

US nuke changes remote due to China, Russia

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Joe Biden's arrival in the White House nearly a year ago seemed to herald a historic shift toward less U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons and possibly a shrinking of their numbers. Even an American "no first use" pledge — a promise to never again be the first to use a nuclear weapon — seemed possible.

Then China happened — revelations about its expanding nuclear force and talk of potential war with Taiwan.

And then Russia happened — signs that it might be preparing to invade Ukraine.

Now, major shifts in U.S. nu-

clear weapons policy seem much less likely, and while Biden may insist on certain adjustments, momentum toward a historic departure from the Trump administration's policy appears to have stalled.

The outlook will be clearer when the Biden administration completes its so-called nuclear posture review — an internal relook at the numbers, kinds and purposes of weapons in the nuclear arsenal, as well as the policies that govern their potential use. The results could be made public as early as January.

The biggest unknown is how forcefully Biden will weigh in on these questions, based on

White House calculations of the political risk. During his years as vice president, Biden talked of new directions in nuclear policy. But heightened concerns about China and Russia would seem to improve the political leverage of Republicans seeking to portray such change as a gift to nuclear adversaries.

Russia became a more urgent focus of Biden's attention after President Vladimir Putin in recent weeks sent an estimated 100,000 troops to positions near Ukraine's border and demanded U.S. security guarantees. Biden and Putin discussed Ukraine by phone on Thursday, and senior American and Russian officials are sched-

uled to follow up with more detailed talks in Geneva on Jan. 9-10.

Tom Z. Collina, policy director at Ploughshares Fund, an advocate for nuclear disarmament, said the China and Russia problems complicate the politics of Biden's nuclear review, but should not stop him from acting to reduce nuclear dangers.

"We do not want a new nuclear arms race with either nation, and the only way to prevent that is with diplomacy," Collina said. "We must remember the main lesson we learned in the Cold War with Russia — the only way to win an arms race is not to run."

Marine virus cluster adds 73 cases over holiday weekend

BY JOSEPH DITZLER

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Another 73 people were confirmed positive for COVID-19 at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni over the four-day New Year's holiday, according to base news releases Friday and Monday.

The base 25 miles south of Hiroshima has reported 143 cases of the coronavirus respiratory disease since Dec. 27. Its new case numbers surged suddenly but fell short of the 200-plus at Marine Corps bases on Okinawa, where a viral cluster erupted in mid-November.

Another Marine Corps installation, Combined Arms Training Center Camp Fuji, reported 10 COVID-19 cases between Dec. 27 and 28, according to a base news release Wednesday.

Tokyo reported 103 new cases Monday, the first time the capital city has confirmed more than 100 infections on one day since Oct. 8, according to NHK.

The public broadcaster also reported Monday that Okinawa prefecture, where the bulk of U.S. forces in Japan are stationed, reported 130 cases Monday, breaking 100 for

the first time since Sept. 25.

Okinawa public health authorities reported 235 cases within the U.S. military on Saturday, a single-day record for that population, according to The Asahi newspaper on Sunday. A spokesman for Marine Corps Installations Pacific did not return an email request for comment Monday from Stars and Stripes.

Commanders at U.S. bases have said this new round of COVID-19 within the U.S. military population in Japan arose mostly with returning travelers and new arrivals to Japan. Its symptoms are generally not severe, according to reports from U.S. bases.

At Misawa Air Base, 850 miles north of MCAS Iwakuni, the base commander last week heightened the health protection status and imposed protective measures amid a COVID-19 surge. At the same time, he cautioned his people not to panic.

Most of the people turning up positive are experiencing very mild symptoms or none at all, Air Force Col. Jesse Friedel said Thursday on American Forces Radio.

"The biggest thing, we don't want people to panic and think it's a big threat out there,"

he said. "The majority of people that are positive we've caught with testing."

There is a downside, however.

"We actually have more cases on the installation than we've ever had," Friedel said.

He did not specify the number of active cases on the base, which has not publicized its coronavirus numbers since reporting 13 in August. Two squadrons of Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons are stationed at Misawa. The Japan Air Self-Defense Force shares the base and has two squadrons of F-35A Lightning II stealth fighters there.

Friedel on Wednesday raised the health protection condition at Misawa from Alpha, which indicates a limited community transmission of the virus, to Bravo, or increased transmission.

With that, he instituted a mask mandate for all indoor public spaces, with an exception for exercise and related physical activity. Also, unit leaders must sign off on any planned social gatherings of more than 10 people, "with particular concern for gatherings that include members who recently returned" to Misawa Air Base from outside of Japan.

Experts: Strike should bring bases near Russia

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — The United States should expedite delivery of sophisticated weapons to Ukraine and warn Moscow that any new invasion of Ukrainian territory will result in permanent American military bases near Russia's borders, 24 former senior government officials and experts recommended in a recent open letter.

The statement, which was issued Thursday by the Atlantic Council think tank, calls for a permanent NATO presence in the Black Sea region and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia if a Russian military buildup along the border with Ukraine turns into an incursion.

Basing permanent forces in the Baltics would conflict with

commitments outlined in the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which calls on allies to refrain from basing nuclear weapons or large numbers of permanent forces in new member states. But a new Russian attack on Ukraine should invalidate elements of that act, the experts said in the statement.

"In short, Moscow appears to be setting the stage for launching a major conventional assault on Ukraine, even though the United States and NATO have shown a willingness to sit down and discuss Kremlin concerns," the statement said.

Among the 24 signatories are former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove and retired Army Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, two of the key U.S. military leaders in Europe during the aftermath of Russia's 2014 military inter-

vention in Ukraine.

The statement comes ahead of a Monday meeting between Washington and Moscow on the crisis in Ukraine.

In the meantime, the Kremlin has issued various demands to the West, including a pledge that Ukraine will never join NATO. Moscow also wants the alliance to cease troop rotations into the Baltic states.

On Sunday, President Joe Biden told Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a telephone call that the U.S. and its allies will "respond decisively" if Russia further invades Ukraine, the White House said. The call came shortly after Biden's conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin about easing tensions on the border with Ukraine, where the Kremlin has reportedly massed about 100,000 troops.

Following Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukrainian territory, the U.S. and other allies increased military support to the Baltic states and Poland. Those NATO missions thus far have been rotational, although some military experts have said they should be made permanent.

Other retaliatory measures that should be taken, according to the statement, include a package of "major and painful sanctions."

The outline of the sanctions should be communicated to Moscow now "so that the Kremlin has a clear understanding of the magnitude of the economic hit it will face," the letter stated.

The most important step for the West, however, is getting more military hardware into Ukraine, according to the statement.

S. Korea: Defector crosses DMZ in return to the North

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

A North Korean defector is believed to have returned to the country on New Year's Day, South Korea's military said Monday.

The man, believed to be in his 30s, first escaped North Korea in November 2020, a military official told Stars and Stripes on the customary condition of anonymity. Thermal surveillance equipment at the Demilitarized Zone detected the man illegally crossing the border into North Korea on Saturday night.

No "special movement" of North Korean troops was detected as of Monday afternoon, according to the military official.

A South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman said it informed North Korea of the incident Sat-

urday and that Pyongyang "received the notice well." The office said it deployed 17 officers to the scene to investigate the border crossing.

"South Korea sent a notice to North Korea for the protection of its citizen," Defense Ministry spokesman Boo Seung-chan said in a briefing Monday morning.

The DMZ is a 150-mile-long, 2 1/2-mile-wide buffer zone established between the two Koreas after the 1950-53 Korean War. The zone is considered to be the most fortified border in the world.

A North Korean defector in his late 20s crossed the border on Nov. 3 after jumping over a roughly 9-foot fence, military officials said at the time. That defector claimed he was a former gymnast after being apprehended by South Korean troops.

Soon to be more troops at US civilian health facilities

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

An additional 65 military personnel have begun deploying to help health care facilities in Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania that are struggling to meet the demands of increased coronavirus patients, according to U.S. Army North.

The deployment primarily includes nurses, respiratory therapists and physicians, and comes at the request of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, according to Army North, the military agency that has overseen these missions since they began in 2020. All troops went back to their duty stations for a period, but missions returned in August.

Once the newly deployed troops arrive, there will be about 260 service members working

FEMA missions to alleviate the stress caused on some medical facilities as the omicron and delta variants of the coronavirus increase demand for care. The 65 service members called up last week are split into four new teams — three 15-person teams working in Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania, and a 20-person team also headed to Pennsylvania, according to Army North.

"As U.S. Northern Command's joint force land component command, our assigned joint forces — from the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force — are prepared and focused on this mission and know what it takes to save lives, alleviate suffering and defeat this pandemic alongside our federal and community partners," Army North commander Lt. Gen. John R. Evans Jr. said in a statement.

Defense secretary tests positive for coronavirus

BY JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin tested positive for COVID-19 over the weekend, the Pentagon announced Sunday evening.

Austin, in a statement attributed to him, said he was tested Sunday after exhibiting symptoms of the coronavirus respiratory disease while at home on leave.

“My symptoms are mild, and I am following my physician’s directions,” Austin said.

“As my doctor made clear to me, my fully vaccinated status — and the booster I received in early October — have rendered the infection much more mild than it would otherwise have been. And I am grateful for that.”

Austin said he will abide by guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and quarantine for five days at home.

“I have informed my leadership team of my positive test result, as well as the President,” he said. “My staff has begun contact tracing and testing of all those with whom I have come into contact over the last week.”

Austin said he last met with President Joe Biden on Dec. 21, “more than a week before I began to experience symptoms.” Austin tested negative for the virus that morning and has not been to the Pentagon since Thursday, when he met briefly with a few staff members and stayed masked and socially distanced.

“Stemming the spread of this virus, safeguarding our workforce and ensuring my own speedy and safe recovery remain my priorities,” Austin said. “To the degree possible, I plan to attend virtually this coming week those key meetings and discussions required to inform my situational awareness and decision making. I will retain all authorities.”

Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks will step in for Austin where appropriate, Austin said. He closed his statement with a reminder to everyone in the DOD to get vaccinated or a booster shot.

“The vaccines work and will remain a military medical requirement for our workforce,” he said. “I continue to encourage everyone eligible for a booster shot to get one. This remains a readiness issue.”

Omicron clouds forecast for end of the pandemic

Associated Press

Pandemics do eventually end, even if omicron is complicating the question of when this one will. But it won’t be like flipping a light switch: The world will have to learn to coexist with a virus that’s not going away.

The ultra-contagious omicron mutant is pushing cases to all-time highs and causing chaos as an exhausted world struggles, again, to stem the spread. But this time, we’re not starting from scratch.

Vaccines offer strong protection from serious illness, even if they don’t always prevent a mild infection. Omicron doesn’t appear to be as deadly as some earlier coronavirus variants. And those who survive it will have some refreshed protection against other forms of the virus that still are circulating — and maybe the next mutant to emerge, too.

The newest variant is a warning about what will continue to happen “unless we really get serious about the endgame,” said Dr. Albert Ko, an infectious disease specialist at the Yale School of Public Health.

“Certainly COVID will be with us forever,” Ko added. “We’re never going to be able to eradicate or eliminate COVID, so we have to identify our goals.”

At some point, the World Health Organization will determine when enough countries have tamped down their COVID-19 cases sufficiently — or at least, hospitalizations and deaths — to declare the pandemic officially over. Exactly what that threshold will be isn’t clear.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, is looking ahead to controlling the virus in a way “that does not disrupt society, that does not disrupt the economy.”

But human immune systems will continue to get better at recognizing and fighting back. Immunologist Ali Ellebedy at Washington University at St. Louis finds hope in the body’s amazing ability to remember germs it’s seen before and create multilayer defenses.

Ellebedy said baseline population immunity has improved so much that even as breakthrough infections inevitably continue, there will be a drop in severe illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths — regardless of the next variant.

He foresees a day when someone gets a coronavirus infection, stays home two to three days “and then you move on. That hopefully will be the endgame.”

FDA expands Pfizer boosters for more teens amid COVID surges

Associated Press

The United States is expanding COVID-19 boosters as it confronts the omicron surge, with the Food and Drug Administration allowing extra Pfizer shots for children as young as 12.

Boosters are already recommended for everyone 16 and older, and federal regulators on Monday decided they’re also warranted for 12- to 15-year-olds once enough time has passed since their last dose.

But the move, coming as classes restart after the holidays, isn’t the final step. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention must decide whether to recommend boosters for the younger teens. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC’s director, is expected to rule later this week.

The FDA also said everyone 12 and older eligible for a booster can get one as early as five

months after their last dose rather than six months.

Vaccines still offer strong protection against serious illness from any type of COVID-19. But health authorities are urging everyone who’s eligible to get a booster dose for their best chance at avoiding milder breakthrough infections from the highly contagious omicron mutant.

Children tend to suffer less serious illness from COVID-19 than adults. But child hospitalizations are rising during the omicron wave — most of them unvaccinated.

The vaccine made by Pfizer and its partner BioNTech is the only U.S. option for children of any age. About 13.5 million 12- to 17-year-olds — just over half that age group — have received two Pfizer shots, according to the CDC.

Pfizer is studying its vaccine, in even smaller doses, for children younger than 5.

Capitol rioters not being spared from jail

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Florida business owner Robert Palmer cheered on the violence at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 before he joined the fray. Screaming obscenities, he hurled a wooden plank and a fire extinguisher at police officers trying to ward off the mob.

Nearly a year later, Palmer fought back tears when he faced the federal judge who sentenced him to more than five years in prison. He said he was “horrified, absolutely devastated” by what he had done.

“I’m just so ashamed that I was a part of that,” Palmer told U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan on Dec. 17 before she gave him the longest prison term for any rioter so far.

Judges are hearing tearful expressions of remorse — and a litany of excuses — from rioters paying a price for joining the Jan. 6 insurrection, even as others try to play down the deadly

attack on a seat of American democracy.

The Justice Department’s investigation of the riot has now entered the punishment phase. So far, 71 people have been sentenced for riot-related crimes. They include a company CEO, an architect, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, a gym owner, a former Houston police officer and a University of Kentucky student. Many rioters have said they lost jobs and friends after their mob of Donald Trump loyalists disrupted the certification of Joe Biden’s presidential victory.

Fifty-six of the 71 pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count of parading, demonstrating or picketing in a Capitol building. Most of them were sentenced to home confinement or jail terms measured in weeks or months, according to an Associated Press tally of every sentencing. But rioters who assaulted police officers have gotten years be-

hind bars.

With hundreds of people charged, the Justice Department has taken heat for not coming down harder on some rioters, and it has failed to charge anyone with sedition or treason despite hints early on in the investigation. But lower-level cases tend to be easier to prosecute and typically get resolved before more complex ones.

At least 165 people have pleaded guilty so far, mostly to crimes punishable by a maximum sentence of six months. There are dozens of cases involving more serious offenses still moving through the system. More than 220 people have been charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement officers at the Capitol, according to the Justice Department. Since November, three of them have been sentenced to prison terms ranging from more than three years to just over five years.

More than 700 people have

been charged so far and the FBI is still looking for more. Among the most serious charges are against far-right extremist group members accused of plotting attacks to obstruct Congress from certifying the 2020 presidential election. Their cases haven’t yet gone to trial.

The rioters’ refrains before the judges are often the same: They were caught up in the moment or just following the crowd into the Capitol. They didn’t see any violence or vandalism. They thought police were letting them enter the building. They insist they went there to peacefully protest.

Their excuses often implode in the face of overwhelming evidence. Thousands of hours of videos from surveillance cameras, cellphones and police body cameras captured them reveling in the mayhem. Many even boasted about their crimes on social media in the days after the deadly attack.

Coalition says 2 armed drones shot down at Baghdad airport

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Two armed drones were shot down at the Baghdad airport on Monday, a U.S.-led coalition official said, an attack that coincides with the anniversary of the 2020 U.S. killing of a top Iranian general.

There were no reports of damage or injuries from the incident, which was also confirmed by an Iraqi security official.

The official with the U.S.-led international coalition fighting the Islamic State in Iraq told The Associated Press that the C-RAM defense system at the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center engaged two fixed wing so-called “suicide drones.” The C-RAM system protects American installations in Iraq.

“This was a dangerous attack on a civilian airport,” the coalition official said.

The Iraqi security official who confirmed the incident said the drones were headed toward a U.S. base at Baghdad airport housing U.S. advisers.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, although one of the wings of the drones had the words “Soleimani’s revenge” painted on it, while another had words reading, “revenge operations for our leaders,” according to the officials. Both spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

The 2020 U.S. drone strike at Baghdad’s airport killed Gen. Qasem Soleimani, who was the head of Iran’s elite Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.

Cats caused over 100 fires in S. Korea in last 3 years

The Washington Post

South Korean officials have a message for pet owners in Seoul: Beware, your cat might burn your house down.

The warning comes as the capital’s Metropolitan Fire & Disaster Headquarters estimated that more than 100 fires over the past three years were started by cats, many of which managed to turn on electric stoves with their furry paws.

“Cat-started fires are continuing to be reported these days,” Chung Gyo-chul, an official working at the department told the Korea Herald. “We advise pet owners to pay extra attention, as fire could spread widely when no one is at home.”

According to the agency, 107 fires sparked by felines were recorded between January 2019

and November 2021. Nearly half of those were started when the owners were out of the house, officials said.

In the recorded incidents, four people were injured. But the pets themselves often do not survive.

Fires accidentally started by pets are not just a problem in South Korea: In the United States, almost 1,000 home fires each year are started by pets, according to the National Fire Protection Association, although it remains unclear what percentage of these blazes are started by cats.

Korean officials have recommended that people keep flammable objects such as paper towels away from their cooking devices to help prevent such accidents.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

New Year's ocean plunge nixed after sewage spill

CA LONG BEACH — Southern California beaches soiled by a sewage spill will remain closed until testing of water samples shows bacteria levels are within state standards, officials said.

A sewer main line failed Thursday in the city of Carson and millions of gallons of untreated sewage were discharged into the Dominguez Channel, a waterway that empties into Los Angeles Harbor.

Officials estimate about 8.5 million gallons of sewage flowed from the line, Bryan Langpap with the LA County Sanitation Districts told The Orange County Register on Saturday. The flow was stopped Friday night.

The 70th annual Polar Bear Swim that usually draws hundreds of people to Cabrillo Beach in San Pedro for a New Year's Day plunge was canceled.

Famous buoy damaged after 2 set tree on fire

FL KEY WEST — Police in Florida are searching for two people who burned a part of Key West's famous Southernmost Point buoy early New Year's Day after setting a fire near the tourist attraction.

Authorities said two males lit a Christmas tree on fire in front of the buoy around 3:30 a.m. Saturday and the flames charred sections of the colorful, 4-ton cement monument that reads "90 miles to Cuba, Southernmost Point, Continental U.S.A."

Archival webcam images of the buoy from a marketing com-

pany shows two people lighting the tree on fire near the marker, with the flames leaving a large black burn mark on the monument.

DA: Ticket-fixing inquiry given over to AG's office

GA ALBANY — A southwest Georgia district attorney said state Attorney General Chris Carr's office is reviewing allegations that court employees were taking money to improperly dispose of tickets.

Dougherty County District Attorney Greg Edwards told WALB-TV that he turned over the allegations concerning Albany Municipal Court to the attorney general's office.

Edwards said in 2020 that officials had received allegations that one or more court employees were taking bribes to fix tickets.

The district attorney said Carr's office has "the expertise and the resources" to better handle the inquiry.

Crews rescue 21 people stuck on tram cars

NM ALBUQUERQUE — Search and rescue crews used ropes and helicopters Saturday to rescue 21 people who were stranded overnight in two tram cars after an iced-over cable caused the cars to get stuck high up in the Sandia Mountains overlooking Albuquerque.

Lt. Robert Arguellas, a Bernalillo County Fire Department spokesperson, said early Saturday afternoon that crews first rescued 20 people stranded in one car and several hours later rescued a 21st person stranded

by themselves in a second car.

All the people on the two cars were employees of the Sandia Peak Aerial Tramway or a mountaintop restaurant, and the 20 in one car were being ferried down to the base of the mountains at the end of their workdays, Arguellas said. The other employee had been heading up the mountain to provide security when the tram system shut down Friday night due to icing, Arguellas said.

There were no reported injuries among those stranded, Arguellas said. "More just pretty frustrated."

27K tons of carpet still piled up decades later

ME WARREN — The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is sending out another request for proposals on removing 27,000 tons of carpet that pose a fire hazard at an abandoned rifle range.

The previous contract expired at year's end with little to show for it. The Bangor Daily News reported that only 16 tons of material were removed by that point.

Some have lost faith in the DEP, and think the town should take charge. But residents voted Wednesday against foreclosing on the property, because that would make the town liable for the cleanup.

Meteor eyed as cause of boom, shaking ground

PA PITTSBURGH — The National Weather Service said an exploding meteor is likely the cause of a loud boom and shaking ground

reported on New Year's Day across portions of suburban Pittsburgh.

Allegheny County officials reported in a Twitter post Saturday that county 911 officials had received reports from South Hills and other areas about the disturbance. County officials said they had confirmed that there was no seismic activity and no thunder and lightning.

The Tribune-Review reported that National Weather Service meteorologist Shannon Hefferan said satellite data recorded a flash over Washington County shortly before 11:30 a.m. Saturday. The weather service theorizes that it was caused by a meteor "falling through the atmosphere."

Man assaulted referee at son's basketball game

WA SEATTLE — A man is accused of storming the court during his son's middle school basketball game and slamming into a referee from behind, breaking the man's nose and cheekbone, according to King County prosecutors.

The Seattle Times reported that Mark McLaughlin, 31, turned himself in to King County sheriff's deputies on Dec. 17, the day after the game at Kenmore Middle School. He was released from jail on Dec. 22 after posting \$20,000 bail after being charged with second-degree assault the day before.

"The defendant is 6'6 and 215 lbs and was likely able to generate a significant amount of force," Senior Deputy Prosecutor Brynn Jacobson wrote in charging papers.

— From wire reports



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Bengals beat Chiefs, secure AFC North

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Patrick Mahomes had a message for young Bengals star Ja'Marr Chase when the two met on the field after Cincinnati's dramatic 34-31 win over Kansas City to clinch the AFC North title.

"Keep going — we'll see you in the playoffs," the Chiefs quarterback told Chase.

The Bengals (10-6) are finally back in the postseason, thanks to Chase and quarterback Joe Burrow, who both shattered team records on Sunday. Chase's 266 receiving yards was more than Mahomes had passing (259) in the game.

With that, Kansas City (11-5) lost its grip on the No. 1 seed in the AFC and the first-round bye and home-field advantage that comes with it. It now has to beat Denver next week and hope woeful Houston can knock off AFC South champion Tennessee to regain the top seed.

"After you lose a game like you lost it today, it shouldn't be difficult to get ready to go next week," Mahomes said. "I think guys will be ready to go. ... We'll try to fix some things and play better football this week."

The last Cincinnati playoff appearance was 2015 when the team started 8-0 and won the division, only to lose a bizarre wild-card game to the Steelers. The Bengals haven't won a playoff game in three decades.

There were plenty of heroics from a new generation of Cincinnati players.

In addition to breaking Jerry Butler's NFL rookie record of 255 yards for Buffalo against the New York Jets on Sept. 23, 1979, Chase set a record for receiving yards in a season by a rookie. He has 1,429 yards with one game left in the league's first 17-game season, surpassing Minnesota's Justin Jefferson, who had 1,400 yards in 2020.

He had 11 catches, including three touchdowns.

Joe Burrow threw for 466 yards and four scores while outdueling Mahomes, and the Bengals rallied from three 14-point deficits against the AFC West champs, finally closing them out when rookie Evan McPherson kicked a 20-yard field goal as time expired.

"That was fun," said Burrow, who puffed on a victory cigar in the locker room that running back Joe Mixon had left for him a couple of weeks ago.

Cincinnati completed a worst-to-first turnaround, winning its division the year after finishing in last place. It makes 17 of the past 19 seasons in which at least one team finished in first place the season after finishing in last or tied for last place.

The Bengals' winning drive was filled with drama.

On fourth-and-inches with under a minute left, Cincinnati decided to go for a touchdown instead of calling on McPherson for a field goal and giving Kansas City the ball back with a chance to win.

"I knew we'd go for it," Burrow said. "They've got Patrick Mahomes on the other side. He could go down and win the game."

Burrow threw incomplete in the end zone, but Chiefs cornerback L'Jarius Sneed was flagged for illegal use of hands, giving the Bengals a fresh set of downs. With Burrow limping on the sideline, backup quarterback Brandon Allen was called on to kneel twice before McPherson came on for the game-winner.

Mahomes looked as if he had the game under control early. He threw two first-quarter touchdown passes to give Kansas City the early lead, but he didn't get another one.

The Chiefs led 14-0, 21-7 and 28-14 in the first half. They were ahead 28-17 at halftime before Cincinnati began the latest of several second-half surges this season.

A 69-yard TD pass from Burrow to Chase early in the second half cut the lead to 28-24. Kansas City responded with Harrison Butker's 34-yard field goal.

Burrow then hit Tyler Boyd for a 5-yard TD, capping an 86-yard drive that was twice extended by flags on Sneed, including an unnecessary roughness penalty that gave the Bengals first-and-goal at the Chiefs' 7.

Mahomes was 26-for-35 for 259 yards and threw touchdown passes to Demarcus Robinson and tight end Travis Kelce, who caught a pass in his 125th straight game. Kansas City's Darrel Williams rushed for 88 yards and scored twice.

"You just go back to work, you don't point fingers," Chiefs safety Tyrann Mathieu said. "You don't blame coaches, you don't blame a particular player or a particular series, you just go back to work. You keep bonding with your teammates, you keep that chemistry alive and you keep believing in your coaches, as well."

Burrow said his right knee was sore but insisted he could have stayed in and will be fine.

The second-year quarterback was outstanding again, completing 30 of 39 attempts. He was sacked four times and hit at least six more times but was as accurate as ever, and Chase caught everything that was thrown near him.

"If you play one-on-one, good luck with that," Burrow said. "I know he's down there somewhere. I just throw it and let him make a play."

Brady rallies Bucs past Jets after Brown walks off

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — Antonio Brown was apparently frustrated and angry. So he walked away.

From the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. And possibly his NFL career.

The mercurial wide receiver was kicked off the Buccaneers after a bizarre, shirtless exit from the field before Tom Brady coolly led the Bucs on a 93-yard drive in the final minutes for a 28-24 victory over the New York Jets on Sunday.

Tampa Bay coach Bruce Arians said after the game Brown was off the team.

"He is no longer a Buc," Arians said. "All

right? That's the end of the story. Let's talk about the guys who went out there and won the game."

Brown's mid-game meltdown came late in the third quarter with Tampa Bay trailing 24-10. He appeared animated while talking to Mike Evans, who tried to calm his teammate. But Brown stripped off his pads, jersey, gloves and T-shirt — tossing the gloves and T-shirt into the stands — and then walked bare-chested down the sideline and into the end zone. He then waved to fans as jogged through the end zone and into the tunnel at MetLife Stadium.

It appeared to be a show of frustration by

Brown, who had three catches for 26 yards.

"I'm not talking about it," Arians said. "He's not part of the Bucs."

Brown was suspended last month for three games for violating the league's COVID-19 protocols.

"It's a difficult situation," Brady said. "Everybody should do what they can to help him in ways that he really needs it. We all love him. We care about him deeply. We want to see him be at his best. Unfortunately, it won't be with our team. ... I think everyone should be very compassionate and empathetic toward some very difficult things that are happening."

Packers ice Vikes to take NFC's No. 1 seed

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Aaron Rodgers and the Green Bay Packers have once again made sure they won't have to leave Lambeau Field for the conference playoffs.

They're hoping it works out better for them this time.

Rodgers threw two touchdown passes, A.J. Dillon ran for two more scores and the Packers routed the Minnesota Vikings 37-10 on Sunday night to wrap up the NFC's No. 1 playoff seed.

"It definitely feels amazing," Dillon said. "It's something we're continuously working toward, we're striving toward, to get that. We know how important it is to have teams come through Lambeau."

Green Bay (13-3) is the lone NFL team with an unbeaten home record and has a chance to reach the Super Bowl without leaving Lambeau Field. Sunday night's game exemplified the potential advantage the Packers have playing home games in January, as the temperature was 11 degrees with a wind chill of 1 just before kickoff.

Green Bay has won 13 straight regular season home games, but lost 31-26 at home to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in last season's NFC championship game. The Packers haven't reached the Super Bowl since their 2010 title and have lost in the conference championship game four of the last seven

seasons.

"Last year we didn't get that good Green Bay weather," Rodgers said. "Tonight was one of those nights. We haven't had a game like this in a while temperature-wise. This was different. It is different, the whole feel of it. I feel like teams can break a little bit easier when it is this cold because there's an excuse — the weather."

The Packers' victory, coupled with Philadelphia's 20-16 triumph at Washington earlier in the day, dropped the Vikings (7-9) from postseason contention and gave the Eagles a playoff berth. Minnesota was playing without quarterback Kirk Cousins after he was placed on the reserve/COVID-19 list Friday.

"Disappointing tonight," Vikings coach Mike Zimmer said. "I didn't feel like we gave ourselves a chance to win."

Rodgers went 29-for-38 for 288 yards with a 20-yard touchdown pass to Allen Lazard and an 11-yarder to Adams, who caught 11 passes for 136 yards.

Adams has 117 receptions to break Green Bay's season record he set last year.

"It means that I'm continuing to push," Adams said. "I said at the end of last year when I did my farewell post on Instagram at end of the season. At the end of that post, I said don't be surprised if I come back better, when I come back better. I hope people aren't surprised because I said it ahead of

time."

Over his last six games, Rodgers has thrown 18 touchdown passes without an interception despite playing with an injured left pinky toe.

The reigning MVP has thrown 56 career regular season touchdown passes against Minnesota, the most the franchise has allowed to any quarterback. Brett Favre, who preceded Rodgers as the Packers' quarterback, threw 54 career touchdown passes against the Vikings before ending his career with Minnesota.

Green Bay coach Matt LaFleur broke George Seifert's 30-year-old NFL record for the most regular season wins by a coach in his first three seasons. LaFleur has a 39-9 regular season mark and 41-11 overall record. Seifert had a 38-10 regular season record from 1989-91 in his first three seasons with the San Francisco 49ers.

Dillon ran for two second-half touchdowns and gained 63 yards on 15 carries. Aaron Jones gained 76 yards on just eight carries as the Packers outrushed the Vikings 174-27.

Minnesota had won its last two matchups with Green Bay but never had much of a chance in this one without Cousins, who had thrown for 341 yards and three touchdowns in a 34-31 home victory over the Packers on Nov. 21.

Titans beat Dolphins, clinch 2nd straight AFC South

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Tennessee Titans are dancing as back-to-back AFC South champs in a season when they lost the NFL's leading rusher at Halloween and have used 88 players—the most ever in a non-strike season for the NFL.

Ryan Tannehill threw two touchdown passes as the Titans clinched their second straight division title Sunday, snapping the Miami Dolphins' seven-game winning streak with a 34-3 win.

"Winning takes care of everything," Titans coach Mike Vrabel said. "That's what I learned a long time ago in athletics. Winning takes care of everything."

Tennessee (11-5) won its second straight overall and third in

four games to clinch its first back-to-back division titles since the start of the AFL when this franchise was the Houston Oilers and won three straight Eastern Division championships. It also won 11 games for a second consecutive season for the first time since 2002-03 — and is currently the AFC's top seed after Kansas City lost at Cincinnati.

It finished off its win and was celebrating with some nice dance moves in the locker room wearing T-shirts reading "TITANS RUN THE SOUTH" while fans stood around TVs on the concourses watching Kansas City lose, which moved the Titans to the top spot due to their Oct. 24 win over the Chiefs.

"It's definitely good to be in

this position," Pro Bowl safety Kevin Byard said. "Usually, the last game of the year we're fighting for something anyway. It's good to go into the last game of the season trying to fight to be this No. 1 seed."

Tennessee plays at Houston next weekend.

Miami came in as the first team in NFL history to win seven straight after a seven-game skid. That surge helped push the Dolphins into the third and final wild card spot in the AFC, but the loss ended their playoff hopes.

"Anytime you don't have the performance that you're looking for, you're disappointed," Miami coach Brian Flores said.

On a cold and rainy day, the Titans ran more than they threw. Tannehill was 13-for-18

for 120 yards and a 127.1 passer rating against the team that drafted him eighth overall in 2012 before trading him to Tennessee in March 2019. Tannehill is 31-15 as the Titans' starter with his third straight playoff berth clinched.

"It was a great win for us," Tannehill said. "Obviously a lot was on the line for us as a team and excited that we came out and played well, a full game as a team. Obviously this was an important one for me being where we're at in the season, and having the opportunity to win the division first and foremost."

D'Onta Foreman ran for 132 yards and a TD. Dontrell Hilliard ran for a 39-yard TD as Tennessee scored 10 points off a pair of turnovers by Tua Tagovailoa.

Brown leads Celtics past Magic in OT

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jaylen Brown scored a career-high 50 points, rallying the Boston Celtics from 14 points down late in the fourth quarter in a 116-111 overtime victory over the Orlando Magic on Sunday night.

Brown scored 21 points in the fourth quarter, then opened OT with his fifth three-pointer. Brown, whose previous career high was 46 against the Knicks on Oct. 20, also had 11 rebounds as the Celtics avoided losing for the fourth time in five games. He was 19-for-29 from the field.

Marcus Smart added 17 points, seven assists and seven rebounds for the Celtics, who needed an 11-2 run down the stretch to force overtime. Dennis Schroder had 21 points and seven assists.

Suns 133, Hornets 99: Devin Booker scored 24 points, Jalen Smith tied a career high with 19 points and 12 rebounds and

short-handed Phoenix rolled to a win at Charlotte.

Chris Paul had 16 assists to help the Suns improve to 28-8 — a half-game behind Golden State for the NBA lead — after they lost three of their previous four.

Phoenix got 11 points and six rebounds from Bismack Biyombo, who signed a 10-day contract Saturday with four Suns players in the NBA's health and safety protocols, including starting center Deandre Ayton, starting forward Jae Crowder and backup center JaVale McGee. Coach Monty Williams also is out.

Lakers 108 Timberwolves 103: LeBron James scored 26 points, Malik Monk added 22 and host Los Angeles beat Minnesota for the first time in three meetings this season.

Russell Westbrook had 20 points, three rebounds and five assists to help the Lakers reach .500 at 19-19.

Naz Reid led the Timberwolves with season highs of 23 points, making 10 of 17 from the floor, and 11 rebounds. Jaylen Nowell added 17 points.

Mavericks 95, Thunder 86: Luka Doncic had 14 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds in his return from a 10-game absence, Marquese Chriss scored a season-high 15 points and Dallas won at Oklahoma City.

Doncic played with a long brace on his left knee and saw just over 31 minutes in his first game in 23 days. He was content with setting up teammates for baskets after missing five games with ankle soreness and five more games due to virus health and safety protocols.

Raptors 120, Knicks 105: Fred VanVleet scored 19 of his season-high 35 points in the third quarter, Pascal Siakam had 20 points and 14 rebounds and Toronto extended its home winning streak against New

York to 11 games.

Evan Fournier led the depleted Knicks with 20 points. RJ Barrett and Obi Toppin each had 19.

Cavaliers 108, Pacers 104: Rookie Evan Mobley had 24 points and nine rebounds, Kevin Love scored 20 points and host Cleveland beat Indiana to snap a three-game losing streak.

Jarrett Allen scored 18 points and Lamar Stevens added a season-high 15 for the Cavs, who trailed 84-73 in the third quarter before going on a 17-0 run to take the lead for good.

Kings 115, Heat 113: De'Aaron Fox scored 11 of his 24 points over the final six minutes, including two free throws with 6.2 seconds left, and host Sacramento ended Miami's five-game winning streak.

Buddy Hield added 26 points, and Damian Jones had 18 points and 10 rebounds.

Rodrigues, Rust each score hat tricks for Pens in win

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Penguins enjoyed a strong six-goal start after a lengthy layoff.

A third-period lull allowed the San Jose Sharks back into the game, but Evan Rodrigues and Bryan Rust came through when Pittsburgh needed it most.

Rodrigues and Rust both finished off hat tricks in the third period and the Penguins beat the Sharks 8-5 Sunday for their eighth straight win — and first since Dec. 19.

"I loved the start we had," Pittsburgh coach Mike Sullivan said. "We brought a ton of energy at the start of the game. We were rewarded, but as a result, when you get up by that many goals, you're fighting against human nature to stay diligent."

Rodrigues and Rust each scored twice as the Pens built a 6-1 lead in the first period. Both added insurance goals in the final period, with Rodrigues completing his first career hat trick with 2:01 left and Rust scoring into an empty net with 11 seconds remaining. Rust had a career-best five points.

The last time two Pittsburgh players scored

hat tricks in one game came on Dec. 11, 2008, when Petr Sykora and Pascal Dupuis did it.

"I was shocked that there were any hats left," Rust said.

San Jose scored three times in the first 4:09 of the third period but couldn't overcome the huge deficit, which led to an early exit for goalie James Reimer. Alexander Barbanov, Brent Burns, Matt Nieto, Jacob Middleton and Logan Couture scored for the Sharks.

Flames 5, Blackhawks 1: Johnny Gaudreau had a goal and two assists, Matthew Tkachuk scored for a third straight game and visiting Calgary beat Chicago.

Elias Lindholm and Trevor Lewis also scored for the Flames. Oliver Kylington added a long empty-netter and Jacob Markstrom blocked 30 shots in Calgary's second straight win.

Alex DeBrincat scored his team-leading 18th goal, but the Blackhawks dropped their fourth straight.

Rangers 4, Lightning 0: Mika Zibanejad had his eighth career hat trick, Igor Shesterkin stopped 38 shots for his second shutout of the season and host New York beat Tampa

Bay.

Ryan Strome also scored, Chris Kreider had three assists and Adam Fox added two to help the Rangers win for the third time in five games (3-1-1).

Andrei Vasilevskiy, playing for the first time in 12 days after coming off COVID-19 protocols earlier in the day, had 17 saves as the Lightning lost their third straight (0-2-1) after winning nine of 10.

Devils 4, Capitals 3 (OT): Nico Hischier scored his second goal of the game with 2:04 left in overtime to give visiting New Jersey a victory over Washington.

Avalanche 4, Ducks 2: Logan O'Connor scored a tiebreaking goal late in the third period and host Colorado rallied from two goals down to get past Anaheim.

Bruins 5, Red Wings 1: Erik Haula scored a tiebreaking goal in the second period and visiting Boston pulled away with three more in the third to beat Detroit.

Jets 5, Golden Knights 4 (OT): Kyle Connor scored in overtime and visiting Winnipeg held off Vegas in its return from a two-week hiatus.