists, and the Nets edged the Bucks 125-123 on Monday night. They are 2-0 since last week's acquisition of Harden, who is averaging 33 points and 13 assists in his new uniform.

"We're still trying to find our

way and we've still got room to improve, but it's a solid start," Durant said.

Durant finished with 30 points, nine rebounds and six assists in a game in which two of the East's best went toe-to-toe right down to a tense finish that ended when Khris Middleton missed a potential winning three-pointer.

Antetokounmpo had 34 points, 12 rebounds and seven assists.

Warriors 115, Lakers 113: Stephen Curry scored 26 points, Kelly Oubre Jr. added 23 and visiting Golden State rallied from a 14-point, fourth-quarter deficit to defeat the Lakers.

LeBron James had a chance to win it at the end, but missed a three-pointer at the buzzer as Los Angeles had its five-game winning streak snapped.

Spurs 125, Trail Blazers 104: LaMarcus Aldridge scored 22 points, DeMar DeRozan had 20 points and 11 assists and visiting San Antonio

beat Portland.

Rudy Gay and Patty Mills came off the bench for 21 points apiece as the Spurs' reserves outscored the Blazers' backups 59-24.

Damian Lillard led Portland with 35 points.

Hawks 108, Timberwolves 97: Clint Capela had 23 points and 15 rebounds, DeAndre Hunter scored 25 and host Atlanta beat Minnesota.

The Hawks, wearing black, tan and white uniforms with "MLK" across the chest to commemorate the holiday honoring slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., snapped a two-game skid.

Heat 113, Pistons 107: Bam Adebayo had 28 points and 11 rebounds and short-handed host Miami got its biggest comeback win of the season, rallying from 19 down to beat Detroit and snap a three-game slide.

Jerami Grant had 27 points for the Pistons, but his layup that could have gotten the team

within three was blocked by Adebayo with 31 seconds left.

Knicks 91, Magic 84: RJ Barrett had 22 points and 10 rebounds, and Julius Randle added 21 points and 17 rebounds to lead host New York past Orlando.

Grizzlies 108, Suns 104: Ja Morant had 17 points and 10 assists and took a key charge late as host Memphis beat Phoenix for its fifth straight victory.

Deandre Ayton led the Suns with 18 points and tied a season high with 16 rebounds.

Raptors 116, Mavericks 93: Kyle Lowry scored 23 points and Pascal Siakam had a big second half, leading host Toronto over Dallas.

Siakam scored 15 of his 19 points in the second half as the Raptors pulled away for their third straight victory.

Bulls 125, Rockets 120: Zach LaVine scored 33 points, and host Chicago overcame a strong effort by Victor Oladipo in his Houston debut.

Butler does it as No. 2 Baylor tops No. 9 Kansas

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Jared Butler hit a three-pointer on the first shot of the game and No. 2 Baylor jumped out to a big lead. The standout guard kept scoring points—and making plays when No. 9 Kansas tried to get close late.

Butler had a season-high 30 points and eight assists as the Bears remained undefeated with a 77-69 victory Monday night over No. 9 Kansas, which has lost consecutive Big 12 games for the first time in nearly eight years.

"It's a team that wins the game. Me trying to do it all by myself, it's never worked out that way," Butler said, deferring some of the credit. "To win the

Big 12, we're going to need all 15 guys, we need everybody, we need the staff. I just make sure we play a team game, and I think we're unbeatable when we play that way."

Baylor (13-0, 6-0 Big 12) led throughout in a matchup of this season's preseason league favorite and the team that has won or shared 15 of the last 16 regular-season titles. The first of Butler's seven three-pointers was part of their opening 11-2 spurt, and they led by as many as 16 in the first half.

"They were real focused, like we've been for every game," Bears coach Scott Drew said.

The Jayhawks (10-4, 4-3) played for the first time since a 75-70 loss last Tuesday at Oklahoma State before their sched-

uled game Saturday was postponed because of COVID-19 issues in Iowa State's program.

Kansas was within 65-60 with 3:18 left after Jalen Wilson drove the baseline for a slam that capped an 8-0 run. Butler then hit a three at the other end, and the Jayhawks never got closer.

When Kansas had closed to 56-51 midway through the second half after a turnover by Butler led to a dunk by Ochai Agbaji, Butler responded with a pass to Mark Vital for a dunk. Butler then followed a turnover by Agbaji with a three-pointer.

Coach Bill Self's team hadn't lost consecutive Big 12 games since a three-game skid in February 2013 against Oklahoma State, TCU and Oklahoma.

St. John's 74, No. 23 UConn

70: Posh Alexander scored 18 points to lead five Red Storm players in double figures in a win over the host Huskies.

Marcellus Earlington scored 15 points and Julian Champagne, the Big East's leader scorer, had 10 of his 12 points in the second half. Rasheem Dunn scored 11 points and Dylan Addae-Wusu chipped in with 10 for St. John's (8-7, 3-6) which won for just the second time in five games.

Wyoming 77, Air Force 58: Xavier DuSell had 19 points off the bench to carry the Cowboys to a road win.

Kenny Foster had 13 points for Wyoming (8-5, 2-4 Mountain West Conference), which snapped its four-game losing streak. Nikc Jackson had 19 points for the Falcons (4-8, 2-6).

Varlamov stymies Bruins in Islanders' home opener

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Semyon Varlamov stopped 27 shots, Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored with 4:09 remaining and the New York Islanders beat the Boston Bruins 1-0 in their home opener Monday.

Adam Pelech fired a shot from the left point and Boston's Patrice Bergeron deflected the puck up in the air. Pageau batted it past goalie Tuukka Rask.

Varlamov, who missed Saturday's game against the Rangers after he took a puck off his neck in pregame warmups, got his second shutout in two starts this season. He had 24 saves in a 4-0 win against the Rangers last Thursday.

Rask, who had beaten the Islanders in seven of his last eight starts against them, stopped 16 shots for the Bruins in the finale of their season-opening three-game trip.

Blues 5, Sharks 4: Jordan Kyrrou got the tiebreaking goal midway through the third period, Justin Faulk scored twice and St. Louis rallied to beat visiting San Jose.

Mike Hoffman scored his first goal with the Blues and Brayden Schenn also scored for St. Louis, which beat the Sharks for the fourth straight time on home ice. Jordan Binnington made 22 saves.

Sabres 6, Flyers 1: Sam Reinhart and Curtis Lazar each scored two goals to lead visiting Buffalo past Philadelphia for its first win of the season.

Carter Hutton stopped 21 shots in a light night of work against a Flyers team that had scored 11 goals as they won their first two games. Nicolas Aube-Kubel spoiled the

shutout bid with 2:05 left.

Ducks 1, Wild 0: John Gibson made 33 saves in his 20th career shutout, and Nicolas Deslauriers scored early in the third period of host Anaheim's victory over Minnesota.

After two scoreless periods dominated by Gibson and Minnesota goalie Cam Talbot, Deslauriers converted a superb pass from new Ducks defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk for his first goal of the season. Anaheim hung on to earn its first win of the season while winning its home opener for the fifth consecutive year.

Canadiens 3, Oilers 1: Jake Allen made 25 saves in his first game with his new team, Shea Weber got his first goal of the season and Montreal won at Edmonton.

Artturi Lehkonen and rookie Alexander Romanov also scored for the Canadiens.

Hurricanes 4, Predators 2: Andrei Svechnikov, Sebastian Aho and Vincent Trocheck each had a goal and an assist as Carolina won at Nashville.

Blue Jackets 3, Red Wings 2: Alexandre Texier and Pierre-Luc Dubois scored 1:16 apart early in the third period to give Columbus a two-goal lead and it held on to win at Detroit.

Flames 5, Canucks 2: Johnny Gaudreau had a goal and an assist, leading host Calgary over Vancouver.

Maple Leafs 3, Jets 1: Mitch Marner scored twice, John Tavares also scored and Frederik Andersen made 27 saves for host Toronto against Winnipeg in the first of 10 meetings between the North Division rivals.

Stephenson scores stickless winner for Vegas

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — A stickless Chandler Stephenson was credited with the game-winning goal, Robin Lehner made 30 saves and the Vegas Golden Knights beat the Arizona Coyotes 4-2 on Monday night.

Not too long after the first of Reilly Smith's two goals tied it early in the third period, Vegas defenseman Zach Whitecloud gathered a loose puck from a faceoff in Arizona's zone and fired a shot off Stephenson's back to give the Golden Knights their first lead of the game.

"My back was to the play, I was trying to get my stick back ... just right place, right time," Stephenson said. "One of those lucky ones you're thankful to get."

Max Pacioretty also scored for the Golden Knights, his third goal in three games.

Vegas has won two straight after trailing to start the third period.

The Golden Knights own a 7-0 goal differential in the final period and improved to 3-0-0 overall.

Tyler Pitlick and Nick Schmaltz scored for the Coyotes. Goaltender Darcy Kuemper stopped 24 shots.

"They made a push," Pitlick said. "I thought we were still playing pretty well, but they made a good push there and they got two goals. That one was a little bit lucky, I thought. It is what it is. We played a pretty good game overall."

Arizona looked like the better team from the outset, controlling the pace with more intensity than Vegas, which struggled with sloppiness throughout the first period.

Tennessee fires football coach Pruitt for cause

Associated Press

The Tennessee football program is starting over yet again, this time after coach Jeremy Pruitt and nine others were fired Monday for cause when an internal investigation found what the university chancellor called "serious violations of NCAA rules."

In other college football news:

■ Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields is forgoing his senior season to enter the NFL

Draft, while Buckeyes wide receiver Chris Olave is returning for his senior year.

Irving rejoins Nets after missing 7 games

Kyrie Irving rejoined the Brooklyn Nets on Tuesday, saying he took a leave of absence because he "just needed a pause."

Irving practiced with the team and could play Wednesday

in Cleveland.

Padres land Musgrove in three-team trade

The San Diego Padres brought right-hander Joe Musgrove to his hometown team Tuesday in a seven-player trade involving the Pittsburgh Pirates and New York Mets. The Padres will send major league reliever David Bednar and three prospects — outfielder Hudson

Head, left-hander Omar Cruz and right-hander Drake Fellows — to the Pirates.

Falcons name Saints' Fontenot as GM

The Atlanta Falcons on Tuesday named Terry Fontenot as general manager, finding new leadership for the team from within their division. Fontenot spent 18 seasons with NFC South rival New Orleans.