

## Israeli strike kills Hezbollah commander

*Associated Press*

BEIRUT — An Israeli airstrike killed an elite Hezbollah commander Monday in southern Lebanon, the latest in an escalating exchange of strikes along the border that have raised fears of another Mideast war even as the fighting in Gaza exacts a mounting toll on civilians.

The strike on an SUV killed a commander in a secretive Hezbollah force that operates along the border, according to a Lebanese security official who spoke on condition of anonymity in

keeping with regulations. Hezbollah identified the slain fighter as Wissam al-Tawil without providing details.

He is the most senior militant in the armed group killed since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into southern Israel triggered all-out war in Gaza and lower-intensity fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, which has escalated since an Israeli strike killed a senior Hamas leader last week in Beirut.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is back in the region this week, appears to be

trying to head off a wider conflict.

Fighting continued in northern Gaza, even after Israel said it has largely wrapped up major operations there to now focus on the central region and the southern city of Khan Younis, where thousands more Palestinians fled.

Israeli officials say the fighting will continue for many more months as the army seeks to dismantle Hamas and return scores of hostages taken during the militants' Oct. 7 attack.

Medics, patients and dis-

placed people fled from the main hospital in central Gaza as the fighting drew closer, witnesses said Monday. Losing the facility would be another major blow to a health system shattered by three months of war.

Doctors Without Borders and other aid groups withdrew from Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah in recent days, saying it was too dangerous. That spread panic among people sheltering there, causing many to join the hundreds of thousands who have fled to the south of the besieged territory.

## Russia fires barrage of missiles across Ukraine

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia launched its latest barrage of hypersonic and cruise missiles against Ukrainian targets early Monday, striking near the front lines of fighting in the east as well as in central and western parts of the country, officials said. At least four civilians were reported killed and at least 30 injured.

Western officials and analysts had previously warned that Russia was stockpiling its cruise missiles in preparation for a strategy of winter bombardment, as bad weather keeps the 930-mile front line largely static after 22 months of war.

Unlike last winter, when the Kremlin's forces targeted Ukraine's power grid, Russia is now aiming at Kyiv's defense industry, they say. But the almost daily barrages have repeatedly hit civilian areas.

Monday's attacks struck a string of urban areas, including housing and a shopping mall,

across Ukraine.

Russia fired 51 missiles of various types, as well as eight Shahed drones, at Ukraine, Ukrainian commander in chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi said.

The Ukrainian Air Force intercepted 18 of the cruise missiles and all the drones, he said.

Russia's Defense Ministry said its forces used precision sea-launched and air-launched long-range missiles, including Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, to strike what it called "facilities of Ukraine's military-industrial complex."

In the southeastern Dnipropetrovsk region, a woman died in a missile attack outside the city of Kryvyi Rih and 24 people were injured in a strike on the town of Novomoskovsk.

In Kryvyi Rih itself, which is Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's home town, more than 20 houses and a shopping mall were damaged in the attack, said regional Gov. Serhii Lysak.

At least four missiles hit

Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city, injuring one person, said Mayor Ihor Terekhov. A woman rescued from the rubble of a building later died, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said. More people may be trapped, he said.

Authorities in the Khmelnytskyi region of western Ukraine said two people died as at least six explosions were heard during the morning missile attack.

In Zaporizhzhia, a major southern city along the Dnipro River, two people were injured in a missile strike on a residential district, said regional Gov. Yurii Malashko.

Two people injured in a Jan. 2 attack died on Monday, officials said.

Meanwhile, Russian troops conducted 131 artillery attacks on the Kherson region, killing two people and injuring five, according to Gov. Oleksandr Prokudin.

Kherson and the surrounding region have been consistently targeted since Russian forces

withdrew from the city to the eastern side of the Dnipro in the autumn of 2022.

Separately, the Ukrainian military said Russian forces have made unsuccessful efforts to advance during the past day in several areas along the front line, including around Lyman in the Kharkiv region and in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia regions.

In the Russia-occupied Luhansk region in Ukraine's east, a Russian warplane accidentally released a bomb on the town of Rubizhne, said Leonid Pasechnik, the head of the region's Moscow-appointed government.

The bomb, an FAB-250 that carries a high-explosive warhead, did not cause injuries, Pasechnik said.

The incident comes six days after Russia accidentally dropped munitions over the village of Petropavlovka in the Belgorod region, which has come under repeated Ukrainian attack.

# US special operators, Bosnian troops drill

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. special operators on the ground in Bosnia coordinated with two U.S. Air Force F-16s flying overhead to rehearse a close air support mission with local forces, American officials said Monday.

The bilateral drill with Bosnia and Herzegovina amounted to a show of force at a time of tension in the country, where concerns are growing over a secessionist movement.

The military cooperation demonstrates the United States' commitment to ensuring the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina "in the face of anti-Dayton and secessionist activity," the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo said in a statement Monday.

The embassy added that the U.S. "will act if anyone tries to

change this basic element" of the 1995 Dayton Accords or the Bosnian constitution, which "provides no right of secession."

In recent weeks, the leader of the Republic of Srpska territory, Milorad Dodik, has threatened to declare independence from Bosnia-Herzegovina. The territory is majority ethnically Serbian and comprises a little less than half of the nation's land.

More than 100,000 people were killed in fighting in the Balkans prior to the accords, when Serbians in Bosnia tried to break away and join Serbia. The accords established Serb and Bosniak-Croat entities held together by joint institutions.

Dodik, who is backed by Russia, has defied U.S. and British sanctions over his policies, according to Associated Press reports.

On Tuesday, Dodik's govern-

ment plans to hold a celebration of a controversial national holiday that Bosnia's top court has declared unlawful. On Jan. 9, 1992, Bosnian Serbs proclaimed the creation of an independent state in Bosnia, which led to the bloodshed.

Dodik has dismissed the U.S. jets' flyover, saying it would contribute to Tuesday's celebrations, which routinely include a parade of armed police and their equipment, the AP reported.

The drills in Bosnia involved air-to-ground training with Army Special Forces joint terminal attack controllers and local troops in the Tuzla and Brcko region.

"American support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's Armed Forces is ironclad, forged over years of close cooperation," U.S. European Command's deputy commander, Lt. Gen. Steven L. Basham, said in a statement.

JTAC teams provide close air support and are "used to direct the action of military aircraft from a forward position in support of ground forces," the embassy statement said.

The mission was supported by a KC-135 Stratotanker that will provide aerial refueling for the F-16s over the Srpska territory, the embassy said.

The exercise was being led by U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa with support from U.S. Special Operations Command Europe.

"U.S. aircraft will return to base immediately following mission completion," the embassy statement said. "The ability to rapidly deploy, reach a target and return home demonstrates the United States' ability to project power anywhere at a moment's notice and operate alongside allies and partners."

## Navy, Coast Guard rescue Chinese boaters near Guam

By ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The U.S. Coast Guard, Navy and Guam first responders worked together over the weekend to rescue six Chinese boaters in distress off Guam's coast.

The six people were sailing about 30 miles northwest of Guam on Saturday when they issued a distress call and reported their 23-foot recreational vessel was "experiencing severe difficulties" and taking on water, U.S. Coast Guard Forces Micronesia/Sector Guam said in a news release that day.

Guam Fire Rescue relayed the distress call to the Coast Guard, which in turn dispatched a 45-foot response boat from its station in Apra Harbor. Dispatchers also contacted the

Navy, which ordered Helicopter Sea Combat Squadron 25 to assist in the search.

An MH-60S Seahawk crew from the squadron found the vessel, which was in "critical condition" and taking on water in multiple locations, according to the release.

The Coast Guard crew deemed it unsafe to tow, and the six boaters were taken aboard the response boat.

The rescue was "swift and effective" despite scattered rain showers and 6-foot waves, Lt. Chelsea Garcia, the Coast Guard's rescue mission coordinator, said in the release.

The Coast Guard delivered the boaters to Hagatna, where Homeland Security agents took custody of them for "further care and assessment."

## Review set on Austin's lack of disclosure on hospital stay

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The White House said Monday that the administration will review what rules or procedures weren't followed when Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin did not disclose his hospitalization for days to President Joe Biden and top officials at the Pentagon and the National Security Council.

"We'll do what's akin to a hot wash," John Kirby, the National Security Council spokesman, said when asked whether Biden wanted a review of what happened. He stressed that the administration will look at the processes in place, and "try to learn from this experience."

Austin was hospitalized Jan. 1, which the Pentagon did not disclose to the public until Jan. 5. Biden and Jake Sullivan, the

president's national security adviser, were not aware of Austin's condition until Jan. 4. The Pentagon has refused to offer details about Austin's initial medical procedure Dec. 22 and what prompted him to be admitted into intensive care at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on New Year's Day.

Kirby said there is an "expectation" among members of Biden's Cabinet that if one becomes hospitalized, "that will be notified up the chain of command."

Still, White House officials emphasized Monday that Austin continues to retain Biden's confidence, with Kirby adding that the president "respects the fact that Secretary Austin took ownership for the lack of transparency."

# US moon landing attempt is in jeopardy

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — The first U.S. moon landing in more than 50 years was in jeopardy Monday after a private company's newly launched spacecraft developed engine trouble.

Pittsburgh-based Astrobotic Technology raced to orient its lander toward the sun so the solar panel could collect sunlight, as battery power dwindled.

The problem arose about seven hours after Monday's pre-dawn liftoff from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. United Launch Alliance's Vulcan rocket provided the lift for Astrobotic's lander, named Pere-

grine, putting it on a long, roundabout path to the moon.

If the propulsion system is at fault, it "threatens the ability of the spacecraft to soft land on the moon" on Feb. 23, the company said in a statement.

"We continue to gather data and report our best assessment of what we see," the company added.

Astrobotic was aiming to be the first private business to successfully land on the moon, something only four countries have accomplished. A second lander from a Houston company is due to launch next month. NASA gave the two companies millions to build and fly their

own lunar landers.

The space agency wants the privately owned landers to scope out the place before astronauts arrive while delivering tech and science experiments for the space agency, other countries and universities as well as odds and ends for other customers. Astrobotic's contract with NASA for the Peregrine lander was \$108 million.

Before the flight, NASA's Joel Kearns, deputy associate administrator for exploration, noted that while using private companies to make deliveries to the moon will be cheaper and quicker than going the usual government route, there will be

added risk. He stressed that the space agency was willing to accept that risk, noting Monday: "Each success and setback are opportunities to learn and grow."

The last time the U.S. launched a moon-landing mission was in December 1972. Apollo 17's Gene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt became the 11th and 12th men to walk on the moon, closing out an era that has remained NASA's pinnacle.

Highlighting Monday's moonshot was the long-delayed initial test flight of the Vulcan rocket from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station.

## Flights resume on Tokyo runway after fatal crash

Associated Press

TOKYO — Flights resumed Monday on a repaired runway at Tokyo's Haneda airport a week after a collision between a Japan Airlines plane and a coast guard aircraft believed to have been caused by human error.

The coastal runway is one of four at Haneda and its reopening means the airport is near returning to normal operations.

The collision occurred Tuesday evening when JAL Flight 516 carrying 379 passengers and crew landed right behind the coast

guard aircraft preparing to take off on the same seaside runway, engulfing both aircraft in flames. All occupants of the JAL's Airbus A350-900 airliner safely evacuated in 18 minutes. The captain of the coast guard's much smaller Bombardier Dash-8 escaped with burns, but his five crew members died.

At the coast guard's Haneda base, colleagues of the five flight crew lined up and saluted to mourn for their deaths as black vehicles carrying their bodies drove past

them. The victims' bodies were to return to their families Monday after police autopsies were conducted as part of a separate investigation into possible professional negligence.

Haneda reopened three of its four runways the night of the crash, but the last runway had remained closed for the investigation, cleanup and repairs.

All scheduled flights have resumed except for 22 JAL flights canceled through Tuesday.

## Boeing jetliner that suffered blowout was restricted

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — The Boeing jetliner that suffered an in-flight blowout over Oregon was not being used for flights to Hawaii after a warning light that could have indicated a pressurization problem lit up on three different flights.

Alaska Airlines decided to restrict the aircraft from long flights over water so the plane "could return very quickly to an airport" if the warning light reappeared, Jennifer Homendy, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board, said Sunday.

Homendy cautioned that the pressurization light might be unrelated to Friday's incident in which a plug covering an unused exit door blew off the Boeing 737 Max 9 as it cruised about three miles over Oregon.

On Monday, the Federal Aviation Administration approved guidelines for inspecting the door plugs on other Max 9 jets and repairing them, if necessary. That move should speed the return to service of 171 planes the FAA grounded under an emergency order Saturday.

Alaska has 64 other Max 9s, and United Airlines owns 79 of

them. No other U.S. airlines operate that model of the Boeing 737.

Shares of The Boeing Co. and Spirit AeroSystems, which builds the fuselage for Boeing's 737 Max, both tumbled 7% at midday Monday, the first day of trading since the incident occurred. Shares of Alaska Airlines were nearly unchanged after slumping earlier in the session.

The auto-pressurization system warning on the ill-fated Alaska Airlines jet lit up during three previous flights. Homendy said she didn't have details

about a Dec. 7 incident, but that it came on again during a flight Jan. 3 and after the plane landed Jan. 4 — the day before the blowout.

"We plan to look at that more and we've requested documentation on all defects since delivery of the aircraft on Oct. 31," she said.

The NTSB said the lost door plug was found Sunday near Portland, Ore., in the backyard of a home. Investigators will examine the plug, which is 26 by 48 inches and weighs 63 pounds, for signs of how it broke free.

# 100K firms join effort to unveil shell companies

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen announced that 100,000 businesses have joined a new database that collects “beneficial ownership” information on firms as part of a new government effort to unmask shell company owners.

Yellen, in remarks prepared for delivery Monday, said the new Treasury database that is collecting beneficial ownership information sends the message that “the United States is not a haven for dirty money.”

Yellen visited the Treasury’s

Financial Crimes Enforcement Network — known as FinCEN — in Vienna, Va., to discuss the launch of the database with the new year. She also expanded on upcoming real estate rules meant to increase transparency about the people and companies buying up property in the U.S.

The Virginia visit was meant to showcase the Biden administration’s intent to increase corporate transparency and prevent the misuse of shell companies.

“Around the world, lack of transparency, specifically due to opaque corporate structures,

makes it easier to conceal illicit activity,” Yellen said in remarks prepared ahead of her visit to FinCEN headquarters. “Information on beneficial ownership will support our law enforcement colleagues in making arrests, prosecuting offenders and seizing ill-gotten assets.”

Along with the business database, Yellen said, the Treasury is considering additional steps to address risks associated with commercial real estate.

Real estate is a commonly used vehicle for money laundering. Yellen said in March

2023 that illicit actors laundered at least \$2.3 billion through U.S. real estate between 2015 and 2020.

“The benefits of increasing corporate transparency through gathering beneficial ownership information — put simply, knowing who owns what — start with protecting our national security,” Yellen said. “Corporate transparency can bring economic benefits as well: protecting our financial system, reducing due diligence costs, enabling fair business competition and increasing tax revenue.”

## Pope Francis calls for global ban on surrogacy

Associated Press

ROME — Pope Francis called Monday for a universal ban on what he called the “despicable” practice of surrogate motherhood, as he included the “commercialization” of pregnancy in an annual speech listing threats to global peace and human dignity.

In a foreign-policy address to ambassadors accredited to the Holy See, Francis lamented that 2024 had dawned at a time in which peace is “increasingly threatened, weakened and in some part lost.”

Citing Russia’s war in Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas war and other issues, Francis delivered a list of the ills afflicting humanity and the increasing violation of international humanitarian law that allows them.

But Francis also listed smaller issues that he said were threats to peace and human dignity, including surrogacy. He said the life of the unborn child must be protected and not “suppressed or turned into an object of trafficking.”

“I consider despicable the practice of so-called surrogate motherhood, which represents

a grave violation of the dignity of the woman and the child, based on the exploitation of situations of the mother’s material needs,” he said.

Saying a child is a gift and “never the basis of a commercial contract,” he called for a global ban on surrogacy “to prohibit this practice universally.”

Francis has previously voiced the Catholic Church’s opposition to what he has called “uterus for rent.” At the same time, however, the Vatican’s doctrine office has made clear that same-sex parents who resort to surrogacy can have their children baptized.

While commercial surrogacy contracts are common in the United States, including with protections for the mothers, guarantees of independent legal representation and medical coverage, they are banned in parts of Europe including Spain and Italy.

Russia’s war in Ukraine, and the threat to babies born to surrogate Ukrainian mothers, exposed the country’s thriving industry. Ukraine is one of the few countries that allow surrogacy for foreigners.

## Illegal border crossings drop after Mexico ups enforcement

Associated Press

EAGLEPASS, Texas — Daniel Bermudez’s family had fled Venezuela and was headed to the United States to seek asylum when the freight train they were riding through Mexico was stopped by immigration officials.

His wife tried to explain that her family had permission to go to the U.S. Instead, they flew her to Mexico’s southern border as part of a surge of enforcement actions that U.S. officials said have contributed to a sharp drop in illegal border crossings.

In addition to forcing migrants from trains, Mexico also resumed flying and busing them to the southern part of the country and started flying some home to Venezuela.

Even if temporary, the decrease in illegal crossings is welcome news for the White House. President Joe Biden’s administration is locked in talks with Senate negotiators over restricting asylum and \$110 billion in aid for Ukraine and Israel hangs in the balance.

Bermudez said his wife became separated from her family when she talked to authorities as he gathered his stepchild and their belongings. He wanted to run, but

his wife said they shouldn’t be because they had followed procedure by making an appointment with U.S. immigration authorities.

“I told her, ‘Don’t trust them. Let’s go into the brush,’” Bermudez said, adding that other migrants had fled. He recalled her telling him, “Why are they sending us back if we have an appointment?”

Last week, Bermudez, his stepchild and two other relatives were waiting for her at a shelter in the Mexican border town of Piedras Negras as she took a bus back in hopes of still making the date.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said a financial shortfall that had led the immigration agency to suspend deportations and other operations was resolved. He did not offer details.

Arrests for illegal crossings into the U.S. from Mexico fell to about 2,500 on Monday, down from more than 10,000 on several days in December, according to U.S. authorities. In the Border Patrol’s busiest area, arrests totaled 13,800 during the seven-day period ending Friday, down 29% from 19,400 two weeks earlier, according to Tucson, Ariz., sector chief John Modlin.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Strays cause thousands in damages at dealership

**TX** HOUSTON — A pair of strays have landed in the doghouse after being caught on video causing more than a quarter-million dollars' worth of damage at a Houston car dealership.

One dog, described as a bull terrier mix, was captured in early December, and the second, whose breed was not immediately known, was caught Dec. 31, KTRK-TV reported. Both dogs are being held by the Houston animal control shelter, BARC.

The dogs were captured on surveillance video scratching the paint and tearing the bumpers off of vehicles in the lot at G Motors, according to the dealership's finance manager, Imran Haq. They caused an estimated \$350,000 in damage.

Haq and sales manager Gaby Fakhoury contacted BARC when the attacks began in November. They believe the dogs entered the lot by crawling under a fence and that they were chasing stray cats that were hiding under the vehicles.

### Man arrested after flying stolen plane across state

**NV** NORTH LAS VEGAS — An Idaho man was arrested after stealing a plane from a North Las Vegas hangar, flying it over 100 miles into a southern California airport and eventually running into a desert area after officers inquired about the aircraft.

The man, who is currently in custody in San Bernardino County, faces charges of possession of a stolen airplane and taking stolen property across state

lines from the incident, according to the county sheriff's department. There could be additional charges in Nevada, according to KSNV-TV.

North Las Vegas officials said the man could also be behind attempted airplane burglaries in the three previous days before his arrest, according to the station.

### Governor urges overhaul of reading education

**NY** ALBANY — New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said she will push for schools in the state to reemphasize phonics in literacy education programs, a potential overhaul that comes as many states revamp curriculums amid low reading scores.

The proposal would require the state education department to draft guidelines centered on the so-called science of reading, a phonics-based approach to literacy education, that school districts would have to follow by September 2025.

The Legislature would need to approve the plan before it could go into effect.

The change would see New York join a national movement away from an education method known as balanced literacy, which focuses on introducing children to books they find interesting — often at the expense of dedicated phonics instruction, which focuses on the relationship between sounds and letters.

### Cop running for Congress after defending Capitol

**MD** ANNAPOLIS — A former police officer who defended the U.S. Capitol against rioters on Jan. 6 an-

nounced he is running for Congress in Maryland.

Harry Dunn wrote on X that he will be running in a crowded Democratic primary to replace Rep. John Sarbanes, a Democrat who is not seeking reelection.

Dunn made the announcement a day before the third anniversary of the attack at the Capitol that disrupted the certification of the 2020 election, saying in his campaign announcement that former President Donald Trump was "hell-bent on finishing what he started" three years ago.

"On January 6th, I defended our democracy from insurrectionists as a Capitol Police Officer. After, President Biden honored me with the Presidential Citizens Medal," Dunn wrote in the announcement of his candidacy. "Today, I'm running for Congress to stop Trump's MAGA extremists & ensure it never happens again."

### Mayor says debris site will be used temporarily

**HI** WAILUKU — The mayor of the Hawaiian island of Maui said a site selected to hold debris from last year's deadly wildfires that devastated the city of Lahaina will not store it permanently.

Instead the debris will be at the Olowalu site south of Lahaina only until a permanent spot is identified and a landfill built there, Mayor Richard Bissen said during a County Council committee meeting, according to a statement from his office.

Most of the steel and concrete left behind by the fire will be recycled. Much of the debris heading for the site will be ash and small particles, which state

Department of Health tests have confirmed is laden with arsenic, lead and other toxins.

Some residents have objected to using the Olowalu site, and a protest was staged. Environmentalists have raised concerns because it's just 400 yards from the coast.

### City suing charter buses for transporting migrants

**NY** NEW YORK — New York City is suing more than a dozen charter bus companies for \$700 million, accusing them of illegally transporting tens of thousands of migrants from the southern border to the city under the direction of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott.

The lawsuit accuses 17 bus companies of participating in a "bad faith" relocation plan that violates state restrictions on abandoning "needy persons" in New York. It seeks financial damages to cover the cost of caring for an estimated 33,000 migrants that have arrived in the city on charter buses since the spring of 2022.

Filed in state court, the lawsuit marked the latest effort by a Democratic mayor to turn back busloads of asylum seekers sent by the Republican governor of Texas. The state has sent more than 95,000 migrants to so-called sanctuary cities, including New York, Chicago and Denver, in protest of President Joe Biden's immigration policies, Abbott said.

Amid an increase in bus drop-offs, both New York City and Chicago announced new restrictions in recent weeks mandating the charter companies to provide advanced notice of their arrivals.

— From wire reports

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# Analysis: Bills, Cowboys win final week

*Associated Press*

Dak Prescott and the Dallas Cowboys made sure they'll start the playoffs at home, where they're undefeated. Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills are going home with a division title instead of heading back to Miami for a rematch.

The NFL playoff field is set. Fourteen teams will compete for a trip to Super Bowl 58 in Las Vegas next month. The postseason starts with six games across three days over wild-card weekend.

The Bills rallied for a 21-14 win over the Dolphins on Sunday night to clinch their fourth straight AFC East title and the No. 2 seed. The Packers and Buccaneers got in with wins earlier in the day. The Steelers secured their spot when the Jaguars collapsed in Tennessee. Jacksonville's loss gave the Texans a division title, completing their last-to-first turnaround.

No. 1 seeds Baltimore and San Francisco rested several starters in Week 18. The Lions and Eagles didn't because they had a shot at the NFC's No. 2 seed and both teams suffered potentially significant injuries.

Patrick Mahomes sat while

backup Blaine Gabbert guided the defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs to victory with the AFC's No. 3 seed already locked up. Matthew Stafford watched Carson Wentz lead the Rams to a comeback win over the 49ers to clinch the NFC's sixth seed. Joe Flacco and other starters didn't play for the Browns in a meaningless loss as Cleveland prepared for just its second playoff appearance in 21 seasons.

Six teams are in the playoffs — Browns, Lions, Packers, Texans, Rams, Steelers — after missing out last season. At least four teams which failed to qualify one season have reached the playoffs the next every year since 1990.

A few reunions highlight the opening round.

Stafford, who was 0-3 in the playoffs with the Lions, goes back to Detroit with the Rams (10-7). The Lions (12-5) tied a franchise record for wins in a regular season and will seek their first playoff victory since beating Dallas on Jan. 5, 1992. They will play on Sunday night.

Detroit lost rookie tight end Sam LaPorta to a knee injury in a 30-20 win over Minnesota. Lions coach Dan Campbell said

“it's not good news” but not as bad as it seemed when LaPorta was carted to the locker room.

Cowboys coach Mike McCarthy will face his former team when Jordan Love leads the Packers (9-8) to Dallas on Sunday afternoon. The Cowboys (12-5) routed Washington 38-10 to clinch the NFC East title and will host Green Bay aiming to stay unbeaten at home this season.

Miami's loss dropped the Dolphins (11-6) to the sixth seed. Instead of hosting Buffalo again next week, they have to visit Kansas City (11-6) on Saturday night. Dolphins superstar wide receiver Tyreek Hill plays against the team he helped win a Super Bowl four years ago. The Chiefs beat the Dolphins 21-14 in Germany in Week 9.

The Buccaneers (9-8) secured their third straight NFC South title with a 9-0 win at Carolina and they'll host struggling Philadelphia on Monday night. The Eagles (11-6) played like a team that already quit in a 27-10 loss to the Giants. The defending NFC champions limp into the playoffs after a late-season collapse, having lost five of their last six games.

Star wide receiver A.J. Brown left the game with a knee injury, though coach Nick Sirianni is hopeful he won't miss time.

The Buccaneers beat the Eagles in a wild-card playoff game two years ago in the last of Tom Brady's 35 career playoff wins. Baker Mayfield and a tough Tampa Bay defense led by safety Antoine Winfield Jr. stand in Philly's way now.

The Browns-Texans matchup kicks off the postseason on Saturday afternoon. The teams met in Week 16 with Cleveland routing Houston 36-22 but C.J. Stroud didn't play in that game. The sensational rookie quarterback finished off an impressive regular season with an outstanding performance in a 23-19 do-or-die win at Indianapolis on Saturday night.

Buffalo (11-6) finished off a dramatic turnaround by defeating Miami for its fifth straight win to close out the regular season. The Bills will host the Steelers (10-7) on Sunday afternoon.

Thirteen games to go. Thirteen teams will go home with a loss. One team will hoist the Vince Lombardi Trophy on Feb. 11.

## Commanders fire Rivera as new ownership starts changes

*Associated Press*

ASHBURN, Va. — The Washington Commanders fired coach Ron Rivera on Monday, the first move of many expected by new owners as they put their stamp on the NFL franchise they bought last year.

The decision came a day after the Commanders' season-ending 38-10 home loss to division-rival Dallas.

“As we look ahead, we recognize the results this season were not good enough and a strategic shift in leadership and approach is necessary,” controlling owner Josh Harris said in a statement.

Harris said he has asked co-owners Mitch Rales, Magic Johnson and David Blitzer as well as former NBA executive

Bob Myers and ex-Minnesota Vikings GM Rick Spielman to work with him in the searches for a head of football personnel and coach. After Dan Snyder hired Rivera four years ago to do both jobs, ownership is now splitting those responsibilities.

Washington made one playoff appearance, winning an uncharacteristically weak NFC East at 7-9 in 2020, during Rivera's four seasons in charge of Washington's football operations. He never had a winning season.

### Falcons part ways with Smith

FLOWERY BRANCH, Ga. — Arthur Smith was back at the Atlanta Falcons'

practice facility on Monday morning for a final meeting with his players after he was fired late Sunday night.

Smith had the support of the players but that was not enough to overcome a third consecutive 7-10 finish. The coaching change was announced at midnight, so Monday's meeting was an opportunity to say goodbye.

Smith's firing was announced a few hours after a 48-17 loss at New Orleans. It was the second-worst loss of Smith's three seasons, following a 43-3 rout at Dallas in 2021. The Falcons dropped four of their last five games and were blown out in Smith's final two contests, losing 37-17 at Chicago a week ago.

# Lakers hold off Clippers, snap skid

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James had 25 points, eight rebounds and seven assists and the Los Angeles Lakers snapped a four-game losing streak with a 106-103 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers on Sunday night.

Anthony Davis had 22 points and 10 rebounds for the Lakers, who beat the Clippers for the second straight time after losing 11 straight to their hallway rivals.

“We played like we needed to win, like it was a must-win,” Davis said. “We competed on both sides of the basketball. We’ve just got to build off of it. We know what we have in the locker room. We know what it takes to win, and we displayed that tonight.”

Norman Powell’s 3-point attempt rattled in and out at the buzzer as the Lakers hung on to beat one of the NBA’s hottest teams. The Lakers also won for only the fourth time in 14 games since winning the NBA’s Inaugural In-Season Tournament.

Paul George scored 22 points and Ivica Zubac had 22 points and 19 rebounds for the Clippers, whose five-game winning streak ended.

James Harden had 15 points and nine assists in the childhood Lakers fan’s first game against them since getting traded home

to the Clippers, who have still won 14 of their last 17.

**Mavericks 115, Timberwolves 108:** Kyrie Irving made the tying and go-ahead 3-pointers, finishing with 35 points to lead host Dallas over Minnesota.

Irving shot 14-for-27, including 6-for-8 from 3-point range. Luka Doncic added 34 points on 12-for-26 shooting, including 5-for-12 on 3s.

Irving’s 3 tied it at 106 with 2:59 remaining. He then stole the ball from Rudy Gobert and made another 3 from the right corner with 2:05 to play.

Anthony Edwards topped West-leading Minnesota with 36 points on 14-for-27 shooting.

**Pelicans 133, Kings 100:** CJ McCollum scored 30 points, making seven 3-pointers, and visiting New Orleans led by 50 points in a rout of Sacramento.

Jonas Valanciunas added 15 points and 12 rebounds for the Pelicans.

Domantas Sabonis had 17 points and 10 rebounds for the Kings, but star guard De’Aaron Fox scored just three points on 1-for-10 shooting.

**Raptors 133, Warriors 118:** RJ Barrett scored a season-high 37 points in his fourth game since being traded to his hometown team, leading visiting To-

ronto past Golden State.

Stephen Curry had an especially off night, finishing 2-for-14 with nine points and missing all nine of his 3-pointers in his second-lowest scoring total this season.

Barrett made 11 of his first 14 shots and wound up 13-for-20 from the floor.

**Nuggets 131, Pistons 114:** Jamal Murray scored a season-high 37 points, Nikola Jokic had 16 assists and Denver handed Detroit its 18th straight road loss.

Jokic was more distributor and shot blocker than scorer, taking just three shots and finishing with four points. The two-time NBA MVP tied a career high with five blocked shots.

Jalen Duren led Detroit with 20 points.

**Trail Blazers 134, Nets 127 (OT):** Anfernee Simons had 38 points and 11 assists and Malcolm Brogdon scored eight of his 18 points during visiting Portland’s nearly flawless overtime against Brooklyn.

Mikal Bridges scored 42 points and made the tying jumper with 1.5 seconds remaining in regulation. But Portland then shot 6-for-7 in overtime, with Brogdon hitting all three shots, including two 3-pointers.

The Nets have lost 11 of their

last 14 games and play their next one in Paris on Thursday against Cleveland.

**Grizzlies 121, Suns 114:** Jaren Jackson Jr. had 28 points and 10 rebounds and visiting Memphis, playing without Ja Morant, overcame an 11-point deficit in the fourth quarter to beat Phoenix.

Marcus Smart added 25 points and Desmond Bane had 23, including a go-ahead 3-pointer with 1:30 to play. Morant was sidelined because of soreness in his right shoulder.

Kevin Durant returned for Phoenix after missing three games because of soreness in his right hamstring. He had 23 points and 10 rebounds.

**Magic 117, Hawks 110 (OT):** Paolo Banchero scored eight of his 35 points in overtime and host Orlando beat Atlanta.

Caleb Houstan added a career-high 25 points in his first start of the season.

Trae Young had 31 points and nine assists for Atlanta.

**Cavaliers 117, Spurs 115:** Jarrett Allen had 29 points and 16 rebounds, Caris LeVert added 23 points and host Cleveland beat San Antonio for its third straight victory.

Victor Wembanyama had 24 points, 10 rebounds and five blocked shots for San Antonio.

# Kirk holds on for season opening win at Kapalua

Associated Press

KAPALUA, Hawaii — Chris Kirk finds pure joy in golf from the work that’s required and how hard it is to succeed, and Sunday at The Sentry was plenty difficult.

A dozen players were lined up behind him, all of them capable of ripping off a low one.

The conditions were so placid the average score in the final round at Kapalua was 66.66, making this the lowest average score to par (6.34 under) of any

round on the PGA Tour since it began keeping detailed records in 1983.

Tougher still was being tied for the lead, 209 yards away on the 17th hole with a gorge between him and the flag and a light wind that felt like it was blowing both directions.

Kirk went from a 7-iron to a 5-iron and hit what he considers the best shot of his career to 2 feet for birdie that sent him to an 8-under 65 and a one-shot victory over Sahith Theegala.

“When you’re about to pull 7 and you end up hitting 5, that doesn’t happen ever. That never happens,” he said. “So to be able to commit to it like I did and make that good of a swing was an incredible feeling.”

Kirk is happy to be competing again after stepping away in 2019 for alcoholism and depression, and he capped his long journey back last year by winning the Honda Classic. This was another big step, beating a world-class field on a day when

any miss was costly.

Theegala stayed with him step for step until his 10-foot birdie putt swirled in and out of the cup, forcing him to settle for a 63. Jordan Spieth was tied for the lead when his tee shot on the 16th plugged into the sand, effectively a one-shot penalty. He narrowly missed a 15-foot eagle on the final hole and shot 65 to finish third.

Kirk started the final round with a one-shot lead and had to post 65 to win by one.

# Jackrabbits repeat as FCS champions

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — South Dakota State never bought into all the hype as defending FCS national champion. With standout quarterback Mark Gronowski and a stifling defense, the Jackrabbits just went out and won another title.

“That first one was ... really, really sweet, just because it was that first one,” said Gronowski, who started his third Football Championship Subdivision title game. “We got to see the other team do it three years ago and be up on that stage where we weren’t, so I think that’s part of the thing that makes this whole thing so much sweeter.”

Gronowski ran for a touchdown and threw for another after halftime as SDSU repeated as champion with a 23-3 win over Montana on Sunday. The Jackrabbits have won 29 games in a row, including over North Dakota State last year for their first national title.

“With as much hype surrounding this football program, we never paid much attention to it. We stayed consistent. We worked extremely hard week in

and week out, and this is the result,” said Jimmy Rogers, the first-year head coach with a 15-0 record after being South Dakota State’s defensive coordinator last season.

SDSU linebacker Adam Boch stuffed running back Eli Gillman for no gain on fourth-and-goal from the 1 on Montana’s opening drive. SDSU allowed only 273 total yards, had five sacks and wrapped up a four-game playoff run in which it allowed only 15 points and had two shutouts.

“Best defense in FCS history,” Rogers said. “I’m proud of that, proud of this football team, proud to go back-to-back.”

South Dakota State had an impressive game-opening drive, but led only 7-3 at halftime. Gronowski then bulled into the end zone for a 10-yard score midway through the third quarter, and on the next possession threw a 23-yard TD to Jadon Janke.

Gronowski was 13-for-21 passing for 175 yards and ran eight times for 62 yards to join Carson Wentz and Brock Jensen, quarterbacks who won

multiple championships with North Dakota State, as the only players selected as most outstanding player in consecutive FCS title games. Gronowski was a true freshman when he tore his left ACL on the opening series of the unusual May 2021 title game the Jackrabbits lost at the end of a pandemic-affected season.

“They have a heck of a leader back there. And he makes them go, for sure,” Montana linebacker Braxton Hill said.

Montana’s 27 playoff appearances are the most in the second tier of Division I football. National champions in 1995 and 2001, the Grizzlies (13-2) have now finished as the runner-up six times, four under coach Bobby Hauck.

This was the Grizzlies’ first title game since 2009, when they were runners-up for the third time in Hauck’s first seven seasons. Hauck then left for FBS team UNLV and also was on staff at San Diego State before returning to Montana in 2018.

Less than two weeks after South Dakota State was crowned champion last year,

John Stiegelmeier retired after 26 seasons as head coach. He was succeeded by Rogers, a former Jackrabbits linebacker who was captain of their first playoff team in 2009 — when they lost to Montana after blowing a 27-point lead.

Both teams had only one possession in the first quarter Sunday. Montana’s opening drive spilled into the first play of the second quarter, when Boch had the big, fourth-down stop.

## The takeaway

**Montana:** Playmaking quarterback Clifton McDowell, who had been 11-0 as the Griz starter, was under increased pressure, especially after halftime. He completed 22 of 39 passes for 165 yards, but was sacked four times. After he was stripped of the ball while being sacked late in the third quarter, 295-yard defensive tackle Ryan Van Marel came up with the ball.

**South Dakota State:** The Jackrabbits became the first team since North Dakota State (2017-19) to repeat as champions.

# Jets win sixth in row, earn a point in 12th straight

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — Mark Scheifele scored twice, Connor Hellebuyck stopped 15 shots and the Winnipeg Jets took the outright NHL points lead, beating the Arizona Coyotes 6-2 on Sunday night to extend their points streak to 12.

Winnipeg shut down the Coyotes most of the night en route to its six victory in a row, holding them to four shots until Nick Schmaltz scored midway through the second period.

Vladislav Namestnikov, Cole Perfetti, Adam Lowry and Nikolaj Ehlers also scored in Winnipeg’s sixth straight victory. The Jets’ points streak (10-0-2)

is their longest since joining the NHL as the Atlanta Thrashers in 1999-00.

Winnipeg has allowed three goals or fewer in a franchise-record 29 straight games. The Jets have 56 points at 26-9-4.

Arizona’s Dylan Guenther scored in the third period of his season debut.

**Capitals 4, Kings 3:** John Carlson scored with 53 seconds left to lift host Washington past Los Angeles.

Nicolas Aube-Kubel had a goal and two assists, Nic Dowd and Dylan Strome also scored and Darcy Kuemper stopped 38 shots to help the Capitals end a two-game slide.

Kevin Fiala struck twice and Adrian Kempe also scored for the Kings. They have lost five in a row.

**Blackhawks 4, Flames 3:** Colin Blackwell had two goals and an assist and host Chicago won its first game since Connor Bedard was sidelined by a broken jaw, topping Calgary.

Nikita Zaitsev added a goal and an assist for last-place Chicago, which had dropped five in a row and seven of eight overall. Philipp Kurashov also scored, and Petr Mrazek made 28 saves.

Bedard’s jaw was fractured when the No. 1 overall pick in last year’s draft was hit by New

Jersey defenseman Brendan Smith in the first period Friday night in a 4-2 loss to the Devils.

Nazem Kadri had two goals for Calgary. Andrew Mangiapane also scored.

**Red Wings 3, Ducks 2:** Michael Rasmussen broke a tie with 1:07 remaining and visiting Detroit beat Anaheim for its third straight victory.

Joe Veleno and Dylan Larkin also scored and Alex Lyon made 29 saves to cap a three-game trip to San Jose, Los Angeles and Anaheim.

Trevor Zegras scored twice for Anaheim. The Ducks were 1-6-1 on an eight-game homestand.