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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US to send lethal weapons to Ukraine

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Ukraine will soon have more lethal

American-made weapons to help it fight Russian-backed separatists.

U.S. officials said Friday that the Trump administration approved a plan to provide lethal weapons to Ukraine, a long-awaited move that deepens America's involvement in the military conflict and could strain relations with Russia.

The new arms include

American-made Javelin anti-tank missiles that Ukraine has long sought to boost its defenses against Russian-backed separatists armed with tanks that have rolled through eastern Ukraine. Violence

that has killed more than 10,000 since 2014. Previously, the U.S. has provided Ukraine with support equipment and training, and has let private companies sell some small arms like rifles.

The officials describing the plan weren't authorized to discuss it publicly and demanded anonymity.

The move is likely to become another sore point between Washington and Moscow, as President Donald Trump contends with ongoing questions about whether he's too hesitant to confront the Kremlin. Ukraine accuses Russia of sending the tanks, and the U.S. says Moscow is arming, training and fighting alongside the separatists.

Trump had been considering the plan for some time after the State Department and

the Pentagon signed off on it earlier this year. President Barack Obama also considered sending lethal weapons to Ukraine but left office without doing so.

The State Department, responsible for overseeing foreign military sales, would not confirm that anti-tank missiles or other lethal weapons would be sent. But in a statement late Friday, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said the U.S. had decided to provide "enhanced defensive capabilities" to help Ukraine build its military long term, defend its sovereignty and "deter further aggression."

"U.S. assistance is entirely defensive in nature, and as we have always said Ukraine is a sovereign country and has a right to defend itself," Nauert said.

'Condolence' payments for Iraqi casualties hard to get

Los Angeles Times

MOSUL, Iraq — When Ali Thanoon lost more than 50 members of his family in a U.S. airstrike during the battle against Islamic State in Mosul in the spring, he turned to the Iraqi government for compensation.

But officials required Thanoon to prove that his relatives had been killed. He could get the necessary death certificates only by digging up their bodies from a mass grave.

That would take time. Thanoon had been trapped for five days under the rubble, and then hospitalized for weeks. By the time a cousin was able to take Iraqi officials to unearth Thanoon's two wives, seven children and other relatives, all they found was "meat and bones," Thanoon said.

"What's this?" one of the officials said. "We need to see faces."

But there was another hard fact: The Iraqi government's compensation program for victims of the Mosul campaign, even those with death certificates, had no money.

For any hope of compensation for his losses, Thanoon would have to turn to the U.S., which since the beginning of the war in Iraq has provided millions of dollars in "condolence" payments to families of civilians inadvertently killed by U.S. air-

strikes or other unforeseen consequences of combat.

Their purpose is both humanitarian and strategic, a way to maintain good relations with Iraqis and to avoid retaliatory attacks.

Yet payments under the U.S. program plummeted after America ended its initial combat role in Iraq in 2010 — and did not pick up again when the U.S.-led coalition launched a new phase of the war with its assault on ISIS.

The U.S. acknowledges it has killed at least 801 civilians in Iraq and Syria since the campaign began in 2014. Independent monitors say the toll is much higher: at least 5,975, according to London-based monitoring group Airwars.

Congress has set aside at least \$5 million through the end of 2018 for payments to civilians under the condolence program. But a review of Pentagon data shows that just three such payments have been made to families in Iraq during the past three years — and none was paid in Syria.

In the highest-profile incident of civilian casualties during the current campaign, a devastating strike that hit Thanoon's neighborhood of Jadidah in west Mosul on March 17, more than 100 people were killed, making it one of the deadliest civilian casualty incidents in modern American

military history.

Yet a survey of the neighborhood last month found almost no one who had been visited by a U.S. investigator or offered compensation. Thanoon said he wasn't even aware that a U.S. program was available.

"No one came to see us," Thanoon said. "Where do we go? We don't know."

A U.S. military investigation found the strike in Thanoon's densely populated neighborhood, which targeted two ISIS snipers, mistakenly killed at least 105 civilians. Residents and volunteers said they retrieved 278 bodies; Thanoon's family now puts the death toll at 155.

Eric Pahon, a Pentagon spokesman, said the condolence program has been difficult to administer with few U.S. ground troops in the region. Areas controlled by ISIS in many cases have been impossible to access, he said.

Still, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., who wrote a 2014 law that set aside money to compensate civilian victims and provided guidance to military commanders on doling it out, questioned why just one payment has been offered for the Jadidah strike.

"When we make tragic mistakes like that, and innocent people are harmed, (the Defense Department) has the authority and funding to help them or their families," Leahy said.

Lawmakers facing defense funding fight

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The budget instabilities that plagued a challenged military in 2017 won't end with New Year's celebrations.

Instead, lawmakers have delayed a defense funding fight to January after averting a government shutdown by passing a short-term budget deal just ahead of a Friday deadline.

The new, four-week funding measure approved Thursday evening has drawn the ire of several military veterans on Capitol Hill who voiced concerns ahead of the Christmas holiday. The new stopgap funding will run out Jan. 19.

"This sort of governing-by-crisis that harms our national security and hurts veterans

has to stop. I didn't spend 23 years in the military, going through multiple deployments, just to weaken our nation so that a bunch of politicians can go home early for the holidays," said Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., a former Black Hawk helicopter pilot who lost both legs in the war in Iraq. "Our servicemembers in danger overseas today don't get to go home for Christmas — they have to do their jobs protecting our nation."

The military, along with the rest of the government, will operate off the temporary funding measure until Jan. 19 and then again will face the risk a government shutdown. It's become common practice for Congress to rely on the temporary spending measures, known as continuing resolutions, that

are used until a full budget is approved.

The government is operating on its third continuing resolution for the 2018 fiscal year, which began Oct. 1.

In a decade plagued by such budget instabilities, the trend has brought bad news for the military, according to industry experts, Pentagon leaders and defense hawks on Capitol Hill.

"This defense budgetary instability is national self-harm on an epic scale," Susanna Blume and Lauren Fish, defense analysts for Washington think tank Center for New American Security, wrote in a recent look at the flood of continuing resolutions in the last decade. "Congress's inability to pass budgets, let alone on time, has severely handicapped the [Defense Department] in fulfilling its sacred mission — to

ensure the safety of the nation and protect U.S. citizens and interests at home and abroad."

And with a plenty of partisan turmoil on Capitol Hill, congressional members could have a tough time reaching a bipartisan funding deal come January. Though Republicans control the House and the Senate, they will need Democrats to pass any sort of omnibus spending plan that includes military spending.

More so, Democratic leadership has warned there won't be a spending plan until there's a deal on the Child Health Insurance Program and immigration.

"It has to be a truly global deal," Senate Minority Leader Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., warned Wednesday. "We can't leave any of those issues behind."

Mattis to soldiers: Being ready for war helps stop it

Associated Press

FORT BRAGG, N.C. — "Storm clouds are gathering" over the Korean Peninsula, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis declared Friday. And as diplomats try to resolve the nuclear standoff, he told soldiers that the U.S. military must do its part by being ready for war.

Without forecasting a conflict, Mattis emphasized that diplomacy stands the best chance of preventing a war if America's words are backed up by strong-and-prepared armed forces.

"My fine, young soldiers, the only way our diplomats can speak with authority and be believed is if you're ready to go," Mattis told several dozen soldiers and airmen at the 82nd Airborne Division's Hall of Heroes, his last stop on a two-day, pre-holiday tour of bases to greet troops.

Mattis' comments came as the U.N. Security Council unanimously approved tough, new sanctions against North Korea, compelling nations to sharply reduce their sales of oil to the reclusive country and to send home all North Korean expatriate workers within two years. Such workers are seen as a key source of revenue for North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's cash-strapped government.

President Donald Trump and other top U.S. officials have made repeated threats about U.S. military action. Some officials have described the messaging as twofold in purpose: to pressure North Korea to enter into negotiations on getting rid of its nuclear arsenal, and to motivate key regional powers China and Russia to put more pressure on Pyongyang so a war is averted.

For the military, the focus has been on ensuring soldiers are ready should the call come.

At Fort Bragg, Mattis recommended the troops read T.R. Fehrenbach's military classic "This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness," first published in 1963, a decade after the Korean War ended.

"Knowing what went wrong the last time around is as important as knowing your own testing, so that you're forewarned — you know what I'm driving at here," he said as soldiers listened in silence. "So you gotta be ready."

The U.S. has nearly 28,000 troops permanently stationed in South Korea, but if war came, many thousands more would be needed for a wide range of missions, including ground combat.

The retired Marine Corps general fielded questions on many topics in his meetings with troops at the Guantanamo

Bay naval base in Cuba and Naval Station Mayport, Fla., on Thursday and at Camp Lejeune and Fort Bragg in North Carolina on Friday. North Korea seemed uppermost on troops' minds as they and their families wonder whether war looms.

Asked about recent reports that families of U.S. servicemembers in South Korea might be evacuated, Mattis stressed his belief that diplomacy still could avert a crisis. He said there is no plan now for an evacuation.

"I don't think it's at that point yet," he said, adding that an evacuation of American civilians would hurt the South Korean economy. He said there is a contingency plan that would get U.S. servicemembers' families out "on very short notice."

Mattis said he sees little chance of Kim disrupting the Winter Olympics, which begin in South Korea in February.

"I don't think Kim is stupid enough to take on the whole world by killing their athletes," he said.

Mattis repeatedly stressed that there is still time to work out a peaceful solution. At one point, he said diplomacy is "going positively." But he also seemed determined to steel U.S. troops against what could be a costly war on the Korean Peninsula.

"There is very little reason for optimism," he said.

Former Marine arrested in terrorism case

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The FBI said Friday that it found a martyrdom letter and several guns in the home of a former Marine recruit who said he wanted to carry out a Christmas Day attack on San Francisco's Pier 39, a popular tourist destination.

Everitt Aaron Jameson, 26, a Modesto tow-truck driver, was charged Friday with attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization.

Jameson told an undercover agent he believed to be associated with Islamic State's senior leadership that he wanted to conduct a violent attack on Pier 39, which is packed with restaurants, bars and souvenir shops, because it is heavily crowded, according to an FBI affidavit.

He told the undercover agent that Christmas Day would be "the perfect day to commit the attack" and that he "did not need an escape plan because he was ready to die," the affidavit said.

He asked for help obtaining a fully automatic military assault rifle, either an M-16 or an AK-47, along with ammunition and materials to make explosives, including nails, timers and remote detonators, the affidavit said. However, Jameson told the undercover agent Monday that he had reconsidered and felt he could not carry out the attack after all, the affidavit says. He denied the allegations during a hearing in federal court Friday.

His father, Gordon Jameson, said he believes the FBI has the facts wrong. "He wouldn't do

that to innocent people," the elder Jameson told the Merced Sun-Star. "He's a loving, kind person that would never hurt nobody."

She and San Francisco acting Mayor London Breed both said there are no other known threats, though police increased their presence throughout the city after being notified of the FBI investigation several days ago.

Jameson had posted radical jihadi messages online, including expressing support for the Halloween terror attack in New York City in which a driver used his truck to kill eight people, the FBI said.

"I'm glad to know we Muslims are finally hitting back," Jameson told an agency informant.

He offered to use his tow

truck to support the cause, the affidavit says.

The FBI began investigating in mid-September when it learned Jameson was expressing support for posts that favored terrorism or ISIS. He "loved" an online post that showed Santa Claus threatening an attack in New York with a box of dynamite.

Agents raided his home Wednesday, finding a martyr's letter signed with an Islamic variation of his name, along with his last will and testament updated in November. They also found fireworks, two rifles and a 9mm handgun.

Jameson was arrested Friday and faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted. At a court hearing, he was ordered held for a Dec. 28 detention hearing.

US air raids destroy 25 Taliban drug laboratories

The Washington Post

KABUL — One month after U.S. and Afghan forces began bombing suspected Taliban drug laboratories in Helmand province, Afghan officials and analysts say they are relieved that the raids are not harming civilians but doubtful that they will be able to significantly reduce the narcotics trade or the insurgents' profits.

The Pentagon announced recently that U.S.-led coalition forces had destroyed 25 insurgent-run drug labs as part of a new U.S. military strategy to weaken the Taliban by going after its sources of revenue. It

said at least \$80 million worth of narcotics had been destroyed.

Initially, the raids triggered alarm in Helmand, a vast province that has long been at the heart of Afghanistan's drug production and trade. Afghan opium is the source of much of the world's heroin, and half of it comes from Helmand. Production and sales of Afghan opium have soared to record levels in the past several years.

When the U.S. airstrikes started, local officials expressed concern that civilians would be mistakenly targeted or harmed. They also suggested that it would be more effective to go after the

organized Afghan and foreign smugglers who make deals and transport drugs across certain border points into Pakistan and Iran.

Today, with more than two dozen such raids completed, local fears of collateral damage seem to have waned, and some officials in the region said the campaign has already had an impact on opium sales. They expressed relief that small farmers who grow poppy are not being singled out.

But Borhan Osman, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, wrote in a report that the bombing of drug labs "will solve

neither the country's Taliban insurgency nor its drug problem." He noted that the Taliban has diverse funding sources and that the bombing could increase support for it because drug labs provide a living for "ordinary people and are usually located in populated areas."

Ahmad Saeedi, a former Afghan diplomat, said the U.S. strategy was aiming too low by targeting "small processing laboratories" instead of "going after the dealers and traffickers" in Kabul and abroad.

"Anyone can hunt a small fish," he said. "They need to go after the big fish and whales, the megadealers and the mafia."

US ups border training in Syria to prevent ISIS resurgence

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States is developing an expanded training program for local Kurdish and Arab border guards in Syria, the top U.S. commander for the Middle East said, to help head off the "significant risk" of Islamic State fight-

ers regrouping in the country.

It's an effort that could entail a longer-term American and allied commitment.

Army Gen. Joseph Votel, head of U.S. Central Command, said in a recent telephone interview with The Associated Press that the border control training would reflect major combat op-

erations in Syria ending and the U.S.-led coalition shifting focus to stabilizing areas seized from ISIS. Washington also wants to root out the remaining insurgents in Syria.

Votel wouldn't say exactly how many U.S. forces will remain in Syria or for how long, but he said the American mili-

tary campaign in Syria will remain consistent.

He suggested no imminent decrease in the U.S. troop level on the ground in Syria, which currently exceeds 2,000. The border security forces "will help prevent resurgence of ISIS and will help bring control," Votel said.

LA won't join Calif.'s legal-pot party Jan. 1

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — There will be no legal pot party in Los Angeles on Jan. 1.

California kicks off recreational sales on New Year's Day, becoming the largest state in the nation with legal marijuana. But Los Angeles officials announced Friday that dispensaries in the city won't be part of the celebration.

The city won't begin accepting applications to sell legal recreational pot until Jan. 3, and it could take weeks before those businesses are licensed properly with the city and the state and open their doors.

Los Angeles is California's largest pot market, and the opening of legal sales was anticipated widely. In March, 80 percent of city voters endorsed a ballot measure that set in motion creation of the new pot marketplace.

The decision to delay licensing was a disappointment for growers and sellers who have feared they could be squeezed out of the market if LA lagged in licensing.

Los Angeles struggled for months to get rules in place to license businesses for legal sales, only agreeing to guidelines earlier this month. Packer was hired in August, just months before legalization kicked in.

Under Los Angeles rules,

neighborhoods would be largely off-limits to pot businesses, and buffer zones would be set up around schools, libraries and parks. The city has long been a hive of unlicensed dispensaries, and hundreds have been shut down.

So far, legalization has resulted in a patchwork of regulations around California.

Santa Cruz, San Diego, Shasta Lake, San Jose and West Hollywood are among the cities where businesses have been authorized for recreational sales. But Kern County is among the places that have banned all commercial marijuana activity.

In general, California will treat pot like alcohol, allowing people 21 and older to legally possess up to 1 ounce and to grow six plants at home.

The slower rollout in Los Angeles will leave operators in a kind of legal limbo, at least temporarily. The state has said licensed businesses should only do business with other properly licensed operators.

Cat Packer, who heads the city's Department of Cannabis Regulation, said medicinal sales to consumers with a doctor's recommendation can continue.

The first licenses are expected to go largely to retailers. However, if not enough cultivators hold licenses, sellers would have to look elsewhere in California to stock their shelves.

Fire now largest in California history

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A California wildfire that has killed two people and seared its way through cities, towns and wilderness northwest of Los Angeles became the largest blaze officially recorded in California on Friday, authorities said.

The Thomas fire took just over two weeks to burn its way into history books as unrelenting winds and parched weather turned everything in its path to tinder — including more than 700 homes.

The fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties had scorched 273,400 acres, or about 427 square miles of coastal foothills and national forest, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

That was 154 acres larger than California's previous fire record holder — the 2003 Cedar fire in San Diego County that killed 15 people.

The Cedar fire had been recognized as the biggest California wildfire in terms of acreage since 1932. Some fires before that date undoubtedly were larger but records are unreliable, state fire officials said.

A firefighter and a civilian fleeing the flames died in the Thomas fire as days of un-

relentingly dry, gusty winds drove the flames.

Often erratic gusts combined with extremely low humidity pushed the blaze with virtually unprecedented speed, blackening more ground in weeks than other fires had consumed in a month or more.

On Wednesday, as the fire continued to march north and west, Santa Barbara County fire Capt. David Zaniboni said, "Those (other) fires burned for weeks and weeks and this fire is only a few weeks old," he said. "It's incredible."

By that point, firefighters were beginning to take advantage of a lull in the weather. Several days of easing winds allowed crews to burn and bulldoze firebreaks in the foothills above communities.

As of Friday, while 18,000 homes and other buildings were at risk, there was little flame showing in previously burned areas, and the fire was moving slowly through wilderness.

The fire was 65 percent contained and colder, moister weather was helping. Although some 50-mph winds gusts were recorded, it produced "no remarkable fire activity" near Montecito or other areas, according to a state fire report.

Tropical storm kills dozens in the southern Philippines

Associated Press

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines — A tropical storm in the southern Philippines unleashed flash floods that swept away people and houses and set off landslides, reportedly leaving more than 120 people dead and 160 others missing, officials said Saturday.

Most of the deaths from Tropical Storm Tembin were in the provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur and on the Zamboanga Peninsula, according to an initial government report on storm casualties.

A search and rescue operation was underway for more than 30 people swept away by flash floods in the fishing village of Anungan, Mayor Bong Edding, of Zam-

boanga del Norte province's Sibuco town, said by phone. Five bodies have been recovered so far.

"The floodwaters from the mountain came down so fast and swept away people and houses," Edding said.

Edding blamed years of logging in the mountains near Anungan for the tragedy that unfolded Friday.

The rest of the deaths were reported in Lanao del Norte, where floodwaters from a mountain also swept away several riverside houses, and Lanao del Sur, police and officials said.

Lanao del Norte officials reported the highest death toll at 64 with 139 missing

followed by Zamboanga del Norte province, where officials reported at least 29 storm deaths with 19 others missing. The storm left 21 dead and one missing in the lakeside province of Lanao del Sur, according to the Department of Interior and Local Government.

Tembin, known locally as Vinta, strengthened and picked up speed late Saturday, packing maximum sustained winds of 65 miles per hour and gusts of up to 90 mph. It struck the southern section of western Palawan province late Saturday and is forecast to blow away from the southern Philippines on Sunday toward the South China Sea.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cops who cuffed girl at gunpoint cleared

MI GRAND RAPIDS — Police officers in western Michigan won't be disciplined for detaining an 11-year-old girl, her mother and aunt at gunpoint outside of their home while searching for another aunt suspected in a stabbing.

The Grand Rapids Police Department said in a news release Wednesday that an internal investigation of the Dec. 6 incident found the officers didn't violate department policy.

Bodycam footage shows police handcuffing Honestie Hodges as an officer repeatedly tells the crying girl she's not being arrested. Police said the aunt suspected of stabbing another relative didn't end up being at the home.

Police Chief David Rahinsky said the footage left him "nauseated" but the officers followed procedure.

Shoplifting arrest at 'Shop with a Cop'

MA FRAMINGHAM — A woman has been arrested for attempting to steal more than \$1,000 in goods from a Target store during a "Shop with a Cop" holiday event.

The Boston Globe reported Melissa Allen, 32, was stopped as she tried to leave the store with the unpaid merchandise Tuesday.

There were more than 50 Framingham police officers in the store as part of a charity event for children sponsored by the department.

Police said Allen had a bin filled with items she tried to steal, including clothing, accessories, and home goods.

Allen, who is homeless, was charged with larceny over \$250 and resisting arrest.

Teachers get wine for 'teaching kid like mine'

OH KETTERING — Saying their son's teachers deserve more than a coffee mug for Christmas, an Ohio couple decided to give them bottles of wine with the child's picture on the label.

Beavercreek resident Mary Sommers told the Dayton Daily News she doubted the teachers needed any more mugs, but, she joked, "who doesn't need a glass of wine after teaching a kid like mine?"

She and her husband, Paul, gave the wine to the teachers at their son Jake's school in Kettering. In addition to a picture of Jake's smiling face, the labels carry a message that says, "Our child might be the reason you drink so enjoy this bottle on us!"

Ex-NBA star rants about stolen toilet

TX DALLAS — A former NBA player took to Twitter to complain that a toilet was among the items stolen from his Dallas home during a burglary.

Charlie Villanueva, 33, a former first-round pick who most recently played with the Dallas Mavericks, posted a photo of the space in his bathroom where his toilet once stood.

In a series of sometimes potty-mouthed tweets, Villanueva said his home appliances also were taken during the burglary Tuesday.

The former Detroit Piston described the episode as "mind blowing," saying he's "in shock."

Villanueva criticized police for a slow response to his burglary report, saying he called four times about the purloined toilet.

Diamond engagement ring found at airport

FL MIAMI — Someone lost a diamond engagement ring at Miami International Airport, and authorities said time is running out for the owner to claim it.

Airport spokesman Greg Chin told the Miami Herald the ring was turned over to the lost and found after someone found it this week. If the owner doesn't come forward within 30 days, it will be handed over to Goodwill Industries, as part of a contract with the nonprofit agency.

Chin wouldn't say where or when the ring was found adding that "only the owner would know certain details about this ring."

Governor picks 23 sites for historic registers

NY ALBANY — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo selected 23 historic sites for inclusion on the state and national registers of historic places.

The Democratic governor said the designation will help property owners obtain tax credits for preservation while boosting arts, culture and tourism.

The sites announced Friday include an early black community along the Hudson Valley that served as a refuge for freed and escaped slaves, a commercial district in Utica with roots stretching back nearly 200 years, and a Catskills retreat that belonged to a 19th century businessman who made his money in soda fountains.

The state's historic preservation officer must formally approve the nominations for the state register and will then recommend them for the national register.

Zoo: Rare leopard a female, not male

TN NASHVILLE — On closer examination, a rare clouded leopard born at the Nashville Zoo in March is actually a female, not a male as originally thought.

Zoo officials said the discovery was made after keepers noticed the cub wasn't developing at the same pace as a male clouded leopard of the same age.

In explaining the mix-up, they say it can be difficult to determine the gender of most species of newborn cats.

Clouded leopards are among the rarest of the world's cat species and have proved difficult to breed in captivity.

6 years later, still no sentence in case

MI DETROIT — A Detroit man who pleaded no contest to manslaughter still hasn't been sentenced — six years after his conviction.

Spokeswoman Maria Miller said the prosecutor's office "lost track of the case," especially after a prosecutor resigned, and Leroy Moon had health problems.

Moon, 78, has been free on bond. He'll appear in court on Jan. 9. The Detroit News said his plea deal calls for one year in jail.

According to authorities, Moon shot a man who was urinating outside his Detroit fish market in 2009. He pleaded no contest to manslaughter in 2011, a year after his murder trial ended without a verdict.

Defense attorney Marlon Evans said Moon still suffers from health problems. He declined further comment.

From wire reports

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Elliott's return a problem for Seahawks

Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — Seattle's Michael Bennett was clearly paying attention when news started circulating of the workouts Ezekiel Elliott was doing to stay in shape during his suspension.

"He definitely going to have fresh legs," Bennett said on Thursday. "I've seen the pictures. He looks like he's been working out every single day on the beach. I know he's ready to go out there and run."

Healthy, motivated and still with playoff aspirations, Elliott will make his return on Sunday against the Seahawks, and the timing could not be worse for Seattle.

They are battered by injuries on defense, fatigued from a long season that has seen their defensive line wear down and have no room for error, needing wins in their final two games to have any playoff hopes.

Those factors don't even take into account some fundamental problems that have plagued the Seahawks the past two weeks and allowed the Jaguars and

Rams to run wild.

"We made some misses in some reads and some things that could be a lot sharper, and it just leads to the easy yardage for them," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said. "Good running backs take advantage of that."

While Leonard Fournette and Todd Gurley are outstanding running backs that took advantage of their opportunities against Seattle, a healthy, rested Elliott is not what the Seahawks wanted to see with their season on the line.

The Seahawks' problems first surfaced in the second half against Jacksonville after Bobby Wagner and K.J. Wright were injured. Fournette rushed for 101 yards in the game, with 84 of those coming in the second half.

It was a similar story against the Rams, just a different point of the game. With Wagner limited because of a hamstring injury and Wright out because of a concussion, Gurley ran for 144 of his 152 yards in the first half of the Rams' 42-7 rout.

While Gurley's 57-yard TD sprint in the final minute of the

first half got most of the attention, the bigger issue was the huge chunk plays Gurley had well before his long run.

The Rams had eight run plays of 10 yards or more in the rout. The Seahawks allowed 10 total running plays of 10 yards or more during a five-game span from late October and November when they were ranked among the best run defenses in the league.

"I'm excited for him, Todd Gurley is a heckuva player," Cowboys QB Dak Prescott said. "You watch that game and you see why. Zeke, with a lot of the similar abilities and traits, we're excited for what he can do."

While Seattle is unsure how much the Cowboys will feature Elliott, the fact he hasn't played in six weeks and isn't worn down from a long season is a boost.

Wagner has been playing with a hamstring injury for nearly two months and it was at its most troublesome last week when he lacked the explosiveness to try to chase down Gurley. Bradley McDougald has

played well at strong safety, but he isn't Kam Chancellor when it comes to stopping the run. The Seahawks will get a lift by having Wright back this week.

Wagner noted that because of all the injuries, what's been an experienced, veteran defense is now full of new faces that have never played together.

"It's kind of just furthering the thing that we have kind of been dealing with, with everybody trying to relearn everybody," Wagner said.

Stopping the run has long been a hallmark of Carroll's defensive priorities and it's proved true in his Seattle tenure.

The Seahawks are 23-31-1 since 2010 in games where they've allowed at least 100 yards rushing to the opponent. They are 55-16 when holding opponents under 100 yards.

Before his suspension, Elliott had four straight games of at least 93 yards rushing, and three of those were well over 100 yards.

"I think he'll be really fired up to play football. I think he has to be about as hungry as you can get," Carroll said.

NHL roundup

Coyotes stay calm, beat Caps in OT on Keller's goal

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — This time, the Arizona Coyotes stayed calm at the end of a close game.

Clayton Keller scored 4:33 into overtime, and the Coyotes rallied to beat the Washington Capitals 3-2 on Friday night.

Arizona had lost seven in a row and 10 of 11. Christian Fischer tied the game with 1:01 to go in regulation, and Christian Dvorak also scored for the Coyotes.

"We had a big meeting after the last game trying to figure out why we panic and things go off the rails," Fischer said. "Tonight we didn't panic. We knew if we stick with it we were going

to give ourselves a chance to win."

Max Domi set up Keller's game-winner, skating in from the left side and deking a defender with a swooping move toward the middle. Philipp Grubauer stopped Domi's shot, but Keller jumped on the rebound for his team-leading 13th goal.

"That's a world-class team," Coyotes coach Rick Tocchet said. "They have Hall of Famers over there. We played a really responsible game and we cashed in our chances at the end."

Panthers 4, Wild 2: Jonathan Huberdeau scored two goals and James Reimer made 29 saves, leading host Florida

to the victory.

Vincent Trocheck and Connor Brickley also scored for Florida, and Aleksander Barkov had two assists. It was the Panthers' first win over the Wild since a 2-1 victory on Jan. 3, 2016.

Sabres 4, Flyers 2: Evander Kane had a goal and an assist, and host Buffalo earned its fourth win in the last 20 games.

Jack Eichel added two empty-netters, helping Buffalo hold on after Philadelphia scored twice in the final 2:10. Ryan O'Reilly also scored for the Sabres, who had dropped three in a row and five of six.

Robin Lehner stopped 33 shots. He was working on his

second shutout of the season before Michael Raffl scored a power-play goal to cut Buffalo's lead to 2-1.

Shayne Gostisbehere scored for Philadelphia on a one-timer with 32 seconds left, but Eichel sealed the win by scoring with 1 second remaining.

Canadiens 3, Flames 2: Byron Froese scored for the first time in 22 months and had an assist, helping Montreal to the road win.

Nicolas Deslauriers and Brendan Gallagher also scored and Carey Price made 21 saves in his 12th straight start since returning from a lower-body injury. The Canadiens are 8-3-1 since Price returned.

Famous Idaho Potato Bowl

Wyoming routs sloppy Central Michigan

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — When Wyoming junior quarterback Josh Allen stepped onto the stage to accept his MVP trophy following the Cowboys' 37-14 victory over Central Michigan on Friday in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl, it didn't take long for the chant to begin.

"Do it! Do it!" Wyoming players shouted in unison as snow began to fall on the field.

Surrounded by teammates and a throng of Wyoming fans, Allen couldn't resist the moment and hoisted the trophy over his head before declaring his intentions to skip his senior season to enter the NFL Draft.

"I was hoping to spend at least a day or two thinking about it," Allen said, "but I think my teammates knew, and they were chanting for me to do it. This was the idea the whole time, to come back and trust what Coach (Craig) Bohl was doing and learn more on the offensive side of the football. It wasn't pre-planned before the season started, but we had a pretty good idea of what we were going to do."

Allen missed the final two regular-season games with a sprained right shoulder, resulting in a pair of close losses. In

warmups, he looked anxious to return to the field and didn't disappoint the Wyoming contingent on hand for his final collegiate game.

"Sitting out for those two games killed me inside," Allen said. "I wanted to be back on the field with my teammates and brothers."

Allen completed 11 of 19 passes for 154 yards and three touchdowns without an interception. He didn't have to do much thanks to Wyoming's suffocating defense. But when the Cowboys needed Allen, he produced.

Allen's first touchdown pass to open the scoring was a 23-yard bullet to Jared Scott. But the potential top-10 draft pick showed off the arm strength and accuracy that has scouts drooling with a 45-yard strike that hit C.J. Johnson in stride in the end zone.

"In today's world where players are making all kinds of decisions about bowl games, Josh chose to play and I applaud him for that," Bohl said before lobbying for Allen to be drafted. "If there's any NFL team looking for a player out there, you're never going to find a bigger competitor and a better leader than him."

However, Allen's performance didn't have to be all that impressive thanks to a defense that forced eight turnovers.

Central Michigan (8-5) had won five straight. The eight turnovers broke the previous Famous Idaho Potato Bowl record of six.

The takeaway

Wyoming: Finding a replacement for Allen will be a high priority for a Cowboys team that is losing only three starters on offense and three on defense. Wyoming returns leading rusher Trey Woods and a stout defense that should give the Cowboys a strong chance to contend for the Mountain West Conference title.

Central Michigan: The Chippewas face a rebuilding season next year in the MAC as they lose seven starters on offense and five on defense. The offense is a mix of good and bad. The bad? They lose starting quarterback Shane Morris along with his top two receivers, Mark Chapman and Corey Willis. However, the top three rushers—Jonathan Ward, Kumehnnu Gwilly, and Romello Ross—all return.

Bahamas Bowl

Ohio RB Brown finds end zone four times in win over UAB

Associated Press

NASSAU, Bahamas — Ohio coach Frank Solich knew his Bobcats were better than their record showed. You'll get no argument from UAB.

Dorian Brown rushed for 152 yards on just 12 carries and scored four touchdowns, Nathan Rourke threw for two scores and Ohio beat UAB 41-6 in the Bahamas Bowl on Friday.

It was a stirring comeback for the Bobcats, who lost their last two games of the regular season to miss a shot at the Mid-American Conference title.

"I feel like eight wins were not enough with this football team, so this ninth win puts a little icing on the cake," Solich said.

Ohio (9-4) averaged 38.9 points per game during the

season, setting a school record with 467 points scored, and the Bobcats exhibited that prowess in the opening half of this one, using big plays to build an insurmountable 27-3 halftime lead.

Brown, a redshirt senior, scored on runs of 74, 9, 25 and 14 yards, two in the second quarter and two in the third as he carried the load for injured A.J. Ouellette.

"It was very important (to go out on a high note)," Brown said. "I had to step up and take my role."

Brown's heroics were too much for the Blazers, a feel-good team seeking its first bowl victory on just its second try. The loss spoiled the end of a remarkable first season back for UAB (8-5), which was predicted to struggle and didn't.

UAB President Ray Watts had cut the football program in December 2014 because a university report deemed it too expensive. After public outcry, football was reinstated, but NCAA rules required the school to skip the 2016 season to help the players who stuck it out re-adjust to competing at the top level of college football.

The Blazers, under Conference USA Coach of the Year Bill Clark, responded by winning a school-record eight games and finished second in the conference's West Division. They won six of their final eight games.

On this day, though, they ran out of miracles.

"It's hurts a lot — to not go out with a victory," senior line-backer Tevin Crews said. "I'm just blessed to be part of a great

team with a great coach and a great role model. This is a starting point — our first season back."

The takeaway

UAB: The Blazers demonstrated this season that they belong at college football's top level. If the community support that helped resurrect the program continues, the Blazers have a coach in Clark, an Eddie Robinson Coach of the Year finalist, who can take them to the postseason on a regular basis.

Ohio: The Bobcats have a budding star in Rourke, who next season has a chance to lead them to their first MAC title since the late 1960s. A native of Ontario, Canada, the sophomore set single-season records at Ohio with 21 rushing touchdowns, 22 touchdowns scored and 132 points scored.

NBA roundup

Clippers knock off Harden-led Rockets

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Austin Rivers scored a career-high 36 points and made six three-pointers, and the short-handed Los Angeles Clippers withstood James Harden's second straight 51-point performance to beat the Houston Rockets 128-118 on Friday night.

The Rockets had a 14-game winning streak snapped by the Los Angeles Lakers on Wednesday night, and lost consecutive games for just the second time this season and the first since Oct. 28 and 30.

The game lacked much of the intrigue it could have had with

Chris Paul sitting out in the first meeting with his former team because of a groin injury. The nine-time All-Star spent the last six seasons with the Clippers before a blockbuster trade brought him to the Rockets this summer.

Patrick Beverley, who was the highest-profile Rocket involved in the trade, also missed the game while recovering from knee surgery.

Warriors 113, Lakers 106: Kevin Durant had 33 points, seven rebounds, seven assists and four blocks, and Golden State held off visiting Los Angeles for its 11th straight victory.

Thunder 120, Hawks 117:

Russell Westbrook hit a three-pointer with 1.7 seconds left to cap a 30-point, 15-assist outing, and host Oklahoma City held off Atlanta.

The Thunder have won five of their last six after an 11-14 start.

Bucks 109, Hornets 104: Khris Middleton scored 28 points, Giannis Antetokounmpo had 26 and Milwaukee overcame a late deficit to beat visiting Charlotte.

Pistons 104, Knicks 101: Andre Drummond had 18 points and 15 rebounds and host Detroit rallied to beat New York.

Nuggets 102, Trail Blaz-

ers 85: Nikola Jokic scored 27 points and Denver won for the first time in Portland since 2013.

Heat 113, Mavericks 101: Wayne Ellington tied a career high with 28 points, Josh Richardson had 24 and injury-ravaged host Miami never trailed against Dallas.

Nets 119, Wizards 84: Rondae Hollis-Jefferson had 21 points and 11 rebounds in Brooklyn's victory over visiting Washington.

Pelicans 111, Magic 97: DeMarcus Cousins had 26 points, 11 rebounds and six assists and New Orleans never trailed against host Orlando.

College basketball roundup

No. 1 Villanova stays unbeaten with rout of Hofstra

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Mikal Bridges scored 20 points and No. 1 Villanova remained unbeaten with a 95-71 rout of Hofstra on Friday night at the Nassau Coliseum.

Bridges was one of five players in double figures for Villanova (12-0).

Omari Spellman had 19 points in 31 minutes, Phil Booth finished with 17, Donte DiVincenzo had 16 and Jalen Brunson added 14 points.

The win marked the fifth time this season that Villanova has scored at least 90 points in a game. The Wildcats' season high for points scored is 113 on Nov. 14 against Nicholls State.

Justin Wright-Foreman had 25 points for the Pride (7-5), who have lost two straight.

No. 3 Arizona State 104, Pacific 65: Shannon Evans II scored 21 points and Tra Holder added 19 as the host Sun Devils dominated from the start.

The Sun Devils (12-0) have been plagued by slow starts in recent games, needing to turn

on their guard-driven firepower to pull away from opponents.

Arizona State jumped on Pacific (5-8) early and didn't let the Tigers up, building a 10-point lead in the opening minutes and expanding it from there to extend the best start in school history.

Miles Reynolds and Jack Williams had 13 points each to lead Pacific, which went 3 for 17 from the 3-point arc.

No. 9 Xavier 77, Northern Iowa 67: J.P. Macura scored 15 points and the visiting Musketeers hung on for their seventh straight win.

Trevon Bluiett scored 12 points with seven rebounds for Xavier (12-1), which went on an 11-2 run down the stretch, highlighted by a three by Bluiett, to break open a tie game.

Macura's breakaway dunk and 3 in the final 95 seconds left sealed it for Xavier, which shot 12 of 23 from 3-point range.

Bennett Koch had 26 points for the Panthers (8-4).

No. 11 Wichita State 75, Florida Gulf Coast 65: Landry Shamet scored 23 points to lift

the host Shockers.

Shamet was 8-for-12 from the field while the rest of his team went 14-for-44.

Darral Willis finished with 15 points and 13 rebounds for Wichita State (10-2).

No. 13 Virginia 82, Hampton 48: Kyle Guy had 15 points, DeAndre Hunter had 14 and Ty Jerome added 10 for the host Cavaliers.

Virginia (11-1) held Hampton to 20.6 percent from the field in the second half and bounced back from a cold start on the offensive end.

No. 15 TCU 86, William & Mary 75: Alex Robinson scored a season-high 23 points and the host Horned Frogs set a school record with their nation-leading 17th consecutive win.

No. 17 Oklahoma 104, Northwestern 78: Trae Young had 31 points and 12 assists for the host Sooners.

Young, the nation's leader in scoring and assists, tied an NCAA record with 22 assists in a 105-68 victory over Northwestern State on Tuesday night. He followed it up by making

9 of 16 shots, including 8 of 13 three-point attempts. He became the first Oklahoma player since Stacey King in 1988-89 to post at least 10 straight games with 20 or more points.

No. 21 Texas Tech 74, Abilene Christian 47: ach Smith scored 16 points in his first game since not getting to start because of a violation of team rules for the host Red Raiders.

Air Force 111, Johnson & Wales (Colo.) 68: Jonathan DeWane scored a career-high 22 points on 10-for-12 shooting to help the host Falcons beat the NAIA Wildcats on Friday.

DeWane, a sophomore forward, came in with 19 career points. Frank Toohey, Lavelle Scottie and Keaton Van Soelen had 12 points apiece for Air Force (6-6). The Falcons, who snapped a three-game skid, had 18 players score.

Air Force finished shooting a season-high 61 percent from the field, tied its season best with 11 three-pointers and out-rebounded the Wildcats 46-21.