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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Roosevelt port call approved by command

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — President Donald Trump has criticized the ousted skipper of the USS Theodore Roosevelt for risking a stop last month in Vietnam, exposing his crew to the coronavirus that has stricken more than 600 sailors.

In the days after the aircraft carrier completed its historic five-day port call to Danang that ran March 5-8, crew members began exhibiting symptoms of the disease, which originated in China late last year.

“I don’t know who gave the orders to stop in Vietnam, but they stopped in Vietnam, and all of a sudden they get on and now you have over 500 sailors and people on the ship that are infected,” Trump said to a Reuters reporter at the White House briefing Monday. “I

don’t know whose idea that was, but that wasn’t such a good idea in the middle of a pandemic.”

But the decision to move forward with the port call was made by high-ranking Pacific military officials only after a thorough analysis of risks posed at that point in the spread of the virus, according to a written statement provided to Stars and Stripes by Pacific Fleet spokesman Cmdr. Myers Vasquez.

Three days before the Roosevelt arrived in Vietnam on March 5, Trump saw little risk posed by the virus. When a reporter asked Trump during a March 2 news conference whether it was “safe or appropriate” for him to continue holding arena-sized rallies, he responded, “I think it’s safe, yeah. I think it’s very safe.”

At that time, the U.S. had just over 100 confirmed cases of the virus, with six deaths.

The visit, which also included the guided-missile cruiser USS Bunker Hill, was an important step in expanding the strategic partnership between the two countries by increasing cooperation in areas such as maritime security, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, Vasquez said.

Indo-Pacific Command sent an “execution order” to Pacific Fleet in January to formally set the carrier visit in motion, he said.

Pacific Fleet conducted a risk analysis looking at data from interagency health organizations, virus mitigation efforts for the crews, confidence in the accuracy of Vietnam’s public health reporting and actions already taken by Vietnam to isolate and contain the virus, Vasquez said.

With that analysis in hand, Pacific Fleet commander Adm.

John Aquilino recommended that the port visit be made, and Adm. Phil Davidson, head of Indo-Pacific Command, agreed, Vasquez said.

At the time of the port call, neither the State Department nor the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had issued travel restrictions for American citizens to Vietnam.

A CDC representative in Vietnam assured Pacific Fleet that the port visit was “low risk,” Vasquez said.

“Throughout the port visit, all scheduled events in Da Nang were reviewed for potential COVID risk and additional support was provided by the host country to screen local participants at these events as well,” he said. “A humanitarian assistance/disaster response professional exchange occurred between U.S. Navy medical staff and local health professionals.”

Pentagon to extend halt on travel past May 11

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Department restrictions barring troops, their families and civilian workers from nearly all official travel will not be lifted May 11 when the initial orders were set to expire, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Tuesday.

The worldwide travel halt has stopped thousands of military moves and has forced some deployed units to remain overseas longer than expected. Esper did not announce immediately how long he expected the stop-movement order to last. But a new target date to end the restrictions meant to help thwart the virus spread could be announced this week, he said.

“At this point in time, since the expiration of the first stop-movement order expires on May 11, we want to give our folks sufficient time to make adjustments and to socialize with them that we are going to be extending beyond that May 11,” Esper told reporters during a video news briefing from the Pentagon. “While I understand the impact this has on our troops and our families, this is a necessary measure to keep our people safe and our military ready to act.”

Esper’s decision to lengthen the orders comes as confirmed coronavirus cases among American troops worldwide surpassed 3,000 on Tuesday, according to Pentagon data. Cases of the fast-spreading virus that has paralyzed move-

ment in the U.S. and dozens of other countries continued to climb within the U.S. military as it works to expand testing.

In addition to the 3,022 U.S. service members who had tested positive for the coronavirus, including two who died from complications caused by the disease, another 1,474 DOD civilian workers, contractors and military dependents had been diagnosed with the virus, the Pentagon said. That tally included 14 deaths among those nonuniformed, DOD-affiliated individuals.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Tuesday that the Pentagon is looking to drastically expand its ability to test troops. The Defense Department now has the capability to

conduct about 8,700 tests each day, but Milley wants to see that expand to 65,000 per day within 45 days.

“Our desire, our determination is to expand testing, especially for groups that are going to probably be in tighter quarters — [submarine] crews, bomber crews, basic trainees, things like that,” Milley said alongside Esper. “Hopefully we’ll get after that here in the next 45 days — rapidly increasing the amount of testing.”

Esper did not provide specific examples of the modifications that he would include. The defense secretary said, however, that travel restrictions and other measures implemented to mitigate the virus’ impacts would be reviewed every 15 days.

7 military clinics in Europe have rapid testing

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — At least seven U.S. military medical clinics in Europe now have an in-house diagnostic tool that processes coronavirus tests in as little as 45 minutes, officials said this week.

Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, the SHAPE Army Health Clinic in Belgium and the Vicenza Army Health Clinic in Italy are the first Army hospitals in Europe to begin using the tool, which was authorized last month by the Food and Drug Administration for use during the global coronavirus emergency.

The Navy hospitals in Rota, Spain, and Naples, Italy, and the Air Force clinics at Lakenheath in England and Aviano in Italy, are also receiving or already using the new diagnostic tool developed by Utah-based BioFire Defense.

LRMC has processed 50 tests using the new system; SHAPE has processed nine and Vicenza has processed four, said Col. Pete Bowden, LRMC deputy commander for patient services.

“The new system gives our other Army Health Clinics more options,” Bowden said. “[It] can process a testing sample in about an hour, so it can be used to test patients with worsening symptoms to help the clinician rule out co-infection with influenza, which would affect how the patient is treated.”

Bowden said LRMC will continue to process tests conventionally, in batches, when large numbers of people must be tested.

Since testing began, military clinics in Europe have sent tests to host-nation labs, to LRMC or to the U.S. for processing.

StarsandStripesreporterBrianFerguson contributed to this story.

US Forces Japan expands its public health emergency

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — The commander of U.S. Forces Japan on Wednesday declared a public health emergency for all U.S. military installations in Japan, expanding an earlier order that covered only the area in and around Tokyo.

Lt. Gen. Kevin Schneider on April 6 declared a public health emergency for U.S. bases in the Kanto Plain, near the Japanese capital. Tokyo is the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in Japan. City officials reported 161 new cases on Tuesday.

Schneider’s action Wednesday extends that status to all in-

stallations across the country, from Misawa Air Base in the northeast to the many bases on the southern island prefecture of Okinawa.

The public health emergency will remain in effect through May 15 unless Schneider renews or terminates it sooner, the statement said.

“The declaration ensures commanders possess the necessary authorities to enforce compliance with health protection measures,” it said. “It is applicable to anyone with access to U.S. installations or facilities and includes military, civilians, contractors and host-nation employees.”

Commanders of U.S. bases on the Kanto Plain have de-

clared their own public health emergencies, which allow them to restrict the movements and activities not only of troops, but also civilian employees, family members, retirees, contractors and local nationals with access to the facilities.

Base commanders in other parts of the country had held off on imposing stricter measures. That hasn’t stopped them, however, from punishing non-service members who ignore their guidelines.

Two civilians were barred from Sasebo Naval Base after security personnel found them in an off-base bar Friday in violation of rules set by the Navy and restrictions imposed to combat the coronavirus.

‘Elephant walk’ on Guam serves as timely airpower demonstration

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

With the USS Theodore Roosevelt sidelined nearby due to the coronavirus, the U.S. military on Guam exhibited a reminder of its deep bench this week in a region where global powers compete.

Fourteen aircraft paraded in a formation known as an “elephant walk” along the runway at Andersen Air Force Base on Monday. Among them were five B-52 Stratofortress strategic bombers, six KC-135 Stratotanker aerial refuelers, an MH-60S Knighthawk helicopter and two unmanned aerial vehicles: an Air Force RQ-4 Global Hawk and a Navy MQ-4C Triton.

The elephant walk was meant to demonstrate the ability to “generate combat airpower at a moment’s notice to ensure re-

gional stability throughout the Indo-Pacific,” according to the 36th Wing website.

The display was likely directed at China and North Korea, according to former Air Force officer Ralph Cossa, now an adviser for the Pacific Forum think tank in Hawaii.

“They want to signal that, despite the problems with the carrier, we still have forces with the ability to respond,” Cossa said Wednesday. “We want to show we are still ready to respond.”

Over the weekend, China’s Liaoning aircraft carrier passed between the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Miyako and east of Taiwan. The voyage showed that the coronavirus has not impacted Beijing’s carrier like it has those of the U.S. Navy, an unnamed Chinese military expert said Monday in the country’s state-run Global

Times newspaper.

Cossa said, however, that the Liaoning isn’t a real threat to U.S. forces in the region.

“Chinese aircraft carriers don’t make me lose a lot of sleep,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to be on one in a fight with the U.S. Navy.”

A day after the Guam elephant walk, North Korean fighter jets fired missiles into the sea off the country’s eastern coast while units launched a salvo of cruise missiles from the ground, according to South Korea’s military.

“Nothing gets the North Koreans’ attention like B-52s,” Cossa said.

The Roosevelt remains in Guam, where five sailors infected with the coronavirus have been hospitalized. There are more than 600 positive cases among the crew, according to the Navy.

Some get relief funds; economic woes shown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Government relief checks began arriving in Americans' bank accounts as the economic damage to the U.S. from the coronavirus piled up Wednesday and the reopening of businesses in Europe and China made it clear that things won't necessarily bounce right back when the crisis eases.

With lockdowns and closings bringing factories and other businesses to a shuddering halt, American industrial output shriveled in March, registering its biggest decline since the U.S. demobilized in 1946 at the end of World War II. And retail sales fell by an unprecedented 8.7%, with April expected to be far worse.

The government this week began issuing one-time payments as part of its \$2.2 trillion coronavirus relief package, with adults receiving checks of up to \$1,200 each and \$500 per child to help households make the rent or cover other bills. The checks will be directly deposited into bank accounts

or mailed to households, depending on how they filed their tax returns in the past.

Meanwhile, the first steps in lifting the economically crippling restrictions in other parts of the world are running into resistance, with shoppers and other customers staying away from the reopened businesses and workers afraid the newly restored freedoms could put their health at risk.

In China, millions are still wary of spending much or even going out. Some cities have resorted to handing out shopping vouchers and trying to reassure consumers by showing officials in state media eating in restaurants.

Worldwide, deaths have topped 128,000 and confirmed infections have surpassed 2 million, according to the tally kept by Johns Hopkins University. The figures understate the true size of the crisis, in part because of limited testing, different ways of counting the dead, and concealment by some governments.

The U.S. has by far been the hardest-

hit country, with more than 26,000 deaths and over 600,000 confirmed infections, by Johns Hopkins' count. Still, nightmare scenarios projecting a far greater number of deaths and hospitalizations have not come to pass, raising hopes from coast to coast.

At the same time, the economic damage from the effort to "flatten the curve" of infections has mounted alarmingly.

Signifying a huge shift in consumer behavior, grocery store sales in the U.S. jumped nearly 26% as Americans stocked up on food and consumer goods to ride out the crisis, while auto sales plummeted by one-quarter and clothing store sales slid by more than half, the government reported. The category that mostly includes online shopping rose more than 3%.

"With clear signs of panic buying of necessities and the fact that lockdowns were introduced only around the middle of the month means that far worse is to come in April and the second quarter more generally," said Michael Pearce, an economist at the consulting firm Capital Economics.

'Arduous and tough situation' for military medical personnel

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Workdays for the military medical personnel overseeing the Jacob Javits Convention Center in Manhattan begin at about 5 a.m., where about 200 military and civilian nurses prepare for a 12-hour shift caring for coronavirus patients, said Army Lt. Col. Leslie Curtis, chief nursing officer of the 9th Field Hospital, which is deployed to New York City from Fort Hood, Texas.

"We have very strict protocol ... to protect every single person," Curtis said Tuesday. "We are extremely busy."

The center averages about 325 coronavirus patients a day in the 2,500-bed facility. The staff — a joint force of Army, Navy, Air Force and civilian personnel — sees about 125 new patients each day and about 40 to 50 discharges.

Military personnel have been in New York City for about two weeks in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The city has been the U.S. epicenter of

the pandemic with more than 106,800 coronavirus cases as of Tuesday. Nationwide, there are more than 610,000 cases, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. The virus has killed more than 25,000 Americans.

The pooling of forces at the Javits Center is unique, Curtis said.

"This is an extraordinary time in history to come together with all services providing care in an arduous and tough situation," she said.

The majority of military personnel are concentrated in New York City.

More than 400 military personnel are working inside 11 New York hospitals, some of them functioning as their own teams within intensive care units while others are filling in personnel gaps among civilian providers as needed, said Navy Capt. Joe Kochan, executive officer for the Operational Health Support Unit Portsmouth, a Navy Reserve unit based at Naval Medical Center Portsmouth, Va.

In nod to governors, Trump walks back authority claim

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said he's open to some states "reopening" before federal social distancing guidelines expire at the end of month, as he appeared to back off his claim of absolute authority to decide when the time was right to act.

Hours after suggesting that the bipartisan concerns of governors about his assertion of power would amount to an insurrection, Trump abruptly reversed course Tuesday, saying he would leave it to governors to determine when and how to revive activity in their states. He said he likely would discuss his plans with governors on Thursday.

"The governors are responsible," Trump said. "They have to take charge."

Still, he insisted, "The governors will be very, very respectful of the presidency."

Democratic and Republican governors had objected after Trump asserted Monday that

he alone would determine when and how to reopen the economy, despite clear constitutional limitations on federal powers.

Trump said Tuesday he would authorize governors "of each individual state to implement a reopening — and a very powerful reopening — plan of their state at a time and in a manner as most appropriate."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious diseases expert, told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the country is "not there yet" when it comes to the kind of testing and tracing needed for the economy to reopen. But Trump made clear Tuesday he is intent on proceeding with his plans.

Trump outlined a vision in which workers would be tested, perhaps weekly, and governors would test travelers arriving at their states' borders. But the U.S. is nowhere near having that kind of infrastructure, with testing still largely reserved for those with serious symptoms and results taking days to learn.

Prosecutors: ISIS plotted to hit US bases in Germany

The Washington Post

BERLIN — German authorities on Wednesday arrested four suspected members of an Islamic State cell accused of plotting attacks on U.S. military bases in the country.

The Tajik nationals were detained in a series of early-morning raids in the western state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the public prosecutor said in a statement. A fifth suspected member of the cell, identified as Ravsan B., was arrested a year earlier, the statement said.

The details released by prosecutors indicated that the plans were already underway: The cell had scouted U.S. Air Force bases in Germany and obtained firearms and ammunition.

Prosecutors said Ravsan B. was in possession of instructions for the production of improvised explosive devices and had procured some of the necessary bomb-building materials online. He is also accused of agreeing to a contract killing in Albania for \$40,000 to finance

the plot, although the killing was not carried out.

German authorities did not release details of which U.S. air bases were targeted. Tens of thousands of U.S. troops are based in Germany, the biggest presence in any country other than Japan. Ramstein Air Base, in southwestern Germany, serves as the headquarters for the U.S. Air Force in Europe.

The suspects are accused of joining ISIS in January 2019, having originally planned to travel to Tajikistan to carry out “jihad” before turning their sights to targets in Germany. The cell was in touch with senior ISIS leaders in Syria and Afghanistan, according to German authorities, who said the group also funneled money to the cell through agents in Turkey.

The cell had also planned to murder an individual in Germany who had been publicly “critical of Islam,” the statement said. It added that one member of the cell had already spied on the unidentified person.

Taliban say US bombing insurgents in homes, contrary to agreement

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — Washington peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad met with Pakistan’s military chief Tuesday, a day after discussing the lagging U.S.-Taliban peace deal in Afghanistan with the chief negotiator for the insurgent movement.

The meetings included Gen. Scott Miller, head of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Statements from the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and the U.S. military in Kabul said Washington was engaged in “ongoing efforts” to find a sustainable peace after decades of relentless war but the U.S. officials released no details.

Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen said the insurgent group’s chief negotiator, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, used Monday’s meeting at the Taliban’s political office in Qatar to protest attacks against Taliban fighters in their homes, contrary to provisions of the Feb. 29 agreement.

“Our men have been targeted in their residential areas while there is no room for such attacks in the agreement, either by the U.S. or their internal (Afghan) supporters,” he said, a reference to Afghan National Security Forces.

The U.S. military has refused

to address the Taliban’s specific complaint but has said that it is abiding by the agreement and will continue to come to the aid of the Afghan military.

At the meeting with Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan’s military leaders reaffirmed their support for U.S. efforts and renewed their “commitment to act to advance a political settlement to the conflict,” according to a statement released by the U.S. Embassy in the Pakistani capital.

At the heart of most of the talks, say Taliban and U.S. officials, is the demand for a reduction of violence. The Taliban have not been attacking U.S. and NATO troops since the agreement was signed, instead attacking Afghan forces in outlying areas. Washington wants a reduction to those attacks.

Shaheen said the Taliban are ready to negotiate a country-wide cease-fire but only during intra-Afghan negotiations, the next critical step of the deal. However, getting to intra-Afghan negotiations, which Washington had hoped would begin weeks earlier, has mostly been held up by political turmoil in Kabul as dueling presidents fight over who is the real winner in last year’s presidential elections.

Armed men seize, release tanker off coast of Iran

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Armed men boarded a Hong Kong-flagged tanker ship Tuesday off the coast of Iran near the crucial Strait of Hormuz, holding the ship for a short time before releasing it amid heightened tensions between Tehran and the U.S., authorities said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the seizure, though suspicion fell on Iran’s paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. Iranian officials and state media did not immediately acknowledge the incident and the U.S. Navy’s Bahrain-based 5th Fleet did not respond to a request for comment.

The incident comes after a private maritime intelligence firm warned of suspicious incidents in recent days near the strait, through which a fifth of all oil is traded. Oil tankers previously have been a target during the tensions.

The incident happened near Iran’s Ras al-Kuh coast. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations organization said in an alert that the vessel “had been boarded by armed men while at anchor. All vessels in the vicinity are to stay vigilant and to report any incidents,” the warning said, urging ships to exercise caution.

The U.K. organization later said the ship had been released and was underway under

its captain’s control, without elaborating.

Dryad Global, the private maritime intelligence firm that issued the first warnings about suspicious incidents, identified the ship as the Hong Kong-flagged SC Taipei bound for Saudi Arabia.

It said the 22 crew members aboard were Chinese. It did not say how it knew the information.

The SC Taipei’s satellite tracking beacon showed it off the coast of Iran in the general vicinity of the warning, according to data from the website Marine Traffic.com.

The ship’s owners could not be immediately reached.

Obama formally endorses his former VP Biden

Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — Former President Barack Obama on Tuesday formally endorsed Joe Biden for president, a big step in helping to unite their party and marking his own entry into the fight against President Donald Trump.

Evoking the nation's current health and economic crisis, Obama said in a video release, "Joe has the character and the experience to guide us through one of our darkest times, and heal us through a long recovery."

There had been little doubt that Obama

would back his former vice president once Biden had a lock on the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, but Obama — one of the most popular Democrats in the country — had steadfastly withheld any endorsement during the long party contest that featured numerous contenders.

"Choosing Joe to be my vice president was one of the best decisions I ever made, and he became a close friend," Obama said, speaking straight to the camera in the 12-minute video. "And I believe Joe has all the qualities we need in a president right now."

Obama's endorsement came one day

after Biden secured the formal backing of his last remaining rival, Sen. Bernie Sanders, of Vermont. Another former competitor, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, is expected to soon endorse Biden as well; the timing of the announcement is being largely determined by the Biden campaign, according to a source familiar with the planning.

The high-level endorsements are part of an orchestrated effort to unify the Democratic Party for the general-election push to defeat Trump, and to avoid the kind of lingering post-primary divisions that hampered the 2016 nominee, Hillary Clinton.

PG&E plan to pay fees from victims' fund is approved

Associated Press

BERKELEY, Calif. — The Northern California victims of catastrophic wildfires caused by Pacific Gas & Electric's decaying electrical grid will have at least \$19 million siphoned away from a \$13.5 billion fund for their losses to cover administrative costs.

A bankruptcy judge said he would approve drawing from the victims' fund as part of a plan reviewed Tuesday during a court hearing.

The decision came after PG&E and a committee representing the victims struck an accord on a \$21.8 million budget for administering the \$13.5 billion fund for the thousands of people who lost loved ones, homes and businesses during a series of

deadly wildfires in 2017 and 2018.

PG&E will pay an additional \$2.5 million to cover the fund's administrative fees, but the rest of the money will come from the fund earmarked for the fire victims under the plan that won U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Dennis Montali's blessing.

Even more money could be diverted from the fire victims' fund to cover its administrative costs if PG&E's plan for getting out of bankruptcy gains court approval by June 30, but misses its Aug. 29 target date for becoming effective.

The economic upheaval triggered by the coronavirus pandemic has increased the chances that it may take longer for PG&E to raise the tens of billions of dollars that will be needed to finance its proposed

bankruptcy plan than the company envisioned earlier this year.

The uncertainty prompted the company to draw up a contingency plan that calls for the plan becoming effective Dec. 30, which would result in the fire victims having to wait until next year before the \$13.5 billion fund starts to pay their claims.

If the plan isn't effective until Dec. 30, another \$21.2 million could be drained from the fire victims' pool of money.

Taking any money away from the fire victims' fund has been a hot-button issue since PG&E agreed to the settlement in December. At one point, two government disaster-relief agencies had been seeking to take a \$4 billion claim on the victims' fund, but finally backed off.

Cardinal Pell links corruption to child abuse charges

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — Cardinal George Pell has linked his fight against corruption in the Vatican with his prosecution in Australia for alleged child sex abuse.

Pell was regarded as the third highest-ranking Vatican official in 2018 when he became the world's most senior Catholic to be convicted of child sex abuse.

He served 13 months in prison before Australia's High Court last week acquitted him of molesting two choirboys in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne while he was archbish-

op of Australia's second-largest city in the 1990s.

Pope Francis' former finance minister said in a television interview broadcast on Tuesday that some church officials believed he was prosecuted by Australian authorities because of the trouble he had caused in the Vatican in implementing financial reforms.

"Most of the senior people in Rome who are in any way sympathetic to financial reforms believe that they are" linked to the prosecution, the 78-year-old cleric told Sky News.

"What was surprising was even my theological opponents in Rome didn't believe the

stories" of sexual abuse, he added.

Pell said that he did not have evidence of a link. But he suspected that a man who swore he had been abused by Pell as a 13-year-old choirboy more than two decades ago had been "used."

Pell said that Francis had "absolutely" supported him, even though "My theological views ... don't line up exactly with Pope Francis.

"I think he values my honesty and perhaps that I would say things that some other people mightn't say, and I think he respects me for that," Pell added.

Pell said that neither Francis

nor Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin were corrupt, but that he did not know how high Vatican corruption rose.

"Just how high up it goes is an interesting hypothesis," he said.

Pell said that he'll return to Rome after the coronavirus pandemic to pack up his apartment, but that he plans to make his home in Sydney, where he had been archbishop.

Victoria police refused to comment on newspaper reports Tuesday that they have begun investigating another child abuse allegation against Pell dating back to the 1970s.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police probe robbery by men wearing face covers

DE WILMINGTON — Delaware State Police are investigating an armed robbery by two men wearing face covers.

Authorities said the suspects entered a Dollar General store in Wilmington. Both were wearing face covers, and one was armed with a gun.

Masks and face covers have become a common sight in stores and on streets amid the coronavirus epidemic.

Police said the suspects corralled employees and customers together inside Dollar General before ordering an employee to open the safe and cash registers. They also demanded that all the individuals turn over their money.

Man arrested after virus test sample stolen

CA DAVIS — A 40-year-old man was arrested after police said he stole a coronavirus test sample from a hospital in Davis.

Shaun Lamar Moore, of Davis, was taken into custody on suspicion of burglary after an officer saw him riding his bicycle across an overpass. Authorities said that a day earlier, Moore stole a specimen that was being tested for COVID-19 at Sutter Davis Hospital and fled the scene on a bike.

Davis police officers responded to the hospital after an employee called to report the theft. Several hours later, police received a call from someone reporting that the sealed specimen had been found in a shopping cart at a CVS Pharmacy less than a mile from the hospital.

Authorities said it is not clear why the specimen was stolen.

State given ownership of last US slave ship

AL BIRMINGHAM — The last slave ship known to have landed in the United States more than 150 years ago has a new owner: the state of Alabama.

A federal judge granted ownership of the Clotilda shipwreck to the Alabama Historical Commission in a one-page order.

The decision by U.S. District Judge Kristi DuBose means the state will have final say over remnants of the ship.

The Clotilda, a two-masted Gulf schooner, sailed to West Africa on an illegal trip financed by a wealthy white businessman as a nation divided over slavery was building toward Civil War. It delivered about 110 kidnapped Africans to Mobile before it was burned in a bayou in 1860 to hide evidence of the crime.

A few pieces of the ship were removed from the river and will be part of an exhibition planned to open later this year in Mobile.

Driver rescued from truck dangling over river

VA CHESAPEAKE — Firefighters rescued a truck driver whose tractor-trailer was nearly blown off a bridge in Virginia, leaving his cab dangling 70 feet over a river.

A large wind gust caused the driver, Wayne B. Boone, to lose control, Virginia State Police Sgt. Michelle Anaya told news outlets.

He had to be pulled from his cab, which was dangling off the side of Interstate 64's High Rise bridge over the Elizabeth River, the Chesapeake Fire Department said in a Twitter post.

It said firefighters used a se-

ries of complex rope maneuvers to reach the driver and pull him to safety.

State launches drive for use of lead-free sinkers

MN ST. PAUL — Minnesota officials are launching a campaign to encourage anglers to stop using lead sinkers because they most likely cause the fatal poisoning of swans.

Officials want to persuade anglers to switch to non-lead tackle and sinkers to protect swans, loons and other birds that mistake sinkers for small stones usually consumed to help digestion, the Star Tribune reported.

The University of Minnesota conducted necropsies that determined lead poisoning was the cause of death for several birds.

Fishery charged with wasting game fish

OH COLUMBUS — An Ohio fishery was charged with wildlife violations after investigators observed abuse and waste of game fish, officials said.

Investigators from the state Department of Natural Resources Division of Wildlife recorded employees from Szuch Fishery Inc. intentionally injure a rare trophy-size fish after it was removed from a commercial fishing net in western Lake Erie, the Dayton Daily News reported Sunday.

Employees were also seen removing several fish from commercial nets, breaking their spines and throwing them back in the lake, according to the department.

The fishery will appear in court on charges of causing intentional injury to a noncom-

mercial fish species, 10 counts of stream littering and 10 counts of disposing of dead fish.

Woman charged in ID theft over 2 years

MS OCEAN SPRINGS — Police said a Mississippi woman faces charges for illegally buying \$140,000 in goods and services using the personal information of a 77-year-old woman she assisted with bills and shopping.

Tammie Scott, of Vancleave, had access to the victim's bank accounts and credit cards and used the victim's personal information to open additional accounts and lines of credit, spending thousands over two years, Ocean Springs Police Capt. Ryan Lemaire told WLOX-TV.

Scott was charged with exploitation of a vulnerable adult.

New island replaces old one off coast

NC NAGS HEAD — Two years after a newly formed North Carolina island was lost to storm surge, a new one appears to be rising in its place on the Outer Banks, park officials said.

Cape Hatteras National Seashore said the nearly 100-foot long formation was discovered about a quarter of a mile south of Cape Point. It's in the same area where Shelly Island showed up on a NASA satellite in the fall of 2016, officials said.

Shelly Island, so named by tourists for its plentiful seashells, survived for more than two years. It grew to 20 acres and a mile in length before a series of storms cut it in half, then washed it away, news sources reported.

From wire reports

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Ionescu looks forward to WNBA career

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — With the spotlight on her growing ever brighter, Sabrina Ionescu is aware she's becoming her own brand.

One of the most decorated players in women's college basketball, Ionescu is about to go pro with the WNBA Draft coming up Friday. She's widely expected to be selected No. 1 by the New York Liberty.

She's also being courted by shoe companies for what could be an unprecedented endorsement deal. On top of it all, she's finishing her master's degree, fittingly in advertising and brand responsibility.

Ionescu said Oregon has prepared her to understand how much impact she can have in the community and on women's basketball.

"It's going to be a learning process of just going into a bigger market with so many things going on. And I think I'm just going to have to find my niche and find what's important to me and what's going to help me — and our team — and kind of use that to the best of my ability," she said on a video call with reporters Tuesday.

Ionescu, who won AP All-American honors three times, shattered the NCAA career triple-double mark (for both men and women) with 26 and became the first player in college history to have 2,000 points, 1,000 rebounds and 1,000 assists.

She helped the Ducks win the Pac-12 regular-season and tournament titles as a senior this season while averaging 17.5 points, 9.1 assists and 8.6 rebounds. She was named the conference's most outstanding player of the tournament and of the regular season.

The 5-foot-11 guard was also named AP Player of the Year and won the Wooden Award, the Naismith Trophy and Wade Trophy.

So it's no wonder shoe companies have flocked to her. Nike, which has obvious ties to Oregon through company co-founder and alum Phil Knight, is in the running, as are Puma and Under Armour. Ionescu has been training in the San Francisco Bay Area with Golden State's Steph Curry, Under Armour's most prominent athlete. At a safe distance, of course.

"I would probably be in meetings with a lot of them, being

able to meet a lot of the team and see how everything's done. But obviously everything's been done online, which has been a little bit different, and I'm still getting used to it," she said. "But I haven't made a decision yet on a shoe company. I'm assuming it will probably happen before the draft. But knowing me, who knows?"

WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert will announce the draft picks on ESPN while Ionescu will be at home in Walnut Creek, Calif.

She'll miss the usual pomp and circumstance that comes with being selected first, but Ionescu understands there are bigger concerns because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Ionescu said she would be excited by the opportunity to suit up for the Liberty, who will play in the Barclays Center whenever the WNBA season begins.

"And then just the marketability that there is in New York, and kind of the hustle and bustle, is something that I think could be not only beneficial to myself as a person, but as a brand, and for women's basketball," she said.

ESPN Analyst Rebecca Lobo spoke about Ionescu in a con-

ference call Monday to preview the draft.

"She's got everything you'd want in the skill set but the No. 1 thing people talk about is her competitiveness and her competitive fire. Whether it's a player like Diana Taurasi or Sue Bird, that's the thing that can separate the great ones and she has proven that she has that and thrives in those moments and loves it and loves basketball," Lobo said.

Oregon teammates Satou Sabally and Ruthy Hebard could also be top-10 picks.

The Ducks finished 31-2 this season, which ended prematurely with the cancellation of the NCAA Tournament because of the pandemic. They were ranked No. 2 in the final AP Top 25.

Although Ionescu returned for her senior year in hopes of winning a national title, she said she has no regrets.

"I would say it was probably one of the best decisions of my life to come back, although there was many ups and downs through the year," she said. "I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else besides there."

Five conferences apply to NCAA for requirement relief

Associated Press

Five major football conference commissioners have asked the NCAA to relax some requirements to compete in Division I for four years, including the minimum number of sports a school must sponsor.

A letter from the commissioners of the American Athletic Conference, Mountain West, Mid-American Conference, Sun Belt and Conference USA to NCAA President Mark Emmert asked for temporary relief from financial aid requirements, along with average football attendance. The request was made on behalf of all 350 Division I schools. The commissioners also asked that a moratorium be placed on schools moving into Division I

for the length of the waiver.

The email dated April 10 was first reported by Yahoo! Sports and obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press.

"As you are aware, the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic turmoil has resulted in the direst financial crisis for higher education since at least the Great Depression," the commissioners wrote.

MAC Commissioner Jon Steinbrecher told the AP the request was to "build flexibility into the decision-making process" schools will be facing.

The letter came to light the same day as the University of Cincinnati in the AAC announced it was dropping its men's soccer program to cut costs. Earlier this month, Old

Dominion of C-USA cut its wrestling program.

NCAA rules require Division I schools to sponsor at least 16 varsity sports. The commissioners also requested lifting rules that require that schools:

- Offer a minimum of 200 athletic grants-in-aid per year or spend at least \$4 million in grants-in-aid on athletes, and provide 90% of the permissible maximum grants-in-aid in football over a rolling two-year period.

- Once every two years on a rolling basis, average at least 15,000 in actual or paid attendance for all home football games. This requirement applies only to FBS schools.

- Play minimum numbers of total games and home games in

sports such as baseball, football and basketball and minimum percentage of games against Division I or FBS competition in various sports.

The NCAA and its schools have already taken a huge financial hit with the cancellation of the men's basketball tournament in March. That cost schools a total of \$375 million in NCAA distributions. More hard times appear to be on the horizon, especially for schools outside the Power Five conferences that can't fall back on billion dollar television rights deals focused on football.

Mountain West Commissioner Craig Thompson said this is not being done with the intention of eliminating sports programs.

USADA trying out home drug testing kit

Associated Press

DENVER — The typical day for Noah Lyles now looks something like this:

Drive to park. Unload weights from truck. Sprint on grassy field. Lift. And, now and then, head home and take a doping test.

The world champion sprinter is one of 15 American athletes who have volunteered to conduct in-home drug tests as part of a pilot program being run by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency. With anti-doping collections severely curtailed across the globe because of the coronavirus pandemic, USADA is looking at new options, in this case by asking a group of leading Americans to give urine and small dried blood samples at home.

"They asked me to do it, and I wasn't opposed to doing it," Lyles said. "It's a way to get my

drug test in."

Athletes are still required to fill out their whereabouts forms, and under this program, a doping control officer will connect with an athlete via Zoom or FaceTime during a prescribed window.

Athletes receive test kits at home and head into their bathroom to give urine samples while leaving their laptops outside the room. Under normal circumstances, the officer would come to the house (or wherever the athlete was at the time) and stand outside the bathroom. In this case, the officer looks on via the camera while the athletes are timed and their temperatures are monitored to ensure they are giving the samples in real time.

The blood test uses a new technology — dry blood sampling — in which athletes prick their arms and small droplets of blood funnel into a contain-

er. Athletes are responsible for packaging the samples and sending them back to testing labs.

USADA CEO Travis Tygart says the program gives clean athletes a chance to prove they have remained clean during a time in which anti-doping regulators are having a difficult time reaching the numbers of athletes they normally would. It's an issue that will make the return to play — the Olympics are rescheduled for 2021 but other events are expected to come back sooner — that much more difficult to navigate.

"It was going to unnecessarily create a question when those athletes went to Tokyo and won, where people would say, 'You won but you weren't tested,' during the pandemic," Tygart said. "How unfair is it for athletes who will be in those circumstances?"

Others taking part in the

USADA program include Allyson Felix, Katie Ledecky, Emma Coburn and Sydney McLaughlin.

USADA hasn't been shy about these sort of test programs in the past. In 2008, it launched a pilot project that involved testing the efficacy of biological passports — which allows authorities to track athletes' blood over time for abnormal changes — the likes of which are in common use today.

Tygart concedes the new system depends on athletes to do the right thing in an industry that has been rife with cheating.

"The people who play clean want to be true heroes and role models," Tygart said. "We also know there are some bad folks out there who will attempt to exploit it. ... For the good of the athletes, anti-doping has to reinvent itself in times like these to stay relevant."

Governor OK with Ariz. hosting all 30 baseball teams

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey says his state is willing to host all 30 major league teams at the time public health concerns allow, which eventually could lead to the start of the baseball season primarily in empty spring training ballparks.

MLB and the players' association have had preliminary discussion of potential ways for the season to start if given the go-ahead by federal, state and local governments and health officials. Having all teams based in the Phoenix area is among the contingency plans being examined. There are 10 spring training parks plus the Diamondbacks' Chase Field, which has a retractable roof, and several college facilities.

"Arizona, at the right time, is very open minded to hosting whatever Major League Baseball would like from the state," Ducey, a Republican, said Tuesday. "At the time that it would be appropriate for pub-

lic health, if Arizona were in a position to reopen, we have the facilities that are here."

"We have the hotel space that is here," he said. "We all want to make certain that the metrics and the data are proper before we're able to go forward, but I think two words that would allow the country and the state of Arizona to know that things were headed back to normal would be: 'Play ball!'"

MLB also said Tuesday it is cutting the salary of senior staff by an average of 35% for this year due to the new coronavirus' impact on the season. MLB is guaranteeing paychecks to its full-time employees of its central office through May.

"I think we're all concerned that there's not going to be a season," Texas Rangers manager Chris Woodward said. "I don't know when it's going to be safe, I think the virus will let us know. If that means that we start in June, July, August or not at all, we definitely are all kind of concerned that we may

not be able to play this year, and that's a reality."

Ducey said he had spoken with Commissioner Rob Manfred about the all-Arizona option.

"There's a number of different scenarios," the governor said. "I think the first scenario that was talked about was the idea of these clubs coming, being in hotels and in a way, having their own stay-at-home orders whether it either be at the hotel, or inside the stadium, without fans. ... It's something that Arizona is open-minded to, and I'm open-minded to."

Many players and staff are concerned about the potential of a long absence from family while sequestered.

Minnesota catcher Mitch Garver wondered how the plan would work.

"Where do we live? Who's allowed to come with us? Are we only allowed to go to the field and back to the hotel? What kind of hotel? What kind of accommodations are we working with? Is there going to be meal

money?" he said. "Then you get into player health, and we're talking about playing in 120 degree weather on spring training fields potentially living out of a visiting locker room."

Manfred announced the salary cut Tuesday in a memorandum to staff, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press. Manfred also said the commissioner's office will make all planned distributions to teams through May.

"As part of our effort to protect the organization, my senior staff and I have decided to reduce our compensation by an average of 35% for 2020 to help the organization weather this terrible storm," Manfred wrote in the memo, which described cost-cutting efforts.

"As a result of these developments, I am pleased to be in a position to ensure that all employees that received regular pay checks in April will continue to be paid through May 31," he wrote.