

STARS AND STRIPES®

Monday, April 27, 2015

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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In Tikrit, fear and anger at militants

BY JOSH SMITH

Stars and Stripes

TIKRIT, Iraq — This city is a ghost town. Weeks after pro-government forces took back Saddam Hussein's hometown from Islamic State militants, the streets remain deserted. Most of the population fled during the town's occupation in the months thereafter and haven't been allowed to return.

Squatting amid the burned and looted buildings last week, a Tikrit police officer swiped through photos on his smartphone. He said his name was Ahmed and he was a father of two. He wouldn't give his last name for fear of reprisals.

Fighters with the Islamic State group kidnapped and killed many of his extended family there to try to force him to defect. They sought his military expertise, partly gained in American advising programs years ago. He said that as far as he knows, the militants are still holding his wife and children.

Ahmed's fear has been sub-

sumed by a deadly resolve.

Gruesome images filled his phone's screen. He stopped at a photo of two severed heads in a cooking pot. "I killed them myself," he said, slashing his finger across his throat. "They took my family. So I took their heads. I won't give up until they are all dead."

Such sentiments are expressed by Iraqis, both Sunnis and Shiites, from the front lines to the strongholds of Baghdad.

Atrocities committed by the militants spread fear through Iraq and among its Western backers as the group swept out of neighboring Syria last year and occupied wide swathes of the country. As Iraqi forces gradually liberate more areas from the Islamic State, the destruction and death left in its wake are steeling their resolve.

But the thirst for revenge threatens to make the conflict even deadlier, as everyone from government troops and militias to victims' relatives look to right wrongs that can never be forgotten.

Perhaps the most ghastly scenes in Tikrit are on the grounds of what was Saddam's lavish palace on the bank of the Tigris River, 100 miles north of Baghdad.

It was on the edge of that river that fighters from the Islamic State systematically murdered hundreds of young Iraqi men, shooting them and dumping their bodies one by one into the river until the water ran red.

Elsewhere on the palace's palm-shaded grounds, militants killed hundreds of others, burying the bodies in mass graves. In all, officials estimate that at least 1,700 people, mostly young cadets from a military academy at a former American air base, were slain after the militants seized control of Tikrit in June.

"They kill men, women and children," said one man who lost relatives at the site. "That's not Islam. They must all be killed."

The Shiite paramilitaries now occupying the palace expressed similar sentiments.

"I answered the call of the ayatollah and my nation to an-

swer this injustice and repression," said fighter Jabbar Sadiq 25. "We will have vengeance for these martyrs. We will be victorious or be martyrs ourselves."

The atrocities committed by the Islamic State group have deeply shocked the world. Many of the Islamic State's victims have been minority ethnic and religious groups, while the group itself has recruited members almost exclusively from the Sunni community.

Iraq's majority Shiite population has also found itself squarely in the path of the group's wrath. The victims in Tikrit were largely Shiites, mostly from the security services. But as Iraqi forces have regained ground in recent months, Shiite militias backed by Iran have been accused of abuses of their own.

United Nations investigators have chronicled a range of war crimes by both militants and Iraqi security forces.

smith.josh@stripes.com

New rules widen Japanese military reach

BY JON HARPER

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The first major revision of U.S.-Japan defense guidelines in nearly two decades opens the door to greater military cooperation between Washington and Tokyo in case of war in Korea or elsewhere in the East Asia, the Pentagon says.

The revised guidelines were released Monday following a bilateral meeting between Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and Secretary of State John Kerry and their Japanese counterparts in New York City.

The biggest changes are allowing for Japan to join in defending the U.S. homeland and American military forces in the Pacific in the event of conflict, as well as the lifting of geographical restrictions on where Japanese military forces can operate.

"It's a big deal because Japanese [military] capabilities have increased," said a senior U.S. defense official, who discussed the new guidelines with reporters on condition of anonymity.

The guidelines were last revised in 1997. The loosened restrictions on what Japan can do to assist the U.S. military

was made possible by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to push forward a reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution, a pacifistic document created after World War II which severely limited what the Japanese Self Defense Forces could do.

Abe has boosted Japanese defense spending since taking office and promoted closer military ties with the United States. He is visiting the U.S. this week to meet with President Barack Obama and members of Congress, among others. He is also expected to attend a wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington

National Cemetery.

The revision of the guidelines also comes in the wake of changes in the international security environment. In recent years, China's rapid military modernization and territorial disputes with its neighbors, including Japan, have alarmed countries in the region and raised concerns in Washington.

The new defense guidelines would allow Japan to shoot down North Korean missiles headed toward the U.S. homeland and assist U.S. forces engaged in combat.

harper.jon@stripes.com

Ghani trip delayed to address Afghan fight

BY CARLO MUNOZ
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan President Ashraf Ghani held emergency talks Monday with NATO's commander about escalating fighting against insurgents in northern Afghanistan, delaying a planned visit to India.

There was no immediate word on the substance of Ghani's talks with Gen. John Campbell, who commands the alliance's Resolute Support training mission. Campbell told reporters before the meeting that the main focus would be the fighting in Kunduz, though other security matters facing Afghan and coalition forces ahead of this year's spring fighting season were likely on the agenda.

After the talks with Campbell, Ghani departed for his trip to India.

Before Monday's meeting, the government ordered 2,000 Afghan army reinforcements into Kunduz province, where Afghan army units launched a major offensive against Taliban and other insurgent groups in and around Kunduz city late last week, local news reports said.

Since then, fighting has intensified, spreading from the provincial center into Qala-e-Zal and Imam Sahib districts in northern and western Kunduz.

Deputy Interior Minister Mohammed Ayub Salangi and several other officials were traveling to Kunduz on Monday to help coordinate plans to evacuate civilians and push out insurgents from the contested areas, said Sayed Sarwar Hussaini, police spokesman in Kunduz.

Zubair Babakarkhail contributed to this report.
munoz.carlo@stripes.com

New oversight urged in academy sex assault cases

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An advocacy group for female service-members on Monday urged the White House to create new oversight of sexual assaults at the U.S. service academies.

The proposal by Service Women's Action Network is modeled on oversight at civilian colleges and would allow students to file assault and harassment complaints with the Defense Department inspector general, according to the group.

It was the latest push by SWAN for reforms that could help rein in sexual assault in the military and its five elite learning institutions including West Point, the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md., and the Air Force Academy in Colorado, which are charged with training the future crop of officers

and leaders.

"This duty is difficult to fulfill when half of all female cadets and midshipmen at the service academies report being sexually harassed annually, but less than two percent of those female cadets and midshipmen feel confident enough in the system to report that harassment," Arielle Humphries, a law student intern in the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Yale Law School that represents SWAN, said in a released statement.

SWAN and Yale sent a proposed executive order to President Barack Obama on Monday, asking that the inspector general take oversight of the cases similar to how the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights handles sexual harassment and assault cases.

tritten.travis@stripes.com

US military to assist Nepal relief efforts

BY JON HARPER
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Air Force and Army Special Operations Forces will assist in disaster relief efforts in Nepal as part of the international response to a massive earthquake that has killed thousands, according to U.S. defense officials.

A magnitude-7.8 earthquake struck central Nepal on Saturday near densely populated Kathmandu, killing more than 4,000 people and causing widespread devastation in the poor mountain country. The quake and its large aftershocks caused buildings to collapse, made roads impassable and triggered an avalanche on Mount Everest which killed mountain climbers.

The government of Nepal declared a state of emergency and requested international assistance, including search-and-rescue assets, rubble-removal equipment, logistical support for getting to difficult-to-reach areas, and medical assistance.

A U.S. military C-17 Globemaster departed Dover Air Force Base, Del., on Sunday, carrying a team of civilian disaster response workers and supplies to Nepal, the Pentagon

said in a statement.

The plane was transporting about 70 personnel, including a USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team and an Urban Search and Rescue Team from Fairfax County, Va., as well as 45 tons of equipment and supplies, according to the Pentagon.

The aircraft was expected to arrive Monday night.

Another C-17 departed March Air Reserve Base, Calif., on Monday carrying a 47-person Los Angeles County search-and-rescue team. That plane is expected to arrive on Tuesday, according to the Pentagon.

There were 26 Army Special Operations Forces personnel in Nepal conducting a high-altitude training exercise when the disaster struck. All of them have been accounted for, according to Pentagon officials.

The special operators will participate in the disaster response effort. They will provide logistical support and medical care in cooperation with the Nepal army, and participate in search-and-rescue efforts to find trapped mountain trekkers, according to U.S. defense officials.

harper.jon@stripes.com

Insurgents take over Syrian military base

BEIRUT — Islamic insurgents overran a military base at a former factory in northwestern Syria on Monday, carting off tanks and other weapons in the latest blow to President Bashar Assad's forces in the region, activists said.

The opposition offensive in Idlib province has captured the provincial capital, a strategic town, as well as villages and military bases since it began last month. An array of anti-Assad

armed factions from across the ideological spectrum has demonstrated a degree of sustained coordination previously unseen in northern Syria, contributing to the campaign's success.

After hours of heavy fighting on Monday, the opposition fighters seized control of the base at the former factory, known as Qarameed, northwest of the town of Ariha, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Jisr al-Shughour activist coordinating committee's Facebook page said.

From The Associated Press

Wizards complete sweep of Celtics

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — John Wall twirled a red towel overhead, Paul Pierce motioned to the fans to make more noise, and the sellout crowd of 20,356 chanted “Sweep! Sweep! Sweep!”

The mood was so festive Sunday night that even sometimes-humorous Washington Wizards coach Randy Wittman cracked wise when a reporter referred to taking a seven-game series 4-0 for the first time in franchise history.

“Oh, is that right?” Wittman replied. “Do I get anything for that?”

Well, Randy, just another trip to the second round, something Washington’s woebegone NBA club hadn’t done in consecutive years since 1978 and 1979, when it was known as the Bullets.

The Wizards emphatically finished off the Toronto Raptors in four games by winning 125-94 Sunday night to quickly close the first-round Eastern Conference series, getting 21 points and 11 rebounds from Marcin Gortat, and 14 points and 10 assists from Wall.

“I don’t think Game 4 was really that tough, like everybody was saying it was going to be,” Gortat said.

Six Wizards scored in double figures, including Bradley Beal with 23 points and Pierce with 14, and that duo made seven of the Wizards’ team playoff-record 15 three-pointers.

“Didn’t have any letdowns,” Pierce said.

After both Games 2 and 3, Pierce — the 37-year-old with an NBA championship ring from his days in Boston — declared that he didn’t want to have to deal with going through U.S. Customs again, a reference to wanting to avoid having to travel back to Toronto for Game 5.

Not a problem.

Washington led by 16 in the first quarter, 20 in the second and by a whopping 32 — 102-70 — entering the fourth.

“It was just embarrassing,” Toronto’s Patrick Patterson said. “It was horrific. It was a letdown. It was just ugly.”

Next up for the No. 5 seed Wizards will be No. 1 Atlanta or No. 8 Brooklyn. Those teams play their Game 4 on Monday, with the Hawks up 2-1.

“We have that mindset that we’re not finished,” Beal said. “We have that mindset that we’re an elite team in this league.”

Toronto went 3-0 against Washington in the regular season, but failed to find any consistency from quarter to quarter in the playoffs. Kyle Lowry kept finding himself in foul trouble — he picked up his third midway through the first quarter Sunday — and shot poorly. He scored 21 in Game 4, while DeMar DeRozan had 14.

“We were just emotionally drained and we just kind of gave in to their onslaught as the game went on,” Raptors coach Dwane Casey said. “That’s kind of the

way sweep games go. Either you’re in it and, if you can handle the haymakers, you can survive. But we didn’t survive.”

The No. 4 seed Raptors extended their history of brief postseasons: Their past five trips ended with first-round exits.

The Wizards are experiencing a revival of sorts, led in large part by Wall, the No. 1 overall pick the 2010 draft and an All-Star the past two seasons.

Washington won 46 games this season, the first time the club topped 45 since it was known as the Bullets in 1979, back before anyone on the current roster other than Pierce had been born — and he was only about 18 months old at the time.

“A lot of people didn’t have us favored in this series because we didn’t beat them in the regular season,” Wall said. “But we showed a different mindset and hunger in the playoffs.”

Cavaliers 101, Celtics 93: LeBron James scored 27 points and visiting Cleveland overcame a shoulder injury to Kevin Love to complete a first-round sweep of Boston.

Love left the court in the first quarter with a dislocated left shoulder, and J.R. Smith was ejected for swinging his arm at Jae Crowder, but the Cavaliers held on to win a series for the first time since 2010, before James left for Miami.

Now Cleveland gets extra time before facing the winner of the Chicago-Milwaukee series. The Bulls lead 3-1.

The Cavaliers led 57-36 at halftime even though James missed eight of 12 shots and Love left the game for good after becoming entangled with Boston’s Kelly Olynyk while chasing a loose ball. Love immediately headed for the locker room.

Clippers 114, Spurs 105: Chris Paul had 34 points and seven assists, Blake Griffin added 20 points and 19 rebounds, and Los Angeles beat host San Antonio to even their first-round series at two games apiece.

J.J. Redick scored 17 points for the Clippers and Austin Rivers provided an unexpected boost off the bench with a postseason career-high 16 points.

Kawhi Leonard scored 26 points, Tim Duncan had 22 points and 10 rebounds and Tony Parker added 18 points, but Paul proved too much.

Mavericks 121, Rockets 109: Monta Ellis scored 31 points, J.J. Barea had 17 points and 13 assists in his first playoff start since boosting Dallas’ run to the 2011 championship and the Mavericks avoided elimination with a victory over visiting Houston.

Dallas cut Houston’s lead to 3-1 in the first-round series.

The Rockets, trying to wrap up their first postseason series victory since 2009, missed 17 consecutive shots covering the second and third quarters. The most-prolific three-point shooting team in NBA history in the regular season was 7-for-31 from long range.

Price dominant as Canadiens oust Senators

The Associated Press

OTTAWA, Ontario — The Montreal Canadiens are moving on — after a few tense days in which a big series lead suddenly dwindled.

Carey Price made 43 saves, Brendan Gallagher scored in the first period, and the Canadiens beat the Ottawa Senators 2-0 on Sunday night to advance to the second round of the NHL playoffs.

Montreal won the best-of-seven series in six games, but lost two in a row after taking a 3-0 series lead — and Ottawa nearly sent it to a deciding seventh game. The Canadiens will face the winner of the Detroit-Tampa Bay series, which the Red Wings lead 3-2.

“I know some people thought it would be pretty easy for us to get the fourth win, but we knew they were a capable team that battled hard all season to get into the playoffs,” defenseman P.K. Subban said. “I like the way we had to win this series.”

Max Pacioretty sealed the win with an empty-net goal with 1 second remaining.

It was the first time this season the Senators were shut out.

“Price stepped up and he was the difference,” Subban said.

Price, nominated for the Vezina Trophy as the league’s top goalie, rebounded after allowing five goals in Game 5 with a masterful effort as the Senators outshot the Canadiens 43-20.

Montreal had the first six shots of the game, but the Senators outshot them 16-3 in a dominant second period in which they did everything but score.

The 20,500 fans at the Canadian Tire Centre were screaming for a call of too many men on the ice against Montreal when referee Chris Lee blew the whistle just

before Jean-Gabriel Pageau put a puck in at 6:55 that had fallen past Price — so the goal didn’t count.

“It was just bad puck luck,” Ottawa coach Dave Cameron said about the disallowed goal.

Ottawa went all out in the third for the equalizer, but Montreal finished with strong checking and two or three more solid saves from Price.

“That’s what it’s all about,” Price said about the frantic final minute. “That’s what makes it fun. Since you’re a little kid, you dream about being in those situations.”

Wild 4, Blues 1: Minnesota was flailing in mid-January, badly needing a boost in the net when Devan Dubnyk arrived just in time.

The lanky goalie still has a lot more big saves to make this spring.

“That’s what we’re hoping for here,” coach Mike Yeo said, “and I think there’s more to this story.”

The next chapter will start in Chicago.

Zach Parise scored twice, including a short-handed, highlight-reel goal to get Minnesota going in the first period, and the Wild beat St. Louis in Game 6 of the first-round series to advance to the Western Conference semifinals for a rematch with the Blackhawks.

Dubnyk made 66 saves over the last two games, resolutely responding to the 6-1 defeat here on Wednesday that let the Blues tie the series. The Wild outscored the Blues 8-2 after that, despite being outshot 68-40.

The building was buzzing from the start, befitting of the occasion to see the Wild celebrate a postseason advancement at home for the first time.

The Wild won three of their previous nine playoff series, all with Game 7 victories on the road. The crowd serenaded Dubnyk at every opportunity, with that catching “Duuuuub!” cheer.

“There was a play in the third period where they got fore-

check pressure, and he kind of hangs on to the puck and shows some unreal composure,” Yeo said, adding: “When your goalie’s playing confident, when the heat is on, I think that the rest of the group feeds off that.”

Parise’s relentless play was contagious, too.

“I try to be a lead-by-example type of guy,” said Parise, who tied for the franchise postseason lead with 22 points in 24 games, five fewer than Marian Gaborik played in.

The Wild were killing an early penalty when Parise snagged a loose puck in the neutral zone, raced away from Blues defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk and triggered a huge roar from the crowd with that bad-angle shot that slipped between goalie Jake Allen’s right arm and the near post into the far side of the net.

Justin Fontaine also scored for the Wild, prompting Blues coach Ken Hitchcock to pull Allen for Brian Elliott with 8:41 left in the second period. T.J. Oshie’s first goal of the series came with 4 seconds left before the second intermission to spark the Blues, who outshot the Wild 27-11 over the last two periods.

Parise’s next goal came on a rebound of Jason Pominville’s attempt early in the third, though, and Dubnyk and the Wild were in lockdown mode after that. Nino Niederreiter added an empty-net goal, steering the Blues toward their third straight first-round ouster.

Dubnyk made a big save soon after the St. Louis change when Chris Porter crashed the net on his shot from the slot. The puck was dislodged during the scrum in the crease but after the whistle, and a replay review upheld the no-goal call.

Porter was so upset on the bench afterward, he was caught on camera snapping the blade off his stick



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A-Rod one HR from tying Mays

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Alex Rodriguez is one big swing from matching Willie Mays. Whether the New York Yankees would celebrate that achievement — or pay for it, for that matter — remains to be seen.

Rodriguez hit his 659th home run to move within one of Mays for fourth place on baseball's career list, and the Yankees took advantage of several mistakes by the suddenly sloppy New York Mets in a 6-4 victory Sunday night.

"Willie was my father's favorite player. I remember hearing about Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle all the time. He's one of my heroes," Rodriguez said.

The Yankees and Rodriguez have a \$30 million marketing agreement that calls for him to receive \$6 million each for up to five accomplishments, payable within 15 days of designation by the team. The accomplishments were contemplated to be home runs 660, 714, 755, 762 and 763.

But with A-Rod's career tarnished by performance-enhancing drugs, the Yankees are thinking about letting the milestones pass without making a designation, which could lead to another legal fight between

the sides.

During his surprisingly powerful start to this season, the Yankees have virtually ignored Rodriguez's pursuit of Mays.

Asked if he knows what the team might do to mark No. 660, the longtime slugger said, "I don't have a marketing degree, so I'm just focusing on playing baseball."

Rodriguez connected in the first inning. He drove a 2-2 curve from Jonathon Niese (2-1) to right-center, with the ball bouncing off the top of the fence and over for an opposite-field solo shot at Yankee Stadium.

"I think it set a tone for our offense," he said.

It was the fifth homer of the season for A-Rod, who sat out last year while serving a drug suspension.

"Another big night," Yankees manager Joe Girardi said. "He sparked our offense."

After falling behind early, the Yankees scored four times in the second and took two of three in the first Subway Series of the season. The crosstown rivals meet again at Citi Field in September.

Rodriguez's first chance to match Mays came in the second inning, when the three-time MVP doubled. He also grounded into a

forceout and lined out to left field.

The Yankees have won eight of 10 after a 3-6 start.

Five relievers combined to throw 4²/₃ hitless innings for the Yankees. Chasen Shreve (1-0) earned his first major league win by getting cleanup batter Michael Cuddyer to ground into an inning-ending double play with two on in the fifth.

Chris Martin got five outs, Dellin Betances struck out three in the eighth and Andrew Miller closed for his seventh save in as many attempts.

"They all came in and did their job and threw really well," Girardi said.

In the seventh inning, Eric Campbell forgot how many outs there were and was easily doubled off first base on a routine fly to right.

Campbell also committed an error at third base, and Cuddyer made one in left field that cost the Mets a run. It was an uncharacteristic performance this season by a surprising team that owns the best record in the majors at 14-5.

"In a game like this, you can't make those mistakes," manager Terry Collins said. "Just a bad night for us."

White Sox take a pair from Royals

rhe Associated Press

CHICAGO — Alex Gordon knew exactly what was going to happen when he hustled over to make a play on Micah Johnson's foul liner. And he went all out for it anyway.

Gordon made a spectacular leaping grab on Johnson's ball in the sixth inning of Kansas City's 5-3 loss to the Chicago White Sox on Sunday, going into the stands to bring it in before he landed in a group of fans.

Gordon also made a fine running catch on Avisail Garcia's liner to left in the fourth, and then threw to second to double off Melky Cabrera for the final out. He went 2-for-4 at the plate, including a two-run drive for his second homer, but it was the defense of the four-time Gold Glove winner that attracted the most attention on a difficult day for the Royals.

The rest of the day belonged to the White Sox, who got their first two wins of the year against Kansas City. Garcia's two-out RBI single sent Chicago to a 3-2 victory in the resumption of a game suspended by rain on Friday night, then an error on Kansas City third baseman Mike Moustakas helped the White Sox rally for the win in the regularly scheduled matchup.

Astros 7, Athletics 6: Evan Gattis hit a two-run double in the ninth inning as AL West-leading Houston completed its first sweep of host Oakland. Gattis matched a career high with four RBIs.

Tigers 8, Indians 6: Miguel Cabrera homered and drove in three runs for host Detroit..

Rangers 5, Angels 4 (11): Leonys Martin led off the 11th inning with a homer as visiting Texas scored another run on Erick Aybar's error before holding on for a victory over Anaheim.

Pirates 8, Diamondbacks 0: Francisco Liriano pitched effectively into the seventh inning in a combined three-hitter and Pittsburgh completed its first sweep in Arizona.

Orioles 18, Red Sox 7: Delmon Young drove in five runs and Chris Davis homered as host Baltimore received a bounce-back pitching performance from Bud Norris.

Marlins 6, Nationals 2: Adeiny Hechavarria hit a bases-loaded triple after a botched rundown kept the inning alive as host Florida completed a three-game sweep of Washington.

Phillies 5, Braves 4: Ryan Howard hit his second homer in two games, helping host Philadelphia beat Atlanta.

Rays 5, Blue Jays 1: Chris Archer pitched two-hit ball in seven scoreless innings and Brandon Guyer drove in four runs as host Tampa Bay won its fifth straight.

Brewers 6, Cardinals 3: Adam Lind hit a two-run homer as host Milwaukee beat St. Louis for just their second victory in the last 12 games.

Cubs 5, Reds 2: Rookie Addison Russell doubled with the bases loaded as visiting Chicago held on for a victory and a sweep of their rain-shortened series against Cincinnati.

Twins 4, Mariners 2 (11): Joe Mauer hit a two-run triple with two outs in the 11th inning, lifting visiting Minnesota over Seattle.

Padres 3, Dodgers 1: Brandon Morrow pitched seven strong innings to earn his first win with host San Diego, and Alexi Amarista and Derek Norris homered as the Padres beat NL-West leading Los Angeles to snap a four-game skid.

Kurt Busch rules at Richmond

The Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Kurt Busch has spent time this year in a Delaware courtroom, then on NASCAR's sidelines as he served a three-race suspension for an alleged domestic assault on a former girlfriend.

Now he has made a trip to Victory Lane, where Busch hoped his victory Sunday at Richmond International Raceway will help him close one of the messiest chapters of his volatile career.

"Standing on the truth the whole time, that gave me the feeling of when I do get back to the car, it's going to be easy to focus, and I think I've shown that," said Busch, who still has a no-contact order against him that was issued in February by a Delaware Family Court judge. The judge ruled that Busch likely assaulted ex-girlfriend Patricia Driscoll in September.

The 2004 series champion dominated

the rain-delayed NASCAR Sprint Cup race that was originally scheduled for Saturday night under the lights.

The Stewart-Haas Racing driver led a career-best 291 of the 400 laps on the 0.75-mile oval, outrunning teammate Kevin Harvick over the final dozen laps to end a 35-race winless streak.

Harvick finished in the top two for the seventh time in nine races, but said he had to rally after his car struggled on one set of tires and drifted back into the pack.

The race looked much like the Xfinity Series event Friday night in which Denny Hamlin led 248 of 250 laps and only lost the lead during green flag pits stops. This time, there were actual green flag lead changes, but only two — when Busch passed Joey Logano after 94 laps to take the lead, and when Jamie McMurray passed Busch after 262 laps.

Busch regained the lead under caution

and never relinquished it, beating Harvick to the finish by 0.754 seconds. The victory was the 26th of Busch's career and second at Richmond.

Jimmie Johnson rallied from a No. 36 starting spot to grab third. McMurray was fourth and pole-sitter Logano, who led the first 94 laps, was fifth. Rookie Chase Elliott, making his second start in NASCAR's premier series, finished 16th.

The day was especially disappointing for Denny Hamlin, who grew up about 20 miles from the track and had a dominating Friday, qualifying second and leading 248 of 250 laps in the Xfinity Series race.

That, however, was before rain all day Saturday washed all the rubber off the track, and when the race began Sunday, Hamlin began fading immediately. He went a lap down after 236 laps and finished 22nd.

Newgarden claims first IndyCar victory

The Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Josef Newgarden's wait is over. To his relief, so is the race.

The 24-year-old Tennessean held off a hard-charging Graham Rahal on Sunday in the Indy Grand Prix of Alabama for his first IndyCar Series victory.

"I'm so relieved that it's over with," Newgarden said. "I really wanted that race to end. It was just so stressful for me. Normally I'm pretty cool, and I felt cool out there, but it was just very stressful to run those laps and try to control that thing. We've been there before and things have gone wrong, and today nothing went wrong."

Things started going right on the opening lap, in fact, when he moved all the way from fifth to second behind pole-sitter Helio Castroneves.

Newgarden led 46 of the 90 laps. He got

his milestone win at Barber Motorsports Park a few hours from his hometown of Hendersonville, Tenn., with most of the major drama coming behind him.

It was his first chance to celebrate a win since Indy Lights in 2011.

Newgarden had posted second-place finishes in each of the past two years before finally finishing up front for CFH Racing, a merger of Sarah Fisher Hartman Racing and Ed Carpenter Racing. He'd been off to a good start, including a seventh-place finish last weekend at Long Beach, before finally snaring a victory.

Rahal finally slipped past Scott Dixon on the final lap after several tries, giving the American drivers a 1-2 finish.

Dixon had his sixth podium finish in as many years in Alabama at No. 3. He picked up the 36th win of his career at Long Beach, moving into sole possession of fifth place in the series. He still couldn't

quite break through in Alabama, saying it was about tire management not fuel.

Rahal's strong finish Sunday gave Honda a boost after Chevrolet fielded the seven fastest cars in qualifying, with Team Penske sweeping the top three.

Rahal flirted with his first victory since becoming the youngest IndyCar winner in 2008 at 19 years old and picked up considerable ground in the final laps.

He made an outside pass of Ryan Hunter Reay with 10 laps to go, went by Castroneves and then took on Dixon, the veteran from New Zealand. Rahal finished 2.2 seconds behind Newgarden.

Two-time defending champion Hunter-Reay, the 2014 Indianapolis 500 winner, made a big surge after starting 18th. He finished fifth, while Team Penske's Power was fourth and Carlos Munoz took sixth.