

Ukraine, Russia, US discuss concessions

Negotiators meeting in Abu Dhabi focus on difficult issue of territory

Associated Press

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the future of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region will be a key focus as negotiators from Ukraine, Russia and the United States meet in Abu Dhabi on Friday for talks to end Russia's invasion.

The three-way talks come hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the settlement in Ukraine with President Donald Trump's envoys during marathon overnight talks. The Kremlin insisted that to reach a peace deal, Kyiv must withdraw its troops from the areas in the east that Russia illegally annexed but never fully captured.

Zelenskyy, meanwhile, reiterated his openness to establishing a free trade zone under Ukraine's control in the country's east. He said he discussed the proposal with Trump in Davos, Switzerland, on Thursday, and told reporters: "I think it will be positive for our busi-

ness."

Friday will be the first known time that officials from the Trump administration simultaneously meet with negotiators from both Ukraine and Russia. While it's unclear how the talks will unfold and many obstacles to peace remain, some see it as a sign that the parties are making headway in closing a deal.

Zelenskyy told reporters after meeting Thursday with Trump in Davos, Switzerland, that while the future status of land in eastern Ukraine currently occupied by Russia remains unresolved, the peace proposals are "nearly ready."

The Kremlin offered little detail beyond calling the meeting a "working group on security issues."

"Today's meeting will be in the format of Ukraine, Russia and the United States, and afterward the Europeans will certainly receive feedback from us," Zelenskyy told journalists in a WhatsApp audio message.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the Russian delegation, headed by Adm. Kostyukov, is comprised of military officials. He said the talks could extend into Saturday "if necessary."

Separately, Putin's envoy Kirill Dmitriev will hold talks with Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff on economic issues, he confirmed.

Kremlin foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov, who participated in Putin's meeting with Trump's envoys Witkoff and Jared Kushner, said "it was reaffirmed that reaching a long-term settlement can't be expected without solving the territorial issue."

Those talks, which began just before midnight in Moscow, lasted nearly four hours past 3 a.m. Friday. They came hours after Zelenskyy sharply criticized his European allies Thursday for what he cast as their slow and fragmented response that he said has left Ukraine at the mercy of Putin amid an on-

going U.S. push for a peace settlement.

Ushakov noted that Trump's envoys informed Putin about Trump's meeting with Zelenskyy, as well as earlier discussions they had with Ukrainian and European officials. He described the talks with the U.S. as "frank, constructive" and "fruitful."

Witkoff and Kushner were joined by Josh Gruenbaum, the head of the Federal Acquisition Service who serves as a senior adviser on Trump's Board of Peace that Russia has been invited to join.

While Russia is considering the invitation, Putin reaffirmed his offer to send \$1 billion to the board from Russian assets frozen in the U.S. to help fund rebuilding Gaza.

Asked about Putin's proposal to use Russia's frozen assets for the contribution to the Board of Peace, Trump said he thought it was fine. "If he's using his money, that's great," he said

Iran toll rises as Trump says US 'armada' approaching

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — The toll in Iran's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests has reached at least 5,002 people killed, activists said Friday, warning many more were feared dead as the most comprehensive internet blackout in the country's history crossed the two-week mark.

Meanwhile, tensions rose between the United States and Iran as a U.S. carrier group moved closer to the Middle

East. President Donald Trump likened the carrier group to an "armada" in comments to journalists late Thursday.

Analysts say a military buildup could give Trump the option to carry out strikes, though so far he's avoided that despite repeated warnings to Tehran.

"While President Trump now appears to have backtracked, likely under pressure from regional leaders and cognizant that airstrikes alone would be insufficient to implode the regi-

me, military assets continue to be moved into the region, indicating kinetic action may still happen," a New York-based think tank called the Soufan Center said in an analysis Friday.

The latest death toll was given by the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, which reported that 4,716 were demonstrators, 203 were government-affiliated, 43 were children and 40 were civilians not taking part in the protests. It

added that more than 26,800 people had been detained in a widening arrest campaign by authorities.

The challenge in getting information out of Iran persists because authorities cut access to the internet on Jan. 8.

Meanwhile, Iran's top prosecutor denied a claim by Trump that his intervention so far had halted the execution of 800 prisoners detained in the demonstrations, calling his comments "completely false."

House OKs final spending bills as Dems denounce ICE funding

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House passed this year's final batch of spending bills on Thursday as lawmakers, still smarting from last fall's record 43-day shutdown, worked to avoid another funding lapse for a broad swath of the federal government.

The four bills total about \$1.2 trillion in spending and now move to the Senate, with final passage needed next week before a Jan. 30 deadline to avoid a partial government shutdown.

Three of the bills had broad, bipartisan support. They funded Defense and various other departments, including Education, Transportation and Health and Human Services. A fourth bill funding the Department of Homeland Security was hotly disputed as Democrats voiced concerns that it failed to restrain President Donald

Trump's mass deportation efforts.

Republicans were able to overcome the Democratic objections and muscle the Homeland Security bill to passage in a 220-207 vote. The broader package, which funds a 3.8% pay raise for the military, passed in a 341-88 vote.

Before the votes, House Democratic leaders announced their opposition to the Homeland Security bill as the party's rank-and-file demanded a more forceful stand in response to the Republican president's immigration crackdown.

Trump's efforts have recently centered in the Minneapolis area, where more than 2,000 officers are stationed and where a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer fatally shot Renee Good, a mother of three.

In a joint statement, the Dem-

ocratic leaders said Trump promised the American people that his deportation policy would focus on violent felons in the country illegally, but instead, ICE has targeted American citizens and law-abiding immigrant families.

"Taxpayer dollars are being misused to brutalize U.S. citizens, including the tragic killing of Renee Nicole Good. This extremism must end," said the statement from Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries, Democratic Whip Katherine Clark and Democratic Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar.

However, there was concern that a failure to fund Homeland Security would hurt disaster assistance programs and agencies such as the Transportation Security Administration, while ICE and Customs and Border Protection would simply carry on.

House GOP defeats Venezuela resolution

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House rejected a Democratic-backed resolution Thursday that would have prevented President Donald Trump from sending U.S. forces to Venezuela after a tied vote on the legislation fell just short of the majority needed for passage.

The tied vote was the latest sign of Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson's tenuous hold on the majority, as well as some of the growing pushback in the GOP-controlled Congress to Trump's aggressions in the Western Hemisphere. A Senate vote on a similar resolution was also tied last week until Vice President JD Vance broke the deadlock.

To defeat the resolution, Republican leaders had to hold the vote open for more than 20 minutes while Republican Rep. Wesley Hunt, who had been out of Washington all week campaigning for a Senate seat in Texas, rushed back to Capitol Hill to cast the decisive vote.

On the House floor, Democrats responded with shouts that Republican leaders were violating the chamber's procedural rules. Two Republicans — Reps. Don Bacon of Nebraska and Thomas Massie of Kentucky — voted with all Democrats for the legislation.

The war powers resolution would have directed Trump to remove U.S. troops from Venezuela. The Trump administration told senators last week that there are no U.S. troops on the ground in the South American nation and committed to getting congressional approval before launching major military operations there.

Administration tells agencies to gather data on funds going to Dem-led states

Associated Press

President Donald Trump's budget office this week ordered most government agencies to compile data on the federal money that is sent to 14 mostly Democratic-controlled states and the District of Columbia in what it describes as a tool to "reduce the improper and fraudulent use of those funds."

The order comes a week after Trump said he intended to cut off federal funding that goes to states that are home to "sanctuary cities" that resist his immigration policies. He said that would start Feb. 1 but hasn't unveiled further details.

A memo to federal departments and agencies did not explain why those states were targeted. All but one — Virginia — were either included last year on the administration's list of sanctuary places or were home to at least one jurisdiction that was. In Virginia, one of Democratic Gov. Abigail Spanberger's first acts after taking office Saturday was to rescind a directive by Republican former Gov. Glenn Youngkin that required law enforcement cooperation with immigration officials.

There is no strict definition for sanctuary policies or sanctuary cities, but the terms gener-

ally describe limited cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The memo stops far short of suspending money.

"This is a data-gathering exercise only," it said. "It does not involve withholding funds."

Trump said at a White House news conference Tuesday — the same day the memo went to federal departments — that he still intended to cut off funding.

"We're not going to pay them anymore. They are sanctuary for criminals," he said. "They can sue us and maybe they'll win, but we're not giving money to sanctuary cities anymore."

Minnesota preps for huge anti-ICE protest

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A vast network of labor unions, progressive organizations and clergy urged Minnesotans to stay away from work, school and stores Friday to protest immigration enforcement operations, even as subzero temperatures beset the state.

Minneapolis and St. Paul have seen daily protests since Renee Good was fatally shot by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer on Jan. 7. Federal law enforcement officers have surged in the Twin Cities for weeks and have repeatedly squared off with community members and activists who track their movements.

Organizers said Friday morning that more than 700 businesses across the state have closed for the day in solidar-

darity with the protest -- from a bookstore in tiny Grand Marais near the Canadian border to the landmark Guthrie Theater in downtown Minneapolis.

"We're achieving something historic," said Kate Havelin of Indivisible Twin Cities, one of the more than 100 groups that is mobilizing. The demonstration coincides with a blast of cold air hitting the Upper Midwest and ahead of a severe winter storm that is expected to affect millions.

On Friday, Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino sought to shift the narrative from that of a 5-year-old boy detained by ICE officers in Minneapolis by attacking the news media for, in his view, insufficient coverage of children who have lost parents to violence by people in the country

illegally. He talked about a mother of five who was killed in August 2023.

On Thursday, a prominent civil rights attorney and at least two other people were arrested for their involvement in an anti-immigration enforcement protest that disrupted a Sunday service at a church in St. Paul. They remained in federal custody Friday morning.

Organizers hope Friday's mobilization will be the largest coordinated protest action to date, with a march in downtown Minneapolis planned for Friday afternoon. Earlier Friday, the temperature in Minneapolis was minus 21 with a wind chill of minus 40.

Havelin compared the presence of immigration officers in Minnesota to the winter weather warnings.

"Minnesotans understand that when we're in a snow emergency ... we all have to respond and it makes us do things differently," she said. "And what's happening with ICE in our community, in our state, means that we can't respond as business as usual."

Somali businesses especially have lost sales during the enforcement surge as workers and customers, fearing detention, stay at home.

Many schools were planning to close Friday, but cited different reasons. The University of Minnesota and the St. Paul public school district said there would be no in-person classes because of the extreme cold. Minneapolis Public Schools were scheduled to be closed "for a teacher record keeping day."

Federal agents detain 5-year-old boy with father

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A 5-year-old boy arriving home from preschool in Minnesota was taken by federal agents along with his father to a detention facility in Texas, school officials and the family's lawyer said, making him the fourth student from his Minneapolis suburb to be detained by immigration officers in recent weeks.

Federal agents took Liam Conejo Ramos from a running car in the family's driveway Tuesday, Columbia Heights Public Schools Superintendent Zena Stenvik told reporters Wednesday. The officers told him to knock on the door to his home to see if other people were inside, "essentially using a 5-year-old as bait," she said.

The father told the child's mother, who was inside the home and has not been named, not to open the door, Stenvik told reporters Thursday.

School officials said the agents wouldn't leave Liam with another adult who lives at the home or an official from the school district. But on Thursday, Department of Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said in an online post that the father asked for the child to stay with him and that they are together at an immigration lockup in Dilley, Texas.

The family, who came to the U.S. in 2024, has an active asylum case and had not been ordered to leave the country, Stenvik said.

McLaughlin said in a statement Wednesday that "ICE did NOT target a child." She said Immigration and Customs Enforcement was arresting the child's father, Adrian Alexander Conejo Arias, who McLaughlin said is from Ecuador and in the U.S. illegally. He fled on foot, "abandoning his child," she said.

Smith defends his Trump investigations at hearing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith defended his investigations of President Donald Trump at a congressional hearing Thursday in which he insisted that he had acted without regard to politics and had no second thoughts about the criminal charges he brought.

"No one should be above the law in our country, and the law required that he be held to account. So that is what I did," Smith said of Trump.

Smith testified behind closed doors last month but returned to the House Judiciary Committee for a public hearing that provided the prosecutor with a forum to address the breadth of evidence he collected during investigations that shadowed Trump during the 2024 presidential campaign and resulted in indictments.

The hourslong hearing imme-

dately split along partisan lines as Republican lawmakers sought to undermine the former Justice Department official while Democrats tried to elicit damaging testimony about Trump's conduct and accused their GOP counterparts of attempting to rewrite history.

Smith said he stood behind his decisions to bring charges against Trump in separate cases that accused him of conspiring to overturn the 2020 election after he lost to Democrat Joe Biden and hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla.

"Our investigation developed proof beyond a reasonable doubt that President Trump engaged in criminal activity," Smith said. "If asked whether to prosecute a former president based on the same facts today, I would do so regardless of whether that president was a Republican or a Democrat."

TikTok finalizes deal to form US entity

Associated Press

TikTok has finalized a deal to create a new American entity, avoiding the looming threat of a ban in the United States that has been in discussion for years on the platform now used by more than 200 million Americans.

The social video platform company signed agreements with major investors including Oracle, Silver Lake and the Emirati investment firm MGX to form the new TikTok U.S. joint venture. The new version will operate under “defined safeguards that protect national security through comprehensive data protections, algorithm security, content moderation and software assurances for U.S. users,” the company said in a statement Thursday. American TikTok users can continue using the same app.

President Donald Trump praised the deal in a Truth So-

cial post, thanking Chinese leader Xi Jinping specifically “for working with us and, ultimately, approving the Deal.” Trump added that he hopes “that long into the future I will be remembered by those who use and love TikTok.”

The Chinese government has not yet publicly commented on TikTok’s announcement. Earlier on Thursday and ahead of the statement, Liu Pengyu, spokesperson of the Chinese embassy in Washington, said “China’s position on TikTok has been consistent and clear.”

Adam Presser, who previously worked as TikTok’s head of operations and trust and safety, will lead the new venture as its CEO. He will work alongside a seven-member, majority-American board of directors that includes TikTok’s CEO Shou Chew.

The deal ends years of uncer-

tainty about the fate of the popular video-sharing platform in the United States. After wide bipartisan majorities in Congress passed — and President Joe Biden signed — a law that would ban TikTok in the U.S. if it did not find a new owner in the place of China’s ByteDance, the platform was set to go dark on the law’s January 2025 deadline. For a several hours, it did. But on his first day in office, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to keep it running while his administration sought an agreement for the sale of the company.

Apart from an emphasis on data protection, with U.S. user data being stored locally in a system run by Oracle, the joint venture will also focus on TikTok’s algorithm. The content recommendation formula, which feeds users specific videos tailored to their preferences

and interests, will be retrained, tested and updated on U.S. user data, the company said in its announcement.

The algorithm has been a central issue in the security debate over TikTok. China previously maintained the algorithm must remain under Chinese control by law. But the U.S. regulation passed with bipartisan support said any divestment of TikTok must mean the platform cuts ties — specifically the algorithm — with ByteDance. Under the terms of this deal, ByteDance would license the algorithm to the U.S. entity for retraining.

The law prohibits “any cooperation with respect to the operation of a content recommendation algorithm” between ByteDance and a new potential American ownership group, so it is unclear how ByteDance’s continued involvement in this arrangement will play out.

Dangerous winter storm barrels toward eastern US

Associated Press

DALLAS — Texas and Oklahoma braced for heavy snow and ice that could make roadways treacherous Friday in what forecasters predict will be some of the initial effects of a huge, dayslong winter storm threatening catastrophic damage, extensive power outages and bitterly cold weather to the eastern two-thirds of the U.S.

In the Houston area, a utility company had 3,300 employees ready to work the winter storm, while Oklahoma’s Department of Transportation pretreated highways and interstates with salt brine. Freezing rain and sleet were also expected in New Mexico as early as Friday.

The massive storm system is expected to bring a crippling ice storm from Texas through parts of the South, potentially

around a foot of snow from Oklahoma through Washington, D.C., New York and Boston, and then a final punch of bitterly cold air that could drop wind chills to minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit in parts of Minnesota and North Dakota.

Forecasters are warning the damage, especially in areas pounded by ice, could rival a hurricane. About 160 million people were under winter storm or cold weather watches or warnings — and in many places both.

Cold air streaming down from Canada caused Chicago Public Schools and Des Moines Public Schools in Iowa to cancel classes Friday. Wind chills predicted to be as low as minus 35 degrees could cause frostbite within 10 minutes, making it too dangerous to walk to school or wait for the bus.

Japan sets early election as Takaichi sees easy gains

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi dissolved the lower house of parliament on Friday, paving the way for an early election on Feb. 8.

The move is an attempt to capitalize on her popularity to help the governing party regain ground after major losses in recent years, but it will delay parliamentary approval for a budget that aims at boosting a struggling economy and addressing soaring prices.

Takaichi, elected in October as Japan’s first female leader, has been in office only three months, but she has seen strong approval ratings of about 70%.

Takaichi’s Liberal Democratic Party could still face some challenges as it reels from a series of scandals about corruption and the party’s past ties

to the Unification Church. But it’s not clear if the new opposition Centrist Reform Alliance can attract moderate voters, while opposition parties are splintered.

Takaichi is also seeing rising animosity with China, since making remarks on Taiwan. And President Donald Trump wants her to spend more on weapons, as Washington and Beijing pursue military superiority in the region.

The dissolution of the 465-member lower House of Representatives paves the way for a 12-day campaign that officially starts Tuesday.

Takaichi’s plan for an early election aims to capitalize on her popularity to win a governing majority in the lower House, the more powerful of Japan’s two-chamber parliament called the National Diet.

Bruins survive Knights' 3-goal flurry

Associated Press

BOSTON — Charlie McAvoy started a three-goal flurry in a 54-second span in the first period, David Pastrnak had a goal and two assists and the Boston Bruins held off the Vegas Golden Knights 4-3 on Thursday night to win for the ninth time in 11 games.

Elias Lindholm and Tanner Jeannot also scored for the Bruins, who made the Golden Knights pay after a double minor for high-sticking was assessed to forward Tomas Hertl at the nine-minute mark of the opening period. Appearing in his second straight game, Joonas Korpisalo made 29 saves.

Vegas cut a 4-0 deficit in half during the opening minutes in the third period behind goals from Jack Eichel and Tomas Hertl. The Golden Knights made it three straight when Pavel Dorofeyev scored with 2:35 left with goalie Akira Schmid off for an extra skater.

Schmid remained in net after a shaky sequence that began when McAvoy blasted one from just inside the blue line for his fourth goal of the season. The goal came 10 seconds into the four-minute power play.

Boston kept charging and made it two power-play goals in 30 seconds when Lindholm scored between the circles for his ninth goal of the season. Pastrnak assisted on both power-play goals.

Jeannot capped the spree off a feed from Sean Kuraly with 9:54 left.

Sabres 4, Canadiens 2: Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 32 saves and Jason Zucker, Beck Malenstyn and Zach Benson gave Buffalo an early lead as the Sabres won at Montreal for their 17th victory in 21 games.

Peyton Krebs added an empty-netter in the third. The Sabres improved to 28-17-5, beating Montreal for the second time in eight days.

Cole Caufield scored for the fourth straight game for Montreal, and Nick Suzuki also connected. The Canadiens dropped to 28-16-7. They had won two in a row.

Samuel Montembeault stopped 13 shots in his first regulation loss since being called up from a conditioning assignment with Laval of the AHL on Dec. 27.

Blackhawks 4, Hurricanes 3 (SO): Oliver Moore scored in the shootout on his 21st birthday and Spencer Knight stopped five of six shots by Carolina to give visiting Chicago a shootout victory.

Connor Murphy, Ilya Mikheyev and Nick Lardis scored in regulation for the Blackhawks. Knight, who shut out Winnipeg on Monday night, made 28 saves in regulation and overtime for his second straight win.

Joel Nystrom, Jordan Staal and Jackson Blake scored for the Hurricanes, whose five-game home winning streak ended. Frederik Andersen stopped 18 shots and four more in the shootout.

The win capped an eventful night for Moore, who celebrated a milestone birthday. He was on the wrong side of a fight with Alexander Nikishin in the second period and then nearly won the game in overtime but was robbed by Andersen.

Blue Jackets 1, Stars 0: Jet Greaves had 28 saves for his third career shutout, Zach Werenski scored his 19th goal of the season, and Columbus beat visiting Dallas.

Werenski scored at 8:48 of the first period with a wrist shot from the right circle that went through traffic and inside the far post with assists from Damon Severson and Isaac Lundstrom, who had missed 12 games with a lower-body injury suffered in practice on Dec. 27.

Blue Jackets forward Charlie Coyle played in his 1,000th career game, the fifth player to reach the mark in a Columbus uniform. He scored into an empty net late in the game but the goal was disallowed for offside.

Predators 5, Senators 3: Steven Stamkos broke a tie with 2:13 left with his third goal of the game and host Nashville overcame a three-goal deficit to beat Ottawa.

After Stamkos tied it at 3 with 9:53 left with his second power-play goal of the game, Ryan O'Reilly beat the Senators to the puck behind the goal line and popped it out front to Stamkos, who batted it out of the air past goalie James Reimer.

O'Reilly set up the tying goal, too, firing a cross-crease feed to Stamkos with the man

advantage. Nashville got the power play when Tim Stutzle cross-checked Stamkos.

Predators captain Roman Josi, playing his 1,000th NHL game, also assisted on the tying goal. The defenseman is the 84th player in NHL history to play his first 1,000 regular-season games with one franchise.

Panthers 2, Jets 1 (SO): Anton Lundell and Sam Reinhart beat Connor Hellebuyck in a shootout to help give Florida a victory at Winnipeg.

Winnipeg shooters Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele came up empty against Daniil Tarasov in the tiebreaker.

Sam Bennett scored in regulation, and Tarasov stopped 17 shots for two-time defending champion Florida. Matthew Tkachuk had an assist for his first point of the season in his second game back from adductor muscle surgery.

Penguins 6, Oilers 2: Anthony Mantha scored twice, Sidney Crosby made it three in an early 37-second span and visiting Pittsburgh beat Edmonton.

The 37-second spree was the fastest three goals in Penguins history and the fastest three allowed by the Oilers.

The Penguins scored on three of their first four shots. Just 2:20 in, Justin Brazeau made a nifty pass through a defender's legs to Mantha, who deflected it in. Twenty-two seconds later, Mantha scored on a breakaway. Crosby struck 15 seconds after that, deflecting a pass from the slot into the net.

Wild 4, Red Wings 3 (OT): Kirill Kaprizov scored his second goal of the game 45 seconds into overtime to give Minnesota a victory over visiting Detroit.

Kaprizov came down the middle and beat goalie Cam Talbot with a wrist shot from between the circles.

Mats Zuccarello also scored twice, and Filip Gustavsson made 31 saves.

Quinn Hughes had three assists, giving him 43 on the season, tied for the most among NHL defensemen. Hughes has seven assists in his last four games and has had at least three assists in a game four times since joining the Wild in a trade with Vancouver on December 12.

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Leonard, Clippers hold off Doncic, Lakers

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Kawhi Leonard scored 24 points — his career-high 23rd consecutive game with at least 20 — and the Los Angeles Clippers survived a tight fourth quarter to beat Luka Doncic and the Los Angeles Lakers 112-104 on Thursday night.

The Clippers have won seven of eight and 14 of 17 as they continue their upward climb from the depths of the Western Conference. Leonard, who missed a stretch when his team had nearly bottomed out in the standings, has a left knee contusion but he didn't sit for long in the fourth.

LeBron James scored 4 points and Doncic hit a 3-pointer to cap a 19-7 run as the Lakers closed the gap to two.

James Harden answered Doncic's 3 with one of his own as the Clippers ran off 10 in a row to stay in front, 103-91.

But the Lakers weren't done yet. James hit a jumper and completed a three-point play in an 11-2 run that cut the lead to three.

Ivica Zubac's reverse dunk and John Collins' 3-pointer extended the Clippers' lead to eight points and they closed it out on Harden's pair of free throws.

Luka Doncic had 32 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists and James added 23 points. The Lakers fell to 5-6 in their past 11.

76ers 128, Rockets 122 (OT): Tyrese Maxey scored six of his 36 points in overtime, Joel Embiid had 32 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists as Philadelphia defeated visiting Houston.

Kelly Oubre Jr. added 26 points for the 76ers, who evened their home record at 12-12. Paul George returned to the lineup for Philadelphia after missing two straight games due to left knee injury management and had 10 points.

Kevin Durant scored 36 points for the Rockets, who had won three in a row. Amen Thompson added 17 for Houston.

The 76ers scored the first five points of the extra session, on George's 3-pointer and VJ Edgecombe's follow from close range after he grabbed an offensive rebound, to take control.

Hornets 124, Magic 97: LaMelo Ball returned to Charlotte's starting lineup and had 16 points, seven assists and six rebounds in a win over host Orlando.

Ball, who a night earlier had one of the worst shooting performances of his career when he came off the bench as part of a plan to manage his minutes, went 6 for 12 from the field and 4 for 8 from 3-point distance against Orlando. In a loss to Cleveland on Wednesday, the No. 3 pick in the 2020 draft

finished with two points on 1-of-15 shooting, including 0 of 10 from 3-point range.

Brandon Miller scored 20 points to lead Charlotte's balanced effort. Collin Sexton came off the bench and scored 12 of his 19 points in the first half, Kon Knueppel and Tidjane Salaunadded added 13 apiece, and Miles Bridges, Moussa Diabate and Ryan Kalkbrenner each scored 10.

Paolo Banchero scored 23 points, and Desmond Bane added 21 for the Magic. Moritz Wagner scored 14, Noah Penda added 13 and Jeff Howard 10.

Nuggets 107, Wizards 97: Peyton Watson scored a career-high 35 points to lead short-handed Denver to a victory at Washington.

Jamal Murray added 24 points for the Nuggets, who avoided their first three-game losing streak of the season. Jonas Valanciunas had 16 points in his return after missing 11 games with a strained calf. Aaron Gordon also scored 16 points.

Nikola Jokic missed his 13th consecutive game for Denver with a hyperextended left knee.

Kyshawn George scored 20 points and grabbed 12 rebounds for Washington, which lost its eighth in a row.

Mavericks 123, Warriors 115: Naji Marshall tied his season highs with 30 points and nine assists, and Dallas beat visiting Golden State, winning a season-best fourth consecutive game while dropping the Warriors to 0-2 since Jimmy Butler's season-ending knee injury.

Stephen Curry scored 38 points and was 8 of 15 from 3-point range on the night the Warriors' superstar became the first in NBA history to attempt 10,000 shots from beyond the arc. He's now 4,222 of 10,007 from deep.

Cooper Flagg had 21 points and a career-high 11 rebounds in 30 minutes when Dallas' rookie No. 1 pick was supposed to be limited to 20-25 minutes in his second game back since missing two with a sprained left ankle.

The Warriors were up one midway through the fourth quarter when Draymond Green was called for a flagrant foul that had him arguing with the officials. Less than a minute later, another foul by Green was reviewed but not called flagrant.

Green argued anyway as he went to the bench after the second foul, and the Mavs continued on an 11-0 run that started after the flagrant foul. Green fouled out with 3:50 remaining.

Bulls 120, Timberwolves 115: Coby White scored 22 points, Josh Giddey added

21 off the bench, and Jalen Smith converted two clutch free throws late to lift Chicago to a win over host Minnesota.

Chicago overcame a 14-point, first-half deficit and also withstood a 13-0 run from Minnesota in the fourth quarter. White hit a clutch 3-pointer from the corner to keep it a one-point game with 1:06 to play.

After White's corner 3-pointer, Minnesota committed a pair of costly turnovers in the final minute. Jaden McDaniels lost the ball out of bounds for Minnesota, and Chicago's Tre Jones made a layup at the other end with 31.1 seconds to play. Smith then converted at the line with 11 seconds remaining, and Minnesota failed to hit a shot in its next possession.

Julius Randle, who was on the injury report with left foot soreness, had a team-high 30 points for Minnesota, but also committed a late turnover. Anthony Edwards and Naz Reid each added 20 points, and McDaniels scored 16 in the loss.

Spurs 126, Jazz 109: De'Aaron Fox scored 31 points, Victor Wembanyama had 26 points and 13 rebounds and San Antonio won at Utah.

Fox shot 10 of 13 from the field with six 3-pointers. Wembanyama — along with five blocks — shot 9 of 14 with four 3s one game after a 5-of-21 performance in a loss to Houston.

Keldon Johnson added 21 points and Stephon Castle had 16 points, eight assists and seven rebounds as the Spurs won their fourth game in their last five.

Utah's Jusuf Nurkic had 17 points, 14 assists and 11 rebounds for his second triple-double in as many games, and third of his career. The Jazz went more than 15 seasons (2008-24) without a single triple-double until the consecutive performances by Nurkic.

The center became the first Jazz player to have back-to-back triple doubles since Pete Maravich in January 1975.

Trail Blazers 127, Heat 110: Shaedon Sharpe scored 27 points and had seven rebounds and four steals, and Portland extended its winning streak to four games with a victory over visiting Miami.

Deni Avdija added 20 points before leaving with a back injury. Caleb Love also had 20 points, Toumani Camara had 16 and Jrue Holiday 15 for the Trail Blazers, who led by as many as 21 and won for the 11th time in 14 games. Their 9-2 mark in January is the best in the NBA.

Bam Adebayo had 32 points and 10 rebounds for the Heat. Norman Powell added 18 points and Simone Fontecchio scored 17.

Broncos put title hopes on Stidham

Nix's backup at QB steps in to face former team as Denver hosts New England in AFC Championship

Associated Press

DENVER — If any opponent is familiar with Denver Broncos fill-in quarterback Jarrett Stidham, it's the New England Patriots, who drafted him in 2019 to serve as Tom Brady's backup.

When Josh McDaniels took the Las Vegas Raiders' head coaching job, he traded for Stidham, who backed up Derek Carr for two years before signing with Denver, where he served as Russell Wilson's No. 2, then as Bo Nix's right-hand man.

After McDaniels returned to New England for his third stint as offensive coordinator last off-season, the Patriots were interested in a reunion with Stidham, but he chose to stay in Denver.

With Nix recovering from surgery after breaking his right ankle on Denver's game-winning drive in overtime against Buffalo last weekend, Stidham steps in Sunday when the Broncos (15-3) host Drake Maye and the Patriots (16-3) in the AFC championship game.

Although Nix was integral to Denver's success this season — he engineered six comebacks in the fourth quarter or overtime and led Denver to an NFL-best 12-2 record in one-score games — his coaches and teammates insist they're equally confident

Stidham can lead them to the Super Bowl.

"We're lucky to have him," right tackle Mike McGlinchey said, "because not everybody has a quarterback waiting in the wings as talented as Jarrett."

Although the Patriots brass knows Stidham well, defensive tackle Milton Williams didn't mince his words when asked what he knew about the sixth-year QB who hasn't thrown a pass in two years.

"Nothing. I ain't going to lie," he said. "Nothing. We're going to watch the tape on him and figure out what he likes to do. But they didn't like him over Bo, so."

Of course, no team likes their backup QB more than their starter, but Broncos coach Sean Payton insists Stidham could start for any number of other NFL teams.

Stidham may not have quite the résumé of Nix, but he's no slouch, said Patriots cornerback Christian Gonzalez.

"He's in the NFL for a reason," Gonzalez said. "They believe in him, they brought him up, so we've got to prepare and be ready for him. They're in this game for a reason, too. They've got a lot of weapons on the offensive side."

And they might get running back J.K. Dobbins back from

foot surgery. The Broncos' backfield has averaged one fewer yard per carry and 29 fewer yards per game since Dobbins got hurt Nov. 6. His return could take a big load off Stidham's shoulders.

Maye had an MVP-caliber season in his second year in the league and first one under McDaniels' tutelage. But he's had a puzzling postseason, getting sacked 10 times, throwing two interceptions, fumbling six times and losing half of them but still beating the Chargers and Texans handily.

"Really impressive," Payton said. "He's extremely fast and those come from obviously pocket scrambles, but he can run. We had that challenge a week ago. It seems like every third week you have that challenge of someone that you have to make sure your pocket rushes are on point."

Denver's defense led the league in sacks with 68 but they had a dearth of takeaways until collecting five against the Bills.

That defense and a good ground game could make a world of difference for Stidham as he faces his former team in the biggest game of a career that features just four starts and one victory, on Dec. 31, 2023, against the Chargers.

"I'm very appreciative of New England for giving me a shot in this league, drafting me," said Stidham, whose only play-callers in the NFL have been McDaniels and Payton.

But it wasn't a hard choice last spring when he re-signed with Denver for \$12 million over two years. He said he believes in Payton, QBs coach Davis Webb and offensive coordinator Joe Lombardi, and that he really enjoys working with Nix.

"I felt like over the last two years that I was here that I got a lot better," said Stidham, who gets the chance to show it this weekend.

Biggest home underdog

The Broncos without Nix are the biggest home underdog ever in a conference championship game. Oddsmakers installed the Patriots, who went 8-0 on the road, as five-point favorites.

"Everybody's been doubting us" all along, McGlinchey said. "We won 14 games and people are saying we're the worst 1 seed in the history of the playoffs. So, that's nothing new. ... Certainly we are a team that's been battle-tested. We've handled adversity every step of the way and we're incredibly confident moving forward in our team."

Ravens hire Chargers coordinator as head coach

Associated Press

Before they even began the process of interviewing more than a dozen people for their coaching vacancy, the Baltimore Ravens knew plenty about Jesse Minter.

Now he has the job.

The Ravens hired Minter on Thursday, just over two weeks after they fired longtime coach John Harbaugh.

Minter, 42, is a familiar face,

part of both Harbaugh's coaching tree and his brother Jim's. Minter's first four seasons (2017-20) as an NFL assistant were with the Ravens, and he spent the past two years as defensive coordinator for the Los Angeles Chargers.

Minter was a big name on the coaching market, interviewing virtually with several teams — including the Pittsburgh Steelers, who are looking for a coach

after Mike Tomlin stepped down last week — before landing in Baltimore. His task with the Ravens includes helping two-time MVP quarterback Lamar Jackson get back on track after an injury-plagued 2025 season in which Baltimore missed the playoffs.

"This is an organization whose values, culture and tradition of excellence reflect everything I believe about the game

of football and how it should be played," Minter said in a statement.

The Ravens decided to move on from Harbaugh after 18 seasons, but Baltimore did a lot right during those years.

Mike Macdonald, a former defensive coordinator under Harbaugh, has been a big success as Seattle's head coach, with the Seahawks playing for the NFC title this weekend.

Super Bowl at stake for Rams, Seahawks in their 3rd meeting

Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — To some extent, Seahawks defensive lineman Leonard Williams was anticipating that the NFC championship game would shake out this way, with Seattle facing division rival Los Angeles for a third time this season.

Williams, a key contributor on the league's top-ranked scoring defense, has seen firsthand how talented the Rams' top-ranked offense is. The Rams racked up 581 yards against Seattle in December in a game the Seahawks ultimately won 38-37 in overtime.

Williams feels good about the players around him and how they will respond Sunday in Seattle.

"I was just expecting it to happen this way," Williams said. "I think it's interesting that the only two teams we played in what feels like over a month is the Niners and the Rams. But I think it's a testament to how good this division has been this year. A lot of respect for both of those teams, but I have even more respect for my team and confidence in my team, and just the way we make it about us is special to me."

Just over a month after that epic overtime game, the Rams have a shot at redemption against the top-seeded Seahawks with a Super Bowl berth on the line.

"We're not immune to understanding the circumstances and what the game means to the outside world, and whether or not we get to continue to keep playing football or not, (but) from a daily standpoint, we operate as normal and get ready to play," said Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford, a finalist for The Associated Press 2025 NFL Most Valuable Player award.

The Rams took the first meeting of the season in November,

led by a defense that intercepted Seahawks quarterback Sam Darnold four times in the 21-19 victory.

Seattle got the better of Los Angeles in the second game in December with a fourth-quarter comeback and became the first NFL team to win on an overtime 2-point conversion.

"I think every week obviously, no matter how many times we've played them, we're trying to find new ways to attack them and ways to get after them," Williams said. "At the same time I think our team does a great job making it about us every day."

Coaching clash

One day after his 40th birthday, Rams coach Sean McVay will attempt to win the NFC title for the third time with the Rams. The youngest coach to win a Super Bowl was profoundly frustrated after his team blew that late 16-point lead in Seattle last month, but he doesn't want his players thinking too much about these teams' two recent thrillers during their preparations for the rubber match.

"You want to be careful not to chase ghosts," McVay said. "It is about good execution and good fundamentals. They're a great team and they're great in all three phases. We'd like to think when we're humming and we're at our best, we're pretty good too."

The offensive wizard reached the Super Bowl in his second season with the Rams. Mike Macdonald would match that achievement Sunday if the defensive guru can lead the Seahawks to the franchise's fourth Super Bowl.

Kupp's reunion

The Rams will be facing their Super Bowl 56 MVP on Sunday when Cooper Kupp squares off

against his former team again. Kupp won the 2021 AP Offensive Player of the Year award and the receiving triple crown during that championship season in his eight prolific years with the Rams.

Kupp had the second-fewest receiving yards of his career for Seattle this season, yet he stayed healthy nearly all year after injury struggles contributed to his release by the Rams last year and he led Seattle with five catches for 60 yards last weekend in its playoff win over the San Francisco 49ers.

"It's crazy to think (of) all of the things he's accomplished, and the way he comes to work and the way he leads," said Seahawks practice squad running back Cam Akers, who was Kupp's teammate on the Rams for a little over three seasons.

Stafford's tenacity

Stafford's statistical performances in the Rams' first two playoff games didn't measure up to his MVP-caliber regular season, yet he led the fourth and fifth game-winning drives of his playoff career under extraordinary road pressure.

While Orange County native Darnold has demonstrated his skills and moxie during two strong seasons with the Vikings and Seahawks, the Rams could have a decided advantage Sunday in experience and poise behind center: Stafford's seven postseason victories are more than twice as many as the three other starting quarterbacks in the playoffs' final four combined.

"I feel like I'm getting pretty repetitive about just how cool, calm and poised he is, and that's what it takes to win games over time," said Rams receiver Davante Adams, who will attempt to win an NFC title game for the first time in five tries.

NFL MVP finalists are announced

Associated Press

Christian McCaffrey has become only the second player to be a finalist for three AP NFL awards in the same year, as he joins Josh Allen, Trevor Lawrence, Drake Maye and Matthew Stafford in the running for The Associated Press 2025 NFL Most Valuable Player award.

McCaffrey and Maye are also finalists for Offensive Player of the Year. McCaffrey and Lawrence are among the finalists for Comeback Player of the Year.

The winners will be announced on Feb. 5.

A look at the finalists, in alphabetical order, for MVP:

■ Allen, the reigning MVP, threw for 3,668 yards, 25 touchdowns and 10 interceptions, posting a 102.2 passer rating while leading Buffalo to its seventh straight playoff appearance. He also ran for 14 TDs.

■ Lawrence helped Jacksonville win 13 games and the AFC South title. He had 4,007 yards passing, 29 TDs and 12 interceptions.

■ McCaffrey, an All-Purpose All-Pro, ran for 1,202 yards and 10 TDs and caught 102 passes for 924 yards and seven TDs. He played a key role in helping the injury-depleted San Francisco 49ers win 12 games. He's a finalist for three awards, a feat last accomplished by Joe Burrow.

■ Maye had 4,394 yards passing, 31 TDs and eight picks to lead the New England Patriots to an AFC East title and an appearance in the AFC championship game on Sunday. Maye led the NFL in passer rating (113.5) and completion percentage (72%).

■ Stafford led the NFL with 4,707 yards passing and 46 TDs. He threw eight interceptions and finished second to Maye with a 109.2 passer rating. Stafford was first-team All-Pro for the first time in his 17-year career.