

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Suspected Syria gas attack kills dozens

Associated Press

BEIRUT — A suspected chemical attack in a town in Syria's rebel-held northern Idlib province killed dozens of people on Tuesday, opposition activists said, describing the attack as among the worst in the country's six-year civil war.

Hours later, a small field hospital in the region was struck and destroyed, according to a civil defense worker in the area. There was no information on if anyone was killed in that attack.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group put the death toll from the gas attack at 58, saying there were 11 children among the dead. Meanwhile, the Idlib Media Center said dozens of people had been killed.

The media center published footage of medical workers appearing to intubate an unresponsive man stripped down to his underwear and hooking up a little girl foaming at the mouth to a ventilator.

It was not immediately clear if all those killed died from suffocation or were struck by other airstrikes occurring in the area around the same time. It was the third claim of a chemical attack in just over a week in Syria.

The previous two were reported in Hama province, in an area not far from Khan Sheikhoun, the site of Tuesday's alleged attack.

Tuesday's reports came on the eve of a major international meeting in Brussels on the future of Syria and the region, to be hosted by the European Union's High Representative Federica Mogherini.

There was no comment from the government in Damascus in the immediate aftermath of the attack, which activists said was the worst since the 2013 toxic gas attack on the Damas-

cus suburb of Ghouta that killed hundreds of civilians. That attack, which a U.N. report said was an attack by toxic sarin gas, was the worst in Syria's civil war.

In the wake of the 2013 attack, President Bashar Assad agreed to a Russia-sponsored deal to destroy his chemical arsenal and joined the Chemical Weapons Convention. His government declared a 1,300-ton stockpile of chemical weapons and so-called precursor chemicals that can be used to make weapons amid international outrage at a nerve gas attack on the outskirts of Damascus.

Those weapons have been destroyed, but member states of the OPCW have repeatedly questioned whether Assad declared everything in 2013. The widely available chemical chlorine was not covered in the 2013 declaration, and activists say they have documented dozens of cases of chlorine gas attacks since then.

The Syrian government has consistently denied using chemical weapons and chlorine gas, accusing the rebels of deploying it in the war instead.

Tarik Jasarevic, spokesman for the World Health Organization in Geneva, said in an emailed statement that the agency is contacting health providers from Idlib to get more information about Tuesday's incident.

The Syrian American Medical Society, which supports hospitals in opposition-held territory, said it had sent a team of inspectors to Khan Sheikhoun before noon and that an investigation was underway.

The Syrian activists claimed the attack was caused by an airstrike carried out either by Syrian government or Russian warplanes. Makeshift hospitals were soon crowded with people suffocating, they said.

US Syrian air base expanded to be used in battle for Raqqa

BY TARA COPP

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force has expanded an air base in northern Syria to assist in the fight to retake the city of Raqqa from Islamic State, U.S. Central Command said.

The base is near Kobani, which is about 90 miles north of Raqqa, the last urban stronghold for ISIS in Syria. It gives the United States an additional location to launch aircraft to support U.S. and other anti-ISIS forces in the campaign to recapture the city, said Col. John Thomas, a spokesman for CENTCOM.

Airmen from the 621st Contingency Response Group needed to expand and modify the airstrip at Kobani, which had been used by U.S. forces in only a limited way because the condition of the runway curtailed what types of aircraft could land there.

Prior to making the airstrip at Kobani more versatile, the closest operating air facilities to support coalition operations were bases in the Turkish cities of Incirlik and Diyarbakir.

Gen. Carlton Everhart II, who leads U.S. Air Mobility Command, said airmen from the 621st group have supported anti-ISIS coalition forces on the ground in Syria, and the base enables aircraft to deliver critical supplies and equipment and help position forces.

"It brings things closer to the fight," Thomas said.

The airmen entered Syria in November on a C-130 that landed on an airstrip of crushed rock, said Senior Master Sgt. Chris Wright, who led the 621st group's security forces on that mission.

The Air Force's contingency response group is tasked with landing on austere airfields so it can prepare them to receive aircraft and forces. Much of the time, the group is setting up airfields to respond to humanitarian crises, but it has deployed three times during Operation Inherent Resolve.

In 2016, the group established the Kobani airfield in Syria and also set up an airfield at Qayarah West, in northern Iraq, to support the fight against ISIS in Mosul. In 2015, it established an airstrip at al-Taqaddum to support Iraq's battle for Ramadi.

"We set up the airfield from scratch," Wright said of the airfield at Kobani, noting that when the unit first arrived just a few days after Army forces did, there were only a few aircraft. Since then, "it's increased significantly," he said.

Wright and a contingent of civil engineers, security forces and intelligence personnel were deployed temporarily to expand the base to "support every type of airframe across the (Defense Department) spectrum," Wright said. They lived in tents and ate Meals Ready to Eat, known as MREs, for 45 days, he said.

The Kobani airstrip has been modified to support not only C-130s, which are able to land in the most difficult of environments, but also C-17s, which need a more hardened runway to support their weight, and other aircraft, Thomas said.

"There are pretty significant parallels between the landing strip near Kobani for the Raqqa battle space and [Qayarah West] for Mosul," Thomas said, noting both bases are "out of enemy range but close to the fight. It helps."

US Army testing mechanical 'third arm'

Stars and Stripes

Soldiers may one day be equipped with a mechanical third arm to lessen the burden of heavy weapons or free their hands for other tasks.

With the weight of firearms expected to increase with improving technology, the Army is testing a body-worn gun mount as a possible solution, officials said in a statement.

The passive mechanical appendage, which looks like something out of an "Inspector Gadget" cartoon, is made of a carbon-fiber composite weighing less than 4

pounds and attaches to soldiers' protective vests.

"We're looking at a new way for the soldier to interface with the weapon," Zac Wingard, a mechanical engineer for the Army Research Laboratory's Weapons and Materials Research Directorate, told Army News Service. "It is not a product; it is simply a way to study how far we can push the ballistic performance of future weapons without increasing soldier burden."

Testing is underway at the lab and at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland using M4 carbine rifles, the Army statement said. Soldiers wear sensors measur-

ing muscle activity to determine if there's a change in fatigue when shooting with the device.

"Imagine shoulder-firing (weapons) without the weight on your arms and without all the recoil going into your shoulder," mechanical engineer Dan Baechle told the news service.

Future testing will include different weapons and fighting techniques, such as shooting around corners, and eventually will lead to heavy field testing, the statement added.

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Poultry embargo limits shoppers in S. Korea

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — Commissary shoppers in South Korea are being squeezed by bird flu outbreaks on both shores of the Pacific.

The Defense Commissary Agency has stopped shipments of fresh poultry products to South Korea after a March 5 outbreak of avian influenza was traced to a commercial farm in Tennessee.

The South Korea-imposed embargo blocks all U.S. imports of uncooked eggs, frozen chicken breasts, thighs, wings and whole chickens, said DeCA and South Korea agriculture officials.

It won't affect U.S. shipments of pasteurized and cooked products such as pot pies, lunch meat and other items that aren't from Tennessee and have the appropriate health certificates.

Japan has blocked poultry from Tennessee, while Taiwan has imposed a ban only on the county where the infected flock was found, according to a Reuters report. The ban affects commissaries in South Korea and not in other countries, DeCA spokesman Richard Brink told Stars and Stripes in an email Friday.

Customers on the peninsula may not notice an immediate

change.

The DeCA said the 11 stores in South Korea will continue to sell U.S. poultry that was shipped before the ban. It also said uncooked fresh poultry products would be available from local sources.

However, South Korea also has been hit by bird flu, forcing authorities to kill more than 37.8 million poultry since November in its worst outbreak. The previous record was nearly 14 million destroyed in a 2014 outbreak, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

In response to the South Korean outbreak, the DeCA began in late February limiting customers to two cartons of U.S. eggs per purchase.

"The carton limit will continue and may be adjusted to ensure the availability of U.S. eggs as long as possible," Brink said.

South Korea's outbreak has sharply driven up the cost of poultry and eggs on the local market.

Chicken prices surged to the highest level in three decades, the Yonhap news agency reported last month. It cited industry data showing consumer prices at about \$2.30 per pound, up 2.9 percent from a year earlier.

Coast Guard's top officer laments being excluded from funding increase

The Washington Post

The Coast Guard's top officer said Monday that his service was "left behind" in an effort by the Trump administration to improve the Armed Forces, and still needs dozens of new ships and thousands more servicemembers.

"I'm delighted that Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps are being plused up, but we've got nothing left," Adm. Paul Zukunft, the Coast Guard commandant, said at a conference hosted by the Navy League at National Harbor in Maryland.

The admiral's comments come after the Trump administration decided to increase the Defense Department's funding by \$54 billion in its first budget, making it one of just a few departments to see an increase. The Coast Guard's funding stayed flat at about \$9.1 billion for 2018 after an earlier draft budget showed that the Trump administration considered slashing \$1.3 billion from the Coast Guard to help pay for his planned wall on the southern U.S. border.

The proposal to reduce Coast Guard funding ultimately was set aside after a bipartisan effort

involving dozens of lawmakers. But Zukunft said Monday it still caused consternation, especially in Maritime Security Response Teams, which carry out counterterrorism patrols in ports and sensitive waterways and were targeted for cuts in the draft budget.

The Coast Guard, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, has often been scrutinized as a place to save money in the federal budget. Efforts have been made to exempt the military from some of the congressionally mandated budget cuts known as sequestration, but they have not applied to the Coast Guard because it is not a part of the Defense Department.

Zukunft told reporters last month that the service must pull itself out of the shadows and "put ourselves in the limelight."

Among the projects the Coast Guard wants to take on is building three large icebreaker ships and three medium-sized ones. Coast Guard officials say they are needed to patrol waterways in the Arctic that increasingly are open to navigation as climate change melts ice there.

Lawmakers weigh offer to revive health care bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans entertained a fresh White House offer to revise the party's failed health care bill Tuesday as the GOP tried to resuscitate the measure that failed less than two weeks ago. But the proposal was getting mixed reviews from both conservative and moderate lawmakers, raising doubts about the rescue mission.

"We're at the concept stage right now," said House Speaker Paul Ryan. The Wisconsin Republican said he believed his party was moving toward consensus but conceded he didn't know if the House would vote on the measure before beginning a two-week recess later this week.

Vice President Mike Pence, who's been touting the administration's new bid to congressional Republicans, said Tuesday that he and President Donald Trump were optimistic.

"The president and I remain confident that working with the Congress, we will repeal and replace 'Obamacare' with health

care reform that will work for the American people and work for the American economy," he said.

Pence and two top White House officials made the offer Monday night in a closed-door meeting with members of the House Freedom Caucus, participants said. Opposition from the hard-line group, which has about three dozen conservative Republicans, helped prompt Ryan to withdraw the bill from a March 24 vote.

Under the White House proposal, states could apply for federal waivers from several coverage requirements that the 2010 health care law, the Affordable Care Act, imposes on insurers.

These would include waivers from an Affordable Care Act provision that obliges insurers to cover "essential health benefits," including mental health, maternity and substance abuse services. The current version of the GOP legislation would erase that coverage requirement but would let states reimpose it on their own.

News of Iraq trip with Kushner in midflight was security breach

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration's failure to keep senior adviser Jared Kushner's trip to Iraq secret isn't standard practice for top U.S. officials visiting war zones. Such trips are usually kept quiet, with the cooperation of journalists, until the officials arrive to ensure maximum security.

A senior administration official told reporters Sunday evening that Kushner — President Donald Trump's son-in-law — was in Iraq, even though he was en route. For the military and security professionals managing the mission, the public disclosure of the trip was a security breach. Gen. Joseph Dunford, the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, also was on board.

Although the plane landed safely in Baghdad on Monday,

the Iraqi capital is hardly a secure location, having suffered countless extremist attacks over the years. The threat is no less acute today as Iraq wages a bitter battle to try to rid Islamic State from its territory. For trips to the city, the military seeks to avoid public mention of plans ahead of time so extremist groups can't plot attacks.

"It's been long-standing practice to strictly avoid announcing the visits of senior U.S. officials in advance of their travels to war zones," said George Little, a Pentagon and CIA press secretary for Leon Panetta, who managed both departments under President Barack Obama. "... You want to avoid giving the enemy any information that could help them to target these delegations, especially in areas where the battle lines aren't clear on the map."

Vets crisis line is better, not 'fixed'

By NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Veterans Crisis Line is showing signs of improvement, but its leaders shouldn't be so quick to say its long-standing problems are completely fixed, some lawmakers, internal watchdogs and veterans organizations said Tuesday.

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a hearing to discuss problems with the suicide hotline following a scathing report released March 20 by the inspector general for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The report concluded about 30 percent of calls to the hotline at the end of 2016 were rolled over to backup centers. The VA does not operate the backup centers, and calls there are sometimes placed in a queue.

VA staff responded to the report March 21, stating all of the issues with the hotline had since been resolved.

"The press release that came out after the [inspector general] report said you had fixed the problem. I would be very careful saying you fixed all the problems with the [Veterans Crisis Line]," Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn., said during the hearing.

As of Tuesday, 99.84 percent of veterans' calls were being answered by hotline workers, said Steve Young, VA deputy undersecretary for operations and management. On Monday alone, the call centers — one in upstate New York and a new one in Atlanta — took 2,246 calls, while seven went to backup centers, he said.

However, lawmakers noted the crisis line still didn't have a permanent director and needed to implement better training and clear policies for its staff. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America officials testified its members who recently used the hotline reported lengthy wait times to talk with some-

one. Members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars asked for call responders to be better monitored by clinicians.

VA Inspector General Michael Missal testified Tuesday that the VA has not successfully followed through on 23 recommendations his office made for the hotline since early 2016. The Government Accountability Office also wrote in testimony that the VA had not implemented two of its recommendations.

"All recommendations remain open today," Missal said. "Until [the VA] fully implements these recommendations, they will continue to have challenges meeting the [Veteran Crisis Line's] critically important mission."

Matthew Eitutis, who directs the VA's office of member services, said he's been trying for months to prove to the inspector general that the crisis line has done enough to fulfill some of the recommendations. The hotline lacks documentation, though, and Missal said there was some misunderstanding of what was required of the VA.

Young and Eitutis defended the hotline Tuesday. There were high rollover rates at the end of 2016, they said, because the VA was opening its new call center in Atlanta. With that call center and the original in upstate New York operating at the same time, the hotline "is the strongest that it has been since its inception in 2007," Young said.

He said its "tipping point" was Jan. 13, the first day that no calls were rolled over to backup centers. Since then, the hotline has tallied 43 days where it answered 100 percent of veterans' calls.

Conservative-leaning Concerned Veterans for America responded that Congress should "trust, but verify" that the crisis line is improving.

The VA plans to have all of the recommendations implemented by December 2017, Young said.

Russia says suicide bomber behind fatal subway attack

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia — A suicide bomber was behind a blast on the St. Petersburg subway that killed 14 people, Russian investigators said Tuesday, while authorities in the Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan identified a suspect as a Kyrgyz-born Russian citizen.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the Monday afternoon attack, which came while President Vladimir Putin was visiting the city, Russia's second-biggest and Putin's hometown.

Russia's health minister on Tuesday raised the death toll from 11 to 14 and said 49 people are still hospitalized.

Residents have been taking flowers to the stations near where the blast occurred.

Every corner and windowsill at the ornate, Soviet-built Senaya Square station on Tuesday was covered with red and white carnations.

Russia's top investigative body said in a statement that investigators have identified a man whose body parts were found on the train and who is suspected to be a suicide bomber. Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security identified one suspect as Kyrgyz-born Russian national Akbarzhon Dzhaliyev, aged between 21 and 22. It was not immediately clear if the two statements related to the same person.

The Interfax news agency on Monday said authorities believe the suspect was linked to radical Islamic groups and carried the explosive device onto the train in a backpack.

The entire subway system in St. Petersburg, a city of 5 million, was shut down and evacuated before partial service resumed six hours later.

Monday's explosion occurred as the train traveled between stations on one of the city's north-south lines. The driver spoke to reporters Tuesday, looking tired but not visibly shaken by the events of the previous day.

Alexander Kavernin, 50, who has worked on the subway for 14 years, said he heard the blast, called security and carried on to the next station as the emergency instructions prescribe.

"I had no time to think about fear at that moment," he said.

Four stations on the subway were closed again Tuesday due to a bomb threat but later reopened.

DOJ seeks pause on Baltimore police deal

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Baltimore's mayor and police chief worked closely with Justice Department investigators to scrutinize the city's police force and embraced a plan they crafted to overhaul the troubled department.

So they were surprised by the Justice Department's sudden request Monday for more time to see how the proposed changes might conflict with the aggressive crime-fighting approach new Attorney General Jeff Sessions favors.

Democratic Mayor Catherine Pugh and police Commissioner Kevin Davis believed the proposed agreement would repair public trust in the police while also quelling violence. They swiftly voiced their opposition to the requested delay and pledged to press ahead with the business of transforming the police department with or without a court-enforceable consent decree.

"The Baltimore Police Department is continuing to move forward with reforms related to the forthcoming consent decree for the overall progress of the city of Baltimore," said department spokesman T.J. Smith. "Further delays only serve to erode the trust of the public in this process."

The government's request for a 90-day continuance came three days before a scheduled hearing before a federal judge, and just hours after Sessions announced he had ordered a sweeping review of the Justice Department's interactions with local law enforcement, including existing or proposed consent decrees.

It provided an early glimpse of the attorney general's stance on police department oversight and his ambivalence about mandating widespread change of local law enforcement agencies.

California lawmakers approve immigrant sanctuary measure

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California lawmakers gave initial approval Monday to a measure that prevents law enforcement from cooperating with federal immigration officials, a measure that proponents said rebukes President Donald Trump for his immigration crackdown.

It makes California a statewide sanctuary for many people who are in the country illegally.

The state Senate passed the measure on a 27-12 vote, sending it to the state assembly over the objection of opponents who said it endangers the public by shielding felons from being deported.

The bill advanced after Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de Leon, a Democrat from Los Angeles, amended it to let state and local law enforcement notify Immigration and Customs Enforcement federal agents before convicted serious or violent felons are released from custody.

De Leon also stripped the bill of a provision that would have required a two-thirds vote. Passing the measure with a simple majority means it wouldn't take effect until Jan. 1, while the previous version would have taken effect

immediately.

"We will cooperate with our friends at the federal level with serious and violent felons. But we won't cooperate or lift a finger or spend a single cent when we're talking about separating children from their mothers, mothers from their children," de Leon said. "That's not who we are as a great state."

Trump in January signed an order threatening to withdraw federal grants from jurisdictions that bar officials from communicating with federal authorities about someone's immigration status.

The American Civil Liberties Union, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and other supporters said the bill would give California some of the nation's strongest anti-deportation protections.

Lawmakers in the nation's most populous state also advanced two other bills that attempt to impede the president's immigration policies. They sent the assembly a bill that would provide \$12 million to pay lawyers for immigrants facing deportation, and another measure that would bar state officials from sharing data if the federal government creates a Muslim registry.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Couple leave letter as prank for mailman

PA LEWISBURG — A Pennsylvania couple pranked their mailman on April Fools' Day by leaving an extralong letter sticking out of the mail slot on their front door.

Bill Kelly and his wife used a piece of paper several feet long that they folded over to look like an envelope. They waited for the mail man to grab it from the mail slot then laughed as he pulled several feet of it from the door of their Lewisburg home on Saturday.

The couple addressed it to "A.P. Relfools" and, in case the postman didn't figure it out right away, wrote "April Fools!" in big letters on the other end of the fake envelope, several feet away.

9/11 victim's daughter dies at eating contest

CT HARTFORD — A 20-year-old Connecticut university student whose father was killed in the Sept. 11 attacks died after choking during a pancake-eating contest on campus.

Police said Sacred Heart student Caitlin Nelson died at a New York City hospital on Sunday, three days after the contest during a fraternities and sororities event at the Catholic school in Fairfield, Conn.

Fairfield police said nursing students and first responders performed lifesaving measures on Nelson and she was taken to an area hospital. She was transported to a New York hospital Friday.

Nelson's father, James Nelson, was a Port Authority of New York and New Jersey police officer killed in the Sept. 11 attacks. The 40-year-old was killed while trying to rescue

people trapped in the World Trade Center. His obituary said he was survived by two daughters, 11-year-old Anne and 5-year-old Caitlin.

Mother of 3 dies at end of half-marathon

PA SCRANTON — A married mother of three died at the end of a half-marathon in Pennsylvania, and now authorities are trying to figure out why.

Lindsay Doherty, 36, collapsed at the end of Sunday's 13.1-mile Scranton Half Marathon. She died a short time later at Geisinger Community Medical Center.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Scranton said Doherty worked in its development office, raising money for Catholic education.

Medical workers, including two emergency room physicians, worked to resuscitate Doherty before she was rushed to the hospital.

Man crashes car into emergency room

MI WYANDOTTE — Police said a man suspected of being under the influence of narcotics or alcohol was injured when he crashed a car into an emergency room entrance at a suburban Detroit hospital.

Wyandotte Police Department Lt. Archie Hamilton said the 30-year-old Lincoln Park man had lacerations but no one else was injured. He said the man could face charges.

Driver abandons SUV, is killed while walking

MS PASCAGOULA — A 38-year-old Biloxi man was hit and killed while walking in the left lane of west-

bound Interstate 10 in Jackson County.

According to a statement from the Mississippi Highway Patrol, troopers believe the man was walking early Sunday because he had lost control of his 2003 Chevrolet Suburban and crashed into a 2005 Nissan Altima parked on the shoulder.

The driver walked away before law enforcement arrived. The statement said he had walked less than a mile before he was hit.

Girl retrieving phone on tracks is struck

NY NEW YORK — Police said a 13-year-old girl trying to retrieve her cellphone after it fell onto New York City subway tracks was struck and killed by a train at a station in Queens on Sunday afternoon.

Police said Deena Kadribasic climbed down onto the tracks and was struck by a southbound R train.

Thieves cutting birch trees in two states

MN MINNEAPOLIS — County sheriffs and state natural resource officials are responding to a rash of thefts of birch trees in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Thieves are quickly cutting down the young, paper-white trees. The Minneapolis Star Tribune reported the logs are sold to city residents who want a touch of the northwoods in their homes.

Chief Deputy Mike Richter, with the Washburn County Sheriff's Office in Wisconsin, said birch trees have been poached in at least 15 to 20 locations in his county.

Conservation officer Dave Zebro, of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, said thieves take chain saws to birch groves and are "gone before

anyone sees them."

Birch thieves also are cutting down whole strands across the Iron Range of northern Minnesota.

Drivers warned about frogs, salamanders

VT MONTPELIER — The Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife is warning drivers to be wary and drive with caution due to seasonal frog and salamander migrations.

The department said that frogs and salamanders tend to cross roads in groups during rainy spring nights in search of breeding pools. They are often killed by cars, which contributes to their decline.

Officials and volunteers will work to slow traffic and manually carry the amphibians across the roads during spring nights.

The state is also working to build culverts and wildlife barriers around hot spots to avoid unnecessary amphibian deaths.

Rescue kittens attend veterinarians' wedding

CO LARKSPUR — Veterinarians Michele and Nicholas Anderson don't leave anyone out when they celebrate life's big moments.

The Colorado couple "invited" two rescue kittens to their March wedding and included them in photos.

ABC News reported the newlyweds volunteer at Devine Feline, a cat welfare clinic in Denver. They brought the kittens, Jeeves and Houdini, along on their wedding day to help raise awareness about animal welfare issues.

The couple met in vet school and had been dating for four years before getting married.

From wire reports

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and Military News

North Carolina takes home NCAA title

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — For a whole year, the North Carolina Tar Heels wondered if they'd get another chance.

For a whole year, the Tar Heels thought about what might have been.

When Monday night's slugfest with Gonzaga came to a merciful end, the Heels had all their answers: The national title was theirs, the nets were hanging around their necks, the redemption tour was a success.

Their 71-65 win will not be mistaken for a work of art. But for anyone who bleeds Carolina Blue, it sure was a thing of beauty.

"This is what we worked for," junior guard Joel Berry II said. "And the ups and downs we've had? It's all worth it."

The story starts with the downs. When Villanova's Kris Jenkins hit his three-pointer at the buzzer to beat Carolina in the 2016 final, coach Roy Williams buckled over like a man who'd just been punched in the gut, put both hands on his knees and tried to figure out how to explain it.

"The feeling of inadequacy in the locker room last year is the worst feeling I've ever had,"

Williams said.

What ensued was a year of working harder, doing more, making sure That didn't happen again.

With 1:40 left in the final, Justin Jackson took a laser of a pass from Theo Pinson and laid it in while being fouled. He made the free throw, and that three-point play gave the Tar Heels a 66-65 lead.

Gonzaga didn't score again, though in a game that left fans from both sides booing a spate of over-officious officiating, the game couldn't be settled without a controversial (non-)call in the last minute.

Leading by 1, and in a scrum under the Carolina basket, Tar Heels forward Kennedy Meeks went to the floor to try to wrestle the ball away from Silas Melson. Refs called a jump ball, and with the possession arrow favoring North Carolina, the Tar Heels converted on an Isaiah Hicks runner to push the lead to three. Replays and pictures, retweeted and reposted thousands of times on social media, showed Meeks' right hand touching out of bounds.

But there was no protest, no review.

"Probably on me," said Gonzaga coach Mark Few, whose

first knowledge of the call came in the postgame press conference. "From my angle, it didn't look like an out-of-bounds situation or I would have called a review. That's tough to hear."

Through NCAA spokesman David Worlock, national coordinator of basketball officials JD Collins said the play was not reviewable.

Neither Few nor Williams threw much blame toward the officials, but the refs made this game virtually unwatchable.

They called 27 fouls in the second half and put both teams in the bonus with 13-plus minutes left. They left the big men — Meeks and Gonzaga's 7-footers Przemek Karnowski and Zach Collins — among those languishing on the bench in foul trouble. They stifled any bit of flow that existed in the game and turned it into a review-driven free-throw contest. They brought steady cascades of boos from the crowd of 76,168, as fans from each side took turns protesting the whistles.

"It's a very difficult game to call," said Williams, who has now led the Tar Heels to three of the program's six titles. "I'm sitting over there, I'm not thinking the officials are doing

a terrible job. ... I'm thinking our offense stinks."

He had a point.

Carolina shot 35 percent from the field, a percentage point worse than it did in Saturday's semifinal win over Oregon, which stood, for two days, as its worst shooting night in a tournament win since 1967.

Some of the culprits: Berry led the Tar Heels with 22 points but needed 19 shots to get there. Jackson had 16 points but went 0-for-9 from three-point range. Pinson went 2-for-9.

Gonzaga's numbers were even worse — 20-for-59 for 33.9 percent. Nigel Williams-Goss scored eight straight points for the Bulldogs to give them their last lead — 65-63 with 1:52 left.

Moments later, Williams-Goss twisted his ankle and neither he nor anyone on his team scored again.

"To be so close for us is a temporarily crushing blow right now," Few said. "But I'm hoping and knowing that perspective will come with time."

At Gonzaga — a program on fantastic footing thanks to two decades' worth of building led by Few — they'll regroup and reload and try to finish the deal next year.

Source: Romo retiring to take job in broadcast booth

Associated Press

DALLAS — Tony Romo is retiring rather than trying to chase a Super Bowl with another team after losing his starting job with the Dallas Cowboys, a person with knowledge of the decision told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

The all-time passing leader for the storied franchise is headed to the broadcast booth after spending weeks considering those offers, the person said. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because Romo's decision hasn't been announced.

Romo's departure from Dallas has been the most likely outcome since November, when he

returned after missing the first 10 weeks with a back injury. He conceded the starting job to rookie Dak Prescott with the Cowboys in the middle of a franchise-record 11-game winning streak.

Cowboys owner Jerry Jones told Romo before free agency opened that the team would release him to give him a chance to continue his career with another contender. But Dallas decided at the last minute to try to generate interest in a trade.

That move gave Romo more time to consider retirement, and the likelihood appeared to grow when he played in a golf tournament last week. Romo, who turns 37 this month, had

given up his favorite hobby after a series of back injuries that included two surgeries in less than a year.

Romo, who was signed through 2019, had a \$14 million base salary and a \$24.7 million salary cap hit for the Cowboys this season.

The franchise leader with 34,183 yards passing and 248 touchdowns, Romo never parlayed his regular-season success into deep playoff runs the way Hall of Famers and multiple Super Bowl winners Roger Staubach and Troy Aikman did before him.

Romo was 78-49 as the starter in Dallas, but just 2-4 in the postseason, with no road vic-

tories and no trips to the NFC championship game for a proud franchise that is one of just three teams that hasn't played for the NFC title the past 21 seasons.

His playoff debut a little more than 10 years ago illustrated the playoff struggles ahead when Romo infamously flubbed the snap on what could have been a winning field goal in Seattle.

A year later, the Cowboys lost their playoff opener to the New York Giants as the No. 1 seed in the NFC, a defeat that stung even more for fans because Romo went to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, during the bye week with several teammates.

Pair of HRs lifts Nationals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Adam Lind's first swing as a member of the Nationals resulted in a pinch-hit, go-ahead, two-run homer in the seventh inning while Bryce Harper went deep on Opening Day for the fifth time in his young career, leading Washington past the Miami Marlins 4-2 on Monday.

Stephen Strasburg (1-0) earned the win, allowing two runs and six hits in seven innings, pitching out of the stretch the whole way. It was his return to action after missing last September and the playoffs with a right elbow injury.

Matt Wieters singled ahead of Lind's drive off David Phelps (0-1) that made it 3-2.

Orioles 3, Blue Jays 2: Mark Trumbo homered off Jason Grilli (0-1) at Baltimore with two outs in the 11th inning in a rematch of last year's AL wild card playoff, won by Toronto 5-2 on an 11th-inning home run by Edwin Encarnacion.

Mets 6, Braves 0: Noah Syndergaard struck out seven in six sharp innings in his first Opening Day start for host New York before leaving with a blister, Asdrubal Cabrera snapped a seventh-inning tie with a single and the Mets broke through following a pivotal replay rever-

sal at the plate in which Wilmer Flores initially was called out.

New York took advantage of five walks by a shaky Braves bullpen in a six-run bottom of the seventh that lasted 35 minutes.

Red Sox 5, Pirates 3: Rookie Andrew Benintendi hit a three-run homer off Gerrit Cole (0-1) that capped a five-run fifth inning as host Boston began its post-David Ortiz era.

Rockies 7, Brewers 5: Bud Black won his debut as Colorado manager, and Greg Holland got a save in his first game with the visiting Rockies.

Twins 7, Royals 1: Miguel Sano homered and drew the third bases-loaded walk during a dreadful seventh inning for Kansas City's bullpen, and the host Twins won an opener for the first time in nine years.

Ervin Santana (1-0) gave up two hits and two walks while striking out three over seven innings, aided by two diving catches of sinking line drives by center fielder Byron Buxton.

Phillies 4, Reds 3: Cesar Hernandez opened the Phillies' season with a homer on host Cincinnati's eighth pitch, and Jeremy Hellickson drove in a run with his first career triple.

Hellickson (1-0) pitched into the sixth, allowing a run and

six hits, and he also contributed his RBI triple in the sixth.

Dodgers 14, Padres 3: Joc Pederson launched a grand slam and the host Dodgers backed Clayton Kershaw with a franchise-record four home runs on Opening Day.

Pederson drove in five runs, Yasmani Grandal homered twice and Corey Seager added a three-run shot.

Indians 8, Rangers 5: Abraham Almonte singled in the go-ahead run in a three-run ninth as visiting Cleveland won the opener of its AL title defense.

Making his first Opening-Day start for Texas, Yu Darvish had a 5-1 lead behind Rougned Odor, who homered twice and drove in four runs.

Astros 3, Mariners 0: Dallas Keuchel (1-0) allowed two hits over seven innings, Luke Gregerson and Ken Giles completed the three-hitter and host Houston won its fifth straight opener.

Athletics 4, Angels 2: Khris Davis hit a go-ahead homer in the sixth and connected again leading off the eighth to lead host Oakland past Anaheim.

Davis had just the second multihomer game on Opening Day in Oakland history — Jason Giambi did it in 2000 — to back Kendall Graveman (1-0).

Minnesota gets past Portland

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — As Karl-Anthony Towns powered through Portland's smaller frontcourt, the Trail Blazers found out just how much they're going to miss big man Jusuf Nurkic down the stretch.

Towns had 34 points and 12 rebounds as the Minnesota Timberwolves snapped Portland's six-game winning streak with a 110-109 victory over the Trail Blazers on Monday night.

It was the second game for Portland without Nurkic, who galvanized the team after coming over in a trade from Denver at the deadline.

He will miss at least the rest of the NBA regular season with a fractured right leg, leaving the Blazers to battle big frontcourts in San Antonio, Utah and one more time against Minnesota without him and just a 1½-game cushion on Denver for the eighth seed in the Western Conference.

"There's a lot of good bigs out there and we're thin right now. We've got Meyers (Leonard) and [Al-Farouq Aminu], who's not really a five," C.J. McCollum said. "So we're in a tough position, but it's not an excuse. We've got to go out there and play and make the best of it."

Damian Lillard scored 25 points but made just 7 of 21 shots, including 3 of 11 three-pointers. His potential game-winning pull-up jumper at the buzzer glanced off the rim.

Andrew Wiggins scored 29 points and Ricky Rubio had 11 points, 16 assists and seven rebounds for the Timberwolves, who bounced back from an ugly home loss to Sacramento that eliminated them from postseason contention on Saturday.

"They're playing small, we have a big who can guard smalls and play like a big at the other end," Rubio said of Towns. "That's big for us."

Aminu scored 20 points and Maurice Harkless had 17 points, eight rebounds and a big block of a Rubio drive.

Georgetown hires alum Ewing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Patrick Ewing put Georgetown basketball on the map, turning the Hoyas into a national power as the menacing force in the middle in the 1980s.

Three decades later, Ewing is the Big Man on Campus again.

Georgetown hired Ewing on Monday, bringing the Hoyas legend back to take over a program that had fallen on hard times over the past two seasons and helping the former All-American center finally realize his long-held dream of becoming a head coach.

"My four years at Georgetown were the best of my life," Ewing said in a statement issued by the school.

"Georgetown is my home and it is a great honor for me to return to my alma mater and serve as

the next head coach. I have been preparing to be a head coach for many years and can't wait to return to the Hilltop."

In announcing the hire, Georgetown called Ewing "the greatest men's basketball player to ever don the Blue [and] Gray."

He led the Hoyas to the school's only national championship in 1984 and now he takes over for the son of the man who coached him at Georgetown in what is surely an emotional transfer of power.

John Thompson III, the son of Big John Thompson, was fired last month after consecutive losing seasons.

Ewing was a three-time All-American at Georgetown, a fearsome presence in the paint who led the Hoyas to three national title games.

He is leaving his position as associate head coach with the NBA's Charlotte Hornets.

NHL won't let players go to Olympics

Associated Press

The NHL announced Monday that it will not participate in the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, refusing for the first time in 20 years to halt its season for three weeks so its stars can chase gold for their home countries.

From Alex Ovechkin and Jonathan Toews to Connor McDavid and Henrik Lundqvist, the world's best players called playing in the Olympics important. The league decided otherwise.

Commissioner Gary Bettman and Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly informed the NHL Players' Association that the matter was "officially closed" after weeks of speculation.

The NHLPA said in a statement that players are "extraordinarily disappointed and adamantly disagree with the NHL's shortsighted decision."

The NHL had allowed its players to participate in the past five Olympics dating to 1998, giving the Winter Games pro-level star power akin to the NBA players who participate in the Summer Olympics.

The league said no meaningful dialogue had emerged in

talks with the NHLPA, International Olympic Committee and International Ice Hockey Federation.

Even after the IIHF had agreed to pay for players' travel and insurance costs when the IOC refused, the NHL had been looking for more concessions that were believed to include marketing opportunities tied to the Games.

The IOC said Tuesday it "feels very sorry for the athletes," but could not give the NHL special favors.

"The IOC, which distributes 90 percent of its revenue for the development of sport in the world, obviously cannot treat a national commercial league better than not-for-profit international sports federations which are developing sport globally," the Olympic body said in a statement.

The league wanted the matter resolved before the playoffs begin April 12.

"The league's efforts to blame others for its decision is as unfortunate as the decision itself," the NHLPA said.

"NHL players are patriotic and they do not take this lightly. A decent respect for the opinions of the players matters.

This is the NHL's decision, and its alone."

Toronto Maple Leafs coach Mike Babcock, who led Canada to consecutive Olympic gold medals in 2010 and 2014, said, "I'm just going to tell you I'm disappointed."

Players immediately blasted the decision. Montreal Canadiens goaltender Carey Price, who played in Sochi under Babcock, called it "very disappointing" and said it was short-changing younger players who hadn't got to experience it before.

"Disappointing news, (the NHL) won't be part of the Olympics 2018. A huge opportunity to market the game at the biggest stage is wasted," tweeted Lundqvist, the New York Rangers goaltender who won the 2006 Olympic gold medal with Sweden.

"But most of all, disappointing for all the players that can't be part of the most special adventure in sports."

Former NHL forward Brandon Prust, who's now playing in Germany, tweeted: "Way to ruin the sport of hockey even more Gary #Olympics."

"It's going to do more damage to this sport than people

realize, and whoever made that decision obviously doesn't know what they are doing," Ottawa Senators captain Erik Karlsson said.

For now, the league is making its 2017-18 schedule without a break for the Olympics.

"We have previously made clear that, while the overwhelming majority of our clubs are adamantly opposed to disrupting the 2017-18 NHL season for purposes of accommodating Olympic participation by some NHL players, we were open to hearing from any of the other parties who might have an interest in the issue," the NHL said.

Team owners have long complained that stopping the NHL season every four years wasn't worth it and they have been wary of injuries to star players.

Still, many players expressed a strong desire to go, and Ovechkin has said he plans to go regardless of NHL participation.

"I think the players know it's very important for us to represent our countries," the Washington Capitals star said last month. "Everybody wants to go there."

Lehkonen's 2 goals help Canadiens clinch Atlantic

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Artturi Lehkonen was happy to be a part of the Montreal Canadiens' division-clinching performance.

Lehkonen scored twice in the third period and had an assist to help the Canadiens secure the Atlantic Division title with a 4-1 victory over the Florida Panthers on Monday night.

Andrew Shaw and Alexander Radulov also scored for Montreal, and Charlie Lindgren stopped 31 shots in his second NHL start.

"When we clinch a spot, it's always good news," Lehkonen said. "Now we just have to keep building our game toward the playoffs."

Lehkonen put Montreal ahead 2-1 at 1:27 of the third as he beat Florida goalie Reto Berra with a rising shot from between the circles high to the glove side. He made it a two-goal game when he followed Paul Byron's breakaway attempt by knocking in the rebound for his 16th with 3:11 remaining.

"We clinched first place, and now it's (a matter of) continuing to try to improve ourselves as a team to make sure we head into the playoffs the right way," Canadiens coach Claude Julien said.

Red Wings 5, Senators 4 (SO): Evgeni Svechnikov scored the only goal of the shootout in his NHL debut, lifting host De-

troit past Ottawa.

In the seventh round of the tiebreaker, Svechnikov went to his backhand and slid the puck between the pads of Ottawa goalie Craig Anderson.

Tomas Tatar had a goal and an assist, and Frans Nielsen, Gustav Nyquist and Dylan Larkin scored in regulation for Detroit, Nick Jensen had two assists and Petr Mrazek stopped 41 shots.

Kyle Turris and Fredrik Claesson scored 4:09 apart in the third period to tie the score for the Senators, who pulled into a tie with Boston for third place in the Atlantic Division.

Maple Leafs 4, Sabres 2: Auston Matthews scored his 39th goal to set the record for

most by an American-born rookie and visiting Toronto moved closer to clinching its second playoff berth in 12 seasons.

Nazem Kadri had a goal and an assist, James van Rimesdyk and Leo Komarov also scored, and Frederick Andersen made 18 saves for the Maple Leafs in their fourth straight win.

The victory vaulted Toronto (39-24-15) one point ahead of Ottawa and Boston for second place in the Atlantic Division.

The Sabres have lost three in a row and are 6-12-2 in their past 20 games. The late-season collapse will extend Buffalo's playoff drought to six consecutive seasons.