

Dems vote to block funding legislation

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats voted to block legislation to fund the Department of Homeland Security and several other agencies Thursday as they continued to negotiate with Republicans and the White House on new restrictions for President Donald Trump's surge of immigration enforcement.

Thursday's 45-55 test vote came as Democrats have threatened a partial government shutdown when money runs out on Friday. But Trump said just ahead of the vote that "we don't want a shutdown" and the two sides were discussing a possible agreement to separate homeland security funding from the rest of the legislation and fund it for a short time.

As the country reels from the deaths of two protesters at the hands of federal agents in Minneapolis, irate Senate Democrats laid out a list of demands on Wednesday, including that officers take off their masks and identify themselves and obtain

warrants for arrest. If those are not met, Democrats say they are prepared to block the wide-ranging spending bill, denying Republicans the votes they need to pass it and triggering a shutdown.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York has said that Democrats won't provide needed votes until U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is "reined in and overhauled" and that this is "a moment of truth."

"The American people support law enforcement. They support border security. They do not support ICE terrorizing our streets and killing American citizens," Schumer said.

Schumer has pushed Republicans and the White House to strip the Homeland Security funding from the rest of the bill, which includes money for the Defense Department and other agencies. In the deal under discussion, Homeland Security would still be funded but for a short time to allow for negotia-

tions on the Democrats' demands.

Other agencies included in the bill would be funded through the end of September.

Still, with no agreement and an uncertain path ahead, the standoff threatened to plunge the country into another shutdown just two months after Democrats blocked a spending bill over expiring federal health care subsidies, a dispute that closed the government for 43 days as Republicans refused to negotiate.

That shutdown ended when a small group of moderate Democrats broke away to strike a deal with Republicans, but Democrats are more unified this time after the fatal shootings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good by federal agents.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., encouraged Democrats and the White House to talk and find agreement.

"We're getting closer," the GOP leader said on the Senate

floor Thursday morning.

Kicking off a Cabinet meeting, Trump said his administration is speaking with congressional Democrats.

"We're working on that right now," Trump said while declining to go into specifics. He added: "We don't want a shutdown."

There's a lot of "unanimity and shared purpose" within the Democratic caucus, Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith said after a lunch meeting Wednesday.

"Boil it all down, what we are talking about is that these lawless ICE agents should be following the same rules that your local police department does," Smith said. "There has to be accountability."

Earlier Thursday, Tom Homan, the president's border czar, said during a press conference in Minneapolis that federal immigration officials are working on a plan to begin drawing down the number of agents in Minnesota but that it would depend on cooperation from state authorities.

Trump warns Iran time is running out to make a deal

Bloomberg News

President Donald Trump warned Iran to make a nuclear deal with the U.S. or face military strikes far worse than the attack he ordered last June, increasing pressure on the regime and propelling oil prices higher.

In a social media post on Wednesday, Trump said the fleet of U.S. ships he'd ordered to the region, led by the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier, is "ready, willing, and able to rapidly fulfill its mission, with speed and violence, if necessary."

"Hopefully Iran will quickly

'Come to the Table' and negotiate a fair and equitable deal — NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS — one that is good for all parties," Trump wrote.

In response, Iran said it stands ready for dialogue based on mutual respect and interests but warned that "IF PUSHED, IT WILL DEFEND ITSELF AND RESPOND LIKE NEVER BEFORE," the country's mission to the United Nations said in a post on X. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi held a series of calls with top regional officials to discuss the escalating situation.

Trump has repeatedly

warned Iran that the U.S. might launch another attack, but those threats have recently been linked to Tehran's deadly crackdown on protests rather than its atomic activities. The U.S. leader has previously said Iran's nuclear program was "obliterated" in the strikes last June that targeted three facilities across the country.

Iran has long said it doesn't want to develop nuclear weapons. Notably, in his latest post, Trump didn't demand that Iran end uranium enrichment, its ballistic-missile program or its funding of anti-U.S. proxy mili-

tias, all conditions Iran has balked at before

Trump said this month that Iranian officials had reached out to resume negotiations over a deal, which in the past have focused on limits to the country's nuclear development in exchange for sanctions relief. Signs have emerged in recent months that Iran could restart the program if it wanted. Rafael Mariano Grossi, the director of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, said in an interview last week that the country retains its stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

Chaplain: Spiritual support is 'anchor' for Navy, sailors

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Navy has marked Spiritual Awareness Month on a global scale for the first time, an initiative aimed at supporting sailors of all beliefs, including those who find meaning through community rather than organized religion.

The observance was intended to strengthen sailors' "spiritual wellbeing" through religious services, confidential counseling and other connections to community, according to Navy Installations Command.

"Naval service is incredibly demanding which requires our warriors to remain ready, both physically and spiritually," command spokeswoman Destiny Sibert said Tuesday.

The effort began in 2022 as a regional observance at Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Fla. Vice

Adm. Scott Gray, head of the installations command, expanded it into a global program beginning this year.

At Yokosuka — home to the U.S. 7th Fleet and the Navy's largest overseas installation — January featured a range of activities, many adapted from existing programs. Events included all-hands emails, relationship workshops, yoga classes, canine therapy and mindfulness seminars, said Chaplain (Cmdr.) Daniel Clark, the base's command chaplain.

"This doesn't even necessarily have to pertain to religion itself — it's spirituality, it's the anchor," he said during a Jan. 20 interview at Yokosuka.

Outside organized religion, spirituality may include family, shared values, fellow sailors or devotion to country, Clark said.

"It could be along the lines of patriotism — a connection with, say in the United States, the Con-

stitution and the values that it portrays," he said. "Rooting yourself in that, that's one example of a non-religious but spiritual connection."

Clark said the observance was organized before Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced plans to "make the Chaplain Corps great again."

He and his team coordinated events with such organizations as the Red Cross, Fleet and Family Services and the USO.

At the USO on Jan. 19, that included Therapy Tails, a program allowing sailors to spend time with therapy dogs. Jacee Maldonado, a military spouse, and her dog, Penny, are regular volunteers.

"I really think it just helps them spiritually, and just gives them, you know, kind of offloading the bad and just feeling a little bit of joy, even if it's only for a couple of minutes," she said.

Marines ban coat over flaws

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is making its all-weather coat unavailable due to a defect that can cast an unsightly hue, according to a new memo from the service.

The fabric of some of the trench coat-style garments bleeds a noticeable orange substance when exposed to water or rain, resulting in an "unprofessional appearance," the Marine Corps said in the Monday message. Such exposure also can stain and damage uniforms.

The manufacturing defect was identified in a specific production lot of the gray double-breasted coat, the message said.

All sales and initial issuance of the coat are suspended until further notice, and the Defense Logistics Agency was directed to notify the Marine Corps once it had identified the contracts and lot numbers of the affected coats.

Budget office: 2026 Guard deployments could cost \$1.1B

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's deployment of the National Guard to American cities cost \$496 million last year and could cost \$1.1 billion this year, according to an analysis released Wednesday by the Congressional Budget Office.

The estimates cover the cost of deployments to Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; Memphis, Tenn.; Portland, Ore.; and Chicago as well as the mobilization of 200 National Guard personnel who were put on standby in Texas after leaving Chicago.

The deployments to Los An-

geles, Chicago and Portland have ended, but the National Guard presence is continuing in Washington, D.C., Memphis and New Orleans, where troops were deployed in late December. The standby force in Texas also remains.

Continuing those deployments at their year-end size would cost \$93 million per month, according to the nonpartisan agency's analysis, which was requested by Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon, the top Democrat on the Senate Budget Committee. Nearly a dozen other Senate Democrats signed on to the request for a formal probe in October.

The agency said it was difficult to predict future costs, partly because many of the deployments have been challenged in court. Generally, deploying 1,000 National Guard personnel to a U.S. city in 2026 would cost \$18 million to \$21 million per month, depending on living costs.

The ongoing deployment of more than 2,690 troops to Washington, D.C., will cost \$55 million per month, or \$660 million for the year, according to the analysis.

The agency said it calculated expenses by tallying costs for military pay and benefits when National Guard personnel are

mobilized, costs for housing and food, and transportation costs for moving personnel from their home stations and back. Those total expenses range from \$522 to \$607 per service member per day.

Trump began the deployments in June 2025 in Los Angeles in response to protests stemming from immigration enforcement efforts.

The Congressional Budget Office said the mobilization cost \$193 million last year. Deployments cost \$223 million in Washington, D.C.; \$33 million in Memphis; \$26 million in Portland; and \$21 million in Chicago.

Homan plans drawdown of agents in Minn.

The Washington Post

President Donald Trump's border czar, Tom Homan, said Thursday that his team is working on a plan to draw down the number of federal immigration enforcement agents they have in Minneapolis, pending cooperation with state and local officials. Homan's announcement came hours after Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, confirmed that large-scale Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations had ended in her state, as the White House seeks to quiet a growing backlash against immigration crackdowns following Saturday's fatal shooting of Department of Veterans Affairs hospital ICU nurse Alex Pretti by federal immigration enforcement.

Homan met with Minnesota

leaders on Tuesday and Wednesday, including Democratic Gov. Tim Walz, Attorney General Keith Ellison and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey. He called them "good brokers" and said he had made "great progress" in particular with Ellison and local sheriffs, alluding to agreements in which ICE officers would conduct more activity in county jails.

"If we get these agreements in place, that means less agents on the street. More agents in the jail means less agents in the street. This is common-sense cooperation that allows us to draw down on the number of people we have here," Homan said, later adding that he would not be "walking away" without seeing plans put in place.

Without making specific concessions, Homan also said the federal government had not "carried this mission out perfectly."

"President Trump and I, along with others in administration, have recognized that certain improvements could and should be made. That's exactly what I'm doing here. ... The mission is going to improve because of the changes we're making internally," he said.

Frey called his conversation with Homan "productive and collegial" during a CNN town hall broadcast Wednesday evening.

The Trump administration dispatched Homan to Minneapolis this week to replace Border Patrol chief Greg Bovino amid

calls from Democrats, and some Republicans, for Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem to be dismissed or impeached.

Federal authorities have called on city and state officials to transfer custody of undocumented immigrants already in state and county jails to Homeland Security officers who have secured immigration detainees on them.

State corrections officials have cooperated with such federal requests, but some Minnesota counties have ordinances that limit cooperation on federal immigration enforcement.

Meanwhile, Collins wrote on X early Thursday morning that Noem had informed her that ICE had ended its "enhanced activities" in Maine.

New videos show Pretti in prior tiff with agents

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Pretti was forcefully taken to the ground by federal immigration agents after kicking out the tail light of their vehicle during a Minneapolis protest 11 days before he was shot and killed by Border Patrol officers, videos that emerged Wednesday show.

The Jan. 13 scuffle was captured in a pair of videos that show Pretti shouting an expletive at the federal officers and struggling with them.

His winter coat comes off when he's on the ground and he either breaks free or the officers let him go and he scurries away.

When he turns his back to the camera, what appears to be a handgun is visible in his waistband. At no point do the videos show Pretti reaching for the gun and it is unclear whether the federal agents saw it.

A person with knowledge of the incident confirmed to The Associated Press that the man in the videos is Pretti and that he

had told his family of the confrontation.

The new videos immediately rekindled the national debate about the death of Pretti, 37, an intensive care nurse at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center. Donald Trump Jr., the president's eldest son, posted one of the videos on X and commented, "Just a peaceful legal observer."

Steve Schleicher, a Minneapolis-based attorney representing Pretti's parents, said the earlier altercation in no way justified the officers fatally shooting Pretti on Saturday.

"A week before Alex was gunned down in the street — despite posing no threat to anyone — he was violently assaulted by a group of (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents," Schleicher said in a written statement. "Nothing that happened a full week before could possibly have justified Alex's killing at the hands of ICE on Jan 24."

Sen. Klobuchar aims to become Minn. governor

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar said Thursday she is running for governor of Minnesota, promising to take on President Donald Trump while unifying a state that has endured a series of challenges even before the federal immigration crackdown.

Klobuchar's decision gives Democrats a high-profile candidate and proven statewide winner as their party tries to hold onto the office occupied by Gov. Tim Walz.

The 2024 Democratic vice presidential nominee, Walz abandoned his campaign for a third term earlier this month amid criticism over mismanagement of taxpayer funding for child care programs.

"Minnesota, we've been through a lot," Klobuchar said in a video announcement Thursday. "These times call for leaders who can stand up and not be rubber stamps of this administration — but who are also

willing to find common ground and fix things in our state."

Klobuchar cited Trump's immigration crackdown in Minnesota, federal officers killing two Minnesotans who protested, the assassination of a state legislative leader and a school shooting that killed multiple children — all within the last year.

"I believe we must stand up for what's right and fix what's wrong," Klobuchar said.

The senator has been among the loudest Trump critics.

Multiple Republicans already are campaigning in what could become a marquee contest among 36 governorships on the ballot in November. Among those running for the GOP nomination are MyPillow founder and chief executive Mike Lindell, a 2020 election denier who is close to Trump; Minnesota House Speaker Lisa Demuth; Dr. Scott Jensen, a former state senator who was the party's 2022 gubernatorial candidate; and state Rep. Kristin Robbins.

South struggles to recover from storm

Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — Mississippi dispatched 500 National Guard troops to clear roads blocked by fallen trees and Tennessee had nearly 1,000 linemen scrambling to restore power to thousands of Nashville homes as the Southern states raced to recover from a crippling winter storm before another blast of dangerous cold hits Friday.

The National Weather Service said arctic air moving into the Southeast will cause already frigid temperatures to plunge into the teens Friday night in cities like Nashville, where more than 90,000 homes and businesses still had no electricity five days after a massive storm dumped snow and ice across the eastern U.S.

At least 80 people have died in areas afflicted with bitter cold from Texas to New Jersey.

The extended deep freeze has left some people increasingly desperate in a region unaccustomed to and ill-equipped for such cold. Emergency dispatchers in Mississippi were getting calls from people running out of food and medications while stuck at home. Tennessee had troopers making welfare checks on residents who hadn't been heard from in days.

The situation in hard-hit northern Mississippi was "life-or-death," said Jamie Parttridge, a longtime resident of Batesville, where residents shivered in line outside a Walmart store waiting for a turn to buy supplies.

More than 300,000 U.S. homes and businesses had no electricity Wednesday, according to the outage tracking website poweroutage.us. The vast majority were in Mississippi

and Tennessee, with roughly 100,000 each.

Nashville Electric Service said in a social media post Thursday that it had 963 linemen working on repairs after the storm snapped hundreds of power poles in the Nashville area. A utility vice president, Brent Baker, said Wednesday crews would need the weekend, or longer, before all customers could be restored.

Interstates 55 and 22 were closed in northern Mississippi after emergency crews with tow trucks and snowplows removed gridlocked vehicles stuck on the icy roads. Gov. Tate Reeves said road crews would continue to work Thursday toward reopening the major highways.

Reeves said he had mobilized 500 National Guard troops to clear trees and other debris still blocking roads.

Mississippi officials say it's the state's worst winter storm since 1994. About 60 warming centers were opened across the state, known as one of the nation's poorest. But for some communities, they weren't enough.

Hal Ferrell, mayor of Batesville, said Wednesday that no one in the city has power and, with roads still slippery with ice, it's too soon to begin recovery efforts.

"We're at a real mess and warming centers just don't exist for 7,500 people," Ferrell said.

Forecasters say the subfreezing weather will persist in the eastern U.S. into February and there's high chance of heavy snow in the Carolinas, Virginia and northeast Georgia this weekend. Snowfall is also possible along the East Coast from Maryland to Maine.

FBI searches election office for records from '20 Ga. vote

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The FBI on Wednesday searched the election office of a Georgia county that has been central to right-wing conspiracy theories over President Donald Trump's 2020 election loss, acting just one week after the Republican leader predicted prosecutions over a contest he has baselessly insisted was tainted by widespread fraud.

The search at Fulton County's main election facility in Union City sought records related to the 2020 election. It appeared to be the most public step by law enforcement to pursue Trump's claims of a stolen election, grievances rejected time and again by courts and state and federal officials, who found no evidence of fraud that would have altered the outcome.

It also unfolds against the backdrop of FBI and Justice Department efforts to investigate per-

ceived political enemies of Trump, including former FBI Director James Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James.

Trump has for years focused on Fulton, Georgia's most populous county and a Democratic stronghold, as a key example of what he claims went wrong in the 2020 election.

His pressure campaign there culminated in a sweeping state indictment accusing him and 18 others of illegally trying to overturn the vote.

FBI agents secured an area around the large warehouse building that houses the county elections hub with yellow tape and could be seen loading boxes from the building into trucks. FBI spokesperson Jenna Sellitto confirmed that the boxes contained ballots.

The Justice Department had no immediate comment.

Chinese warships sail near Okinawa following US drills

BY ALEX WILSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

Japan tracked four Chinese warships transiting a strategic waterway near Okinawa this week, a move that followed U.S.-Philippine military drills near a contested South China Sea atoll that drew complaints from Beijing.

The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force monitored two Chinese guided-missile destroyers, a frigate and a replenishment ship as they passed through the Miyako Strait between 7 p.m. Tuesday and 2 a.m. Wednesday, according to a Wednesday news release from Japan's Joint Staff.

The vessels traveled southeast through the strait — an approximately 155-mile-wide waterway between Miyako Island and Okinawa — moving from the East China Sea into the Philippine Sea, the release said. The strait is an in-

ternational waterway that lies within Japan's exclusive economic zone.

Japan's Ministry of Defense conducted surveillance and intelligence gathering using the mine-sweeper JS Shishijima, a Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft and a P-3C Orion surveillance plane, the Joint Staff said.

The Chinese transit came a day after the U.S. and the Philippines concluded a two-day exercise near Scarborough Shoal, a South China Sea feature claimed by China, Taiwan and Philippines, according to a Wednesday news release from the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The guided-missile destroyer USS John Finn and a P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft joined Philippine forces, including the guided-missile frigate BRP Gabriella Silang, an A-29 Super Tucano attack aircraft and an FA-50 light fighter jet.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Homeless services CEO charged with fraud

CA LOS ANGELES — The CEO of a Los Angeles homeless services charity faces federal and state fraud charges after prosecutors said he lived a luxury lifestyle that included lavish vacations and designer clothes paid for with \$23 million in public money meant to keep people off the streets.

Alexander Soofer, 42, was arrested last Friday at his \$7 million home that investigators believe he afforded using funds that were supposed to support his nonprofit Abundant Blessings, said First Assistant U.S. Attorney Bill Essayli.

The charitable group was contracted with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, a county agency, to use taxpayer money to find shelter and provide three meals a day for more than 600 homeless residents.

Instead, prosecutors said Soofer bought a \$125,000 Range Rover, a \$2,450 Hermes jacket, a vacation home in Greece and a trip to Hawaii, where he stayed at the Four Seasons hotel that was famously the setting for the HBO TV show "The White Lotus."

If convicted as charged, Soofer could receive a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, Essayli said. An email was sent Monday seeking comment from Soofer's attorney, Hilary Potashner.

Authorities: Gangs sought to assassinate judge

IN LAFAYETTE — Members of a motorcycle club and a street gang clearly targeted an Indiana judge for assassination, police

said Tuesday, days after officers arrested five people in connection with the attack.

Police and prosecutors at a news conference praised what they characterized as a relentless effort to track down who opened fire on Tippecanoe County Superior Court Judge Steven Meyer and his wife, Kim, at their home in Lafayette on Jan. 18. Meyer and his wife suffered gunshot wounds but survived.

The Lafayette Police Department, the FBI, the Indiana State Police and the Purdue University Police Department apprehended five people in synchronized arrests on Jan. 22, including four in Indiana and one in Lexington, Ky.

Prosecutors allege that the attack was designed to derail a domestic abuse case against Thomas Moss, a member of the Detroit-based Phantom MC motorcycle club with ties to the Vice Lords street gang. According to a probable cause affidavit, the Vice Lords offered the victim in the case \$10,000 not to testify against Moss but she refused.

With Moss' trial set to begin on Jan. 20 in front of Meyer, another Phantom MC member, Blake Smith, purchased a shotgun. A masked man traveled to the Meyers' home armed with that shotgun on Jan. 18. He lured the couple to the door by saying he was looking for his dog, shot them through the door and fled.

USA Today Co. to buy 2nd Detroit newspaper

MI LANSING — USA Today Co., which owns the Detroit Free Press, said Monday that it plans to acquire the Detroit News and

bring both major metropolitan newspapers under its banner.

The Detroit News and the Detroit Free Press recently ended an almost 40-year agreement that allowed the two papers to operate in the same city and merge aspects of their business operations.

According to a statement from USA Today Co., the newspaper publisher formerly named Gannett, both newspapers will continue to publish separately. The company provided little other information on the planned operation of the daily newspapers.

The statement also did not disclose a price of the sale.

USA Today Co., which publishes the largest chain of newspapers in the U.S., said the sale is being funded through cash and financing managed by Apollo Global Management, the private equity firm that funded New Media Investment Group Inc.'s 2019 acquisition of Gannett.

Decision on GOP-controlled House district appealed

NY ALBANY — Republicans on Monday appealed a judge's decision to throw out the lines of New York City's only GOP-controlled House seat, a case that could have national reverberations in the fight for control of Congress.

The appeal came just days after a judge ruled U.S. Rep. Nicole Malliotakis' Staten Island and Brooklyn district was drawn in a way that dilutes the power of its Black and Hispanic voters. The judge ordered the state's Independent Redistricting Commission to complete a new map by Feb. 6.

The case was filed by an election law firm aligned with the

Democratic Party. It came as part of a national gerrymandering fight that started after President Donald Trump pushed to craft new congressional districts in Republican-controlled states such as Texas.

Republicans filed appeals to both a mid-level appeals court and to the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals.

The Court of Appeals rejected congressional maps that had been seen as helping Democrats and directed a court-appointed expert to redraw districts. It then threw out those maps before the 2024 congressional elections.

Judge rules halted offshore wind project can continue

MA BOSTON — A federal judge said Tuesday that a nearly completed Massachusetts offshore wind project can continue, as the industry successfully challenges the Trump administration in court.

At U.S. District Court in Boston, Judge Brian Murphy halted the administration's stop work order for Vineyard Wind, citing the potential economic losses from the delays and the developers' likelihood of success on their claims. Vineyard Wind is one of five big offshore wind projects on the East Coast that the Trump administration froze days before Christmas, citing national security concerns — and the fourth that has since been allowed to go forward.

Vineyard Wind is 95% complete and partially operational, able to produce nearly 600 megawatts of power for the New England electric grid, according to the complaint.

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Sabalenka heading into 4th straight final

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Not even a point penalty for hindrance slowed Aryna Sabalenka's run to a fourth consecutive Australian Open final.

The top-ranked Sabalenka overpowered Elina Svitolina 6-2, 6-3 Thursday night to move within one victory of a third Australian Open title in four years.

A rematch of the 2023 final against Elena Rybakina was set up when the No. 5 seed ousted No. 6 Jessica Pegula 6-3, 7-6 (7) in the second semifinal.

"It was a great battle (against Sabalenka in 2023)," Rybakina said. "In the end, she played a bit better and it was well deserved. I want to enjoy the final and hopefully I can serve better than today. I am so excited."

Her semifinal was mostly one way until Rybakina had match point. The 2022 Wimbledon champion missed three match points on Pegula's serve and then was broken twice while serving for the match.

Pegula rallied and had two set points in the tiebreaker but

wasn't able to convert, and Rybakina finally clinched it 29 minutes after her first match point.

"I'm proud no matter the situation. It got very tight, I stayed there," she said of the win over Pegula. "I was fighting for each point."

All four players reached the semifinals without dropping a set — in Australia for the first time in 56 years — and Sabalenka and Svitolina were each on 10-match winning streaks to start the season after titles in warmup events.

Sabalenka kept both of her streaks alive. She hit 19 winners and broke Svitolina's serve twice in the first set. She finished with 29 winners to 12 for her Ukrainian rival.

As has become customary for Ukrainians against players from Russia and Belarus, there was no handshakes at the net. There was also no group photo before the match.

Sabalenka is the third woman in the Open era to reach four consecutive singles finals at the

Australian Open after Evonne Goolagong and Martina Hingis.

The hindrance call

The only hiccup was the hindrance to start the fourth game. Hindrance is called for a distraction that prevents a player from making a shot and can include an opponent's loud noise.

Umpire Louise Azemar Engzell deemed Sabalenka made a prolonged grunt after she shanked a forehand. The shot seemed to be going long but landed inside the baseline, giving Svitolina the chance to play on. That's when the umpire intervened.

Sabalenka asked for a video review but, after going to the tape, Azemar Engzell confirmed her decision that the grunt was more elongated than usual.

It didn't hurt Sabalenka. She broke serve in that game.

Sabalenka said it aggravated her, but also worked as motivation.

"It actually helped me—I was more aggressive. I was not hap-

py with the call, and it really helped me to get that game," Sabalenka said.

Svitolina's exit

After reaching her first semifinal in Australia and winning a title in a warmup tournament in New Zealand, Svitolina will return to the top 10 for the first time since she took a maternity break in 2022.

The Auckland title was her first foray back on tour after an early end to the 2025 season for a mental health break. She said the rest and time out prolonged her career.

"Definitely very, very happy with the two weeks here and in New Zealand, as well, winning," she said.

"Gutted to not make it through tonight but it's very difficult when you're playing the world No. 1, who is really on fire."

Svitolina was playing her fourth semifinal at a major — 2019 and 2023 at Wimbledon and the 2019 U.S. Open — but again wasn't able to go to the championship match.

Djokovic focusing on 'creating own history', ignoring 'Sincaraz'

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — The most successful player ever in men's tennis felt disrespected, and had to pause before summarizing the offending question out loud just to process it again.

Novak Djokovic, winner of 24 Grand Slam singles titles, including 10 at the Australian Open, was fielding questions about his pending semifinal with defending champion Jannik Sinner when he returned serve on one that he didn't like.

He was asked to compare eras from when he broke onto the scene while Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal were at the top of tennis to now, when Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz have blocked him from winning a major for the last two seasons.

"I'm chasing Jannik and Car-

los?" he responded. "In which sense?"

In terms of trying to break the "Sincaraz" streak of eight titles.

"I find it a little bit disrespectful that you kind of miss out on what happened in between where the times when I started chasing, as you say, Rafa and Roger, and now that I'm chasing Carlos and Jannik, and there's probably about a 15-year period in between where I was dominating the Grand Slams.

"It's important to put that in perspective. I don't feel like I'm chasing, to be honest. I'm creating my own history."

Sinner vs. Djokovic

Make no mistake, the 38-year-old Djokovic is in Melbourne with one objective: to win a 25th Grand Slam singles title. That

would cement him as the most decorated tennis player of all time. He reached the semis at all four majors last year, but didn't contest a final.

He concedes he's "lucky this time" to still be in the running, after trailing fifth-seeded Lorenzo Musetti 6-4, 6-3 in Wednesday's quarterfinal before the 23-year-old Italian retired in the third set with an injured right leg.

But Sinner is also counting his luck. He was on the verge of a third-round exit when he was cramping and stumbling while down a break against No. 85-ranked Eliot Spizzirri in the third set. He only got a reprieve when the Extreme Heat Policy was activated, and an eight-minute delay to close the roof completely swung momentum.

Sinner is on a 19-match win-

ning streak at Melbourne Park after his comprehensive 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 quarterfinal win over eighth-seeded Ben Shelton. The 24-year-old Italian has a 6-4 lead in head-to-heads with Djokovic, including wins in the last five.

Alcaraz vs. Zverev

The 22-year-old Alcaraz is bidding to become the youngest player to complete a career Grand Slam by winning all four major titles. The 28-year-old Zverev, seeded third, is bidding for his first major trophy. He's been runner-up three times, including last year in Australia when his trip was overshadowed by German court proceedings.

Alcaraz said Zverev edged him in a recent practice match with a "high level of tennis, high level of intensity."

Tough coaching helped Pats' Maye flourish

Associated Press

Drake Maye got the tough coaching he wanted and thrived.

The 23-year-old Maye is one victory away from being the youngest quarterback in NFL history to win a Super Bowl. He is grateful to have coach Mike Vrabel and offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels in New England.

The Patriots went from 4-13 under Jerod Mayo in Maye's rookie season to 14-3. They won their 12th AFC championship game and will seek a record seventh Super Bowl title when they face the Seattle Seahawks on Feb. 8.

"Coach McDaniels and Coach Vrabel coming in, they've been awesome," Maye told The Associated Press. "Two coaches that have made a huge impact on not only us as a team, but my personal play and personal life outside of football. I think one of the biggest things about them is they coach me hard, but they care about me as a person and they want the best for me. They coach me hard each and every day. And, it's not always about football, it's about life and leadership and things that go a long way playing my position at quarterback.

And I think, from there Ashton Grant in the quarterback room, as well the quarterbacks in the room, man, we got a great group. I'm just fortunate enough to have great players around me."

The supporting cast includes wide receiver Stefon Diggs, running backs TreVeyon Henderson and Rhamondre Stevenson and tight end Hunter Henry.

Selected No. 3 overall in the 2024 draft behind Caleb Williams and Jayden Daniels, Maye started 12 games as a rookie and was 3-9. He threw for 2,276 yards, 15 touchdowns and 10 interceptions on a team that lacked talent and direction.

Vrabel, McDaniels and Grant came in and quickly unlocked his potential. Maye threw for 4,394 yards with 31 TDs and only eight picks this season, becoming a finalist for the AP NFL MVP and Offensive Player of the Year awards. He led the league in completion rate (72%) and passer rating (113.5), and also rushed for 450 yards and four TDs, earning second-team AP All-Pro honors.

"Having the experience from last year, I'm fortunate enough my rookie season to get some starts and play meaningful foot-

ball and just understand what the league is like, what it's about, what the defenses are like, kind of running the offense, running the show," Maye said.

"Playing quarterback in this league at this level is tough. It takes a lot. And I think knowing that our job playing quarterback is one of the toughest jobs in sports, but also it's one of the most rewarding. And just feeling that and translating that in my year two and learning a new offense."

Tom Brady, Kurt Warner, Russell Wilson and Ben Roethlisberger won Super Bowls in their second seasons in the NFL. Joe Burrow, Brock Purdy, Colin Kaepernick and Dan Marino got there and lost.

Marino is the youngest to start the game. Roethlisberger is the youngest to win it.

Maye's only other trip to the Super Bowl was also at Levi's Stadium, home of the San Francisco 49ers. Ten years ago, he was a fan in the crowd cheering for Cam Newton and the Carolina Panthers against Peyton Manning and the Denver Broncos.

Denver dominated in a 24-10 win. Fittingly, Maye became the first quarterback to lead

New England to a road win over the Broncos in the playoffs.

"It's full circle," he said. "My dad, when I was maybe in seventh grade, said if the Panthers made it, we were going to go. It was heartbreaking, they lost to the Broncos. But no, it was a good experience for a kid my age who loved football, loved quarterbacks. That was Peyton's last game. What a Hall of Fame career he had. Pretty cool to be full circle, going back here 10 years later, and I think it's just a special moment for this whole team."

Maye hasn't played his best in the playoffs. He's completed just 55.8% of his passes for 533 yards, four TDs, two interceptions and has lost three fumbles and been sacked 15 times in three games. He's used his legs effectively, rushing for 141 total yards and the team's only TD in the 10-7 win over Denver on Sunday.

"That's the great thing about Drake, his ability to extend plays and if it's not there, gain chunks," Vrabel said. "He's done that most of the year. Again, we'll have to get a lot of things corrected, and we'll have to play our best football game in two weeks if we want to finish as champions."

Palat scores in Islanders debut, adds assist in win vs. Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Ondrej Palat scored the opening goal and added an assist in his debut with the New York Islanders, who defeated their cross-town rival New York Rangers 5-2 on Wednesday night.

Simon Holmstrom had a goal and two assists, David Rittich made 14 saves, and the Islanders won their second straight game. Mathew Barzal, Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Emil Heineman also scored.

Mika Zibanejad and Taylor Raddysh scored for the Rangers. Spencer Martin stopped 31 shots, but the Rangers lost for the fourth time in their last five games and are 2-8-1 since they won the Winter Classic in Florida on Jan. 2. Star forward Artemi Panarin was held out of the lineup for roster manage-

ment purposes and will not play again for them before the Olympic break.

The Islanders acquired Palat from the New Jersey Devils, along with a third-round pick in 2026 and a sixth-round pick in 2027, in exchange for forward Maxim Tsyplakov.

Blue Jackets 5, Flyers 3: Charlie Coyle had a goal and an assist and host Columbus beat Philadelphia for its third straight win.

Kirill Marchenko, Eric Gudbranson, Sean Monahan and Mathieu Olivier also scored for the Blue Jackets to offset a hat trick by the Flyers' Travis Konecny.

Columbus has won seven of its last eight games and is tied at 57 points with Philadelphia and Washington for fourth place in the Metropolitan Division.

Konecny's hat trick was the third of his ca-

reer and Dan Vladar made 26 saves in his first start after missing six games with a lower-body injury. Rasmus Ristolainen left with a lower-body injury in the first period and did not return in the Flyers' second straight loss.

Senators 5, Avalanche 2: Tim Stutzle had a goal and an assist, Artem Zub added two assists and host Ottawa defeated league-leading Colorado.

Nick Cousins, Ridly Greig, Claude Giroux and Brady Tkachuk also scored for the Senators and James Reimer made 16 saves.

Parker Kelly and Valeri Nichushkin scored for the Avalanche, who have now lost three of their last four. Mackenzie Blackwood stopped 18 shots.

Tkachuk and Stutzle each added empty-net goals.

Cavs spoil James' return to Cleveland

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Donovan Mitchell scored 25 points, Jaylon Tyson had 20 and the Cleveland Cavaliers used a big third quarter to beat the Los Angeles Lakers 129-99 and spoil LeBron James' return to Northeast Ohio.

De'Andre Hunter added 19 points, and Jarrett Allen had 17 points and nine rebounds to help Cleveland to its season-best fifth straight victory.

James had only 11 points, the first time in 13 trips to Cleveland as an opposing player he has not had at least 20. The 41-year old Akron native was 3 of 10 from the field, including 0 of 3 on 3-pointers, and was 5 of 6 from the line in 27 minutes.

It also was James' worst loss in Cleveland as a visiting player. He is 10-3, but has been on the losing end in his last two.

James teared up during a timeout with 7:46 remaining in the first quarter when the Cavaliers showed video highlights of him scoring 25 straight points during Game 5 of the 2007 Eastern Conference finals against the Detroit Pistons.

Luka Doncic led the Lakers with 29 points. Los Angeles fell to 3-2 on its seven-game road trip.

Doncic missed six minutes in the first quarter after having his

left ankle looked at in the locker room. Doncic tweaked his ankle when he landed awkwardly near the Lakers' bench after attempting a 3-pointer.

Cleveland led 57-55 at halftime, but took control in the third quarter, outscoring Los Angeles by 20 (42-22). It was the 12th time this season that the Cavaliers scored at least 40 points in a period.

Pacers 113, Bulls 110: Aaron Nesmith made a go-ahead reverse layup with 13.9 seconds left and blocked Coby White's attempt from close range with 2.9 seconds remaining, and host Indiana rallied from a 14-point fourth-quarter deficit to beat Chicago.

Pascal Siakam scored 20 points, Andrew Nembhard had 18, Jarace Walker added 16, Benedict Mathurin had 15 and Nesmith finished with 14 for the NBA-worst Pacers, who improved to 3-0 against Chicago this season.

Hawks 117, Celtics 106: Nickeil Alexander-Walker scored 21 points, Jalen Johnson had 19 points and 14 rebounds and visiting Atlanta beat Boston to avenge a lopsided home loss.

Onyeka Okongwu added 17 points, Dyson Daniels had 15 and Corey Kispert 13 to help the

Hawks win their fourth straight.

Knicks 119, Raptors 92: Mikal Bridges scored 19 of his 30 points in the third quarter, Karl-Anthony Towns had a season-high 22 rebounds and visiting New York extended its winning streak to four, rallying past Toronto.

OG Anunoby had 26 points and a season-high six steals against his former team. Josh Hart scored 22 points and Jalen Brunson added 13 as the Knicks won their 11th straight meeting with Toronto.

Hornets 112, Grizzlies 97: Brandon Miller scored 26 points, Moussa Diabate had 18 points and 20 rebounds and visiting Charlotte topped its victory total from all of last season, beating Memphis.

Charlotte had won four straight to improve to 20-28 after finishing 19-62 last season. Miles Bridges added 20 points, and LaMelo Ball had 16. Diabate was 9 of 10 from the field in the first night of a back-to-back.

Magic 133, Heat 124: Paolo Banchero had 31 points and 12 rebounds, Anthony Black scored 26 points and visiting Orlando beat Miami to snap a four-game skid.

Desmond Bane finished with 23 points on 10-of-16 shooting and Jalen Suggs scored 16 for the

Magic, who are 3-0 against the Heat this season.

Timberwolves 118, Mavericks 105: Julius Randle scored 31 points, Naz Reid added 23 and Minnesota beat short-handed Dallas.

The Mavericks were without rookie No. 1 pick Cooper Flagg, who sat for left ankle injury management on the first night of a back-to-back. Flagg played the previous three games after an ankle sprain sidelined him for two games.

Warriors 140, Jazz 124: Stephen Curry scored 27 points, Moses Moody had 26 and visiting Golden State beat Utah.

Gui Santos had 16 points off the bench for the Warriors. Golden State made 23 3-pointers and never trailed over the final three quarters. Moody led the way with five 3s.

Spurs 111, Rockets 99: Victor Wembanyama had 28 points, 16 rebounds and five blocks to help San Antonio rally for a road victory over Houston.

The Spurs trailed by 16 and didn't have a lead until late in the third quarter. Wembanyama scored nine points, with five free throws, to power an 11-0 run to open the fourth quarter that put the Spurs on top 95-86 with less than eight minutes to go.

Flemings has 25, Sharp 23 as No. 10 Houston beats TCU

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Houston freshman Kingston Flemings scored 25 points, Emanuel Sharp had 23 and the 10th-ranked Cougars overcame an extended shooting slump in a 79-70 win at TCU on Wednesday night.

The Cougars (18-2, 6-1 Big 12) trailed only once, by one point 2½ minutes into the game, and began the second half with a 15-point lead. But they missed their last four shots before halftime, then 11 of 13 out of the break. There was a more than five-min-

ute gap between jumpers by Flemings while TCU got within two points.

Flemings, who had his ninth 20-point game and matched his second highest-scoring game, was coming off 42 points in a 90-86 loss at now-No. 11 Texas Tech on Saturday that ended the Cougars' 16-game winning streak in true road games, which was a Big 12 and school record. Houston had also won 11 in a row overall.

The Cougars finished shooting 44.4% overall (25 of 54) after they made 16 of 22 to start the game.

Xavier Edmonds had 18 points and 10 rebounds for TCU (13-8, 3-5). David Punch had 16 points and six assists.

No. 19 Florida 95, South Carolina 48: Thomas Haugh scored 18 points, Rueben Chinyelu had 14 points and 11 rebounds, and visiting Florida pounded South Carolina.

Neither team look sharp early, with Florida missing five of its first seven shots and South Carolina going 1 of 6 as the Gators led 12-8. Then Florida turned it into a rout with a 36-12 run.

Florida finished by matching its largest margin of victory in an SEC road game, according to ESPN.

No. 25 St. John's 92, Butler 70: Dillon Mitchell had 14 points and 13 rebounds as host St. John's blew out Butler at Madison Square Garden for its seventh consecutive victory.

Ian Jackson scored 18 points and Zuby Ejiofor added 15 for the Red Storm (16-5, 9-1 Big East), who never trailed in giving Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino his 901st career win.