

US challenged to contain Mideast violence

Washington Post

The United States faced intensifying military action by Iran and its allies Tuesday, an escalating threat to the Biden administration's effort to contain violence across the Middle East following the launch of Israel's war with Hamas militants.

A drumbeat of tit-for-tat incidents between U.S. forces and Iranian-backed armed groups, including a new round of strikes Tuesday against Houthi militants in Yemen, and Iranian strikes into Iraq and Syria on Monday, served as a test of Washington's attempt to limit regional instability and avoid a direct confrontation with Tehran.

The incidents also highlight the potential for miscalculation as military action accelerates and the U.S. continues support for close ally Israel, whose response to Hamas' bloody Oct. 7 attacks has killed more than 24,000 people in the Gaza Strip, most of them Palestinian civilians, and galvanized opposition across the Arab world to Israel and its chief backer.

Tuesday's strike on the Ira-

nian-linked Houthi movement in Yemen, the third such attack in the last week, targeted four sites where the rebels were preparing to launch missiles against commercial shipping vessels, U.S. Central Command said in a statement.

The Houthis, one powerful faction in Yemen's ongoing civil war, have framed their campaign against merchant ships transiting the region, which has included more than 30 drone and missile attacks since November, as retaliation for Israel's war in Gaza.

The group almost immediately made good on its vow to continue its campaign, launching an anti-ship ballistic missile that struck the Maltese-flagged ship M/V Zografia. No one was injured and the ship continued its voyage.

The recent violence has also revived concerns about militant networks not involved in the backlash by Iranian-linked groups to Israel's operation in Gaza. The rare airstrike into Syria by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps on Monday targeted what Tehran said were sites linked to the Islamic State,

the extremist group that claimed responsibility for a deadly twin bombing this month in the Iranian city of Kerman.

While that action appeared unrelated to recent violence pitting Israel and the U.S. against Iranian-sponsored militants, Iran also conducted a strike on what Iranian officials described as an Israeli spy site in Iraqi Kurdistan, a move that prompted outcry by officials in Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of the semiautonomous northern region.

Gerald Feierstein, a former U.S. ambassador to Yemen who is now a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, said Iran appeared determined, like the U.S., to stay out of a direct conflict with the U.S. military and its allies. He pointed to the fact that the Lebanese militia group Hezbollah, Iran's largest and most powerful proxy, had not unleashed the full power of its vast missile arsenal against Israel in recent months. On Tuesday, Israeli forces conducted dozens of strikes across the border into southern Lebanon.

Likewise, while Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria have launched regular attacks on U.S. military facilities in both countries, they often fall far from their purported targets and inflict limited damage. In what has appeared to be a parallel American bid at restraint, retaliatory U.S. strikes have been limited in scope, though an airstrike in Baghdad earlier this month killed a militia commander accused of orchestrating violence against Americans deployed there.

Feierstein said that while Iran appears determined to refrain from direct involvement in the Gaza situation, the current U.S.-Houthi showdown may serve Tehran's interests.

"Their partner in the 'axis of resistance' is standing up on behalf of Palestinians, but it's not crossing American red lines," he said, referring to a loose coalition of groups that, along with Iran, seek to push back against U.S. influence in the region. "It's not likely to get us into a conflict with Iran directly, and so everybody can live at this level that they're at right now."

US to redesignate Yemen Houthis as global terrorists

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration is expected to soon announce plans to redesignate Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen as specially designated global terrorists, according to two people familiar with the White House decision and a U.S. official.

The move comes as the Houthis have launched dozens of attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea. The group

said it has attacked the ships in response to Israel's military operations in Gaza in the aftermath of Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

The three people familiar with the decision were not authorized to comment and requested anonymity to discuss the matter ahead of the expected formal announcement.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken delisted the Houthis as both a foreign terrorist organization and as specially designat-

ed global terrorists in February 2021 as the administration sought to make it easier to get food imports and humanitarian aid into Yemen.

In its waning days, the Trump administration designated the Houthis a foreign terrorist organization over the strong objections of human rights groups.

The foreign terrorist designation barred Americans and people and organizations subject to U.S. jurisdiction from providing

"material support" to the Houthis, which the groups said would result in an even greater humanitarian catastrophe than what was already happening in Yemen.

Shortly after the Biden administration took office, Blinken removed the designations in a step that was roundly criticized by conservative lawmakers and others, but was intended to keep much-needed food, medicine and other aid flowing to Yemen.

Suit blames naval hospital for ‘disfigurement’

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A Guam couple is suing the federal government, alleging a U.S. military hospital on the island failed to provide proper medical care over nine days in 2021.

Sandra Leipheimer and John Leipheimer filed suit on Dec. 22 for negligence, medical malpractice, emotional distress and disruption of their relationship, according to their complaint in the District Court of Guam.

Sandra Leipheimer sought treatment at Naval Hospital Guam for an abscess in her jaw in April 2021, according to their complaint.

The couple alleged that, because of the hospital's actions, she was left with unresolved medical issues, health complications and “permanent scarring and disfigurement,” the document said.

The couple is seeking court costs and damages to be determined at trial. The federal government has not yet filed a response to the complaint, according to court records.

Naval Hospital Guam first admitted Sandra

Leipheimer on April 3, 2021, for a suspected abscess in her jaw, according to the suit. A physician at the hospital, Dr. Carter Schmidt, assessed her situation and performed surgery, and Leipheimer was discharged less than two days later, according to the complaint.

However, the couple alleged that her symptoms worsened, and she returned to the hospital on April 6. She complained of symptoms that included “extreme pain and fever.”

The complaint alleges Schmidt advised Leipheimer to get blood work and a CT scan, but the hospital's emergency room informed her that its scanner was broken; the hospital sent her home after taking her blood work, according to the suit.

Leipheimer returned on April 8 and complained of similar symptoms as well as numbness in her jaw and neck and the inability to open her jaw or move the left side of her mouth; Schmidt allegedly did not order any change to Leipheimer's treatment.

Leipheimer returned to the hospital on

April 12 and complained of worsening pain and “feelings of toxicity,” but was told the hospital's CT scanner still was not working, according to the complaint.

The couple alleged that, throughout the ordeal, Schmidt “failed to provide care, sent her out of the clinic, failed to refer her to other providers, and failed to otherwise arrange for alternative care.”

They also alleged the hospital prematurely discharged Leipheimer from the hospital and failed to provide follow-up treatment or prevent complications.

As a result, Leipheimer's medical condition “continued unresolved, deteriorated, and worsened” and that she required further surgeries and medical treatment, according to the suit.

The couple's attorney, Peter Perez, of Hagatna, did not respond to phone and email requests for comment on Wednesday. A spokesperson for the hospital did not respond to multiple phone calls and email requests for comment.

US carrier trains with S. Korea, Japan in wake of North's launch

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — Nine warships from the United States, South Korea and Japan kicked off a combined naval exercise south of the Korean Peninsula a day after North Korea fired its first ballistic missile of the year, Seoul announced Wednesday.

The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and guided-missile cruiser USS Princeton joined South Korean and Japanese destroyers equipped with the Aegis missile-defense system in international waters near the South's Jeju Island, according to a news release from the South Korean Ministry of National Defense.

The exercise — a three-day response to North Korea's nuclear, missile and underwater threats — ended Wednesday, according to the ministry. The training will enhance the allies' ability to respond to North Korean threats in a “joint capacity,” the release said.

The chairman of South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Kim Myung-soo, visited the Carl Vinson during the exercise to in-

spect the training and personnel, according to the release.

The commander of U.S. Forces Korea, Army Gen. Paul LaCamera, met Kim aboard the carrier on Monday, USFK said in a separate news release Wednesday.

The carrier last appeared near Jeju Island in November for similar training with South Korean and Japanese destroyers.

The latest trilateral naval exercise started a day after North Korea fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile Sunday. The solid-fueled missile — North Korea's first launch this year — was launched near Pyongyang and traveled roughly 620 miles east before falling into the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, according to the South's military.

North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency in a report Monday described the missile as being tipped with a hypersonic warhead and deemed the test a success.

Asked by email if the trilateral naval drill was scheduled prior to Sunday, U.S. Navy Region Korea spokeswoman Enjoli Janel Di Patri said the command “routinely trains with our allies.”

Marines OK after winds take them out of drop zone

BY SETH ROBSON AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — A group of U.S. Marine parachutists landed on sports fields and private property after strong winds blew them out of a training area near Mount Fuji on Tuesday, according to U.S. and Japanese officials.

The five parachutists involved in the incident were members of the 3rd Marine Division, Maj. Clay Groover, a division spokesman, told Stars and Stripes by email Wednesday. The Marines had jumped over Combined Arms Training Center Camp Fuji, about 8½ miles from Mount Fuji, but “unexpected high winds” sent them beyond their targeted landing zone, Groover said.

“There are no reported injuries or damage, and the Marines were not carrying weapons or sensitive equipment,” he added.

Two Marines landed in a sports park in Susono, two landed on a soccer field in Gotemba and another landed on private property, a spokesman for Japan's South Kanto Defense Bureau said by phone Wednesday.

Ice storm coming to Pacific Northwest amid power woes

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Residents of the Pacific Northwest suffered more misery as an ice storm bore down Wednesday, threatening to turn mountain highways treacherous and zap power in bitterly cold temperatures. Much of the region was under an ice storm warning through the morning, promising only to add to the damage brought by a powerful winter storm that hit over the weekend.

Parts of southwest Washington and western Oregon — including the latter state's largest cities of Portland, Salem and Eugene — expected a quarter-inch to an inch of ice, while freezing rain was forecast in the Seattle area.

Schools were closed, bus service was curtailed and warming shelters opened while officials warned of bad roads and the chance of new power outages, even as crews struggled to restore electricity to thousands of

customers blacked out for days.

The forecast came as much of the United States copes with bitter weather that in some places put electricity supplies at risk. Another day of bitter temperatures swept much of the Rockies, Great Plains and Midwest, with wind chills below minus 30 extending into the mid-Mississippi Valley.

Freezing temperatures spread as far south as North Florida on Wednesday morning, said Bob Oravec, a forecaster at the National Weather Service. It was 12 degrees early Wednesday in Atlanta, where thousands of students were just returning to school after several of Georgia's largest school systems closed Tuesday as icy weather threatened the region.

It was 5 degrees in Chicago and 6 degrees in Detroit, making both cities significantly colder than Alaska's capital of Juneau, where it was 18 degrees. Some residents managed to find a

bright side.

"It's probably the most beautiful time in Chicago, ever," Chicagoan Richard Wineberg said as he admired the snow-covered landscape.

In northeastern Pennsylvania, five people were struck and killed by a tractor-trailer on Interstate 81 after they left their vehicles following a separate crash on slick pavement. Investigators were still determining the exact cause.

Heavy lake-effect snow was forecast in Buffalo, N.Y., with up to 4 inches an hour expected through the afternoon. City hall was closed, and school districts declared snow days. Travel bans were issued for several suburbs.

Just after sunrise Wednesday, Patrick Sahr shoveled snow from his car and driveway in Buffalo after at least 18 inches of new snow fell overnight — on top of 3 feet over the weekend.

"I just want to keep up with it," he said during a lull.

Bill to avert shutdown clears 1st Senate test

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — A temporary spending bill to prevent a partial U.S. government shutdown on Saturday passed its first procedural test in the Senate on Tuesday, a sign that the legislation is on track to be approved in time to meet the deadline.

The Senate voted 68 to 13 to advance the measure toward the end of a snowy day in Washington with many lawmakers absent.

The short-term spending measure would fund some U.S. agencies through March 1 and others through March 8.

The interim funding has the support of congressional leaders including House Speaker Mike Johnson, so the prospects for passage in both chambers are good. It doesn't include several disputed items, such as continuing efforts to reach a bargain on U.S. border restrictions and Ukraine aid. Nor does it carry an emerging potential \$80 billion business tax package being worked on by congressional tax panel members.

While ultra-conservatives in the House say they oppose keeping agencies open at current funding levels, the speaker can bypass them by relying on Democrats for support. The House Freedom Caucus denounced the bill as "surrender" in a post on the social media site X over the weekend.

Senate critics of the interim measure haven't signaled any intention to use procedural obstacles that could delay passage beyond the shutdown deadline.

"The key to finishing our work this week will be bipartisan cooperation in both chambers," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor.

Judge threatens to eject Trump over his loud talking at Manhattan trial

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump was threatened with expulsion from his Manhattan civil trial Wednesday after he repeatedly ignored a warning to keep quiet while writer E. Jean Carroll testified that he shattered her reputation after she accused him of sexual abuse.

Judge Lewis A. Kaplan told the former president that his right to be present at the trial will be revoked if he remains disruptive. After an initial warning, Carroll's lawyer said Trump could still be heard making remarks to his lawyers, including "it is a witch hunt" and

"it really is a con job."

"Mr. Trump, I hope I don't have to consider excluding you from the trial," Kaplan said in an exchange after the jury was excused for lunch, adding: "I understand you're probably eager for me to do that."

"I would love it," Trump shot back, shrugging as he sat between lawyers Alina Habba and Michael Madaio at the defense table.

"I know you would like it. You just can't control yourself in this circumstance, apparently," Kaplan responded.

"You can't either," Trump muttered.

Kaplan cracked down after Carroll lawyer Shawn Crowley complained for a second time that Trump could be heard "loudly saying things that are false" as he sat at the defense table, frequently tilting back in his chair and leaning over to speak with his lawyer.

Among his comments, Crowley said, were that the longtime Elle magazine advice columnist was lying about the assault and that she seemed to have "gotten her memory back." Crowley suggested that if Carroll's lawyers could hear Trump from where they were sitting, jurors could maybe hear him too.

Medicine sent to locals, hostages in Gaza

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — A shipment of medicine for dozens of hostages held by Hamas was en route to Gaza on Wednesday after France and Qatar mediated the first agreement between Israel and the militant group since a week-long cease-fire in November.

The medicines arrived in Egypt and were on the way to the border. A senior Hamas official said that for every box provided for the hostages, 1,000 boxes would be sent in for Palestinians. The deal also includes the delivery of humanitarian aid to residents of the besieged coastal enclave.

The agreement came more

than 100 days into a conflict that shows no sign of ending and which has sparked tensions across the Middle East, with a dizzying array of strikes and counterstrikes in recent days from northern Iraq to the Red Sea and from southern Lebanon to Pakistan.

Palestinian militants are still putting up resistance across Gaza in the face of one of the deadliest military campaigns in recent history. Some 85% of the narrow coastal territory's 2.3 million people have fled their homes, and the United Nations says a quarter of the population is starving.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas to ensure it can nev-

er repeat an attack like the one on Oct. 7 that triggered the war. Militants burst through Israel's border defenses and stormed through communities, killing some 1,200 people and capturing around 250.

Israel also has promised to return more than 100 hostages still held inside Gaza after Hamas in late November released most of the women and children held captive in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

Hamas has said it will not release any more hostages until there is a permanent cease-fire, something Israel and the United States, its top ally, have ruled out.

France said it took months to organize the shipment of the medicines.

Qatar, which has long served as a mediator with Hamas, helped broker the deal that will provide three months' worth of medication for chronic illnesses for 45 of the hostages as well as other medicine and vitamins. Several older men are among the remaining hostages held in Gaza.

Moussa Abu Marzouk, a senior Hamas official, said in a post on X that the International Committee of the Red Cross will deliver all the medicines, including the ones destined for the hostages, to hospitals serving all parts of Gaza.

NATO officer: New mindset needed to help Ukrainians

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Ukraine is locked in an existential battle for its survival almost two years into its war with Russia and Western armies and political leaders must drastically change the way they help it fend off invading forces, a top NATO military officer said on Wednesday.

At a meeting of the 31-nation alliance's top brass, the chair of the NATO Military Committee, Adm. Rob Bauer, also said that behind President Vladimir Putin's rationale for the war is a fear of democracy, in a year marked by elections.

Over two days of talks in Brussels, NATO's top officers are expected to detail plans for what are set to be the biggest military drills in Europe since the Cold War later this year.

The wargames are meant as a fresh show of strength from NATO and its commitment to defend all allied nations from attack.

As the war bogs down, and with U.S. and European Union funding for Ukraine's conflict-

ravaged economy held up by political infighting, Bauer appealed for a "whole of society approach" to the challenge that goes beyond military planning.

"We need public and private actors to change their mindset for an era in which everything was plannable, foreseeable, controllable and focused on efficiency to an era in which anything can happen at any time. An era in which we need to expect the unexpected," he said as he opened the meeting.

"In order to be fully effective, also in the future, we need a warfighting transformation of NATO," Bauer added.

On Monday, U.K. Defense Secretary Grant Shapps announced that his government would send 20,000 troops to take part in the NATO military exercises — known as "Steadfast Defender" — with many deployed in eastern Europe from February to June.

The U.K. will also send advanced fighter jets and surveillance planes, plus warships and submarines.

Russian missiles hit Ukraine apartments in latest strikes

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia fired two missiles at Kharkiv during the night, hitting apartment buildings and a medical center and injuring 17 people in the city in northeastern Ukraine, officials said Wednesday, in Moscow's latest strikes on civilian areas in the almost two-year war.

The S-300 missiles landed after dark Tuesday, Kharkiv regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said on Telegram.

Normally surface-to-air missiles, the S-300s have been adapted by Russia to hit targets on the ground and are cheaper to make than ballistic or cruise missiles. However, they are inaccurate and have a shorter range, analysts say.

Both sides are looking to replenish their weapons stockpiles as fighting along the 930-mile front line is largely bogged down during winter and the war's focus turns to long-range missile, drone and artillery strikes.

Russia's recently intensified aerial attacks sharply in-

creased civilian casualties in December, with more than 100 Ukrainians killed and nearly 500 injured, according to the United Nations.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been making a diplomatic push for Kyiv's Western allies to keep supplying weaponry.

He recently visited the three Baltic countries and on Tuesday attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he met with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Ukraine has accomplished a lot more than might be obvious on the battlefield at the moment, Blinken said Wednesday in Davos. Kyiv's forces last year clawed back about half of the territory lost to Russia after the full-scale invasion in February 2022 and have forced the Russian navy to pull back from the Ukrainian coast in the Black Sea, he noted.

"The strategic picture looks ... very different than maybe the day-in and day-out picture" on the battlefield, he said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Emergency federal aid approved after flooding

CT HARTFORD — Connecticut is receiving emergency federal aid following severe flooding this month that caused dam breaches and road closures.

President Joe Biden on Saturday approved an emergency declaration for the state that authorizes the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other agencies to provide assistance to state and local authorities responding to the ongoing inclement weather that began Jan. 10.

The authorization allows FEMA to “identify, mobilize, and provide at its discretion, equipment and resources necessary to alleviate the impacts of the emergency,” including direct federal funding.

Parents look for better security at Iowa schools

IA PERRY — Several parents in an Iowa town where a deadly school shooting took place earlier this month told school officials on Monday they want more preventative measures and transparency as the school board plans for students’ return.

Their comments came during a Perry school board meeting, the day after the death of Principal Dan Marburger, who was critically injured in the shooting.

Grace Castro criticized the school district’s policies, saying that “lives were lost due to our lack of preventative measures.” She suggested the installation of

metal detectors at schools’ entrances and a temporary remote learning option at the same time, and enforcement of a clear-bag policy as “the absolute least you can do.”

Her comments echoed what many other many other parents — including some of the victims’ families — have been saying on the Perry Facebook page since the district first announced its reopening plan last week.

Monday’s meeting had been postponed from Sunday because of Marburger’s death.

Two Boeing planes collide before takeoff

IL CHICAGO — A plane taxiing for departure clipped another aircraft at Chicago O’Hare International Airport on Sunday evening, the Federal Aviation Administration said Monday.

No injuries were reported, both planes were of Boeing design, and the FAA says it will investigate the incident.

The left wing tip of Flight 11 from All Nippon Airways, a Japanese airline, struck the rear of Delta Air Lines Flight 2122 on Sunday around 6:30 p.m. Central Time, FAA spokesperson Tony Molinaro said. The All Nippon Airways flight was a Boeing 777, and the Delta Airlines aircraft was a Boeing 717.

Boeing faces increasing scrutiny following a series of mechanical failures and subsequent grounding of its Boeing 737 Max 9 model after an emergency exit door failed and caused an emergency landing last week. It was not immediately clear what caused the incident on Sunday and whether it was related to a manufacturing

flaw.

Delta spokesperson Emma Johnson said Monday afternoon by phone that an All Nippon Airways aircraft clipped a Delta plane while it was parking at a gate after arriving at O’Hare from Detroit.

Pence’s older brother won’t seek reelection

DC WASHINGTON — Republican U.S. Rep. Greg Pence of Indiana said Tuesday he will not seek reelection this year to a fourth term, becoming the latest House member to announce that they won’t run for reelection.

Pence, the older brother of former Vice President Mike Pence, announced his decision in a statement on X, formerly Twitter, which did not give any indication why he had decided not to run again for Indiana’s 6th District seat.

His famous sibling had held the seat for 12 years before later serving as Indiana’s governor. Greg Pence was first elected in 2018 to the seat, which spans parts of central, eastern and south-central Indiana.

More than two dozen House members are seeking other office or retiring so far heading into the 2024 election.

Capital’s water said OK after one-day boil order

MS JACKSON — One day after Mississippi health officials told residents in the state’s capital that dangerous bacteria could be in their tap water, the state health department said that city water was safe to consume.

Mississippi health officials

lifted their health advisory after a new round of test results did not find E. coli in Jackson’s supply. The move came hours after Ted Henifin, Jackson’s interim water manager, said repeat samples taken from the city’s water system tested negative for E. coli.

The new round of results, which were collected from the same locations where state officials reported positive results the day before, show the previous test was likely a false positive caused by lab contamination, Henifin said.

State health officials imposed boil-water notices in Jackson and Flowood following positive results in both cities Thursday. The state health department said the boil-water notice is still in effect in Flowood, pending further tests.

Baltimore Sun bought by Sinclair media exec

MD BALTIMORE — The Baltimore Sun newspaper has been purchased by David D. Smith, the executive chairman of the media conglomerate Sinclair Inc.

Smith told the newspaper he acquired Baltimore Sun Media from the investment firm Alden Global Capital in a private deal reached last week. He did not disclose how much he paid in the agreement.

Smith bought the paper with his own assets independently of Sinclair, which is known for its ownership of local television news stations across the U.S. He said, however, that there could be partnerships between the two brands in the future. He will remain the executive chairman at Sinclair.

— From wire reports

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49ers use painful losses as motivation

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The pain from crushing playoff losses never fully goes away for the San Francisco 49ers.

A blown 10-point lead in the fourth quarter of a Super Bowl. Another double-digit, fourth-quarter lead squandered in an NFC championship game thanks in part to a dropped interception.

Then an NFC title game when the Niners never really had a chance thanks to an elbow injury on the first drive to quarterback Brock Purdy.

Those moments serve as fuel as the 49ers gear up for another playoff run starting on Saturday night when they host the Green Bay Packers in the divisional round.

“You always remember those moments,” All-Pro linebacker Fred Warner said. “It’s important during those times like last year in Philly and you see the confetti coming down,

you see them with their hats and T-shirts on the stage, they’re happy, and you’re standing there watching it all happen. I can put myself right back there in this moment. The part that sucks is you can’t just blink and you’re right back into having an opportunity to go back and do it again.”

The 49ers (12-5) came into the season talking about returning to this stage and finally getting over the hump to deliver the franchise its sixth Super Bowl title but first since the 1994 season.

With a strong season from Purdy and a high-powered offense and the usual swarming defense, San Francisco earned the top seed in the NFC thanks in large part to dominant wins over contenders such as Dallas and Philadelphia.

“You have to build the team back up again, and it feels like just yesterday we were doing that and you blink and we’re here,” Warner said. “It’s the

start of the playoffs with an opportunity to do something special. I think that’s what the scars are for. You remember those moments. How can I not give my all to this?”

The Niners have been agonizingly close in recent years. They were the No. 1 seed in the NFC in 2019 and rolled into the Super Bowl against Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs.

But a 20-10 lead in the fourth quarter turned into a 31-20 loss as the defense gave up too many big plays and quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo faltered down the stretch.

After missing the playoffs in an injury-filled 2020 season, the 49ers returned in 2021 and made it back to the NFC title game where they held a 17-7 lead in the fourth quarter. A dropped interception by Jaquiski Tartt helped the Rams rally to a 20-17 win.

San Francisco then went into last year’s title game on a 12-game winning streak and full

of confidence that was shattered as soon as Purdy’s elbow got hurt on the opening drive.

Fourth-string quarterback Josh Johnson came in and tried to keep the game close but then left with a concussion, forcing the Niners to play most of the second half of a 31-7 loss without a functioning quarterback.

“There’s not much more we could have done differently as a team once that injury occurred,” All-Pro tight end George Kittle said. “We were playing at a super high level. We were playing well, that happens and we lose. So it’s not like we have to go train harder. We need to do this better. It’s just like we just need to get better, continue to keep on the streak that we’re going on, continue to play at a high level. We’ve got the players for it. We got the scheme for it. We’ve got the confidence. Hey, let’s just stay healthy and just go play football.”

Ravens hope bye left them refreshed, healthier

Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — Leave it to Roquan Smith, Baltimore’s chatty linebacker, to put the enormity of the postseason into words.

“I don’t feel pressure at all, but some do say pressure bursts pipes and makes diamonds,” Smith said. “I know a lot of guys in there like diamonds, so I would say we’re in a diamond-making business.”

With their first postseason matchup finally set — it’s Saturday against Houston — the Ravens are now back in their game week routine. They practiced Tuesday — indoors, with the outdoor fields at the team facility covered in snow — and it appears they’ll be a lot closer to full strength after enjoying a first-round bye.

Cornerback Marlon Hum-

phrey missed practice with a calf injury, but aside from that, Baltimore seems about as healthy as could be expected. Tight end Mark Andrews, who is still on injured reserve but was designated to return last week, has clearly made a lot of progress from his November ankle injury.

“I think today was his best showing so far,” coach John Harbaugh said. “So that’s encouraging. We’ll just have to see how it goes.”

Linebacker Del’Shawn Phillips (shoulder) and receiver Tylan Wallace (knee) both missed practice Tuesday. Receiver Zay Flowers (calf) and linebackers Odafe Oweh (ankle) and Malik Harrison (groin) were limited.

The Ravens weren’t sure who they’d be playing this week until Pittsburgh lost on Monday in

a game pushed back a day because of snow in the Buffalo area. Only then did the Baltimore-Houston game become official for Saturday, but having one fewer day to rest shouldn’t be a huge issue for either team. The Ravens didn’t play last weekend, and Houston’s first-round win over Cleveland was on Saturday, so the Texans will have a normal amount of time between games.

Baltimore clearly looked the part of a Super Bowl contender in December when the Ravens swept through a grueling stretch of games against the Rams, Jaguars, 49ers and Dolphins. There was some wear and tear, though.

All-Pro safety Kyle Hamilton missed the Miami game with a knee injury. So did guard Kevin Zeitler (knee/quad) and corner-

back Brandon Stephens (ankle). Hamilton and Zeitler were also held out of the regular-season finale against Pittsburgh — along with Humphrey and Flowers — after Baltimore had wrapped up the top seed in the AFC.

The question now is whether that Week 18 loss to the Steelers — in which star quarterback Lamar Jackson didn’t play, either — followed by a first-round bye might have slowed the Ravens’ momentum.

“I believe we were getting into a groove,” Jackson said. “But it is what it is. Coach Harbaugh still made us practice like we were preparing for a game, so I believe we will still be ready.”

And given Baltimore’s injury situation down the stretch, the benefits of the weekend off presumably outweigh the costs.

Djokovic gets spark after calling out heckler

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Already sick and tired in another early round slog, Novak Djokovic unloaded on a heckler who crossed the line at the Australian Open.

Defending champion Djokovic angrily challenged the spectator to “say that to my face” and gestured to the man to come down onto the Rod Laver Arena court, the venue for 10 of his record 24 Grand Slam titles.

He then went on a roll, winning three straight games from 2-2 in the fourth set before finishing off Alexei Popyrin 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (4) 6-3.

The 36-year-old Serb then turned to the crowd again and yelled, pumping his fist to celebrate the victory.

Asked later what triggered his rage, Djokovic responded: “I mean, you don’t want to know.”

“I was tolerating it for most of the match. At one point I had enough,” he said. “He didn’t have the courage to come down.

That’s what I was asking him: ‘If you have courage, if you’re such a tough man, tough guy, come down and tell it to my face.’”

That didn’t happen. Djokovic didn’t ask for the man to be removed. Stadium security didn’t intervene.

Djokovic moved on to the third round, still simmering a little bit about the episode.

“I’m not going to sit and say ‘it’s all good.’ It’s not good,” he said. “Of course, it upsets me. I’m frustrated. I don’t want to be experiencing that, but I have to accept it as it is.

“Sometimes I don’t tolerate when somebody crosses the line. That’s it.”

Djokovic has been dealing with a sore wrist and said after his opening match — a four-hour, four-set win over 18-year-old qualifier Dino Prizmic — that he hasn’t been well. He was struggling against Popyrin, who is ranked 43rd.

So, was it the kind of spark that he needed?

“Look, I don’t want to be in

those types of situations. Yeah, I was flat I guess emotionally. Game-wise I was quite flat,” he said. “Maybe that was needed for me to be shaken up a bit and start to find the kind of intensity that I needed to have all match.”

Stefanos Tsitsipas, who lost the final in Melbourne last year to Djokovic, also had a tough time against an Aussie on an adjacent court in the night session.

Tsitsipas had match points in the fourth set and then had to save four set points to force a tiebreaker, which he clinched in a 4-6, 7-6 (6), 6-2, 7-6 (4) win.

Defending champion Aryna Sabalenka and U.S. Open winner Coco Gauff avoided the early Day 4 upsets in the women’s draw to advance to the third round, along with 16-year-old Mirra Andreeva.

Three-time major finalist Ons Jabeur lost 6-0, 6-2 in 54 minutes to Andreeva in Wednesday’s opening match on Rod Laver Arena and then 2018 champion Caroline Wozniacki also lost to a young Russian on the

No. 3 show court.

Two other 16-year-old players lost their center court matches to highly-ranked players: No. 10 Beatriz Haddad Maia accounted for Alina Korneeva 6-1, 6-2 and Sabalenka overpowered Brenda Fruhvirtova 6-3, 6-2 to open the night session.

Gauff extended her winning streak to nine matches at Grand Slams with a 7-6 (2), 6-2 win over fellow American Caroline Dolehide.

Dolehide served for the opening set at 6-5 before U.S. Open champion Gauff took control in the tiebreaker.

“It was really hard,” Gauff said. “If you give her something short, she’s going to punish you for it, so if I could go back and do something I’d change that.”

Gauff will next play another American, Alycia Parks, who reached the third round of a Grand Slam singles tournament for the first time with a 7-5, 6-4 win over 32nd-ranked Leylah Fernandez.

Rangers beat Kraken behind Wheeler, Kakko

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Blake Wheeler had two goals, Kaapo Kakko scored in his second game back from a long injury absence and the New York Rangers beat the Seattle Kraken 5-2 on Tuesday night.

Igor Shesterkin made 29 saves as the Rangers won their second straight after four consecutive losses. Vincent Trocheck and Erik Gustafsson scored in the first period for New York.

“That was important for the team. A huge win,” Shesterkin said before the Rangers head west on a four-game trip to face Vegas, Los Angeles, Anaheim and San Jose.

Jordan Eberle and Jared McCann had the Seattle goals.

Mika Zibanejad and Adam Fox each had two assists for the Rangers, who are 5-0-1 against the Kraken — an expansion franchise in 2021-22 — and have outscored them 23-12.

“In the second period we had great opportunities, we just didn’t execute,” Kraken coach Dave Hakstol said. “We had a lot of

jump, but guys who played a lot of minutes last night also had to play big minutes tonight, and that wears on you.”

Oilers 4, Maple Leafs 2: Ryan McLeod had a goal and an assist as host Edmonton rallied past slumping Toronto for its franchise-record 11th consecutive victory.

Leon Draisaitl, Derek Ryan and Evan Bouchard also scored for the Oilers (24-15-1), who erased a 2-0 deficit to improve to 19-3-0 in their last 22 games. Stuart Skinner made 25 saves, and Connor McDavid picked up an assist to extend his point streak to 11 games.

Stars 5, Kings 1: Roope Hintz and Joe Pavelski each scored their 18th goal this season to share the team lead, and Jake Oettinger won a matchup of Western Conference All-Star goaltenders as host Dallas pulled away from Los Angeles.

Dallas got three goals in the first 10 minutes of the third period to take complete control. Hintz, Wyatt Johnston and Evgenii Dadonov each had a goal and an assist, and Sam Steel scored short-handed for the Stars, who are 4-

1-0 in their last five games. Jason Robertson added two assists.

Jets 4, Islanders 2: Kyle Connor scored into an empty net after a 16-game absence and Mason Appleton snapped a 25-game goal drought to help host Winnipeg get back to its winning ways with a victory over New York.

Capitals 2, Ducks 0: Ethan Bear scored his first NHL goal in a year, Darcy Kuemper stopped all 24 shots he faced and host Washington blanked Anaheim.

Avalanche 7, Senators 4: Mikko Rantanen scored twice and visiting Colorado closed with four unanswered goals in the third period to beat Ottawa.

Blackhawks 2, Sharks 1 (SO): Boris Katchouk scored in the ninth round of a shootout and Petr Mrazek made the clinching save on Filip Zadina to lift host Chicago over San Jose.

Flames 3, Coyotes 2 (OT): Yegor Sharangovich scored a power-play goal late in overtime to complete host Calgary’s comeback against Arizona.

76ers win Embiid-Jokic MVP matchup

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Joel Embiid palmed Nikola Jokic's head and whispered into his ear with the highest of praise one MVP could tell another in the aftermath of an epic showdown.

Embiid told Jokic that his counterpart was "the best player in the league."

With good reason: Jokic does have an NBA Finals MVP and a championship ring. Embiid is doing his best to chase him down.

Embiid had 41 points and 10 assists to lead the Philadelphia 76ers past Jokic and the Denver Nuggets 126-121 on Tuesday night in a battle of the last two NBA MVPs.

Jokic held up his end of a heavyweight showdown with 25

points and 19 rebounds, including 11 offensive boards.

"It's funny, because Twitter, we have a war going on between Philly fans and Denver fans," Embiid said. "It's funny because both of us are just like, who cares? We want to play basketball and win some games. But he deserves (the praise). Until you knock him down, that's the best in the league. He's the finals MVP. Until you take that away, he can claim that."

"But then again, I also believe in myself."

Tyrese Maxey scored 25 points and Tobias Harris had 24 for the Sixers.

Embiid got the better of Jokic late, buoyed by a three-point play that stretched the Sixers'

lead. Embiid was fouled on a bucket and crotch-chopped in celebration toward the fans. He made the free throw for a 118-113 lead. Embiid followed with a 3-pointer for an eight-point lead and showed the Sixers are as good as any team when he's healthy—even against the NBA champs.

Embiid had his 18th straight 30-point game, tying Hall of Famer Elgin Baylor for the sixth-longest streak in NBA history.

Suns 119, Kings 117: Kevin Durant made two free throws with 1.8 seconds remaining and host Phoenix staged a furious comeback to beat Sacramento.

Grayson Allen tied a franchise record with nine 3-pointers and scored 29 points for the

Suns, who trailed 113-96 before closing the game with a 23-4 run. Durant finished with 27 points.

The Kings led by as many as 22 points, but Durant sparked a comeback with a pair of 3-pointers in the fourth quarter.

Clippers 128, Thunder 117: Paul George scored 18 of his season-high 38 points in the fourth quarter and host Los Angeles beat Oklahoma City for its ninth win in 11 games.

Kawhi Leonard and James Harden added 16 points apiece to complete a big day for the franchise. Earlier, the league announced the 2026 All-Star Game will be held at the Clippers' under-construction arena in Inglewood, where they begin play next season.

Edey, No. 2 Purdue finally able to beat rival Indiana

Associated Press

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. — Zach Edey had 33 points and 14 rebounds as No. 2 Purdue rolled past rival Indiana 87-66 on Tuesday night.

Edey was 11-for-23 from the field and 11-for-12 at the free-throw line to help the Boilermakers (16-2, 5-2 Big Ten) win at Assembly Hall for the first time in three seasons. Fletcher Loyer scored 19 points and Lance Jones added 17 for Purdue.

Trey Galloway scored 17 points and Mackenzie Mgbakco had 15 for the Hoosiers (12-6, 4-3), who swept last season's series.

The Boilermakers stormed out to 51-29 lead at halftime, but the Hoosiers charged back, opening the second half on a 20-7 run and closing to 60-51. Purdue answered with five straight points and never allowed Indiana to get close again.

No. 3 Kansas 90, Oklahoma State 66: Hunter Dickinson had 21 points and seven rebounds, and the visiting Jay-

hawks rolled past the Cowboys.

Kevin McCullar Jr. scored 18 points, KJ Adams Jr. scored 16 for Kansas (15-2, 3-1 Big 12).

Bryce Thompson led Oklahoma State with 20 points.

No. 6 Tennessee 85, Florida 66: Dalton Knecht scored a career-high 39 points and had eight rebounds to lead the host Volunteers past the Gators.

Jonas Aidoo had 19 points and a team-high 10 rebounds to help Tennessee (13-4, 3-1 Southeastern Conference) win its 12th straight at home.

Kansas State 68, No. 9 Baylor 64 (OT): Arthur Kaluma converted a four-point play to give his team the lead with 20 seconds left in overtime, and Tylor Perry added a pair of free throws with 6.9 seconds to go, helping the Wildcats beat the visiting Bears.

Perry and Cam Carter finished with 18 points apiece for Kansas State (13-4, 3-1 Big 12). Kaluma had 12.

Langston Love had 15 points and Jalen Bridges scored 11 to lead Baylor (14-3, 3-1), which

was just 5-for-28 from beyond the arc. Ja'Kobe Walter was held to eight points on 3-for-11 shooting.

Penn State 87, No. 11 Wisconsin 83: Kanye Clary scored 27 points, Ace Baldwin Jr. added 20 and the host Nittany Lions beat the Badgers for their first win over an AP Top 25 team under coach Mike Rhoades.

Penn State (9-9, 3-4 Big Ten) barely trailed as it knocked off the Big Ten's last unbeaten team in league play.

AJ Storr scored 23 points and Steven Crowl added 17 for Wisconsin (13-4, 5-1).

New Mexico 99, No. 16 Utah State 86: Nelly Joseph scored a season-high 26 points, Donovan Dent had 15 points and a career-high 14 assists, and the host Lobos beat the Aggies for their second straight victory over a ranked opponent.

New Mexico (15-3, 3-2 Mountain West), which was coming off a victory over then-No. 19 San Diego State, had six players in double figures.

Ian Martinez scored 22

points, but Utah State (16-2, 4-1) had its 15-game winning streak snapped.

Cincinnati 81, No. 19 TCU 77 (OT): Dan Skillings Jr.'s go-ahead layup with 22 seconds left in overtime lifted the host Bearcats to a victory over the Horned Frogs.

Day Day Thomas scored 21 points to lead Cincinnati (13-4, 2-2).

Trevian Tennyson scored 17 and Emanuel Miller had 15 for TCU (13-4, 2-2 Big 12).

No. 20 BYU 87, No. 24 Iowa State 72: Spencer Johnson scored a career-high 28 points to lead the host Cougars to a victory over the Cyclones.

Johnson shot 62% from the field and also had nine rebounds and five assists.

Keshon Gilbert led the Cyclones (13-4, 2-2) with 16 points.

No. 21 Dayton 70, St. Louis 65: DaRon Holmes II scored 25 of his 29 points in the second half and grabbed 14 rebounds to help the host Flyers beat the Billikens for their 11th straight victory.