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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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2 top Navy officials seek to calm fleet

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Two top Navy officials sought to reassure U.S. sailors that the service was moving forward after a week marred by the coronavirus contagion, the sacking of an aircraft carrier captain and the untimely exit of the acting Navy secretary.

"The events of the past week have been difficult for our Navy and our nation," Adm. Mike Gilday, chief of naval operations, said Thursday in a memo to the fleet. "We will learn from them. But make no mistake, we are moving forward. The Navy has our orders and we are executing them."

James E. McPherson, the newly installed acting Navy secretary, told sailors in a memo he would "do everything in my power to support your efforts and safety, and the safety and well-being of your families."

Former acting secretary Thomas Modly resigned Tuesday after audio was leaked in which he called the former commander of the USS Theodore Roosevelt "stupid" dur-

'The events of the past week have been difficult for our Navy and our nation. We will learn from them. But make no mistake, we are moving forward. The Navy has our orders and we are executing them.'

Adm. Mike Gilday
chief of naval operations

ing an in-person address to the ship's crew.

Modly had fired Capt. Brett Crozier over a memo the carrier commander composed warning certain Navy officials that the coronavirus was spreading on the ship and immediate steps were needed to

deal with the hazard.

Modly flew to Guam to address the Roosevelt crew, which had given Crozier a standing ovation as he departed the ship after being relieved.

McPherson said in the memo he was "keenly aware of the sacrifices you make," but with the challenges posed by the coronavirus and changing global threats the nation "needs you more than ever."

He said Navy leadership would maximize its resources in response to the coronavirus crisis to "protect our people, maintain warfighting readiness, and fully support the whole of government/whole of nation response to protect the American people."

"Many of you — our active and reserve shipmates — are closing the margin and saving lives through countless and selfless acts of individual initiative and collective teamwork," McPherson said.

Gen. John Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters at the Pentagon on Thursday that 416 of the Roosevelt's crew of 4,865 had

tested positive for coronavirus. One of them is now hospitalized in intensive care on Guam.

Gilday said in his memo that the Roosevelt crew had provided an example of "staring down an invisible enemy" in the "new environment of coronavirus" that requires "learning, adapting and improving by the hour."

He ticked off a list of things sailors were doing to assist in the mission to treat and control the spread of the virus.

"As I write, we have thousands of Sailors on mission, above, under, and on the seas as well as here at home on the front lines of the coronavirus crisis," he said.

"Seabees are converting commercial buildings into medical facilities across six states. Three thousand Navy doctors, nurses and corpsmen, including hundreds of reservists, are caring for our fellow Americans on USNS MERCY, COMFORT, in New York City's Javits Center, and in civilian hospitals. Hundreds more deployed to treat the sick in Dallas and New Orleans."

Esper would consider reinstating former Roosevelt skipper

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Friday that he is willing to consider reinstating Capt. Brett Crozier as commander of the USS Theodore Roosevelt, pending the outcome of an investigation.

"No further action will be taken against Capt. Crozier until the investigation is completed. And once that's completed, we'll see where that takes us. And so we've taken nothing off the table," Esper said Friday

during an interview with "CBS This Morning."

Crozier was relieved of his command of the Roosevelt on April 2 by former acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly after the captain emailed at least 20 people requesting help for the coronavirus outbreak aboard the aircraft carrier. Crozier's letter was leaked to the media.

As of Friday, 447 sailors from the ship have tested positive for the coronavirus.

About 3,155 sailors of the 4,800 member crew have been

moved ashore on Guam where the ship is in port due to the outbreak, according to the Navy.

Modly resigned Tuesday after his speech to the Roosevelt crew that included calling Crozier stupid surfaced online a day earlier. James McPherson, who had been the acting Army undersecretary, was appointed by Esper to be the acting Navy secretary.

Adm. Robert Burke, vice chief of naval operations, is investigating Crozier's decision to email the letter as well as

the climate across the Pacific Fleet to determine why there was a breakdown in the chain of command.

Esper said he is waiting for the Navy's recommendations from the investigation.

"My inclination is to always support the chain of command and to take their recommendations seriously. So, we'll see how that plays out," he said. "At some point here in the coming days, they will come to me and share with me their findings and recommendations."

Nation grapples with strain from virus

Associated Press

With a startling 6.6 million people seeking unemployment benefits last week, the United States has reached a grim landmark: More than one in 10 workers have lost their jobs in just the past three weeks to the coronavirus outbreak.

The ripples of those losses reached places like San Antonio, where thousands lined up at a flea market Thursday for a distribution of household essentials.

About 10,000 households were aided in a jammed flea market lot as the San Antonio Food Bank served more people than at any time in its 40-year history, Food Bank President Eric Cooper told the San Antonio Express-News.

Across the nation the unemployment numbers collectively constitute the largest and fastest string of job losses in records dating to 1948. By contrast, during the Great Recession it took 44 weeks — roughly 10 months — for unemployment claims to go as high as they now have in less than a month.

The damage to job markets is extending across the world. The equivalent of 195 million full-time jobs could be lost in the second quarter to business shutdowns caused by the viral outbreak, according to the United Nations' labor organization. It estimates that global unemployment will rise by 25 million this year. That doesn't even count workers on reduced hours and pay. Lockdown measures are affecting

nearly 2.7 billion workers — about 81% of the global workforce — the agency said.

Around half a billion people could sink into poverty as a result of the economic fallout from the coronavirus unless richer countries act to help developing nations, Oxfam, a leading aid organization, warned Thursday.

In the United States, the job market is quickly unraveling as businesses have shut down across the country. All told, in the past three weeks, 16.8 million Americans have filed for unemployment aid. The surge of jobless claims has overwhelmed state unemployment offices around the country. And still, more job cuts are expected.

More than 20 million people may lose jobs this month. The unemployment rate could hit 15% when the April employment report is released in early May.

"The carnage in the American labor market continued unabated," said Joseph Brusuelas, chief economist for RSM, a tax advisory firm.

The viral outbreak is believed to have erased nearly one-third of the U.S. economy's output in the current quarter. Forty-eight states have closed non-essential businesses.

A nation of normally free-spending shoppers and travelers is mainly hunkered down at home, bringing entire gears of the economy to a near-halt. Non-grocery retail business plunged 97% in the last week of March compared with a year earlier, ac-

cording to Morgan Stanley. The number of airline passengers screened by the Transportation Security Administration has plunged 95% from a year ago. U.S. hotel revenue has tumbled 80%.

Applications for unemployment benefits are a rough proxy for layoffs because only people who have lost a job through no fault of their own are eligible.

The wave of layoffs may be cresting in some states even while still surging in others. Last week, applications for jobless aid declined in 19 states. In California, they dropped nearly 13% to 925,000 — still a shockingly high figure. In Pennsylvania, they dropped by nearly one-third to 284,000. That's still more than the entire nation experienced just four weeks ago.

By contrast, in Georgia, which issued shutdown orders later than most other states, filings for unemployment claims nearly tripled last week to 388,000. In Arkansas, they more than doubled. In Arizona, they jumped by nearly 50%.

On Thursday, the Federal Reserve intensified its efforts to bolster the economy with a series of lending programs that could inject up to \$2.3 trillion into the economy. Chairman Jerome Powell said that the economy's strength before the viral outbreak means it could rebound quickly in the second half of the year.

"There is every reason to believe that the economic rebound, when it comes, will be robust," Powell said.

Schools struggle to get free meals to needy students

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — When schools started closing across the U.S. during the coronavirus pandemic, they scrambled to keep feeding millions of students from poor families who depend on free and reduced-price meals every day.

Cities big and small quickly ran into problems: food workers, teachers and volunteers manning curbside pickup locations came down with the virus themselves or were too scared to report for duty. Some districts have been forced to suspend their programs altogether.

That's left families already struggling to put food on the table more desperate and

schools searching for ways to keep serving those in need safely. Among the biggest school districts to suspend its federally assisted meal program was in Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city, after a worker was exposed to the coronavirus.

"We said, 'Oh, my God, we have to close down because we don't know what's happening,'" said Betti Wiggins, nutrition services officer for the Houston Independent School District.

It stopped giving out meals for more than a week. When the program reopened this week, it had a new way of packaging and handing out food. Instead of providing small meals every day citywide, the district now

has fewer, centralized locations where people pick up 30-pound bags stuffed with chicken, potatoes, apples, juice and more. They're designed to last a family of four several days.

Among those getting food this week was Maria Robles, who arrived two hours before pickup opened and the line of cars behind her already stretched for more than a mile. Some without cars pick up food in anything they can, including baby strollers.

Robles, 49, is unemployed and depends on the meals to help feed her teenage son, who typically eats twice a day at school. Plus, her house is now crowded with four more children after

her niece saw her work hours slashed and moved in.

When Houston schools temporarily halted meals, Robles' family went to food banks, where pickings were often slim.

"Food is scarce right now," Robles said, fighting back tears. "It's hard for the adults because we have to see our children go through it. ... It has gotten real scary. There are times I will not eat to make sure they will get something."

During a normal school day, about 22 million students nationwide receive free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch, according to the School Nutrition Association.

DOD: Special pay rules can be waived

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will allow troops to receive special pay, such as incentives for dangerous duties, even if they cannot complete requirements because of the pandemic, the Defense Department said Thursday.

The new guidance will allow top commanders to waive the requirements service members must complete to receive those special and incentive payments for troops who are “unable to perform the required duties

through no fault of their own” amid the ongoing pandemic that has locked down most military movement globally. The guidance also allows service members to receive free Defense Department-supplied meals as part of an on-post, coronavirus-related isolation, and it grants some reservists and National Guard members the ability to complete monthly training via telework.

Pentagon officials issued the new guidance Thursday with a memorandum to the force, which stated top leaders within each service had the power

to apply the exemptions. The memo said those policy exemptions are, in part, meant to minimize financial risks to service members and their families.

Special and incentive pay affected by the guidance includes programs such as Hazardous Duty Incentive Pay and Aviation Incentive Pay, according to the memo.

The memo also stated service members who have been confined to government housing “for self-monitoring, to protect the health of our personnel and their families, or to assure essential mission function capa-

bility” will not have to pay for government-provided meals during their isolation. Typically, service members would have to pay for such meals out of their Basic Allowance for Subsistence payment.

The Pentagon memo also cleared the way for National Guard and reserves commanders to approve telework or “alternate places of duty” to conduct monthly drills, so their troops can continue to be paid. That policy exemption is only meant to be used in local areas impacted by the coronavirus, the memo states.

Migrants at border expelled to limit virus

Associated Press

A U.S. Border Patrol agent wouldn't let Jacqueline Reyes explain why she and her 15-year-old daughter fled Honduras and needed asylum, pointing to the coronavirus. It was just days after the Trump administration essentially shut down the nation's asylum system.

“The agent told us about the virus and that we couldn't go further, but she didn't let us speak or anything,” said Reyes,

35, who was shuttled on March 24 to Reynosa, Mexico, a violent border city.

President Donald Trump's administration is relying on a seldom-used public health law to set aside decades-old national and international immigration laws. People seeking refuge in the U.S. are whisked to the nearest border crossing and returned to Mexico without a chance to apply for asylum. It may be the most aggressive clampdown on im-

migration by a president who's made reducing asylum claims a top priority.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said Thursday that nearly 10,000 Mexicans and Central Americans have been “expelled” to Mexico since the rules took effect March 21. Mark Morgan, the agency's acting commissioner, said the changes were “not about immigration.”

“What's happening right now is a public health crisis driven

by a global pandemic, which has resulted in a national emergency declared by this president to protect the health and safety of every American in this country,” he told reporters.

The administration tapped a law allowing the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to ban foreigners if their entry would create “a serious danger” to the spread of communicable disease.

Christians mark Good Friday locked down

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Christians are commemorating Jesus' crucifixion without the solemn church services or emotional processions of past years, marking Good Friday in a world locked down by the coronavirus pandemic.

The chanting of a small group of clerics inside Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher echoed faintly through the heavy wooden doors, as a few people stopped and knelt outside to pray. The centuries-old church, built on the site where

Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and rose from the dead, is usually packed with pilgrims and tourists.

Later, four monks in brown robes and blue surgical masks prayed at the Stations of the Cross along the Via Dolorosa, the ancient route through the Old City where Jesus is believed to have carried the cross before his execution at the hands of the Romans. It runs past dozens of souvenir shops, cafes and hostels, nearly all of which are closed.

In ordinary times, tens of thousands of pilgrims from

around the world retrace Jesus' steps in the Holy Week leading up to Easter. But this year, flights are grounded and religious sites in the Holy Land are closed as authorities try to prevent the spread of the virus.

In Rome, the torch-lit Way of the Cross procession at the Colosseum is a highlight of Holy Week, drawing large crowds. It's been canceled this year, along with all other public gatherings in Italy, which is battling one of the worst outbreaks.

Instead of presiding over the Way of the Cross procession, Pope Francis led a Good Friday

ceremony in St. Peter's Square without the public.

In the Philippines, Asia's bastion of Catholicism, Masses and other solemn gatherings have been put on hold, including folk rituals that feature real-life crucifixions and usually draw thousands. The annual procession of the “Black Nazarene,” a centuries-old statue of Jesus, through downtown Manila, has also been canceled.

Churchgoers have been told remember Jesus' suffering through prayers, fasting and by watching Masses on TV or online.

Inmates stage protest at prison in Wash.

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Inmates at a Washington state prison staged a large protest following new coronavirus diagnoses at the facility and health officials say they continue to see high numbers of cases in the state's long-term care facilities.

More than 9,600 people have tested positive for COVID-19 and at least 446 have died, according to the Department of Health.

State Health Officer Dr. Kathy Lofy said there are signs that the state has begun to "flatten the curve" but said people should continue to stay home and keep their distance from others.

Inmates at the Monroe Correctional Complex held a demonstration on Wednesday night after six inmates tested positive at the prison, according to the Washington State Department of Corrections.

Corrections officers used verbal orders, pepper spray and rubber pellets to get the demonstrators under control, but the inmates ignored those efforts, officials said. Both housing units were evacuated and the situation was under control soon afterward. No one was injured.

Alaska

JUNEAU — State officials extended a closure of schools and restrictions on travel and public activities meant to help slow the spread of the coronavirus, as Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy said Thursday the state plans to lay out some "re-entry ideas to get society and businesses up and running again."

Dunleavy said the state has been planning for that eventuality and next week officials would discuss ideas "to give Alaskans hope, and it's going to be genuine hope, that we can get things going again." The effort will be led by the state's medical team, he said.

Arizona

PHOENIX — The coronavirus outbreak has prompted

the Arizona Supreme Court to schedule remote legal arguments in six cases with attorneys appearing through video conferencing.

The arrangement is a departure from the court's standard practice of hearing arguments in its Phoenix courtroom or alternative locations such as law schools.

The justices will be in the courtroom except for a former justice and a Court of Appeals judge filling in for justices who recused themselves from one or more cases.

California

SACRAMENTO — California lawmakers want a fuller accounting of Gov. Gavin Newsom's plan to buy 500 million protective masks, with a top budget official on Thursday seeking details on how the state will distribute the masks and ensure they are good quality.

In a letter to Newsom's finance director, state Sen. Holly Mitchell asked for details on the contract Newsom is executing to buy 200 million masks per month through an American subsidiary of a Chinese company. Newsom announced the deal Tuesday and asked lawmakers for authority to quickly spend some of the money needed to purchase the masks.

Connecticut

HARTFORD — Public schools across Connecticut will be required to stay closed until at least May 20 to fight the spread of the coronavirus, Gov. Ned Lamont said Thursday.

Schools had been under orders to stay shuttered until April 20, and Lamont has suggested previously that students might not return until the fall.

"I don't want us to get complacent and I wouldn't be surprised if that May 20th date extends as well," the Democrat said.

Indiana

INDIANAPOLIS — Gov. Eric Holcomb on Thursday urged Indiana churches, syna-

gogues and other faith venues to remain closed and adhere to social distancing guidelines during services and observances for Passover and Easter to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

"Get the word and get home," Holcomb told reporters. "This is about worship and we can follow the rules."

Louisiana

BATON ROUGE — Gov. John Bel Edwards said Thursday he's likely to keep Louisiana's K-12 public schools shuttered for the rest of the school year because of the coronavirus, in response to calls from state education leaders not to reopen them because of public health risks.

Edwards' school closure order remains in place through the end of April. Louisiana's top education board, school superintendents and school boards sent requests to the Democratic governor, asking him to extend those closures through the end of the school year, which runs until the final weeks of May.

Maine

AUGUSTA — A traveling salesperson helped to spread the coronavirus in Maine and several other states early in the outbreak last month.

The salesperson was a so-called "super spreader," a single person responsible for a significant number of exposures to the virus, said Dr. Nirav Shah said, director of the Maine Center for Disease Control.

"This traveling salesperson visited a particular establishment in Maine and had a series of meetings and infected a certain number of individuals, all of whom we traced," Shah said.

The person was linked to infections outside of Maine, as well, Shah said.

Minnesota

MINNEAPOLIS — Partisan tempers flared over Minnesota's response to the COVID-19 outbreak Thursday as Republi-

cans expressed frustration with Democratic Gov. Tim Walz for extending his stay-at-home order through May 4 and questioned the modeling behind his decision.

GOP Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka expressed dismay a day after Walz issued an extension that allowed certain categories of employees to return to work but maintained closures of bars, restaurants and other businesses deemed non-essential. About 80% of Minnesota employees are exempt.

"I do not approve of the Governor's unilateral decision to continue the order to shelter at home until May 4th. We have to get on with our lives," tweeted Gazelka, the state's top elected Republican.

North Carolina

RALEIGH — North Carolina groceries and other retailers must meet capacity restrictions and cleanliness standards if they want to keep operating next week under expanding social distance directives to blunt COVID-19, Gov. Roy Cooper announced Thursday.

Under a new executive order Cooper signed, retailers, pharmacies and other businesses will have to limit entry so that occupancy can't be more than 20% of their fire-code capacity, or above 5 customers per 1,000 square feet.

The retail rules, which take effect Monday afternoon and last for 30 days, also require frequent and routine cleaning of "high-touch" areas.

Vermont

All 95 senior nursing students at the University of Vermont are going to be graduating early this year so they can support health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, school officials said Thursday.

Vermont's State Board of Nursing will offer the students temporary permits so they can begin staffing hospitals and other health facilities immediately after they graduate May 1, the university said.

Storms, high winds cause damage in the Midwest

Associated Press

MOORESVILLE, Ind. — Severe storms with high winds, hail and tornadoes swept across the Midwest and caused damage to dozens of homes and businesses in parts of Indiana and Arkansas, authorities said.

A few injuries were reported following Wednesday night's storms and the threat of more severe weather was forecast for the coming days throughout much of the United States.

In the central Indiana community of Mooresville, about 15 miles southwest of Indianapolis, what the National Weather Service described as an EF-1 tornado with winds estimated at 100 miles per hour damaged downtown buildings. Bricks were scattered along the town's main downtown thoroughfare and traffic was blocked by debris. Police Officer Brock A. Chipman told WISH-TV that the storm knocked the second story off a two-story vacant building, and one woman was slightly injured after power lines fell on her car.

Indiana's stay-at-home order amid the coronavirus pandemic likely kept people out of danger as the storms moved through, tearing roofs off some buildings and damaging downtown storefronts, said Division Chief John Robinson of the Mooresville Fire Department.

More than 100,000 utility customers in Indiana lost power following the storms across central and southern Indiana.

Just outside the Arkansas town of Harrisburg, about 105 miles northeast of Little Rock, a tornado spinning winds of about 125 miles per hour touched down Wednesday night near Claypool Reservoir, the National Weather Service confirmed Thursday. The EF2 storm damaged more than 30 homes and injured two people, Jonesboro TV station KAIT reported.

Marines passed time jumping rope during their quarantine

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

A group of Marines has emerged from a two-week quarantine in Darwin, Australia, with new jump-rope skills.

Fifty-four Marines, the advance party of what was to be a 2,500-strong summer rotational force Down Under, were placed in quarantine last month to guard against transmission of the coronavirus.

The Marine Corps postponed the rotation on March 30 following an order from Defense Secretary Mark Esper a week earlier barring nearly all official movement overseas for Defense Department personnel.

One of the Marines in Darwin, 1st Lt. Kevin Heine, 25, of Frederick, Md., said he and seven other members of Kilo Battery, 3rd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, learned they were headed for quarantine during the trip south from Ma-

rine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif.

"Before we left Twentynine Palms we got word there was a good chance [a quarantine] was going to happen," he said.

The Marines, who took a commercial flight to Australia out of Los Angeles, were given masks and gloves when they landed at Darwin, then taken to nearby Robertson Barracks in official vehicles, Heine said.

The Marines did their quarantine in barracks rooms, each with its own bathroom, desk, couch and kitchenette, he added.

Heine and the other Marines in his unit worked out with jump ropes during their confinement.

"This probably forced me into the longest jump-rope sessions I've ever done," he said, adding that one of his comrades can do some nifty tricks. "All

eight of us could probably put on a show after two weeks."

The Marines spent a lot of their time on the internet, Heine said. They also watched movies and read books.

Heine is Kilo Battery's executive officer and spent much of his time in quarantine planning and coordinating for the arrival of the rest of the force once the pandemic subsides.

"We were just setting conditions for what we would have to do when we got out of quarantine," he said.

At the end of quarantine, each Marine was checked by a corpsman who took their temperature and looked for signs of the virus.

First Lt. Bridget Glynn, a public affairs officer with the Marines in Darwin, said the group is following guidelines that include social distancing and limiting groups to a maximum of two Marines.

Marines' families sue over fatal helo crash

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

The families of four Marines killed in a helicopter crash in 2018 have filed a lawsuit against two companies, claiming they provided faulty parts for the aircraft that led to the fatal accident in southern California.

Defendants Kampi Components and Diamond Rubber knew or should have known they provided a noncompliant part that caused the Marine CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter to crash on April 3, 2018, in El Centro, near the U.S. border with Mexico, according to court documents filed March 31 in the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia County, Pa.

Capt. Samuel Schultz, Capt. Samuel Phillips, Gunnery Sgt. Derik R. Holley and Lance Cpl. Taylor J. Conrad died in the crash. They were assigned to Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 465, Marine Aircraft Group 16, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, based at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego, Calif.

The families were informed following a Marine Corps investigation that "the root cause of the crash was the failure of a component part

known as a bypass valve button," according to the court documents.

The part's failure caused what is known as a "hydraulic lock" condition, resulting in a loss of flight control of the helicopter. In this condition, pilots could not do anything to regain control of the aircraft and are "blameless in this crash," according to the lawsuit.

Investigators concluded a bypass valve button manufactured by Alabama-based Diamond Rubber Products Co. and supplied by Pennsylvania-headquartered Kampi Components Co., Inc., used rubber that decomposes when exposed to hydraulic fluid, said David S. Casey Jr., managing partner at San Diego-based law firm CaseyGerry. He represents the families of Holley and Conrad.

"Disintegrating rubber in the valve button caused a dangerous blockage in the helicopter's hydraulic system — making the flight control system uncontrollable and inoperable," he said.

Prior to the crash, the companies knew the critical importance of compliance, knew they continued to use faulty parts and were aware that a fix was available, according to court documents.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Walmart patron sprays cashier with Lysol

MA LEICESTER — Police in Massachusetts are searching for a woman who they said sprayed a Walmart employee in the eyes with Lysol disinfectant.

Leicester police said in a Facebook post that the unidentified woman sprayed the worker after being informed there was a limit on the number of cans she could buy.

Police said the woman completed her purchase after spraying the employee and then left in an Uber. They said EMS also responded to the scene to treat the worker.

Explosion at fuel plant, no serious injuries

NC LONG VIEW — An explosion at a hydrogen fuel plant in North Carolina has damaged nearby homes but left workers without any serious injuries.

News outlets reported that the explosion occurred at the OneH2 Inc. hydrogen fuel facility in Long View. The plant provides hydrogen for fuel cells that power machines such as forklifts.

Terri Byers, fire education coordinator for the Hickory Fire Department, told the Hickory Daily Record that there were no serious injuries.

The plant's building was damaged. So were some nearby houses that suffered broken windows and had doors blown out of their frames.

Postal worker sentenced for stealing gift cards

KS TOPEKA — A woman who ran a small Kansas post office has been sentenced to probation after she

allegedly stole gift cards from the mail.

Stacy A. Vasko was sentenced to three years of probation, 40 hours of community service and ordered to \$200 in restitution. She pleaded guilty in federal court to misdemeanor obstructing mail.

At the time of the thefts, Vasko was living in Salina and was the only postal employee at the Brookville post office, which was open just four hours a day.

The investigation began in February 2019, when a greeting card containing a \$200 gift card arrived at its destination taped shut after being opened and without the gift card.

Shop owner threatens mask wearers online

DE MILFORD — A Delaware distillery owner threatened to point a shotgun at anyone who tries to enter his store wearing a mask, a news outlet reported.

Eric Fibelkorn made the threat in a Facebook message that was later deleted, saying that people who come into Feebs Distilling Co. in Milford with a mask on would "be met with a 12-gauge to the face," The Delaware News Journal reported. Fibelkorn posted the message shortly after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released guidance advising people to wear face coverings in public to slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

Fibelkorn defended his message in an interview with the newspaper, saying that while he understands customers wanting to follow the guidelines, he cannot risk a robbery. Now he's installing lockers so that patrons can call ahead and pick up their bottles without coming into the store.

Synagogue vandalized with swastikas, slurs

AL HUNTSVILLE — An Alabama synagogue has been vandalized with swastikas and other anti-Semitic graffiti at the start of Passover.

News outlets reported that Huntsville police were investigating after the Etz Chayim temple was desecrated.

Photos showed at least two Nazi symbols on the exterior of the building along with anti-Jewish slurs.

A statement from another Jewish congregation in the city, B'nai Sholom, said an attack on one synagogue is an attack on all. The statement said B'nai Sholom has asked for additional police protection in response.

Wire theft puts street lights out of commission

NM ALBUQUERQUE — Officials in New Mexico's largest city are warning that copper wiring thefts have put some street lights out of commission, resulting in dangerous conditions for pedestrians and drivers.

In an effort to discourage would-be thieves, the city of Albuquerque is working with a lighting contractor to reinforce poles and switch out copper wiring for less valuable aluminum.

Mayor Tim Keller said the copper thefts can create a safety problem as well as burden taxpayers.

In February alone, the city saw \$16,000 worth of copper stolen, which accounted for more than one-quarter of all maintenance of street lights. Officials said dealing with the theft makes it harder to get to the routine maintenance required to keep street lights running, replace broken bulbs and install new lights.

Guns stolen from police chief's SUV

GA CHAMBLEE — Multiple guns were recently reported stolen from a Georgia police chief's city-owned SUV, despite a department policy stating firearms should not be left unattended inside take-home cars, police records obtained by a newspaper showed.

The firearms were taken from Chamblee police Chief Kerry Thomas' city-issued Chevrolet Tahoe while it was at an apartment complex, The Atlanta Journal Constitution reported, citing Chamblee police reports.

Among the items missing from the department vehicle were a rifle with scope, a long rifle, a 12-gauge shotgun, ammunition, magazines, bullet-proof vests and police badges from another department, the report listed.

Jail inmate escaped undetected for 14 hours

AZ TUCSON — A Pima County jail inmate whose escape wasn't detected for about 14 hours has been recaptured in Tucson, the Sheriff's Department said.

Jose Fernandez, 29, escaped late Tuesday afternoon by breaking through steel mesh covering an exercise yard and his escape wasn't reported until Wednesday morning, the department said in a statement.

Fernandez was recaptured Wednesday night, the department said.

The department said it appeared that inmates in the exercise yard weren't adequately monitored and that an evening headcount wasn't conducted appropriately.

From wire reports

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Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Source: Rams trade WR Cooks to Texans

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles Rams are trading receiver Brandin Cooks to the Houston Texans, according to a person familiar with the deal.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity Thursday because the teams hadn't announced the trade. The NFL Network reported the Rams will get a second-round pick while sending a future fourth-rounder to Houston.

Cooks will help the Texans replace DeAndre Hopkins, who was shockingly traded to the Arizona Cardinals last month for running back David Johnson and two draft picks.

While Cooks hasn't matched Hopkins' superstar play, Cooks is a fast, steady deep threat who has five 50-reception seasons over his six-year career. Cooks posted 1,000-yard seasons for each of his first three NFL teams: New Orleans, New England and Los Angeles.

Cooks, a California native who spent his first three seasons with the Saints, played the past two years for the Rams after they

acquired him from the Patriots. Los Angeles gave him an \$81 million contract extension through 2023 before he played a game for the team.

Cooks played in back-to-back Super Bowls, suiting up for New England in early 2018 and for the Rams in early 2019. He caught 80 passes for 1,204 yards and five touchdowns in 2018 with the Rams' NFC championship team.

But Cooks managed a career-low 42 catches for just 583 yards last season while overcoming the latest in a series of concussions. He had only 15 catches after Week 7, and he sat out for two games after incurring a concussion during the Rams' game against Cincinnati in London.

Cooks has incurred at least five concussions during his NFL career. He didn't play for four weeks after his most recent concussion, seeking additional medical help during that stretch.

Although Houston still has receivers Kenny Stills, Will Fuller and Randall Cobb, the Texans clearly wanted another veteran target for Deshaun Watson after they

moved on from Hopkins and his steadily spectacular production. Hopkins, who has five career 1,000-yard seasons, caught roughly one-third of Watson's completions over the past three years.

Cooks joins running back Todd Gurley in the offseason exodus of veteran talent from the Rams. Cooks and Gurley, the former AP Offensive Player of the Year, were vital components of coach Sean McVay's offense the past two seasons.

Yet the Rams still have plenty of offensive skill-position talent heading into the draft later this month.

Robert Woods and Cooper Kupp were a potent, productive wideout combination last season while Cooks' availability was limited. Receiver Josh Reynolds seemed capable of a larger role when he stepped up in Cooks' absence, making 15 catches for 224 yards in a five-game stretch.

Tight end Tyler Higbee also had a breakout finish to last season, making a whopping 48 catches for 542 yards in the Rams' final six games.

NBA briefs

Karnisovas reportedly taking over in Chicago

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Chicago Bulls came into the season thinking they were poised to contend for a playoff spot. The plan did not unfold the way they envisioned, and now, they have a new leader in the front office.

The Bulls hired Denver Nuggets general manager Arturas Karnisovas to run their basketball operation, a person familiar with the situation said Thursday night.

The person, who confirmed reports by several outlets, spoke on the condition of anonymity because the move has not been announced.

Longtime executive John Paxson was expected to move into an advisory role. The futures of general manager Gar Forman and coach Jim Boylen were unclear.

The move allows the Bulls to have their new top executive in place if the season resumes

from the COVID-19 pandemic suspension.

The 48-year-old Karnisovas starred at Seton Hall and had a successful international career that included two Olympic bronze medals playing for Lithuania. He worked in basketball operations for the NBA from 2003 to 2008 and spent five years as an international scout for the Houston Rockets before joining Denver's front office in 2013. He became the Nuggets' general manager four years later, with Tim Connelly promoted from GM to president of basketball operations.

Karnisovas had big roles in Denver taking two-time All-Star center Nikola Jokic in the second round of the 2014 draft with the 41st overall pick, as well as recent lottery selections Jamal Murray and Michael Porter Jr. Karnisovas and Connelly also have constructed a highly respected international scouting operations.

Players will receive full checks April 15

NBA players will receive their full checks when the next payday for most of them arrives on April 15 despite no games having been played for more than a month at that point.

The league gave teams the directive on Thursday in a memo that was obtained by The Associated Press.

The league and the National Basketball Players Association have been in talks for weeks about the status of salaries during the game's shutdown. The last NBA games were played March 11, the day that Utah center Rudy Gobert became the first player in the league to test positive for the coronavirus.

The pandemic will lead to the delay of at least 259 regular-season games through April 15, what would have been the end of the regular season. NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said earlier this week that

no decisions about the rest of the season, including whether play can resume, would occur before May.

None of the games have been canceled yet. The playoffs were to begin on April 18, and the losses in revenue should the season either be shortened or not finished could easily reach hundreds of millions of dollars.

Being paid in full now also doesn't mean that things will stay that way for players. What the collective bargaining agreement between the league and its players describes as a "Force Majeure Event" — the legal term for unforeseeable circumstances, such as an epidemic or pandemic — could still come into play. Per the Collective Bargaining Agreement, players could lose 1.08% of their annual salary for each game that is canceled.

If the rest of the season is called off, that means players would lose, on average, about 21% of their salary.

Jimmie Johnson's final season still in limbo

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Jimmie Johnson, seven-time NASCAR champion and all-around Everyman, has added home-schooling elementary teacher to his résumé.

The sports stoppage from the coronavirus pandemic has thrown a red flag on Johnson's farewell tour. He had planned a final season of racing a full NASCAR schedule, but so far that has lasted just four races.

Amid all the uncertainty, Johnson doesn't know when he'll be back in his beloved No. 48 Chevrolet.

NASCAR is publicly targeting a May 9 return at Martinsville, privately holding its breath for a May 24 re-opening at the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte but vowing to complete the entire 36-race points schedule.

In the meantime, Johnson teaches his two daughters' daily school lessons, continues his fanatical fitness routine, spends hours upon hours on his racing simulator and waits to see how his pending retirement plan goes.

"I don't know what's going to happen in the coming months and if we'll be able to run the full season or not," Johnson said Thursday. "I feel like I set out to make 2020 my last full-time year, but I've always left the door open for other racing in NASCAR and abroad for the future.

"I feel like I am still pretty much on that path. I am hopeful that we get our full year in and we can get back going in a month or so ... and that I can run the season to its entirety. I really don't have an answer — it's up in the air just as so much is in the world."

This 19th season was supposed to be his last as a full-time driver at Hendrick Motorsports because Johnson, now 44 and father of two active young girls, doesn't want to live in a motorhome at tracks across the country 38 weekends a year. Johnson wanted to shift his racing to focus on a bucket list — the kind of schedule former Formula One champion Fernando Alonso, a new friend, has created.

This unconventional route

works for drivers who still have the skills and ability to compete but are exhausted from their full-time jobs. NASCAR has the longest season in sports and participants average three nights a week — the weekend — away from home.

Johnson figured he'd transition to the kind of competitions he could never do as a NASCAR racer: Besides triathlons, Iron Man competitions and cycling pursuits, Johnson was locked in on trying IndyCar and had a test scheduled for early April that was canceled because of the pandemic.

Now he's adapting to what he described as the most free time he's ever had as an adult and is eager to get back to work. Johnson was off to a decent start before the season was suspended; through four races he had a pair of top-10 finishes and was fifth in points.

Impressive for Johnson, who has slogged through a winless streak dating to June 4, 2017. He'd unburdened himself this year of the internal pressure to win a record eighth championship that would separate him

from Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt. And he is far more comfortable in the new Camaro that General Motors is racing this year.

Final or not, this year could ultimately be wasted. But Johnson sympathizes most with the fans who paid to attend what they thought would be his final races at respective tracks.

"I know where I am in terms of fulfillment with the career I've had. Sure, I want to be on track and sure, I want to go to these places a final time," he said. "But I feel more for the fans who aren't having that opportunity now than I long for myself to experience it and to be there."

He also recognizes that the sports shutdown is minor when put in perspective to the enormous toll the pandemic has had worldwide.

"This is way bigger than me," he said, "way bigger than what was going to be my final time at these tracks. There are so many other issues at hand to be concerned with. It's been all about others rather than how this has affected me personally."

White forced to cancel UFC 249 by ESPN, Disney

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — UFC 249 was canceled Thursday after ESPN and parent company Disney stopped UFC President Dana White's plan to keep fighting amid the coronavirus pandemic.

After defiantly vowing for weeks to maintain a regular schedule of fights while the rest of the sports world halted, White confirmed the decision to cease competition in a text to The Associated Press.

"I was ready to go on Saturday, but Disney and ESPN asked me to step down," White wrote. "I love and respect my partnership with them so I postponed the event."

UFC 249 was scheduled for April 18 on ESPN Plus pay-per-view, and White planned to follow it with regular fight

cards from Tachi Palace Hotel & Casino on tribal land in California's Central Valley.

In an interview on ESPN, White said he "got a call from the highest level you can go at Disney and the highest level of ESPN" asking him to cancel the shows. The UFC moved to ESPN in 2019 with a reported \$1.5 billion deal.

The network issued a statement to the AP: "ESPN has been in constant contact with the UFC regarding UFC 249. Nobody wants to see sports return more than we do, but we didn't feel this was the right time for a variety of reasons. ESPN expressed its concerns to the UFC and they understood."

While the UFC won't have fights in the upcoming weeks, White said he is still pursuing his plan to build an octagon

and everything else necessary to telecast small fight shows on an unidentified private island. White had planned to use the so-called "Fight Island" in upcoming months for non-American fighters who couldn't get into the U.S.

"Fight Island infrastructure is being built and will be up and running ASAP," White told the AP.

White's frustration with the decision was obvious after he had repeatedly vowed to fight on amid mixed public opinion. He has described the past month of preparation for UFC 249 as the most challenging part of his fight promotion career, which began as the UFC's president in 2001.

The UFC boss still remained upbeat, vowing to be "the first sport back" after the pandemic

eases.

White announced the cancellation shortly after U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein issued a statement urging the mixed martial arts promotion to reconsider its plan. A few hours earlier, former strawweight champion Rose Namajunas dropped out of her co-main event bout at UFC 249 after two deaths in her family related to the pandemic.

The UFC planned to stage the fights in an empty arena owned by the Santa Rosa Indian Community of the Tachi Yokut Tribe. White never publicly disclosed the location of the upcoming fight cards until he announced their cancellation, likely to avoid the scrutiny that arrived shortly after the location was reported in MMA media over the weekend.