

World prepares for worst as cases rise

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Taking an act-now-ask-questions-later approach, countries around the world slammed their doors shut again to try to keep the new omicron variant at bay Monday as more cases of the mutant coronavirus emerged and scientists raced to figure out just how dangerous it might be.

Japan announced it would bar entry of all foreign visitors, joining Israel in doing so just days after the variant was identified by researchers in South Africa. Morocco banned all incoming flights. Other countries, including the United States and European Union members, have moved to prohibit travelers arriving from southern Africa.

Travelers infected with the new version have turned up in a widening array of countries over the past few days, and new cases in Portugal and Scotland have raised fears that the variant may already be spreading locally.

“Many of us might think we are done with COVID-19. It’s not done with us,” warned Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-

general of the World Health Organization.

Days after the variant sent a shudder through the financial world nearly two years into the pandemic that has killed over 5 million people, markets had mixed reactions Monday, with European stocks and oil prices rebounding and Wall Street opening higher, while Asian markets fell further.

The infections showed the difficulty in keeping the virus in check in a world of jet travel and open borders. Yet many countries tried to do just that, even against the urging of the WHO, which noted that border closings often have limited effect and can wreak havoc on lives and livelihoods.

Some argued that such restrictions could provide valuable time to analyze the new variant. Little is known about it, including whether it is more contagious, more likely to cause serious illness or more able to evade vaccines.

While the initial global response to COVID-19 was criticized as slow and haphazard, the reaction to the new variant came quickly.

“This time, the world showed it is learn-

ing,” said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, singling out South African President Cyril Ramaphosa for praise. “South Africa’s analytic work and transparency and sharing its results was indispensable in allowing a swift global response. It no doubt saved many lives.”

The WHO has praised Botswana as well as South Africa for quickly alerting the world to the presence of the new variant, and many have warned that the countries should not be punished for their speed.

But that did not hold von der Leyen back from successfully pushing the 27-nation EU to agree on a ban on flights from seven southern African nations over the weekend, similar to measures many other countries have taken. On Monday, EU members Spain and Poland followed through by announcing travel and quarantine restrictions.

Cases had already been reported in EU nations Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands before Portuguese authorities identified 13 cases of omicron among team members of the Belenenses professional soccer club.

Esper files lawsuit over DOD redactions to memoir

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper claims in a lawsuit against the Defense Department that material is being improperly withheld from his use as he seeks to publish an “unvarnished and candid memoir” of his time in President Donald Trump’s Cabinet.

The lawsuit, which was filed Sunday in U.S. District Court in Washington, describes the memoir, “A Sacred Oath,” as an account of Esper’s tenure as Army secretary from 2017 to 2019 and his 18 months as defense secretary, which ended when Trump fired him in a tweet just days after the president lost his reelection bid.

The period in which Esper was Pentagon chief was “an unprecedented time of civil unrest, public health crises, growing threats abroad, Pentagon transformation and a White House seemingly bent on circumventing the Constitution,” the lawsuit says.

Esper and Trump were sharply divided over the use of the military during civil unrest in June 2020 following the killing of George Floyd. Other issues led the president to believe Esper was not sufficiently loyal while Esper believed he was trying to keep the department apolitical. Firing a defense secretary after an election loss was unprecedented, but the opening allowed Trump to install loyal-

ists in top Pentagon positions as he continued to dispute his election loss.

The lawsuit contends that “significant text” in the memoir, scheduled for publication by William Morrow in May, is being improperly held under the guise of classification and that Esper maintains it contains no classified information. The suit notes that Esper is restricted by his secrecy agreements from authorizing publication without Pentagon approval, or face possible civil and criminal liability.

The lawsuit quotes from a letter Esper sent to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin criticizing the review process. He wrote that he had been asked not to quote

Trump and others in meetings, not to describe conversations he had with Trump and not to use certain verbs or nouns when describing historical events.

The letter describes other problematic subjects and says some 60 pages of the manuscript contained redactions at one point. Agreeing to all of those redactions would result in “a serious injustice to important moments in history that the American people need to know and understand,” Esper wrote.

The suit itself says some stories Esper relates in the manuscript under consideration appeared to have been leaked to some mainstream media “possibly to undermine the impact” it would have had in his book.

Ex-Army civilian sentenced for kickbacks

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

An ex-Army civilian employee was sentenced to prison this month for offering a government contractor much more than soup, salad and breadsticks at an Olive Garden in Kuwait in 2015.

Ephraim Garcia, 64, pleaded guilty earlier this year to one count of conspiring to offer a kickback and one count of offering a kickback, both stemming from the meeting at the chain restaurant between the unnamed American contractor and the head of a Kuwaiti firm that was seeking about \$3 million in subcontract work on Camp Arifjan, Kuwait.

Garcia, who retired from the Air Force in 2000 as a master sergeant, admitted to brokering the meeting, where prosecutors said he and the CEO of the firm Gulf Link Venture Co., Gandhiraj Sankaralingam, offered to pay the employee of Colorado-based

Vectrus Systems Corp. to steer some of the company's government contract business to Gulf Link.

In 2011, Vectrus was awarded the Kuwait base operations security and service support contract, for which the Army had paid out more than \$2.7 billion as of 2016, the Pentagon's Inspector General said in a report four years ago.

Sankaralingam and Garcia, who was a mechanical engineer for the Army's department of public works on Camp Arifjan, offered to split proceeds from the inflated costs of heating and air conditioning work under that contract — possibly up to \$756,000 — with the Vectrus employee if it was awarded to Gulf Link, court records state. Instead, the employee reported the illegal offer to the government.

Officials with the Pentagon IG, Defense Criminal Investigative Service and Army Criminal Investigative Com-

mand were involved in the investigation.

Garcia, who also retired after 16 years as an Army civilian in 2016, was arrested in 2019 and indicted the following year. Sankaralingam was also charged in the indictment with conspiring to offer a kickback and paying illegal gratuities to Garcia, but he remains a fugitive.

Under a plea agreement last summer, the government dropped a charge that Garcia had received some \$170,000 in illegal gratuities from Sankaralingam and others at Gulf Link and another firm, which they said was sent to Garcia's adult daughters' bank accounts from 2010 to 2015.

"Mr. Garcia emphatically denies that this money was derived illegally," his attorneys said pleading for the judge's leniency in sentencing, citing their client's age, declining health and the difficulties his family has suffered since he

was arrested.

Prosecutors had sought a sentence of eight to 10 years and a fine of \$165,000, citing Garcia's net worth of more than \$1 million.

But in a letter to the judge, Garcia sought probation and home confinement, citing his impoverished upbringing in the Philippines, his honorable military service, his wife's worsening health over stress from his arrest and his daughter's acid reflux.

In response, prosecutors said his involvement in the kickback conspiracy was not a "one-time lapse in judgment," and suggested to D.C. District Judge Amit P. Mehta that if he were inclined toward leniency, he not sentence Garcia to less than five years in prison.

Garcia was sentenced to two years, a \$200 fine and three years of probation. The court document giving Mehta's reasons for the sentence remains sealed.

Russian navy test-fires hypersonic missile

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia's navy has successfully test-fired a prospective hypersonic missile, the military said Monday.

The Defense Ministry said the Admiral Gorshkov frigate in the White Sea launched the Zircon cruise missile, hitting a practice target 215 nautical miles away. The launch was the latest in a se-

ries of tests of Zircon, which is set to enter service next year.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said Zircon would be capable of flying at nine times the speed of sound and have a range of 620 miles. Putin has emphasized that its deployment will significantly boost the capability of Russia's military.

Zircon is intended to arm Russian cruisers, frigates and submarines. It is one of several hypersonic missiles under development in Russia.

The Kremlin has made modernizing the country's arsenals a top priority amid the tensions with the West that followed Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula.

Ky. National Guard to deploy to eastern Africa

Associated Press

LEXINGTON, Ky. — The Kentucky National Guard said that about 150 soldiers are deploying to eastern Africa.

A ceremony Saturday at the

Lexington airport honored members of the Somerset-based 149th Infantry Regiment as they entered federal active duty, the National Guard said in a news release.

The unit will deploy under

the command of a task force from the Virginia Army National Guard and provide security around the Horn of Africa, the statement said.

About 200 other members of the Kentucky National Guard

are preparing for a separate mobilization to southeastern Europe in early 2022.

They will work with the Virginia National Guard in a NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, the statement said.

Global inflation surges; families struggle

Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary — From appliance stores in the United States to food markets in Hungary and gas stations in Poland, rising consumer prices fueled by high energy costs and supply chain disruptions are putting a pinch on households and businesses worldwide.

Rising inflation is leading to price increases for food, gas and other products and pushing many people to choose between digging deeper into their pockets or tightening their belts. In developing economies, it's especially dire.

"We've noticed that we're consuming less," Gabor Pardi, a shopper at an open-air food market in Hungary's capital, Budapest, said after buying a sack of fresh vegetables recently. "We try to shop for the cheapest and most economical things, even if they don't look as good."

Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic impact of the crisis is still being felt even after countries raced out of debilitating lockdowns and consumer demand rebounded. Now, another surge of infections and a new coronavirus variant, omicron, are leading countries to tighten their borders and impose other restrictions, threatening the global economic recovery.

The reverberations are hitting central and Eastern Europe especially hard, where countries have some of the highest inflation rates in the 27-nation European Union and people are struggling to buy food or fill their fuel tanks.

A butcher at the Budapest food market, Ildiko Vardos Serfozo, said she's seen a drop in business as customers head to multinational grocery chains that can offer discounts by buying in large wholesale quantities.

"Buyers are price sensitive and therefore often leave us behind, even if our products are high quality. Money talks," she said. "We notice that inflation is not good for us. ... I'm just glad my kids don't want to continue this family business, I don't see much future in it."

In nearby Poland, Barbara Grotowska, a 71-year-old pensioner, said outside a discount supermarket in the capital of Warsaw that she's been hit hardest by her garbage collection fee nearly tripling to \$21. She also lamented that the cooking oil she uses has gone up by a third of its price, to \$2.40.

"That's a real difference," she said.

The recent pickup in inflation has caught business leaders and economists around the world by surprise.

In spring 2020, the coronavi-

rus crushed the global economy: governments ordered lockdowns, businesses closed or slashed hours and families stayed home. Companies braced for the worst, canceling orders and putting off investments.

In an attempt to stave off economic catastrophe, wealthy countries — most notably the United States — introduced trillions of dollars worth of government aid, an economic mobilization on a scale unseen since World War II. Central banks also slashed interest rates in a bid to revive economic activity.

But those efforts to jumpstart economies have had unintended consequences: as consumers felt more emboldened to spend the money they had received through government assistance or low-interest borrowing, and vaccine rollouts encouraged people to return to restaurants, bars and shops, the surge in demand tested the capacity of suppliers to keep pace.

Ports and freight yards were suddenly clogged with shipments, and prices began to rise as global supply chains seized up — especially as new outbreaks of COVID-19 sometimes shut down factories and ports in Asia.

The rise in prices has been dramatic. Inflation in the Unit-

ed States surged to 6.2% in October, the highest since 1990, and the International Monetary Fund predicts that world consumer prices will rise 4.3% this year, the biggest jump since 2011.

It is most pronounced in the developing economies of central and Eastern Europe, with the highest annual rates recorded in Lithuania (8.2%), Estonia (6.8%) and Hungary (6.6%). In Poland, one of Europe's fastest-growing economies, inflation came in at 6.4% in October, the highest rate in two decades.

Several shoppers at a vegetable stand in Warsaw said they are anxious about rising prices for staples like bread and cooking oil and are expecting the situation to get worse in the new year, when energy prices are set to rise.

Piotr Molak, a 44-year-old vegetable vendor, said he has not yet had to raise prices on the potatoes, apples or carrots he sells but the cherry tomatoes he imports from Spain and Italy, which he buys in euros, have gotten far more expensive as Poland's currency, the zloty, has weakened.

"We will mostly feel this in the new year when electricity goes up," Molak said. "We are really going to feel it when we have to spend more on our home than on pleasure."

McConaughey won't run for Texas governor in 2022

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Actor Matthew McConaughey isn't running for Texas governor after months of publicly flirting with the idea of becoming the latest celebrity candidate.

The Academy Award winner said in a video posted Sunday night that political leadership was not a route he was choosing to take "at this moment." McConaughey, 52, said he would instead focus on supporting businesses and foundations that create pathways for others to succeed.

The Texas governor's race is already shaping up to be one of the nation's highest-profile contests in 2022. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott is seeking a third term and Democrat Beto O'Rourke, coming off failed bids for the U.S. Senate and president, announced Monday that he was getting in the race.

The "Dazed and Confused" and "Dallas Buyers Club" star had never said what party — if any — he would run under while acknowledging that he was mulling a run for governor in his home state. McConaughey

had also shied away from going into policy specifics and positions on contentious issues in Texas.

"Politicians? The good ones can help us to get to where we need to go, yeah," McConaughey said in the video posted to Twitter. "But let's be clear, they can't do anything for us unless we choose to do for ourselves."

In California, former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner ran for governor this year in a failed GOP-led recall effort against Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom but gained little momentum.

Iran nuclear talks set to resume in Vienna

Associated Press

VIENNA — Negotiators gathered in Vienna on Monday to resume talks over reviving Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, with hopes of quick progress muted after the arrival of a hard-line new government in Tehran led to a more than five-month hiatus.

The remaining signatories to the nuclear deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action — Iran, Russia, China, France, Germany and Britain — will convene at the Palais Coburg, the luxury hotel where the agreement was signed six years ago. The talks come as Austria remains locked down over the coronavirus, which start a week earlier over a surge in cases.

The last round of talks, aimed at bringing Iran back into compliance with the agreement and paving the way for the United States to rejoin, was held in June. Since then, the task has

only become more difficult.

The U.S. is not at the table because it unilaterally pulled out of the deal in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump, who restored and augmented American sanctions in a campaign of “maximum pressure” to try to force Iran into renegotiating the pact.

President Joe Biden has signaled that he wants to rejoin the deal. A U.S. delegation headed by the administration's special envoy for Iran, Robert Malley, is participating indirectly in the talks, with diplomats from the other countries acting as go-betweens.

The nuclear deal saw Iran limit its enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. Since the deal's collapse, Iran now enriches small amounts of uranium up to 60% purity — a short step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Iran also spins advanced centrifuges barred by

the accord and its uranium stockpile now far exceeds the accord's limits.

Iran maintains its atomic program is peaceful. U.S. intelligence agencies and international inspectors, however, have said that Iran had an organized nuclear weapons program up until 2003. Nonproliferation experts fear the brinkmanship could push Tehran toward even more-extreme measures to try and force the West to lift sanctions.

Making matters more difficult, United Nations nuclear inspectors remain unable to fully monitor Iran's program after Tehran limited their access. A trip to Iran last week by the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Grossi, failed to make any progress on that issue.

Russia's top representative, Mikhail Ulyanov, said he held “useful” informal consultations with officials from Iran and

China on Sunday. That meeting, he said, was aimed at “better understanding ... the updated negotiating position of Tehran.” Enrique Mora, the European Union official chairing the talks, on Twitter wrote Monday of “intense preparatory work ongoing.”

A delegation appointed by new President Ebrahim Raisi is joining the negotiations for the first time. Iran has made maximalist demands, including calls for the U.S. to unfreeze \$10 billion in assets as an initial goodwill gesture, a tough line that might be an opening gambit.

Ali Bagheri, an Iranian nuclear negotiator, told Iranian state television late Sunday that the Islamic Republic “has entered the talks with serious willpower and strong preparation.” He cautioned, however, that “we cannot anticipate a timeframe on the length of these talks now.”

Embattled Kan. lawmaker arrested again after month

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — A 21-year-old embattled Kansas lawmaker was arrested on suspicion of drunken driving — his second arrest in less than a month — and is facing fresh calls for his resignation or removal from office.

A Kansas trooper arrested Aaron Coleman around 1 a.m. Saturday on Interstate 70 near Lawrence, the Kansas Highway Patrol said. Coleman was taken to the Douglas County Jail, where he bonded out hours later.

Coleman did not immediately return phone and email messages left Monday morning by The Associated Press seeking comment.

At the time of the arrest, Coleman was already out on bond from an Oct. 30 domestic battery arrest. In that case, he allegedly pushed, hit and spit on his 18-

year-old brother in a fight that erupted because the brother was going to get baptized, according to court documents.

The Kansas City Democrat has been embroiled in controversy since before he took office after being elected in 2020 and has acknowledged past abuses against girls and young women. A legislative committee reprimanded Coleman in writing in February over those abuses.

Both Kansas House Speaker Ron Ryckman, a Republican, and Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly have joined the chorus of those calling for Coleman to resign. If he refuses to resign, Kelly said, the Legislature should remove him from office, saying his latest arrest “is further evidence that he is not fit to serve in the Kansas House of Representatives.”

‘Vaccine’ chosen as 2021 word of year by Merriam-Webster

Associated Press

NEW YORK — With an expanded definition to reflect the times, Merriam-Webster has declared an omnipresent truth as its 2021 word of the year: vaccine.

“This was a word that was extremely high in our data every single day in 2021,” Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster's editor-at-large, told The Associated Press ahead of Monday's announcement.

“It really represents two different stories. One is the science story, which is this remarkable speed with which the vaccines were developed. But there's also the debates regarding policy, politics and political affiliation. It's one word that carries these two huge stories,” he said.

The selection follows “vax” as word of the year from the folks

who publish the Oxford English Dictionary. And it comes after Merriam-Webster chose “pandemic” as tops in lookups last year on its online site.

“The pandemic was the gun going off, and now we have the aftereffects,” Sokolowski said.

At Merriam-Webster, lookups for “vaccine” increased 601% over 2020, when the first U.S. shot was administered in New York in December after quick development, and months of speculation and discussion over efficacy. The world's first jab occurred earlier that month in the United Kingdom.

Merriam-Webster has been declaring a word of the year since 2008. Among its runners-up in the word biography of 2021 were insurrection, infrastructure, perseverance and nomad.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Fire station severely damaged in huge blaze

GA SMARR — A middle Georgia fire station was heavily damaged in a late Saturday blaze.

Monroe County Emergency Services said in a social media post that its station in Smarr caught fire and burned while no firefighters were present. A pumper truck that had been used to respond to an earlier call Saturday night was parked inside the station and was also severely damaged.

As firefighters battled the blaze, part of the roof collapsed. A fire battalion chief injured his knee and was taken to a local hospital.

Firefighters fought the fire for more than three hours and continued monitoring for hotspots, the agency said.

No cause has been determined.

Lawsuit accuses priest of keeping donations

KY LOUISVILLE — Parishioners in Kentucky have accused a Roman Catholic priest of converting church funds for his personal use.

Current and former parish council members at St. John Vianney Catholic Church in Louisville filed a civil lawsuit in Jefferson County against the Rev. Anthony Ngo, news outlets reported.

The lawsuit accuses Ngo of violating his fiduciary duties by pocketing the donations. Ngo has refused to share documents with the parish council about the church's funds and donations and instructed a parish accountant to withhold the documents as

well, it said.

Louisville Archdiocese spokeswoman Cecelia Price said a financial audit was conducted and “no malfeasance was found.” Ngo has been pastor for more than two decades and remains assigned to the church.

Man pleads guilty in airline baggage scam

LA NEW ORLEANS — A Louisiana man has pleaded guilty in an airline baggage scam that resulted in more than \$300,000 in fraudulent claims, prosecutors said.

Pernell Anthony Jones Jr., 31, of Kenner, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit mail fraud and mail fraud, U.S. Attorney Duane A. Evans said in a news release Tuesday. For each count, Jones faces up to 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. U.S. District Judge Susie Morgan set sentencing for Feb. 24.

According to court documents, beginning in 2015, Jones flew on several airlines using false identities. When he arrived at the destination airport, he then falsely claimed that his baggage was lost and requested reimbursement to compensate him for his loss.

Through the scheme, Jones submitted more than 180 false claims for lost luggage, requesting over \$550,000 in reimbursement, Evans' office said.

In total, the airlines paid over \$300,000 in fraudulent claims.

Museum gets \$750K gift and renames gallery

ME OGUNQUIT — A Maine art museum has received one of the largest gifts in its history and is renam-

ing a gallery after the donors.

The Ogunquit Museum of American Art said it received the \$750,000 gift from Carol and Noel Leary. The gift will help fund the expansion.

The museum said it renamed its largest gallery the “Carol and Noel Leary Gallery” in honor of the donors. The Learys are longtime donors to the museum, and Carol Leary was elected its board president this month.

People irked by odor lose to beet processor

MI BAY CITY — Residents complaining about foul odors from a sugar beet processor in Bay City have a lost a key decision at the Michigan Court of Appeals.

Michigan Sugar, which turns beets into sugar, is accused of depriving people from enjoying their property because of odors.

But the appeals court said Mikkie Morley and Jonathan Morley, who moved into their home in 2016, haven't exhausted the complaint process at state agencies. The court also dismissed a separate negligence claim.

Michigan Sugar's attorney, Brion Doyle, said millions of dollars are being spent to control odors under a previous agreement with regulators.

Up to 30 conduct robbery at Best Buy

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A group of 20 to 30 people grabbed numerous electronic items at a Best Buy store in Burnsville and quickly fled before police could arrive.

No weapons were seen in the caper Friday night and no one was reported injured, Burnsville

police Capt. Don Stenger said.

The Star Tribune reported no one had been arrested as of Saturday morning.

The robbery occurred shortly after 8 p.m. on Black Friday, one of the busiest shopping days of the year following the Thanksgiving holiday.

The incidents resemble a number of mass robberies recently reported across the United States, where groups of people swarm a store, clear the shelves of goods and then flee.

Man arrested in fatal fall down subway stairs

NY NEW YORK — A man suspected in a deadly mugging on a subway station stairway was arrested four months later when someone spotted him in Central Park and called a tip line, police said.

David Robinson, 53, was awaiting arraignment after being arrested Friday on murder and manslaughter charges in the death of Htwe Than Than.

Police said the 58-year-old victim was walking up some steps in a station in Manhattan's Chinatown with her 22-year-old son on July 17 when Robinson grabbed the son's backpack, propelling both son and mother down the stairs.

She was in a coma for several days before succumbing to her injuries.

Noting that the transit agency now has security cameras in every station, Metropolitan Transportation Authority spokesperson Tim Minton said in a statement Saturday that “anyone who preys on transit riders can expect to be identified and face justice.”

— From wire reports

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Passing allure seduces even best run teams

Associated Press

Throwing the football in the NFL is so alluring it can seduce even the best run teams.

The Indianapolis Colts forgot they have Jonathan Taylor after relying on Carson Wentz's arm to build a 10-point halftime lead against the defending Super Bowl champion Buccaneers.

The Philadelphia Eagles climbed into the playoff race because of a potent rushing attack and let Jalen Hurts throw it away against the Giants.

The Baltimore Ravens and Cleveland Browns combined for five turnovers on pass plays in the second quarter Sunday night. Lamar Jackson threw three picks. Baker Mayfield and wide receiver Jarvis Landry fumbled on sacks.

If the Ravens didn't play against the Browns, the NFL's five top running teams would've lost in Week 12. The Tennessee Titans, who entered with the league's fifth-ranked rushing offense, kept rolling on the ground with 270 yards, but they were blown out by the Patriots 36-13.

Most baffling was the Colts' play calling in the second half.

Facing the league's stingiest run defense, Indianapolis couldn't get Taylor going early. Tampa Bay (8-3) wasn't going to allow Taylor, the league's first 1,000-yard rusher this season, to beat them. It dared the Colts to throw, and Wentz responded with three perfect touchdown passes in the first half for a 24-14 lead.

Indianapolis (6-6) got the ball to start the third quarter and kept on throwing. Wentz dropped back on 26 straight plays at one point, including the final eight plays in the second quarter. The results in the second half were disastrous. Shaquil Barrett's strip-sack of Wentz led to a touchdown for the Buccaneers. Wentz then threw a pick on a deep ball in which Antoine Winfield Jr. made a leaping grab over Michael Pittman Jr. That led to another touchdown for Tampa Bay.

When the Colts finally handed it to Taylor again in the fourth quarter, he gained 58 yards on eight carries, including a game-tying TD. But Tom Brady then led the Buccaneers on the winning drive with Leonard Fournette scoring his fourth TD of the game for a 38-31 victory.

Why didn't Taylor run the ball on the first three possessions of the second half?

"We were rolling," Colts coach Frank Reich said. "We tried to run it in the first quarter, this is the No. 1 run defense, and we weren't getting anything. We tried throwing in the second quarter and started having a lot of success. Carson was hot. Called a bunch of RPOs that got to throws because they were throw reads. We come out in the third quarter, we move the ball well in the third quarter. We moved down there twice, we're moving it well."

The Colts became enamored with the pass because it was working, but the turnovers ended up hurting them. Perhaps, giving the ball to Taylor in the third quarter

would've allowed Indianapolis to extend the lead and avoid those costly mistakes.

"When we turn it over, it gives them life," Reich said. "That's No. 1. No. 2, they have Tom Brady."

Reich's former offensive coordinator, Nick Sirianni, helped the Eagles turn things around this season after he committed to the run. The first-year coach guided Philadelphia (5-7) to three wins in the last four weeks with a heavy emphasis on the run, led by Hurts. But against New York, the Eagles moved away from it for stretches. Hurts threw 31 passes and was picked three times, including twice in the red zone. He had a chance at the end to win it, but Jalen Reagor couldn't make a catch near the goal line and the Giants held on for a 13-7 win.

When the Eagles ran, they had success, racking up 208 yards on the ground. They just didn't run it enough to beat the Giants (4-7).

"When you turn the ball over three times, there are different things at play there, but not a winning performance," Sirianni said. "Running the ball was good."

The Ravens (8-3) defeated the Browns (6-6) 16-10 despite a career-worst four interceptions by Jackson. Cleveland entered with the league's No. 1 rushing offense, but handed the ball to Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt just 15 times while Mayfield made 37 passes.

As the weather gets colder in December, running teams will have to do what they do best to win.

Trojans hire coach Riley away from Sooners

Associated Press

Southern California desperately wanted a marquee head coach after more than a decade of underachievement and embarrassment.

The Trojans landed one of the biggest, brightest names in the game.

USC hired Oklahoma's Lincoln Riley on Sunday in a stunning and rare move of one traditional college football powerhouse swiping another's highly accomplished coach.

Riley went 55-10 in five seasons leading the Sooners, winning four Big 12 titles and making three College Football Playoff appearances

in his first head coaching job. Southern Cal sold the 38-year-old Texan on the chance to return the Trojans to their glory days as an annual national championship contender and the West Coast's premier program.

"USC has an unparalleled football tradition with tremendous resources and facilities, and the administration has made a deep commitment to winning," Riley said in a statement. "I look forward to honoring that successful tradition and building on it. The pieces are in place for us to build the program back to where it should be and the fans expect it to be."

Riley "will immediately transition to USC," according to the school's statement. Interim coach Donte Williams will lead the Trojans (4-7, 3-5 Pac-12) in their season finale at California on Saturday night.

Bob Stoops is returning as Oklahoma's interim head coach to lead the Sooners in their bowl game, the school announced. Riley took over the program in 2017 when Stoops retired, and Oklahoma has dominated the Big 12 in the half-decade since.

"Leaving OU was probably the most difficult decision of my life," Riley said. "OU is one of the best college football programs in the

country, and it has been forever. That's not going to change. It's not going to change in the SEC, it's not going to change with another head coach. It's stood the test of time and it's going to continue to do so. This was a personal decision solely based on my willingness to go take on a new challenge."

Southern Cal fired Clay Helton in September after the second game of his seventh season in charge, and the school has been searching for a game-changing head coach to revive a program that has had meager success since a dominant run through the 2000s under Pete Carroll that included two national titles.

Jones throws 2 TD passes as Patriots thump Titans

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — The Titans ended an era for the Patriots during the 2019 season when they knocked them out of the playoffs in Tom Brady's final game in New England.

The Patriots are hoping Sunday's victory over Tennessee will be part of the blueprint to get them back to the postseason without Brady.

Rookie Mac Jones threw two touchdown passes, New England's defense forced four turnovers and the Patriots earned their sixth straight win, rolling past the undermanned Titans 36-13.

"You're not gonna win a Super Bowl now. You're gonna win it in February. We gotta keep that same mindset," defensive lineman Davon Godchaux said of the victory, which snapped New England's two-game losing streak to Tennessee.

The Patriots (8-4) hadn't beaten the Titans since former New England linebacker Mike Vrabel took over as coach in 2018. The Pats improved to 6-1 against AFC opponents this season.

Jones completed 23 of 32 passes for 310 yards. Kendrick Bourne had both of New England's touchdown receptions, finishing with five catches for 61 yards. Jones took

multiple deep shots down the field, connecting with Bourne on a 41-yard TD and Jakobi Meyers for 38 yards to set up a field goal.

"I can rely on any of them and we can rely on any of them," Jones said.

Tennessee (8-4) stayed close early, but couldn't survive a bevy of errors that included three fumbles by its running backs and an interception by Ryan Tannehill. He finished 11-for-21 for 93 yards and a touchdown.

"Put all those together and you put yourself in a difficult situation," Tannehill said.

Playing without star Derrick Henry (foot surgery) for the fourth straight game, the Titans had mixed results from their rushing attack. They also were missing several other starters, notably top receiver A.J. Brown (chest), guard Nate Davis (concussion) and linebacker Rashaan Evans (ankle).

Dontrell Hilliard and D'Onta Foreman became the first Tennessee backs other than Henry to rush for 100 yards since 2018. Hilliard carried 12 times for a career-high 131 yards and a 68-yard TD. He also a fumble in the second quarter that set up a Patriots field goal.

Foreman rushed 19 times for 109 yards and broke free for a 34-yard rush in the third quarter.

Toe doesn't slow Rodgers, Packers defeat LA Rams

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Aaron Rodgers isn't letting his toe injury lower his expectations even as it limits his practice time.

Rodgers threw two touchdown passes and also ran for a score in the Green Bay Packers' 36-28 victory over the Los Angeles Rams on Sunday. Not bad for someone who hadn't practiced all week.

"When I step on the field, I expect greatness," said Rodgers, who said he fractured his pinky toe while working out during his quarantine after a positive COVID-19 test. "Anyone who's a great competitor feels the same way. I don't lean on excuses."

Rodgers went 28-for-45 for 307 yards as the Packers bounced back from a 34-31 loss at Minnesota. The reigning MVP threw touchdown passes of 7 yards to Randall Cobb and 5 yards to A.J. Dillon.

His injury had caused him to practice just once in the week leading up to his 385-yard, four-touchdown effort at Minnesota.

"It definitely isn't the ideal situation not to practice," Rodgers said. "But if I can go out there, take mental reps, go through the plan and my preparation and feel good about what I'm doing, and when I get out there, I've just got to rely on my instincts. The beauty is it's an 11-person-a-side game, and I really feel the offensive line allowed me just to settle in."

Mixon runs for 165 yards, Bengals defeat Steelers

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Bengals cornerback Mike Hilton, who played for the Steelers for his first four years, got his first pick-6 at any level of football against his former team late in the first half Sunday.

Hilton's interception of Ben Roethlisberger put Cincinnati up 31-3 and seemed to serve as a symbolic turning point in Pittsburgh's longtime domination of the Bengals and the AFC North.

"To do it against those guys in a big division game, it couldn't be any sweeter," Hilton said as his teammates shouted and the music thumped in the locker room next door.

The 41-10 win by Cincinnati

(7-4) on Sunday followed a double-digit win in September, making it the Bengals' first season sweep of the Steelers since 2009.

A 27-17 upset by Cincinnati last Dec. 21 broke an 11-game winning streak by Pittsburgh in the series.

"Beating these guys, for me twice and for some of those other guys three times straight, is a big change of the guard in our opinion," said Hilton, who signed with the Bengals as a free agent before the season. "It's given us a lot of confidence, and guys are excited to see how the rest of the season plays out."

Joe Mixon rushed for a career-high 165 yards and two touchdowns, Joe Burrow scrambled

for a score and passed for another one as Cincinnati crushed the Steelers (5-5-1) and kept them winless in their past three games.

And the Bengals stamped themselves as a legitimate play-off contender.

Mixon, coming off a rugged 123-yard, two-TD performance in a win over Las Vegas last week, pounded away for 117 yards in the first half.

"To be honest, I feel like I'm starting to reach that point, my prime, like starting to get there," said Mixon, who was slowed by a foot injury last season. "I know what type of speed the defense comes with, I know how to slow the game down myself. As much as it comes down to me making

plays, that has to do with my teammates."

Cincinnati scored on its first four drives, and then Hilton jumped James Washington's route and ran it back 24 yards for a touchdown with 30 seconds left in the half.

"It was a big moment, it was an emotional moment," Bengals coach Zac Taylor said. "For Mike to turn around and go the other way with it really kind of catapulted us to what we wanted to do the rest of the day."

The Cincinnati defense kept Roethlisberger from getting any real traction until it was too late. He was picked off twice and sacked three times, finishing with 263 yards.

Warriors beat Clippers, await Suns

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Stephen Curry is among the most dangerous players in the NBA. But an angry Curry proved to be more lethal.

The Golden State star took out his frustrations Sunday on the Los Angeles Clippers after being called for a technical foul with 9:08 remaining in the fourth quarter. He scored 11 of his 33 points after that as the Warriors extended their winning streak to eight with a 105-90 victory.

“It was just an accumulation of all types of weird stuff. All that led into where I thought I got a foul,” said Curry, who also had a season-high six steals to go with five rebounds and six assists. “It definitely fired me and the team up. After that, it was time to direct my energy into putting the ball in the basket.”

Curry lost his temper when he didn’t draw a foul while driving to the basket after it appeared Clippers guard Terance Mann made contact. Coach Steve Kerr said he figured Curry was going to get a technical when he saw him go toward the official and pump his fist.

“That was as upset as I’ve seen him and that I have been in a long time. He clearly got fouled,” Kerr said. “When he knows he

got fouled on a play like that and he doesn’t call the call, the competitor will come out in him and he will lose his mind a little bit. But it will spur him like it did in this instance.”

Golden State had a 79-70 lead when Curry’s outburst happened, but the team put it away afterward with a 21-7 run during a nearly five-minute span. Curry made three three-pointers during the spurt, and applied the dagger shot with an off-balance triple from the right corner with 5:20 remaining.

Otto Porter Jr. added 18 points and 10 rebounds, and Jordan Poole scored 17 points for the Warriors. They improved their NBA-best record to 18-2 heading into a showdown Tuesday night in Phoenix against the streaking Suns — 17-3 after winning 16 straight.

Lakers 110, Pistons 106: LeBron James had 33 points, nine assists and no confrontations with Isaiah Stewart in host Los Angeles’ victory over Detroit.

Russell Westbrook had 25 points and nine assists, and Anthony Davis added 24 points and 10 rebounds for the Lakers. They returned to .500 with their second win over the Pistons in eight days.

Stewart was booed repeatedly and zealously by Los Angeles’ crowd, but he appeared to have no significant interactions

with James after both players were ejected from the teams’ meeting in Detroit a week earlier for an ugly altercation.

Bucks 118, Pacers 100: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 26 points and 13 rebounds, and Milwaukee won at Indiana for its seventh straight victory.

Jrue Holiday scored 11 of his 23 points in the third quarter. Bobby Portis added 15 points and Khris Middleton and Pat Connaughton each had 14.

Caris LeVert led the Pacers with a season-high 23 points.

Celtics 109, Raptors 97: Marcus Smart scored 21 points, Al Horford had 17 points and 11 rebounds and Boston won at Toronto to snap a two-game losing streak.

Josh Richardson scored 18 of the Celtics’ 32 bench points. Jaylen Brown added 16 points and Grant Williams had 15 to help the team improve to 11-10.

Grizzlies 128, Kings 101: Dillon Brooks scored 21 points, Desmond Bane added 18 and Memphis took advantage of visiting Sacramento’s poor shooting.

The Grizzlies were playing their first game without scoring leader Ja Morant. He sprained his left knee Friday night in a loss to Atlanta.

Buddy Hield led the Kings with 14 points.

Orlov scores late to lead Capitals past Hurricanes

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Dmitry Orlov scored on a power play with 2:55 remaining, and the Washington Capitals recovered after blowing a two-goal lead to beat the Carolina Hurricanes 4-2 on Sunday.

Alex Ovechkin and Aliaksei Protas scored 59 seconds apart in the second period for the Capitals, who’ve won nine of their last 11 games (9-1-1). John Carlson added an empty-netter after posting two assists earlier.

The winning goal, which was set up by Tom Wilson’s pass, came just seconds after Washington’s 5-on-3 advantage expired, but the Capitals still had time with an extra skater. Washington has a power-play goal in three of its last four games.

“It was a great moment for us

to win the game,” Orlov said. “I tried to come there (in the slot) and make a strong shot.”

Jesper Kotkaniemi and Nino Niederreiter scored in the third period for the Hurricanes. Niederreiter’s goal, his first since Oct. 28, tied the game at 2-2 with 6:28 remaining.

“That was a tough way to end the game. I thought it was a great hockey game,” Carolina coach Rod Brind’Amour said. “I thought we had a great third period. We just did everything we could.”

Ilya Samsonov stopped 30 shots for the Capitals, while the Hurricanes’ Frederik Andersen made 21 saves.

Samsonov, whose record improved to 9-0-1, played in his third consecutive game for the first time this season. There was

plenty to keep him busy.

“In a big game, in a big situation, too,” Washington coach Peter Laviolette said. “There were some big saves that (Samsonov) made out there.”

Maple Leafs 5, Ducks 1: Michael Bunting, Alexander Kerfoot and William Nylander each had a goal and an assist, and Toronto beat Anaheim to tie a franchise record with its seventh straight road win.

The Maple Leafs also had seven straight road wins in 1940-41, 1960-61 and 2002-03.

Wild 4, Lightning 2: Ryan Hartman broke a 2-all tie midway through the third period, and host Minnesota beat Tampa Bay.

Hartman scored for the third straight game and has goals in five of the past six games to give

him 12 on the season.

Sharks 2, Blackhawks 0: Timo Meier scored on a deflection and added an empty-net goal, James Reimer earned his 42nd career shutout and visiting San Jose beat Chicago.

The Sharks won for the third time in four starts, all with Reimer in goal. He was only occasionally challenged en route to his first shutout in 22 months, stopping 29 shots.

Devils 5, Flyers 2: Andreas Johnsson had two goals and two assists, Jesper Bratt had a goal and two assists, and host New Jersey beat Philadelphia.

Bruins 3, Canucks 2: Brad Marchand scored the tying goal on a power play in the third period and set up David Pastrnak’s go-ahead score, helping host Boston over Vancouver.