

## Omicron variant puts world on alert

*Associated Press*

LONDON — Britain became the latest country Saturday to report cases of the new potentially more contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus as governments around the world sought to shore up their defenses by slapping restrictions on travel from nations in southern Africa.

Amid fears that the recently identified new variant has the potential to be more resistant to the protection offered by vaccines, there are growing concerns that the pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions will persist for far longer than hoped.

U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid confirmed that two people have tested positive with the omicron variant in the southeastern English town of Chelmsford and in the central city of Nottingham. He said the cases were linked and related to travel from southern Africa.

Javid said the two confirmed cases are self-isolating alongside their households while contact tracing and targeted testing takes place. He also added four more countries — Angola, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia — onto the country's travel red list from Sunday. Six others — Botswana, Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland), Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe — were added

Friday. That means anyone permitted to arrive from those destinations will have to quarantine.

"This is a real reminder that this pandemic is far from over," he said. "If we need to take further action, we will."

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, along with his top advisers, was to hold a briefing later Saturday.

Many countries have slapped restrictions on various southern African countries over the past couple of days including Australia, Brazil, Canada, the European Union, Iran, Japan, Thailand and the United States, in response to warnings over the transmissibility of the new variant — against the advice of the World Health Organization. Pharmaceutical companies expressed optimism that they could finesse their vaccines to deal with the new variant though that would clearly take some time.

Despite the banning of flights, there are mounting concerns that the variant has already been widely seeded around the world. In addition to the U.K., cases have been reported in travelers in Belgium, Israel and Hong Kong. Germany also said it suspected a positive case and Dutch authorities were testing whether 61 people who arrived on two flights from South Africa with COVID-19 have the omicron variant.

The planes arrived in the Netherlands from Johannesburg and Cape Town shortly after the Dutch government imposed a ban on flights from southern African nations. The 539 travelers who tested negative were allowed to return home or continue their journeys to other countries. Under government regulations, those who live in the Netherlands and are allowed to return home must self-isolate for at least five days.

Meanwhile, a German official said that there's a "very high probability" that the omicron variant has already arrived in the country.

Kai Klose, the health minister for Hesse state, which includes Frankfurt, said in a tweet that "several mutations typical of omicron" were found Friday night in a traveler returning from South Africa, who was isolated at home. Sequencing of the test had yet to be completed.

The global health body has named the new variant omicron, labeling it a variant of concern because of its high number of mutations and some early evidence that it carries a higher degree of infection than other variants. That means people who contracted COVID-19 and recovered could be subject to catching it again. It could take weeks to know if current vaccines are less effective against it.

## Poland seeks more NATO forces amid Russia concerns

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTT GART, Germany — Poland has urged NATO to send reinforcements east over concerns about Russia's military buildup near Ukraine, which is expected to be the focus of high-level alliance talks in Latvia this week that will include U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

President Andrzej Duda said Thursday at NATO headquarters in Brussels that a beefed up military presence along NATO's eastern flank is needed given concerns over Russian's intentions in the region.

"This cautiousness and vigilance from NATO, which is responsible for the military security of the allies, is necessary," Duda told reporters after a meeting with NATO

Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

Duda said NATO's boosted presence could be demonstrated through strengthening its air policing role and border surveillance capabilities in the east, along with the deployment of additional units to the region. He also said that "strengthening of the readiness" of NATO units already deployed in Poland and the Baltic states should be considered.

"It is also our request that the readiness of the alliance be increased, that the strategic cautiousness be increased and especially the monitoring of that situation along the eastern flank of NATO," he said.

The request comes as Poland contends with a crisis on its border with Belarus, a close ally of Russia's.

For weeks, thousands of migrants have been involved in a standoff at the border as they try to gain entry to Poland. Similar events have occurred along Belarus' borders with allies Lithuania and Latvia, where NATO foreign ministers will meet Tuesday.

Allies have accused the government of Belarus, which faces a range of economic sanctions by the European Union, of orchestrating the border crisis.

Meanwhile, Russia's military buildup outside eastern Ukraine has stoked fears that Moscow is planning for a large-scale invasion of that country.

For NATO, both issues will be atop the agenda when foreign ministers meet in Riga for two days of talks.

# NATO chief to Russia: Attack will cost

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned Russia Friday that any attempt to invade Ukraine would have costs, as concern mounts about a Russian military buildup near its former Soviet neighbor's borders.

Ukraine says Moscow kept about 90,000 troops near their common border following massive war games in western Russia earlier this year. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry said units of the Russian 41st army remain near Yelnya, about 160 miles north of the border.

Moscow denies that it's planning any invasion and refuses to provide details about troop movements on its own territory.

"If Russia uses force against Ukraine that will have costs, that would have consequences," Stoltenberg said, ahead of a meeting of the 30-nation military organization's foreign ministers in Latvia Nov. 30-Dec. 1, where Russia's activities will be high on the agenda. He did not say what those costs would be.

"This is the second time this year that

Russia has amassed a large and unusual concentration of forces in the region," Stoltenberg told reporters. He said it includes tanks, artillery, armored units, drones, and electronic warfare systems, as well as combat-ready troops.

"This military buildup is unprovoked and unexplained. It raises tensions and it risks miscalculations," Stoltenberg said. He conceded that "there is no certainty about the intentions of Russia" but said that "this is a military buildup by a country that has invaded Ukraine before."

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 after the country's Moscow-friendly president was driven from power by mass protests. Weeks later, Russia threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency that broke out in Ukraine's east.

Ukraine and the West accused Russia of sending its troops and weapons to back the rebels. Moscow denied that, saying that Russians who joined the separatists were volunteers. More than 14,000 people have died in the fighting that devastated Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland known as Donbas.

A 2015 peace agreement brokered by France and Germany helped end large-scale battles, but efforts to reach a political settlement have failed and sporadic skirmishes have continued along the tense line of contact.

NATO would not be able to provide Ukraine with any substantial military support in time to make a difference against Russian forces, so economic measures like Western sanctions are more likely to be used to inflict a financial cost on Moscow.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday alleged that his country's intelligence service has uncovered plans for a Russia-backed coup d'etat in Ukraine this week, something which the Russian government denied.

U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Friday spoke with the head of the Presidential Administration in Ukraine, Andriy Yermak. The two discussed their shared concerns about ongoing Russian military activities near Ukraine's border, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement.

## Biden sees coronavirus as culprit for woes in US

By ZEKE MILLER

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Inflation is soaring, businesses are struggling to hire and President Joe Biden's poll numbers have been in free-fall. The White House sees a common culprit for it all: COVID-19.

Biden's team views the pandemic as the root cause of both the nation's malaise and his own political woes. Finally controlling COVID-19, the White House believes, is the skeleton key to rejuvenating the country and reviving Biden's own standing.

But the coronavirus challenge has proved to be vexing for the White House, with last summer's premature claims of victory swamped by the more transmissible delta variant, stubborn millions of Americans unvaccinated and lingering eco-

nomics effects from the pandemic's darkest days.

All of that as yet another variant of the virus, omicron, emerged overseas. It is worrying public health officials, leading to new

### ANALYSIS

travel bans and panicking markets as scientists race to understand how dangerous it may be.

Although the economy has actually been coming back, there are multiple signs that COVID-19 will leave its scars even if the pandemic fades.

For now, in the administration's view, an intransigent minority that is resisting vaccination is spoiling the recovery for the rest of the country — forcing masks on the vaccinated and contributing to lingering anxiety everywhere you look.

Asked why Americans aren't getting the message that the economy is improving, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said earlier this month: "We're still in the middle of fighting a pandemic and people are sick and tired of that. We are, too."

The state of affairs, she said, affects everything from how people feel about sending their kids out the door to the price for a gallon of gas.

The administration views vaccination mandates as critical, not only to preventing avoidable illness and death but to safeguarding the economic recovery — and salvaging Biden's political position.

"We have the tools to accelerate the path out of this pandemic widely available," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff

Zients told a coronavirus briefing. While he ruled out large-scale lockdowns like the United States experienced in 2020 and like those popping up again across Europe, Zients renewed the administration's appeals for more Americans to get their shots.

But on Friday, the discovery of the new variant in southern Africa had much of the world acting to to shut down travel from the region and contain a threat that the World Health Organization suggested could be worse than the ravaging waves from delta.

Biden on Friday appealed for unvaccinated Americans to be "responsible" and get the shot and for those eligible for a booster to get that, too. "That is the minimum that everyone should be doing."

# Shippers prep for another gift surge

*Associated Press*

PORTLAND, Maine — The last holiday season was far from the most wonderful time of the year for the U.S. Postal Service: sick and quarantined workers, a flood of packages from shoppers loathe to set foot in stores and a last-minute dump of packages from overwhelmed private shippers.

Postal workers who recall packages and letters piled up in distribution hubs are better prepared this time as they gear up for another pandemic crunch. But low product inventories and port and supply chain disruptions are creating new uncertainty about getting gifts delivered.

Already, workers are seeing a surge in holiday packages that began several weeks ago.

“A lot of the workers are saying, ‘Oh no. Here we go again,’” said Scott Adams, local

president of the American Postal Workers Union in Portland.

The U.S. Postal Service and private shippers UPS and FedEx are bolstering their hiring—bringing in about 230,000 temporary workers—and taking other steps to ensure they don’t become overwhelmed by packages.

Nearly 3.4 billion parcels are expected to crisscross the country this holiday season, representing an estimated increase of about 400 million compared to last year, said Satish Jindel, from Pennsylvania-based ShipMatrix, which analyzes shipping package data.

When cards and letters are included, the U.S. Postal Service said it’ll be delivering more than 12 billion items.

“The pandemic is still here. The supply chain is a challenge that’s going to impact

how people shop and how products move,” said Mark Dimondstein, president of the American Postal Workers Union, which represents more than 200,000 postal workers.

Despite the precarious situation, the Postal Service, UPS and FedEx are in better shape to handle the peak volume, and several trends could work in their favor, Jindel said.

More people are shopping in stores compared to last year, and people have been placing online orders earlier because they’re keenly aware of supply chain problems, Jindel said. Also, with workers returning to offices, there are fewer office supply shipments being made to homes, he said.

Most importantly, the shippers are adapting after their rough-and-tumble experience last year, he said.

## Biden sets out oil, gas leasing program reform

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration on Friday recommended an overhaul of the nation’s oil and gas leasing program to limit areas available for energy development and raise costs for oil and gas companies to drill on public land and water.

The long-awaited report by the Interior Department stops short of recommending an end to oil and gas leasing on public lands, as many environmental groups have urged. But officials said the report would lead to a more responsible leasing process that provides a better return to U.S. taxpayers.

“Our nation faces a profound climate crisis that is impacting every American, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland said in a state-

ment, adding that the new report’s recommendations will mitigate worsening climate change impacts “while staying steadfast in the pursuit of environmental justice.

The report completes a review ordered in January by President Joe Biden, who directed a pause in federal oil and gas lease sales in his first days in office, citing worries about climate change. It seeks a middle ground that would continue the multibillion-dollar leasing program while reforming it to end what many officials consider overly favorable terms for the industry.

The report recommends hiking federal royalty rates for oil and gas drilling, which have not been raised for 100 years. The fed-

eral rate of 12.5% that developers must pay to drill on public lands is significantly lower than many states and private landowners charge for drilling leases on state or private lands.

The report also said the government should consider raising bond payments that energy companies must set aside for future cleanup before they drill new wells. Bond rates have not been increased in decades, the report said.

The Bureau of Land Management, an Interior Department agency, should focus leasing offers on areas that have moderate to high potential for oil and gas resources and are close to existing oil and gas infrastructure, the report said.

## Oil tanker’s master cites fatigue ahead of crash

*Associated Press*

NEW ORLEANS — An oil tanker hit an offshore oil platform at night off Louisiana because its Turkish operating company didn’t give the ship’s master time to recover from days of sleepless travel, federal investigators have found.

The master, or person in charge of sailing the *Atina*, had

traveled from Istanbul and told investigators “he was tired from having no sleep for over 50 hours,” according to a National Transportation Safety Board report made public Tuesday.

The crash early Oct. 17, 2020, did an estimated \$72.9 million in damage — \$72.3 million to the platform SP-57B and the rest to the tanker *Atina*, the board said.

However, nobody was hurt when the empty 898-foot-long ship ran into the platform at 4:46 a.m., and there wasn’t any pollution, the board said.

The “accident master” took over immediately from the departing master even though the operating company’s own safety manual calls for a 24-hour overlap, the report said. Such an

overlap would have let him rest, it said.

The report described the accident’s probable cause as the “operating company not ensuring sufficient time for the master’s turnover, which resulted in the master’s acute fatigue and poor situation awareness during an attempted nighttime anchoring evolution.”

## Professor of book on adults attracted to minors resigns

*New York Daily News*

A Virginia professor who recently published research on adults who are attracted to minors is resigning amid “multiple threats.”

Ally Walker, who’s transgender and uses they/them pronouns, announced their resignation on Wednesday — eight days after they were placed on administrative leave.

Walker is an assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice at Old Dominion University. Their book, “A Long, Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity,” was published in June and it sought to challenge “widespread assumptions” that people who are attracted to minors “are necessarily also predators and sex offenders,” according to its publisher.

The book, for which Walker interviewed more than 40 “non-offending minor-attracted persons” aims to offer an account of the “lived experiences of this hidden population,” and it argues that destigmatizing that attraction could ultimately lead to the prevention of sexual abuse.

“I worry that my readers will somehow think that I am downplaying sexual abuse against children or that I am even trying to normalize it,” the professor wrote in the preface of the book. “Nothing could be further from the truth,” they added.

While the research was praised by some scholars — including Jill Levenson, a professor of social work at Florida’s Barry University, who said that the “book will help prevent harm and enhance well-being” — it also generated widespread criticism.

An online petition calling for the firing of Walker has been signed by nearly 15,000 people.

ODU President Brian O. Hemphill confirmed that Walker would step down at the end of the academic year in May.

## Police find bodies after rioting in Solomon Islands

*Associated Press*

CANBERRA, Australia — Solomon Islands police found three bodies in a burned-out building and arrested more than 100 people in last week’s violence sparked by concerns about the Pacific nation’s increasing links with China.

Australian media reported the bodies were recovered late Friday after riots and protests subsided. No other details were given.

Authorities imposed a curfew in the capital Honiara, after a 36-hour lockdown ordered by the embattled Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare ended Friday.

Sogavare blamed outside interference for stirring up the protests calling for his resignation, with a thinly veiled reference to Taiwan and the United States.

Sogavare has been widely criticized by leaders of the country’s most populous island of Malaita for a 2019 decision to drop diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of mainland China. Beijing claims the self-ruled island of Taiwan as part of its territory.

His government, meanwhile, has been upset over millions in U.S. aid promised directly to Malaita, rather than through the central government on the largest island of Guadalcanal, where Honiara is located. The two islands have been rivals for decades.

Andrew Yang, a professor at Taiwan’s National Sun Yat-sen University and former deputy defense minister, said China’s efforts to win diplomatic recognition from the Solomon Islands are part of a competition for regional dominance with the United States and its ally, Australia. The Solomon Islands, with a population of about 700,000, are about 1,000 miles northeast of Australia.

Riots and looting targeting Hoinara’s Chinatown and downtown precincts erupted Wednesday out of a peaceful protest in the capital by people from Malaita. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the demonstrators, who set fire to the National Parliament, a police station and many other buildings.

Critics also blamed the unrest on complaints of a lack of government services and accountability, corruption and Chinese businesses giving jobs to foreigners instead of locals.

Since the 2019 shift in allegiance from Taiwan to China, there has been an expectation of massive infrastructure investment from Beijing — locally rumored to be in the range of \$500 million — but with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic shortly after the shift, none of that has yet materialized.

Malaita threatened to hold a referendum on independence over the issue, but that was quashed by Sogavare’s government.

A plane carrying Australian police and diplomats are in Honiara to help local police restore order. Up to 50 more Australian police and 43 defense force personnel were also deployed following a request by Sogavare under a bilateral treaty with Australia. The presence of an independent force, though small, seemed to help quell some of the violence.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has been following the protests “with concern,” his deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said: “(Guterres) calls for an end to the violence and the protection of hard-won peacebuilding gains. He urges dialogue and peaceful means to address differences,” Haq said in a statement on Friday.

## ‘Flash mob’ smash-and-grabs continue in LA

*Los Angeles Times*

LOS ANGELES — More smash-and-grab “flash mob” robberies at luxury stores have police and retailers struggling with how to crack down on the crimes.

A rash of such thefts continued in Los Angeles as organized groups descended on stores and grabbed expensive merchandise in pre-Thanksgiving raids around the city.

On Wednesday night, a security guard

was attacked with bear spray as several people entered the Nordstrom store at the Westfield Topanga & the Village shopping center in Canoga Park, grabbed merchandise and ran out, according to the Los Angeles Police Department. Police are investigating a similar incident the same night in which groups struck several stores in the Beverly Center in the Beverly Grove neighborhood

The thefts came two days after an orga-

nized group broke into a Nordstrom at The Grove shopping center by smashing a window and stole thousands of dollars’ worth of merchandise, police said.

LAPD Chief Michel Moore told the Los Angeles Police Commission that the department would be stepping up patrols and dedicating additional resources to some higher-end locations to deter the wave of mob thefts.

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Missing 54 years, slain officer's badge found**

**IL** CHAMPAIGN — Zane Ziegler, a retired Champaign police officer, was curious when a fellow exhibitor at a police memorabilia show said that he had a vintage badge from the department.

The (Champaign) News-Gazette reported that it was the badge of Robert Tatman, a Champaign officer killed on duty with his own service revolver on Nov. 25, 1967. The case remains unsolved, and for 54 years, so was the question of where his badge went.

Ziegler bought the star from the other vendor at the National Police Collector's Show in St. Charles, Mo., and has reclaimed it for Champaign, where he was an officer and remains the department's historian.

**School cook who wrote taunt on menu fired**

**VT** WALDEN — The head cook at a Vermont school has been fired for writing "Let's Go Brandon" — a euphemism for a vulgarity targeting President Joe Biden — on a menu calendar and leaving work early.

The Walden School termination letter for Alex McGregor said he wrote the phrase "on school property in a location where it would easily be seen by students and staff," the Caledonian Record reported. He also did not work his entire shift on Nov. 9, 11 and 17 without a valid reason, the letter stated.

McGregor told the newspaper that he doesn't believe that he should have been fired and that the menu calendar was in

his office, in view of very few people. He also said the phrase doesn't necessarily translate into "F— Joe Biden."

**9 injured when vehicle rear-ends Amish buggy**

**WI** LITTLE BLACK — Nine people were injured in north-central Wisconsin when a vehicle rear-ended an Amish buggy at "highway speeds," authorities said.

The crash was reported in the town of Little Black, the Taylor County Sheriff's Department said in a statement. Ten people were in the buggy as it headed north on a county road.

The release said eight of the nine people injured had "significant injuries" and were transported for medical care. Their conditions are not known.

The driver, 35, of the vehicle is being held in the Taylor County Jail on suspicion of operating under the influence of a controlled substance and inattentive driving, authorities said.

**Fan's obituary urges betting on the Huskers**

**NE** LINCOLN — Milton Andrew Munson's obituary recalled his life as an Air Force veteran, a pharmacist, husband and father, and as a Nebraska football fan. That was evident in one line in the obit: "In lieu of flowers, please place an irresponsibly large wager on Nebraska beating Iowa."

Munson, 73, died Nov. 16. The obit, written by Munson's sons, ran in the Hastings Tribune, the Lincoln Journal Star reported. It caught fire on social media and captured the attention of two radio hosts, Josh Peterson,

co-host of an afternoon sports talk show on KOZN-AM in Omaha and Jack Mitchell of KLIN-AM in Lincoln.

They decided to throw in some money and make a bet for the Huskers to pull an upset at the upcoming game in Lincoln, but once word got out, listeners and others pitched in and the total grew to nearly \$5,000.

Munson's son, Todd, who appeared on Peterson's show, said the family would give some of the money to Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and would use some to bet on the Cornhuskers.

The Hawkeyes won 28-21.

**Man gets 2-plus years for pit bull scheme**

**MD** MOUNT RAINIER — A Maryland man has been sentenced to more than two years in prison after selling pit bull puppies online but failing to deliver the animals to buyers.

The Washington Post reported that Fonjeck Eric Azoh, 42, of Mount Rainier, received his sentence in U.S. District Court in Washington. Azoh had plead guilty to a charge of wire fraud in August. He must also pay \$158,000 in restitution and forfeit \$67,000 seized by law enforcement.

Prosecutors said his scheme involved at least 119 victims who lived in 40 different states. He collected the money at Walmart stores across the city of Washington and surrounding states, prosecutors said.

**Charge: Off-duty cop hit man, took body in car**

**NJ** NEWARK — A Newark police officer fa-

tally struck a man walking on a highway shoulder then drove around with the man's body and visited his mother looking for advice, according to charges.

Officer Louis Santiago faces charges in the death of Damian Dymka, 29, on Nov. 1 including vehicular homicide, leaving the scene of a crash resulting in death, desecrating or moving human remains, tampering with physical evidence and official misconduct. He was off-duty at the time.

Santiago's mother, Annette, who worked as a nurse, and Albert Guzman, a passenger in the car, were charged with desecrating human remains, hindering apprehension and conspiracy to hinder apprehension and tamper with physical evidence.

**Looking to beat freeze, man lands record fish**

**MN** MINNEAPOLIS — A Minnesota man rushing to sneak in a final fishing expedition before the freeze on one of the state's largest lakes appears to have broken a 64-year-old state record.

Nolan Sprengeler, 27, of Plymouth, landed a muskie on Lake Mille Lacs that tipped the scales at 55 pounds, 14.8 ounces. The previous Minnesota record for heaviest muskie, 54 pounds, was set in 1957 on Lake Winnibigoshish.

Sprengeler and two friends had to break ice for about 100 yards to find open water.

Sprengeler, 27, hooked the fish while casting a large soft-plastic bait to a rock reef. He said the three of them worked for an hour to try to revive the fish, but to no avail.

— From Associated Press

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# No. 4 Cincinnati remains undefeated

*Associated Press*

GREENVILLE, N.C. — No. 4 Cincinnati looked comfortable playing its first game in playoff position.

The Bearcats handled business in their final road game of the season Friday, beating East Carolina 35-13 in a quest to maintain a spot among the top four in the College Football Playoff rankings.

“We knew there were more things at stake,” coach Luke Fickell said. “It’s great when you have a mature group that you don’t have to go over every little thing. You trust that they’re enjoying it, but they have to understand that to whom much is given, much is expected.”

Desmond Ridder threw two touchdown passes and Cincinnati (12-0, 8-0 American Athletic Conference, CFP No. 4) completed a perfect regular season. The Bearcats are trying to become the first team outside of a Power Five conference to compete in the CFP.

“We got another one and we have to finish strong,” Ridder said.

They’ll be at home when facing Houston this week in the AAC title game.

“Put yourselves in position to play for championships, a lot of other things can happen,” Fickell said.

Defense and special teams helped put the game away for

Cincinnati. Arquon Bush blocked a field goal and Ahmad Gardner returned the ball 60 yards for a fourth-quarter touchdown to make it 28-6.

“We always get the job done,” Bush said.

Less than four minutes later, Darrian Beavers intercepted a pass at the 7:27 mark, but the ensuing possession resulted in Cincinnati’s second turnover inside the East Carolina 5-yard line.

The Bearcats had four trips into East Carolina territory that resulted in no points, which let ECU hang around, but never really threaten.

East Carolina (7-5, 5-3) had a four-game winning streak snapped.

“You see why they’re in contention for a national championship,” East Carolina coach Mike Houston said of the Bearcats.

“I thought our kids played really, really hard. I thought they did many things well. ... For our young players, it’s a great learning experience.”

Ridder finished 17-for-28 for 301 yards with two interceptions. Alec Pierce caught eight passes for 136 yards. Jerome Ford rushed for 85 yards and a touchdown.

In a matter of four Cincinnati snaps early in the second quarter, the Bearcats went from down 3-0 to up 14-3.

Ridder connected with Leonard Taylor on a 44-yard touch-

down play. Cincinnati got the ball back and went 58 yards in three plays, with Ridder’s 53-yard throw to Pierce setting up Ford for a 2-yard scoring run.

Then Cincinnati drove 88 yards on seven plays with Pierce snagging a 28-yard touchdown catch.

After building a 21-3 lead, Cincinnati botched another chance on Ford’s fumble at the East Carolina 3 on its final drive of the first half.

East Carolina closed within 21-6 and then drove to the Cincinnati 5 early in the fourth quarter. But after a penalty, the Pirates were ready to settle for Owen Daffer’s third field goal before Bush disrupted those plans in what seemed like a game-clinching sequence with 11:07 remaining.

The All-America cornerback Gardner grabbed the bouncing ball and was way out in front of the pack for a score.

“I was just making plays as they came,” Gardner said. “I wasn’t trying to be a superhero.”

East Carolina’s winning streak marked its longest string of success in AAC play in its eight seasons as a league member.

Cincinnati also went 12-0 in the 2009 regular season.

The Pirates, facing their highest-ranked team since a 27-10 home loss in 2006 to then-No. 4 West Virginia, were held to 282 yards of total offense.

“It also shows the level of defense that Cincinnati had,” Houston said. “We thought we would be able to run it better, but we couldn’t.”

Holton Ahlers was 19-for-38 for 228 yards, an interception and a 12-yard touchdown pass to Jsi Hatfield.

## The takeaway

**Cincinnati:** The Bearcats wasted numerous scoring chances and that could have haunted them if not for a stellar defensive performance. They gave up only one touchdown and held East Carolina to 54 rushing yards — almost 120 below the Pirates’ season average.

**East Carolina:** The Pirates, who’ll finish in a third-place tie in the AAC with Central Florida and Saturday’s Tulsa-Southern Methodist winner, were aiming for a rare victory against a Top 25 team. With this result, the Pirates are 13-63-1 vs. Top 25 foes. East Carolina outscored its four AAC visitors in the first quarter by a combined 27-0 this year, but its 77 yards of total offense in the first half Saturday put it in a bind.

## Poll implications

Cincinnati wasn’t threatened much in this game, but the bar might be high for the Bearcats. It’s hard to see them climbing after this result, though the performance should be enough to hold steady.

# Air Force hammers UNLV in regular-season finale

*Associated Press*

AIR FORCE ACADEMY, Colo. — Brad Roberts rushed for two touchdowns and Emmanuel Michel ran for 123 yards and a score as Air Force rolled up 511 yards on the ground to defeat UNLV 48-14 in a season-ender on Friday.

Michel carried 12 times and scored from the 2-yard line in

the third quarter as 14 players ran the ball for the Falcons (9-3, 6-2 Mountain West Conference). Air Force attempted no passes but had 69 running plays and more than a 20-minute advantage in time of possession.

Roberts scored both his touchdowns in the first quarter, scoring on runs of 1 and 3 yards.

Brandon Lewis scored in the

second quarter as Air Force gained 181 yards on the ground in the first half, leading 24-0. Lewis took a pitch right and flashed through a hole in the line, accelerating down the far sideline for a 41-yard touchdown run.

The Falcons had rolled up 413 yards rushing after three quarters, carrying a 41-7 lead into

the fourth. Air Force finished tied atop the conference’s Mountain Division standings with Utah State but lost to the Aggies by four points in September.

Charles Williams carried 16 times for 137 yards and scored both touchdowns for UNLV (2-10, 2-6). Justin Rogers was 8-for-18 passing for 127 yards.

# NC State roars back to stun North Carolina

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Devin Leary threw two touchdown passes in a 26-second span, with North Carolina State recovering an onside kick in between, to stun North Carolina 34-30 on Friday and remain alive in the ACC Atlantic Division title chase.

With N.C. State down 30-21, Leary found Emeka Emezie on a busted coverage for a 64-yard touchdown strike with 1:33 left. The Wolfpack recovered the onside kick, then Leary threw a 24-yard sideline pass to Emezie with 1:09 remaining.

N.C. State (9-3, 6-2) beat North Carolina (6-6, 3-5) for the first time since 2018 to remain in contention for a trip to the conference championship game. It also officially eliminated six-time reigning league champion Clemson from the Atlantic Division race.

The Wolfpack would reach the title game if No. 21 Wake Forest loses at Boston College

on Saturday, creating a three-way tie atop the division that would favor N.C. State by virtue of its division record and head-to-head win over Clemson.

**No. 17 Iowa 28, Nebraska 21:** Spencer Petras had a 2-yard touchdown run with 2:58 left to give his team its first lead and the visiting Hawkeyes came back from a 15-point deficit in the third quarter to beat the Cornhuskers.

Iowa won the border battle for the seventh straight year, but not before Jermari Harris intercepted Logan Smothers' pass at the Iowa 2 with 43 seconds to play.

The Hawkeyes (10-2, 7-2) stayed alive in the Big Ten West race and now need Minnesota to beat Wisconsin on Saturday to go to the conference championship game next week in Indianapolis.

**No. 16 Utah 28, Colorado 13:** Cameron Rising threw three touchdown passes, Ta-

vion Thomas ran for 142 yards and a score and the host Utes beat the Buffaloes.

Utah (9-3, 8-1 Pac-12), which won its fifth straight game, rushed for 265 yards and held Colorado (4-8, 3-6) to 148 yards of total offense with the Pac-12 Championship game looming.

Rising scrambled and found Britain Covey on an improvised forward pitch for a 13-yard touchdown with 6:45 left in the third quarter to cap the scoring.

**No. 22 San Diego State 27, Boise State 16:** At Carson, Calif., Jordon Brookshire led his team to 24 straight points after replacing Lucas Johnson late in the first half, and the Aztecs beat the Broncos to win the Mountain West's West Division title.

Brookshire passed for 192 yards and a touchdown and rushed for 46 yards and another score. San Diego State (11-1, 7-1) celebrated at its temporary home in the Los Angeles sub-

urbs after completing its first 11-win regular season in 99 years of football.

The Aztecs, who have never had a 12-win season, will host the Mountain West title game next Saturday against Air Force or Utah State.

**No. 25 Arkansas 34, Missouri 17:** KJ Jefferson threw for 262 yards and a touchdown and ran for another 58 yards to help the host Razorbacks beat the Tigers.

Jefferson led Arkansas (8-4, 4-4 Southeastern Conference) to scores on four straight drives in the third and fourth quarters to turn a four-point halftime lead to 18 with less than 12 minutes left. Treylon Burks was his biggest help, catching seven passes for 129 yards and a touchdown.

Arkansas hadn't beaten Missouri since 2015, which was the last time the Razorbacks were eligible for a bowl. The eight wins are Arkansas' most in the regular season since 2011.

## Rangers set mark for Gallant for points in 20 games

Associated Press

BOSTON — Artemi Panarin scored the first of New York's three third-period goals with 8:25 left and the Rangers beat the Boston Bruins 5-2 on Friday, giving Gerard Gallant the best start in his first 20 games as coach in team history.

The Rangers have 31 points in Gallant's first 20. Phil Esposito held the previous mark with 30 in 1986-87.

Ryan Strome, Dryden Hunt, Alexis Lafreniere and Jacob Trouba also scored, and Igor Shesterkin made 29 saves. The Rangers have won three straight and seven of eight.

Craig Smith and Patrice Bergeron scored for Boston.

**Capitals 4, Panthers 3:** Alex Ovechkin scored two of his three goals over 56 seconds in the second period and host

Washington beat Florida.

Ovechkin has 18 goals, the most through 21 games in a season by a player in at least his 17th season. He's 19 goals from passing Jaromir Jagr for third on the career list following his 28th hat trick.

**Stars 3, Avalanche 1:** Joe Pavelski scored twice in 20 seconds in the opening 1:31 to reach 400 career goals, and two goal-tenders combined to shut down the NHL's highest-scoring team as host Dallas beat Colorado.

Denis Gurianov added a power-play goal for Dallas, which has won its last five home games and five of six overall.

**Penguins 1, Islanders 0:** Tristan Jarry made 25 saves, Kasperii Kapanen scored in the second period and Pittsburgh kept depleted New York winless at its new arena.

Pittsburgh won its fifth straight, with Jarry driving the hot streak.

**Lightning 3, Kraken 0:** Andrei Vasilevskiy made 17 saves in his 200th victory and host Tampa Bay beat Seattle for its sixth win in seven games.

**Wild 7, Jets 1:** Kirill Kaprizov scored and tied a career high with three assists to help host Minnesota rout Winnipeg.

**Sabres 4, Canadiens 1:** Tage Thompson scored twice, Cody Eakin had a goal and an assist, and host Buffalo beat Montreal to snap a four-game skid.

**Hurricanes 6, Flyers 3:** Sebastian Aho scored twice, Jesperi Kotkaniemi had a goal and an assist and visiting Carolina beat Philadelphia.

The Flyers have lost five in a row.

**Blue Jackets 4, Canucks 2:**

Elvis Merzlikins stopped 39 shots, Gustav Nyquist scored short-handed and had an assist, and host Columbus beat Vancouver.

**Ducks 4, Senators 0:** Rickard Rakell had a goal and an assist, Anthony Stolarz made 34 saves and host Anaheim beat Ottawa.

**Blackhawks 3, Blues 2 (OT):** Alex DeBrincat scored 1:27 into overtime and host Chicago overcame an early two-goal deficit to beat St. Louis.

**Predators 4, Devils 2:** Roman Josi and Alexandre Carrier each scored and had an assist to lead host Nashville over New Jersey.

**Maple Leafs 4, Sharks 1:** John Tavares and William Nylander each had a goal and assist and visiting Toronto beat San Jose.

# No. 5 Duke hands No. 1 'Zags first loss

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — In a town known for major championship fights, it seemed only fitting a long-anticipated 40-minute heavyweight bout between No. 1 Gonzaga and No. 5 Duke take place in Las Vegas.

Paolo Banchero scored 21 points to help Duke hold off a turnover-prone Gonzaga team 84-81 on Friday night in front of an announced 20,389 fans — the largest basketball crowd ever in Nevada.

"It's just a really big-time game, what a great crowd," said Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski, who is in his final year at the helm of the Duke Blue Devils (7-0). "We thought it might be a showcase game and it was. But having this type of crowd was amazing. Obviously, we feel great about

the win, and we think we beat an outstanding basketball team."

That's saying something, considering Gonzaga coach Mark Few shapes his program after Duke.

"We've always asked over the years before we've had to make decisions on anything — how we travel, how we operate, how we schedule, facility-wise — the first question always is, 'What's Duke doing?'" Few said. "I don't think I can pay any higher respect than that."

Unfortunately for Few, his Bulldogs' best couldn't match the resilience of Krzyzewski's Blue Devils.

Gonzaga (6-1) battled back from a nine-point deficit thanks to Julian Strawther's offensive prowess early in the

second half. He scored eight of the Bulldogs' first 14 points to help them get within two. But Gonzaga suffered through a 0-for-5 span down the stretch and turned the ball over three times to allow Duke to close the game on a 13-9 run.

"We felt like if we played our best and did what we do best, we were going to have a real shot for the win," Banchero said.

Wendell Moore Jr. scored 20 points and Mark Williams added 17 points and 9 rebounds for the Blue Devils.

Strawther led Gonzaga with a career-high 20 points and 10 rebounds, including shooting 57.1% from the floor in the second half. Drew Timme added 17 points, Chet Holmgren had 16 points and Rasir Bolton

chipped in 15 for the Bulldogs.

"The beautiful thing is we all believe in each other," said Strawther, who registered his second career double-double. "Even if I miss a couple of shots, they're going to keep looking for me. That's what really keeps me going. They showed a lot of belief in me after I missed a few."

Gonzaga, however, had 17 total turnovers for the game.

The Bulldogs did claw their way back to a 53-52 lead, and the game quickly became a battle of Duke's relentless defensive pressure and Gonzaga's precise passing through lanes the Bulldogs created on the fly.

"It felt like a Final Four-type game," Timme said. "The atmosphere was great and it was two Goliaths going at it."

# Suns roast Knicks for 15th straight victory

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Devin Booker scored 32 points and the Phoenix Suns beat the New York Knicks 118-97 on Friday night for their 15th straight victory, matching the second-longest winning streak in franchise history.

Chris Paul had 14 points and 10 assists to help the Suns improve to 16-3. The reigning Western Conference champions will try to wrap up a perfect four-game trip Saturday night in a showdown with East-leading Brooklyn.

Phoenix also won 15 straight during the 2006-07 season. The Suns won a franchise-best 17 in a row later that season.

**Kings 14 1, Lakers 137 (30T):** De'Aaron Fox scored 34 points, Buddy Hield had 13 of his 25 after regulation and Sacramento beat host Los Angeles.

The Lakers, who are 10-11 after dropping five of their last seven, had four players with at least 20 points for the first time this season. LeBron James led the way with 30 points, Russell Westbrook added 29, Anthony Davis 23 and Malik Monk 20.

**Warriors 118, Trail Blazers 103:** Stephen Curry had 32 points, eight assists and seven rebounds, Andrew Wiggins scored 25 points and Golden State beat visiting

Portland for its sixth straight victory.

Trail Blazers star Damian Lillard's streak of nine straight games with 20 or more points ended, as he finished with 16.

**Hornets 133, Timberwolves 115:** Kelly Oubre Jr. matched a career high with seven three-pointers and had 27 points off the bench, helping host Charlotte snap Minnesota's five-game winning streak.

Miles Bridges and Gordon Hayward each had 18 points, and LaMelo Ball had 10 points and 13 assists. The Hornets have won eight of their last nine games.

**Hawks 132, Grizzlies 100:** Trae Young had 31 points and 10 assists to lead visiting Atlanta to a win in a game where Memphis lost point guard Ja Morant to a left knee injury.

Morant left the first quarter with what the team announced as a left knee injury and did not return. He had missed his only shot and converted a pair of free throws.

**Bucks 120, Nuggets 109:** Giannis Antetokounmpo had 24 points and 13 rebounds, Pat Connaughton added 20 points off the bench and Milwaukee beat short-handed host Denver for its sixth straight victory.

The anticipated matchup of the last two MVPs didn't happen. Nikola Jokic, who

won last season in becoming the first Nuggets player to capture the award, missed his fourth straight game with a sprained right wrist.

**Bulls 123, Magic 88:** DeMar DeRozan scored 23 points, Zach LaVine added 21 and Chicago beat Orlando.

Chicago center Nikola Vucevic, playing in Orlando for the first time after nine seasons with the Magic, added 16 points and eight rebounds.

**Wizards 101, Thunder 99:** Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored a season-high 20 points, Bradley Beal also had 20 and Washington topped host Oklahoma City.

The Wizards trailed by as many as 10 points in the first half before rebounding to snap a two-game skid.

**Pacers 114, Raptors 97:** Domantas Sabonis had 23 points and 18 rebounds and host Indiana beat short-handed Toronto.

**Spurs 96, Celtics 88:** Dejounte Murray had 29 points and 11 rebounds and San Antonio rallied to beat visiting Boston.

**Pelicans 87, Jazz 97:** Devonte' Graham made a three-pointer with 1.9 seconds to lift visiting New Orleans past Utah in the opener of a two-night, two-game set.

**Clippers 107, Pistons 96:** Reggie Jackson scored 21 points and Los Angeles beat visiting Detroit.