

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

Friday, April 21, 2017

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Mattis: Syria moved jets to Russian base

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Syrian government has dispersed its warplanes in recent days and has retained some of its chemical weapons, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said Friday in Israel, where he joined top Israeli leaders in condemning Iran's influence on the region.

At a news conference in Tel Aviv, Mattis confirmed Syria had moved its combat aircraft. He spoke alongside his Israeli counterpart, Avigdor Lieberman.

"They have dispersed their aircraft, no doubt," Mattis said. "They have dispersed their aircraft in recent days."

The regime moved its warplanes to a Russian air base in Latakia, presumably in case of a second U.S. missile attack.

The United States destroyed more than 20 Syrian planes in an April 6 missile strike on a Syrian air base in retaliation for President Bashar Assad's sarin gas attack on civilians on April 4. Assad has denied his military's involvement in that attack.

Mattis said Friday that the regime has retained some of its chemical weapons even after the U.S. launched 59 Tomahawk missiles at Shayrat air base. He called on the international community to find a diplomatic solution to the problem.

"The bottom line is, I can

say authoritatively they have retained some (chemical weapons)," Mattis said. "It's a violation of the United Nations Security Council resolutions."

Israeli defense officials said this week that Syria possesses up to 3 tons of chemical weapons, according to The Associated Press.

Lieberman declined to comment on the size of Syria's chemical weapons stock, but he said there was no doubt Assad's regime was behind the April attack in Idlib.

Lieberman largely blamed Iran — which has bolstered Assad in the nation's six-year civil war — for the instability in Syria and the Middle East, echoing recent comments by Mattis.

"No doubt the main problem, not only for us in Israel, but for the entire world, is an axis of evil from North Korea to Tehran to Damascus to the Hezbollah in Beirut," the Israeli defense minister said. "No doubt the main link in this chain — it is Iran."

Mattis, who met later Friday with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said the U.S. would continue its support for Israel and other Middle East partners in fighting Iran's influence on the region.

"If good people don't band together, then bad people do a lot of damage in this world," Mattis said.

dickstein.corey@stripes.com
Twitter: @CDicksteinDC

DOD chief: US won't reveal 'mother of all bombs' toll

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — The ear-splitting explosion from America's "mother of all bombs" has been followed by calculated silence about the damage it inflicted.

U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said Thursday he does not intend to discuss damage estimates from last week's use of the military's most powerful non-nuclear bomb on an Islamic State stronghold in Afghanistan.

The April 13 attack on an ISIS tunnel-and-cave complex near the Pakistani border marked the first-ever combat use of the bomb, known officially as a GBU-43B, or Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb. U.S. military officials have said the 11-ton bomb effectively neutralized an ISIS defensive position.

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, however, called the use of the weapon "an immense atrocity against the Afghan people."

The Afghan government has estimated a death toll of more than 90 militants. It said no civilians were killed.

Reporters traveling with Mattis in Israel asked for his assessment of the bomb's damage, but he refused.

"For many years, we have not been calculating the results of warfare by simply quantifying the number of enemy killed," Mattis said.

But the Pentagon sometimes announces death counts after attacks on extremists.

On Jan. 20, for example, it said a B-52 bomber strike killed more than 100 militants at an al-Qaida training camp in Syria. That same day, the Pentagon said more than 150

al-Qaida operatives had been killed by U.S. strikes since Jan. 1.

On Jan. 25 the Pentagon said U.S. strikes in Yemen killed five al-Qaida fighters.

Mattis, who assumed office hours after President Donald Trump's inauguration on Jan. 20, hasn't publicly discussed such numbers. He said Thursday his view was colored by lessons learned from the Vietnam War, when exaggerated body counts undermined U.S. credibility.

"You all know the corrosive effect of that sort of metric back in the Vietnam War and it's something that's stayed with us all these years," said Mattis, who was in Tel Aviv to meet Israeli government leaders on Friday.

He met Thursday with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi.

The publicity created by the bombing in Afghanistan caught many Pentagon leaders by surprise, leading to questions about whether U.S. commanders fully considered the strategic effects of some seemingly isolated decisions.

The Pentagon also has been criticized for its declaration that an aircraft carrier battle group was being diverted from Southeast Asia to waters off the Korean Peninsula, amid concern that North Korea might conduct a missile or nuclear test. The announcement led to misinformed speculation that the ships were in position to threaten strikes on North Korea.

Mattis said he is confident his commanders are properly weighing their actions.

"If they didn't, I'd remove them," he said.

Trump raps Iran on 2015 nuclear deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Iran is failing to fulfill the “spirit” of its nuclear deal with world powers, President Donald Trump has declared, setting an ominous tone for his forthcoming decision about whether to pull the U.S. out of the landmark agreement.

As he often had during the president campaign, Trump ripped into the deal struck by Iran, the U.S. and other world powers in 2015 and said “it shouldn’t have been signed.” Yet he pointedly stopped sort of telegraphing whether or not the U.S. would stay in.

“They are not living up to the spirit of the agreement, I can tell you that,” Trump said of the Iranians on Thursday, though he did not mention any specific violations. Earlier this week, the administration certified to Congress than Iran was complying — at least technically — with the terms of the deal, clearing the way for Iran to continue enjoying sanctions relief in the near term.

Trump and his top officials have been walking a narrow line as they seek to show an aggressive stance. While disparaging the nuclear deal and accusing Iran of fomenting violence and terrorism throughout the Middle East, Trump has avoided committing to abandoning the agreement, a move that would be staunchly opposed by U.S. businesses and European allies.

Yet the president seems keenly aware that his indecisiveness about the deal’s future is a step back from his campaign declaration that as president he would rip it up or renegotiate.

He said of Iran, “I think they are doing a tremendous disservice to an agreement that was signed.”

Under the deal, brokered during the Obama administration, Iran agreed to roll back key aspects of its nuclear program in exchange for relief from certain economic sanctions.

Officer held by Iran to stay in Navy

BY ALEX HORTON
Stars and Stripes

SAN ANTONIO — A Navy officer captured by Iran and briefly held prisoner along with nine other sailors in early 2016 will be allowed to remain in the service, his lawyer said Thursday.

A trio of senior officers at a Navy separation board in Imperial Beach, Calif., ruled Lt. David Nartker will stay in the Navy, according to his lawyer, Phil Lowry. The board’s decision appears to bring charges and punishment against Nartker to an end 15 months after the incident.

Nartker, as the commander of two riverine patrol boats, accidentally crossed into Iranian territorial waters in the Persian Gulf on Jan. 12, 2016. He was captured, along with the other sailors, and his filmed apology to Iran sparked an international incident.

al incident.

The sailors were detained overnight and returned after they were interrogated.

The Navy found Nartker guilty of three general order violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice at an admiral’s mast, a proceeding to determine minor offenses, Lowry said. Lowry is a lawyer in the Utah Army National Guard but represented Nartker in his civilian capacity.

The Navy said Nartker failed to conduct a patrol brief and to prepare a paper chart of his intended movement, Lowry said.

Those two charges were dropped, but a third — failure to move his ship’s weapons from class 4 to class 3 when leaving port, which is a higher readiness posture in the region — remained, Lowry said.

Now-retired Rear Adm. Frank Morneau, who led the Navy Expeditionary Combat

Command at the time, handed down the guilty decision following the admiral’s mast, which triggered the hearing, Lowry said.

At the board, Navy officials also argued an administrative charge that Nartker displayed “substandard deportment,” the Navy’s term for poor performance or appearance, despite his history of high fitness reports, Lowry said.

Senior leaders from Nartker’s command vouched for his character during the hearing, Lowry said, offering descriptions of an officer with a history of high performance and little evidence of poor leadership.

Investigations into the incident found a toxic culture of leadership, Lowry said, which he argued the Navy was attempting to pin on Nartker, following an embarrassing incident with a hostile nation.

Trump hails Italy for international role

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Thursday hailed Italy’s contributions to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its efforts seeking stability in Libya, but dismissed the possibility of U.S. intervention in that country, saying the U.S. has “enough roles.”

After a White House meeting with Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, Trump stuck to his demand that European allies meet their financial obligations in their partnerships with the U.S., including NATO. He urged Italy to address the refugee crisis through a policy that “seeks the eventual return of refugees to their home countries so they can help to rebuild their own nations.”

Gentiloni, who took office in December, stressed the need for burden-sharing in the refugee crisis, given Italy’s proximity to Libya, where large numbers of migrants take the risky voyage across the Mediterranean to

reach Europe.

Trump was quick to dismiss the notion that the U.S. would get involved in Libya, telling a joint news conference, “I do not see a role in Libya.”

“We have enough roles. We have a role everywhere,” Trump said.

Gentiloni noted Italy and America’s “common commitment against terrorism.” He said it requires social and economic collaboration with Muslim communities to be effective.

He said that despite budgetary limitations, Italy was committed to increase its defense spending from 1 percent of gross domestic product to 2 percent — the threshold that Trump has called for all NATO members to adhere to. Trump has complained that the U.S. contributes more to the military alliance than it receives.

Trump plans to attend a NATO meeting in Belgium next month before attending a summit of the Group of Seven major industrialized nations. Italy will

host the summit, and Gentiloni can shape the agenda on behalf of European leaders wary of Trump’s position on some long-standing agreements.

Gentiloni has been strongly critical of protectionist trade policies shielding a country’s domestic industries from foreign competition by taxing imports. Italy has suffered sluggish economic growth and was a staunch backer of a proposed U.S.-European free trade agreement negotiated by the Obama administration.

Trump favors bilateral trade deals and has used trade as a tool for pressuring countries to do more on national security matters.

Thursday’s U.S.-Italy meeting took place against a backdrop of high uncertainty in Europe, following Britain’s decision to leave the European Union and the upcoming French presidential election — the first round of voting is Sunday.

Gunman had shot at French police before

Associated Press

PARIS — The Champs-Élysées gunman who shot and killed a police officer just days before France's presidential election was detained in February for threatening police but then freed, two officials told The Associated Press on Friday. He was also convicted in 2003 of attempted homicide in the shootings of two police officers.

The French government pulled out all the stops to protect Sunday's vote as the attack deepened France's political divide.

"Nothing must hamper this democratic moment, essential for our country," Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said after a high-level meeting Friday that reviewed the government's already heightened security plans for the two-

round presidential vote that begins Sunday.

Investigators believe that the gunman, 39-year-old Frenchman Karim Cheurfi, was alone in killing one police officer and wounding two others and a female German tourist on Thursday night, a French official who discussed details of the investigation with the AP said on condition of anonymity.

The attack came less than 72 hours before the polls open.

Police shot and killed Cheurfi after he opened fire on a police van on Paris' most famous boulevard. Investigators found a pump-action shotgun and knives in his car.

Cheurfi had been detained toward the end of February after speaking threateningly about police but was then released for lack of evidence, according to that French official and an-

other, who also spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to publicly discuss the probe.

The policeman killed Thursday was identified as Xavier Jugele by Flag!, a French association of LGBT police officers.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for Thursday's attack in an unusually quick statement that sowed confusion by apparently misidentifying the gunman.

Municipal workers in white hygiene suits were out before dawn to wash down the sidewalk where the assault took place — a scene now depressingly familiar after multiple attacks that have killed more than 230 people in France over two years.

A key question was how the attack might affect French

voters, since campaigning is banned starting Friday at midnight.

Inserting himself into the debate, U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted that the attack "will have a big effect" on the election and that "the people of France will not take much more of this."

The two top finishers Sunday advance to a winner-takes-all presidential runoff on May 7. Two of the main candidates, conservative Francois Fillon and centrist Emmanuel Macron, canceled campaign events Friday.

The attack brought back the recurrent campaign theme of France's fight against Islamic extremism, one of the mainstays of the anti-immigration platform of far-right leader Marine Le Pen and also, to a lesser extent, of Fillon.

First phase of population transfer concludes in Syria

Associated Press

BEIRUT — The first phase of a troubled population transfer concluded Friday as thousands of displaced Syrians were evacuated out of besieged areas and an agreement was reached to release hundreds of government detainees, government media and rebels said.

One of the largest population transfers in Syria's civil war had been tied to the fate of 26 hostages, including members of Qatar's ruling family, who had been held by a Shiite militia in Iraq and were released Friday. Qatar, which is the patron of some Syrian armed opposition groups, was a main negotiator of the deal. Iran, which backs Iraqi and Lebanese militias fighting in Syria, served as the other negotiator.

With the transfer completed Friday, the first phase of the population-swap deal in Syria comes to an end. A total of 8,000 residents from the pro-government villages of Foua

and Kfarya — besieged for two years amid Syria's bloody civil war by anti-government rebels — and nearly 3,000 evacuees from the rebel-held Zabadani, Madaya and surrounding areas, have left their homes.

Under the deal, an estimated 30,000 people will be transferred from their hometowns over 60 days, most of them from the pro-government villages in northern Idlib. It is one of Syria's largest population transfers, which the opposition has described as "demographic engineering," and the first to involve a reciprocal population swap.

The Syrian military media arm said 46 buses carrying residents of Foua and Kfarya arrived in Jibreen, an Aleppo suburb, on Friday. Some 15 buses were carrying residents and rebels from the Zabadani area, which was besieged by the government, departed for Idlib.

China tries to repel planes with top Filipino officials

Associated Press

PAG-ASA ISLAND, South China Sea — Chinese forces tried to drive away two Philippine planes carrying Manila's defense and military chiefs Friday near a Chinese man-made island, officials said, adding they admired seeing up close the stunning, city-like features, including buildings, roads and a runway in the South China Sea's hotly contested region.

Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said the aircraft continued uninterrupted after Filipino pilots messaged back to the Chinese that they were flying over Philippine territory. The Chinese warned the Philippine aircraft they were entering the periphery of Chinese installations and told them to avoid miscalculation.

The aircraft that took Lorenzana, military chief of staff Gen. Eduardo Ano and about 40 journalists to Philippine-occupied Pag-asa Island were "challenged" by China as they flew in the vicinity of

Chinese-held Subi Reef, just 15 miles away.

"Those were just exchanges and no untoward incident happened," Lorenzana told reporters, adding that those normally transpire amid the unresolved territorial conflicts. The Chinese navy similarly has warned U.S. ships and aircraft to leave what Beijing claims as its territory, messages that the Americans also have ignored.

On Pag-asa, known internationally as Thitu, Lorenzana announced that the Philippines would start to develop the island, the second-largest in the Spratly archipelago, with plans for a wharf and reinforcing and extending the partly eroded dirt airstrip. China could protest the planned construction, but Lorenzana said he did not expect it to worsen into a confrontation.

Philippine officials also said they were checking reports that Filipino fishermen recently were harassed by the Chinese coast guard near Union Bank in the South China Sea.

Future of revamped health bill still dubious in House

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Eager for a victory, the White House is expressing confidence that a breakthrough on the mired Republican health care bill could emerge in the House next week. The chamber's GOP leaders, burned by a March debacle, are dubious and signs are scant that an emerging plan is gaining enough votes to succeed.

During a White House news conference on Thursday, President Donald Trump said progress was being made on a "great plan" for overhauling the nation's health care system, though he provided no details.

"We have a good chance of getting it soon," Trump said. "I'd like to say next week."

The White House optimism is driven largely by a deal brokered by leaders of the conservative Freedom Caucus and the moderate Tuesday Group aimed at giving states more flexibility to pull out of "Obamacare" provisions. A senior White House official acknowledged that it was unclear how many votes Republicans had, but said House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., has told the White House that a vote could come together quickly. Yet GOP lawmakers and aides to party leaders, conservatives and

moderates alike were skeptical that the House would vote next week on the health care legislation. They cited the higher priority of passing a spending bill within days to avert a government shutdown, uncertainty over details of the developing health care agreement and a need to sell it to lawmakers.

Trump said he planned to get "both" a health care deal and a spending bill.

Many Republicans also expressed doubts that the health care compromise would win over enough lawmakers to put the bill over the top. The bill would repeal President Barack Obama's health care law and would replace it with less generous subsidies and eased insurance requirements.

"Every time they move the scrimmage line, you risk losing other people who were 'yes,' but this changes them to a 'no,'" Rep. Dan Donovan, R-N.Y., said Thursday of attempts to win over one end of the GOP spectrum without losing votes from the other side. The Staten Island centrist said he remained a no vote.

The White House official and most lawmakers and GOP congressional aides who spoke were not authorized to discuss the internal process publicly and insisted on anonymity.

Officials revisiting Medicaid recipient work requirement

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A simple question — should adults who are able to work be required to do so to get taxpayer-provided health insurance? — could lead to major changes in the social safety net.

The federal-state Medicaid program for low-income and disabled people covers more than 70 million U.S. residents — about 1 in 5 — including an increasing number of working-age adults. In a break from past federal policy, the Health and Human Services Department already has notified governors it stands ready to approve state waivers for "meritorious" programs that encourage work.

Separately, an amendment to the still-stuck House GOP health care bill would allow individual states to require work or training for adults, with exceptions such as pregnant women, or parents of disabled children.

Yet a surprising number of working-age adults with Medicaid are already employed. Nearly 60 percent work either full- or part-time, mainly for employers that don't offer health insurance, says the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. Most who are not working report reasons such as illness, caring for a family member, or going to school.

Geraldine Stewart, a Medicaid beneficiary from Charlotte, N.C., questioned the impact of a work requirement on older adults. Stewart was incapacitated by painful problems with her feet, now relieved by surgery covered under the program. In her early 60s, she was able to return to part-time work as a home health aide.

"To do work anywhere, I have to have my feet," said Stewart. "I really hope that they do not force anyone who has a medical condition to work to have to pay for those services. I don't think it's been researched properly."

Reports: US officials mull charges against WikiLeaks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Two media reports say U.S. prosecutors are preparing or closely considering charges against the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks, including its founder Julian Assange, for revealing sensitive government secrets.

CNN reported Thursday that authorities are preparing to seek Assange's arrest. The Washington Post reported prosecutors are weighing charges against the organization's members after the Obama-era Justice Department declined to do so. Possible charges include conspiracy, theft of government property and violating the Es-

spionage Act, the newspaper said, though any charges would need approval from high-ranking officials in the Justice Department.

The move comes after WikiLeaks last month released nearly 8,000 documents that it says reveal secrets about the CIA's cyberespionage tools for breaking into computers, cell phones and even smart TVs. It previously published 250,000 State Department cables and embarrassed the U.S. military with hundreds of thousands of logs from Iraq and Afghanistan.

CIA Director Mike Pompeo last week denounced the group

as a "hostile intelligence service" and a threat to national security. And Attorney General Jeff Sessions said Thursday that Assange's arrest is a priority as the Justice Department steps up efforts to prosecute people who leak classified information to the media.

Their condemnation of WikiLeaks differed sharply from President Donald Trump's past praise of the organization. Before last year's election, Trump said he was happy to see WikiLeaks publish private, politically damaging emails from Hillary Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta. He was less thrilled about the re-

lease of CIA tactics, which the White House said was different because it involved information about secretive national security tools.

The Post reported that it wasn't clear whether prosecutors are also looking at WikiLeaks' role in the Podesta case.

Assange's attorney, Barry Pollack, said authorities have not apprised him of the status of their investigation. Assange, an Australian, has resided the past four years in Ecuador's embassy in London. He received political asylum after skipping bail to avoid extradition to Sweden, where he is wanted over a rape allegation.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

19th-century antique cannonball was live

MA HULL — An antiques collector in Massachusetts said he didn't realize he had an explosive 19th century cannonball sitting in his home until a bomb squad detonated the device.

WFXT-TV reported that Bruce Wescott, of Hull, took the cannonball to a gun store Wednesday to try to sell it. He found the explosive, which he believed to be from the Civil War, in a box of antiques he bought a year earlier but never looked through. He said the owner of the gun store told him the cannonball was potentially dangerous and asked him to leave.

Wescott took the cannonball home and called police, who told him not to touch it.

Neighbors were evacuated as a state police bomb squad removed the device, took it to a landfill and blew it up.

No more cowbells allowed at arena

PA ERIE — A Pennsylvania arena has decided it really needs less cowbell.

The Erie Times-News reported that the operator of the Erie Insurance Arena is banning the noisemakers.

Fans clanged cowbells throughout the Erie Otters' playoff game Tuesday. And some fans threw them onto the ice as the Otters celebrated a win that sent them to the Ontario Hockey League's Western Conference finals.

The Otters had provided cowbells to fans as a giveaway and sold them as part of its merchandise line, but spokesman Aaron Cooney said the team agrees with the ban and will no longer sell the items.

New damages hearing for stripper shot on job

SC COLUMBIA — The quibbling continues over how much a South Carolina stripper should be compensated after being shot while on the job.

The state Supreme Court ruled Wednesday LeAndra Lewis should get a new hearing before the Workers' Compensation Commission to determine her damages.

The high court in 2015 ruled Lewis was an employee of the Boom Boom Room Studio 54 and not an independent contractor, thereby making her eligible for compensation following a 2008 shooting at the club. The justices left it to the state board to determine how much Lewis should get.

The court said Wednesday the commission didn't present enough evidence about how it reached the decision to award Lewis \$75 per week.

Giraffe live video feed to be taken down

NY HARPURSVILLE — A livestreamed video of a pregnant giraffe that enthralled millions of YouTube viewers since February is coming to an end.

Animal Adventure Park in rural upstate New York said the giraffe cam showing April the giraffe and her new baby will go dark by the end of the week.

The park made the announcement on its Facebook page late Monday amid a flurry of messages from fans concerned April had a slight limp. The park said April's leg injury was minor and was much better Tuesday.

The giraffe cam made Animal Adventure Park the second-most-live-viewed channel in YouTube's history, with more than 232 million live

views since February.

More than 1.2 million viewers were watching when April gave birth Saturday.

Strange, brown spots spur complaints, testing

FL SPRINGFIELD — The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is looking into complaints about brown spots that are appearing on cars, boats, air conditioning units and other objects in a couple of cities.

Dozens of people complained to Springfield city officials in the last week or so, prompting them to ask the environmental agency to investigate.

Agency spokeswoman Brandy Smith said investigators have visited some of the larger nearby industrial facilities, but didn't find a potential source for the spots.

Charles Lewis told The News Herald the spots went through the clear top coat on the hood of his new silver SUV and won't come off.

Springfield Mayor Ralph Hammond said that so far, no one has reported health issues.

Breathalyzer officer goes to work drunk

TX AUSTIN — An Austin police officer whose duties included administering Breathalyzer tests has been fired after a self-administered test indicated he had reported for work drunk.

His supervising sergeant is suspended for 60 days.

A memo released Tuesday showed the officer reported for his shift one day last October, then drove his patrol car to the Travis County Jail for a self-administered breath test required by his certification. The results showed a blood-alcohol concentration of between 0.064 and 0.065 percent.

The officer drove back to his substation and gave the results to his supervisor, who told him to stay out of service until sober.

A state police scientist said an extrapolation of the results meant the officer reported for work with a blood-alcohol concentration of between 0.084 and 0.124 percent, above the state limit for drivers of 0.08 percent.

Troopers seek man who stole sports bras

PA MYERSTOWN — Pennsylvania state police are looking for a man who stole some sports bras and other exercise clothing from a clothesline outside the victim's residence.

Troopers from the Lickdale barracks said that happened Monday about 5:45 p.m. in Myerstown.

Police said surveillance video shows the man was driving a white, four-door Chevrolet Cavalier with a Pennsylvania license plate. The numbers weren't clear in the picture.

Man who blew horn in bunny suit at police guilty

NJ SPARTA — A New Jersey man who wore a bunny costume and blew an air horn inside a police station has pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct.

Kevin Hemmerich entered the plea Thursday and was fined \$500. The judge also ordered a police officer charged with striking him in Hopatcong last November to stand trial July 6.

Kevin Hemmerich, accompanied by his brother, entered the Hopatcong Police Department lobby to turn himself in for an outstanding warrant. Kevin Hemmerich was dressed in a bunny costume and repeatedly blew the air horn.

From wire reports

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James leads record-setting comeback

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — LeBron James celebrated another milestone with the greatest second-half comeback in playoff history.

Win one more at Indiana, the four-time MVP will be crowned king of the first round.

James scored 41 points while padding his postseason resume with yet another triple-double, leading defending champion Cleveland back from a 25-point halftime deficit to a 119-114 victory over the Pacers on Thursday night.

“We knew we had to take (some) punches, but it was a flurry, more than we expected,” James said. “At halftime, I was just looking at the guys and telling them ‘Let’s get a couple stops.’”

Officially, it will go down as the third-largest comeback in playoff history. But the largest halftime deficit overcome previously was 21 points, by Baltimore against Philadelphia in 1948.

As for James, he keeps moving up in the record books, too.

He scored 28 in the second half and finished with 13 rebounds and 12 assists, moving past Kobe Bryant and into third on the NBA’s playoff scoring list. Bryant

had 5,640 points; James now has 5,669.

James also won his 20th consecutive first-round game, matching a feat achieved by three other former Lakers — Michael Cooper, Magic Johnson and James Worthy. Win Sunday, and he’ll have the longest first-round winning streak under the current playoff format, which began in 1984.

Cleveland has won 11 straight first-round games since James returned to his hometown team.

And this time, Kevin Love and Kyrie Irvin got a firsthand glimpse of James’ mastery as they watched the entire fourth quarter from the bench.

Of course, none of that matters to James right now. All he wants to do is chase a fourth title.

“I just try to put myself in position to help my teammates win — no matter who’s on the floor with me,” James said. “I just don’t settle for being not as great as I can be. The only thing that matters is (winning) — that’s what I’m here for.”

Paul George did everything he could to get Indiana back in the series. He scored 36 points, grabbed a playoff career-high 15 rebounds and finishing with nine assists, one short of his second postseason triple-

double. He even held James in check in the first half.

And it still wasn’t enough.

Now the Pacers are one loss away from being eliminated by James’ team for the fourth time in six years.

“Early on in the third (quarter), I saw it getting out of hand. I trust the guys on that floor, but I just thought — you know, I watched it kind of unravel — that’s when I should have stepped in and demanded the ball a little bit more,” he said.

After trailing 74-49 at halftime, James helped spur a rally that cut the deficit to 77-62. Indiana extended the lead to 20 on back-to-back 3-pointers from Jeff Teague and Lance Stephenson, and then it was all Cavs.

Cleveland finally tied the score at 98 and took its first lead since the first quarter when James scored on a dunk with 6:27 to go. The teams traded leads on each of the next four baskets, but after George’s 3 with 5:15 to go gave Indiana a 104-103 lead, James scored on a layup that started a 12-5 run to seal it.

“We just never quit,” coach Tyrone Lue said. “We knew the importance of this game. To go up 3-0, makes things a lot more difficult for those guys.”

Grizzlies get crucial victory at home

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Memphis coach David Fizdale set the tone with his memorable rant about the officiating in Game 2, which led to a \$30,000 fine by the NBA.

Then the Grizzlies matched his intensity on the court.

Mike Conley had 24 points and eight assists, helping the Grizzlies snap a 10-game postseason skid against the San Antonio Spurs with a 105-94 victory Thursday night.

Faced with the possibility of a daunting 3-0 deficit in its first-round playoff series, Memphis responded with a physical, rugged effort.

“I mean the Spurs were punking us. Let’s be real about it,” Fizdale said. “Those first, probably out of the eight quarters, they just bullied us for like five and a half of those, and you’re not going to beat the Spurs letting them dictate everything. So we had to match them, or otherwise we were going to get pummeled. And so I was just really proud of the way we stepped up and took the challenge.”

It was the Grizzlies’ first win over the Spurs in the playoffs since April 2011, when Memphis beat San Antonio in six games. It also was Fizdale’s first postseason victory as a head coach.

Game 4 is Saturday night.

“It wasn’t about the last two playoff series we’ve had against them,” Conley said. “It was about tonight and showing that we have heart and showing that we have enough in the tank to show that we can win and give ourselves confidence and allow us to believe that we can make this a series.”

Marc Gasol and Zach Randolph each scored 21 points for Memphis, which outscored San Antonio 31-17 in the third quarter and led by as much as 22 in the second half.

Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said the game got away from San Antonio in the first minute of the third quarter.

“We turned it over twice to start the minute like we were out on a picnic some place,” Popovich said.

San Antonio star Kawhi Leonard, who scored 32 and 37 in the first two games,

was held to 18 points.

Bucks 104, Raptors 77: The Bradley Center was throbbing, filled with raucous basketball fans eager to watch one of the NBA’s up-and-coming teams.

Milwaukee fed off the energy that pulsed through the stands, overwhelming cold-shooting Toronto from the opening tip.

Khris Middleton scored 20 points as the Bucks took a 2-1 lead in their first-round Eastern Conference playoff series.

Greg Monroe added 16 points and seven rebounds for the sixth-seeded Bucks, who held DeMar DeRozan without a basket and never looked back after leading by 20 points after the first quarter.

Milwaukee hasn’t won a playoff series since going to the conference finals in 2001.

“It was big from the first play,” All-Star forward Giannis Antetokounmpo said about the home-court environment. “It was just fun, fun to play with such great fans ... Hopefully they can show some love and be loud in Game 4.”

The teams meet again on Saturday back in Milwaukee.

Pats host Chiefs in '17 opener

Associated Press

One of the spoils of being champion: The New England Patriots will kick off the NFL season on Sept. 7 by hosting the Kansas City Chiefs.

New England earned that honor with its record comeback to beat the Atlanta Falcons in the Super Bowl. Its opening opponent in a Thursday night game won the AFC West last season.

The Falcons visit Chicago in their first game.

The rest of the opening weekend will feature what seems like a yearly occurrence, with Dallas hosting the New York Giants on Sunday night. They finished first and second, respectively, in the NFC East in 2016.

On the first Monday night of the season, New Orleans is at Minnesota, followed by the Chargers, in their first game representing Los Angeles since 1960, at Denver.

Five games will be held abroad, beginning with Baltimore vs. Jacksonville in London on Sept. 24. The next week, Miami hosts New Orleans. In Week 7, the Rams host the Cardinals, followed the next week by Minnesota vs. Cleveland.

New England is the visitor against Oakland at Mexico City on Nov. 19.

Thanksgiving's traditional games will have Minnesota at Detroit and the Chargers at Dallas. In prime time, the Redskins will be home for the Giants.

Christmas weekend will be busy. Two Saturday matches have Indianapolis at Baltimore in late afternoon, Minnesota at Green Bay at night on Dec. 23. Most of the rest of the schedule will be played on Dec. 24, with no night game. On Christmas Day, Pittsburgh will go to Houston in a late-afternoon matchup, followed by Oakland at Philadelphia.

The season ends when 2017 does, on Dec. 31.

Predators shock Blackhawks

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tennessee — Now that they've swept the Western Conference's top seed out of the Stanley Cup playoffs, the Nashville Predators want to continue making history by finally advancing beyond the second round.

The Predators have been around since 1998-99 but never have won a second-round playoff series. They came close last year before losing a seventh game to the San Jose Sharks.

Then again, the Predators also had never recorded a playoff sweep or had won a post-season series with the Chicago Blackhawks before this week.

"We've got a lot of work to do," Predators coach Peter Laviolette said Thursday after a 4-1 victory that completed the stunning sweep of Chicago. "It's such a long process. I promise you this, the next round will be harder than this one. That's not to disrespect (the Blackhawks). It's just the way the playoffs go. It gets harder in the second round. It gets harder in the third round. And when you're in the Finals, it's lightning speed and ridiculously hard."

The Predators next face the winner of the St. Louis Blues-Minnesota Wild quarterfinal, a series St. Louis leads 3-1.

"Right now, I don't really care who we play against," goalie Pekka Rinne said. "If we can keep this up, I feel really confident facing anybody."

Rinne has reason to feel confident after allowing just one even-strength goal during the entire series with Chicago.

This marked the first time a No. 1 seed has lost in the opening round since the Los Angeles Kings knocked off the Vancouver Canucks on their way to the Stanley Cup title in 2012. The Predators became the first team to sweep a No. 1 seed in the opening round since the NHL adopted its current playoff format in 1994.

Penguins eliminate Blue Jackets

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Marc-Andre Fleury is doing his best to stay in the present.

Who knows how much longer he'll play for the Pittsburgh Penguins? The winningest goaltender in franchise history certainly has no clue. Heck, 10 days ago he was the backup to Matt Murray. Now he's the most important reason the defending Stanley Cup champions are heading to round two after taking care of Columbus in five games.

"I think once you realize you never know what's coming, you try to enjoy every moment that you have," Fleury said after Pittsburgh finished off the Blue Jackets with a 5-2 win on Thursday. "We have a great team. We have great fans. It's a fun place to play. Try to embrace it and enjoy the momentum."

There's plenty to go around for the Penguins. Fleury turned aside 49 shots in the clincher, including a first-period barrage that kept the Blue Jackets at bay until his teammates got it going, and another 19 in the third as Columbus tried to keep its season alive.

"He had to make a ton of huge saves," Pittsburgh cap-

tain Sidney Crosby said. "They weren't necessarily routine, either. He was tested a lot. We don't like to have to make him work that hard. He was our best player tonight."

When the breakdowns came on Thursday, Fleury was there to clean up the mess. He stopped 181 of the 194 shots he faced in the first round, outplaying Sergei Bobrovsky, who led the league in goals against and save percentage during the regular season.

"Defense wins championships," defenseman Justin Schultz said. "You've got to be good defensively and that's something we'll work on but we've got some time off here to do that and we'll be better."

Rangers 3, Canadiens 2 (OT): Mika Zibanejad scored at 14:22 of overtime, lifting visiting New York to a big win in its Eastern Conference quarterfinal series.

Chris Kreider's shot on a rush went off Alexei Emelin's stick right to Zibanejad for a shot into an open side.

The Rangers grabbed a 3-2 lead in the best-of-seven series. They can advance with a win in Game 6 on Saturday.

Jesper Fast and Brady Skjei also scored for New York. Hen-

rik Lundqvist made 34 saves.

Artturi Lehkonen scored and set up a goal by Brendan Gallagher in the first period for Montreal. Carey Price had 33 stops.

Oilers 4, Sharks 3: David Desharnais scored late in the first overtime to lift host Edmonton to a win over San Jose, pushing the Sharks to the brink of playoff elimination.

Desharnais, in the slot, one-timed a Leon Draisaitl cross-ice pass past Sharks goaltender Martin Jones to cap an overtime session dominated by Edmonton.

The Oilers lead the Western Conference quarterfinal series 3-2 with Game 6 Saturday night in San Jose.

The series winner takes on the Anaheim Ducks in Round 2.

Patrick Maroon, Mark Letestu, and Oscar Klefbom also scored for Edmonton. Mikkel Boedker, Patrick Marleau, and David Schlemko had goals for San Jose.

The Oilers — looking for a bounce-back game after a 7-0 beat-down by the Sharks in Game 4 — dominated the first 10 minutes, energized by the deafening roar of the orange and blue-clad fans at Rogers Place.

Souza has 3 hits as Rays sweep Tigers

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Steven Souza Jr.'s simple approach at the plate is working.

Souza came within a single of hitting for the cycle, Erasmo Ramirez and two relievers combined on a five-hitter, and the Tampa Bay Rays beat Detroit 8-1 Thursday for a three-game sweep of the Tigers.

"Just letting my ability play," Souza said. "I can really overthink things, and put a lot of pressure on myself. Throughout the years, I think that's what I've done."

Souza doubled in the first, hit a two-run triple in the second and added a solo homer in the eighth. He has reached base multiple times in 12 games this season.

"I think we're seeing him put it together," Rays manager Kevin Cash said.

Ramirez (2-0) allowed one run and two hits in five innings with five strikeouts and no walks. In the rotation because Jake Odorizzi strained his left hamstring, Ramirez had not started since April 16 last year.

Chase Whitley gave up a hit and two

walks in three innings, and Tommy Hunter allowed two hits in the ninth.

Tampa Bay rookie Daniel Robertson hit his first career homer, an eighth-inning solo shot off Warwick Saupold.

The Tigers were outscored 21-9 in series and while making just two errors allowed several catchable balls to fall for hits.

"I'll be honest with you, this is the worst defensive series I've seen the Detroit Tigers play since I've been here," manager Brad Ausmus said.

Daniel Norris (1-1) gave up five runs and eight hits over 4²/₃ innings.

Ian Kinsler hit his 41st leadoff homer, but Tampa Bay tied the score in the bottom half after Souza doubled on a fly ball that right fielder Tyler Collins appeared to lose. He scored when Dixon Machado, filling in for injured shortstop Jose Iglesias, made an errant throw after fielding Rickie Weeks' grounder.

Souza tripled on an opposite-field flare that bounced past Collins near the right-field line, then scored on Kevin Kiermaier's single for a 4-1 lead.

Kiermaier homered off Saupold in the seventh.

Saupold was optioned to Triple-A Toledo after the game, and left-hander Blaine Hardy will be recalled from the International League club.

Short staffed: The game started with just three umpires because crew chief Larry Vanover left due to a personal matter. Joe West was brought in to fill out the crew and arrived to take the field in the bottom of the first.

Streak over: Norris entered without a loss in his first 16 career road starts, which tied Todd Wellemeier and Larry Jansen for the second longest stretch since 1913. Only Dave LaPoint has more with 20.

Up next: Tigers right-hander Justin Verlander (1-1) looks to rebound Friday night against Minnesota after allowing a career-high-tying nine runs Saturday at Cleveland. He has won 12 of his last 13 decisions against the Twins, dating to July 9, 2010.

Rays right-hander Alex Cobb (1-1) goes against Houston righty Mike Fiers (0-1) Friday night.

A's Valdez makes first start since 2010

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Cesar Valdez pitched in the major leagues for the first time in nearly seven years as the Oakland Athletics beat the Seattle Mariners 9-6 Thursday night.

He allowed three runs and five hits in four innings, struck out four and walked two. This marked just the third start of his career and 10th appearance in all — he's probably headed back to the minors soon.

A 32-year-old right-hander from the Dominican Republic, he was called up from Triple-A Nashville to fill in for injured opening day starter Kendall Graveman. Valdez last pitched in the big leagues on June 10, 2010, with Arizona just more than a month after his previous start on May 8.

Trevor Plouffe hit a three-run homer in the seventh and Ryan Dull (1-1) pitched 1¹/₃ scoreless innings for the win in Oakland's third straight victory.

Taylor Motter hit a two-run homer for Seattle in the sixth against Frankie Montas.

Red Sox 4, Blue Jays 1 (10):

Chris Sale struck out 13 in eight shutout innings, Mookie Betts hit a three-run double in the 10th and visiting Boston beat Toronto.

Toronto (3-12) is off to the worst start in team history and has lost its first five series for the first time.

Astros 2, Angels 1: Carlos Beltran hit his first home run this season and Jake Marisnick also homered for host Houston.

Beltran's shot came with one out and the first inning off Matt Shoemaker (0-1), and Marisnick's second homer this season made it 2-0 in the fifth.

Indians 6, Twins 2: Trevor Bauer (1-2) struck out seven in 6¹/₃ innings, giving up two runs, three hits and three walks, and Carlos Santana had two doubles and two RBIs for visiting Cleveland.

Ervin Santana gave up one run, four hits and three walks over six innings for the Twins.

Phillies 6, Mets 4: Maikel Franco homered and doubled while breaking a career-worst 0-for-22 hitless streak, and vis-

iting Philadelphia capitalized on an error by untested first baseman Jay Bruce.

Mets closer Jeurys Familia struck out two and walked two in a hitless ninth inning of his season debut after serving a 15-game suspension for violating Major League Baseball's domestic violence policy.

Orioles 2, Reds 1 (10): J.J. Hardy singled home the tie-breaking run off Blake Wood (0-2) in the 10th inning, and visiting Baltimore took two of three in the series, leaving them 8-4 in interleague play against Cincinnati.

Three pitchers limited Cincinnati to two hits for the second night in a row.

Nationals 3, Braves 2: Ryan Zimmerman hit a two-run homer in the sixth that erased a 2-1 deficit against R.A. Dickey (1-2) as visiting Washington completed a three-game sweep.

Stephen Strasburg (2-0) struck out 10 in seven innings.

Rangers 1, Royals 0 (13): Delino DeShields had an RBI single with one out in the 13th inning to score Joey Gallo as

host Texas beat Kansas City.

Gallo had pulled a one-out double into the right-field corner off Travis Wood (0-1), the third Royals reliever after starter Danny Duffy went 7¹/₃ innings. Gallo scored when DeShields hit a sharp single to left on the 10th pitch of the at-bat.

Brewers 7, Cardinals 5: Jett Bandy, Eric Thames and Travis Shaw hit home runs to help host Milwaukee beat St. Louis.

Bandy hit a two-run homer in the sixth and Thames put Milwaukee ahead with a two-run shot off Carlos Martinez (0-3) in the fifth. Shaw's three-run blast in the first made it 12 consecutive games with a homer for the Brewers, who lead the majors with 32.

Padres 4, Diamondbacks 1: Clayton Richard pitched into the seventh inning and Wil Myers and Austin Hedges homered to lead host San Diego over Arizona.

Richard (2-2) gave up a run and nine hits in 6²/₃ innings. The left-hander struck out a season-high eight to win for the first time in his past three starts.