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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## DOD to gut office for reducing civilian harm

*The Washington Post*

The Defense Department is moving to dismantle efforts focused on reducing civilian harm in U.S. military operations, according to three defense officials, part of a Trump administration shift to scale back protections of innocents so commanders can focus more on "lethality" when conducting military strikes.

Pentagon leaders have decided to shutter civilian protection efforts across the agency, according to two of the officials. On the chopping block is a broad cross-command effort known as the Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response, which includes dozens of staffers worldwide who work alongside commanders to refine targeting operations, along with a center overseen by the Army that outlines best practices and training for military leaders to follow.

The engine of the effort, the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence, or CP CoE, was a target before President Donald Trump took office, with a Day 1

order for officials to submit plans for its "diseestablishment."

Though its formal closure requires congressional approval, staffers at the center have expressed concerns that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth will effectively gut the organization, said people familiar with the matter, who like some others spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

The center's senior leadership was instructed Monday that the Pentagon was moving forward with plans to halt all civilian harm mitigation work, including winding down the center, rescinding Biden administration directives and firing or reassigning nearly 170 personnel who advise military leaders on limiting noncombatant casualties, said Wes Bryant, the center's branch chief for civilian harm assessments.

The center and wider civilian harm mitigation effort do not play a decision-making role in advance of a planned strike nor

do they have a legal review capacity, said Bryant, who previously served in Air Force Special Operations. Rather, the role is to advise on the risks of collateral damage and offer a clearer picture of the combat environment, he said.

The moves have prompted alarm that the Pentagon might be more inclined to approve operations with little or no regard for civilian casualties, Bryant said.

The effort to reduce headcount at CP CoE accelerated last week, with an email sent to probationary employees informing them to accept a buyout option or face termination. Probationary employees at the center are at "high risk for dismissal," according to a Friday email obtained by The Post — a change among leaders who were previously optimistic they would be shielded from plans to fire thousands of Pentagon staff.

Fourteen people, about half of the 15 month-old office's civilian workforce, are considered

probationary. All but two accepted the buyout, an Army official said.

The cull could be among the first of many at the Defense Department in coming weeks. The Pentagon said in a statement last month that it anticipated firing about 5,400 employees as soon as last week, and it has launched a study that could eventually reduce the department's civilian workforce by 5% to 8%. With more than 900,000 civilian employees, that could lead to tens of thousands of job cuts.

About 30 people staff the center that provides best practices and tools for commanders to mitigate civilian harm, in response to thousands of civilian deaths during U.S. counterinsurgent operations following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The center was established under the Biden administration and passed into law by Congress, but the initial steps for a civilian harm policy began under the first Trump administration.

## Reenlistment low for troops who refused vaccine

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Roughly 650 Marines and Army soldiers who were forced out of the military for refusing to get the COVID-19 vaccine have so far expressed interest in returning to the force under an executive order from President Donald Trump, officials said this week.

The number represents about 8% of the roughly 8,200 troops who had been discharged.

The total, officials say, confirms military leaders' early view that many troops have

moved on with their lives.

They have been allowed to rejoin since 2023, and Trump's offer of providing back pay may be a factor in spurring a bit more interest now.

The Army and Marine Corps have been sending out emails, texts and phone calls to service members discharged for refusing to get the vaccine.

The Navy and the Air Force are planning to begin their efforts to contact service members but are waiting for additional guidance. The totals will

likely increase once formal notices go out.

Officials stressed that the numbers are very preliminary because troops have only expressed interest in reenlisting and haven't actually taken steps to formally do so.

They will have to go through the enlistment procedure again, pass all required legal and moral standards and physical fitness requirements and agree to reenlist for at least two years.

Trump has argued that the vaccine mandate wrongly

pushed troops out and suggested that many would return.

In an executive order signed a week after he took office, Trump said that the mandate cost the military "some of our best people" and he vowed to "rehire every patriot who was fired from the military with ... backpay."

Those who voluntarily left to avoid the vaccine also can rejoin, but they must swear that they left the service for that reason and they will not receive back pay.

# S. Korean bombs accidentally dropped

By DAVID CHOI

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — Several people were injured Thursday in Pocheon city after two South Korean fighter jets accidentally released eight live bombs outside a practice range, according to South Korea's air force.

The MK-82 bombs were "abnormally" dropped at 10:04 a.m. Thursday beyond an unspecified live-fire range by a pair of KF-16 fighters, according to an air force statement to reporters that day. Each jet dropped four bombs, according to the air force.

The bombs were not practice rounds, a Ministry of National Defense spokesman said by phone Thursday. The MK-82 is a 500-pound, 7-foot-long free-fall bomb also employed by the U.S. military. The KF-16 is the South Korean air force's variant of the U.S. F-16 Fighting Falcon.

At least 15 people, including area resi-

dents, were injured in the incident, Yonhap News reported Thursday.

The fighters were taking part in activity "linked" to Freedom Shield, an upcoming, large-scale exercise by U.S. and South Korean forces, a National Defense Ministry spokesman said Thursday in a statement to reporters.

South Korean officials customarily speak to the media on the condition of anonymity.

Pocheon is roughly 20 miles from the border that divides North Korea and South Korea. The city is also the site of several U.S. and South Korean military firing ranges, such as the Rodriguez Live Fire Complex and the Seungjin Science and Technology Training Center.

The air force said the incident is under investigation and the service was implementing "all necessary measures, including compensation for damages."

"We wish the injured a speedy recovery,"

the service said.

In October 2023, a stray 5.56 mm bullet from the Rodriguez complex struck the windshield of an SUV passing beyond the range. The driver was not injured, and the U.S. Eighth Army took responsibility for the incident.

The 10-day Freedom Shield exercise begins Monday and includes sites on land, air and sea throughout South Korea, according to a Thursday joint news release from South Korea's military.

Roughly 19,000 South Korean troops will participate in Freedom Shield, Lee Sung-jun, a South Korea Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman, said during a news conference Thursday in Seoul.

U.S. Forces Korea, the command responsible for 28,500 American troops in South Korea, does not release its troop figures for major military exercises as a matter of policy, citing operational security concerns.

## Former USAID official: Loss of agency is a boon to China

By WYATT OLSON

*Stars and Stripes*

The Trump administration's dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development is a boon to Beijing's designs on Pacific island nations and weakens America's national security, the former China policy lead for USAID told lawmakers Wednesday.

"Destroying a crucial national security tool, the trust of our allies — basically overnight — has not made the United States safer, stronger and more prosperous," Francisco Bencosme said during testimony during a hearing of the House Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs.

"It does not put America first," he said. "It puts the People's Republic of China first, and Pacific prosperity and security last."

The hearing was intended to examine the Office of Insular Affairs' role in fostering prosperity

and addressing external threats to peace and security in the U.S. territories of Guam, American Samoa and Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands. Insular Affairs coordinates federal policy for those three territories and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Democratic subcommittee members, however, continually brought the topic back to the extreme cuts to federal agencies by the Department of Government Efficiency. Thousands of USAID employees have been fired, with only a remnant staff of a few hundred remaining.

Bencosme, whose appointment ended during the Biden administration, focused his comments entirely on the impact of the closure of USAID on Pacific islands security.

"Gutting foreign assistance limits our ability to influence and address the challenges in the Pacific," he said.

## Cobra Gold troops add space to rural school in Thailand

By ALEX WILSON

*Stars and Stripes*

PHU LUANG, Thailand — Hundreds of people gathered Wednesday at a remote school to mark the opening of a new addition built by Thai, South Korean and American troops as part of the Cobra Gold military exercise.

The annual exercise regularly includes myriad live-fire drills, but it also features community outreach events.

This year, troops from participating nations built six multi-purpose rooms for six schools in four Thai provinces over the past month.

In Phu Luang, about 235 miles northeast of Bangkok, U.S. Army soldiers along with troops from Thailand and South Korea completed an approximately 2,000-square-foot building for the Nong Nok Khian Samakki School.

The project will accommodate an influx of new students,

according to Army Sgt. 1st Class Sean Ramones, a platoon sergeant with the 557th Engineer Construction Company from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

"From what I'm hearing, some local schools are shutting down, and that's why this is going to be expanded," Ramones, of Anchorage, Alaska, told Stars and Stripes ahead of the ceremony. "So, it's going to support more kids in the local area."

Students, teachers, local government workers and military leaders from all three countries took part in the opening ceremony, among them 7th Infantry Division commander Maj. Gen. Michelle Schmidt.

"This school is more than just a building, it's an investment in the future of this community, a place where students will learn, grow and build their own futures," she said in brief remarks to the crowd.

# Tariffs on most Mexican goods delayed

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Thursday that he has postponed 25% tariffs on most goods from Mexico for a month after a conversation with that country's president.

Trump's announcement comes after his commerce secretary, Howard Lutnick, said tariffs on both Canada and Mexico would "likely" be delayed. This is the second one-month postponement Trump has announced since first unveiling the import taxes in early February. The reprieve would apply to goods that are compliant with the trade agreement Trump negotiated with Canada and Mexico in his first term.

"We are working hard, together, on the Border, both in terms of stopping illegal aliens from entering the United States and, likewise, stopping fentanyl," Trump said on Truth Social.

Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum posted on X that they "had an excellent and respectful call in which we agreed that our work and collaboration have yielded unprecedented results."

The Mexican government has cracked down on cartels, sent troops to the U.S. border and delivered 29 top cartel bosses long chased by American authorities to the Trump administration in a span of weeks.

Lutnick discussed the delay before the announcement in an interview on CNBC, estimating that more than half of what the U.S. imports from those two countries would be eligible for the exemption.

Lutnick's comments came as Trump's on-again, off-again tariffs threats have roiled financial markets, lowered consumer confidence, and enveloped many businesses in an uncertain atmosphere that could de-

lay hiring and investment. Lutnick emphasized that reciprocal tariffs, in which the United States applies import taxes on countries that tariff U.S. exports, will still be implemented April 2.

U.S. markets bounced off their lows for the day shortly after Lutnick spoke.

Also Thursday, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau indicated that he expects his country will be in a trade war with the United States for the foreseeable future.

Trudeau said the broader month-long pause "aligns with some of the conversations that we have been having with administration officials."

The Canadian leader said the move by the Trump administration was a "promising sign," but it also "means that the tariffs remain in place and therefore our response will remain in place."

Lutnick also said in the inter-

view that if Canada and Mexico don't make enough progress limiting the shipment of fentanyl into the United States, the 25% tariffs could be re-applied in a month as well.

Mexico and Canada have "done a good job offering us ever more work" to show that they are moving to combat shipments of fentanyl, a key demand Trump has made in return for permanently removing the 25% duties.

But Lutnick suggested that the number of U.S. fentanyl overdose deaths will be the key metric the administration will focus on when determining whether Canada and Mexico have done enough.

"We need to see fentanyl deaths decline, that is the metric I am focused on," he said.

Tariffs, in Trump's view, are a cure for a number of the nation's ills and the tool to reach new heights.

## Judge extends block on freezing grants and loans

Associated Press

BOSTON — A second federal judge on Thursday extended a block barring the Trump administration from freezing grants and loans potentially totaling trillions of dollars.

U.S. District Court Judge John McConnell in Rhode Island granted the preliminary injunction in the lawsuit filed by nearly two dozen Democratic states after a Trump administration plan for a sweeping pause on federal

spending stirred up a wave of confusion and anxiety across the United States.

The states say a litany of programs are still waiting for federal funds or some clarity on whether the money is going to be delivered.

Among the funding impacted is billions of dollars that would fund rooftop solar power in low-income neighborhoods, subsidizes low- and moderate-income households' purchase and instal-

lation of electric heat pump water heaters and grants to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other harmful pollutants.

The White House previously said the temporary funding halt would ensure that the payments complied with President Donald Trump's agenda, which includes increasing fossil fuel production and ending diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

The Republican administration has since rescinded a memo

outlining the funding freeze. Still, many state governments, universities and nonprofits have argued federal agencies continue to block funding for a range of programs.

U.S. District Judge Loren AliKhan in Washington has also extended an order blocking the funding freeze. AliKhan granted a preliminary injunction requested by groups representing thousands of nonprofits and small businesses.

## Fired head of watchdog agency dropping legal battle

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The fired head of a federal watchdog agency said Thursday that he's dropping his legal battle over his removal by President Donald Trump.

Hampton Dellinger an-

nounced his decision to drop his case in an emailed statement a day after the federal appeals court in Washington sided with the Trump administration in removing him as the head of the Office of Special Counsel.

The case had become a flash-

point in the debate over how much power the president should have to replace the leaders of independent agencies as he moves to radically reshape and shrink the federal government. The case was expected to go to the U.S. Supreme Court.

But Dellinger said he's dropping his fight because his removal Wednesday means the office "will be run by someone totally beholden to the President" for the months it would take for him to get a final ruling before the Supreme Court.

# Hamas brushes off Trump threat

Associated Press

CAIRO — The Hamas militant group on Thursday brushed off President Donald Trump's latest threat and reiterated that it will only free the remaining Israeli hostages in exchange for a lasting ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas accused Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of trying to back out of the ceasefire agreement they reached in January. The agreement calls for negotiations over a second phase in which the hostages would be released in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners, a permanent ceasefire and an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Hamas spokesman Abdel-Latif al-Qanoua said the "best path to free the remaining Israeli hostages" is through negotiations on that phase, which were supposed to begin in early February. Only limited preparatory talks have been held so far.

On Wednesday, Trump issued what he said was a "last warning" to Hamas after meeting with eight former hostages. The White House meanwhile confirmed it had held unprecedented direct talks with the militant group, which Israel and Western countries view as a terrorist organization.

Hamas is believed to still have 24 living hostages taken in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack that trig-

gered the war, including Israeli-American Edan Alexander. It is also holding the bodies of 34 others who were either killed in the initial attack or in captivity, as well as the remains of a soldier killed in the 2014 war.

Hamas released 25 Israeli hostages and the bodies of eight more in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners in the first, 42-day phase of the ceasefire, which ended on Saturday.

Israel supports what it says is a new U.S. plan for the second phase in which Hamas would release half the remaining hostages immediately and the rest when a permanent ceasefire is negotiated. Hamas has rejected

the proposal and says it is sticking with the agreement signed in January.

Israel has cut off the delivery of food, fuel, medicine and other supplies to Gaza's roughly 2 million Palestinians in an attempt to pressure Hamas into accepting the new arrangement. It has threatened "additional consequences" if Hamas does not resume the release of hostages.

It's unclear if the U.S.-Hamas talks made any progress. The Trump administration has pledged full support for Israel's main war goals of returning all the hostages and eradicating Hamas, which may be incompatible.

# France to keep providing intel to Ukraine

Associated Press

PARIS — France will keep providing military intelligence to Ukraine after Washington announced it was freezing the sharing of information with Kyiv, French defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu said Thursday.

The U.S. said Wednesday it had paused its intelligence sharing with Ukraine, cutting off the flow of vital information that has helped the war-torn na-

tion target Russian invaders, but Trump administration officials have said that positive talks between Washington and Kyiv mean it may only be a short suspension.

American intelligence is vital for Ukraine to track Russian troop movements and select targets.

Speaking to France Inter radio on Thursday, Lecornu said France is continuing its intelli-

gence sharing.

"Our intelligence is sovereign," Lecornu said. "We have intelligence that we allow Ukraine to benefit from."

Lecornu's office later said the sharing of intelligence with Ukraine is not a novelty but "a continuity of service."

Lecornu added that following the U.S. decision to suspend all military aid to Ukraine, French President Emmanuel Macron

asked him to "accelerate the various French aid packages" to make up for the lack of American assistance.

Lecornu said that in the wake of the U.S. decision, shipments of Ukraine-bound aid departing from Poland had been suspended, adding however that "Ukrainians, unfortunately, have learned to fight this war for three years now and know how to stockpile."

# Romania detains 6 suspected of plotting coup

Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania — Six people suspected of colluding with Russia to plot a coup against the Romanian government have been detained, according to police in the European Union and NATO-member country.

Romania's anti-organized crime agency, DIICOT, detained all six on Wednesday for forming a criminal group, which was initially set up in 2023 and had links to Russia.

Police said the group was formed to allegedly undermine the "sovereignty and independence" of the Romanian state by "politically undermining the country's defense capacity."

Investigations supported by Romanian intelligence services revealed that the group allegedly sought "the removal of the current constitutional order, the dissolution of political parties," and the installation of a new government formed by its members, police said.

"In order to achieve their destabilizing objectives, representatives of the group actively requested support from officers within the Embassy of the Russian Federation," said Romania's domestic intelligence agency, the SRI.

The group had "a military-type structure" that aimed to negotiate withdrawal from NATO, which Romania joined in 2004, as well as the adoption of a new Constitution, country name, flag and anthem, police

said.

Two of the suspects allegedly traveled to Moscow in January, where police allege they had contact with individuals who supported "efforts to take over state power in Romania," police said.

On Wednesday, authorities raided eight homes in the municipality of Bucharest and the counties of Ilfov, Giurgiu and Maramures, which police said yielded "several pieces of evidence" that were seized.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Pot gummies send 11 students to hospitals

**NY** MORICHES — Police and a middle school in suburban New York are looking into how a student got hold of marijuana gummies and gave them to about a dozen schoolmates, sending 11 of them to hospitals.

The episode happened Monday morning at William Floyd Middle School in Moriches, a Long Island community. The sickened students are 13- and 14-year-olds, Suffolk County police said.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the student who handed them out knew they contained the drug.

No criminal charges have been filed, and it wasn't immediately clear whether any students will face discipline.

### State may ban multi-pick local election method

**ND** BISMARCK — When Fargo voters approved a unique local election system in 2018, their goal was to choose candidates with broader support to lead North Dakota's largest city.

It worked — maybe too well.

Now the state Legislature is moving to ban the system, with the lawmaker pushing for the restriction saying it elects "vanilla" candidates rather than the "principled" leaders he thinks Fargo residents deserve.

"When you have middle-of-the-road candidates that don't take hard stances, they tend to be more tolerable to more people, and I believe this voting method is attempting to hire those people for the job," said Republican Rep. Ben Koppel-

man, who sponsored the bill banning the system. "It doesn't want any heavily principled people that might be polarizing to some."

Fargo leaders disagree. As Mayor Tim Mahoney puts it, "We think we have a system that allows for any candidate to run but also allows the city (voters) to choose the people they feel best represent them."

Under the system, voters can choose as many candidates as they like, and the one receiving the most votes wins. The system is different from ranked voting, in which voters rank candidates in order of preference.

### Stuck astronauts finally closing in on return to Earth

**FL** CAPE CANAVERAL — NASA's two stuck astronauts are just a few weeks away from finally returning to Earth after nine months in space.

Butch Wilmore and Sunita Williams have to wait until their replacements arrive at the International Space Station next week before they can check out later this month.

They'll be joined on their SpaceX ride home by two astronauts who launched by themselves in September alongside two empty seats.

Speaking from the space station Tuesday, Williams said the hardest part about the unexpected extended stay was the wait by their families.

"It's been a roller coaster for them, probably a little more so than for us," she said.

Wilmore and Williams expected to be gone just a week or so when they launched in June aboard Boeing's new Starliner capsule, making its crew debut after years of delay. The Starlin-

er had so many problems getting to the space station that NASA ruled it too dangerous to carry anyone and it flew back empty.

Their homecoming was further delayed by extra completion time needed for the brand new SpaceX capsule that was supposed to deliver their replacements.

### Governor: Requiring an ultrasound 'goes too far'

**WY** CHEYENNE — A bill that would have required women seeking medication abortions to get ultrasounds has been vetoed by Wyoming's Republican governor, who questioned whether it was reasonable and necessary especially for victims of rape and incest.

"Mandating this intimate, personally invasive, and often medically unnecessary procedure goes too far," Gov. Mark Gordon wrote in a letter explaining his veto late Monday.

The bill would have required women planning medication abortions to arrange and potentially drive long distances for ultrasound appointments in the rural state.

### Survey: More Mexican gray wolves seen in southwest

**NM** ALBUQUERQUE — It is a ritual that takes place every winter — federal and state wildlife managers use remote cameras, scat collection, radio telemetry devices and helicopters to count Mexican gray wolves that are roaming mountain ranges in parts of New Mexico and Arizona.

The predators that are captured during the annual survey are weighed and vaccinated,

their blood is drawn and their radio collars are checked. It is all part of a decades-long effort to gauge the success of the work being done to return the endangered species to its historic range in the southwestern U.S. and in Mexico.

This year's count shows the recovery of Mexican wolves is inching forward. There are at least 286 Mexican wolves in the wild in New Mexico and Arizona. It's 11% more than the previous year, and it marks the ninth straight year that the population has grown. Reintroductions began in 1998 with the release of 11 captive-reared wolves in southeastern Arizona.

There are 26 breeding pairs in the wild — 16 in New Mexico and 10 in Arizona.

### Governor returns from overseas with broken arm

**CT** HARTFORD — Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont has returned from a state trade mission to India with a broken arm.

The Democrat appeared Monday at a state Capitol news conference with his left arm in a sling. Lamont, who is right-handed, said he slipped on wet marble sometime during his weeklong visit.

"It's broken," he told reporters, noting how the cost of his medical treatment in India was a bargain.

"I'll tell you that it broke, I get a nurse, I go and get an X-ray, they give me this sling. I come back, I go talk to this business group and I said, 'You guys are amazing, it only cost \$10.' They said, 'You got ripped off.'"

"That's India," Lamont added.

— From wire reports

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## Reporting World, National and Military News

# Florida tops Alabama in key SEC matchup

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Alex Condon had 27 points and 10 rebounds to lead No. 5 Florida to a 99-94 win over No. 7 Alabama on Wednesday night.

The Gators (26-4, 13-4 Southeastern Conference) also got 22 points and eight assists from Walter Clayton Jr. Florida strengthened its NCAA Tournament resume with a second road win over a top 10 team, after beating No. 1 Auburn on earlier this season. It's the first time in program history the Gators have done it twice in one season.

The win could put Florida ahead of Tennessee in the race for the final No. 1 seed.

Mark Sears led the Crimson Tide (23-7, 12-5) with 30 points, six rebounds and five assists. Alabama also got 19 points from Labaron Philon, 11 from Clifford Omoruyi and 10 points each from Grant Nelson and Aiden Sherrell.

The Crimson Tide are rarely beaten on the glass, but the Gators outrebounded Alabama 50-35, including a 16-10 edge on the offensive end.

**Mississippi 78, No. 4 Tennessee 76:** Jaemyn Brakefield scored all 19 of his points in the final 11 minutes, including a tie-breaking basket with 7 seconds remaining that lifted the host Rebels to an upset over the Volunteers.

Brakefield rebounded a missed 3-pointer from Sean Pedulla and fought through traffic inside to convert the decisive layup. Malik Dia and Dre Davis had 13 points apiece for Ole Miss (21-9, 10-7 Southeastern Conference), and Matthew Murrell added 12.

The Rebels are 5-0 in games decided by four points or fewer since late January.

Tennessee (24-6, 11-6) had an opportunity in the last few seconds, but a short running jumper by Igor Milicic Jr. bounced off the rim. The loss snapped a four-game winning streak.

Jordan Gainey scored 17 points, Chaz Lanier had 15 and Felix Okpara added 13 points and seven rebounds for the Volunteers.

**No. 9 Texas Tech 91, Colorado 75:** JT Toppin had 30 points and 14 rebounds as the host Red Raiders led throughout in a win over the Buffaloes, clinching a double-bye into the quarterfinal round in next week's Big 12 Tournament.

It was 13th double-double this season for Toppin, the sophomore who is a transfer from New Mexico. He led five players scoring in double figures for Texas Tech (23-7, 14-5 Big 12) in its home finale.

Chance McMillian added 15 points, while Christian Anderson and Kerwin Walton each had 12. Darrion Williams scored 11.

Bangot Dak and Sebastian Rancik each scored 12 points for Colorado (11-19, 2-17).

**No. 11 Clemson 78, Boston College 69:** Jaeden Zackery returned to Chestnut Hill and scored 21 points against his former team, hitting a key 3-pointer after the host Eagles cut a 16-point deficit to two and leading the Tigers to a victory.

Chase Hunter added 18 points and Viktor Lakhin scored 11 with 13 rebounds to help Clemson (25-5, 17-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) win its seventh straight game.

Jayden Hastings scored 18 for Boston College (12-18, 4-15).

The Tigers led by 16 in the first half and still held a 62-53 edge midway through the second before the Eagles scored seven straight points to make it a two-point game. But then Lakhin muscled one in underneath and Zackery hit a corner 3 to extend the lead to seven.

**No. 12 Wisconsin 74, Minnesota 67:** John Blackwell had 25 points and a career-high 11 rebounds to help the visiting Badgers beat the Golden Gophers.

John Tonje added 18 points

and seven boards for Wisconsin (23-7, 13-6), which forged a three-way tie for third place in the Big Ten with a top-four seed and the accompanying double-bye for the conference tournament in sight.

The Badgers, the national free-throw shooting leader, went 21 for 24. Minnesota, the Big Ten's worst team at the line, was 8 for 15.

Brennan Rigsby led the Gophers (15-15, 7-12) with 18 points and Lu'Cye Patterson added 15 points in Minnesota's ninth straight loss to Wisconsin. Dawson Garcia, the Big Ten's fourth-leading scorer, had 14 points on 6-for-17 shooting in his last home game.

**No. 13 Maryland 71, No. 17 Michigan 65:** Derik Queen had 17 points and 12 rebounds, leading the visiting Terrapins to a win over the Wolverines that gave No. 8 Michigan State at least a share of the Big Ten title.

Michigan (22-8, 14-5) has lost two straight and three of its last four home games, falling out of first place in the conference.

Maryland took control by holding the Wolverines to a season-low 22 points in the first half while building an 11-point lead.

Michigan hurt its comeback chances with nine turnovers in the second half.

Rodney Rice scored 19 points and Selton Miguel had 17 for the Terrapins.

Vladislav Goldin and Danny Wolf each scored 20 points, and Tre Donaldson added 10 points and six assists for the Wolverines.

**No. 14 Louisville 85, California 68:** Terrance Edwards Jr. scored a career-high 35 points to lead the host Cardinals to a victory over the Bears.

Edwards, the Sun Belt Player of the Year last season for James Madison, provided early offense as he made six of his first eight shots to give Louisville (24-6, 17-2 Atlantic Coast

Conference) a 22-19 lead with 7:22 remaining before halftime.

Meanwhile, Edwards' teammates missed a combined 10 of 11 shots during that span. Edwards shot 11-for-19 overall from the field and set a career high with seven 3-pointers in 11 attempts.

Chucky Hepburn added 16 points, seven rebounds and five assists for the Cardinals. J'Vonne Hadley finished with 16 points and eight rebounds.

Jovan Blacksher Jr. scored 22 points for California (13-17, 6-13), which also got 11 from Jeremiah Wilkerson.

**Oklahoma 96, No. 15 Missouri 84:** Freshman guard Jeremiah Fears scored a career-high 31 points and the host Sooners defeated the Tigers to boost their NCAA Tournament hopes.

It was Oklahoma's fifth win over a Top 25 team this season, and Missouri was the highest ranked among them. The Sooners (18-12, 5-12 Southeastern Conference) were coming off losses to ranked opponents Kentucky and Ole Miss by a combined four points.

Mark Mitchell scored 18 points and Caleb Grill added 16 points and eight rebounds for the Tigers (21-9, 10-7), who have lost three of four.

**UConn 72, No. 20 Marquette 66:** Alex Karaban scored 21 points, including a pivotal 3-pointer with 23.7 seconds left, and the host Huskies defeated the Golden Eagles.

Liam McNeely had 11 points and Samson Johnson added 10 points and 11 rebounds for UConn (21-9, 13-6 Big East), which pulled into a tie with Marquette for third place in the conference standings.

The Huskies own the tie-breaker after sweeping the season series.

Solo Ball and Hassan Diarra each scored 10 points as the two-time defending NCAA champions beat the Golden Eagles for the fifth straight time.

# Giannis: 20K points due to steady work ethic

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Milwaukee Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo believes his latest milestone should serve as a testament to his consistent work ethic.

Antetokounmpo scored 32 points in a 137-107 victory over the Dallas Mavericks on Wednesday to increase his career total to 20,010, becoming the 52nd player to reach that mark. The only players to score 20,000 career points at a younger age than the 30-year-old Antetokounmpo were LeBron James, Kevin Durant, Kobe Bryant, Wilt Chamberlain and Michael Jordan.

"I hope a lot of people see me and I represent the people who might not have it all, might not be the most talented people, but they are disciplined and they show up every night to do the right thing," Antetokounmpo said. "No matter the outcome, they keep coming back and keep on being disciplined in their craft. I hope I can represent all those people."

Antetokounmpo reshaped his body and transformed his game after the Bucks selected the raw and athletic 18-year-old from Greece with the 15th overall pick in the 2013 draft.

As he launched his NBA career, Antetokounmpo said he spoke with plenty of former players to ask what it takes to succeed at this level.

"They told me that the best players — the greats — never get bored," Antetokounmpo said.

Antetokounmpo said he took that message to heart as he developed into a two-time MVP. He believes his heart, spirit and work ethic help separate him from other players.

As an example, Antetokounmpo discussed his postgame routine after Milwaukee completed its most lopsided victory of the season while playing on a second straight night. He kissed his children goodnight and completed his media session before lifting weights, something he makes sure to do after every game.

"It doesn't matter what I feel — if I feel good, bad, if I'm bored or I'm excited," Antetokounmpo said. "If I've lost the game or won the game, it does not matter. I will do what's necessary. I will do the job. I won't negotiate with myself."

That approach has helped Antetokounmpo become one of the most consistent superstars of his generation.

Antetokounmpo entered Wednesday's action ranked second in the league in scoring (30.8), sixth in rebounding (12.1) and 23rd in assists (6.0). Last season, he became the first player in NBA history to average 30 points while shooting at least 60% from the floor. He's on pace to do it again this year.

"It's like Groundhog Day," Bucks coach Doc Rivers said. "He does it every day, same thing. I think at times we do take it for granted. And we really shouldn't."

It perhaps was only fitting that Antetokounmpo reached this

milestone against Dallas. Antetokounmpo began his NBA career in Milwaukee playing for Jason Kidd, who now coaches the Mavericks.

The Bucks aired a video honoring Antetokounmpo during the timeout that immediately followed him crossing the 20,000-point mark. He became the second player on Milwaukee's roster to join the 20,000-point mark, as Damian Lillard got there last season.

Lillard noted how Antetokounmpo compiled all those points in a much different way.

"In a time where the league is shooting a lot of 3s and a lot of scorers shoot a lot of 3s, for him to be doing it mostly in the paint and at the rim and at the free throw line, that's tough," Lillard said. "A lot of physical buckets. He's playing through a lot of contact consistently. So even more so for him, your body has to be able to take that. You've got to be able to sustain that style of play for a long period of time. It says a lot about him."

## Pritchard scores career-high 43 as Celtics top Blazers

Associated Press

BOSTON — Payton Pritchard scored a career-high 43 points and knocked down a career-best 10 3-pointers to lead the short-handed Boston Celtics past the Portland Trail Blazers 128-118 on Wednesday night.

Derrick White added career highs with 41 points and nine 3s to lead Boston to its eighth victory in 10 games, making Pritchard and White the first Celtic duo to score 40 or more points in the same game and the first duo in NBA history with nine or more 3-pointers each in a game.

With starters Jayson Tatum (shoulder), Jrue Holiday (finger) and Kristaps Porzingis (illness) all sitting out, Pritchard picked up the scoring load for a Boston team that made 23 3-pointers.

Anfernee Simons led Portland with 30 points and Shaedon Sharpe added 25.

**Timberwolves 125, Hornets 110:** Anthony Edwards and Jaden McDaniels scored 29 points apiece and visiting Minnesota beat Charlotte.

Julius Randle finished with 25 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists for the Timber-

wolves, who won their third straight. McDaniels grabbed 10 rebounds.

**Cavaliers 112, Heat 107:** Donovan Mitchell scored 26 points, Darius Garland had 10 assists and host Cleveland survived some sloppiness in the final two minutes to win their 12th straight game, over banged-up Miami.

With the win, the Cavs became the first team to clinch a playoff berth.

**Wizards 125, Jazz 122:** Kyshawn George scored 23 points, Alex Sarr added 21 and host Washington edged Utah.

Seven of the nine players used by the Wizards were in double figures, with Justin Champagnie coming off the bench for 17 points.

**Bucks 137, Mavericks 107:** Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 32 points to bring his career total over 20,000, Damian Lillard added 34 points and Kevin Porter Jr. had a triple-double as surging Milwaukee trounced short-handed Dallas.

Antetokounmpo, who played less than 25 minutes, also had 15 rebounds as the host Bucks won for the eighth time in their

last nine games.

**Nuggets 116, Kings 110:** Nikola Jokic had 22 points and 14 rebounds, Russell Westbrook scored 25 points, and host Denver rallied in the fourth quarter to beat Sacramento.

Jamal Murray added 24 points for the Nuggets, who have won the first three games between the teams this season.

**Thunder 120, Grizzlies 103:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 41 points and keyed a third-quarter rally as visiting Oklahoma City beat Memphis.

Jalen Williams added 20 points and Aaron Wiggins had 16 for the Thunder, who have now won five straight games and seven of their last eight. Isaiah Hartenstein finished with 10 points and 15 rebounds.

**Clippers 123, Pistons 115:** James Harden scored 50 points, his 24th career 50-point game and first with Los Angeles, and the host Clippers beat Detroit.

Harden scored 23 in the first quarter and ended up with the eighth 50-point game in franchise history, the first since Lou Williams on Jan. 10, 2018, at Golden State.

# Florida, Tampa deal before NHL trade deadline

Associated Press

While the Tampa Bay Lightning answered the cross-state-rival and defending Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers' activity ahead of the NHL trade deadline with a big move of their own Wednesday to bolster their playoff chances, an Eastern Conference bottom-feeder well out of contention was a buyer of sorts.

Tampa Bay acquired forwards Yanni Gourde and Oliver Bjorkstrand from Seattle in a three-team trade that also involved Detroit facilitating by retaining salary. They sent conditional 2026 and '27 first-round picks, a second-rounder this year and winger Mikey Eysimont to the Kraken and a fifth-rounder this year to the Red Wings.

The Lightning also received a 2026 fifth-round pick and the rights to unsigned prospect Kyle Aucoin as part of another aggressive maneuver by two-time Cup-winning general manager Julien BriseBois, who is again reinforcing his roster to try to make a long playoff run.

"We're adding two players that are going to play significant minutes for us and two players that are highly competitive, have had success in the postseason in

the past, have raised, have elevated their game when it matters most," BriseBois told reporters in Tampa.

Reacquiring Gourde, who was part of those back-to-back title teams in 2020 and '21, and adding Bjorkstrand gives coach Jon Cooper and the Lightning — currently the hottest team in the league with 10 wins in their last 12 games — some valuable depth. Gourde just returned Tuesday night from sports hernia surgery to repair an injury that caused him to miss the past two months.

Seattle retained half of Gourde's salary and Detroit another quarter, so Tampa Bay gets him at the bargain cap hit of just under \$1.3 million. The first-round picks the next two years are top-10 protected, and the Kraken could receive additional compensation as a result.

"Oliver and Yanni were tremendous players for our organization who led by example on and off the ice," Seattle GM Ron Francis said. "Decisions like these are never easy, but creating this valuable cap space and draft capital allows us to be active in improving our team moving forward."

BriseBois is glad to have Bjorkstrand, who turns 30 in

April, under contract through next season and expressed optimism about also re-signing Gourde, who is back with the Lightning at age 33. Gourde did not choose to leave Tampa, but rather was taken by the Kraken in the expansion draft in 2021.

Of course, trading one or more first-round picks to make deadline deals has become a nearly annual tradition for BriseBois. He did so for Barclay Goodrow and Blake Coleman in 2020, David Savard in 2021, Brandon Hagelin in 2022 and Tanner Jeannotin in 2023. The Lightning don't have a first-rounder again until 2028, but BriseBois expects to be picking between 20-32 every year and has pointed out the value there is not the same as No. 1.

Plus, he'd rather be responsible for championship banners hanging from the rafters than choosing 18-year-old prospects in the draft.

"I'd rather have a lineup full of good players than a bank of a ton of draft picks because I think ultimately what we're trying to do is win hockey games," BriseBois said at his news conference. "What guides us, what drives us is trying to win a championship, and that's really hard."

While the odds of the final fea-

turing a team based in the state of Florida for a sixth consecutive year went up, the path through the Atlantic Division and the Eastern Conference is a difficult one.

Tampa Bay's salvo came hours after the Panthers remained active before the 3 p.m. EST deadline Friday, acquiring goaltender Vitek Vanecek from the San Jose Sharks for 25-year-old forward Patrick Giles.

Vanecek gives Florida depth in net, along with Chris Driedger, behind two-time Vezina Trophy-winning starter Sergei Bobrovsky, who backstopped the Panthers to their first Cup championship in franchise history last year. Florida also signed Jesse Puljujarvi a month after the Finnish winger mutually terminated his contract with Pittsburgh.

The Sharks held Vanecek out of their game Tuesday night at Buffalo in preparation of trading the 29-year-old from Czechia.

"Unfortunately sometimes players get moved," said San Jose goaltender Alexandar Georgiev, who was traded there from Colorado for Mackenzie Blackwood earlier this season. "Hopefully it's a good opportunity for him."

# Ovechkin gets goal No. 885 as Caps beat Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Alex Ovechkin got his 885th career goal to tie it midway through the third period, Tom Wilson scored 4:07 into overtime and the Washington Capitals rallied to beat the New York Rangers 3-2 on Wednesday night.

Ovechkin pulled nine goals from tying Wayne Gretzky's NHL record, and Pierre-Luc Dubois also scored for the Capitals. Charlie Lindgren had 15 saves as Washington got its second straight win.

Artemi Panarin and Sam Carrick scored for the Rangers, and Igor Shesterkin had 23 saves. New York, which began the day in a playoff position for the first time since Dec. 11, lost for just the second time in six games.

In the extra period, Wilson deflected a

pass from Dylan Strome on a 2-on-1 break after Strome got around a sliding defender.

**Senators 4, Blackhawks 3 (OT):** Tim Stutzle scored on a deflection off his skate at 46 seconds of overtime to give visiting Ottawa a victory over Chicago.

Off a turnover, Stutzle raced deep into the zone and cut across the crease, with the puck striking his skate and going past goalie Arvid Soderblom.

**Golden Knights 5, Maple Leafs 2:** Jack Eichel, Noah Hanifin and Tomas Hertl each had a goal and an assist and host Vegas beat Toronto for its third straight win.

The Golden Knights, who won for the sixth time in their last seven games, increased their lead in the Pacific Division to six points ahead of the Edmonton Oilers.

**Blues 3, Kings 2 (SO):** Robert Thomas scored the decisive goal in the shootout and scored a goal in regulation to extend his point streak to 11 games as visiting St. Louis beat Los Angeles.

Jake Neighbours also scored for the Blues late in the first period while Jordan Binnington made 21 saves as St. Louis played its second game of a six-game trip and the first of three in Southern California.

**Canucks 3, Ducks 2:** Carson Soucy scored the winner as host Vancouver downed Anaheim.

Jake DeBrusk put away his team-leading 22nd goal of the season for the Canucks on a second-period power play. Teddy Blueger followed with a goal and Filip Hronek contributed a pair of assists.