

FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Allies urged US to hold off on Iran strikes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Several Middle Eastern allies of the United States have urged the Trump administration to hold off on strikes against Iran for the government's deadly crackdown on protesters, according to an Arab diplomat familiar with the matter.

Top officials from Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have raised concerns in the last 48 hours that a U.S. military intervention would shake the global economy and destabilize an already volatile region, said the diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the sensitive conversations.

Oil prices fell on Thursday as the markets appeared to take note of President Donald Trump's shifting tone as a sign that he's leaning away from attacking Iran after days of launching blistering threats at Tehran for its brutal crackdown.

Nevertheless, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt on Thursday maintained that "all options remain on the

table" for Trump as he deals with Iran.

"The truth is only President Trump knows what he's going to do and a very, very small team of advisers are read into his thinking on that," Leavitt said. She added, "He continues to closely monitor the situation on the ground in Iran."

The protests challenging Iran's theocracy appeared increasingly smothered Thursday, a week after authorities shut the country off from the world and escalated a bloody crackdown that activists say has killed at least 2,637 people.

The delicate diplomacy from Arab officials comes during a period of rhetorical whiplash from Trump.

Trump, in a matter of a day, went from offering assurances to Iranian citizens that "help is on its way" and urging them to take over their country's institutions to abruptly declaring on Wednesday that he had received information from "very important sources on the other side" that Iran had stopped killing protesters and was not going

forward with executions.

The Arab officials also urged senior Iranian officials to quickly end the violent repression of protesters. They warned that any Iranian response to a U.S. action against the U.S. or other targets in the region would have significant repercussions for Iran, the diplomat said.

Ambassador Mike Waltz, the U.S. envoy to the United Nations, said military action is an option that remains in play.

"President Trump is a man of action, not endless talk like we see at the United Nations," Waltz said in remarks at a meeting of the U.N. Security Council to discuss the protests. "He has made it clear all options are on the table to stop the slaughter."

But Trump himself appeared to send signals he could be backing away from a potential U.S. strike on Iran after days of threatening one. He took to social media to highlight a Fox News headline about the suspension of a death sentence for an Iranian shopkeeper, 26-year-old Erfan Soltani.

Iranian state media denied

Soltani had been condemned to death. Iranian judicial authorities said Soltani was being held in a detention facility outside of the capital.

Alongside other protesters, he has been accused of "propaganda activities against the regime," state media said.

"This is good news. Hopefully, it will continue!" Trump said in his post about the reported pause in the execution of the shopkeeper. The White House later asserted that Iran had halted 800 scheduled executions.

Jeremy Shapiro, research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, said Trump may have decided to hold off on strikes because of concerns about the current U.S. force posture in the Mideast.

There are currently no U.S. aircraft carriers, considered a critical asset in a significant military operation, in the region after the USS Gerald R. Ford and its strike group were deployed to the U.S. Southern Command region as the part of a massive counternarcotics operation focused on Venezuela.

Iranian cleric urges executions, a red line for Trump

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — As Iran returned to uneasy calm after a wave of protests that drew a harsh crackdown, a senior hard-line cleric called Friday for the death penalty for detained demonstrators and directly threatened President Donald Trump — evidence of the rage gripping authorities in the Islamic Republic.

Harsh repression that has left several thousand people dead appears to have succeeded in

stifling the demonstrations, which began Dec. 28 over Iran's ailing economy and soon morphed into protests directly challenging the nation's theocracy.

There have been no signs of protests for days in Tehran, where shopping and street life have returned to outward normality, though a week-old internet blackout continued. Authorities have not reported any unrest elsewhere in the country.

The U.S.-based Human

Rights Activists News Agency on Friday put the death toll, which continues to rise, at 2,797.

Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami's sermon, carried by Iranian state radio, sparked chants from those gathered for prayers, including: "Armed hypocrites should be put to death!" Executions, as well as the killing of peaceful protesters, are two of the red lines laid down by Trump for possible military action against Iran.

Khatami, appointed by Su-

preme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and a member of both the country's Assembly of Experts and its Guardian Council, described the protesters as the "butlers" of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and "Trump's soldiers." He insisted their plans "imagined disintegrating the country."

"They should wait for hard revenge from the system," Khatami said of Netanyahu and Trump. "Americans and Zionists should not expect peace."

Nobel laureate presents medal to Trump

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado said she presented her Nobel Peace Prize medal to President Donald Trump at the White House on Thursday even as he has questioned her credibility to take over her country after the U.S. ousted Nicolás Maduro.

The Nobel Institute has said Machado could not give her prize to Trump, an honor that he has coveted. Even if it the gesture proves to be purely symbolic, it was extraordinary given that Trump has effectively sidelined Machado, who has long been the face of resistance in Venezuela. He has signaled his willingness to work with acting President Delcy Rodríguez, who had been Maduro's second in command.

"I presented the president of

the United States the medal, the Nobel Peace Prize," Machado told reporters after leaving the White House and heading to Capitol Hill. She said she had done so "as a recognition for his unique commitment with our freedom."

Trump confirmed later on social media that Machado had left the medal for him to keep, and he said it was an honor to meet her.

"She is a wonderful woman who has been through so much. María presented me with her Nobel Peace Prize for the work I have done," Trump said in his post. "Such a wonderful gesture of mutual respect. Thank you María!"

The White House later posted a photo of Machado standing next to Trump in the Oval Office as he holds the medal in a large frame. A text in the frame reads,

"Presented as a personal symbol of gratitude on behalf of the Venezuelan people in recognition of President Trump's principled and decisive action to secure a free Venezuela."

Trump has raised doubts about his stated commitment to backing democratic rule in Venezuela, giving no timetable on when elections might be held. Machado indicated that he had provided few specifics on that front during their discussion.

She did not provide more information on what was said.

After the closed-door meeting, Machado greeted dozens of cheering supporters waiting for her near the White House gates, stopping to hug many.

"We can count on President Trump," she told them without elaborating, prompting some to briefly chant, "Thank you, Trump."

Before her visit to Washington, Machado had not been seen in public since she traveled last month to Norway, where her daughter received the peace prize on her behalf. She had spent 11 months in hiding in Venezuela before she appeared in Norway after the ceremony.

The jubilant scene after her meeting with Trump stood in contrast to political realities in Venezuela. Rodríguez remains in charge of day-to-day government operations, along with others in Maduro's inner circle. In her first state of the union speech Thursday, the interim president promoted the resumption of diplomatic ties between the historic adversaries and advocated for opening the state-run oil industry to more foreign investment after Trump pledged to seize control of Venezuelan crude sales.

Venezuela's new leader vows 'new policy' for oil

Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuela's acting President Delcy Rodríguez used her first state of the union message Thursday to advocate for opening the crucial state-run oil industry to more foreign investment following the Trump administration's pledge to seize control of Venezuelan crude sales.

For the first time, Rodríguez laid out a vision for Venezuela's new political reality — one that challenges her government's most deeply rooted beliefs less than two weeks after the United States captured and toppled former President Nicolás Maduro.

Under pressure from the U.S. to cooperate with its plans for reshaping Venezuela's sanctioned oil industry, Maduro's former vice president declared that a "new policy is being formed in Venezuela."

She urged the foreign diplomats in attendance to tell investors abroad about the changes and called on lawmakers to approve oil sector reforms that would secure foreign firms' access to Venezuela's reserves.

"Venezuela, in free trade relations with the world, can sell the products of its energy industry," she said.

The Trump administration has said it plans to control future oil export revenues to ensure it benefits the Venezuelan people. In that vein, Rodríguez described cash from the oil sales flowing into two sovereign wealth funds, one to support crisis-stricken health services and another to bolster public infrastructure, much of which was built under Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, and has since deteriorated.

These days the country's hos-

pitals are so poorly equipped that patients are asked to provide supplies needed for their care, from syringes to surgical screws.

While Rodríguez criticized the U.S. capture of Maduro and referred to a "stain on our relations," she also promoted the resumption of diplomacy between the historic adversaries. Her succinct, 44-minute speech and mollifying tone marked a dramatic contrast to her predecessors' fiery rants against U.S. imperialism that often went on for hours.

"Let us not be afraid of diplomacy," Rodríguez. "I ask that politics not be transformed, that it not begin with hatred and intolerance."

The day before, she gave a four-minute briefing to the media to say her government would continue releasing pris-

oners detained under Maduro's harsh rule. But human rights groups have verified just a fraction of the releases that she claimed took place.

Rodríguez appears to be threading a needle.

A portrait of Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, was displayed next to her as she spoke. She called for the U.S. government to "respect the dignity" of Maduro, who is being held in a Brooklyn jail after pleading not guilty to drug-trafficking charges. She portrayed herself as defending Venezuela's sovereignty even as the country warmed up to the U.S. with dizzying speed.

"If one day, as acting president, I have to go to Washington, I will do so standing up, walking, not being dragged," she said. "I'll go standing tall ... never crawling."

Senators grill nominee to lead SOUTHCOM

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps general tapped to lead U.S. military operations in Latin America told lawmakers Thursday that he stands ready to oversee an expanded presence that began ahead of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro's capture — but he doesn't know how long that enhanced focus will last.

If confirmed by the Senate, Lt. Gen. Francis Donovan will take over U.S. Southern Command, replacing Navy Adm. Alvin Holsey, who retired last year amid increasing scrutiny over the Trump administration's deadly strikes on alleged drug boats in the region, a remarkable extension of American power in Latin America.

U.S. troops earlier this month deposed and apprehended Maduro, the culmination of a pressure campaign that began with the largest military buildup in the region in generations and expanded to dozens of attacks

on boats accused of smuggling drugs and the seizure of sanctioned oil tankers connected to Venezuela.

Democrats and Sen. Angus King, a Maine Independent, pressed Donovan for details on how he would oversee SOUTHCOM and for the broad outline of the Trump administration's long-term plans for the region. Donovan, however, said he didn't know.

"So you don't know what the plan is now? You don't know why all those ships and aircraft and soldiers are there?" King asked.

"Senator, I do not," Donovan said, explaining that he isn't involved in military plans for the region in his current role as vice commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command.

But Donovan acknowledged that the renewed interest in Latin America is likely to bring changes to SOUTHCOM, which is headquartered in Doral, Fla.

"Do you expect, because of this pivot to the Western Hemisphere, that SOUTHCOM this year is going to have to be much different than SouthCom last year?" asked Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Ariz.

"Yes I do," Donovan replied.

The confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Service Committee was the latest effort by some lawmakers to question the Trump administration over its military operations in Latin America and its justification for the boat strikes, which have prompted concerns about international law and the use of force.

Lawmakers also questioned Lt. Gen. Joshua Rudd, nominated to lead the National Security Agency, over his views on surveillance and concerns that the NSA could be used against innocent Americans.

Sen. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., a former CIA analyst, said she worries that the Trump administration could order the NSA to

spy on Americans because of their political views or speech, something she said is expressly forbidden by federal law.

"Will you reject that?" asked Slotkin, who is one of several Democratic lawmakers who say they face criminal investigation by the Trump administration after appearing in a video urging service members to resist illegal orders.

"Senator, if confirmed, I will execute my responsibilities in accordance with the Constitution and all applicable laws," Rudd said.

The NSA has been without a permanent director since Trump fired Gen. Tim Haugh last year.

The NSA director also runs the Pentagon's Cyber Command, giving it a critical role in the nation's defensive and offensive cyber capabilities.

Lawmakers from both parties said they expect the nominations to be approved. A vote has not been announced.

Congress works toward averting another shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress is halfway home in approving government funding for the current budget year that began Oct. 1 after the Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly passed a three-bill package.

Now comes the hard part. Lawmakers still must negotiate a spending bill for the Department of Homeland Security amid soaring tensions on Capitol Hill after the shooting of a Minnesota woman by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent.

Lawmakers are working to complete passage of all 12 annual spending bills before Jan. 30, the deadline set in a funding patch that ended a 43-day government shutdown in November. With the Senate's action on Thursday, six of those bills have

now passed through both chambers of Congress. The measure before the Senate passed by a broadly bipartisan vote of 82-15.

That recent success would greatly reduce the impact of a shutdown, in the unlikely event that there is one, since lawmakers have now provided full-year funding for such agencies as the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, Interior and Justice.

Lawmakers from both parties are determined to prevent another lapse in funding for the remaining agencies. The House's approval of a separate two-bill package this week nudges them closer to getting all 12 done in the next two weeks.

"Our goal, Mr. President is to get all of these bills signed into law. No continuing resolutions that lock in previous priorities

and don't reflect today's realities," said Sen. Susan Collins, the Republican chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"No more disastrous government shutdowns that are totally unnecessary and so harmful."

The biggest hurdle ahead is the funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security. The plan was to bring that bill before the House this week, but Rep. Tom Cole, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said the decision was made to pull the bill and "buy some time" in the wake of the Minneapolis shooting.

Democrats are seeking what Rep. Rosa DeLauro called "guardrails" that would come with funding for ICE.

"We can't deal with the lawlessness and terrorizing of communities," said DeLauro, the

top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee. "We're going back and forth with offers."

Trump's deportation crackdown, focused on cities in Democratic-leaning states, has incensed many House Democrats who demand a strong legislative response. Last week, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer shot and killed Renee Good in a shooting that federal officials said was an act of self-defense but that the mayor described as reckless and unnecessary.

Some 70 Democrats have signed onto an effort to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem. Others are seeking specific changes to how the agency operates, such as requiring ICE agents to wear body cameras.

Ex-S. Korean leader sentenced to 5 years for martial law decree

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — A South Korean court sentenced former President Yoon Suk Yeol to five years in prison Friday in the first verdict from eight criminal trials over the martial law debacle that forced him out of office and other allegations.

Yoon was impeached, arrested and dismissed as president after his short-lived imposition of martial law in December 2024 triggered huge public protests calling for his ouster.

The most significant criminal charge against him alleges that his martial law enforcement amounted to a rebellion. An independent counsel has requested the death sentence over that charge, and the Seoul Central District Court will decide on that in a ruling on Feb. 19.

Yoon has maintained he didn't intend to place the country under military rule for an extended period, saying his decree was only meant to inform

the people about the danger of the liberal-controlled parliament obstructing his agenda. But investigators have viewed Yoon's decree as an attempt to bolster and prolong his rule, charging him with rebellion, abuse of power and other criminal offenses.

In Friday's case, the Seoul court sentenced Yoon for defying attempts to detain him, fabricating the martial law proclamation and sidestepping a legally mandated full Cabinet meeting, depriving some Cabinet members who were not convened of their rights to deliberate on his decree.

Judge Baek Dae-hyun said in the televised ruling that imposing "a heavy punishment" was necessary because Yoon hasn't shown remorse and has only repeated "hard-to-comprehend excuses." The judge also said restoring legal systems damaged by Yoon's action was necessary.

Yoon's defense team said they will appeal the ruling, which they believe was "politicized" and reflected "the unliberal arguments by the independent counsel." Yoon's defense team argued the ruling "oversimplified the boundary between the exercise of the president's constitutional powers and criminal liability."

Park SungBae, a lawyer who specializes in criminal law, said there is little chance the court would sentence Yoon to death in the rebellion case. He said the court will likely issue a life sentence or a sentence of 30 years or more in prison.

South Korea has maintained a de facto moratorium on executions since 1997 and courts rarely hand down death sentences. Park said the court would take into account that Yoon's decree didn't cause casualties and didn't last long, although Yoon hasn't shown genuine remorse for his action.

Netanyahu says start of ceasefire's next phase a 'declarative move'

Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli strikes in Gaza on Thursday killed nine people, including three women, a day after the U.S. announced that the fragile ceasefire would advance to its second phase.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the ceasefire announcement largely symbolic, raising questions about how its more challenging elements will be carried out.

Speaking with the parents of the last Israeli hostage whose remains are still in Gaza, Netanyahu late Wednesday said the governing committee of Palesti-

nians announced as part of the second phase was merely a "declarative move," rather than the sign of progress described by U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff.

Israeli police officer Ran Gvili's parents had earlier pressed Netanyahu not to advance the ceasefire until their son's remains were returned.

The announcement of the ceasefire's second phase marked a significant step forward but left many questions unanswered. Those include the makeup of the proposed, apolitical governing committee of Palestinian experts and an international "Board of Peace."

The committee's composition was coordinated with Israel, said an Israeli official speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Questions also include the timing of deployment of international forces and the reopening of Gaza's southern Rafah border crossing, as well as concrete details about disarming Hamas and rebuilding Gaza.

Ali Shaath, the former Palestinian Authority official slated to head the committee, said Wednesday that he anticipated reconstruction and recovery to take roughly three years. He said it would start with immediate needs like shelter.

Moscow, Trump say Ukraine stalling deal

Associated Press

Moscow agrees with President Donald Trump's view that Ukraine is holding up a peace deal, a Kremlin official said Thursday.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, "Yes, we can agree with it; it's indeed so." His comments came after Trump said in published remarks Wednesday that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is an obstacle in U.S.-led peace talks.

That assessment is at odds with the sentiment of European officials, who have repeatedly accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of stalling in negotiations while his bigger army tries to push deeper into Ukraine and Russia relentlessly bombs Ukrainian cities.

Kyiv and Moscow still appear publicly far apart on their terms for a peace deal.

"I think he's ready to make a deal," Trump was quoted as saying of the Russian president in an interview with Reuters. "I think Ukraine is less ready to make a deal," he said, naming Zelenskyy as obstructing a settlement.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who along with many European and NATO member nations has strongly backed Ukraine, pushed back on Trump's reported comments.

"It is Russia who rejected the peace plan prepared by the U.S.," not Zelenskyy, Tusk posted on X on Thursday. "The only Russian response (was) further missile attacks on Ukrainian cities. This is why the only solution is to strengthen pressure on Russia. And you all know it."

Putin said Thursday that Moscow, like Ukraine, demands security guarantees as part of a prospective peace deal.

Rested Broncos host banged-up Bills

Divisional-round matchup against Buffalo is top-seeded Denver's 1st home playoff game since 2015

Associated Press

DENVER—After the Buffalo Bills ended the Broncos' season with a 31-7 thrashing in the playoffs last year, Sean Payton resolved to return the postseason party to Denver with its mile-high air and thunderous, stadium-rattling crowd.

"We talk about earning seeds and trying to get all edges. It was the same way I felt in that first year in 2006 in New Orleans when we lost in Chicago in the championship game: 'How do we get this game at home?'" recounted Payton, whose New Orleans Saints did just that three years later on their way to winning the Super Bowl following the 2009 season.

Now in his third season in Denver, Payton is trying to become the first head coach to win Lombardi Trophies with two franchises.

The well-rested Broncos (14-3) earned home-field advantage by securing the AFC's top seed and lone first-round bye. They'll host the banged-up, sixth-seeded Bills (13-5), who are coming off their first road playoff triumph since the 1992 AFC championship game, Saturday at Empower Field at Mile High.

It's the first playoff game in Denver in a decade, since Jan. 24, 2016, when the Broncos beat New England in the 17th and final matchup between superstars Tom Brady and Peyton Manning.

The Broncos have won 13 of their past 14 home games and were 8-1 in Denver this season, their only loss coming to the Jacksonville Jaguars, the team the Bills eliminated 27-24 last weekend in Josh Allen's first career fourth-quarterback comeback in the playoffs.

With Patrick Mahomes, Joe Burrow and Lamar Jackson sitting out these playoffs, this might be Allen's best chance to finally win the big one.

But he's dealing with ailments to his right foot, left knee and throwing hand, and he was also checked for a concussion last weekend.

"I feel good," Allen insisted. "I feel good. I feel better than I have in the last few weeks."

Fourteen other Bills were listed on the injury report this week and Buffalo coach Sean McDermott ruled out safety Jordan Poyer (hamstring) and CB Maxwell Hairston (ankle). Also, WRs Gabe Davis and Tyrell Shavers landed on IR this week because of knee injuries.

Allen hasn't missed a game because of an injury since his rookie season in 2018.

"I don't know," where that toughness comes from, Allen said, "obviously country boy, out in the middle of nowhere, my worst fear as a kid was missing games. Even when I got in trouble, my parents would threaten missing a game and not playing in it, and I was like, 'Alright, I'll behave.' So I just love being out there."

Allen and NFL rushing leader James Cook will face a much improved Denver defense, which looks nothing like the unit they gashed for 210 yards on the ground in last year's playoffs.

The Broncos added safety Talanoa Hufanga and inside linebacker Dre Greenlaw in free agency and they played a big role in Denver's No. 1 ranking in sacks and red zone efficiency.

"They're built the right way," McDermott said.

Behind Nik Bonitto and Jonathon Cooper, the Broncos led the league with 68 sacks, and sealing the escape route up the middle in Vance Joseph's cage-the-quarterback scheme was All-Pro defensive tackle Zach Allen, who led the league with 47 QB hits.

The Broncos ranked second against the run this season, so the Bills might have to lean on their depleted receiving group Saturday.

"Obviously not an ideal situation," Josh Allen said. "But I still trust that room completely. Whoever we bring up needs to step up. And we have full confidence that they will."

Depleted supporting cast, banged-up

body, it doesn't matter, Zach Allen said.

"He's a combination of every single great quarterback in this league," Zach Allen said. "He does what they do best. It's just so rare. He's got the arm, he's got the IQ to make the right decisions with the ball. He's got the size, the running ability and the leadership.

"It's a lethal combination. That's why everyone's calling him Superman."

Tables turned

Broncos QB Bo Nix, who tied the NFL record with two dozen wins in his first two seasons, said he's glad it's Josh Allen who will have to deal with the crowd noise this time around.

"Last year was a tough environment, tough road experience," Nix said. "It's obviously nice to be at home. It's nice for that challenge to be on the other side. Being able to use verbal cadence, being able to talk, being able to communicate is going to go better for us at home."

Boosting Bosa

Bills edge rusher Joey Bosa wasn't the only one disappointed with his lack of production against Jacksonville. Coordinator Bobby Babich weighed in on the 10th-year player finishing with a stat line that featured just one quarterback hit.

"He knows what we're expecting and what he needs to do and what his job is," Babich said. "He knows he needs to play better."

Coleman's contributions

Buffalo's injury-depleted receiver position provides Keon Coleman an opportunity. The second-year receiver's playing time and production have dropped severely since serving a one-game team suspension in Week 11 for being late to a team meeting, his third such infraction.

"I know what I can do. That hasn't changed," said Coleman, one of just three healthy receivers on Buffalo's active roster.

STARS AND STRIPES

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

**Reporting
World, National
and Military News**

Tucker agrees to a \$240M, 4-year contract with Dodgers

Associated Press

Kyle Tucker has agreed to a \$240 million, four-year contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers, according to a person familiar with the deal, bolstering the team's chance for a third consecutive World Series championship.

Tucker can opt out of the deal after years two and three, according to the person who spoke to The Associated Press on Thursday night on condition of anonymity because the agreement was pending a physical.

Tucker's \$60 million average annual value would be the second-highest in baseball history, without factoring in deferred money, behind Shohei Ohtani's \$70 million in his 10-year deal with the Dodgers that runs through 2033.

Tucker becomes the latest accomplished veteran scooped up by the deep-pocketed Dodgers, who will have seven of the majors' 29 biggest contracts by average annual value in 2026. Los Angeles' previous big move of the offseason was signing former New York Mets closer Edwin Díaz, widely considered to

be the best reliever on the free agent market, to bolster their subpar bullpen.

The Dodgers will welcome Tucker's exceptional bat for the heart of their order, but he also fixes one of their few roster deficiencies as an everyday corner outfielder after Michael Conforto and several others largely struggled last season in left field. Tucker seems likely to play right field for Los Angeles, allowing the club to move Teoscar Hernández back to left.

When healthy, Tucker is among the best all-around players in the majors. But he played in just 214 regular-season games over the past two years.

He batted .266 with 22 homers and 73 RBIs with the Chicago Cubs last season. He was acquired in a blockbuster trade with Houston in December 2024 that moved slugging prospect Cam Smith to the Astros.

Tucker was slowed by two injuries in his lone season with the Cubs. He sustained a small fracture in his right hand on an awkward slide against Cincinnati on June 1. He also strained his left

calf against Atlanta on Sept. 2.

After getting off to a fast start with his new team, Tucker hit just .231 with five homers in 41 games after the All-Star break. He served as Chicago's designated hitter in the playoffs as the Cubs eliminated San Diego in the first round before losing to Milwaukee in a five-game NL Division Series.

Tucker, who turns 29 on Saturday, rejected a \$22,025,000 qualifying offer in November, so his new deal means the Cubs will get a compensatory draft pick — likely in the No. 77-80 range.

Tucker was selected by Houston with the No. 5 pick in the 2015 amateur draft. He played in three World Series with the Astros, winning a ring in 2022.

He hit at least 29 homers and drove in at least 92 runs for three straight seasons from 2021-23.

He won a Gold Glove in 2022 and led the AL with 112 RBIs in 2023.

The Tampa, Fla., native is a .273 hitter with 147 homers, 490 RBIs and an .865 OPS in 769 career games.

Seahawks QB confident he'll play despite oblique injury

Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — Seattle Seahawks quarterback Sam Darnold injured his left oblique during Thursday's practice and was listed as questionable for Saturday's NFC divisional playoff game against the San Francisco 49ers, but he said he's confident he'll play.

Darnold said he felt something in his oblique while throwing passes to receivers with no defenders.

"Didn't want to push it," Darnold said. "Wasn't the day to push it. That was it. Just came inside, got some rehab. Feel like I'll be ready to go for Saturday."

The eighth-year quarterback said this is the first time he has dealt with an oblique issue and that he'll be getting treatment leading up to the game. When asked about his chances of sitting out, Darnold said, "Very low percentage. Probably closer to zero."

Darnold passed for 4,048 yards with 25 touchdowns and 14 interceptions in his first season with the Seahawks, earning his second straight Pro Bowl selection. He led Seattle to a 14-3 record and the NFC's top seed.

Backup Drew Lock has appeared in five games this season and attempted just three passes.

Ravens interview former Dolphins coach McDaniel

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — The Baltimore Ravens have interviewed former Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel for their coaching vacancy. McDaniel was fired this month after going 35-33 in four seasons in Miami.

The Ravens fired John Harbaugh after 18 seasons. They have also interviewed Anthony Weaver, Jesse Minter, Jim Schwartz, Brian Flores, Kliff Kingsbury, Matt Nagy, Vance Joseph, Davis Webb, Klint Kuobiak and Kevin Stefanski.

No. 9 Gonzaga beats Washington State

Associated Press

PULLMAN, Wash. — Graham Ike had 23 points and 11 rebounds for his second consecutive double-double as No. 9 Gonzaga beat Washington State 86-65 on Thursday night to extend its winning streak to 11 games.

After a slow start, Ike scored eight points in the final five minutes of the first half and 13 more in the second. He has 11 double-doubles this season, which leads the West Coast Conference and is tied for fourth in the nation.

Even with forward Braden Huff sidelined, Ike and the Bull-

dogs (18-1, 6-0 WCC) dominated the Cougars in the frontcourt. Gonzaga outscored Washington State 52-12 in the paint.

Gonzaga also held a 43-29 rebounding advantage and scored 19 second-chance points. Washington State attempted 16 fewer field goals than Gonzaga.

Simon Hildebrandt, Ace Glass and Jerone Morton led Washington State with 16 points apiece. Hildebrandt and Glass each made four 3-pointers.

Washington State (8-11, 3-3) kept pace with a high-powered Gonzaga offense in the first half,

as Hildebrandt and Glass each hit three consecutive 3s to halt the Bulldogs' momentum. The Cougars opened 8 of 15 from beyond the arc, but a 15-3 Gonzaga run to end the half nullified Washington State's hot shooting.

The Bulldogs scored 27 points off 17 Cougars turnovers.

Gonzaga earned its eighth straight win against Washington State and its 15th under coach Mark Few. The Cougars lead the all-time series 98-55, but have not beaten the Bulldogs at home since 2010.

Banchero, Magic top Grizzlies in Germany

Associated Press

BERLIN — Paolo Banchero had 26 points and 13 rebounds, Franz Wagner had 18 points and nine rebounds in his return to the Magic lineup, and Orlando beat the Memphis Grizzlies 118-111 on Thursday in the NBA's first regular-season game in Germany.

Wagner had missed more than a month with a high ankle sprain but was able to return in his native country and play alongside his brother, Moritz Wagner, for the first time in more than a year. Moritz Wagner tore his left ACL on Dec. 21, 2024, and returned earlier this week. He had seven points in 14 minutes on Thursday.

Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 30 points, Santi Aldama had 18 and Cedric Coward had 17 for the Grizzlies, who have lost seven of nine.

Memphis' Ja Morant was sidelined with a right calf injury, but NBA Commissioner Adam Silver expressed some optimism that the two-time All-Star will play on Sunday when the Grizzlies and Magic meet again in London.

Anthony Black added 21 points for the Magic, who have won three of four.

Pistons 108, Suns 105: Duncan Robinson scored 19 points, Jalen Duren had 16 points and 18 rebounds and Detroit rallied to beat visiting Phoenix.

The Eastern Conference-leading Pistons trailed by 16 points in the first half and were behind after each of the first three quarters. Tobias Harris made a go-ahead jumper over Dillon Brooks midway through the fourth quarter and they held on for their fourth win in five games.

Grayson Allen scored 21 of his 33 points in the first half, leading the Suns with star Devin Booker sidelined by an ankle injury.

Celtics 119, Heat 114: Anfernee Simons scored 18 of his

season-high 39 points in the fourth quarter, Jaylen Brown added 27 and Boston trailed most of the way before rallying to win at Miami.

Sam Hauser added 17 points for the Celtics, who outscored Miami 36-21 in the fourth quarter and won after facing as much as a 19-point deficit. It was their second-biggest comeback win of the season, after coming from 20 down to beat Indiana on Dec. 22.

Simons had the second highest-scoring game for a reserve this season — Utah's Brice Sensabaugh had 43 on Wednesday night in a loss to Chicago — and became the fourth Celtics player in the last 50 years to score at least 39 off the bench. The others: Larry Bird, Todd Day and Payton Pritchard.

Norman Powell scored 26 points for Miami, which got 22 points apiece from Bam Adebayo and Tyler Herro. Andrew Wiggins added 16 for the Heat.

Thunder 111, Rockets 91: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 20 points, Chet Holmgren added 18 and Oklahoma City pulled away in the fourth quarter to beat host Houston.

Cason Wallace added 17 off the bench and the NBA-leading Thunder outscored Houston 34-16 in the final quarter to get a fifth straight victory.

Kevin Durant led Houston with 19 points, but he was 0 for 5 on 3-pointers and 7 for 23 overall on a night the Rockets made just 7 of 24 behind the arc.

The Thunder led by two early in the fourth quarter before using an 11-2 run, with a 3-pointer from Ajay Mitchell and two from Wallace, to make it 90-79 with less than nine minutes left.

Spurs 119, Bucks 101: Victor Wembanyama returned from a first-quarter injury scare to score 22 points and grab 10 rebounds and lead San Antonio to a victory over visiting Milwaukee.

Stephon Castle added 19 points and 10 assists and Julian

Champagnie had 13 points and 11 rebounds for San Antonio. The Spurs led by 39 points early in the fourth quarter.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 21 points as Milwaukee suffered its third straight loss.

Wembanyama startled the sellout crowd at the Frost Bank Center and it had nothing to do with his freshly shaved scalp.

He returned to the court after making knee-to-knee contact with Antetokounmpo's left leg under the Bucks basket with 9:18 remaining in the first quarter. Wembanyama dropped to the court in pain before rising and hobbling unassisted in a half sprint toward the locker room.

Mavericks 144, Jazz 122: Klay Thompson matched his season high with six 3-pointers and moved into fourth place on the league career list, scoring a season-best 26 points to help Dallas beat visiting Utah.

The Mavericks (16-26) played without rookie star Cooper Flagg after he sprained his left ankle Wednesday night in the first half of a home loss to Denver.

Thompson has 2,809 3-pointers, passing Damian Lillard (2,804) on the career list. Stephen Curry is the leader, followed by James Harden and Ray Allen, who had 2,973. Thompson shot 10 for 18 overall and had a season-high six assists.

The teams — both coming off losses Wednesday night — will meet again Saturday in Dallas.

Brice Sensabaugh scored 27 points for Utah as the Jazz dropped to 14-27. Scoring leader Lauri Markkanen sat out for the second consecutive game because of illness.

Trail Blazers 117, Hawks 101: Shaedon Sharpe scored 24 points and Portland overcame high-scoring Deni Avdija's absence to beat visiting Atlanta.

Avdija missed his second straight game because of lower-back soreness. He's averaging

26.1 points, 7.1 rebounds and 6.9 assists.

Portland took an 88-87 lead into the fourth quarter and pulled away. The Trail Blazers had lost two straight after winning five a row.

Onyeka Okongwu led Atlanta with 26 points. The Hawks were 1-3 on a four-game trip. They have lost nine in a row in Portland since Feb. 13, 2017.

Warriors 126, Knicks 113: Jimmy Butler had 32 points and eight rebounds, Stephen Curry warmed up in the second half to finish with 27 points and seven assists, and Golden State beat visiting New York.

Moses Moody scored 21 points with seven 3-pointers for the Warriors, while Brandin Podziemski had 19 points.

Deuce McBride and OG Anunoby each scored 25 points and Mikal Bridges had 21 as New York lost for the seventh time in nine games. The Knicks were without Jalen Brunson because of a sprained right ankle suffered in a 112-101 loss at Sacramento a night earlier.

Hornets 135, Lakers 117: LaMelo Ball scored 27 of his 30 points in the second half while tying his career high with nine 3-pointers, and Charlotte overcame Luka Doncic's 39 points for a victory at Los Angeles.

Ball had 11 assists and six rebounds, and he hit eight 3-pointers in the second half alone, gleefully celebrating each one while quieting the home crowd in his native Los Angeles area.

Brandon Miller also scored 26 points for the Hornets, while Miles Bridges added 25 and rookie Kon Knueppel had 19.

Ten days after the sub-.500 Hornets shocked the NBA-leading Oklahoma City Thunder with a 27-point road victory, Charlotte showed another taste of its considerable promise. The Hornets improved to 2-1 on their five-game West Coast trip by running away from Doncic and LeBron James, who had 29 points and nine rebounds.

Thompson's hat trick powers Sabres

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Tage Thompson scored three times, including the 200th goal of his career, and added two assists in the Buffalo Sabres' 5-3 victory over the Montreal Canadiens on Thursday night.

Josh Doan had a goal and assist, and Alex Tuch also scored as the surging Sabres improved to 15-2 in their past 17 games. Colten Ellis stopped 20 shots.

At 26-16-4, Buffalo's win total and 56 points are the most through 47 games since the team went 30-11-6 over the same span in 2009-10.

Montreal's Cole Caufield and Nick Suzuki had a goal and assist each, and Ivan Demidov also scored. Rookie Jacob Fowler finished with 22 saves.

After trading leads through two periods, Thompson scored the go-ahead goal 5:12 into the third. Peyton Krebs kept the puck inside the Montreal zone, with Doan tracking it down in the right circle. He fed a pass to Thompson who snapped a shot inside the left post.

Thompson capped his ninth career hat trick with an empty-net goal.

Blue Jackets 4, Canucks 1: Kirill Marchenko and Kent Johnson each had a goal and an assist, leading host Columbus over skidding Vancouver for its third straight win.

Charlie Coyle scored for the third time in three games and Zach Werenski added his team-leading 18th goal, the most this season by an NHL defenseman.

Elvis Merzlikins stopped 30 shots to earn his first win since Dec. 4.

Brock Boeser scored and Kevin Lankinen made 32 saves for Vancouver, which has lost nine straight (0-7-2) and 11 of 12 (1-9-2). The Canucks went 0-6 on their road trip and remain in the NHL cellar.

Penguins 6, Flyers 3: Sidney Crosby scored one of host Pittsburgh's three power-play goals

in a victory over Philadelphia.

Crosby also had an assist to become the eighth player in NHL history with 19 or more 50-point seasons. Crosby, who reached 50 for the sixth consecutive season, has points in 29 of his last 34 games against the Flyers.

Justin Brazeau and Bryan Rust also scored power-play goals for Pittsburgh, which has nine with the man advantage in its past 12 games.

Rodrigo Abols, Nick Seeler and Matvei Michkov scored for the Flyers, who lost their fifth straight.

Sharks 3, Capitals 2: Collin Graf and Pavol Regenda each had a goal and an assist and San Jose used a three-goal second period to win at Washington.

Zack Ostapchuk also scored, tying the game with the first of the Sharks' three goals in a span of 2:46. Alex Nedeljkovic made 21 saves for San Jose, which has won four of five.

Dylan Strome and Ryan Leonard scored for the Capitals, Alex Ovechkin had an assist and Logan Thompson made 23 saves.

Strome put the Capitals up 1-0 at 10:58 of the second period, but the Sharks took over from there.

Bruins 4, Kraken 2: Marat Khusnutdinov and Viktor Arvidsson scored in the first 3:45 of the game, and Boston held on to beat visiting Seattle after raising Zdeno Chara's No. 33 to the rafters.

Mark Kastelic added a short-handed goal in the second period, and Jeremy Swayman stopped 26 shots for Boston, which swept a five-game homestand for the first time since 2019 and won for the seventh time in eight games. David Pastrnak scored an empty-netter with 15 seconds left after the Kraken picked up back-to-back penalties, then pulled the goalie to play five-on-four.

Chandler Stephenson and Eeli Tolvanen scored, and Joey

Daccord made 20 saves for the Kraken, who have lost four of their past five games.

The Bruins began the night by honoring Chara, the Hall of Fame defenseman who was the captain of their 2011 Stanley Cup championship team. Hall of Famers Bobby Orr and current Bruins president Cam Neely were among those who took part in the ceremony, which ended with Chara's children raising his number to the TD Garden rafters.

Jets 6, Wild 2: Mark Scheifele had a goal and three assists, Jonathan Toews scored for the fourth consecutive game and Winnipeg won at Minnesota.

Toews also had an assist, Gabriel Vilardi and Josh Morrissey each had a goal and an assist, and Tanner Pearson and Logan Stanley scored as Winnipeg tied its season high for goals.

Connor Hellebuyck made 32 saves as the Jets won their fourth straight following an 11-game losing streak (0-7-4). Winnipeg is 9-1-1 in its past 11 games against the Wild, including six straight wins in Minnesota.

Danila Yurov and Marcus Johansson scored for the Wild, who are 1-3-2 in their past six games. Jesper Wallstedt made 14 saves in two periods; Filip Gustavsson had eight in the third.

Flames 3, Blackhawks 1: Mikael Backlund and Yegor Sharrangovich each had a goal and an assist as Calgary won at Chicago.

Devin Cooley made 22 saves and Matt Coronato added an empty-net goal for the Flames, who won for only the second time in seven games. They completed a 2-3 trip, improving to 8-16-2 on the road this season.

Nick Foligno scored early and Spencer Knight stopped 20 shots for the Blackhawks, out-scored 7-2 while dropping the first two games of a four-game homestand. They have lost

three of four following a four-game win streak.

Mammoth 2, Stars 1: John Marino scored at 4:03 of the third period to break a tie and give Utah a victory over visiting Dallas.

Marino also assisted on Nick Schmaltz's 17th goal of the season and Karel Vejmelka made 26 stops as the Mammoth won for the fifth time in six games.

Mikko Rantanen scored and Jake Oettinger had 25 saves for Dallas, which has lost nine of its last 11 games.

Islanders 1, Oilers 0: Ilya Sorokin made 35 saves for his NHL-leading fifth shutout of the season, Anthony Duclair scored the game's only goal in the third period on the power play and visiting New York edged Edmonton.

Duclair broke the deadlock with 6:18 remaining in the third period after Calum Ritchie sent a backhand pass to him. Matthew Barzal also assisted on the goal, giving him 500 career points in his 576th game over 10 NHL seasons.

Leon Draisaitl — whose tripping penalty put the Islanders on the power play for their goal — nearly tied it with just over 30 seconds left, but his shot in close hit off the far post to the right of Sorokin.

Golden Knights 6, Maple Leafs 5 (OT): Jack Eichel scored at 2:44 of overtime, Mitch Marner had two assists against his former team and Adin Hill made 23 saves in his return as Vegas rallied to defeat visiting Toronto for its sixth straight victory.

Tomas Hertl forced overtime on a 6-on-5 with a goal with 7 seconds left off a pass from Eichel, who had four points.

Pavel Dorofeyev scored two power-play goals for Vegas and appeared to have a hat trick with 4:10 left to tie it, but with the ice littered with hats, the Maple Leafs successfully challenged the play for offside.