

Biden readies response to drone attack

Bloomberg News

President Joe Biden said he had made a decision on how to respond to an attack by Iranian-backed militants that killed three American troops in the Middle East, although he did not reveal his plans as he spoke to reporters Tuesday.

Biden said Iran was responsible for providing the weaponry used in the strike, but added that he did not seek a broader confrontation with tensions in the region already high.

“I don’t think we need a wider war in the Middle East. That’s not what I’m looking for,” Biden said.

An unmanned aerial drone struck a base located in northeast Jordan close to the Iraqi and Syrian borders over the weekend, killing the three Americans and injured dozens. The American deaths were the first by enemy fire since the Israel-Hamas

war began in October.

The incident poses an election-year dilemma for the U.S. president who has sought to keep tensions from escalating amid the Israel-Hamas war, even as Iranian proxies in the region step up their attacks.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the eventual U.S. response could involve multiple steps.

“It’s very possible that what you’ll see is a tiered approach here, not just a single action but potentially multiple actions over a period of time,” Kirby told reporters aboard Air Force One, traveling with Biden to Florida.

Kirby said Biden spoke Tuesday morning to the family members of the killed service members and would attend what is known as a dignified transfer ceremony at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware on Friday

when their bodies are flown back to the U.S.

“He expressed to them how proud we all are of their service, how we mourn and feel sorrow over their loss, made sure that those families knew that not only was that service and sacrifice going to be honored and respected, but that they would continue to get the support that they need,” Kirby said.

Lawmakers in the U.S. have been pressing Biden to retaliate against the militants behind the drone strike — and some have urged him to strike Iranian territory, a move that risks widening the conflict in the Middle East, which U.S. officials have painstakingly taken steps to contain.

While the U.S. has not directly blamed Iran, Biden in a statement Sunday said the U.S. knew the attack was “carried out by radical Iran-backed militant

groups” and vowed to hold “those responsible to account.”

Iran has denied involvement in the strike and has urged the U.S. to use diplomacy to ease tensions. Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said “active” diplomacy is underway to find a political situation to the war in Gaza and the regional fallout but did not detail those efforts.

The administration is considering ways to respond, though it believes a stronger reaction is warranted than in previous attacks where Americans were not killed, a person familiar with U.S. deliberations said.

Biden met with members of his national security team, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, and national security adviser Jake Sullivan, to discuss the latest developments on Monday.

Probe finds cruiser captain bullied crew, hit sailors

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A Navy captain relieved of command of a cruiser last year battered and bullied sailors while creating a culture of fear through temper tantrums and public humiliation, according to a service investigation.

Capt. Danielle DeFant’s toxic leadership aboard the San Diego-based USS Lake Erie put the ship’s crew at higher risk of an accident, investigators concluded in an Oct. 2, 2023, command report.

A copy of the report was first obtained and posted online by San Diego’s KPBS through a Freedom of Information Act request.

DeFant made some sailors

feel as if they were “walking on eggshells” and caused many of the nearly 50 officers assigned to the ship’s wardroom to fear giving her bad news, according to the report.

“There is clear evidence that Captain DeFant’s recurrent, counterproductive behaviors have had adverse effects on subordinates and the command, and have had destructive effects on her crew,” the report stated.

DeFant, whose Navy career spans more than 30 years, was fired Oct. 12. She subsequently was transferred to commander, Naval Surface Force, Pacific Fleet.

Such headquarters reassignments are common while the

Navy determines whether an officer relieved of duty for loss of confidence in their ability to command will remain in the service.

DeFant was fired 10 days after the 25-page investigation report was sent to Rear Adm. Christopher Alexander, commander of Carrier Strike Group 9.

The report, which examines DeFant’s leadership after taking command of Lake Erie in July 2022, investigated complaints of toxic command culture and sexual discrimination. It included summaries of interviews with DeFant and at least 45 officers and other sailors.

The report did not find evidence to substantiate the alle-

gation of sexual discrimination.

However, investigators concluded that DeFant’s repeated targeting of two officers on Lake Erie violated the service’s rules on bullying, the report states.

DeFant also likely violated the Uniform Code of Military Justice when she grabbed a bridge officer by the collar and admonished him for speaking out of turn, investigators found.

The names of the witnesses and other crew members were redacted in the report.

Other sailors reported being hit, roughly pushed or nudged by DeFant. The captain characterized some of those encounters as an effort to get a sailor’s attention or correct them.

Marines to deploy new ACVs to Pacific

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is sending its new amphibious combat vehicle to the Pacific with an expeditionary unit from California, the Corps' acting commandant said Thursday.

The new additions to the service's inventory will arrive on Okinawa with the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit from Camp Pendleton, Calif., Gen. Christopher Mahoney said during an event at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C.

The eight-wheeled amphibious combat vehicles, or ACVs, move troops from ship to shore and are designed to ride the surf close to shore during assaults. They are essential to the Marines' force redesign that aims to structure the Corps as a dis-

tributed, light strike force equipped to fight across Pacific islands.

The combat vehicles deploying with the 15th MEU will "become part of the Okinawa contingent once they get out there," Mahoney said without elaboration.

The ACV, first developed by BAE Systems of York, Pa., under a \$67 million contract in June 2019, replaces the amphibious assault vehicles whose use by the Corps concluded not long after the accidental deaths of nine crew in July 2020.

Eight Marines and a Navy corpsman drowned when their amphibious assault vehicle sank off the coast of Southern California. An investigation blamed the sinking and fatalities on poor training, bad judg-

ment and shabby maintenance, but the mishap also underscored the assault vehicle's deficiencies.

In fall 2020, BAE Systems received a \$184 million contract for "full-rate production" of the amphibious combat vehicle, according to the company website, and late the following year, the Corps announced it would replace the aging, tracked amphibious vehicles with the new, wheeled vehicles.

The replacement ACVs have had their own set of problems, both on land and sea.

The Corps halted ACV training in rough waters after one of them rolled over in the surf zone near Camp Pendleton in October 2022. There were no fatalities.

In December, a Marine with

the 15th MEU died when the ACV he was in rolled over at Pendleton.

Mahoney told the audience that the service is working toward lifting training restrictions on the ACVs to get them back into "unprotected waters."

Mahoney, the assistant commandant, is standing in for Commandant Gen. Eric Smith, who is recovering from an Oct. 29 heart attack, a month after being sworn in by Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro. Defense News reported that the Boxer Amphibious Ready Group will deploy from the West Coast in phases this spring with the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer and dock landing ship USS Harpers Ferry, from which the ACVs would deploy, expected to depart in March.

Fort Moore reservists killed in drone attack in Jordan

By **COREY DICKSTEIN**
AND **MATTHEW ADAMS**
Stars and Stripes

ATLANTA — The three U.S. service members killed in a one-way drone strike in Jordan were Army reservists from Georgia, the Pentagon said Monday.

Sgt. William Jerome Rivers, Spc. Kennedy Ladon Sanders and Spc. Breonna Alexsondria Moffett were killed in the strike on the small base in northeast Jordan known as Tower 22, according to the Pentagon.

The soldiers were assigned to the 718th Engineer Company, 926th Engineer Battalion from the 926th Engineer Brigade based at Fort Moore, Ga.

Rivers, 46, was from Carrollton, Ga.; Sanders, 24, was from Waycross, Ga.; and Moffett, 23, was from Savannah, Ga. Pentagon officials said the three soldiers were killed when the at-

tack drone struck their container housing quarters early Sunday morning.

President Joe Biden on Tuesday spoke with the families of the fallen service members.

"He expressed to them how proud we all are of their service, how we mourn and feel sorrow over their loss, made sure that those families knew that not only was that service and sacrifice going to be honored and respected, but that they would continue to get the support that they need," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said in a report by Bloomberg News.

Kirby said Biden would attend the dignified transfer ceremony at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware on Friday.

The soldiers' deaths have "left an indelible mark on the United States Army Reserve," said Lt. Gen. Jody Daniels, the Army Reserve's top general. "I

share in the sorrow felt by their friends, family and loved ones. Their service and sacrifice will not be forgotten, and we are committed to supporting those left behind in the wake of this tragedy."

Pentagon officials said an Iran-backed militia was responsible for the drone strike. Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh declined to say specifically which militia launched the drone, but said it was one backed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, an elite unit of Iran's armed forces that supports terrorist groups and anti-American militants in Iraq and Syria.

The drone struck Tower 22, a logistics support base in Jordan, along the Syrian border, where U.S. forces support the decade-old Operation Inherent Resolve, a mission to ensure the defeat of Islamic State. U.S. Central Command in a state-

ment Sunday said approximately 350 U.S. Army and Air Force troops were deployed to the base.

An investigation was ongoing into how the drone was able to evade U.S. air defenses used to protect forces on the Jordan base, Singh said.

Initial reports indicate that as the enemy drone was flying in at a low altitude, a U.S. drone was also returning to the small desert installation and might have been let pass by mistake, according to a preliminary conclusion first reported by The Wall Street Journal. As a result, there was no effort to shoot down the enemy drone, the newspaper reported.

At least 40 other American service members were injured in the strike, she said. That number could rise as troops are evaluated for injuries, including traumatic brain injuries, Singh added.

House GOP to vote on impeachment of DHS head Mayorkas

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans were preparing to take a key vote Tuesday toward impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas over what they call his “willful and systematic” refusal to enforce immigration laws as border security becomes a top 2024 election issue.

The Homeland Security Committee opened a daylong hearing on two articles of impeachment against Mayorkas, a rare charge against a Cabinet official unseen in nearly 150 years, as Republicans make GOP presidential front-runner Donald Trump’s hard-line deportation approach to immigration their own.

“The actions and decisions of Secretary Mayorkas have left us with no other option but to proceed with articles of impeachment,” said Chairman Mark Green, R-Tenn.

The articles charge that Mayorkas “willfully and systematically refused to comply with Federal immigration laws” and that he has “breached the public trust” in his claims to Congress that the border is secure.

“We cannot allow this man to remain in office any longer,” Green said.

With an unusual personal appeal Mayorkas wrote in a letter to the committee that it should be working with the Biden administration to update the nation’s “broken and outdated” immigration laws for the 21st century and an era of record global migration.

“We need a legislative solution and only Congress can

provide it,” Mayorkas wrote in the pointed letter to Green.

Mayorkas never testified on his own behalf during the rushed impeachment proceedings — he and the committee couldn’t agree on a date — but drew on his own background as a child brought to the U.S. by his parents fleeing Cuba and on his career spent prosecuting criminals.

“Your false accusations do not rattle me and do not divert me” from public service, he wrote.

Green, the Republican committee chair, disparaged Mayorkas’ letter as an “11th-hour response” to the committee that was “inadequate and unbecoming of a Cabinet secretary.”

Rarely has a Cabinet member faced impeachment’s bar of “high crimes and misdemeanors” and Democrats on the panel called the proceedings a stunt and a sham that could set a chilling precedent for other civil servants snared in policy disputes by lawmakers who disagree with the president’s approach to issues.

“This is a terrible day for the committee, the United States, the Constitution and our great country,” said Rep. Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, the committee’s ranking Democrat.

The House’s proceedings against Mayorkas have created an oddly split-screen Capitol Hill, as the Senate works intently with the secretary on a bipartisan border security package that is now on life support.

Vietnam veteran who received Medal of Honor last year dies

Staff and wire reports

Larry Taylor, who received the Medal of Honor in September for his daring 1968 helicopter rescue during the Vietnam War, died Sunday at his home in Tennessee, according to a news release from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.

Taylor, a retired Army captain and Chattanooga native, was 81. A cause of death was not released.

President Joe Biden presented Taylor the medal — the military’s highest honor — at

the White House on Sept. 5.

“Larry’s mission on this earth is now over and he is forever safe and indeed home in God’s forever attack helicopter base camp,” retired Army Gen. Burwell “B.B.” Bell, who worked on the petition to get Taylor the medal, said in a news release.

Taylor’s remains will be buried at the Chattanooga National Military Cemetery, near those of other Medal of Honor recipients

Charles Coolidge and Desmond Doss, Bell said.

Trump stays on Illinois’ ballot as election board declines to ban him

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Illinois’ election board on Tuesday kept former President Donald Trump on the state’s primary ballot, a week before the U.S. Supreme Court hears arguments on whether the Republican’s role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol disqualifies him from the presidency.

The board’s ruling comes after its hearing officer, a retired judge and Republican, found that a “preponderance of the evidence” shows Trump is ineligible to run for president because he violated a constitutional ban on those who “engaged in insurrection” from holding office. But the hearing officer recommended the board let the courts make the ultimate decision.

That will likely be the case now, with the Supreme Court scheduled next week to hear

arguments in Trump’s appeal of a Colorado ruling declaring him ineligible for the presidency in that state.

The nation’s highest court has never ruled on a case involving Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which was adopted in 1868 to prevent former confederates from returning to office after the Civil War but has rarely been used since then.

Some legal scholars say the post-Civil War clause applies to Trump for his role in trying to overturn the 2020 election and encouraging his backers to storm the U.S. Capitol after he lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

Dozens of cases have been filed around the country seeking to bar Trump from the presidency under Section 3.

The Colorado case is the only one that succeeded in court.

Israeli forces kill 3 in West Bank hospital

Associated Press

JENIN, West Bank — Israeli forces disguised as civilian women and medical workers stormed a hospital Tuesday in the occupied West Bank, killing three Palestinian militants in a dramatic raid that underscored how deadly violence has spilled into the territory from the war in Gaza.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said Israeli forces opened fire inside the wards of the Ibn Sina Hospital in the town of Jenin. The ministry condemned the raid and called on the international community to pressure Israel's military to halt such operations in hospitals. A hospital spokesperson said there was no exchange of fire, indicating that it was a targeted killing.

The military said the militants were using the hospital as a hideout, without providing evidence. It alleged that one of those targeted in the raid had transferred

weapons and ammunition to others for a planned attack, purportedly inspired by the Hamas assault on southern Israel on Oct. 7 that triggered the war in Gaza.

Footage said to be security camera video from the hospital that circulated on social media showed about a dozen undercover forces, most of them armed, dressed as women with Muslim headscarves or hospital staff in scrubs or white doctor's coats. One in a surgical mask carried a rifle in one arm and a folded wheelchair in the other. The forces were seen patting down one man who kneeled against a wall, his arms raised.

The Associated Press has not independently verified the footage, but it is consistent with AP reporting.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, meanwhile, denied reports of a possible ceasefire deal to end the war in Gaza

during an event in the occupied West Bank on Tuesday, repeating his vow to keep fighting until "absolute victory" over Hamas.

"We will not end this war without achieving all of our goals," he said. "We will not withdraw the Israeli military from the Gaza Strip and we will not release thousands of terrorists," he said, referring to Hamas' main demands.

The war began when hundreds of Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel, killing about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting about 250 others. Over 100 were released during a weeklong cease-fire in November in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. In response, Israel launched a blistering air, sea and ground offensive that killed more than 26,700 people in Gaza, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

The conflict has also leveled vast swaths of the tiny coastal en-

clave, displaced 85% of its population, and pushed a quarter of residents to starvation. That humanitarian crisis may soon be exacerbated, the U.N. has warned, after several countries froze funding to the main aid provider to Palestinians in Gaza following Israeli claims that a dozen of its workers participated in the Oct. 7 assault.

Israel has come under heavy criticism for its raids on hospitals in Gaza, which have treated the tens of thousands of Palestinians wounded in the war as well as providing critical shelter for displaced people.

Israel says militants use hospitals as cover, hiding out in them or launching operations from them.

Since Oct. 7, violence in the West Bank has also surged as Israel has cracked down on suspected militants, killing more than 380 Palestinians, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry.

Ukraine's strikes hurt Putin's efforts to smother war effects

Associated Press

The wail of air raid sirens is commonplace in Belgorod, a Russian border city whose residents are on edge following a Ukrainian missile attack on a New Year's holiday weekend that left dozens of people dead and injured.

A spectacular explosion rocked a huge fuel export terminal on the Baltic Sea southwest of St. Petersburg this month from a Ukrainian drone, forcing the energy company Novatek to suspend operations for several days.

Last week, an apparent drone attack in the Black Sea port of Tuapse in the southern Krasnodar region hit one of Russia's largest refineries and ignited a fire, while another big refinery in the Volga River city of Yaroslavl, north of Moscow, came under attack early Monday, but officials said there was no damage. There also have been strikes on a gunpowder factory in the Tambov re-

gion and arms producers and military facilities in the Bryansk, Smolensk and Tula regions.

Attacks like these are dealing a heavy blow to President Vladimir Putin's attempts to reassure Russians that life in the country is largely untouched by the war.

"Ukraine has increased its capacity to strike back against Russia," Michael Kofman, a military expert with the Carnegie Endowment, said in a recent podcast.

"You see increased Ukrainian attacks against Russian critical infrastructure, retaliatory attacks against cities like Belgorod and greater strikes against Russian military base[s] in Crimea," he said.

As Putin ramps up his campaign ahead of the presidential election in March, he wants to maintain an air of normalcy. But the increasingly frequent Ukrainian attacks have raised the visibility of the war on Russian soil.

Anchorage gets 100 inches of snow earlier than ever

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Even by Alaska standards, there's a lot of snow this winter.

So much snow has fallen — so far, more than 8.5 feet — that roofs on commercial buildings are collapsing around Anchorage and officials are urging residents to break out their shovels to avoid a similar fate at home. Over the weekend, there was nearly 16 more inches of snowfall, pushing Alaska's largest city past the 100-inch mark earlier than at any other time in its history.

The city is well on track to break its all-time record of 134.5 inches.

Now, even winter-savvy Anchorage residents are getting fed up with the snow-filled streets and sidewalks, constant shoveling and six days of pandemic-era remote learning. It's already in the record books with this year's

snowfall, at eighth snowiest with a lot of time left this season.

"It's miserable," said Tamera Flores, an elementary school teacher shoveling her driveway on Monday, as the snow pile towered over her head. "It's a pandemic of snow."

Last year, 107.9 inches fell on Anchorage, making this only the second time the city has had back-to-back years of 100-plus inches of snow since the winters of 1954-55 and 1955-56.

This year, the roofs of three commercial structures collapsed under loads of heavy snow. Last year, 16 buildings had roofs collapse with one person killed at a gym.

The city last week issued guidance urging people to remove snow from their home roofs. Officials said there were snow loads of over 30 pounds per square foot.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dying thief who stole 'Oz' slippers avoids jail

MN DULUTH — A dying thief who confessed to stealing a pair of ruby slippers that Judy Garland wore in "The Wizard of Oz" because he wanted to pull off "one last score" was given no prison time at his sentencing hearing Monday.

Terry Jon Martin, 76, stole the slippers adorned with sequins and glass beads in 2005 from the Judy Garland Museum located in the late actor's hometown of Grand Rapids, Minn.

He gave into temptation after an old associate with connections to the mob told him the shoes had to be adorned with real jewels to justify their \$1 million insured value, his attorney revealed in a memo to the federal court ahead of his sentencing in Duluth.

Martin showed little emotion as the judge handed down the sentence and was physically unable to fully rise from his chair as the judge adjourned the hearing. He declined to address the court.

But defense attorney Dane DeKrey said the resolution of the case should bring a measure of closure to the government, the museum, the slippers' owner and to Martin himself.

13 hurt when over 40 vehicles crash on bridge

MD BALTIMORE — Crashes involving more than 40 vehicles closed all lanes on the heavily-traveled U.S. 50 Bay Bridge in Maryland on Saturday, injuring 13 people

and snarling traffic for about six hours, authorities said.

The Maryland Transportation Authority said on X, formerly Twitter, that the morning crashes were on the westbound lanes.

Eastbound and westbound traffic were alternating turns on the eastbound bridge until the westbound lanes reopened later Saturday, the transportation authority said on X.

Two people were taken to hospitals with serious injuries, authorities said. Eleven others were also hurt. None of the injuries were considered life-threatening.

Also known as the William Preston Lane Jr. Memorial Bridge, the span crosses the Chesapeake Bay. It connects Maryland's Eastern Shore with the metropolitan areas of Baltimore, Annapolis and Washington, the transportation authority said on its website.

Online seller loses \$8K sale on stolen Rolex

NY MASSAPEQUA PARK — An \$8,000 Facebook Marketplace deal has gone bad on Long Island, with a man who was selling a Rolex watch jumping onto the hood of the thief's car in a desperate attempt to keep from being robbed.

Steve Mauro, 43, had arranged to sell the Rolex, purchased just days prior, on Friday in front of his home in Massapequa Park.

A would-be buyer showed up and asked Mauro to approach for the money. But instead of handing over the cash, the thief locked his doors and started speeding away, Nassau County

Police said.

Officers coincidentally patrolling the area saw a gray Honda SUV launch into reverse and knock Mauro over. Mauro jumped on the hood, but was thrown off as the driver fled with the luxury watch, police said. Mauro was treated at the scene for minor cuts to his hand, elbow and knee.

Police are promising anonymity to anyone who comes forward with information about the theft to Nassau County Crime Stoppers.

2 in custody after baby found behind dumpsters

MS HOLLY SPRINGS — Two people were taken into custody as part of an investigation into the abandonment of a newborn girl who was found last week behind dumpsters in Mississippi, authorities said.

The two people were arrested Friday, the Marshall County Sheriff's Office said on social media, without providing further details.

The newborn was found wrapped up in several blankets in a car seat Wednesday behind dumpsters at the Grove of Cayce mobile home park, near the Tennessee border, the sheriff's office said.

The baby was taken to a hospital and was in good condition, authorities said Friday.

6 hospitalized after hard airplane landing

HI HONOLULU — An American Airlines flight from Los Angeles made a hard landing at Maui's main airport, sending five flight at-

tendants and one passenger to the hospital.

The six were later released, the airline said in a statement.

Flight 271 arrived at Kahului Airport around 2 p.m. Saturday, according to the Federal Aviation Administration, which said it was investigating. Neither American Airlines nor the FAA provided additional details.

The Airbus 320 was carrying 167 passengers and seven crew, according to the airlines.

7 king cakes stolen during bakery break-in

LA NEW ORLEANS — With their purple, gold and green colors and toy babies hidden inside, king cakes are staples of Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans, but apparently they're also valuable enough to steal — at least this time of year during the Carnival season.

A thief stole seven king cakes — about as many as he could carry — during a break-in last week at a New Orleans bakery.

The thief also took cash and a case of vodka from Bittersweet Confections last Wednesday, according to New Orleans Police Department.

"Our king cakes are just that good," the bakery wrote on social media. "But please come and purchase one during our regular store hours."

King cakes are among the foods most associated with Carnival in New Orleans. The rings of pastry are adorned with purple, green and gold sugar or icing, and they often have a tiny plastic baby hidden inside as a prize.

— From wire reports

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Messi drives Inter Miami's global tour

Associated Press

Inter Miami played six pre-season matches last season. Most were behind closed doors with few people watching, all took place in Florida and the biggest news probably came when some fans prematurely set off fireworks and got ejected from the exhibition-season opener.

It's wildly different this season.

Such is life in Lionel Messi's world.

The soccer icon and Inter Miami have a two-game tour of Saudi Arabia this week. The first match was a 4-3 loss Monday to Al-Hilal and the second match will be Thursday against Al Nassr — one where Messi may share the pitch again with longtime rival and fellow great Cristiano Ronaldo, assuming the Portugal star has recovered enough from a calf injury to play.

The club already has played two exhibitions this year — one in El Salvador, one at Dallas' Cotton Bowl — and has matches in Hong Kong and Japan still to come after the Saudi swing is complete. It's basically an

around-the-world, big-crowd, big-money, bright-spotlight batch of preseason games for Inter Miami, which instantly became a global brand when Messi announced last summer that he was joining the Major League Soccer club.

"It's incredible," said DeAndre Yedlin, the Inter Miami defender who was captain until Messi arrived. "Obviously, it's not just one guy, but I think most of the focus is on Leo. So, it shows just kind of the influence that he's had on the game and has had on the game. People want to know what he's doing. People want to know anything that he's involved with, what's going on. It's great for the league. It's great for us."

Inter Miami is in Saudi Arabia because of Messi, plain and simple. There is no bigger name in the game than the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner and captain of reigning World Cup champion Argentina, and Messi — who had an offer to play in Saudi Arabia, which he turned down to join MLS and come to Inter Miami — is a Saudi ambassador to help promote tourism.

He was even suspended once

by one of his former clubs, Paris Saint-Germain, for making an unauthorized trip to the country. But Inter Miami not only understands the value of having Messi, it welcomed this massive preseason stretch in advance of an MLS season that starts Feb. 21.

"Having the possibility of seeing Messi up close in this circumstance is really very valuable," Inter Miami coach Gerardo "Tata" Martino said in Spanish last week before the team departed on its 13½-hour charter flight to Riyadh. "You have to see how many times these people are going to have this possibility."

The financial benefit of Inter Miami and Messi playing in Saudi Arabia hasn't been revealed. It's reasonable to think it's a big number, enough to help the MLS club offset at least some of Messi's salary — he's on a 2½-year contract that will pay him around \$150 million — and what the team spent to land the likes of Sergio Busquets, Jordi Alba and Luis Suarez to play with him.

The Saudis have made clear that they'll spend big for what

they want; some have used the term "sportswashing" when it comes to how the kingdom has spent billions bankrolling LIV Golf and attracting Formula One, boxing, horse racing, even BMX racing and professional wrestling. Much of this comes with great criticism. Messi's fame hasn't taken a hit from his association with the Saudis. Such is his power.

"What I love about Saudi," Messi says in a marketing campaign for the country, "is that I always discover what I never expected."

The trip itself speaks to how different everything for Inter Miami has become. The club faced Florida International University with no fans allowed in one of its preseason matches last season; this season, it's facing Ronaldo with the soccer world watching for a result that won't even count. The team had less than 1 million followers on Instagram; it has 16 million now, many of them no doubt driven there by the half-a-billion followers Messi has on that site.

An around-the-world trip for a whole new world makes sense.

Mariners acquire Polanco in trade with Twins

Associated Press

SEATTLE — After several seasons of asking and coming up short, the Seattle Mariners finally found a trade package that worked to land Jorge Polanco.

The Mariners acquired Polanco from the Minnesota Twins on Monday for pitchers Anthony DeSclafani and Justin Topa, two minor leaguers and cash.

"I think I personally made more calls on this trade than I ever have on any trade before at the behest of both my own want to add him, and our group," Seattle general manager Justin Hollander said.

The deal could help both teams. Seattle adds a proven switch-hitter to its lineup, and a healthy Polanco should provide an upgrade at second base.

The Twins get a standout reliever in Topa, a viable starter in DeSclafani and one of Seattle's top prospects in outfielder Gabriel Gonzalez. Minor league pitcher Darren Brown is also going to Minnesota.

The 33-year-old DeSclafani was traded to the Mariners earlier this month from San Francisco. He had a 4.88 ERA for the Giants last season while making 18 starts.

The right-handed Topa had a 2.61 ERA in 75 relief appearances

as a rookie for the Mariners in 2023.

The 30-year-old Polanco became expendable with the emergence last season of rookie Edouard Julien for the Twins, who are trimming their club-record payroll from 2023 in light of the uncertainty around their regional broadcast revenue. Polanco will make \$10.5 million this season, and his contract has a \$12 million club option for 2025 with a \$750,000 buyout.

Polanco came back from a knee injury to hit .255 with 14 home runs and a .789 OPS in 80 games for the Twins in 2023 while playing some second base

and moving to third base to accommodate Julien. Polanco has the most home runs (112) by a switch-hitter in Twins history.

Polanco signed with the Twins out of the Dominican Republic in 2009, made his major league debut in 2014, became their regular shortstop in 2016 and ultimately moved to second base in 2021. Ankle and knee problems limited him in recent years, but when he stayed healthy he thrived at the plate. Polanco made the AL All-Star team in 2019 while hitting a career-high .295 in 153 games. In 2021, he hit 33 homers with 98 RBIs — both career highs — in 152 games.

Nuggets spoil Rivers' debut as Bucks coach

Associated Press

DENVER — Doc Rivers saw the same thing coaching from the sideline Monday night as he did watching from his couch all season — a talented Milwaukee team that just needs a little more time to take shape.

Also, that Nikola Jokic continues to be next-level at everything he does.

Jokic spoiled Rivers' debut as the Bucks' coach by recording his 14th triple-double of the season to help the Denver Nuggets surge by Milwaukee, 113-107.

"They're great," Rivers said of his new squad. "They're a very coachable team."

Jokic finished with 25 points, 16 rebounds and 12 assists. Jamal Murray scored 35 for the Nuggets, who gained separation during a late 8-0 run.

The game was a chance for Rivers to size up his built-to-win-now club. Bucks players made an instant impression with him — and he on them.

"He did a great job commanding the team, leading the team," forward Khris Middleton said. "It's going to take time for us to get used to him and him to see what we've been doing and how we've been successful so far this season and in

the past."

Nets 147, Jazz 111: Ben Simmons had 10 points, 11 assists and eight rebounds in his return from a 38-game absence, Mikal Bridges added 33 points and host Brooklyn routed Utah.

Simmons hadn't played since Nov. 6 because of a pinched nerve in his lower back. The No. 1 pick in the 2016 draft played 18 minutes off the bench, made all five shots and likely would have had a triple-double if not for a minutes restriction.

Suns 118, Heat 105: Eric Gordon scored 23 points, Devin Booker had 22 and visiting Phoenix handed Miami its seventh consecutive loss.

Kevin Durant scored 20 and Bradley Beal had 19 for the Suns, who are 8-2 in their last 10 games and swept the Heat for just the second time in the last 17 seasons.

Cavaliers 118, Clippers 108: Donovan Mitchell had 28 points and 12 assists and Jarrett Allen extended his double-double streak to 15 straight games, leading host Cleveland past Los Angeles.

Allen finished with 20 points and 17 rebounds. Isaac Okoro added 17 points — all in the first half — as the Cavs held off a late

Clippers comeback and ended LA's winning streak at five. Cleveland is 10-1 since Jan. 3.

Knicks 113, Hornets 92: Jalen Brunson scored 32 points, Donte DiVincenzo added 28 and visiting New York kept rolling without the injured Julius Randle, beating Charlotte for its seventh straight victory.

Josh Hart chipped in with 12 rebounds, eight points and seven assists for the Knicks, who entered with the fourth-best record in the Eastern Conference.

Celtics 118, Pelicans 112: Jayson Tatum scored 12 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter and host Boston rallied past New Orleans.

The victory snapped a two-game skid at home for Boston, which started the season 20-0 at TD Garden.

Kings 103, Grizzlies 94: Domantas Sabonis had a career-high 26 rebounds along with 20 points, De'Aaron Fox scored 23 points and visiting Sacramento rallied past Memphis.

Sabonis finished 10-for-11 from the field and had 16 rebounds in the first half, a Kings record for rebounds in a half since the franchise moved to Sacramento in 1985. His previ-

ous career best was 25 rebounds for Indiana on Nov. 29, 2021, against Minnesota, and he surpassed it with 27.5 seconds left — part of a stout defensive performance by the Kings to close out the game.

Rockets 135, Lakers 119: Jalen Green scored 34 points and Alperen Sengun added 31 as host Houston beat Los Angeles.

LeBron James, Anthony Davis and D'Angelo Russell scored 23 points apiece for the Lakers, who had won two in a row, capped by a 145-144 double-overtime victory over Golden State on Saturday.

Trail Blazers 130, 76ers 104: Jerami Grant scored 27 points and host Portland took advantage of Joel Embiid's absence to rout Philadelphia.

Mavericks 131, Magic 129: Luka Doncic had 45 points and 15 assists and Tim Hardaway Jr. added 36 points as host Dallas beat Orlando.

Wizards 118, Spurs 113: Kyle Kuzma had 18 points and 11 rebounds, Daniel Gafford added 16 points and 13 boards, and visiting Washington rallied past San Antonio to win consecutive games for the first time this season.

No. 4 Houston holds off stubborn Texas for win in overtime

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — J'Wan Roberts made a tiebreaking layup with 37 seconds left in overtime and Emanuel Sharp's four free throws in the final 10 seconds sent No. 4 Houston to a 76-72 win over Texas on Monday night.

Jamal Shead led all scorers with 25 points for Houston (19-2, 6-2 Big 12). Shead came up with big shots time after time in a defensive slugfest when the Cougars struggled to find any offensive rhythm.

"We're not really trying to be the prettiest team. That's never been my deal. We're just trying to win the game," Houston coach Kelvin Sampson said.

Shead's consecutive 3-pointers in the second half came as part of a 9-0 run that helped Houston regain the lead after Texas

had rallied from 11 points down. The Big 12's best defensive team held the Longhorns to a single basket in overtime.

"We just went back to playing our defense," Sampson said. "We said, 'Let's get out and stop the ball.'"

No. 7 Duke 77, Virginia Tech 67: Jeremy Roach scored 16 points off the bench to lead the visiting Blue Devils to a victory over the Hokies on Monday night.

Bothered by knee and ankle injuries of late, Roach shot 5-for-11 from the floor and made four 3-pointers for Duke (16-4, 7-2 Atlantic Coast Conference), which has won three straight games and 11 of 12.

"I thought our team just had great togetherness," coach Jon Scheyer said. "We hit some timely 3s and some guys stepped up in key moments. ... Proud of this win. You get a

chance to play two games in three days (Duke played Clemson on Saturday), and to win both of them is really good. Looking forward to building it from here."

MJ Collins paced Virginia Tech (13-8, 5-5) with 17 points. The Hokies had their three-game winning streak snapped.

The Blue Devils grabbed the lead with a 12-0 run in the first half and never relinquished it. Virginia Tech cut a 35-29 half-time deficit to three on three occasions in the second half, with the final time coming on Hunter Cattoor's 3-pointer with 14:07 remaining.

Duke, though, gradually pulled away behind 59.3% shooting in the final 20 minutes (16-for-27). Kyle Filipowski added 14 points for the Blue Devils, and Tyrese Proctor finished with 12.

Russians still get bronze, not Canada

Associated Press

GENEVA — Despite the disqualification of Kamila Valieva in a doping case, the Russian figure skating team still stands to finish on the podium and get bronze medals from the 2022 Beijing Olympics behind the United States and Japan.

The Americans moved into the gold medal position in the team event, and Japan has been upgraded to silver from bronze. The demoted Russians drop into third place, one point ahead of Canada even after being stripped of the points the then-15-year-old Valieva earned on the ice.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of an email sent from the IOC to the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee saying it “is now in position to award the medals in accordance with the ranking, which has to be established by the International Skating Union” — the federation in charge of running the event at the Olympics.

The IOC said it had “great sympathy with the athletes who have had to wait for two years to get the final results of their competition.”

The USOPC confirmed that CEO Sarah Hirshland had re-

ceived the news that the Americans were declared the winners.

The ISU published an amended standings from the Beijing competition on Tuesday that removed Valieva’s maximum 10 points from each of her two events but did not add an extra point to the other teams below her.

The proposal by the ISU is likely to provoke fresh legal action at the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which on Monday disqualified Valieva from the 2022 Olympics and other events, and banned her for four years until December 2025.

Russian Olympic officials said Tuesday they will appeal to regain the Olympic title, arguing that ISU rules mean sanctions against Valieva “cannot be the basis for reviewing the results of the team event.”

A second challenge at CAS could come from fourth-place Canada because the rest of the field did not have their points increased by the ISU following Valieva’s disqualification.

“Skate Canada strongly disagrees with the ISU’s position on this matter and will consider all options to appeal this decision,” the country’s figure skat-

ing body said in a statement Tuesday.

The final decision on awarding medals is for the International Olympic Committee, which the ISU said was consulted before amending the results as the event organizer.

“The ISU is in close contact with the International Olympic Committee and the relevant ISU member federations in regard to the implementation of this decision,” the governing body said Tuesday.

The unprecedented turmoil of canceling the medal ceremony at the Olympics has tested the rules of figure skating’s team event, which debuted at the 2014 Sochi Games. The Russians and Canadians traded gold and silver at the first two editions.

In the newly updated Beijing result, Canada still gets eight points out of 10 from the women’s short program and free skate sections, where its skater was Madeline Schizas. Japan still gets nine points each for originally finishing second to Valieva — Wakaba Higuchi in the short program and Kaori Sakamoto in the free skate.

Canada’s overall point total remained at 53 while the Rus-

sians’ tally dropped from 74 to 54 — enough for the bronze medals for everyone on the team except the disqualified Valieva.

Skate Canada praised the ruling to disqualify Valieva, which it said “underscores the significance of stringent anti-doping measures and the need for continuous vigilance in protecting the integrity of figure skating and all sports.”

A Canadian appeal to CAS in Lausanne, Switzerland, could extend the case for about another year.

That would stall a medal ceremony that did not take place in Beijing because details of Valieva’s positive test for a banned heart medicine emerged only hours after she skated in the Russian team’s win.

In Russia on Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Valieva and her five teammates from two years ago were still considered winners.

“Upon their return from China we honored these athletes as Olympic champions,” Peskov said. “We are convinced that they will always remain Olympic champions to us, whatever decisions may be taken in that regard, even unfair ones.”

Giroux’s OT goal caps Senators’ rally past Predators

Associated Press

OTTAWA, Ontario — Claude Giroux scored 3:36 into overtime, and the Ottawa Senators rallied from three goals down to beat the Nashville Predators 4-3 on Monday night.

Brady Tkachuk and Tim Stutzle each had a goal and an assist, and Drake Batherson also scored for the Senators, who won for the fourth time in seven games (4-1-2). Mads Sogaard allowed three goals on 11 shots in the first period. Joonas Korpihalo stopped all 17 shots he faced the rest of the way to get the win.

In the extra period, Giroux scored on a one-timer from the left circle off a pass from Stutzle for his 15th of the season.

“It’s great to see how we responded,” Giroux said. “We didn’t change our game, we didn’t try to do too much, we just let the game come to us and when we had the chance, we were able to score. This one feels pretty good.”

Philip Tomasino had a goal and an assist, Michael McCarron and Yakov Trenin also scored, and Roman Josi had two assists for the Predators. Juuse-

Saros made 31 saves in Nashville’s fourth loss in five games (1-3-1).

The Predators had an opportunity to end the game early in overtime when Denis Gurianov broke in with Josi on a two-man rush, but couldn’t even manage a shot. The Senators went back the other way and ended the game.

“I think you learn to close a game down when you’re not at your best or at least give yourself a chance to get a point,” Predators coach Andrew Brunette said. “Throughout the course of

the season we gave away a lot of points where we got nothing out of it. So tonight, we were able to grind away and get a point.”

Nashville scored three times in the first period to take the lead, and Ottawa tied it with three in the second.

“I don’t know how the other guys felt, but after the first, I knew we were coming back,” said Stutzle. “Just the way we were talking in the room, just everybody stood up in the room and said ‘Hey guys, we’ve just got to do a better job and help our goalies out.’”