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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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# New threats to US issued in Middle East

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Two Iranian-backed militias in the Mideast are signaling their willingness to launch new attacks, likely trying to back Iran on Monday as it worried about an approaching U.S. aircraft carrier after President Donald Trump threatened military action over its crackdown on nationwide protests.

Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels signaled a willingness to resume attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. That came just after Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah paramilitary group, long supported by Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, issued a direct threat late Sunday toward any attack targeting Iran, warning a "total war" in the region would be a result.

Both the Houthis and Kataib Hezbollah, however, sat out from Israel's 12-day war on Iran in June that saw the United States bomb Iranian nuclear sites. The hesitancy to get involved shows the disarray still affecting Iran's self-described "Axis of Resistance" after facing attacks from Israel during its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

A short video by the Houthis included images of a ship on fire, with the caption: "Soon." It later aired footage Monday from its January 2024 attack in the Gulf of Aden on the Marshall Islands-flagged tanker Marlin Luanda, one of the over 100 ships attacked as part of a campaign the Houthis said pressured Israel over its war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis halted their fire after a ceasefire in the conflict, though they've repeatedly

warned they could resume fire if needed.

Meanwhile, Ahmad "Abu Hussein" al-Hamidawi of Kataib Hezbollah issued his own threat in a statement.

"We affirm to the enemies that the war on the (Islamic) Republic will not be a picnic; rather, you will taste the bitterest forms of death, and nothing will remain of you in our region," he said.

The threats came as the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and other guided missile destroyers with it move toward the region. Trump has said the ships are being moved "just in case" he decides to take action against Iran. Trump has already laid out two red lines for attack — the killing of peaceful protesters and Tehran conducting mass executions of those it has arrested in a massive crackdown over the demonstrations.

The "Axis of Resistance" alliances had allowed Iran to project its power across the Mideast but was also seen as a defensive buffer, intended to keep conflict away from Iranian borders. But it has collapsed after Israel targeted Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon and others during the Gaza war. Meanwhile, rebels in 2024 overthrew Syria's Bashar Assad after a yearslong, bloody war in which Iran backed his rule.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, speaking to Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, also warned Iraq late Sunday about Iran's influence.

"A government controlled by Iran cannot successfully put Iraq's own interests first, keep Iraq out of regional conflicts or

advance the mutually beneficial partnership between the United States and Iraq," a statement on Rubio's behalf read.

The United Arab Emirates announced Monday that it would not allow its airspace, territory, or territorial waters to be used for military action against Iran. The UAE said it would stress dialogue and diplomatic resolutions.

Iranian Defense Ministry spokesperson Gen. Reza Talaei-Nik renewed warnings Monday to both Israel and the U.S. over any possible attack, saying it would "be met with a response that is more painful and more decisive than in the past." Iranian state television quoted Talaei-Nik as adding that threats from the two countries required Iran "to maintain full and comprehensive preparedness."

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei separately told journalists: "Regional countries fully know that any security breach in the region will not affect Iran only. The lack of security is contagious."

Iran over the weekend unveiled a new banner in Tehran's Enghelab Square threatening the Lincoln, showing an aircraft carrier strewn with bodies and streaked with blood with the warning: "If you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind." Iran, however, is still reeling from the 12-day war launched in June that saw its air defense systems broadly destroyed and top military leaders killed, as well as its nuclear enrichment sites bombed by the U.S.

As a sign of concern over its airspace, Iran issued a notice

to pilots Sunday that banned small private aircraft from flying in the country, with carve-outs for the oil industry and emergency medical flights.

Many Western airlines have started to avoid Iranian airspace entirely due to the tensions, though Gulf Arab carriers flying to Moscow still rely on the route. Iranian air defense troops in 2020 shot down a Ukrainian commercial airliner, killing 176 people on board.

The protests in Iran began Dec. 28, sparked by the fall of the Iranian currency, the rial, and quickly spread across the country. They were met by a violent crackdown by Iran's theocracy, the scale of which is only starting to become clear as the country has faced a more than two-week internet blackout — the most comprehensive in the nation's history.

The U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency on Sunday put the death toll at 5,848, with the number expected to increase. It said more than 41,280 people have been arrested.

The group's figures have been accurate in previous unrest and rely on a network of activists in Iran to verify deaths. The death toll exceeds that of any other round of protest or unrest there in decades, and recalls the chaos surrounding Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Associated Press has not been able to independently verify the toll.

Iran's government has put the death toll at a far lower 3,117, saying 2,427 were civilians and security forces, and labeled the rest "terrorists." In the past, Iran's theocracy has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

# China goes retro with its submarine design

BY GARY WARNER

*Stars and Stripes*

China has rapidly built up its submarine fleet by making a technological U-turn to produce boats the U.S. hasn't built in more than 65 years.

More than half of the estimated 66 submarines operated by the Chinese navy are conventionally powered. The fleet includes more than 20 Yuan-class diesel-electric boats.

The U.S. Navy's last diesel-powered submarine was the USS Blueback, a Barbel-class submarine commissioned in 1959 and retired in 1990.

The Pentagon forecasts that China will have more than 75 submarines by 2030. The United States currently has 69 submarines, all nuclear-powered, according to the Naval Vessel Register.

The shorter construction time of the conventional submarines has allowed China to pull close to U.S. numbers and cover its strategic goals in Asia, according to a 2025 report by the non-partisan Congressional Research Service.

China's Yuan-class submarines are 254-foot-long boats with a displacement of 3,600 tons that can move at 20 knots submerged. They carry up to 65 crew members. The boat has six torpedo tubes and can launch

anti-ship missiles. In comparison, the main variant of the U.S. Navy's latest Virginia-class submarine is 377 feet long, with a 7,900-ton displacement and a speed of more than 25 knots. It's armed with four torpedo tubes and vertical missile launch capability. It has a crew of up to 135.

Bryan Clark, a defense analyst with the Hudson Institute think tank, said that though the Chinese submarines are not nuclear-powered, they are built to modern standards in acoustic sound suppression.

"The Chinese Yuan-class conventional submarines use an air-independent propulsion system to recharge their batteries, which can give them a few weeks of submerged endurance," Clark said. "They are very quiet, and the PLA Navy has about two dozen now."

Nuclear-powered submarines are complex designs — the U.S. plans on building only two Virginia-class attack submarines in 2026. Meanwhile, two aging Los Angeles-class submarines are scheduled for decommissioning this year. The Navy is still waiting for its first of the new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines, which the CRS says is 18 months behind schedule and not expected to be delivered prior to 2030.

The Chinese see Taiwan as a renegade province, a part of the country that split away after World War II, when Nationalist Leader Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters fled there in 1949 as Mao Tse-tung and the communists took Beijing and the rest of the country.

Then-CIA director William Burns said in 2023 that U.S. analysts believed Chinese President Xi Jinping has called on his country's armed forces to have the capability to invade Taiwan by 2027, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army.

The CIA did not say China would invade at that time but that the country's political and military leaders wanted the armed forces prepared to execute a plan by then. The Taiwan Strait Risk Report, issued in 2025 by a risk assessment firm, says that 50% of world container ship traffic passes through the Taiwan Strait and forecast a 30% chance of an invasion of Taiwan by China in the next five years and a 60% chance of an air and naval blockade.

Clark and other analysts say the diesel-powered submarines are a practical solution for the Chinese because any fight with the United States and its allies is likely to come close to home ports.

The potential battleground is the Taiwan Strait, in the South China Sea, which is 78 miles across from the mainland. The South China Sea is busy with ships transiting the strategically tense area.

The Chinese have spent \$50 billion to build a constellation of installations in the First Island Chain, which curves from Japan past Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Borneo, to Vietnam. It's centered on two deepwater bays on the southern Chinese island of Hainan, which is home to the Greater Yulin Naval Base and East Yulin Naval Base.

Yuan-class ships are built to operate in the relatively shallow South China Sea, with some coastal shelves just 250 feet below the surface, and many reefs — some of which China has fortified as missile-launching centers or airfields meant to give cover to Chinese ships and submarines if the U.S. and its allies intervene in the region.

Clark, the Hudson Institute analyst, said that now that China has nearly achieved parity in submarine numbers with the United States, it will shift back to building more nuclear submarines with a more extended "blue sea" reach as China expands its areas of interest beyond Northern Asia.

## First Naval Construction Regiment head relieved of duties

*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy has relieved the commodore of the First Naval Construction Regiment of his duties, the service said Friday.

Capt. Douglas Whimpey, a Navy reservist, was relieved "due to loss of confidence in his ability to command."

The U.S. military routinely cites only a vague "loss of confi-

dence" when removing commanders and other leaders from authority positions.

The regiment is headquartered in Port Hueneme, Calif.

Whimpey was relieved of command by Capt. Angel Santiago, commander of Naval Construction Group 1.

"Navy leaders are expected to uphold the highest standards

of responsibility, reliability and leadership personally and professionally, and the Navy holds them accountable when they fall short of those standards," the Navy said in a statement.

Capt. Steven Sherman has assumed the duties of commodore of the First Naval Construction Regiment.

Whimpey, who took over

command in February 2023, has been temporarily reassigned to the staff at NCG-1.

Naval Construction Regiments provide a wide range of military construction capabilities to include the building and repair of roads, bridges, bunkers, airfields, expeditionary medical facilities and logistics bases.

# Democrats vow to deny DHS funding

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democratic senators are vowing to oppose a funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security following the shooting death of a 37-year-old Minnesota man, a stand that increases the prospect of a partial government shutdown by the end of the week.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, in a social media post hours after the Saturday shooting, said that what is happening in Minnesota is “appalling” and that Democrats “will not provide the votes to proceed to the appropriations bill if the DHS funding bill is included.”

Six of the 12 annual spending bills for the current budget year have been signed into law by President Donald Trump. Six more are awaiting action in the Senate, despite a revolt from House Democrats and mounting calls for Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem’s impeachment.

If senators fail to act by midnight Friday, funding for Home-

land Security and the other agencies covered under the six bills will lapse.

“Democrats sought common sense reforms in the Department of Homeland Security spending bill, but because of Republicans’ refusal to stand up to President Trump, the DHS bill is woefully inadequate to rein in the abuses of ICE,” said Schumer, D-N.Y. “I will vote no.”

The White House reached out to Senate Democrats late Sunday, as have Republicans, according to a Senate Democratic leadership aide who insisted on anonymity to discuss the private talks.

But they have not yet raised any realistic solutions, the aide said.

Republicans will need some Democratic support to pass the remaining spending bills in time to avoid a partial shutdown. That support was already in question after Renee Good, a mother of three, was fatally shot and killed earlier this month by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent in Minnea-

polis. But the fatal shooting Saturday of Alex Pretti, an intensive care unit nurse, quickly prompted Democrats to take a more forceful stand.

On Sunday, House and Senate Democrats convened separate conference calls as they privately assess next steps and press to restrain the Trump administration’s immigration enforcement operations.

Washington Sen. Patty Murray, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee and key negotiator on the funding package, had been pushing her colleagues to vote for the homeland security bill, arguing that Democrats had successfully fought off major increases to the ICE budget. But in the wake of the shooting, Murray said Sunday on X that “I will NOT support the DHS bill as it stands.”

“Federal agents cannot murder people in broad daylight and face zero consequences,” Murray wrote.

Federal officials have defended the actions of the agents involved in the Good and Pretti

shootings as justified. Democrats said video showed otherwise. Republicans are increasingly challenged, with some calling for thorough investigations while others stand with federal officials.

The growing backlash from Democrats puts Republican leaders in the Senate in a difficult position.

Much of the government, including the Department of Defense, continues to operate on a short-term bill that provides funding only through Friday.

Before Pretti’s death, many Democrats hoped to avoid a potential shutdown, lending support in the House to most of the remaining appropriations bills — with DHS the exception.

House Democrats largely rejected the homeland security portion last week with just a handful joining Republicans to ensure its passage.

The House sent the six funding bills to the Senate as a package, and that makes it difficult to strip out the homeland security portion which Democrats are demanding.

## GOP calls growing for deeper probe into Minn. killing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A growing number of Republicans are pressing for a deeper investigation into federal immigration tactics in Minnesota after a U.S. Border Patrol agent fatally shot a man in Minneapolis, a sign that the Trump administration’s accounting of events may face bipartisan scrutiny.

House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Andrew Garbarino sought testimony from leaders at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, saying “my top priority remains keeping Americans safe.”

A host of other congressional

Republicans, including Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas and Sens. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, pressed for more information. Their statements, in addition to concern expressed from several GOP governors, reflected a party struggling with how to respond to Saturday’s fatal shooting of Alex Pretti, 37, an intensive care nurse at a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital.

Trump administration officials were quick to cast Pretti as the instigator. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem was among those who said Pretti “approached” immigration officers

with a gun and acted violently. Videos from the scene show Pretti being pushed by an officer and then a half-dozen agents descend on him. During the scuffle, he is holding a phone but is never seen brandishing the 9 mm semiautomatic handgun police say he was licensed to carry.

The killing has raised uncomfortable questions about the GOP’s core positions on issues ranging from gun ownership to states’ rights and trust in the federal government.

Cassidy, who is facing a Trump-backed challenger in his reelection bid, said on social media that the shooting was “incredibly disturbing” and that the “credibility of ICE and DHS are

at stake.” He pushed for “a full joint federal and state investigation.” Tillis, who is not seeking re-election, urged a “thorough and impartial investigation” and said “any administration official who rushes to judgment and tries to shut down an investigation before it begins are doing an incredible disservice to the nation and to President Trump’s legacy.”

Trump and other administration officials remained firm in their defense of the hard-line immigration enforcement tactics in Minneapolis, blaming Democrats in the state along with local law enforcement for not working with them. Many Republicans either echoed that sentiment or stayed silent.

# Israel: Remains of final hostage recovered

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — The remains of the final hostage in Gaza have been recovered, Israel's military said Monday, clearing the way for the next phase of the ceasefire that paused the Israel-Hamas war.

The announcement that the remains of Ran Gvili had been found and identified came a day after Israel's government said the military was conducting a "large-scale operation" in a cemetery in northern Gaza to locate them.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it "an incredible achievement" for Israel and its soldiers, telling Israeli media that "I promised we would bring everyone home and we have brought everyone home." He said Gvili, who was killed during the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war, was among the first to be taken into Gaza.

The return of all remaining hostages, living or dead, has been a key part of the Gaza ceasefire's first phase, and Gvili's family had urged

Israel's government not to enter the second phase until his remains were recovered and returned.

Netanyahu's office said Sunday that Israel would open the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which Palestinians see as their lifeline to the world, once the search for Gvili was finished. It has been largely shut since May 2024, except for a small period in early 2025.

Israel and Hamas had been under pressure from ceasefire mediators including Washington to move into the second phase of the U.S.-brokered truce, which took effect on Oct. 10.

Israel had repeatedly accused Hamas of dragging its feet in the recovery of the final hostage. Hamas said it had provided all the information it had about Gvili's remains, and accused Israel of obstructing efforts to search for them in areas of Gaza under Israeli military control.

Israel's military had said the operation to locate Gvili's remains was "in the area of the

Yellow Line" that divides the territory.

The Oct. 7, 2023, attack killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage. Gvili, a 24-year-old police officer known affectionately as "Rani," was killed while fighting Hamas militants.

Before Gvili's remains were recovered, 20 living hostages and the remains of 27 others had been returned to Israel since the ceasefire, most recently in early December. Israel in exchange has released the bodies of hundreds of Palestinians to Gaza.

The next phase of the 20-point ceasefire plan has called for creating an international stabilization force, forming a technocratic Palestinian government and disarming Hamas.

Israeli forces on Monday fatally shot a man in Gaza City, according to Shifa Hospital, which received the body. The man was close to an area where the military had launched the search operation for Gvili, the hospital said.

## Northeast sees more snow from storm that has killed at least 18

Associated Press

The U.S. workweek opened with yet more snow dumping on the Northeast under the tail end of a colossal winter storm that brought lingering misery to parts of the South, where freezing rain left hundreds of thousands shivering without electricity Monday. Authorities reported at least 18 weather-related deaths.

Deep snow — over a foot extending in a 1,300-mile swath from Arkansas to New England — halted traffic, canceled flights and triggered wide school closings Monday. Up to two feet were forecast in some places.

There were more than 800,000 power outages in the nation on Monday morning, most of them in the South, according to poweroutage.com. The region got its share of sleet and freezing rain during the storm.

There also were more than 6,400 flight delays and cancellations nationwide, according to flight tracker flightaware.com.

More light to moderate snow was forecast in New England through Monday evening.

In Falmouth, Mass., about an hour's drive south of Boston, snow came down in sheets and closed down the town.

Nell Fields said she had to shovel just to be able to let her dog outside Sunday. Seven inches had fallen, with more still on the way.

"I feel that the universe just put a big, huge pause on us with all the snow," Fields said.

On Manhattan's Upper East Side, January Cotrel enjoyed the fresh snow on a block that always closes during snowstorms for residents to sled, throw snowballs and make snowmen.

"I pray for two feet every time we get a snowstorm. I want as much as we can get," she said. "Let the city just shut down for a day and it's beautiful, and then we can get back to life."

Meanwhile, bitter cold followed in the storm's wake. It got down to minus-40 degrees Fahrenheit in parts of Minnesota on Sunday. Many communities across the Midwest, South and Northeast awakened Monday to subzero weather. The entire Lower 48 states were forecast to have their coldest average low temperature since January 2014.

Record warmth in Florida was the only thing keeping that average from going even colder, said former National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chief scientist Ryan Maue, who calculates national averages based on National Weather Service data.

At one point Sunday morning, about 213 million people were under some sort of winter weather warning, authorities said.

## 7 killed when jet crashes in Maine

Associated Press

The Federal Aviation Administration says seven people were killed and a crew member survived with serious injuries when a private business jet crashed in a snowstorm at Maine's Bangor International Airport.

The Bombardier Challenger 600 carrying eight people crashed on takeoff Sunday night as much of the country grappled with a massive winter storm. The airport, about 200 miles north of Boston, shut down after the crash.

The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating. The NTSB said preliminary information shows the plane crashed upon departure and experienced a post-crash fire, but that it would have no further statement until after investigators arrive in a day or two.

The NTSB said it has no role in the release of information about victims and that such information is handled by local authorities.

But airport director Jose Saavedra refused to comment, saying at a news conference Monday that he was "awaiting guidance and support from federal partners."

An audio recording of air traffic controllers includes someone saying "Aircraft upside down. We have a passenger aircraft upside down," about 45 seconds after a plane was cleared for takeoff.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### First-ever parking fees at popular park draw ire

**CA** SAN DIEGO — For decades, parking lots at San Diego's Balboa Park were packed, with lines of drivers snaking through lanes in search of a rare open spot.

Recently there were plenty of open spaces and several lots were half empty, while people lined up behind kiosks to pay newly imposed parking fees.

This month the city imposed the first parking fees for the century-old cultural site, provoking confusion and contempt. Museums reported that visitation dropped 20% immediately, vandals defaced the meters and San Diego County mayors urged the city to reverse the unpopular policy.

San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria has said the parking fees will provide stable revenue for the park and its museums, and help close a city budget gap of roughly \$300 million this fiscal year and \$110 million next year.

### Car crashes into airport entrance, injuring 6

**MI** DETROIT — A car crashed through the entrance of the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport on Friday evening, striking a ticket counter and injuring six people, airport officials said.

The driver was taken into custody, the Wayne County Airport Authority said in a statement. The cause of the crash was not yet known, and airport police were investigating.

The WCAA Fire Department treated six people at the site.

Video posted on social media

showed a blue, four-door sedan stopped, with its hood and truck popped open, in front of Delta Air Lines counters in what appeared to be a departure lobby.

Glass and other debris lay strewn on the ground at the entrance, and yellow police tape cordoned off the scene.

The driver's name was not immediately released.

### Massive sewage spill flows into the Potomac

**DC** WASHINGTON — A massive pipe that moves millions of gallons of sewage ruptured and sent wastewater flowing into the Potomac River northwest of Washington, D.C., sending repair crews scrambling.

DC Water, which operates the sewer system, was hooking up pumps to divert sewage around the rupture and allow crews to make repairs. It has cautioned people to stay out of the area and to wash their skin if exposed.

The spill was caused by a 72-inch diameter sewer pipe that collapsed late last Monday, shooting sewage out of the ground and into the river.

DC Water spokesperson John Lisle said the utility estimates the overflow at about 40 million gallons each day — enough to fill about 66 Olympic-size swimming pools — but it's not clear exactly how much has spilled into the river since the overflow began.

### Doctor pleads not guilty in killings of couple

**OH** COLUMBUS — An Illinois doctor indicted on murder charges in the December shooting deaths of his ex-wife and her dentist hus-

band in their Columbus home pleaded not guilty to the killings in an Ohio courtroom on Friday.

Michael David McKee, 39, appeared remotely on camera from jail for his arraignment in Franklin County, where he faced four aggravated murder counts and one count of aggravated burglary while using a firearm suppressor in connection with the Dec. 30 double homicide of Monique Tepe, 39, and Dr. Spencer Tepe, 37. He was garbed in prison attire and did not speak during the brief hearing. Defense attorney Diane Menashe waived a request for bond, at least for now.

The mystery that first surrounded the case — which featured no forced entry, no weapon and no obvious signs of theft, additional violence or a motive — drew national attention. McKee, of Chicago, was arrested 11 days later near his workplace in Rockford, Ill. He was returned to Ohio on Tuesday to face the charges.

### Earthquake monitors are able to track space junk

**FL** CAPE CANAVERAL — As more and more space junk comes crashing down, a new study shows how earthquake monitors can better track incoming objects by tuning into their sonic booms.

Scientists reported Thursday that seismic readings from sonic booms that were generated when a discarded module from a Chinese crew capsule reentered over Southern California in 2024 allowed them to place the object's path nearly 20 miles farther south than radar had predicted from orbit.

Using this method to track

uncontrolled objects plummeting at supersonic speeds, they said, could help recovery teams reach any surviving pieces more quickly — crucial if the debris is dangerous.

### Men face charges after dogs found out in cold

**CT** BRIDGEPORT — Two men face animal cruelty charges after they left dogs exposed to life-threatening cold at a Union Avenue address that was the site of similar abuse in 2018 and 2023, Bridgeport police said.

Benito Islesias, 72, and Rusty Rodriguez, 46, both of Bridgeport, were taken into custody on Friday about 11:45 p.m. Rodriguez also was charged with interfering with an officer after he disregarded officers' commands and tried to hide one of the three dogs, police said. Both men posted bond and were released. They are scheduled to be arraigned in state Superior Court in Bridgeport on Friday, police said.

Officers responded to the 400 block of Union Avenue after dispatchers received an anonymous call that dogs had been left outside in the freezing cold for several hours, police said. Officers found two of the dogs barking and tethered to dilapidated wooden shelters in the backyard, police said. A third dog was located in the basement. Police responded to the same address on Union Avenue for animal cruelty calls in 2018 and 2023, and Islesias was charged with animal cruelty in the 2018 incident, police said. Court records on the disposition of that case were not immediately available.

— From wire reports

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## Reporting World, National and Military News

# Patriots advance with gritty win vs. Broncos

Associated Press

DENVER — Drake Maye handled the sloppy, snowy conditions better than the home team and he scored New England's only touchdown on a 6-yard keeper, propelling the Patriots to their 12th Super Bowl with a 10-7 win over the Denver Broncos in the AFC championship game Sunday.

Maye threw for just 86 yards, but ran for 65 and iced the win with a 7-yard keeper on third-and-5 in the waning minutes to send New England (17-3) to the Super Bowl in Mike Vrabel's first year as coach.

The Patriots will play the Seattle Seahawks, who beat the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC championship game, on Feb. 8 in Santa Clara, Calif.

"I'm just proud of this team," said the 23-year-old Maye, who's the second-youngest starting quarterback to reach the Super Bowl, behind only Miami's Dan Marino. "Don't have many words. Just thankful

for this team. Love each and every one of them. It took everybody."

Christian Gonzalez intercepted Jarrett Stidham, starting in place of an injured Bo Nix, with 2:11 remaining for New England's second takeaway. The first set up the Patriots with a short field and led to Maye's touchdown scamper that tied it at 7 heading into halftime.

With Nix looking on from a suite following ankle surgery Tuesday in Alabama, Stidham made his first start in more than two years. His first completion since the 2023 regular-season finale was a 52-yard dart to Marvin Mims Jr. to the New England 7 that set up Courtland Sutton's 6-yard touchdown catch.

That was Stidham's highlight as he turned the ball over twice and finished 17 of 31 for 133 yards with the TD.

"I was super excited for the opportunity and just hate that we fell short," Stidham said.

The Patriots, who went 4-13 last year under Jerod Mayo, became the third team in the Super Bowl era to win a conference championship with 10 points or less. Buffalo beat Denver 10-7 in the 1991 AFC title game, and Los Angeles beat Tampa Bay 9-0 in the 1979 NFC championship game.

Vrabel, who won three Super Bowls as a playmaking linebacker for New England, could become the first person in NFL history to also win as a head coach for the same franchise.

"I won't win it. It'll be the players that'll win the game," Vrabel said. "I promise you, it won't be me that'll win it, and I promise you that I'll do everything I can, and our staff, to have them ready for the game."

The Broncos (15-4) had a 7-0 lead early in the second quarter that was short-lived. Elijah Ponder recovered Stidham's backward pass at the Denver 12 with three minutes left, setting

up the tying touchdown two plays later.

"I thought I threw it forward and obviously the replay said differently," Stidham said. "Probably should have just eaten the sack and let (Jeremy) Crawshaw punt the ball and flip the field."

Both kickers missed two field goals in the frigid conditions with the Broncos' Wil Lutz and the Patriots' Andy Borregales wide on long tries just before the snow came in at halftime. Lutz's 45-yard attempt late in the fourth quarter was tipped by Leonard Taylor III.

New England's victory was its 40th in the playoffs, breaking a tie with the San Francisco 49ers for the most in NFL history.

It was sunny at kickoff with a temperature of 26 degrees, but by halftime the snowflakes began falling and grounds crews had to use snowblowers to mark the hashmarks and yard lines by the fourth quarter, when it was 16 degrees.

## Seahawks beat Rams for NFC title, head to Super Bowl

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Sam Darnold was cast aside by the New York Jets, who drafted him No. 3 overall in 2018. The Minnesota Vikings didn't bring him back after he led them to a 14-3 season but flopped in the playoffs.

Now, in his first season with the Seattle Seahawks, he's Super Bowl-bound.

Darnold threw for three touchdowns, Seattle's "Dark Side" defense came up with a critical fourth-down stop, and the Seahawks advanced to the Super Bowl, beating the Los Angeles Rams 31-27 in an electrifying NFC championship game Sunday.

"You can't talk about the game without talking about our quarterback," second-year coach Mike Macdonald said. "He shut a lot of people up tonight, so I'm happy for him."

Led by Darnold — an eight-year veteran playing for his fifth team — Seattle (16-3) reached its fourth Super Bowl in franchise history and first in 11 years. The Seahawks lost that most recent appearance to the New England Patriots, their opponent in two

weeks at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif.

Darnold, who was blown out in his playoff debut last year with Minnesota — by Los Angeles, no less — played through an oblique injury and completed 25 of 36 passes for 346 yards with no turnovers. Jaxon Smith-Njigba had 153 yards receiving — the second-most in a playoff game in franchise history — and a touchdown on 10 catches.

Seattle needed Darnold to keep pace with Matthew Stafford, who drove the Rams (14-6) into position to take the lead with 4:59 remaining. On fourth-and-4 at the Seattle 6, coach Sean McVay elected to go for it and Stafford's pass was broken up in the end zone by Devon Witherspoon.

"He's just the heart of our defense," safety Julian Love said of Witherspoon. "He just is the essence. 'Spoon is it. He plays with just such a raw energy. And we love him for it."

LA didn't get the ball back until there were 25 seconds left, and Puka Nacua was tackled inbounds near midfield on the final play.

Stafford threw for 374 yards and three touchdowns, but the Rams were undone by

critical errors, including a muffed punt by Xavier Smith in the third quarter. On the next play, Darnold connected with Jake Bobo for a 17-yard touchdown and a 24-13 lead.

The Seahawks led 31-20 late in the third quarter on Darnold's 13-yard TD pass to Cooper Kupp, but Los Angeles got back into the game when Seattle cornerback Riq Woolen was flagged for taunting after breaking up a pass to Nacua on third-and-12, giving the Rams a first down.

On the next play, Stafford threw at Woolen again, and Nacua beat him in the corner of the end zone for a 34-yard touchdown.

"Even though I made a great play, I wasn't great for my team," Woolen said, "and I've got to be better with that and celebrate with the team."

LA forced a punt on the Seahawks' next possession and went on a 14-play, 84-yard drive that came up empty thanks to Witherspoon's pass breakup.

Seattle stayed aggressive on its final possession, with Darnold throwing for three first downs to run out most of the clock.

# Nelson's hat trick keeps Avs streaking vs. Leafs

Associated Press

TORONTO — Brock Nelson scored twice in a 1:12 span in the first period and sealed his fifth career hat trick with an empty-netter in the Colorado Avalanche's 4-1 victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Sunday.

Jack Drury also scored to help NHL-leading Colorado improve to 35-6-9. MacKenzie Blackwood made 32 saves.

The Avalanche became the fourth team in NHL history with six or fewer regulation losses through 50 games, joining the 1979-80 Philadelphia Flyers (35-3-12), 1943-44 Montreal Canadiens (38-5-7) and 1975-76 Canadiens (36-6-8).

The last team with at least 77 points through 50 contests was the 2022-23 Boston Bruins (38-7-5), who went on to set the NHL record for wins in a season with 65.

Toronto had a 4-3 overtime victory in Denver on Jan. 12, but has dropped six of seven (1-4-2), including an ugly 0-3-1 start to its current five-game homestand following an 8-0-2 run.

**Ducks 4, Flames 3 (OT):** Rookie Beckett Sennecke scored at

2:54 of overtime for his first NHL hat trick as visiting Anaheim rallied to beat Calgary.

Sennecke's winner came on a 2-on-1 in which he kept the puck and snapped a shot past Dustin Wolf, just inside the post.

Chris Kreider also scored for the Ducks (28-21-3), who extended their winning streak to seven games.

Sennecke's three-goal effort gives him 18 for the season and 41 points overall, which places him second in rookie scoring to Montreal's Ivan Demidov, who has 11 goals and 32 assists for 43 points.

**Kraken 4, Devils 2:** Matty Beniers and Berkly Catton scored 18 seconds apart in the third period, Joey Daccord made 27 saves and host Seattle beat New Jersey.

Ryker Evans and Jordan Eberle also scored for the Kraken, who have won three of their last 10 games.

Dougie Hamilton and Jack Hughes scored for the Devils, who end their four-game Pacific Division road trip with a 3-1-0 record.

Hamilton opened the scoring

8:11 into the first period with a clean shot on the power play. Scoring his sixth goal of the season, Hamilton now has eight points in his last nine games.

## Senators 7, Golden Knights 1:

**1:** Stephen Halliday had two goals and an assist, Dylan Cozens also scored twice and host Ottawa routed Vegas.

Halliday scored his second and third career goals, and added the assist for a three-point game in his first season in the NHL.

Fabian Zetterlund, Jordan Spence and Nick Jensen also scored, and Brady Tkachuk had three assists.

Rasmus Andersson scored in third period for the Golden Knights, making it 7-1. It was the defenseman's first goal in two games with Vegas following a trade with Calgary.

**Penguins 3, Canucks 2:** Rookie Ben Kindel scored twice in the second period to lead visiting Pittsburgh to a win over Vancouver and a sweep of its four-game western Canada trip.

Kindel, from nearby Coquitlam, British Columbia, had a large contingent of supporters

on hand for his second multi-goal game. The 18-year-old had gone 20 games without a goal after scoring eight in his first 28 and has 10 goals and 12 assists in 48 games.

Jake DeBrusk and Teddy Blueger scored in the third period for the Canucks (17-30-5), who failed to complete their comeback try and dropped their second straight. Kevin Lankinen stopped 21 shots.

## Panthers 5, Blackhawks 1:

Defenseman Tobias Bjornfot scored his first two goals this season — giving him just three over seven NHL seasons and 139 career games — and visiting Florida defeated Chicago for its third straight win.

Mackie Samoskevich and Carter Verhaeghe connected 2:04 apart early in the third period and Sam Reinhart added an empty-netter as the Panthers won for the sixth time in eight games.

Tyler Bertuzzi scored his team-leading 25th goal for the Blackhawks. Spencer Knight, who started his career with Florida, made 20 saves and fell to 0-2 against his former team.

# Pelicans rebound to top Spurs after blowing 20-point lead

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Saddiq Bey and Zion Williamson each had 24 points and 10 rebounds and the New Orleans Pelicans squandered a 20-point lead before rebounding to beat the San Antonio Spurs 104-95 on Sunday night.

San Antonio held a 24-5 advantage to open the fourth quarter, but New Orleans closed the game on a 17-3 run to avoid a season sweep by the Spurs.

Victor Wembanyama had 16 points, 16 rebounds and four blocks to lead San Antonio. Keldon Johnson added 15 points as the Spurs failed to capitalize on a double-digit rally.

**Warriors 111, Timberwolves 85:** Stephen Curry scored 26 points to lead visiting Golden State past Minnesota, the fifth straight loss for the Timberwolves and their longest skid in more than three years.

Curry added seven assists and four of his team's season-high 20 steals after being listed as questionable to play because of knee soreness. Moses Moody added 19 points and eight rebounds for the Warriors (26-21), who moved within 1½ games of Minnesota (27-19) for seventh place in the Western Conference.

**Pistons 139, Kings 116:** Cade Cunningham had 29 points and 11 assists and host Detroit routed Sacramento for its fifth victory in six games.

The Eastern Conference-leading Pistons rebounded from a home loss to Houston on Friday night to improve to 33-11. Tied at 35 after a quarter, Detroit broke it open in the second by outscoring the Kings 43-30.

**Raptors 103, Thunder 101:** Immanuel Quickley had 23 points and 11 rebounds to help visiting Toronto defeat NBA-leading Oklahoma City.

R.J. Barrett scored 14 points and Scottie Barnes added 10 points and 10 rebounds for the Raptors, who won their fourth straight.

**Heat 111, Suns 102:** Bam Adebayo scored 22 points, Jaime Jaquez Jr. added 20 and visiting Miami beat short-handed Phoenix.

The Heat had a short turnaround after blowing out Utah 147-116 on Saturday night but took advantage of the Suns playing without Devin Booker and Jalen Green.

**Clippers 126, Nets 89:** Kawhi Leonard scored 21 of his 28 points in the first half as host Los Angeles built a 38-point lead in the second quarter and beat Brooklyn.

James Harden scored 19 points, John Collins added 18, and Jordan Miller had 16. Ivica Zubac finished with 11 points and 10 rebounds as the Clippers won for the eighth time in nine games.

# Pegula tops Keys for All-American match

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Jessica Pegula knocked podcast pal and defending champion Madison Keys out of the Australian Open on Monday to secure a quarterfinal against Amanda Anisimova, another all-American match.

Their fourth-round wins on Day 9 meant four Americans reached the women's singles last eight in Australia for the first time since 2001, when Serena and Venus Williams, Jennifer Capriati, Monica Seles and Lindsay Davenport made it through.

"Sucks that one American has to go out in the quarterfinals," Anisimova said.

Pegula had a slightly different take: "At least one of us will get through and I think that's great for American tennis. Yeah, it's been pretty crazy how well the women have been doing and how many top-ranked girls there are. I'm just happy to be a part of that conversation."

Pegula and Anisimova advanced a day after No. 3 Coco Gauff and 18-year-old Iva Jovic earned their places on the other side of the draw.

Pegula's 6-3, 6-4 win at Rod Laver Arena ended Keys' first Grand Slam title defense in a tough section of the draw.

Anisimova, runner-up at the last two majors at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open, advanced 7-6 (4), 6-4 over Wang Xinyu.

At that time, the temperature started rising at Melbourne Park, causing organizers triggered the heat stress policy which allowed for extra cooling breaks.

"What a battle out there. Tough conditions against a really good opponent," Anisimova said. "There were a lot of fans from China today but, honestly, it made the atmosphere great."

No. 2 Iga Swiatek continued her quest to complete a career Grand Slam with a 6-0, 6-3 win over home qualifier Maddison Inglis, giving the center court

crowd little to cheer on the Australia Day national holiday.

Swiatek next meets No. 5 Elena Rybakina, runner-up to Aryna Sabalenka here in 2023.

## Pegula's play

Pegula is in the quarterfinals for the fourth time in Australia, but has never previously gone further at the season-opening major. Anisimova is in the last eight here for the first time.

"I have been seeing, hitting, moving, I feel very well this whole tournament, and to be able to keep that up against such a great player as Maddie and defending champion was going to be a lot tougher of a task today," Pegula said. "I was still able to do that really well."

Pegula and Keys had played three times previously, and Keys had won the last two. But Monday it was Pegula who dominated, racing to 4-1 leads in both sets.

Pegula's best performance in a major was reaching the U.S. Open final in 2024.

## Italian men

Three Italian men started Day 9. Only two could advance.

Two-time defending champion Jannik Sinner beat compatriot Luciano Darderi 6-1, 6-3, 7-6 (2) two days after admitting he felt lucky to survive the third round.

Sinner struggled with the extreme heat and cramping in his Saturday afternoon win over No. 85-ranked Eliot Spizzirri, and only took control of that match after the roof was closed in the third set.

His evening match Monday was much cooler, and so was Sinner. He served a personal best 19 aces and controlled the tempo against Darderi, taking the last seven points in the tie-breaker.

Lorenzo Musetti reached the quarterfinals for the first time in Australia with a 6-2, 7-5, 6-4 win over an ailing Taylor Fritz.

It completed a Grand Slam set of quarterfinals for the 23-year-old Italian.

# Scheffler starts new golf season with same winning ways

Associated Press

LA QUINTA, Calif. — New year, same Scottie Scheffler.

The world's No. 1 player loves coming to the California desert early in the season to take stock of his game and get into tournament shape. There wasn't much wrong Sunday in The American Express.

Scheffler made birdie on half of his holes, going from a two-shot deficit early to a lead that stretched to six shots late before he closed with a 6-under 66 for a four-shot victory.

He had four birdies in a six-hole stretch on the front nine to blow past 18-year-old Blades Brown and everyone and the rest of the field.

Scheffler won for the 20th time on the PGA Tour — all in the last four years — to earn a lifetime

membership. More indicative of his dominance in the game is winning nine of those 20 tournaments by four shots or more.

The world's No. 1 player briefly shared the stage with Brown, who finished high school two weeks ago and tied for 17th in a Korn Ferry Tour event in the Bahamas that finished Wednesday. He's the first player to play eight straight days of PGA Tour-sanctioned competition.

Brown was one shot behind 54-hole leader Si Woo Kim and one shot ahead of Scheffler heading to the tee at the par-3 fourth on the Stadium Course at PGA West. Five holes later, Brown and Kim both were five shots behind and Scheffler was putting it into overdrive.

It all looked so routine at the end. Scheffler rapped in a par putt

to finish at 27-under 261, stuffed the golf ball in his pocket and smiled. It all looks so routine.

Scheffler seized control quickly after a birdie-bogey start. He hit 8-iron to 2 feet on the par-3 fourth hole, played the par-5 fifth smartly with a shot away from the water and a pitch-and-run he nearly holed from across the green for birdie. Wedges led to two more birdies to close out the front, two more early on the back to lead by four.

Brown's chances seemed to end on one hole. He took an aggressive line and pulled his tee shot into the water on the par-5 fifth. He had to drop in front of the tee boxes — he chose to drop in the dormant Bermuda rough instead of the teeing ground — and then hit a poor wedge when he got back into position that led to double bogey.

Brown went 11 holes without a birdie and had two late bogeys that led to a 74. He fell from a tie for second to a tie for 18th, costing him a spot at Torrey Pines next week.

Scheffler's only big blunder was when it didn't matter, a tee shot into the water on the par-3 17th known as "Alcatraz," and by then he had plenty of get-out-of-jail-free cards. His double bogey only kept the margin from being greater against the strongest field The American Express has had in decades.

Scheffler now takes a week off before ending the West Coast with three straight events, starting with the Phoenix Open where this amazing run began four years ago. He won his first PGA Tour title in a playoff. It hasn't been that close lately.