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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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AF chief says 30K more airmen needed

USA Today

GRAND FORKS AIR FORCE BASE, N.D. — The Air Force's top officer said the service is critically short of personnel and needs to expand by more than 30,000 active-duty servicemembers to meet its security obligations, including an air war against Islamic State group militants.

"We just got too small too fast and we've got to grow," Gen. David Goldfein, the Air Force chief of staff, told USA Today in an interview Wednesday. "We're at a risk level I'm not comfortable with."

Goldfein, who is completing a five-day tour of air bases around the United States, said the trip reinforced his concerns that the service is stretched thin. "The shortage of people has fundamentally changed the way we do business," he said. "To most of the American people, they still think they have the Air Force of Desert Storm (1990-91 Gulf War) and we're not even close."

President-elect Donald Trump, who promised to rebuild the military, likely will face an array of requests from the services, which have lobbied for more troops and weapons in years past but have had to

preside over smaller forces more recently because of budget pressures despite a resurgence of new threats, particularly in the Middle East.

Goldfein said he will recommend expanding the size of the active-duty Air Force from its current size of about 317,000 to 350,000. It probably would take five or six years to reach the higher level. Under current plans, the Air Force had planned to grow to 321,000.

The increase in personnel size would cost about an additional \$3 billion per year on top of the Air Force's \$151 billion budget.

In 2014, the Islamic State group swept into Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, prompting the Obama administration to deploy roughly 5,000 troops in Iraq and to begin a bombing campaign over Iraq and Syria.

The Air Force is ferrying tons of weapons and ammunition to Iraqi forces battling the Islamic State, and has air-dropped supplies to a rebel force marching on Raqqa, the Islamic State's de facto capital in Syria. It also is responding to other global crises.

"It seems like every two weeks, we're

responding to a crisis or event around the globe," said Gen. Carlton Everhart, commander of the Air Mobility Command at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois.

Meanwhile, China is expanding its presence in the South China Sea and Russia has become a major player in Syria's civil war, siding with the regime of President Bashar Assad.

The U.S. Air Force has rarely been challenged in the skies during its campaign against the Islamic State group. That could change if the United States were to face another nation's military.

Earlier this week, Goldfein spent a night with a crew in an underground nuclear control facility in a remote corner of Nebraska. Airmen guard the facility round the clock and a pair of young officers sit at the controls that would launch nuclear-tipped Minuteman III missiles from nearby silos if the president orders strikes.

At Schriever Air Force Base in Colorado, he spoke to airmen manning 24/7 operations centers where the service controls satellites that provide GPS and communications coverage around the world.

AFRICOM ends Libya strikes as 'core objective' reached

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. Africa Command has ended its air campaign against the Islamic State group in Libya after carrying out nearly 500 airstrikes in support of local ground forces who pushed the militants from their coastal stronghold.

During the 4-month-long Operation Odyssey Lightning, U.S. warplanes pounded a range of targets on an almost daily basis, hitting everything from enemy fighting positions and roadside bombs devices to command and control centers and weapons caches.

The mission centered on backing up forces aligned with Libya's Government of National Accord, which led a ground assault on the Islamic State militants in the coastal city of Sirte. A year ago, several thousand Islamic State fighters were believed to be operating across the city.

Those numbers dwindled to several hundred by late summer.

"In partnership with the Libyan Government of National Accord, the operation succeeded in its core objective of enabling GNA-aligned forces to drive Daesh out of Sirte," AFRICOM said, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group.

For now, no other strikes are planned, AFRICOM said. But that could change, depending on conditions.

AFRICOM's chief, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, has expressed concern about fighters who have fled Sirte during the offensive, saying they could cause trouble elsewhere.

"We have to continue to develop those targets and have certainty of who we are seeing and what the activities are," Waldhauser said in an interview with Stars and Stripes in November. "We just need to have that level of certainty if we decide to strike outside the limits of Sirte."

The move to neutralize Islamic State fighters in other parts of Libya comes amid

concerns the group could reorganize and threaten the North African nation's fragile government or infiltrate into neighboring states.

AFRICOM officially ended the mission in Sirte on Monday at the request of the Libyan government. AFRICOM has pledged continued support if called upon.

Operation Odyssey Lightning was AFRICOM's second combat foray in Libya. The command was in charge of the initial wave of strikes in 2011 against the regime of dictator Moammar Gadhafi. The operation, later taken over by NATO, turned one of Africa's wealthiest nations into a failed state, with a weak central authority and an array of tribal, criminal and Islamist militias, including the Islamic State group. Security analysts have said the complex mix of forces makes Libya a harder place for Islamic State fighters to gain traction than in the group's strongholds in Syria and Iraq.

Navy, Marines go it alone in Alligator Dagger exercise

BY CHRIS CHURCH

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — The Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group and 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit completed a two-week exercise with no shoreside assistance near Djibouti Thursday, officials said.

Alligator Dagger showed combatant commanders and allies that the ARG/MEU is a flexible, combat-ready land, sea and air force that can respond quickly to any threat in the region, said 11th MEU Commander Col. Clay C. Tipton.

Djibouti is in the Horn of Africa, across the Bab el Mandeb strait from Yemen. In October, Iranian-backed Houthi rebels fired cruise missiles at U.S. Navy ships in the strait — one of three vital maritime commerce chokepoints in the Middle East — and the Red Sea on several occasions, not far from where the exercise was conducted. However, officials said the decision to conduct the training in Djibouti wasn't in response to those attacks.

The exercise was unusual in that it brought the entire ARG/MEU together and was entirely sustained by Naval forces with no shoreside assistance, said a U.S. Naval Forces Central Command spokesman.

"Everything that we did, we were tied back to the ARG shipping," said Tipton. "That included making water. A large portion of the exercise we had 1,500 Marines or more ashore conducting training ... They were drinking water that our Marines were making on the beach."

To be successful, the Navy and Marine teams had to work together on a number of tasks, including transporting fuel trucks to and from the beach to fuel ashore assets, Tipton said.

It's the type of exercise U.S. Naval Forces Central Command has wanted in the past and was pleased when it came to fruition, said NAVCENT spokesman Lt. Ian McConnaughey. Officials would like

every ARG/MEU team that comes into the theater to conduct this kind of amphibious and combat training.

"This is a unique theater where plenty of things can happen," McConnaughey said. "We want to make sure we are prepared, and people know we are prepared to respond to any kind of emergent crisis."

Alligator Dagger, which was announced Dec. 7, used all three of the ships in the ARG — the amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island, the amphibious transport dock ship USS Somers and the amphibious dock landing ship USS Comstock. It also involved a variety of MEU assets including ground and aviation combat elements.

It focused on a variety of mission sets including amphibious assaults, helicopter-borne raids, visit, board, search-and-seizure operations, airstrikes, and defense of the amphibious task force.

Amphibious ready groups are considered a Swiss Army knife for the U.S. military because they can conduct a vast array of operations at sea, on land and in the air. Their components can work in concert or individually.

For instance, during most of the USS Wasp amphibious ready group's deployment last summer, the Wasp, an amphibious assault ship, conducted air operations from the 6th Fleet area of operations over Libya, while the other two ships operated throughout the 5th Fleet area of responsibility.

The ships are also able to come together to work as an aggregated force, a sort of force multiplier, as they demonstrated during Alligator Dagger.

"One of the things we always stress on the blue-green team is readiness," said Capt. Mike Crary, the commander of Amphibious Squadron 5. "[We] always want to be ready for any tasking our commanders give us, so the reason we did it was to make sure our skill sets are refined and ready to go."

US returns swath of land to Okinawa

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND CHIYOMI SUMIDA

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — U.S. and Japanese representatives came together Thursday, despite protests, to return the largest swath of land to the Japanese government since 1972.

Meeting at Nago's Bankoku Shinryokan Hall, U.S. officials handed back 4,000 of the Northern Training Area's 7,542 hectares — or nearly 10,000 acres, roughly the size of two Kadena Air Bases. The land is mostly undeveloped jungle. It now will be absorbed and protected by the surrounding Yanbaru National Park.

Though the return officially reduced the American footprint on Okinawa by 20 percent, the ceremony was overshadowed by protesters seeking a smaller American military presence on Okinawa and was boycotted by Okinawa Gov. Takeshi Onaga, who opposes U.S. basing on the island.

The government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe "has worked with a determination that it would do everything possible to mitigate the impacts of

the military presence on Okinawa, and in a visible way," Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said during the ceremony.

Suga also tried to assuage the fears of residents who had opposed six helicopter landing zones built in a consolidated area to facilitate the land's return.

"Construction of the helicopter landing zones has caused great trouble and concern to residents in Kunigami and Higashi villages," he said. "Safety is the major prerequisite. To mitigate aircraft noise and ensure safety, we will work closely with the (U.S.) military so their aircraft avoids flying over residential areas."

U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy said the handover would reduce the U.S. military footprint on Okinawa while allowing the United States to fulfill its security commitments to Japan. She said it would allow for the untouched jungle to be protected for future generations.

"Japan and the U.S. are the closest of allies," she said. "Today's ceremony marks a milestone in (that) alliance."

USS Zumwalt gets new commander

The Navy's biggest, most expensive and technologically advanced warship has a new commanding officer.

Capt. James A. Kirk relinquished command of the USS Zumwalt to Capt. Scott A. Tait during a ceremony Tuesday at Naval Base San Diego.

Kirk had led the new destroyer since it departed Maine shipbuilder Bath Iron Works in September. The \$4.4 billion vessel was plagued by problems, including a highly publicized breakdown in the Panama Canal, during its monthslong

journey to its homeport in San Diego.

Tait, who joins the Zumwalt from the Joint Staff J5 Directorate, expressed his gratitude to Kirk and the 147-member crew during the ceremony.

"That next chapter would not be possible if not for the effort that has gone into bringing Zumwalt to her current state," he said. "Words cannot express my gratitude, or my admiration, for the ship and crew that Capt. Kirk is turning over."

Kirk's next assignment is with Surface Warfare at the Pentagon, a Navy statement said.

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Trump could be open to ban on Muslim immigration to US

Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. — Denouncing the deadly attack on a Christmas market in Germany, President-elect Donald Trump renewed his vow to stop radical terror groups and appeared to suggest a willingness to move ahead with his campaign pledge to temporarily ban Muslim immigrants from coming to the United States.

Trump proposed the ban during the Republican primary campaign, drawing criticism from both parties. During the general election, he shifted his rhetoric to focus on temporarily halting immigration from an unspecified list of countries with ties to terrorism, though he did not disavow the Muslim ban, which is prominently displayed on his campaign website.

The president-elect, when asked Wednesday if the attack in Berlin would cause him to

evaluate the proposed ban or a possible registry of Muslims in the United States, said “You know my plans. All along, I’ve been proven to be right, 100 percent correct.”

Trump said the violence is “an attack on humanity, and it’s got to be stopped.”

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for Monday’s attack in Berlin that left 12 people dead and 48 injured. On Wednesday, German officials launched a Europe-wide manhunt for a Tunisian man suspected in the killings.

Trump, who addressed reporters for less than two minutes outside his South Florida estate, said he has not spoken to President Barack Obama since the attack. Aides said he received the classified presidential daily intelligence briefing Wednesday and met with incoming White House national security

adviser Michael Flynn.

Trump was spending the final days of 2016 huddled with advisers at Mar-a-Lago, his resort in Palm Beach finalizing his senior White House team.

The president-elect announced plans to hire economist Peter Navarro to run a new National Trade Council housed in the White House. Navarro, author of “Death by China,” has endorsed a hard line approach toward relations with Beijing.

Trump also named billionaire investor Carl Icahn as an adviser on regulatory reform, though the transition team said Icahn would not be serving as a federal government employee.

Trump also announced Thursday that Kellyanne Conway, who served as his campaign manager, will be part of the senior leadership team in the White House with responsibility for messaging.

NC lawmakers fail to repeal anti-LGBT law

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — A supposedly bipartisan deal to repeal North Carolina’s anti-LGBT law collapsed when both sides balked and started blaming each other, likely meaning corporations, entertainers and high-profile sporting events will continue to shun the state.

After more than nine hours of backroom discussions and sporadic public effort, Republican state legislators quit trying to repeal House Bill 2 and went home Wednesday night.

The law omits gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people from state anti-discrimination protections, bars local governments from passing broad nondiscrimination ordinances covering them, and orders transgender people to use bathrooms and showers that align with their sex at birth.

GOP legislators who see themselves as business-friendly appeared shaken by a monthslong backlash as major companies like BASF, IBM and Bank of America described HB2 as bad for business.

The compromise touted by both Democratic Gov.-elect Roy Cooper and outgoing GOP Gov. Pat McCrory called for Charlotte to do away with its ordinance. In exchange, lawmakers would undo the LGBT law.

But many conservatives never wanted to repeal the law, and GOP lawmakers cried foul when Charlotte leaders initially left part of the city’s ordinance in place. When the Senate bill called for a monthslong ban on cities passing similar ordinances, Democrats said Republicans were going back on their promise.

Senate leader Phil Berger, a Republican, blamed Cooper and the Democratic-controlled Charlotte City Council for sinking the repeal effort.

Berger said Charlotte officials misled lawmakers into thinking they had fully repealed their ordinance Monday.

The U.S. Justice Department contends the threat of sexual predators posing as transgender people to enter bathrooms is practically nonexistent.

Firm: Russian military hacked DNC

The Washington Post

A cybersecurity firm has uncovered strong proof of the tie between the group that hacked the Democratic National Committee and Russia’s military intelligence arm — the primary agency behind the Kremlin’s interference in the 2016 election.

The firm CrowdStrike linked malware used in the DNC intrusion to malware used to hack and track an Android phone app used by the Ukrainian army in its battle against pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine.

While CrowdStrike, which was hired by the DNC and whose findings are described in a new report, had suspected that one of the two hacker groups that struck the DNC was the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence agency, it had only medium confidence.

Now, said CrowdStrike co-founder Dmitri Alperovitch, “we have high confidence” it was a unit of the GRU. CrowdStrike had dubbed that unit “Fancy Bear.”

The FBI, which has been investigating Russia’s hacks of political, government, academic and other organizations for several years, privately has concluded the same.

CrowdStrike’s fingering of the GRU helps to deepen the public’s understanding of how different arms of the Russian government are carrying out malicious cyberacts in the United States. After the election, the CIA and other intelligence agencies concluded that one of Russia’s aims was to help President-elect Donald Trump win the election.

The GRU, evidently, was key to this operation.

CrowdStrike found that a

variant of the Fancy Bear malware that was used to penetrate the DNC’s network in April 2016 was also used to hack an Android app developed by the Ukrainian army to help artillery troops more efficiently train their howitzers on targets.

The Fancy Bear crew evidently hacked the app, allowing the GRU to use the phone’s GPS coordinates to track the Ukrainian troops’ position.

Ukrainian brigades operating in eastern Ukraine were on the front lines of the conflict with Russian-backed separatist forces during the early stages of the conflict in late 2014, CrowdStrike noted. By late 2014, Russian forces in the region numbered about 10,000. The Android app was useful in helping the Russian troops locate Ukrainian artillery positions.

Berlin Christmas market reopens after attack

Associated Press

BERLIN — Authorities across Europe scrambled Thursday to track down a Tunisian man suspected of driving a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin, as one of his brothers urged him to surrender.

Nearly three days after the attack that killed 12 people and injured 48 others, the market in the center of the German capital reopened, with concrete blocks in place at the roadside.

Organizers at the market decided to ditch party music or bright lighting, and Berliners and visitors have laid candles and flowers at the site in tribute.

German authorities issued a wanted notice for Anis Amri, 24, on Wednesday and offered a reward of up to \$104,000 for information leading to his arrest, warning that he could be “violent and armed.”

The Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper and broadcasters NDR and WDR reported Thursday that Amri’s fingerprints were found on the driver’s door of the Polish-registered truck used to ram the market Monday night. The daily Berliner Zeitung reported that his fingerprints were found on the truck’s steering wheel.

One of Amri’s brothers still in Tunisia, meanwhile, urged him to stop being a fugitive.

“I ask him to turn himself in to the police. If it is proved that he is involved, we dissociate ourselves from it,” Abdelkader Amri told The Associated Press.

Several locations across Germany were searched overnight, including a house in Dortmund and a refugee home in Emmerich, on the Dutch border, German media reported.

The manhunt also prompted police in Denmark to search a Sweden-bound ferry in the port of Grenaa after receiving tips someone resembling Amri had been spotted, but police said they found nothing indicating his presence.

An Israeli woman, Dalia Elyakim, and Fabrizia Di Lorenzo, 31, of Italy, were among the 12 killed in the Berlin market attack, their countries said.

German officials had deemed Amri, who arrived in the country last year, a potential threat long before the attack Monday — and even kept him under covert surveillance for six months this year before halting the operation.

They had been trying to deport him after his asylum application was rejected in July but were unable to do so because he lacked valid identity papers, and Tunisia initially denied he was a citizen.

Last of civilians to evacuate from Aleppo

Associated Press

BEIRUT — The evacuation of the last remaining civilians and fighters from the last rebel-held sliver of eastern Aleppo will be completed in the coming hours, the Red Cross and state TV said Thursday, as 4,000 people were evacuated overnight, and more gunmen and civilians braved freezing temperatures to leave.

The evacuations came as Syrian President Bashar Assad said his forces’ achievements in Aleppo are a “major step on the road to wiping out terrorism” and should pave the way toward ending Syria’s civil war.

By early afternoon, a steady stream of vehicles carrying opposition fighters moved through the Ramousseh crossing on their way to the main drop-off point in the Rashideen district.

The evacuations were set in motion last week after Syria’s opposition agreed to surrender its last footholds in eastern Aleppo. Since then, some 35,000 fighters and civilians have been bused out, according to the United Nations.

“The bad weather, including heavy snow and wind, and the poor state of vehicles mean things are moving much more slowly than expected,”

the ICRC statement said. “The evacuation will continue for the entire day and night and most probably tomorrow.”

The departures pave the way for President Bashar Assad to assume full control after more than four years of fighting over Syria’s largest city.

Ingy Sedky, a spokeswoman for the International Committee of the Red Cross, said the few thousand remaining people will be evacuated in 40 buses and hundreds of private cars. She said another four buses will leave the besieged government-held villages of Foua and Kfarya in the northwestern province of Idlib in a parallel evacuation. Hezbollah’s Al-Manar TV reported that two of the four buses that left Foua and Kfarya have arrived in government-held areas in Aleppo and two others are being held until the last group leaves Aleppo.

Sedky said the Aleppo operation will likely be completed later on Thursday. Exclusive Associated Press footage from Aleppo showed armed rebels in pickup trucks leaving the eastern part of the city on Thursday through the Ramousseh crossing.

Putin: Russia’s military stronger than anyone’s

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia’s military is now stronger than any potential foe, President Vladimir Putin told an annual end-of-year meeting with the defense ministry on Thursday.

“We can say with certainty: we are stronger now than any potential aggressor,” he told the meeting. “Anyone!”

His comments come at the end of a year when tensions between Russia and the West have remained strained, largely to do with differing approaches to the civil war in Syria.

Tensions between Russia and the West escalated after Russia’s annexation in

Crimea in 2014 and its involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Last year, Russia began an air force operation in Syria to support President Bashar Assad that has irked the U.S. in particular.

Both Russia and NATO members conducted a flurry of military drills near the Russian border this year. Russia has insisted that it’s bolstering its forces at the border to react to a growing NATO threat.

Speaking at the defense ministry’s headquarters in Moscow, Putin said Russia should follow closely any military movement along its border as well as changes “in the military and political situation globally.” He said Russia should be swift

in “adjusting plans to neutralize potential threats to our country.”

Putin made the comments after Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu presented his annual report, lauding Russia’s military achievements in Syria as well as successful efforts to modernize the Russian army.

Among other things, Shoigu said Russia “for the first time in its history” has fully covered the Russian border with early warning anti-missile systems. Shoigu complained about an increased number of NATO drone flights along the Russian border and announced plans to send more troops to Russia’s western, southwestern and Arctic regions.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman charged with stealing from church

RI WESTERLY — A Westerly woman was charged with stealing money from two church collection boxes.

Darlene Kripps is charged with larceny of less than \$1,500. The actual theft likely amounted to \$15 or less.

Police say surveillance footage at Immaculate Conception Church showed the 52-year-old walk into the candle room last week donning a long, hooded dark jacket and a red scarf.

Police say she used a tool to remove money from the offering boxes.

Malnourished children found living in car

FL GREENACRES — A man and woman are facing child neglect charges after a sheriff's deputy found five malnourished children living in a car parked outside a Wal-Mart store.

The Palm Beach Post reported Donell Barron and Rikki Hart, both 34, were arrested Sunday.

An arrest report said the deputy looked inside the car after detecting a strong odor "similar to that of homeless camps." Barron told the deputy the family lost their home and lived in motels until they ran out of money two months ago.

The Department of Children and Families took custody of the children.

First verified cougar sighting since 2011

LA BATON ROUGE — Wildlife biologists say they saw Louisiana's first verified cougar sighting in five years in a trail camera photo

taken last month.

There's no way to tell whether the animal photographed in northeast Louisiana is a wild animal or an escaped illegal pet, the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries said in a news release.

The cougar photographed Nov. 23 is unlikely to stay in one area longer than it would take to eat a kill, and may be photographed by other trail cameras set up at deer feeders, said Maria Davidson, the department's large carnivore program manager.

She said Louisiana's last documented cougar sighting was a trail camera photograph in Vernon Parish in August 2011.

Marine killed helping accident victim

CA LOMA LINDA — A Marine who stopped to help a driver in a rollover crash was struck and killed on Interstate 10 in Southern California.

Enrico Antonio Rojo, 29, was driving his family to an airport early Monday when he stopped because a woman's car had flipped onto its roof.

Redlands Fire Department Battalion Chief Jim Topoleski told the San Bernardino Sun that the Marine made a comment to his family that he had to help.

A short time later he was struck by another car, which stayed at the scene.

California Highway Patrol Officer Brian Alvarez says the driver of the car that overturned was arrested for investigation of driving under the influence.

Teen performs CPR on child at Chick-fil-A

DE DOVER — A Smyrna High School student

used CPR to save the life of an 18-month-old child at a Dover Chick-fil-A.

Theresa'lyn Outten told local media she was having lunch with her sister Monday at the Chick-fil-A when she "heard a commotion" and saw a toddler struggling to breathe. Outten, 18, a high school senior, sprang to action and performed CPR on the child as others called 911. She then began performing chest compressions.

Outten says the toddler was awake and alert when medics arrived. The child was taken to Ken General Hospital.

The teen says she attributes her skills and quick thinking to the training she received in her Allied Health class at Smyrna High School.

Man could be charged for biting deputy

WV PRINCETON—West Virginia officials say a man awaiting a pretrial hearing for attempted murder could be charged with biting a local sheriff's deputy.

The Bluefield Daily-Telegraph reported Ryan Keith Tilley, 33, of Princeton, is accused of biting Mercer County Sheriff's Deputy S.J. Cary on the left hand. Officials say Cary was bitten while he and other officers were attempting to restrain Tilley, who was kicking a metal toilet in a holding room after complaining that his handcuffs were too tight.

Cary was treated at the courthouse by the Princeton Rescue Squad and was taken to a hospital.

8th-grader punched by adult during game

OR GRANTS PASS — An eighth-grade basketball player from southern Or-

egon needed 10 stitches after he was punched in the face by an adult during an altercation.

The Daily Courier reported the incident happened after a hard foul in Sunday's game in Medford between a team from Humboldt County, Calif., and one from Hidden Valley, near Grants Pass.

After the boys involved in the foul exchanged blows, a Humboldt supporter ran on the court and punched the Hidden Valley player, opening a gash above his eye.

Medford police are tracking down video to determine what happened. Lt. Kerry Curtis said a "person of interest" contacted authorities to provide his side of the story.

The injured boy returned for the fourth quarter of the team's final game in Sunday's tournament.

Stranger gifts \$100 bills at laundry facility

OH COLUMBUS — Several patrons at an Ohio self-service laundry facility say they were sweetly surprised when a stranger handed them holiday cards, then stunned to discover the gift inside — a \$100 bill in each card.

The Columbus Dispatch reported a woman walked into the business south of downtown Columbus last weekend and handed cards to four women who were there, telling the last one simply, "Merry Christmas." Then the stranger disappeared before they could thank her.

That generosity alleviated an immediate financial problem for one recipient, who says she had an auto-insurance bill due the next day and was worried about balancing that with Christmas dinner this week.

From wire reports

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Alabama is unbeaten, not unbeatable

Associated Press

Everybody says they want Alabama. Then they get the Crimson Tide and reality sets in: These guys are almost impossible to beat.

Alabama is in the College Football Playoff for the third straight season, the only school that can make that claim. And as good as Alabama has been through an unprecedented run of four national titles in seven seasons, this version of the top-ranked Tide might be the best of all.

Washington is in contention for a national title for the first time in decades, with a coach who has a reputation for pulling off upsets. Ohio State fans have every reason to believe the Buckeyes can take down the Tide — Urban Meyer's team did just that in the first playoff semifinals.

Deshaun Watson and Clemson went toe-to-toe with the Tide in last season's championship game.

Coach Nick Saban's crew of former blue-chip recruits and future NFL players is unbeaten, but are they unbeatable? A case for each of the teams in the playoff:

Washington

What it needs to do: Play the perfect game.

Sounds impossible, right? It seems the only chance Washington has against the Crimson Tide is to play flawlessly and hope Alabama is already looking forward to hanging out on the beaches of Tampa ahead of the championship game.

But perfection for the Huskies doesn't mean going outside of what got them to the national semifinals, especially on the offensive side.

"You don't want to get too far away from what got you to this point," Washington offensive coordinator Jonathan Smith said. "At the same time you've got some time to put in some wrinkles or do things differently."

Quarterback Jake Browning spent most of the season avoiding mistakes and must do the same against Alabama. But his

two worst games came against USC and Colorado, the two most athletic and physical defenses the Huskies faced. Alabama had 45 sacks this season, third most in the nation, and Browning is not particularly mobile. If Browning can get the ball to speedster John Ross and fellow wide receiver Dante Pettis — big if — there could be some favorable matchups for Washington.

Possible difference-maker: Coach Chris Petersen. He has a track record during his time at Boise State of beating long odds. The ultimate example happened 10 years ago when his first Boise State team knocked off Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl. Petersen loves his tricky plays and has a good feel for when to break out the gadgets.

Chances to beat 'Bama: Poor. No team truly matches up with Alabama, but the Huskies' relatively inexperienced offensive line and stationary quarterback is a recipe for disaster.

Ohio State

What it needs to do: Beat Alabama at its own game, turning turnovers into touchdowns.

The Crimson Tide has 14 non-offensive touchdowns, including 11 on defense. Ohio State has seven defensive touchdowns.

Ohio State will have a hard time recreating the offensive success it had against Alabama in the 2014 semifinals if it does face the Tide in the championship game in Tampa, Florida, on Jan. 9.

The Buckeyes struggled this season against good defenses, such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Penn State. The Buckeyes have proved resilient, though, rallying to win overtime games against the Badgers and Wolverines.

"I think it's good for us to have a few tough games under our belt because we know how to respond to adversity," running back Mike Weber said. "We know how it is to play really good teams."

The Buckeyes best hope is defense and special teams. They have a front seven that

can pressure Tide quarterback Jalen Hurts. The Buckeyes secondary is one of the best in the nation, led by All-America safety Malik Hooker, who has returned three interceptions for touchdowns. Thanks to Cameron Johnston's well-placed punts, Ohio State has allowed 3.2 yards per return.

Possible difference-maker: J.T. Barrett has not been much of a down-field passer for Ohio State, but he is mobile (847 yards rushing) and one of the best in the country at protecting the ball with only five interceptions. Ohio State is a team that could — maybe — force Alabama's offense to do all the scoring.

Chances to beat 'Bama: Better than Washington's, but still not great with an offense that does not stretch the field.

Clemson

What it needs to do: Start with what it did in last year's championship game.

"You take a carbon copy of that game plan," former Clemson coach Tommy Bowden said. "Pare back the things that didn't work and bring it in to face Alabama."

Alabama's stunning on-side pop kick in a 24-all game turned things in the Tide's favor against Clemson in a 45-40 thriller.

"If they had just played someone 2 yards back to catch that kick," Bowden said with a chuckle.

Clemson showed Alabama's defense could be beat, though it takes a special effort by a special player. Watson accounted for 478 yards and four TDs.

This is not exposing a flaw in Alabama as much as it is stating the obvious: To beat a great defense — Alabama is No. 1 total defense, scoring defense and run defense — you need your great quarterback to play great. And it helps if he is great at multiple things, running and passing.

Watson was most effective running in the postseason last year, getting 68 carries and 349 yards in the ACC title game and the team's two College Football Playoff games.

Possible difference-maker: Mike Williams, who has 84 catches for 1,171 yards and 10 touchdowns, did not play in last season's game as he was recovering from a neck injury. The 6-foot-3, 205-pound Williams is a matchup nightmare.

Chances to beat 'Bama: "Of the three teams, I think Clemson has the best chance," Bowden said.

Bowden is probably a bit biased, but he is also right.

Alabama

What it needs to do: Implode.

The Crimson Tide is not perfect. You do have to dig deep to find the flaws.

Alabama has fallen behind — OK, by one score — in each of its past three games against Florida (7-0), Auburn (3-0) and even Chattanooga (3-0). But none of those teams really mounted much of a challenge.

The defense must replace starting inside linebacker Shaun Dion Hamilton (knee), but it is loaded with potential first-round draft picks and All-Americans Jonathan Allen, Reuben Foster and Minkah Fitzpatrick. And the likely replacement for Hamilton, Rashaan Evans, was one of the nation's top recruits and has played in 39 career games.

Possible difference-maker: Hurts has made some mistakes early in games and is not the most accurate passer.

If opponents are going to make Alabama pay for any freshman mistakes, they'd better jump on them early. Hurts has been intercepted only twice in the second half while throwing 14 touchdown passes. Of course, Hurts has also had few games that were still undecided in the fourth quarter.

Chances to beat 'Bama: Straight up, nobody is outplaying Alabama.

"We don't think about really what has to happen for us to lose," guard Ross Pierschbacher said. "I think we have the mindset that we can only beat ourselves. I'll just leave it at that."

Duke suspends guard Allen indefinitely

Associated Press

GREENSBORO, N.C. — Duke suspended Grayson Allen indefinitely from the team Thursday, one day after he was caught tripping an opponent for the third time in a year.

In a brief statement announcing the suspension, coach Mike Krzyzewski said the program “needed to take further steps regarding his actions that do not meet the standards of Duke basketball.”

Allen picked up a technical foul for tripping Elon’s Steven Santa Ana on a drive in the first half of a 72-61 win Wednesday night. That earned him a seat on the bench for the final 4:15 of the half and the start of the second half, though he returned to the game with about 16 minutes left.

Afterward, Allen met with Santa Ana and Elon coach Matt Matheny to apologize before hanging his head and fighting back tears while talking to reporters in the locker room.

“Just talking about what led up to it is just an excuse,” Allen said. “There’s no excuse for it.”

Krzyzewski called Allen’s actions “unacceptable and inexcusable” in the statement. He described them similarly in the immediate aftermath of the game, but at

that time declined to publicly reveal any other measures or reprimands.

“I handle things the way I handle them,” Krzyzewski said after the game. “I think I’ve handled this correctly and moving forward I will continue to handle it correctly, and I don’t need to satisfy what other people think I should do.

“I’m a teacher and a coach. And I’m responsible for that kid, so I know him better than anybody. So to think that it’s the last thing that’s said about this to him is wrong. Obviously, we will do more. It doesn’t mean you have to see it, or anybody else has to see it.”

Teammate Matt Jones said he tried to console the emotional Allen afterward.

“I love Grayson, he’s my brother,” Jones said. “We’ve been to battle, we’ve won a (national) championship together. We won plenty of games together. So there’s nothing really you can say.

“I just gave him a really big hug, told him, ‘I love you.’ That’s all that was, and let the silence kind of fill the void. There’s nothing really you can say about it.”

It’s officially a pattern for Allen, who was twice caught tripping opponents last winter.

On Feb. 9, Allen received a flagrant foul for extending his leg to trip Louisville’s

Ray Spalding after he fell to the court and Spalding tried to go by him. Roughly two weeks later, Allen kicked up his left leg to trip Florida State’s Xavier Rathan-Mayes as Rathan-Mayes tried to run by from behind.

Allen wasn’t called for a foul there, but the Atlantic Coast Conference later reprimanded him.

The Blue Devils don’t play again until opening ACC play at Virginia Tech on Dec. 31.

“I made a really bad play,” Allen said after the game. “I’m sorry to him, Santa Ana. I’m sorry to the officials who have to call that. I’m sorry to my team. It’s selfish and it took away from them. I’m not proud of it at all.”

After Allen’s trip, Duke (12-1) saw a 32-24 lead turn into a 35-34 halftime deficit before earning its 10th straight win in its final game before starting conference play.

Brian Dawkins scored 18 points for the Phoenix (7-5). Santa Ana, who finished with 11 points, tried to deflect questions about the trip.

“He came up to me and apologized to me and was very sincere about it,” Santa Ana said of the postgame meeting, “and I accepted his apology.”

Snider, Louisville outlast No. 6 Kentucky

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Scoreless in two previous rivalry games, the point guard Louisville calls “Q” regrouped to be the Cardinals’ X-factor against Kentucky.

Quentin Snider scored a career-high 22 points, including a key drive with 1:44 remaining, and Jaylen Johnson and Donovan Mitchell combined for four points in the final 16 seconds to help No. 10 Louisville hold off No. 6 Kentucky 73-70 on Wednesday night in the 50th battle for Bluegrass bragging rights.

After managing just two rebounds in 28 minutes last year in Lexington, Snider rebounded with 10-for-19 shooting, including two three-pointers, as the Cardinals earned a signature win against their in-state rival. The Louisville native’s final basket was beautiful, a fake ending with a drive for a 69-

63 lead that proved critical in withstanding Kentucky’s furious final rally.

“This was pretty big,” Snider said. “Last year’s performance kind of carried into my mind the whole season, so I was waiting for this game. This was kind of a revenge game.”

It ended a four-game losing streak in the series.

Malik Monk — whose NBA-range three-pointer with 12 seconds left capped a 7-2 run that got Kentucky within 71-70 before he fouled Mitchell in the backcourt — bounced another three-point attempt to tie off the front of the rim with 3 seconds left. Deng Adel (career-high 18 points) grabbed the rebound to seal the win for Louisville (11-1) and spark a loud celebration among teammates and fans.

No. 1 Villanova 90, American 48: Josh Hart scored 20 points to lead the host Wildcats (12-0) to their 18th straight win.

No. 2 UCLA 82, Western Michigan 68: Bryce Alford scored 22 points, Aaron Holiday had 16 and TJ Leaf added 14 as the host Bruins (13-0) remained unbeaten.

No. 4 Baylor 89, Texas Southern 63: Johnathan Motley had 17 points and 11 rebounds and the host Bears finished their perfect run through nonconference play.

No. 7 Gonzaga 102, South Dakota 65: Freshman Zach Collins scored 21 points and the host Bulldogs (12-0) are off to the best start in program history.

No. 8 North Carolina 85, Northern Iowa 42: Kennedy Meeks scored 10 of his 18 points during the host Tar Heels’ dominant second half.

No. 12 Virginia 56, California 52: Isaiah Wilkins scored a tiebreaking three-point play with 1:02 remaining, Mamadi Diakite added a key basket in the final minute and the Cava-

liers snapped the Golden Bears’ school-record 27-game home winning streak.

No. 13 Butler 81, Vermont 69: Andrew Chrabaszcz scored a season-high 28 points and the host Bulldogs (11-1) shot 69.6 percent in the second half.

No. 15 Purdue 91, Norfolk St. 45: Caleb Swanigan had a career-best 32 points and 20 rebounds — his fourth consecutive double-double — to lead the host Boilermakers to their sixth straight victory.

Clemson 62, No. 22 South Carolina 60: Jaron Blossomgame had 15 points and 10 rebounds to lead the visiting Tigers to their seventh straight victory.

Army 71, Binghamton 60: Jordan Fox had eight points, 10 assists and six rebounds, Matt Wilson added 15 points in 15 minutes for the visiting Black Knights.

Cavs top Bucks for 2nd time in 24 hours

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Kyrie Irving didn't get tired of seeing the Milwaukee Bucks on consecutive days in December.

In fact, he wouldn't mind playing them a few more times in late April, May or June when it really matters.

"I hope," he said.

Irving had 31 points and a career-high 13 assists while LeBron James scored 29 as the Cleveland Cavaliers won their second game in 24 hours over the young Bucks, 113-102 on Wednesday despite being without two starters.

The NBA champions were not at full strength as Kevin Love didn't dress for the second straight game with a bruised left knee, and J.R. Smith sat out after breaking his right thumb Tuesday at Milwaukee. Smith needs surgery, and the Cavs won't have a timetable on his return until after the operation.

They were barely missed as Cleveland's two biggest stars more than made up for the absences and the Cavs won for the

eight time in nine games.

After his big performance Wednesday night, Irving was asked if he sees the Bucks as a contender, a team Cleveland could meet in the playoffs. Milwaukee beat the Cavs 118-101 on Nov. 29.

"I hope, man. It would be great, four games against them," Irving said. "I'm fired up to go against them every time now, for real. Ever since they kicked our (butts) in Milwaukee it's been personal and it's going to continue to be personal."

Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 28 points and Jabari Parker 27 for the Bucks, who took the Cavs to overtime at home Tuesday but fell behind by 21 in the fourth quarter this time and couldn't come back.

"They're the champs," Milwaukee coach Jason Kidd said. "They showed that again tonight. They never panic. They've seen everything. For a young team like ourselves, we're going through that. Hopefully, we can learn from

our mistakes."

Tristan Thompson added 15 rebounds for Cleveland.

Cavs coach Tyronn Lue wanted to rest Irving and James, who played a respective 47 and 45 minutes in Tuesday's overtime win at Milwaukee.

"He came to me and asked me how I felt. I said great," James said. "He gave me a little look and I said, 'I feel great,' and uh, that was it."

Mavericks 96, Trail Blazers 95: Harrison Barnes had 28 points and visiting Dallas held off a furious rally by Portland that ended when Damian Lillard missed a three-pointer at the final buzzer.

Deron Williams added 23 points for the Mavericks, who led by 25 early in the third quarter.

Lillard finished with 29 points, including 20 in the third period. It was Portland's fourth straight loss.

Grizzlies 98, Pistons 86: Marc Gasol matched a career high with 38 points on 14-for-17 shooting, and Memphis beat

host Detroit in a matchup of slumping teams.

The Grizzlies ended their three-game losing streak, while Detroit dropped its fourth straight.

Timberwolves 92, Hawks 84: Andrew Wiggins scored 19 points and Karl-Anthony Towns had 17 points and 18 rebounds in visiting Minnesota's victory over Atlanta.

Thunder 121, Pelicans 110: Russell Westbrook had 42 points and 10 rebounds to lead Oklahoma City over host New Orleans.

Wizards 107, Bulls 97: John Wall had 23 points and nine assists, and Washington rallied past Chicago for its third road victory of the season.

Rockets 125, Suns 111: James Harden had 27 points and 14 assists, propelling visiting Houston past Phoenix for its 11th victory in 12 games.

Kings 94, Jazz 93: DeMarcus Cousins scored 21 points and Sacramento rallied from a 20-point deficit to defeat host Utah.

Oilers beat Coyotes in regulation for first time in 26 games

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Edmonton's fourth line, centered by feisty Mark Letestu, does not get the recognition it sometimes may deserve. Fourth lines rarely due, especially on teams with stars like Connor McDavid.

Those fourth liners were the difference Wednesday night, helping the Oilers end one long, frustrating streak.

Letestu had a goal, two assists and a fight, anchoring a fourth line that combined for seven points in a 3-2 win over Arizona, the Oilers' first regulation win against the Coyotes in 26 games.

"We've won now, so we don't have to answer all your questions," Oilers coach Todd McLellan said. "Tonight's game was not different probably than many during the streak, but we

found a way to win."

Arizona had gone 21-0-4 its previous 25 games against the Oilers, including a pair of wins this season. Edmonton jumped on the Coyotes with two goals in the first period and pushed the lead to 3-0 in the second to beat Arizona for the first time since Jan. 25, 2011.

Arizona's points streak had been tied for sixth-most against one opponent in NHL history.

The fourth line made the victory happen.

Letestu scored the first goal, had assists on the two others and went toe to toe with Martin Hanzal in the third period to complete the "Gordie Howe Hat Trick."

Linemate Matt Hendricks had a goal and an assist, and fellow fourth-liner Zack Kassian had two assists.

"I'd like to say it's all the saucer passes and toe drags,

but no, it's definitely simplicity with us," Hendricks said. "We just try to play to each other's strengths."

Cam Talbot stopped 28 shots in Edmonton's fourth win in five games.

Arizona started slow and finished strong. It still resulted in another one-goal loss.

The Coyotes were flat against the flying Oilers in the first period but showed some life in the second when Hanzal scored on a power play. Arizona made a big push in a testy third period and Oliver Ekman-Larsson scored with 6.1 seconds left, but it came too late.

"We've had some good breaks against this team for a long time," Coyotes coach Dave Tippett said. "Tonight, the breaks went against us."

Flyers 3, Capitals 2 (SO): Steve Mason and the Flyers didn't want to waste their re-

cent winning streak. Mason made 36 saves before stopping three straight shots in the shootout, Jakub Voracek and Wayne Simmonds scored in the tiebreaker and Philadelphia beat the Washington Capitals 3-2.

Michael Raffl and Claude Giroux scored in regulation for Philadelphia, which snapped a two-game skid that followed a 10-game winning streak.

"It's definitely good to get back in the win column," Mason said. "You go on a 10-game winning streak and you can't let it slide. You can't let it slide and counteract everything we did on the winning streak."

Philadelphia's streak ended with Saturday's loss at Dallas. The Flyers then fell to the Predators in a shootout at home on Monday night.