

STARS AND STRIPES®

Tuesday, April 10, 2018

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Trump threatens military strike on Syria

From wire reports

WASHINGTON — After threatening a military strike against Syria, President Donald Trump on Tuesday canceled plans to travel to South America later this week, choosing to stay in the United States to manage the response to an apparent chemical weapons attack.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Tuesday that Trump will not attend the 8th Summit of the Americas in Lima, Peru, or travel to Bogota, Colombia, as planned, remaining in the United States to “oversee the American response to Syria and to monitor developments around the world.”

The decision marks the first time an American president has not attended the summit. Vice President Mike Pence will travel in Trump’s place.

Trump on Monday promised a decision on Syria within hours, declaring that Russia or any other nation found to share responsibility for Saturday’s apparent chemical weapons attack on civilians will “pay a

price.”

The White House sharply rejected any suggestion that Trump’s own words about pulling U.S. troops out of Syria had opened the door for the attack, which killed more than 40 people, including children.

Trump, asked whether Russian President Vladimir Putin bore any responsibility, responded, “He may, yeah, he may. And if he does, it’s going to be very tough, very tough.” He added, “Everybody’s gonna pay a price. He will. Everybody will.”

In Moscow, a hard-line Russian lawmaker who once commanded Russian airborne forces said a U.S. strike on Syria could trigger a direct military clash between Russia and the United States. Vladimir Shamanov, who heads the defense affairs committee in the lower house of parliament, said Russia has “the necessary means for that, and the Americans and their allies know that quite well” and that a Russian retaliatory strike could target U.S. Navy ships and aircraft.

British Prime Minister The-

resa May’s office said Tuesday the leaders of Britain, France and the United States are determined that those behind a chemical weapons attack in Syria will be “held to account.”

May’s office said the prime minister spoke by phone Tuesday with Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron.

There was no indication what form that response would take. May would not comment when asked whether Britain would join any U.S.-led military intervention.

Amid the tough talk from the White House, the U.S. military appeared to be in position to carry out any attack order. A Navy destroyer, the USS Donald Cook, was underway in the eastern Mediterranean after completing a port call in Cyprus. The guided missile destroyer is armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles, the weapon of choice in a U.S. attack one year ago on an airfield in Syria following an alleged sarin gas attack on civilians.

Syrian government forces and their allies were on alert Tuesday amid fears of an

American strike. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that as of Monday night, troops have been on a 72-hour alert and are fortifying their positions. The Observatory’s chief, Rami Abdurrahman, said the alert includes all army positions and bases from the southern province of Sweida all the way to Aleppo province in the north, the Mediterranean coast in the west to Deir el-Zour province in the east, along the Iraqi border.

The Sound and Picture Organization, an activist collective in eastern Syria, said Iranian fighters and members of Lebanon’s Hezbollah group have evacuated their positions in the Boukamal area, near Iraq’s border.

A Lebanese politician with close links to the Syrian government said officials were expecting a limited strike, similar to the one on Shayrat air base last year, when U.S. missiles struck the base following a chemical weapons attack on northern Syria that Washington blamed on the government.

Guard members arriving at US-Mexico border

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Some National Guard members have started arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border with more expected as federal government officials seek ways to curtail illegal immigration.

The Republican governors of Texas, Arizona and New Mexico on Monday committed 1,600 Guard members to the border, giving President Donald Trump many of the troops he requested to fight what he’s called a crisis of migrant crossings and crime.

The only holdout border state was California, led by Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown, who has not announced whether troops from his state’s National Guard will participate and has repeatedly fought with Trump over immigration policy.

Under the federal law Trump invoked in his proclamation calling for National Guard troops, governors who send troops retain command and control over their state’s Guard members and the U.S. government picks up the cost.

Brown’s spokesman, Evan

Westrup, said California officials still are reviewing Trump’s troop request.

Trump said last week he wants to send 2,000 to 4,000 National Guard members to the border, issuing a proclamation citing “the lawlessness that continues at our southern border.”

Trump administration officials have said that rising numbers of people being caught at the southern border, while in line with seasonal trends in recent years, require an immediate response.

Apprehensions are still well

below their historical trends during the terms of former presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, both of whom also deployed the Guard to the border.

In Mexico City, a caravan of Central American migrants that had been heading north stopped in the Mexican capital. The caravan had sparked furious criticism from Trump, followed days later by his National Guard border protection deployment plan. Organizers said they never intended to go to the U.S. border.

Navy advancement change to require pretesting online

BY JASON BEHNKE
Stars and Stripes

Come September 2019, sailors will have to pass an online military knowledge test in order to take the E-4, E-5 and E-6 advancement exams.

The test, announced last week by the Navy, contains 100 questions pertaining to professional military knowledge. It must be passed once per pay grade before a sailor is eligible to take the actual advancement exam.

“Direct feedback from sailors” was the reason the Navy gave for the change.

“As part of Sailor 2025 and rating modernization efforts, the PMK exam continues to emphasize the importance of Professional Military Knowledge, while also taking this initial step into the electronic exam process,” Karim Cole, master chief of the Naval Education and Training Command Force, said in a statement.

Currently, advancement exams consist of 150 individual job-specific questions and 25 military knowledge questions.

The new advancement exam will contain 175 questions focused solely on the sailor’s job field.

The last major change to the advancement exams occurred in 2012. Before that, the test was 200 questions, with a greater focus on professional military knowledge for higher pay grades.

The online exam for military knowledge will cover five topics: leadership and character, career information, professional conduct, naval heritage and seamanship. Sailors must achieve a passing score of 80 percent on each topic, with the ability to retake each section until achieving a passing grade.

Sailors must pass the professional military knowledge exam before they can be eligible to start the advancement exam.

Sailor 2025 is the Navy’s initiative to improve and modernize personnel management and training systems to more effectively recruit, reward and retain sailors.

Truman deploys to Mideast and Europe

BY TYLER HLAVAC
Stars and Stripes

The USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group departed Naval Station Norfolk, Va., on Wednesday for a deployment to the Middle East and Europe.

The aircraft carrier will be accompanied by the guided missile cruiser USS Normandy and the guided missile destroyers USS Arleigh Burke, USS Bulkeley, USS Forrest Sherman and USS Farragut. The destroyers USS Jason Dunham and USS The Sullivans will join the strike group later, a Navy statement said.

The strike group, carrying 6,500 sailors and Carrier Air Wing One, will cruise alongside the German frigate FGS Hessen during the first half of the deployment. The German ship conducted a brief mission with the Harry S. Truman in 2010, the Navy said.

It’s the first extended deployment for the Harry S. Truman since it wrapped up a 10-month maintenance period last July. The warships’ mission will include “maritime security operations and theater security cooperation efforts alongside allies and partners,” and they will “provide crisis response capability and increase theater security cooperation and forward naval presence” in the Europe and Middle East, the statement said.

The Harry S. Truman will replace the USS Theodore Roosevelt strike group, which wrapped up its four-month deployment to the Middle East last month, and is operating in the Western Pacific.

The Harry S. Truman, which is assigned to the Navy’s Fleet Forces Command, last traveled to the Middle East in 2015 to join the anti-Islamic State mission Operation Inherent Resolve before returning home in 2016.

During that deployment, the carrier traveled more than 53,000 nautical miles and its aircraft flew more than 27,000 hours and 9,500 sorties, 1,461 of which were in support of anti-ISIS missions.

The Navy routinely sends carrier strike groups on rotational deployments to Bahrain, home of the 5th Fleet, and has been an important part of efforts to defeat ISIS. Naval forces in the region began an air campaign against the terror group in August 2014 when the USS George H.W. Bush launched airstrikes against targets in Iraq.

It remains unclear what the upcoming strike group deployment might entail. Last month, President Donald Trump said he would withdraw U.S. forces from Syria and that other countries in the region should continue the campaign against ISIS.

Wasp trains with Japanese ship for 1st time since arrival

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The USS Wasp has trained alongside a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel for the first time since arriving at its new homeport in Japan earlier this year.

“Navigational maneuvers” held Monday in the East China Sea involved the Wasp — whose strike group includes F-35B Lightning II stealth fighters and elements of the Okinawa-based 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit — sailing in formation with the am-

phibious transport dock JS Shimokita.

The brief exercise demonstrated both services’ “enduring commitment” to the “U.S.-Japan alliance and security of the region,” a Navy statement said. Chinese activity in the East China Sea has long been an issue for Japan. Tokyo protested to Beijing in January after a submarine, presumed to be Chinese, was detected near Okinawa and the disputed Senkaku Islands. Vice Foreign Minister Shinsuke Sugiyama expressed “great concern” over the issue and urged China not to repeat the incursion.

Rear Adm. Tsutomu Shirane called Monday’s bilateral drill, which included sailors coordinating rendezvous points and using universal tactical signals, a valuable experience for the JMSDF.

“We welcome the deployment of USS Wasp in this region, and I hope we continue to work together with Wasp,” he said of the ship, which arrived at Sasebo Naval Base in January and will eventually replace the USS Bonhomme Richard as flagship of Amphibious Force 7th Fleet.

Navy attorney accused of unlawful influence

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — The Navy's top attorney might have scuttled a war crimes case against three SEALs by unlawfully meddling behind the scenes to bring charges against them.

After a flurry of Monday motions in the courtroom of Navy Cmdr. Arthur Gaston, the military judge ruled that Vice Adm. James Crawford III — the Navy's judge advocate general — appears to have exerted unlawful command influence in a case first brought to light by a 2015 story in *The New York Times*.

The burden now shifts to military prosecutors to prove that Crawford, Naval Special Warfare Command Rear Adm. Timothy Szymanski and other senior leaders never created the appearance of behind-the-scenes maneuvers.

In the case at hand, Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Daniel V. Dambrosio Jr. and two Special Operator Chief Petty Officers — Xavier Silva and David N. Swarts — are accused of abusing male prisoners at Village Stability Platform Kalach in the Chora District of Afghanistan's Uruzgan province on May 31, 2012.

A June trial for their commander, Navy Lt. Jason L. Webb, waits in the wings but could be scuttled by the judge's ruling, too.

Although military officials insist the SEALs' defense team was searching for evidence that didn't exist, the attorneys for the three commandos pointed to a series of actions by Crawford and other high-ranking commissioned officers, including now-retired Rear Adm. Brian Losey, the former commander of Coronado, Calif.-based Naval Special Warfare.

For example, defense attorneys say that although Losey was hedging at reopening a probe into the SEALs, Crawford told him that a captain was being scrutinized for allegedly bypassing traditional investigative processes — possibly sending a warning to junior leaders that the Navy wanted the commandos prosecuted.

It's now the third time Crawford has been accused of unlawfully plotting with military leaders to convict SEALs.

A ruling is expected in the coming days from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces in Washington into Crawford's

alleged involvement in the rape case of Senior Chief Special Warfare Operator Keith Barry, who was court-martialed and convicted in San Diego in 2015.

A special judge hearing evidence in Barry's appeal already ruled that Crawford and others unlawfully tampered in the matter but left the final adjudication to the higher court. Crawford also was accused by defense attorneys of unlawfully inserting himself into a probe involving the May 6, 2016, pool drowning of Seaman James Derek Lovelace during initial SEAL training. He has long insisted he was innocent in those cases and declined to comment Monday.

Military prosecutors suspect that the three SEALs and several village militiamen began committing war crimes hours after a bomb detonated at an Afghan Local Police checkpoint.

Angered by the death of one of their militiamen in the blast, the Afghan police unit detained a group of Afghan men and marched them to the American compound near Kalach, kicking them and beating them with rifle butts and car antennas, according to witness statements compiled in a Navy Criminal In-

vestigative Service report.

Relying on the recollections of four American soldiers, two Navy support personnel and a local Afghan police officer who allegedly witnessed and reported parts of the incident, prosecutors believe that Dambrosio, Silva and Swarts joined in with the militiamen and, by the end of the night, one Afghan prisoner died.

An Army witness later claimed that a senior Afghan police officer told him that the prisoners, including the dead detainee, were innocent.

SEAL Team 5's Swarts has also been charged with conspiring with his commander, SEAL Team 10's Webb, to lie to military leaders about what really happened that night.

Neither Webb nor his men ended up at a court-martial after allegations of the war crimes surfaced. Their commander, Capt. Robert E. Smith, gave them nonjudicial punishment. After the 2015 story in *The New York Times*, the Navy launched probes not only into what the SEALs allegedly did in Afghanistan but also the process Smith used to sidestep court-martial proceedings against them.

Acting VA leader wants Congress to overhaul Choice

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON—The acting secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs supports a package of VA reforms Congress failed to pass last month and urged lawmakers Monday to try again.

Robert Wilkie wrote in a statement that the VA and Congress need to come together to overhaul the VA Choice program, which veterans use to receive private-sector medical care.

Lawmakers and large veterans organizations agree the program is complex and difficult for veterans to use, and they've been working for more than a year to garner support to pass large-scale reforms.

The Choice program was

created in response to the VA wait-time scandal uncovered in Phoenix four years ago Monday.

"It's time to fix the Choice program — as well as the department's other non-VA care efforts — once and for all by merging them into a single, streamlined community care program that's easy to use for veterans and VA employees," Wilkie wrote.

Wilkie told members of the House and Senate veterans' affairs committees Monday that he supported a package of reforms they failed to attach to Congress' massive spending bill in March. The package was a deal between Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn., the chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and Sens. Johnny

Isakson, R-Ga., and Jon Tester, D-Mont., who lead the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

In addition to overhauling the Choice program, the reforms included an expansion of benefits for veteran caregivers, as well as a plan to initiate a systematic review of VA infrastructure, with the intention of disposing of aging and under-used facilities nationwide.

Wilkie expressed urgency Monday, noting Congress has been forced in multiple instances during the last year to approve emergency funding for the program. The program faces another funding shortfall — it's slated to run out of money in early June.

TriWest Healthcare Alliance, which contracts with the VA to arrange private-sector care for

veterans through the Choice program, warned lawmakers last week that another shortfall could lead to restricted care for veterans, as well as layoffs and financial ruin for the alliance.

Wilkie, who came to the VA from the Defense Department, is temporarily leading the VA following the dismissal of former VA Secretary David Shulkin on March 28. He sat down with several large veterans organizations for the first time Friday and is scheduled to meet with Roe in the coming days.

In an official press release last week, the VA rejected claims by Shulkin that he was fired because administration officials sought to privatize the agency and saw him as an obstacle.

N. Korea's Kim briefs officials on US talks

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea—North Korean leader Kim Jong Un made his first publicly reported comments about talks with the United States as plans moved forward for a summit expected to be held within weeks.

President Donald Trump offered a timeline Monday, saying the summit would be held in May or early June, but the communist state had largely maintained silence on the issue after delivering an invitation via South Korean envoys.

That raised concerns about the North's sincerity in holding what would be its first-ever summit with a sitting U.S. president. However, Kim briefed top ruling party officials Monday,

giving them his "profound analysis and appraisal" of prospects for future dialogue with the United States, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

The KCNA report didn't specifically mention plans for a summit with Trump, but it comes on the heels of confirmation that Washington and Pyongyang have been in contact and the North has said it's ready to discuss its nuclear weapons program.

Kim spoke at a meeting of the politburo of the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee, which approved a budget for the year that's to be presented to parliament, due to convene Wednesday, KCNA said.

It added that the leader men-

tioned his upcoming summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, which is to be held on April 27 in the truce village of Panmunjom in the heavily fortified border that divides the rival nations.

He then discussed the "prospect of the [North Korean]-U.S. dialogue and set forth the strategic and tactical issues" to be maintained by the party, KCNA said.

The comments come as diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis move forward with surprising speed after the North agreed to join the Olympics, opening the door for the first formal talks with Seoul in more than two years and reducing tensions that had spiked after months of saber-rattling

and missile and nuclear tests by the North.

South Korean envoys who met with Kim in Pyongyang then said he had invited Trump for talks as soon as possible and was willing to discuss denuclearization. Trump surprised the international community by quickly agreeing to meet.

Trump administration officials reportedly said Sunday that they have confirmed via direct contact with the North that Kim is willing to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Experts have warned against raising expectations for the outcome of the meeting, noting the sides still have major differences, including the definition of denuclearization.

Court: Women's pay can't be based on past wages

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Relying on a woman's previous salary to determine her pay for a new job perpetuates disparities in the wages of men and women and is illegal when it results in higher pay for men, a federal appeals court ruled Monday.

The unanimous ruling by an 11-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals came in a lawsuit filed by a California school employee who learned over lunch with colleagues in 2012 that she made thousands of dollars less than her male counterparts.

The 9th Circuit held that pay differences based on prior salaries are inherently discriminatory under the federal Equal Pay Act because the previous salaries were the result of gender bias.

"Women are told they are not worth as much as men," Judge Stephen Reinhardt wrote before he died last month. "Allowing prior salary to justify a wage differential perpetuates this message, entrenching in salary systems an obvious means of discrimination."

In the case decided Monday, plaintiff Aileen Rizo took a job as a math consultant in Fresno County in 2009 after working for several years in Arizona. The policy of the Fresno County superintendent of schools at the time was to add 5 percent to the previous salaries of all new hires.

The policy was "gender-neutral, objective and effective in attracting qualified applicants," Fresno County Superintendent of Schools Jim Yovino responded in a statement Monday saying he will appeal the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Rizo, who trained math teachers in the Fresno County district before leaving for another job, learned that one male colleague with less experience, education and seniority made nearly \$13,000 more than her, she said.

"This case is not about me," said Rizo, now an advocate for equal pay. "It's about all women and the chance that we have for pay equity when we're released from historically low wages that many women, especially women of color like myself, have been earning."

Ex-spy's daughter is released from hospital

Associated Press

LONDON — A British health official said Tuesday that Yulia Skripal, who was targeted along with her father in a nerve agent attack in England, has been discharged from a hospital.

"This is not the end of her treatment but marks a significant milestone," Dr. Christine Blanshard said.

She said she would not provide details about Skripal's condition out of concern for the patient's privacy.

The 33-year-old daughter of ex-spy Sergei Skripal, 66, has been taken to a secure location.

Blanshard said Sergei Skripal, the apparent target of the attack, is recovering more slowly than his daughter but continues to improve.

The doctor said no date has been set for the elder Skripal's release from Salisbury District Hospital.

The two were poisoned March 4 in an attack that has led to a prolonged confrontation between Russia and Britain that has revived Cold War tensions. Both were in critical con-

dition for several weeks after the poisoning.

The British government, which accuses Russia of carrying out the attack, is likely to keep details about Yulia Skripal's location secret given the sensitivity of the case.

If she is well enough, she is likely to be extensively questioned by British security officials and police about her recollection of events leading up to her poisoning.

The Russian Embassy congratulated Yulia Skripal on her release in a tweet but said pointedly that Russia needs "urgent proof" that "what is being done to her is done on her own free will."

Russia said it has no role in the attack and has demanded consular access to Yulia Skripal, who has Russian nationality.

British officials say the lethal nerve agent Novichok was placed on the door handle of Sergei Skripal's house in Salisbury.

The nerve agent also sickened Nick Bailey, a police detective who came to their aid.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Driver asleep at wheel hit cruiser

ME BELGRADE — Police in Maine said a driver fell asleep at the wheel and rear-ended a cruiser, injuring a deputy sheriff.

Police said Kennebec County deputy Jeremy York, 36, was rear-ended on Sunday night on Route 27 in Belgrade. They said he was parked in a breakdown lane in a patrol vehicle when he was rear-ended.

Police said York and a passenger in the other vehicle were taken to a hospital for injuries that were not life-threatening.

Fired officer guilty of pretending to be cop

NJ NEWARK — A former New Jersey police officer who was fired in 2008 has been convicted of continuing to wear his uniform and filing false police reports.

Newark resident Eddie Gonzalez handed in his badge, but prosecutors said he continued to wear his uniform in public to receive favors. Authorities said he used the police uniform to enter into a relationship with a woman in 2013, whom he then accused of stalking him and of violating a restraining order.

Police said they later learned Gonzalez, 39, was lying to them.

Gonzalez was forced to resign in 2008 after police said he assaulted his 14-year-old neighbor by forcing his tongue into her mouth. He will be sentenced June 8. He faces a minimum of 18 months in prison.

11 hurt as thieves set off firecrackers

FL ORLANDO — Police said 11 people were injured fleeing when jewelry

store thieves set off firecrackers in a Florida mall to simulate gunshots.

The Orange County Sheriff's Office said deputies arrived quickly at the Florida Mall near Orlando on Sunday evening after gunfire was reported. They quickly determined no shots were fired but that firecrackers had been used as a distraction in a jewelry store theft.

Five of the injured were taken to the hospital.

Man dies after brick smashes windshield

MO ST. LOUIS — A Missouri man died after a brick fell off an oncoming vehicle and smashed through his windshield.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported the crash happened Saturday evening about 60 miles northwest of St. Louis on Highway 47 in Lincoln County.

The Missouri Highway Patrol said Frederick Lueck, 73, of Troy, was driving east when the brick crashed through the windshield of his Chevrolet Impala. The car hit several poles and a sign before stopping.

Lueck died at the scene. His passenger, Kathleen Lueck, 67, also of Troy, declined treatment after the crash.

Courthouse home to nesting pair of falcons

IA DUBUQUE — Officials said speedy peregrine falcons are nesting again on a ledge of the Dubuque County Courthouse in Dubuque.

The Telegraph Herald reported that a female laid two eggs last week in a pea gravel nest set up by Dubuque County Conservation staffers. The nest and the birds can be seen on a YouTube stream.

Officials said the pair first

showed up in spring 2016, but their eggs were blown off the ledge. Conservation staffers put a wooden box filled with pea gravel on the ledge. The pair returned, but no new eggs were seen.

The birds returned last year, and one of their three eggs hatched.

Police: Wind blamed for cocaine in purse

FL FORT PIERCE — Authorities said a Florida woman blamed a windy day for the cocaine that police found in her purse.

WPLG reported Kennecia Posey was one of two passengers in a car stopped by Fort Pierce police in late March. Police said an officer smelled marijuana and that, after the car was searched, cocaine and marijuana in separate bags were found inside a purse Posey had on her lap.

Authorities said they questioned Posey about the drugs. According to the police report, Posey responded, "It's a windy day. It must have flown through the window and into my purse."

Posey was charged with a felony count of cocaine possession and a misdemeanor count of marijuana possession. She later was released on bond.

Abandoned bikes on ferries cause problem

WA SEATTLE — Bicycles left on Washington State Ferries are causing problems for ferry and Coast Guard operations.

Officials said that when a passenger leaves a bicycle behind, Coast Guard and ferry personnel treat it like a potential distress situation until the bicyclist can be confirmed safe. That wastes taxpayer dollars

and could affect actual distress situations.

Twelve bikes were left on ferries in the past 18 months. Three were ride-share bikes. Each response can require helicopters, boats and specialized crews to search for nonexistent victims.

Accidental shooting in apartment a near miss

ND MINOT — Charges are pending against a woman after a near-miss accidental shooting in a Minot apartment building.

Police said the 27-year-old woman was cleaning her gun about 1 a.m. Monday and pulled the trigger, firing a round through the floor and into the apartment below.

Authorities said the bullet struck a dresser near where a man was sitting. He wasn't hurt.

The woman was arrested on a reckless endangerment charge.

Woman goes into labor during arrest

WA KENNEWICK — Washington authorities said a pregnant woman went into labor as an officer was attempting to arrest her on suspicion of using drugs.

KOMO-TV reported police found the woman in the parking lot of a Kennewick Walmart on Sunday morning after receiving a report of a pregnant woman using drugs in a car.

Authorities said an officer was about to arrest her when she went into labor.

She was taken to Trios Women's and Children's Hospital.

Her condition and the condition of the baby are unknown.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

NHL playoffs all about matchups in East

Associated Press

Seeding means nothing in the giant game of rock, paper, scissors that is the Eastern Conference playoffs.

Top-seeded Tampa Bay lost all three meetings this season against eighth-seeded New Jersey, Toronto beat Boston three out of four times and records don't matter when Pittsburgh and Philadelphia meet in another battle of Pennsylvania. The Penguins are the back-to-back defending Stanley Cup champions while the Lightning and Bruins are among the best teams in the NHL — and yet there isn't one obvious team to beat.

"In the East, anybody can beat anybody," said Devils defenseman Ben Lovejoy, who won it all with the Penguins in 2016. "When we're playing our best game, I think we can beat anybody, and I think that the opposite is true. We have to be dialed in no matter who we're playing, and we've done a really good job of that against the best teams in the league this year."

The Devils certainly match

up better against the Lightning than they would have against the Bruins, who are in for a tough series against the Maple Leafs. Washington has had a lot of success in recent years against Columbus but has a big question of who to start in goal and the Capitals have not played the Blue Jackets and their additions at the trade deadline.

Before stubbing their toe in game 82 and failing to win the Atlantic, the Bruins looked like they had the potential to be a buzz saw with Tuukka Rask in goal and enough depth to withstand injuries all season. They still might be.

Goaltending doesn't hurt, either. If Tampa Bay gets the kind of Vezina Trophy-caliber play out of Andrei Vasilevskiy that he delivered for much of the season, it could go on a deep run, though the same could be said for Pittsburgh with Matt Murray, Washington with Braden Holtby or Philipp Grubauer, Columbus with Sergei Bobrovsky or Toronto with Frederik Andersen.

Lightning vs. Devils

The East's top team for much of the year, Tampa Bay hopes Steven Stamkos is healthy after dealing with a nagging lower-body injury late in the season. Stamkos, 100-point scorer Nikita Kucherov and top defenseman Victor Hedman make the Lightning a scary opponent. The Devils aren't scared. They have Hart Trophy candidate Taylor Hall, star rookie Nico Hischier and enough veteran playoff experience to not look out of place.

Bruins vs. Maple Leafs

Plenty has changed since Boston beat Toronto in seven games in 2013. The Maple Leafs added Mike Babcock as coach, Andersen in goal and have young stars Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and William Nylander.

The Bruins can go punch-for-punch with the Maple Leafs and just about anyone in the league. Led by the top line of Brad Marchand, Patrice Bergeron and David Pastrnak, they have handled injuries to Bergeron, Rick Nash, captain Zdeno Chara and others and just keep clicking.

Capitals vs. Blue Jackets

Despite losing several key players last offseason, the Capitals won the Metropolitan Division for the third consecutive year. Their reward: a matchup against Bobrovsky, Artemi Panarin and the John Tortorella-coached Blue Jackets.

"We've always thought that they've been a pretty good team for the last few years, not just the last couple where they've had more success," Holtby said. "I think we've always had a good challenge against them. We play better against solid teams, teams that are coached well and it's always fun to play against them. I think it'll be a good series."

Penguins vs. Flyers

These two teams don't like each other, which should make for some fireworks in the first round. Since they last met in 2012, Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and the Penguins have won the Cup twice, but something about Philadelphia-Pittsburgh makes for good games.

"They're really fun games to play," Flyers MVP candidate Claude Giroux said. "They're not easy games to play, but it's easy to get up and play some hockey when you know you're playing the Penguins."

Predators, Knights: Changing of the guard in the West

Associated Press

The Predators have the Presidents' Trophy, and the NHL-expansion Golden Knights carry the buzz entering the Western Conference playoffs, which have the potential of resembling nothing from the past.

So step aside Chicago, which missed the playoffs for the first time in nine years, and say bye to the Blues, whose six-year playoff run is over.

The changing of the West's guard begins at the top, where Nashville clinched its first Central Division title by running away with the league's best record. And then there's Vegas, which broke every measurable NHL expansion record for success by going 51-24-7 to win the Pacific Division.

Predators vs. Avalanche

Nashville finished seventh in the league with 261 goals without any player scoring 30. The Predators' balanced attack is fueled by a group of speedy, playmaking defensemen who combined for a league-best 206 points (56 goals, 150 assists). Pekka Rinne went 42-13-4 to finish third in victories, and his 2.31 goals-against average was third among goalies playing 40 or more games.

Nathan MacKinnon entered the MVP discussion by leading Colorado with 97 points, including a league-leading 12 game-winning goals. Colorado tied with Arizona with the youngest roster at 25.8 years old.

Golden Knights vs. Kings

A Golden Knights team put together with other teams' discards spent the season using a "why not us?" mantra in setting expansion-

team records for most wins (51), home wins (29), road wins (22) and longest point streak (10-0-2). Vegas features six 20-goal-scorers, including trade-deadline addition Tomas Tatar.

The defensive-minded Kings allowed a league-low 202 goals and had the league's best penalty-killing unit. Jonathan Quick's 2.40 goals-against average was sixth among goalies appearing in 40 games.

Jets vs. Wild

The Jets closed their most successful season in both victories and points on a 20-5-1 run, including winning the final nine home games. Winnipeg is still searching for its first playoff victory after being swept in two previous appearances: by Anaheim in 2015, and by the Rangers in 2007, when the Jets were based in Atlanta.

The Wild limp into their sixth straight playoff appearance with defensemen Ryan Suter (broken right ankle) and Jared Spurgeon (torn right hamstring) sidelined, though Spurgeon is expected back from a 17-game absence in this series. Eric Staal's 76 points (42 goals, 34 assists) were third-most in team history.

Ducks vs. Sharks

The Ducks earned home-ice advantage with a 3-0 season-ending win over Arizona, coupled with the Sharks' season-ending 6-3 loss to the Minnesota Wild. Anaheim went 25-10-4 since the bye break, and is 14-1-2 at home since Jan. 23. Goalie John Gibson went 21-7-3 in his final 31 decisions, but missed the final week and is listed day to day with an upper body injury.

Scherzer gets steal, shutout for Nats

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Max Scherzer's fifth big league shutout was all well and good, of course. His 10 strikeouts and zero walks Monday were terrific, too.

The most memorable part of the night for the two-time reigning NL Cy Young Award winner as he led the Nationals past the Atlanta Braves 2-0 to end Washington's five-game losing skid and get the team back to .500? His first stolen base since high school.

"Finally! I've been yelling at Matt Williams, and I've been yelling at Dusty Baker, like, 'Let me go!'" he said, referring to former Washington managers.

"There's obviously situations where I feel like I'm fast enough," Scherzer said with a grin.

Then, taking a playful jab at former

teammate Jayson Werth, Scherzer continued with this punch line: "If J-Dub can steal a base, so can I."

On the mound, Scherzer (2-1) made a slight tweak with the way he holds the baseball, making his sure his fingers were on top of the ball and not on its side, and didn't let the Braves push a runner beyond first base. Atlanta only produced two singles, by Kurt Suzuki in the second and Nick Markakis in the fifth, and neither advanced.

So even Scherzer managed to get farther than that: He swiped second after singling off reliever Peter Moylan in the seventh.

Howie Kendrick delivered all the offense Washington needed with a two-run double off Julio Teheran (0-1) in the first inning.

"Just got unlucky on that one," Teheran said.

As Scherzer spoke to reporters after-

ward, a base sat to his right on the red carpet near his locker. Rookie manager Dave Martinez presented it to the 33-year-old rightly — either as a keepsake or a prank, depending on who you asked.

"Honestly, I knew he was going to do it. We've talked about it for a week now. He's gung-ho. He loves to play the game," Martinez said. "We talked, I said, 'Hey, if a guy plays behind you and you think you've got a chance. ... But please, don't get hurt sliding.' He said 'I've got the best pop-up slide in baseball.' And he showed it."

He's got a pretty good pitching repertoire, too, of course. This was his ninth complete game in 299 major league starts, and he needed only 102 pitches, a far more efficient outing than his previous time on the mound: He threw 110 over five innings in a 7-1 loss at Atlanta on April 4.

MLB roundup

Mets win, tie mark for best franchise start

Associated Press

MIAMI — Noah Syndergaard walked out of the New York Mets postgame clubhouse and into the Miami night wearing a man bun, which shows he can make an adjustment when necessary.

The right-hander's long, wet, unruly mane gave him the most trouble Monday, when he allowed one earned run in six innings to help the Mets win their sixth consecutive game and match the best start in franchise history by beating the Marlins 4-2.

After making his first two starts of the season in chilly weather, Syndergaard took the mound on a humid, 83-degree night and tired in the sixth. He also dealt with blisters on two fingers but said they weren't a hindrance.

"I was actually just more annoyed with my hair flipping in my eyes," he said.

"He was sweating, and his hair was hitting him in the face," manager Mickey Callaway confirmed with a chuckle. "He said that's what he was most frustrated with."

Syndergaard (2-0) had less

than his best stuff but stranded four runners in scoring position. That was good enough to help the Mets extend their longest winning streak since September 2016, and they improved to 8-1, matching their start in 1985 and 2006.

"It's a lot of fun watching us play," Syndergaard said. "It's a contagious feeling. Everybody is on the edge of the dugout cheering each other on. It's a lot of fun to be a part of."

Jeury Familia escaped a jam in the ninth to earn his fifth save, most in the majors. He gave up a single and double before striking out Miguel Rojas and Starlin Castro for the victory.

"We just weren't able to kick anything across," Marlins manager Don Mattingly said.

Familia and three other relievers combined to shut out Miami over the final three innings, lowering the team ERA to 2.25.

The announced crowd of 7,003 — most of them rooting for the visitors — was the Marlins' smallest at home since 2006.

Brewers 5, Cardinals 4 (10): In his St. Louis debut, Greg

Holland walked four batters in the 10th inning and forced home the go-ahead run.

Royals 10, Mariners 0: Jakob Junis carried a no-hit bid into the seventh inning, and host Kansas City scored more runs than it had in its last six games combined.

Astros 2, Twins 0: Justin Verlander struck out nine over seven dominant innings, and Carlos Correa had two hits and scored twice for visiting Houston.

Verlander (2-0) was in control throughout on a chilly night with a first-pitch temperature of 35 degrees. The right-hander gave up three hits and walked one while helping the reigning World Series champions match their best 11-game start by going 9-2.

Blue Jays 7, Orioles 1: Steve Pearce homered in a third successive game, Josh Donaldson tacked on a ninth-inning grand slam and Toronto beat Baltimore before 7,915 fans, the lowest paid crowd in Camden Yards history.

Gametime temperature was 44 degrees, and a slight mist made the conditions even more miserable.

Diamondbacks 2, Giants 1: Zack Godley pitched seven scoreless innings and Paul Goldschmidt had an RBI triple for visiting Arizona.

Angels 8, Rangers 3: Albert Pujols hit his 616th career homer, Martin Maldonado had two RBI singles along with an evasive move to score a run and visiting Los Angeles extended its best start in more than three decades.

Indians 2, Tigers 0: Corey Kluber (1-1) struck out 13, pitching two-hit ball for eight innings and leading host Cleveland in snow flurries.

Phillies 6, Reds 5: Pinch-hitter Nick Williams hit a tiebreaking solo homer in the eighth inning to lift host Philadelphia.

Padres 7, Rockies 6: Pitcher Clayton Richard homered into the second deck at Coors Field and San Diego weathered Carlos Gonzalez's disputed home run.

Rays 5, White Sox 4: Malle Smith matched a career high with four hits, Joey Wendle hit his first homer and visiting Tampa Bay stopped an eight-game losing streak.

NBA roundup

Spurs earn 21st straight bid

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — The Spurs seemed like a perfect free-agent destination as Rudy Gay searched for a guaranteed playoff berth after just one postseason appearance in 11 previous seasons.

That assurance was eroded by injuries this season, but Gay made sure two decades of success didn't come to an end in his first year in San Antonio.

Gay scored 18 points, Manu Ginobili had 17 and the Spurs rallied late to beat the Sacramento Kings 98-85 on Monday night and clinch their 21st straight postseason appearance.

"It feels good, it feels great actually," Gay said. "This is what the regular season is for, to get to where we are now. This is a good feeling, something that I'm anxious for something I've been looking forward to for a long time. It'll be fun."

San Antonio is fifth in the Western Conference despite only having star forward Kawhi Leonard available for nine games this season. The Spurs still have a slim chance of finishing fourth and earning home-court advantage in the first round with one game remaining. For now, they are just happy to make the playoffs.

"For moments we felt like the worst team in the NBA," Ginobili said, "but we still managed

to go close to 50 games and make it to the playoffs in a conference that is tough and talented and young and athletics. So, we managed to compete."

Sacramento, which was eliminated from the postseason on March 11, led by 14 points before being outscored 38-19 in the fourth quarter.

Reserves Gay, Ginobili and Bryn Forbes combined for 25 points in the fourth quarter. Forbes finished with 11 points total.

Thunder 115, Heat 93: Paul George scored 27 points, Russell Westbrook got his 25th triple-double of the season and visiting Oklahoma City clinched a playoff spot.

Westbrook finished with 23 points, 18 rebounds and 13 assists for the Thunder, who were down 18 in the opening minutes before outscoring the Heat 39-12 in the fourth.

Cavaliers 123, Knicks 109: LeBron James had 26 points and 11 assists, Kevin Love scored 28 points, and the Cavaliers got their 50th win and another Central Division title by beating the host Knicks.

The Cavaliers pulled within a half-game of Philadelphia for the No. 3 spot in the Eastern Conference.

Raptors 108, Pistons 98: Jonas Valanciunas scored 25 points, and the Raptors scored the first 13 points of the fourth

quarter before holding on for a victory over host Detroit.

Nets 114, Bulls 105: Allen Crabbe scored 20 of his career-high 41 points in the first quarter and host Brooklyn beat Chicago for its first three-game winning streak this season.

Timberwolves 113, Grizzlies 94: Karl-Anthony Towns slammed his way to 24 points and grabbed 18 rebounds for the host Timberwolves, who toughed out a victory over the Grizzlies to move one step closer to a long-sought spot in the playoffs.

Bucks 102, Magic 86: Shabazz Muhammad scored a season-high 22 points and helped spark a key third-quarter run, Eric Bledsoe had a triple-double and host Milwaukee beat Orlando.

The Bucks leapfrogged Miami for sixth in the Eastern Conference.

Pelicans 113, Clippers 100: Anthony Davis scored 28 points, Nikola Mirotic had a double-double and New Orleans beat host Los Angeles to clinch its first playoff berth in three years.

Nuggets 88, Trail Blazers 82: Nikola Jokic posted his 10th triple-double of the season and host Denver kept its playoff hopes alive by rallying past Portland.

Suit alleges rape by trio of Spartans

Associated Press

EAST LANSING, Mich. — A woman who attends Michigan State University filed a federal lawsuit against the school Monday alleging three former men's basketball players sexually assaulted her at an off-campus apartment in 2015 and she was discouraged from reporting what happened.

The woman and players are not named in the suit, which was filed in U.S. District Court in Grand Rapids. It seeks compensatory and punitive damages.

Michigan State has been rocked for months by a sexual assault scandal involving a former sports doctor that now includes his ex-boss. Three ex-football players also were charged last year with sexual assault.

Monday's lawsuit says the female student was 18 on April 12, 2015, when she met the players at an East Lansing bar. She was later taken to an off-campus apartment where she was told a party was going on, according to the lawsuit.

The woman said she was feeling "discombobulated" and tried to "send a phone text, but she could not control her thumbs to formulate a text."

At some point, the players took turns raping her in a bedroom, according to the lawsuit, which added that she had "no intention of having any physical contact with any of the people present at the party."

"Plaintiff does not remember anything else until she woke up on the couch a few hours later," the suit said.

She caught a taxi back to her dorm room and contacted university Counseling Center staff about a week later.

After the woman told counseling center staff that basketball players were involved, she said the staff made it clear that if she reported it to police "she faced an uphill battle that would create anxiety and unwanted media attention," according to the lawsuit.

Beckham shows for Giants' OTAs

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — The New York Giants have opened their first organized team activities under new coach Pat Shurmur with star receiver Odell Beckham Jr. in the building.

Speaking on a conference call Monday, Shurmur said he hadn't talked to Beckham, whose name has been mentioned in trade speculation in recent months.

The coach didn't know how many of the voluntary activities Beckham planned to attend or the condition of his left ankle. The ankle was broken

in the fifth game of a 3-13 season that led to the firing of coach Ben McAdoo and general manager Jerry Reese.

Shurmur said he previously spoke with Beckham about a video that surfaced online showing the 25-year-old who wants to be the NFL's highest paid player on a bed holding what appeared to be a hand-rolled cigarette. A woman next to him had unidentified white powder on a table.

Shurmur didn't reveal what he said to Beckham. He also is not worried whether the player will be affected by the recent hype surrounding the video and trade rumors.