

US: Intel finds Chinese bounties on troops

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Trump administration is working to verify intelligence that shows China offered to pay militants in Afghanistan to kill American troops, a U.S. news website has reported, citing anonymous high-level sources.

“Administration officials across multiple agencies are currently working to corroborate the initial intelligence reports,” which is in the process of being declassified, the Axios news website, which broke the story, reported Wednesday.

National security advisor Robert O’Brien briefed President Donald Trump on the reports earlier this month, Axios reported.

But the intelligence the administration claims to have was “thinner even than reports that Russia offered payments to the Taliban to target U.S. and coalition troops, which were never corroborated,” another news website said, citing an unnamed government official.

A report in The New York Times in June claimed a Russian military spy unit offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants to attack coalition forces in Afghanistan, including U.S. and British troops.

Days after that report was released, Trump dismissed it as “possibly another fabricated Russia Hoax” and said the information wasn’t credible. In July, then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper told House lawmakers that Pentagon intelligence agencies had not corroborated the reports.

But now that Beijing faces the same accusations as Moscow did six months ago, the outgoing administration is handling the allegations “very differently,” wrote Politico reporter Lara Seligman.

In addition to briefing the president, O’Brien convened a National Security Council Policy Coordination Committee to discuss it on Dec. 22, Seligman wrote, citing an unnamed administration official.

“The U.S. ‘treats this intelligence with caution, but any intelligence or reports re-

lating to the safety of U.S. forces is something we take very seriously,’” the official was quoted as saying.

The allegations, which were made just three weeks before Trump leaves office, were out-of-character for China, which “has long played a quiet diplomatic role in Afghanistan,” Axios reporters Jonathan Swan and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian said.

“If this intelligence were to be confirmed, it would represent a dramatic strategic shift for China, and sharply escalate tensions between China and the U.S.,” they wrote. “If the intelligence does not prove accurate, it raises questions about the motivations of the sources behind it as well as the decision to declassify it.”

Beijing made the alleged offer to pay bounties for attacks on U.S. troops “some time after late February when the U.S. struck its deal with the Taliban,” Axios cited a senior U.S. official as saying.

There have been no U.S. combat deaths in Afghanistan since the deal was signed.

Security firms: Suspicious object on oil tanker off Iraq

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Sailors involved in transferring fuel oil from an Iraqi tanker in the Persian Gulf to another vessel owned by a shipping company traded in the United States discovered a “suspicious object” they fear could be a mine, authorities said Thursday.

The discovery comes amid heightened tensions between Iran and the U.S. in the waning days of President Donald Trump’s administration.

America has already conducted B-52 bomber flyovers and sent a nuclear submarine into the Persian Gulf over what Trump officials describe as the possibility of an Iranian attack on the one-year anniversary of the U.S. drones strike in Baghdad that killed a top Iranian general.

Two private security firms said sailors feared they found a limpet mine on the MT Pola, a Liberian-flagged tanker that was receiving assistance Thursday in the Persian Gulf off Basra. A limpet mine is a

type of naval mine that attaches to the side of a ship, usually by a diver-member of special forces. It later explodes, and can significantly damage a vessel.

The two firms, Ambrey Intelligence and Dryad Global, say investigations are ongoing.

The United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations, an organization under Britain’s royal navy, said on its website that an “unknown object” had been attached to a ship’s hull in the vicinity of Iraq’s Khor Al-Zubair Port, without providing further information.

The U.S. Navy’s 5th Fleet, which patrols the Mideast, was monitoring the incident, said spokeswoman Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich. Iraqi officials did not immediately comment on the incident.

The Pola, along with another tanker, serves as floating fuel oil storage of Iraq’s State Organization of Marketing of Oil, said Sudharsan Sarathy, a senior oil analyst at the data-analysis firm Refinitiv. Smaller vessels carry the fuel oil to the

ship, which then conducts ship-to-ship transfers in the Persian Gulf to clients.

Sarathy said the Pola was conducting a ship-to-ship transfer with the MT Nordic Freedom, a Bermuda-flagged tanker. Dryad Global posted a satellite photo that it said showed the Pola and the Nordic Freedom.

The owners of the Nordic Freedom, the company Nordic American Tankers, could not be immediately reached. Stock in the firm traded slightly down early Thursday on the New York Stock Exchange at just under \$3 a share. In 2019, the U.S. blamed Iran for a series of limpet mine attacks on oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which 20% of all the world’s oil passes. Iran denies being involved.

The location of the tankers involved in Thursday’s incident sits just offshore from the border of Iraq and Iran near the mouth of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the Shatt al-Arab.

Afghanistan: Remembering the fallen of 2020

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars And Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Ten American service members died in Afghanistan in 2020, including four who were killed in action, making for the lowest number of U.S. combat deaths in the country in a calendar year since the war began in October 2001.

All four combat deaths occurred before Feb. 29, when the Taliban agreed under a deal signed with the U.S. not to attack international troops and the Americans pledged to fully withdraw from the country by May, provided certain conditions were met.

U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan are expected to fall to around 2,500 by mid-January, the lowest they've been since the war started more than 19 years ago. More than 2,300 American service members have been killed in Afghanistan and over 20,000 have been wounded since the conflict began.

Ian P. McLaughlin

Army Staff Sgt. Ian P. McLaughlin, 29, died on Jan. 11, 2020, when his vehicle hit a roadside bomb in southern Kandahar province. He was on his first combat deployment and was killed alongside Army Pfc. Miguel Angel Villalon.

McLaughlin, of Newport News, Va., was assigned to the 307th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division out of Fort Bragg, N.C. He joined the Army in 2012.

He is survived by his wife and four children.

Miguel A. Villalon

Army Pfc. Miguel A. Villalon, 21, was killed on Jan. 11, 2020, when his vehicle struck a roadside bomb that also took the life of Army Staff Sgt. Ian P. McLaughlin and injured two other soldiers. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the blast.

Villalon was assigned to the 307th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division out of Fort Bragg, N.C.

An Illinois native, Villalon joined the Army in 2018 to become a combat engineer. He was on his first combat mission when he was killed.

He is survived by his mother and father.

Paul K. Voss

Air Force Lt. Col. Paul K. Voss, 46, died on Jan. 27, 2020, when the Bombardier E-11A he was piloting crashed in Ghazni province. Air Force Capt. Ryan S. Phaneuf was also killed.

The crash was a noncombat incident that was not caused by enemy fire, the military said.

A grass-to-brass officer, Voss served 25 years in active duty with the Air Force and was on a voluntary deployment supporting the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing at the time of his death.

He is survived by his wife, Shannon, and their three daughters.

Ryan S. Phaneuf

Air Force Capt. Ryan S. Phaneuf, 30, was killed in a plane crash in central Ghazni province on Jan. 27, 2020, alongside Air Force Lt. Col. Paul K. Voss.

Phaneuf was assigned to the 37th Bomb Squadron at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., and was flying in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel at the time of his death.

The Hudson, N.H., native entered active duty in June 2012 after being commissioned through ROTC.

He is survived by his wife, Megan Murat Phaneuf.

Javier J. Gutierrez

Army Sgt. 1st Class Javier J. Gutierrez, 28, died on Feb. 8, 2020, in an insider attack in Nangarhar province. Army Sgt. 1st Class Antonio R. Rodriguez was also killed in the attack.

Gutierrez was assigned to 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, out of Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

He was born in Jacksonville, N.C., but grew up in Texas. He enlisted in the Army in 2009 and, in 2015, graduated as a Special Forces communications sergeant and reported to 7th Group.

He is survived by his parents, his wife, Gabriela Elena, and their four children.

Antonio R. Rodriguez

Army Sgt. 1st Class Antonio R. Rodriguez, 28, was killed in an insider attack in eastern Nangarhar province on Feb. 8, 2020, alongside Army Sgt. 1st Class Javier J. Gutierrez.

Rodriguez was assigned to 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, out of Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

Born in Las Cruces, N.M., Rodriguez enlisted in the Army in October 2009. He was first assigned to 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, out of Fort Benning, Ga., and deployed eight times as a Ranger. In 2018, he reclassified as a cryptologic linguist with Spanish as his chosen language. He deployed twice with 7th Group.

Rodriguez is survived by his parents and his wife, Ronaleen.

Branden T. Kimball

Army Spc. Branden T. Kimball, 21, died in a noncombat incident at Bagram Airfield on Feb. 12, 2020.

Kimball was assigned to 3rd Battalion, 10th Aviation Regiment, 10th Combat Aviation Brigade, out of Fort Drum, N.Y.

A native of Central Point, Ore., Kimball joined the Army in 2016 and served as an aircraft structural repairer. He was on his second deployment at the time of his death.

Kimball is survived by his mother and three brothers.

Trevarius R. Bowman

Army 1st Lt. Trevarius R. Bowman, 25, died on May 19, 2020, in a noncombat incident at Bagram Airfield.

Originally from Spartanburg, S.C., Bowman was assigned to Company B, 198th Signal Battalion, 261st Signal Brigade, out of Newberry, S.C. The unit is attached to the 228th Theater Tactical Signal Brigade with the South Carolina National Guard.

He earned a bachelor's degree in information management systems from the University of South Carolina Upstate and joined the university's Palmetto College campus as an IT specialist in 2018, according to the USC website.

Vincent S. Ibarria

Army Spc. Vincent S. Ibarria, 21, died on July 3, 2020, in a vehicle rollover accident in western Farah province.

Ibarria was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, out of Fort Drum, N.Y.

He was originally from San Antonio.

Joseph T. Allbaugh

Army 1st Lt. Joseph T. Allbaugh, 24, died in a noncombat incident in Kandahar province on July, 12, 2020. He was serving as an engagement operations cell battle captain at the time of his death.

Allbaugh was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery regiment, 108th ADA Brigade, out of Fort Campbell, Ky.

He was raised in Folsom, Calif., and graduated from Vanguard University in 2018 with a psychology degree. He was commissioned through the ROTC as an Army air defense artillery officer.

He is survived by his wife, Ashley.

McCain, Wilbur make Taiwan Strait transit

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The guided-missile destroyers USS John S. McCain and USS Curtis Wilbur closed out 2020 with a transit of the Taiwan Strait on Thursday, 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley said.

The ships steamed through the contested, 110-mile-wide waterway separating Taiwan from mainland China to demonstrate “the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific,” Keiley said by email.

“The United States military will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows,” he said.

The transit was the Navy’s 13th this year, passing its previous record of 12 set in 2016. It made nine such trips last year, three in 2018 and five in 2017. The Navy last sent a warship, the guided-missile destroyer USS Mustin, through the strait on Dec. 18.

The number of Navy trips through the strait has increased along with tensions between the U.S. and China in the South and East China seas. Strain with China over Taiwan increased after the U.S. last month approved a \$280 million sale of advanced military communications equipment to Taiwan.

The transit came as the Chinese military conducts exercises in the waters around

Hainan Island, about 760 miles west of Taiwan, according to China’s Ministry of Defense. China’s Sanya Maritime Safety Administration announced the exercises on Monday, directing all other vessels to avoid the area during the exercises from Dec. 29 to Jan. 7.

The McCain made the trip following back-to-back freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea.

On Dec. 22, the destroyer steamed past Spratly Islands, a disputed chain east of Taiwan. On Dec. 24, the McCain challenged Vietnamese maritime claims around the Con Dao Islands, about 150 miles south of Ho Chi Minh City.

Navy restricts travel to all but 3 installations

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — All but three Navy bases have reinstated their travel restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Pentagon announced Wednesday as military infections surpass 105,000.

As of Monday, 59 out of 62 naval bases had travel restrictions reinstated, according to a Pentagon document released Wednesday. The only U.S. naval bases that have lifted their travel restrictions are located overseas: Naval Station Rota in Spain, Naval Station Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and Naval Support Activity Bahrain.

Travel restrictions were first put into place in March to try to prevent the spread of the virus within the Defense Department. Then Defense Secretary Mark Esper signed a memorandum May 22 that laid out the conditions needed for locations to allow for travel to and from bases. The restrictions have impacted the military moves of service members and their families during the past several months, causing backlogs during the busiest moving season for the military.

As of Monday, 91 out of 231 U.S. military installations around the world, or 39%, had lifted their travel restrictions for personnel, according to the document. The last time there was that few bases open for travel was July 13.

The military reached the most open bases on Nov. 4 at 153 out of 231, or 66%, according to the Pentagon. Since then, more installa-

tions have had to reinstate travel restrictions as coronavirus cases have risen during the holiday season and cooler weather.

The other services have different proportions of their installations restricted or open to travel. Of the Air Force’s 80 installations, 45 have lifted restrictions as of Monday, according to the Pentagon. The Army currently has only 28 of its 68 installations open. The Marine Corps has lifted restrictions at 14 of its 17 installations. Of the four remaining Defense Department installations — three finance centers and the Pentagon — only the Pentagon has lifted travel restrictions.

As of Wednesday, the Pentagon reported that a total of 105,871 service members have tested positive for the coronavirus, 931 have been hospitalized, 68,049 have recovered and 14 have died.

The Army still has the largest share of those cases with 37,736 soldiers infected, according to the Pentagon. The Navy has had 22,225 cases, the Air Force has had 19,520 and the Marine Corps has had 12,763 cases. The National Guard has reported 12,897 cases among its service members.

The United States has surpassed 19.6 million cases of the virus as of Wednesday, the most reported cases of any country, according to Johns Hopkins University. Behind the U.S. is India, which has reported 10.2 million cases, and Brazil with 7.5 million cases. The U.S. also has the highest number of people to die from the coronavirus at 340,956 as of Wednesday. Brazil has lost 192,681 people to the virus and India has lost 148,429 people.

Biden picks first woman as deputy defense secretary

Bloomberg

President-elect Joe Biden will nominate former Pentagon official Kathleen Hicks to serve as the first female deputy defense secretary, saying he wanted someone who knows the department “inside and out” to help restore order to an agency he says was cast into disarray by President Donald Trump.

Colin Kahl, who served as Biden’s national security adviser when he was vice president, will be nominated for undersecretary of defense for policy.

The new additions to Biden’s national security team, announced Wednesday, signal a return to experienced hands as Trump has run through a number of defense leaders, including two confirmed secretaries and three acting secretaries of defense. Biden complained Monday that critical national security posts have been “hollowed out” in personnel, capacity and morale.

Hicks and Kahl would report to Lloyd Austin, the retired four-star Army general and Raytheon Technologies Corp. board member who Biden has tapped to be Secretary of Defense.

Hicks, who heads Biden’s Pentagon transition team, is a think-tank expert on national security at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and is on the board of Aerospace Corp. She served as deputy undersecretary of defense for strategy, plans and forces from 2009-12 and as principal deputy undersecretary of Defense for policy from 2012-13.

Jobless claims down 19K, but remain high

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell by 19,000 last week to a still historically high 787,000 as a resurgent coronavirus grips the U.S. economy.

While at the lowest level in four weeks, the new figures released Thursday by the Labor Department are nearly four times higher than last year at this point before the coronavirus struck. Employers continue to cut jobs as rising coronavirus infections keep many people at home, and state and local governments re-impose restrictions.

Jobless claims were running around 225,000 a week before the pandemic struck with force last March, causing weekly job-

less claims to surge to a high of 6.9 million in late March as efforts to contain the virus sent the economy into a deep recession.

The government said that the total number of people receiving traditional unemployment benefits fell by 103,000 to 5.2 million for the week ending Dec. 19, compared with the previous week.

The four-week average for claims, which smooths out weekly variations, rose last week to 836,750, an increase of 17,750 from the previous week.

Economists believe that the holidays, in addition to broad confusion over the status of a COVID-19 relief package, suppressed applications for benefits last week.

Congress finally passed a \$900 billion relief bill that would boost benefit payments

and extend two unemployment assistance programs tied to job losses from the pandemic. President Donald Trump, however, called the measure a “disgrace” because it did not provide enough in direct payments to individuals in his view.

Trump eventually signed the measure on Sunday, but sought to pressure Congress to boost the stimulus payments to individuals from the \$600 in the bill to \$2,000. The Democratic-controlled House quickly passed legislation to meet Trump’s demand, but the Republican-led Senate checked that momentum.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Wednesday that the proposal to boost payments to \$2,000 has “no realistic path to quickly pass the Senate.”

California sees record deaths, new virus variant

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles County surpassed 10,000 deaths from the coronavirus Wednesday as California also hit a record high number of fatalities. The governor also announced the first detected case of the new and apparently more contagious variant of the coronavirus in a San Diego man.

LA County Health Director Dr. Barbara Ferrer called the 10,056 deaths there a “terrible milestone.” She noted that more than 7,400 people remain hospitalized with coronavirus in the county, with 20% of them in intensive care units.

“Most heartbreaking is that if we had done a better job of reducing transmission of the virus, many of these deaths would not have happened,” Ferrer said.

The milestone came the same day Gov.

Gavin Newsom announced an “unprecedented” high of 432 reported deaths, a figure that was likely elevated due to a lag in reporting over the holidays. He said during a briefing with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s leading infectious disease expert, that he had just learned that the new strain of the virus had been detected, the second reported case in the nation.

“I don’t think Californians should think that this is odd; it’s to be expected,” Fauci said of the virus variant.

San Diego County officials said the infected man is a 30-year-old with no history of travel.

“The patient became symptomatic on the 27th. He was tested yesterday and the new strain was detected early (Wednesday),” said Eric McDonald, the county’s medical director for epidemiology. Another person

in the man’s household was being tested, he said.

The Colorado and California cases have triggered a host of questions about how the variant circulating in England arrived in the United States and whether it is too late to stop it now, with top experts saying it is probably already spreading elsewhere in the U.S. One San Diego supervisor said the detection means it is already circulating there.

Hours after the new variant was detected, San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria signed an executive order directing stricter enforcement of state and local public health rules. He said he’s asked police and the city attorney to pursue fines “and potentially other enforcement actions” against those who are “blatantly and egregiously” defying health orders.

Abortion set to be legal in pope’s native Argentina

Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina — Argentina on Wednesday became the largest nation in Latin America to legalize elective abortion, a triumph for a feminist movement that overcame a last-minute appeal by Pope Francis to his compatriots and could pave the way for similar actions across the socially conservative, heavily Roman Catholic region.

After a marathon 12-hour session, the country’s Senate passed the law after mid-

night by a comfortable 38-29 margin just two years after a similar initiative fell short in a cliffhanger vote.

The legislation, which President Alberto Fernández has vowed to sign into law in the coming days, guarantees abortion up to the 14th week of pregnancy and beyond that in cases of rape or when a woman’s health is at risk.

“Safe, legal and free abortion is now the law,” Fernández tweeted after the vote, noting that it had been an election pledge.

“Today, we are a better society that expands women’s rights and guarantees public health,” he added.

While abortion is already allowed in some other parts of Latin America — such as in Uruguay, Cuba and Mexico City — its legalization in Argentina is expected to reverberate across the region, where dangerous clandestine procedures remain the norm a half-century after a woman’s right to choose was guaranteed in the United States.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Prisoner accused of harassing victim's widow with letters

TN NASHVILLE — A Tennessee prisoner was accused in a criminal complaint of sending harassing letters to the widow of the man he murdered.

Hank Wise sent numerous communications over several years to his victim's wife, according to the complaint unsealed on Tuesday. They included holiday cards in which Wise professed his love for the woman and told her that he thinks about her every day, according to a news release from the U.S. Attorney's Office in Nashville.

Wise is serving a 23-year sentence for shooting and killing a man identified in the complaint as "B.G." in front of his wife in Nashville in 2009.

Wise has now been charged with mail stalking. If convicted, he faces up to five years in federal prison.

Robots with rhythm: Video of dancing androids is a hit

MA WALTHAM — These robots have rhythm.

Boston Dynamics released a video on Tuesday showing four of its robots dancing to the 1962 hit "Do You Love Me?" by The Contours, and it caught fire online.

Two of the company's humanoid Atlas models do the twist, the mashed potato and other classic moves, joined by Spot, a doglike robot, and Handle, a wheeled robot designed for warehouse work.

Boston Dynamics is infamous for its scary robot videos, but this one is clearly a playful attempt to close the books on 2020.

"Our whole crew got together to celebrate the start of what we hope will be a happier year," the Waltham company says in the caption.

Escaped murder suspect recaptured after 2 weeks

IN EAST CHICAGO — A murder suspect who escaped from a security

company's van while the vehicle was stopped at a McDonald's in northwest Indiana was recaptured Wednesday morning after more than two weeks on the lam, authorities said.

Leon Taylor, 22, of Hammond, Ind., was taken into custody by officers searching for him in neighboring East Chicago, Lake County Sheriff Oscar Martinez said, The (Northwest Indiana) Times reported. Details on the capture were not immediately released.

Taylor escaped Dec. 14 after the van stopped in Gary as an agent with REDI Transports of Green Bay, Wis., was moving him from Texas via O'Hare International Airport to the Lake County Jail.

Taylor, who was arrested in Texas on Dec. 2, is a suspect in a murder in East Chicago and is also a suspect in five northwest Indiana armed robberies.

Program seeks to help pair veterans with pets

NE LINCOLN — A new program seeks to help Nebraska veterans adopt pets.

The Lincoln Journal Star reported that the Nebraska Department of Veterans' Affairs is launching its "Vets Get Pets" program on New Year's Day to help pay animal adoption fees for veterans through the sale of special license plates.

The new license plate design is available for all Nebraska drivers to purchase. The \$5 cost for the alphanumeric version or \$40 cost for custom message plates will fund an adoption fee reimbursement program for veterans expected to begin in July.

Veterans Affairs Director John Hilgert said in a news release that animal companions can help veterans deal with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Officials: Inmates locked up guard, didn't escape

SC MCCORMICK — State inmates locked a guard into a cell Sunday

night, but none of the prisoners escaped, South Carolina prison officials said.

Five inmates were caught near an interior prison yard fence at McCormick Correctional Institution on Sunday evening, the South Carolina Department of Corrections said on Twitter.

The department said that no one escaped, adding that no staff suffered injuries and two inmates were taken to a local hospital with non-life-threatening injuries. No further details about the injuries were available.

McCormick County Sheriff Clarke Stearns told the Greenwood Index Journal that a perimeter was set up in the area, but officers saw no activity outside the prison.

The prison's police department and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division are investigating.

Man out thousands of dollars in gift card scam

AZ COTTONWOOD — A 75-year-old Cottonwood man was tricked into buying thousands of dollars in gift cards as part of a scam, and authorities say he could have lost even more money.

The man told Yavapai County sheriff's deputies that he received multiple calls from people who claimed his Social Security number was used illegally, and he needed to pay up or risk arrest. One caller posed as a Cottonwood Police Department employee and directed him to purchase gift cards to be held as evidence.

The man bought \$30,000 in gift cards and provided the numbers to the callers. He also mailed \$10,000 in cash at the behest of a caller, supposedly as extra protection against a warrant, the Sheriff's Office said. A deputy checked the tracking number and saw it hadn't reached its destination and was able to get it returned to the man.

The office said it contacted the man's family so they could consider a financial power of attorney to protect his money. Authorities also posted warning signs at businesses where gift cards are sold.

— From The Associated Press

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Hammon first woman to coach NBA team

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Becky Hammon would have preferred a victory over history after becoming the first woman to coach an NBA team.

The assistant coach took over the San Antonio Spurs in the second quarter after coach Gregg Popovich was ejected in a 121-107 loss to LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers on Wednesday night.

"I try not to think of the huge picture and huge aspect of it because it can be overwhelming," Hammon said. "I really have had no time to reflect. I have not had time to look at my phone. So, I don't know what's going on outside the AT&T Center."

Hammon and the Spurs already had a lot to contend with against the defending league champion Lakers.

James celebrated his 36th birthday with 26 points, eight assists and five rebounds in Los Angeles' third double-digit victory. The teams will complete the two-game set Friday night.

"(I was) trying to get the guys

in the right spots," Hammon said. "Trying to get them motivated. Obviously, it's a learning situation for all of us, but I would have loved to have walked out there with a win with the guys."

Popovich was ejected by official Tony Brown with 3:56 remaining in the second quarter. Popovich screamed at Brown and entered the court following a non-call on DeMar DeRozan's attempted layup and a subsequent attempted rebound by Drew Eubanks.

As he exited the court to applause from several of the team's family members in attendance, Popovich pointed a finger at Hammon and had a succinct message.

"You got 'em," Hammon said. "See? He doesn't treat us any differently than he does you guys."

Said James: "Obviously she's been paying her dues over the last few years and Coach Pop has given her the opportunity. ... It's a beautiful thing just to hear her barking out calls, barking

out sets. She's very passionate about the game. Congrats to her and congrats for our league."

Hammon took over the team's huddles during timeouts and walked the sideline following Popovich's ejection. Hammon was the first full-time female assistant coach in league history.

"Well deserved," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "I've talked to her before and she really knows her stuff and obviously she's here for a reason. She's equipped, intelligent (and the) guys have great respect for her. She's going to be a great coach one day."

A three-time All-American at Colorado State, Hammon played for the New York Liberty and San Antonio Stars in the WNBA as well as overseas before retiring to join Popovich's staff in 2014.

"Even in timeouts with Pop as head coach, she is quick on her feet," DeRozan said. "She tells us about defensive assignments, offensive sets we should run. Seeing her in the forefront,

it would have definitely been cool to have won for her."

Los Angeles contributed to Popovich's frustration and the San Antonio's fortunes didn't get much better after the veteran coach exited.

Dennis Schroder had 21 points, and Anthony Davis had 20 points and eight rebounds for the Lakers. Wesley Matthews was 6-for-6 on three-pointers in scoring 18 points off the bench.

The Spurs opened with a 9-2 run, including an uncontested drive through the lane by Keldon Johnson for a two-handed slam. Los Angeles responded with an 11-0 run that promoted a timeout by Popovich.

The Lakers took their first double-digit lead at 35-25 on Kyle Kuzma's three-pointer with 1:14 remaining in the first quarter.

The Spurs' Dejounte Murray had a career-high 29 points, seven assists and seven rebounds.

"At the end of the day, it don't mean nothing, we lost," Murray said.

Heat avenge blowout loss to Bucks on previous day

Associated Press

MIAMI — The Miami Heat engineered a 58-point turnaround against the Milwaukee Bucks in 24 hours.

And just like that, an embarrassing loss was avenged.

Goran Dragic scored 26 points off the bench, Bam Adebayo finished with 22 points, 10 assists and eight rebounds and the Heat beat the Bucks 119-108 on Wednesday night — one day after Milwaukee made an NBA-record 29 three-pointers on the way to a 47-point romp on Miami's home floor.

"They were better than us last night," Dragic said. "Tonight, we had to fight."

Tyler Herro scored 21 points and grabbed a career-best 15 rebounds for Miami, which

trailed by 14 early in the second half and rallied to get a split of the two-game, two-night series against the team that finished with the NBA's best record in each of the past two regular seasons.

Celtics 126, Grizzlies 107: Jaylen Brown scored 18 of his 42 points in the second quarter and host Boston pulled away to its 10th straight victory over Memphis.

Brown matched his career best of 34 points with three minutes left in the third and tied a career-high with seven three-pointers made. Jayson Tatum scored 16 points, and Marcus Smart had 14.

Nets 135, Hawks 141: Kyrie Irving shook off three rough quarters to score 17 of his 25

points in the fourth, Kevin Durant had 33 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists, and host Brooklyn handed Atlanta its first loss.

In the opener of a two-game series between the teams that was almost entirely about offense — the third game in Nets franchise history where both teams had 100 points through three quarters — Irving couldn't get into the act. He was just 3-for-16 from the field and getting badly outplayed by point guard counterpart Trae Young. But he made three three-pointers in the final period after missing all seven through three as the Nets rallied to win after dropping two straight following their 2-0 start.

Hornets 118, Mavericks 99:

LaMelo Ball scored 22 points, Miles Bridges had 20 points and 16 rebounds and visiting Charlotte blew out Dallas in its home opener.

Terry Rozier, who scored 18 points, hit a pair of three-pointers early in a 14-0 run to start the second half, giving the Hornets a 25-point lead coming off their first win, over Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving and the Brooklyn Nets.

Clippers 128, Trail Blazers 105: Kawhi Leonard scored 28 points in his return from a two-game absence, Paul George added 23 points, and host Los Angeles breezed past Portland.

It was the Clippers' second straight blowout win to close out the year.

Sooners overwhelm Gators in Cotton Bowl

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Lincoln Riley will remember this Oklahoma season for a long time. It took a lot to get to the end of it — with two significant trophies.

The No. 8 Sooners navigated through the season played under the cloud of a pandemic, and their first 0-2 start in Big 12 play since 1998, to win their sixth conference title in a row, then wrapped it up with an overwhelming 55-20 win over 10th-ranked SEC runner-up Florida on Wednesday night in the Cotton Bowl — the first New Year's Six game played.

"It's very meaningful to us with the way the year has gone for everybody to be able to look at the tough things and not see obstacles, but see opportunities," Riley said. "It's been our mindset. We felt that way the entire year and really closed so strong."

Spencer Rattler threw for three touchdowns and ran for another score, and Rhamondre Stevenson rushed for 186 yards for the Sooners (9-2, No. 6 CFP), who won the Cotton Bowl in the same NFL stadium where 11 days earlier they claimed their latest Big 12 title. They led 17-0 in the first sev-

en minutes on the way to the most points and yards (684) they have ever had in a bowl game.

The Sooners had 435 yards rushing, including 110 from freshman Marcus Major. They averaged 10.52 yards per play overall, the most ever against a Power 5 opponent in a bowl game, according to STATS.

Rattler threw a 27-yard TD pass to fellow freshman Marvin Mims on the game's opening drive, and Florida's first possession ended with Tre Norwood's 45-yard interception return for a touchdown. That was the first of three picks thrown by Heisman Trophy finalist quarterback Kyle Trask in the first quarter, after only five all season.

"A couple of times, we confused their quarterback with coverage, and he let go of a couple of throws that weren't as decisive as we usually see him make," Riley said.

Oklahoma played in its sixth consecutive New Year's Six bowl game, but the last three seasons had lost College Football Playoffs semifinal games while giving up an average of 54 points to different SEC teams.

The Sooners finished this season with an eight-game winning streak. Their 0-2 start

in Big 12 play effectively knocked them out of playoff contention by mid-October.

Duke's Mayo Bowl

Wisconsin 42, Wake Forest 28: The Badgers captured the Duke's Mayo Bowl and the trophy that came along with it. And then they broke it.

While dancing around to celebrate his team's win, quarterback Graham Mertz dropped the football-shaped piece of Lenox crystal, leaving it shattered on the floor of the locker room.

"We just wanted everybody to have a piece of that trophy," Wisconsin coach Paul Chryst joked.

Mertz accounted for three touchdowns and the Badgers turned four second-half interceptions, all by different players, into 21 points to turn a close game into a near-rout of the Demon Deacons. Five players scored touchdowns for the Badgers. Mertz, a red-shirt freshman, threw for 130 yards and ran for two short TDs as Wisconsin (4-3) finished a rocky 2020 season on a high note.

"Yeah, I dropped it," Mertz said sheepishly. "That's on me. It happened."

No. 7 Tennessee routs No. 12 Missouri

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Yves Pons can help Tennessee win games even without scoring, yet he's perfectly capable of dominating on offense, too.

On Wednesday night, the reigning Southeastern Conference defensive player of the year did a bit of everything, leading the seventh-ranked Volunteers to a 73-53 victory over 12th-ranked Missouri.

Pons scored 13 points, grabbed six rebounds and blocked four shots to help Tennessee (7-0) win its SEC opener.

"Yves Pons was terrific," Vols coach Rick Barnes said. "That's the player we know he can be. If you could have heard the reception he got when he came off the TV interview into the locker room, it would show you the respect his teammates have for him."

Barnes said Pons, a bouncy 6-foot-6 senior forward, can guard any position on the floor. His early blocks caused Tigers players to alter their shots when they got into the lane. Missouri (6-1) shot just 36% from the floor.

"This is what I do. Play hard on defense, try to block shots, try to fix plays," said Pons, a native of Haiti who grew up in

France.

Pons had plenty of offensive help from an efficient Tennessee team. Santiago Vescovi scored 15 points, Jaden Springer had 13 and John Fulkerson added 11. The Volunteers relied on their mid-range game to shoot 50% from the field, and they hit 5 of 7 three-pointers.

Xavier Pinson led the Tigers with 11 points. They had just four assists and 21 turnovers and were thoroughly frustrated by the Vols' defense.

"They played with more grit, more toughness and more focus," Missouri coach Cuonzo Martin said of Tennessee.

Playing its first road game of the year, Tennessee was right at home in Mizzou Arena. The Volunteers made their first seven shots to build a 21-4 lead. The second half was more of the same as Tennessee hit its first three shots and scored eight points in the first minute and a half. The Vols led by as many as 28 points.

On consecutive second-half possessions, Tennessee ran isolation plays for Pons on the left wing. Defender Parker Braun backed off, but Pons still drove past him to the basket, dunking on the first drive and

drawing a foul on the second. Barnes told Pons they would run the play again, and the next time he should shoot a three-pointer. Pons never got the chance, leaving at least one column blank on the stat sheet.

No. 2 Baylor 105, Alcorn State 76: Macio Teague had 18 points to lead six players scoring in double figures for the host Bears, who earned their second lopsided victory in a 23-hour span.

Jared Butler added 17 points on 6-for-8 shooting and Matthew Mayer had 14 points for Baylor (8-0). Davion Mitchell, Jordan Turner and Zach Loveday each scored 10.

No. 23 Virginia 66, Notre Dame 57: Khei Clark had 19 points and five assists, and the visiting Cavaliers continued their dominance of the Fighting Irish.

Virginia (5-2, 1-0) improved to 12-0 in Atlantic Coast Conference openers under coach Tony Bennett and 10-0 in ACC regular-season matchups against Notre Dame.

No. 25 Ohio State 90, Nebraska 54: Justin Ahrens came off the bench to score 18 points and freshman Zed Key added 14 points on 5-for-5 shooting as the host Buckeyes used balanced scoring for their third win in four games.

Athletes rose up against racial injustice

Associated Press

As the NBA neared its restart in late July, its players vowed to keep the calls for social justice reform at the forefront in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

The basketball stars weren't the only athletes to act.

In a most unusual year already thrown into chaos by the coronavirus pandemic, many athletes took unprecedented steps when a nationwide reckoning on race spilled into the streets of American cities after the death of Floyd, a Black man, during a May arrest in Minneapolis.

Normally focused on the games they play, this time the sports world stood up — U.S. Open tennis champion Naomi Osaka, NASCAR's Bubba Wallace, the NFL's Malcolm Jenkins and Kenny Stills, WNBA star Nneka Ogwumike, and basketball's Chris Paul, LeBron James and Steph Curry were among the most prominent players to help turn protest cries of "Black Lives Matter," "Say His Name" and "Say Her Name" into tangible action.

The NBA painted "Black Lives Matter" on the courts inside their Orlando, Fla., "bubble" and social justice messages were emblazoned on the backs of jerseys. Players

and coaches during "The Star-Spangled Banner" locked arms and knelt.

Kneeling, which drew the ire of President Donald Trump and several team owners when NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick started doing it in 2016 to protest racial injustice, became a ubiquitous gesture during the national anthem this year — and during rallies after Floyd was killed by a white police officer who pressed a knee against his neck for nearly eight minutes.

As excitement built as games returned, another sobering moment pushed the sports world to mobilize. Jacob Blake, a Black man, was shot seven times by police on Aug. 23 in Kenosha, Wis., leaving him paralyzed from the waist down.

"We all hurt," Chris Paul, president of the National Basketball Players Association, said at the time. "We're all tired of just seeing the same thing over and over again, and everybody just expects us to be OK just because we get paid great money. We're human. We have real feelings."

Three days later, the Milwaukee Bucks refused to play against the Orlando Magic and demanded Wisconsin officials address police brutality. The whole league shut down temporarily, with other sports such as Major League Baseball, the WNBA, the National Hockey League and the National Football League halting games and practic-

es.

Paul met with NBA players, and they decided awareness wasn't enough anymore.

"We're about action," Paul said. "And that's what our meeting was about. It's about real action. We've been saying this, we've been saying that, but what's the action?"

Paul later backed up his words. He joined nearly 2,500 people on a march to a voting site in North Carolina. More than 20 NBA teams eventually signed on to host voting or other election-related activities — including voter registration and poll worker training — in their arenas or practice facilities.

James, The AP's Male Athlete of the Year, already had started More Than A Vote. The organization dedicated to maximizing Black turnout in November drew more than 42,000 volunteers to work at polling stations.

In August, Curry appeared with his wife, Ayesha, and their two daughters in a video endorsing President-elect Joe Biden during the Democratic National Convention. Osaka — whose father is Haitian and mother is Japanese — declared she would not play her semifinal of a U.S. Open tuneup tournament after Blake's shooting. Other tennis players expressed support and the tournament was halted for one day, prompting Osaka to remain in the draw.

Hoyer says Cubs will be competitive despite trades

Associated Press

Jed Hoyer insists this time won't be like 2011 for the Chicago Cubs.

The team's new president of baseball operations said Wednesday that Chicago plans to retool rather than bring out the wrecking ball the way it did nine years ago.

In his first major deal since replacing friend Theo Epstein, Hoyer sent NL Cy Young Award runner-up Yu Darvish and catcher Victor Caratini to the San Diego Padres for pitcher Zach Davies and four young minor leaguers Tuesday night.

"I'm not going to run the same playbook that we ran in 2011 and 2012," said Hoyer. "I think that

would be foolish. That playbook's been copied so many times, it doesn't work anymore."

Browns close facility due to positive cases

The Cleveland Browns closed their facility and delayed practice for the second straight day after two more players tested positive with coronavirus. The team's latest COVID situation has further impacted the Browns' ability to prepare for Sunday's game against the Pittsburgh Steelers.

In other NFL news:

■ Dalvin Cook's incredible season has come to an end as the Vikings running back left the

team this week after the death of his father, and he will be unavailable for Sunday's regular-season finale against the Lions, according to a league source.

Longtime Pacers executive Walsh retires

Longtime Indiana Pacers executive Donnie Walsh, 79, the architect of the franchise's turnaround, announced his retirement on Wednesday.

Chadwell is AP college coach of the year

Coastal Carolina's Jamey Chadwell is The Associated Press college football coach of the year after leading the Chanticleers to a surprising, near-

perfect season.

In other college football news:

■ Miami quarterback D'Eriq King tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee during the Hurricanes' loss this week in the Cheez-It Bowl. King will have surgery in the coming days and the Hurricanes expect him to be ready for camp.

Bruins defenseman Chara signs with Caps

Longtime Boston captain Zdeno Chara signed with the Washington Capitals on Wednesday, saying his former team had decided to move on from the towering defenseman who helped the Bruins climb into the top echelon of the NHL.