

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Taliban threatening key Afghan province

The Washington Post

MARJAH, Afghanistan — As the Afghan convoy entered the battered village, Taliban fighters opened fire. U.S.-trained Afghan policemen poured out of their Humvees and began shooting their AK-47 rifles in every direction.

“The enemy is firing one bullet, and you are responding with dozens!” their commander, Col. Khalil Jawad, screamed into his radio in frustration. “Aim, then fire!”

A minute later, the militants melted away. On this day in early December in the southern province of Helmand, they had delivered their message: The Taliban are back, showing a battle discipline and initiative far superior to the U.S.-trained and -equipped Afghan security forces.

In private, top Afghan and American officials have begun to voice increasingly grim assessments of the resurgent Taliban threat, most notably in a previously undisclosed transcript of a late October meeting of the Afghan National Security Council.

“We have not met the people’s expectations. We haven’t delivered,” Abdullah Abdullah, the country’s chief executive, told the high-level gathering. “Our forces lack discipline. They lack rotation opportunities. We haven’t taken care of our own policemen and soldiers. They continue to absorb enormous casualties.”

With control of — or a significant presence in — roughly 30 percent of districts across the nation, according to Western and Afghan officials, the Taliban now hold more territory than in any year since 2001, when the puritanical Islamists were ousted from power after the 9/11 attacks. For now, the top American and Afghan pri-

ority is preventing Helmand, largely secured by U.S. Marines and British forces in 2012, from again falling to the insurgency.

As of last month, about 7,000 members of the Afghan security forces had been killed this year, with 12,000 injured, a 26 percent increase over the total number of dead and wounded in all of 2014, said a Western official with access to the most recent NATO statistics. Attrition rates are soaring. Deserters and injured Afghan soldiers say they are fighting a more sophisticated and well-armed insurgency than they have seen in years.

Trying to encourage

In the confidential October meeting, Gen. John Campbell, the commander of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, told his Afghan counterparts that he was as guilty as they were of “just putting our finger in the dike in Helmand.”

But he was highly critical of Afghan security officials for “not managing” their forces in a way that ensured they got enough training, and for allowing “breakdowns in discipline” in the ranks.

“The Taliban are not 10 feet tall,” he said. “You have much more equipment than they do. You’re better trained. It’s all about leadership and accountability.”

Campbell vowed “to fix Helmand.”

“I will use more of my SOF and enablers to buy you more space and time,” he said, referring to Special Operations forces.

Helmand was a key focus in a major American offensive launched in 2010, after President Barack Obama dispatched a “surge” of 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. Marja was the first place Marines launched operations, and by the end of the

surge, in late 2012, the Taliban had been subdued in much of its southern heartland.

Now, the fresh concerns over Helmand arrive at the end of a year in which the Taliban and other insurgents, including the Islamic State group, have steadily advanced, particularly in the north. They have taken advantage of the end of the U.S. and NATO combat mission, which has left a military and political vacuum, forcing Obama to extend the U.S. role by keeping at least 5,500 U.S. troops here after he leaves office.

If there was one province in Afghanistan which the Taliban should have found impenetrable, it was Helmand. The Afghan army has its entire 215th Corps based here, numbering more than 18,000 soldiers. There are also thousands of Afghan police officers. Yet a few hundred Taliban fighters managed to overrun parts of Marja and other districts. Soldiers and police officers fled with little resistance or surrendered to the insurgents.

In Babaji, nine police officers including Abdul Qadim Hemat were unprepared last month when the Taliban fighters attacked their outpost. They were running out of ammunition. And reinforcements they had requested never turned up.

“I watched seven comrades killed in front of me,” recalled Hemat, who soon fled along with the remaining officer. Both then deserted. “We were surrounded, but we didn’t get any help,” Hemat said. “I will not shoot one bullet for the government again.”

Pining for US troops

In parts of Marja, villagers pine for U.S. troops — and the British forces who were once based here — to return.

“When they were here, Marja was as peaceful as this city,” said

Ahmed Jan, who was bringing his 13-year-old nephew to a hospital in Lashkar Gah. A bullet had struck the boy in their village during fighting. “Now, the Taliban are like the government in my village. They drive police vehicles and Humvees, and they have raised their white flag over houses.”

The confidential transcript of the minutes from the National Security Council meeting presents a grim picture.

The Afghan army’s Chief of Staff Gen. Qadam Shah Shaheem said that limited reinforcements and new recruits couldn’t make up for force attrition in Helmand, according to the transcript, which was provided to *The Washington Post* by an official concerned by the insecurity in Helmand.

The morale of the security forces was low, said Rahmatullah Nabil, the nation’s intelligence chief, and some soldiers had complained that they had not been home in two years. Junior commanders, he added, were “openly defying their superiors.”

Gen. Mohammad Salem Ehsas, the top ALP commander, said troops were tired and there was poor coordination among the various security organs.

Campbell said only about half of the positions of the 215th Corps’ troops were manned. Western and Afghan officials said that was largely because of the desertions, high casualty rates and lack of new recruits.

“The blame game must stop now,” Campbell said. “If I hear one more policeman complain about the army or vice versa, I will pull my advisers immediately. It’s over. You’re Afghans first. Work together.”

But Afghans, even senior military officials, no longer even pretend that they can fight the Taliban effectively on their own.

Twisters, floods make bad weather in US worse

Associated Press

GARLAND, Texas — As residents of North Texas surveyed the destruction from deadly tornadoes, the same storm system brought winter storm woes to the Midwest on Monday, amplifying flooding that's already blamed for more than a dozen deaths and prompted hundreds of flight cancellations.

At least 11 people died and dozens were injured in the tornadoes that swept through the Dallas area Saturday and caused substantial damage. That, plus the flooding in Missouri and Illinois, was the latest in a succession of severe weather events across the country in the past week that has led to at least 43 deaths.

A range of precipitation was forecast Monday for the country's midsection, including heavy snow, ice and blustery winds in parts of 11 states and heavy rain in already waterlogged parts of Missouri and Arkansas.

The system caused nearly 900 flights to be canceled — more than a third of which were at Chicago's two main airports — and another 500 to be delayed, according to flight-tracking service FlightAware. A typical day sees about 150 cancellations.

In North Texas, local officials estimated as many as 1,450 homes were damaged or destroyed by at least nine tornadoes. Eight people died in Garland, a suburb about 20 miles northeast of Dallas. The weather service said an EF-4 tornado — which is the second-most powerful, with winds of more than 200 mph — hit the community about 6:45 p.m. Saturday.

Over the weekend, six people died when two separate vehicles drove into flooded roadways in south-central Missouri, Pulaski County Sheriff Ronald Long said. Four of them were international soldiers who were temporarily stationed at an Army base.

Iraqi forces make gains in Ramadi; militants not gone

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi forces backed by U.S.-led airstrikes drove Islamic State militants out of the center of Ramadi on Monday and seized the main government complex there, according to military officials, who said insurgents are still dug into pockets of the city west of Baghdad.

Ramadi, the provincial capital of the western Anbar province, fell to the Islamic State group in May, marking a major

setback for Iraqi forces and the U.S.-led campaign. Ramadi and nearby Fallujah, which is controlled by the Islamic State group, saw some of the heaviest fighting of the eight-year U.S. intervention in Iraq.

In recent months Iraqi forces have launched several offensives to retake Ramadi, but all had stalled.

Brig. Gen. Ahmed al-Belawi said that Islamic State militants stopped firing from inside the government complex at around 8 a.m. Monday and said troops

were encircling it as engineering teams cleared booby traps.

A few hours later, military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Rasool announced in a televised statement that Ramadi had been “fully liberated.”

But Gen. Ismail al-Mahlawi, head of military operations in Anbar, quickly clarified that Iraqi forces had only retaken the government complex and that parts of the city remained under Islamic State control.

Bomber targets foreign convoy in Kabul

BY HEATH DRUZIN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Insurgents targeted a NATO convoy with a suicide car bomb Monday near the military side of Kabul Airport, killing one civilian and injuring dozens more, including schoolchildren, Afghan government officials said.

The bomb went off as a Turkish military convoy passed, a police official said. A spokesman for the international military coalition in Afghanistan said no foreign troops were injured. Among 33 civilians injured by the blast were 18 children studying in a nearby

religious school, said Public Health Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ishmael Kawousi. None of the injuries are thought to be life-threatening.

The blast, which could be heard across central Kabul, occurred about 8 a.m. near the main gate of a coalition military base that shares a runway with the civilian airport.

The Taliban, who often exaggerate the effects of their attacks, claimed responsibility through a spokesman, who said the bomb killed 10 foreign and three Afghan employees of the base.

Resolute Support, the NATO military mission in Afghani-

stan, issued a statement condemning the attack.

“A Taliban group has once again targeted defenseless Afghan civilians, showing their complete disregard for the Afghan people,” Resolute Support spokesman Brig. Gen. Wilson Shoffner said in the statement.

The area around the airport, which contains crucial military assets and houses a large contingent of the Afghan air force, has been a frequent target of attacks, as have other airports in the country. On Dec. 8, insurgents laid siege to Kandahar Airport, which is also attached to a major military base, killing 50 people, mostly civilians.

Emory Land homeport to move to Guam

Submarine-support ship USS Emory S. Land will change its homeport to Guam from the central Indian Ocean.

The submarine tender will move to Naval Base Guam from Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia as part of the Navy's long-range plan to put its most advanced and capable units

forward, a Navy statement said last week. The vessel, which joins fellow submarine tender USS Frank Cable, will support four fast-attack submarines on Guam and other submarines rotating through the region.

The Emory S. Land will arrive with a crew of about 350 officers and enlisted sailors and 150 civil service mariners to provide logistical support — including food, water and

electricity — to submarine forces, the statement said. The ship also provides ordnance, spare parts, maintenance support, medical, dental and legal services to personnel on the submarine.

The deployment is part of the “Pacific pivot,” reflecting the White House's view of the Asia-Pacific region as its highest long-term priority.

From staff reports

Patriots fall to Jets after opting to kick in OT

Associated Press

The Patriots could've been resting next Sunday with the AFC's best record all wrapped up.

Instead, a chain reaction of unorthodox decisions, confusion over the rulebook and bad defense left Tom Brady stranded on the sideline in overtime and kept the top seed up for grabs.

New England fell 26-20 to the Jets on Sunday — a loss that will be remembered for Bill Belichick's decision to give the ball to New York on the first possession of overtime and Pats receiver Matt Slater's bungling of that choice after winning the coin toss.

The team that wins the coin toss actually can choose from three options: kick or receive — or defend their choice of end

zone.

Even though it was warm and not all that windy, Belichick instructed Slater to choose to defend the north end zone if the Patriots won the toss, meaning New York would almost certainly then choose to receive the kickoff. But after Slater won by calling heads, the first words out of his mouth were, "We want to kick." That meant the Patriots had to kick the ball away, and the Jets, not New England, got to choose the direction.

Confusing.

Then, even more bafflingly, the Patriots defense barely resisted, allowing Ryan Fitzpatrick and the Jets to go 80 yards in five plays for the winning touchdown.

Belichick had won an overtime game two years ago using the "take the wind" strategy. He insisted there was no confusion about his plan this time.

"I thought it was the best thing to do," he said.

But nothing went the way the coach drew it up.

And because of that, the Patriots (12-3) will not get to rest starters next Sunday at Miami. They'll go into the game needing a win to guarantee themselves the top seed in the AFC.

In case you missed it, here are the other hot topics after the second-to-last week of the NFL season:

Not undefeated: Instead of thinking about a perfect season, the Carolina Panthers now have to worry about locking down the best record in the NFC. The Panthers fell 20-13 to the Atlanta Falcons for their first loss in 15 games this season — and their first regular-season loss since Nov. 30, 2014. (Side note: Check out

Julio Jones of the Falcons with his leaping, go-ahead touchdown catch.) The Carolina loss, combined with Arizona's 38-8 crushing of the Packers, means that if the Cardinals (13-2) win and Panthers lose next week, Carolina would drop to No. 2 in the conference. Oh, and yes, members of the perfect and still-unmatched 1972 Miami Dolphins finally took their champagne off ice.

Not taking care of business: Also failing to lock things down Sunday were the Pittsburgh Steelers. They were on a three-game winning streak, playing their best football of the season and favored by double-digits. And they lost. The 20-17 setback to the Ravens could cost them a playoff spot. At 9-6, Pittsburgh needs to win next week and get help — either a loss by the Jets or two losses by the Broncos.

Falcons hand Panthers first loss of season

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Carolina's bid for an undefeated season ended Sunday when Julio Jones' dramatic 70-yard touchdown reception powered the Atlanta Falcons to a 20-13 victory over Cam Newton and the Panthers.

Carolina (14-1) got the ball with 90 seconds left and no timeouts remaining. Newton completed a 19-yard pass to Corey Brown on first down but fumbled when stripped by Vic Beasley Jr. on the following play. Adrian Clayborn recovered for the Falcons, wrapping up the win.

Matt Ryan threw for 306 yards and one touchdown for the Falcons (8-7), and Devonta Freeman ran for 73 yards with a touchdown.

Newton threw for 142 yards and ran for 46 yards, including an 8-yard scoring run to cap the Panthers' opening drive.

Jets 26, Patriots 20 (OT): Eric Decker's 6-yard touchdown catch on the first drive of overtime — after visiting New England chose to kick off — lifted New York into position to make the playoffs.

A win next week at Buffalo gives the Jets a wild-card berth.

Marshall had two TD catches and also became the first NFL player with 100 receptions in six seasons.

Cardinals 38, Packers 8: Host Arizona sacked Aaron Rodgers eight times and returned two of his fumbles for touchdowns to clinch a first-round playoff bye.

Carson Palmer threw for 257 yards and two touchdowns for Arizona (13-2).

In all, the Packers were sacked nine times in their most one-sided loss of the season. Dwight Freeney had three and Calais Campbell 2 1/2. Cory Redding rambled 36 yards with one of the fumbles for a score, Jeraud Powers took another 5 yards for a touchdown.

Green Bay (10-5) is home against Minnesota in its regular-season finale next Sunday night, with the NFC North title at stake.

Vikings 49, Giants 17: Adrian Peterson ran for 104 yards and a touchdown over three quarters, Harrison Smith took one of Eli Manning's three interceptions into

the end zone and Minnesota clinched a playoff spot with a victory over visiting New York on a frigid night.

Teddy Bridgewater turned in another sharp December performance, and Blair Walsh made five field goals for the Vikings.

With Peterson relaxing on the sideline, Jerick McKinnon rushed for two more touchdowns in the fourth quarter, including a 68-yard romp through a disinterested defense with the temperature down to 11 degrees.

The Giants (6-9) played with suspended receiver Odell Beckham Jr.

Rams 23, Seahawks 17: Todd Gurley scored on a 2-yard TD run with 10:34 left, Akeem Ayers returned a fumble 45 yards for a touchdown in the first quarter as St. Louis ended host Seattle's five-game winning streak.

St. Louis swept the season series from the Seahawks (9-6) having won 34-31 in overtime in Week 1. The Rams (7-8) flustered quarterback Russell Wilson.

Gurley rushed for 85 yards on 19 carries. Case Keenum won his third straight start for the Rams, completing 14 of 23 passes for 103 yards and a 28-yard touchdown pass to Kenny Britt in the second quarter.

Chiefs 17, Browns 13: Alex Smith threw two touchdown passes for host Kansas City, and the game clock finally stopped Johnny Manziel as the Chiefs won a team record-tying ninth consecutive game.

Smith threw for 125 yards and ran for 54, helping Kansas City (10-5) clinch a playoff berth when Pittsburgh lost to Baltimore moments later.

The Chiefs jumped to a 17-3 halftime lead, but the offense cooled off and Manziel pumped some life into the Browns (3-12).

The Heisman Trophy winner led Cleveland to 10 straight points, then took over at his 30 with 1:52 left and no timeouts. The Browns picked up three first downs, and Manziel hit Darius Jennings on fourth-and-10 from the Chiefs 32. But time expired before Manziel could get another snap off. He spiked his helmet in frustration.

Ravens 20, Steelers 17: Ryan Mallett threw for a career-high 274 yards in his first start with Baltimore in leading the host Ravens to one of the biggest upsets of this contentious rivalry.

The Ravens (5-10) had lost three straight, the last two by a combined 69-20 score. In this one, however, they turned back a team riding a three-game winning streak and striving for a playoff berth.

Baltimore swept Pittsburgh (9-6) for the first time since 2011. The Steelers remain in playoff contention.

Making his seventh career start, Mallett went 28 for 41 with a touchdown and no interceptions. Signed by the Ravens on Dec. 15, he was the fourth quarterback to start for Baltimore in a span of six weeks.

Texans 34, Titans 6: Brandon Weeden scored his first career rushing touchdown and threw for two more as visiting Houston took a big step toward clinching the AFC South.

Houston (8-7), which wraps up the regular season by hosting Jacksonville, couldn't clinch outright when Indianapolis beat Miami 18-12.

The Texans forced four turnovers and turned them into 17 points. Quintin Demps returned a fumble 33 yards for a touchdown less than two minutes into the game.

The Texans scored a season high in points despite starting their fourth different quarterback this season.

Colts 18, Dolphins 12: Third-string quarterback Charlie Whitehurst came off the bench again for visiting Indianapolis, which made a last-minute defensive stand to keep alive their faint playoff hopes.

The Dolphins had a first-and-goal at the 5 with 40 seconds left, but after three consecutive incompletions, rookie center Jamil Douglas appeared to snap the ball prematurely, and Tannehill was sacked by three Colts.

The Colts (7-8) would have been eliminated from the playoff race with a loss. The Dolphins (5-10) were eliminated two weeks ago.

Bills 16, Cowboys 6: Buffalo rookie Mike Gillislee ran 50 yards for a touch-

down with 2:25 remaining to secure the win for the host Bills.

Gillislee finished with 93 yards rushing and led a ground attack that totaled 236 yards. Karlos Williams scored on a 1-yard run as the Bills overcame an injury-depleted offense playing without running back LeSean McCoy.

Rookie linebacker A.J. Tarpley had an interception and sealed the win by forcing Lucky Whitehead to fumble on the kickoff return that followed Gillislee's touchdown.

Bears 26, Buccaneers 21: Ka'Deem Carey caught a touchdown pass from Jay Cutler and the third-string running back also scored on a 1-yard run to help visiting Chicago end a three-game losing streak.

Carey's 1-yard scoring reception put the Bears (6-9) ahead for good early in the fourth quarter. The second-year pro teamed with Matt Forte and Jeremy Langford to spearhead a rushing attack that produced 174 yards and kept Jameis Winston off the field for long stretches.

Lions 32, 49ers 17: Matthew Stafford threw for two touchdowns, including one to Calvin Johnson early in the fourth quarter for host Detroit.

The Lions (6-9) have won five of their last seven games, perhaps giving coach Jim Caldwell a chance to keep his job for a third season. The 49ers (4-11) have lost three straight and five of six under first-year coach Jim Tomsula.

Saints 38, Jaguars 27: At New Orleans, Drew Brees passed for 412 yards and three touchdowns despite his injured right foot.

Brees, who tore his plantar fascia ligament during a loss to Detroit last Monday, showed no ill effects of the normally painful injury while completing 25 of 36 passes.

Running back Tim Hightower, who missed the previous three seasons because of a knee injury and subsequent complications, consolidated his recent resurgence with 122 yards and two touchdowns rushing for New Orleans (6-9).

Blake Bortles passed for 368 yards and four TDs for Jacksonville (5-10).



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Celtics win 4th straight

Associated Press

BOSTON — Isaiah Thomas took off for the basket, just what the Boston Celtics needed with the game tightening up.

Thomas had consecutive key baskets and finished with 21 points, Evan Turner scored 19 and the Celtics won their fourth straight with a 100-91 victory over the New York Knicks on Sunday night.

With the Celtics clinging to a 90-85 lead and just over three minutes to play, Thomas came up with his timely driving baskets to push the lead back to nine. The first came on a drive down the lane and the second he easily beat everyone down the floor after grabbing the rebound.

"Super quick because he loves to score," Turner said of Thomas. "He was tenacious and I think he knew we needed a couple of plays and stepped up."

The Celtics had opened an 88-78 lead on Turner's driving basket with 6:11 to play before New York made its charge. Thomas' plays made sure the Celtics were never in danger of losing.

"We need him to be a good playmaker for us," Boston coach Brad Stevens said. "I think he would tell you it wasn't his best day, but again, he did make the biggest plays to push the lead from five to nine. That gives you a little bit of a comfort level."

Thomas added eight rebounds and six

assists.

Jae Crowder defended Knicks star Carmelo Anthony tough and scored 18 points, and Kelly Olynyk added 11 points and nine rebounds for Boston.

"He's tough. I mean, he's tough," Anthony said of the 5-foot-9 Thomas. "Little guy with big heart out there. Hard to stay in front of him, got to stay in front of him. Draws a lot of attention. If he don't have it with the way that they space the court, when guys (are) making shots, it's kind of tough to kind of stop him."

Anthony led the Knicks with 29 points despite shooting just 11 of 26. Kristaps Porzingis had 16 points and 12 rebounds.

Grizzlies 112, Lakers 96: Mike Conley scored 19 points, Jeff Green added 17 and host Memphis led from start to finish in a win over Los Angeles.

Marc Gasol and Zach Randolph added 16 points apiece, while Courtney Lee contributed 13. Conley and Gasol both connected on 7 of 11 shots and Randolph missed only one of his eight attempts as Memphis shot close to 60 percent for the game before finishing at 56 percent.

Kobe Bryant, playing in only the first and third quarters, scored 19 for the Lakers, with 14 in the opening quarter. Larry Nance Jr. had 17 points and 11 rebounds, while Jordan Clarkson scored 12 points and D'Angelo Russell finished with 10.

Thunder 122, Nuggets 112: Russell Westbrook had 30 points, 12 assists and nine rebounds, and Oklahoma City rallied from an 11-point, second-half deficit to beat visiting Denver.

Kevin Durant recorded his eighth double-double of the season with 26 points and 10 assists for the Thunder, who have won 10 of their last 12 games but were coming off a Christmas Day loss at home to the Chicago Bulls.

Oklahoma City shot a season-best 57.8 percent from the field. The Thunder trailed as late as the 8:13 mark of the fourth quarter before taking control with an 11-2 run that included seven of Enes Kanter's 21 points.

Kenneth Faried had 25 points and 11 points for the Nuggets, who have lost five of their last six games.

Trail Blazers 98, Kings 94: CJ McCollum had 35 points, 11 rebounds and nine assists to lead Portland over host Sacramento.

The Blazers outscored Sacramento 18-14 in the fourth quarter to claim their second straight victory. They were coming off a convincing 105-76 win Saturday over the Cleveland Cavaliers.

DeMarcus Cousins had 36 points and six rebounds for the Kings. Omri Casspi had 14 points and 10 rebounds, and Rajon Rondo finished with nine points and 15 assists.

Former OF Henderson dies of heart attack

SEATTLE — Former major league outfielder Dave Henderson has died after suffering a massive heart attack. He was 57.

Henderson died early Sunday morning at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, according to a statement from the Mariners, one of five teams Henderson played for in his career.

Henderson was best known for his home run in the 1986 AL Championship Series for Boston. With the Red Sox one strike from elimination in Game 5, Henderson hit a two-out, two-run homer in the top of the ninth against the California Angels to send the series back to Boston. The Red Sox won Games 6 and 7 to advance to the World Series.

Ex-Globetrotters star Meadowlark Lemon dies

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Meadowlark Lemon, the "clown prince" of basketball's barnstorming Harlem Globetrotters, whose blend of hook shots and humor brought joy to millions of fans around the world, has died. He was 83.

Lemon's wife and daughter confirmed to the team that he died Sunday in Scottsdale, Ariz., Globetrotters spokesman Brett Meister said Monday. Meister did not know the cause of death.

Though skilled enough to play professionally, Lemon instead wanted to entertain, his dream of playing for the Globetrotters hatched after watching a newsreel of the all-black team at a cinema house when he was 11.

Lemon ended up becoming arguably the team's most popular player, a showman known as much for his confetti-in-the-water-bucket routine and slapstick comedy as his half-court hook shots and no-look, behind-the-back passes.

Sabres' Kane says he's innocent in sex offense

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Buffalo Sabres forward Evander Kane said Monday he has done nothing wrong and is looking forward to clearing his name amid a sex offense investigation.

Kane spoke for about 30 seconds in the Sabres locker room on Monday morning following the team's skate before its game against the Washington Capitals. It was the first time Kane was able to comment since The Buffalo News was the first to report a day earlier that he was the subject of the investigation by Buffalo police.

The alleged incident occurred early Sunday at a downtown hotel, where Kane is living, after he and the Sabres returned to Buffalo following a 6-3 win at Boston.

A person with direct knowledge of the investigation told The Associated Press that police are in the preliminary stages of investigating the claim made against Kane. No police report or charges have been filed.

From the Associated Press

Panthers edge Blue Jackets

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — The Florida Panthers made a giant leap to the top of the standings Sunday.

Aleksander Barkov had a pair of goals as the streaking Panthers earned their sixth straight win to take over the top spot in the Atlantic Division, beating the Columbus Blue Jackets 3-2 at BB&T Center.

Aaron Ekblad also scored a goal for the Panthers (20-12-4). Jonathan Huberdeau had two assists. Reilly Smith and Vincent Trocheck also added helpers.

Brandon Saad and Cam Atkinson scored for Columbus (13-22-3).

Justin Falk, Kevin Connauton, Alexander Wennberg and Ryan Murray had assists.

Roberto Luongo made 15 saves for Florida. Columbus's Curtis McElhinney had 29 saves.

The Panthers started the day one point out of first place in the Atlantic and received help when Ottawa beat Boston 3-1 earlier in the day. The win moved Florida to 44 points, one ahead of Detroit and Montreal.

"It's exciting," said Florida coach Gerard

Gallant, whose club has won 12 of their last 15 games. "We're playing the game and we see Boston had lost in the afternoon, so if we would've won tonight knew we could get to first place. It's almost a new year and being in first place means a lot."

With Florida ahead 1-0 late in the period, Barkov won a faceoff back to Huberdeau inside the period's final minute before Huberdeau skated below the goal line and fed a pass into the low slot. Barkov's shot beat McElhinney on the stick side at 19:42 to give the Panthers a 2-0 lead.

Barkov added his second on a give-and-go with Huberdeau after a late Columbus line change in the third period.

Stars 3, Blues 0: Kari Lehtonen made 22 saves in his 33rd career shutout, Jamie Benn scored his NHL-leading 23rd goal and host Dallas beat St. Louis.

Benn and Patrick Sharp each had a power-play goal and an assist. Cody Eakin scored into an empty net with 1:32 remaining.

Maple Leafs 3, Islanders 1: Tyler Bozak and Michael Grabner scored 1:40

apart in the second period to lead visiting Toronto to a victory.

Senators 3, Bruins 1: Mark Stone scored twice, Craig Anderson stopped 38 shots and host Ottawa beat Boston.

Flames 5, Oilers 3: Red-hot Johnny Gaudreau scored twice and Calgary beat Edmonton for its franchise-record 11th straight home win.

Hurricanes 2, Blackhawks 1: Justin Faulk and Victor Rask scored, backup Eddie Lack stopped 35 shots and Carolina beat host Chicago.

Ducks 4, Flyers 2: Corey Perry had the tying and go-ahead goals, Shawn Horcoff scored a short-handed goal and Ryan Getzlaf connected on a power play, leading host Anaheim to its fifth straight win over Philadelphia.

Coyotes 2, Avalanche 1 (OT): Mikkel Boedker scored at 4:17 of overtime and Anders Lindback stopped 38 shots, helping Arizona beat host Colorado.

Jets 1, Penguins 0: Connor Hellebuyck made 30 saves in his first career NHL shutout to help host Winnipeg beat Pittsburgh.

Carter, Stone shine as No. 4 Maryland defeats Marshall

Associated Press

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Maryland center Diamond Stone is finding his scoring touch just in time for his Big Ten debut.

The freshman continued his recent strong stretch Sunday, finishing with 16 points as the fourth-ranked Terrapins pulled away for an 87-67 victory over Marshall.

"He makes it look so easy," Maryland

coach Mark Turgeon said of Stone, who was 8 of 10 from the field.

Forward Robert Carter added 19 points as Maryland (11-1) shook off 19 turnovers and countered Marshall's perimeter-focused offense with a heavy emphasis on inside play.

"That was our plan," Turgeon said. "I thought we shot too many jump shots early. But we settled down. We went inside."

After a sluggish start to the season, Stone has scored in double figures in his last five games, including a career-best 16 points three times. And the McDonald's All-America has done it primarily while coming off the bench, he says, for the first time "since fourth grade."

He was Turgeon's first sub against Marshall and played a career-high 25 minutes in his final game before Maryland opens the Big Ten season against Penn

State on Wednesday.

"I kind of accepted it and I realized that we're a team and it's not just all about me," Stone said of his role. "And if we're winning and I'm coming off the bench, then it's a good win."

Rasheed Sulaimon added 14 points, while Melo Trimble had 13 and hit three three-pointers, part of a season-high 13 for the Terps.