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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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China might be antagonized by US plans

By **SETH ROBSON**

Stars and Stripes

A plan to put U.S. military forces on Palawan, a Philippine island near disputed territory in the South China Sea, could herald a new era of brinkmanship with China, defense experts say.

While the move would likely ease concerns of U.S. allies over China's aggressive expansionism in the region, it also would move an American presence right on the edge of what Beijing considers its backyard.

The Supreme Court of the Philippines gave the green light last month to an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement allowing U.S. forces to build facilities, store equipment and rotate forces through the nation's military bases. The agreement grants the U.S. access to five military airfields, two naval bases and a jungle training camp, Philippine military spokesman Col. Restituto Padilla told the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

The facilities include three on the main island of Luzon — Basa Air Base in Pampanga province, Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija province and Clark Air Base in Pampanga; two on the central island province of Cebu — the Cebu naval base and Benito Ebuen Air Base; one on Mindanao island — Lumbia Air Field in Cagayan de Oro; and a naval base and the Antonio Bautista Air Base on Palawan facing the South China Sea.

In addition, the U.S. is seeking access to three civilian seaports and airfields on Luzon, including the port at Subic Bay, a former U.S. Navy base, a senior Philippine defense official told Reuters. That would give the U.S. its first large-scale military presence in the Philip-

pinas since 1992, after negotiations on a new lease agreement for American bases broke down and the last of 40,000 U.S. personnel stationed in the country left Subic Bay.

The agreement is dependent on the outcome of May's presidential elections in the Philippines because a new administration could scrap the deal.

Teeth in the 'pivot'

If the deal stands, however, it will put real teeth into America's "Pacific pivot" policy, David Johnson, of the Center for Advanced Defense Studies, a Washington-based think tank, said in a telephone interview this month.

The presence of American forces beyond Japan and South Korea would affirm the U.S. commitment to the Western Pacific and serve as a Cold War-style "trip wire" guaranteeing a U.S. response to military aggression against U.S. partners in the region, Johnson said.

U.S. officials have publicly downplayed the strategic implications of an American military return to the Philippines, a former colony, perhaps to avoid worsening relations with China.

Marine Corps Forces Pacific spokesman Chuck Little said the Marines aren't interested in having a permanent presence of operational forces in the Philippines.

"For the Marines, this means we should be able to visit the Philippines more often to train with more Philippine military units at more locations," he said in a telephone interview this month.

The Marines' MV-22 Ospreys proved their ability to deploy rapidly for relief efforts after Typhoon Haiyan battered

the islands in 2013. The Okinawa-based tilt-rotor aircraft will allow Marines to get to the Philippines and other parts of the Pacific more rapidly than in the past, Little said.

"We plan to come to train with our partners in the Armed Forces of the Philippines from our bases in Japan, and in the near future Guam, and then return to those bases when the training is complete," he said.

The Marines also want to travel occasionally to the Philippines from bases in California, either for major exercises or when Marine Expeditionary Units are embarked aboard amphibious ships in the region, he said.

Not fooling anyone

However, Johnson said that although "rotational forces" include occasional training visits, they might also involve a longer-term presence. Claims that U.S. forces are going there to help with counterterrorism or to prepare for disaster-relief missions "aren't fooling anyone," he said.

The Chinese — engaged in maritime disputes with the Philippines and several other nations in the region — could regard missiles carried by U.S. ships rotating into Palawan the same way Americans thought about Russian missiles in Cuba in the 1960s, he said.

From Manila's perspective, the agreement boosts its position in the dispute with China, he said. "When implemented, it will vastly increase the risk of U.S. involvement in a regional conflict with China over issues that may not be of vital national interest to us, creating a near permanent state of brinkmanship, but, on the other hand, be a very strong signal of our commitment to the national inter-

ests of regional allies," Johnson said.

Jan van Tol, a senior fellow at another Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said operating out of bases on Palawan would put U.S. forces close to the disputed Spratly Islands, where China has been reclaiming land and building airfields and other facilities.

"More visits to the Philippines means more ships in the South China Sea," he said in a telephone interview this month.

Littoral combat ships rotating through Singapore will likely visit ports in the Philippines in the near future, he added.

The basing agreement reversed a longtime Philippine policy of keeping foreign forces off its soil and reflects its level of concern over Chinese expansionism as well as U.S. resolve to remain a major player in East Asia, he said. It is part of an effort that includes freedom-of-navigation operations the U.S. Navy conducted in the South China Sea last week, he said.

Down the road, the agreement will lead to more U.S. forces in and near the South China Sea and more training with partner militaries in the area. It will help counter perceptions that U.S. security guarantees might not be credible in the region, Van Tol said.

"Increased presence, and in particular increasing numbers of freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea to continue to assert our rights under international law, as the secretary of defense just indicated would be happening, will be important signals of increasing peaceful resistance to Chinese coercive activities," he said.

N. Korea rocket launch criticized

By PAUL ALEXANDER
Stars and Stripes

North Korea's rocket launch Sunday puts even more pressure on the international community to find a way to rein in the rogue nation and potentially adds stress to U.S.-China relations that have been frayed by Beijing's aggressive buildup on disputed islands in the South China Sea.

Already facing fresh U.N. Security Council sanctions for its nuclear test a month ago, Pyongyang turned a deaf ear to pleas to cancel the launch, including a visit by ally China's top nuclear negotiator.

Instead, the North tried out what was believed to be an improved version of the three-stage rocket that it fired three years ago. Pyongyang claimed it put a satellite into orbit amid a chorus of condemnation from the U.S., Japan and South Korea that it's really working on a ballistic missile capable of reaching the U.S. mainland with a nuclear warhead. In pronouncing the launch's success, the North vowed to send up more satellites.

"This is our independent and peaceful use of the space," an ob-

viously excited announcer said during a televised broadcast.

But U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the rocket launch "deeply deplorable," and the Security Council set an emergency session for later Sunday.

The U.S. strongly condemned the launch, calling it "a flagrant violation" of Security Council resolutions on the North's ballistic missile program, said Secretary of State John Kerry.

He urged united action by the international community in the wake of "this most recent destabilizing and unacceptable challenge to our common peace and security."

China has shown increasing irritation over the North's provocations. But while it expressed "regret" over the launch, it also called for negotiations — not sanctions — in a sign it might resist action that it deems too strong.

A crippled North Korea could force a regime collapse, risking a flood of refugees and the possible rise of a pro-U.S. government on China's doorstep.

While South Korea and the Pentagon agreed that the rocket did indeed reach space, there were questions about just how

successful it was. Experts will be poring over footage and data for analysis.

The launch occurred at approximately 9:31 a.m. from the North's upgraded launch facility on its northwest coast and was quickly picked up by U.S., Japanese and South Korean monitors.

South Korea said the first stage blew up after separation off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula, raining an estimated 270 pieces on the sea. After shedding its fairing southwest of South Korea's Jeju Island, the rocket then vanished from radar — leading Seoul to speculate that it may have failed completely — only to appear in the skies over Okinawa before disappearing again.

An emergency broadcast system in Okinawa used loudspeakers to alert residents that the missile had passed over 10 minutes after launch. Japan had deployed anti-missile systems on land and sea in case the rocket started to come down over its territory but did not use them and reported no damage.

Stars and Stripes staffers Erik Slavin, Wyatt Olson, Chiyomi Sumida and Hana Kusumoto contributed to this report.

Rubio takes beating at NH debate

Associated Press

MANCHESTER, N.H. — Marco Rubio faced withering criticism of his readiness to be president and his policy depth in the last Republican debate before Tuesday's New Hampshire primary, as New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and other candidates launched an aggressive campaign to slow the Florida senator's rise.

Rubio responded with an uneven performance on Saturday night that could hurt his bid to emerge as an alternative to Donald Trump and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz. If anything, his showing gave new hope to Christie, Jeb Bush and Ohio Gov. John Kasich, all of whom need strong finishes in New Hampshire to keep their White House bids afloat.

Cruz, the Iowa caucus winner, also took criticism at the debate for controversial political tactics, with one candidate disparaging him for having "Washington ethics" and being willing to test the campaign's legal limits.

Russian sub activity at Cold War levels

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Russian submarine fleet has returned to the North Atlantic with such gusto that NATO sub commanders are reporting "more activity from Russian submarines than we've seen since the days of the Cold War," according to a top NATO admiral.

Royal Navy Vice Adm. Clive Johnstone, speaking aboard a Spanish frigate at the end of last month, told the defense analysis group IHS Jane's that the alliance is also seeing "a level of Russian capability that we haven't seen before."

Recently, Russia has commissioned two new types of subs,

including a nuclear-powered attack variant and a nuclear-powered ballistic-missile class. According to Jane's, Russia has started modernizing older submarines as well.

Johnstone said that with these upgrades and newer boats, Russia is "freer to operate" beneath the waves, as the new technology and an increase in spending has greatly increased Russia's capabilities. Johnstone also said that Russian submarine crews are more professional than in years past, something that has also raised concern within the alliance.

While Russia's revamped sub fleet is certainly a concern for the west, what worries John-

stone is the lack of openness about Russia's strategic and operational objectives. The admiral added that the Russians haven't invited a NATO representative to one of their exercises in the last two years — something that NATO does regularly.

Recently, the United States has monitored Russian submarines and surface ships patrolling around undersea fiber-optic cables. While the Russians' intentions are unclear, tapping underwater communication lines is an old Cold War tactic revolutionized by the U.S. Navy in a series of spy missions that began in 1970.

2 ships represent US at India fleet review

A pair of ships deployed to Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, are representing the U.S. at the International Fleet Review in India.

Guided-missile cruiser USS Antietam and guided-missile destroyer USS McCampbell joined vessels from more than 50 nations, including China, Britain and France, on Thursday in Visakhapatnam, India, a Navy statement said.

The exercise, hosted by the Indian navy on the Bay of Bengal to "help enhance mutual trust and confidence with navies around the world," will run through Monday, the statement said.

From staff reports

Favre, Stabler headline '16 HOF class

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — The first NFL game Brett Favre ever attended, as a teenager growing up in Mississippi, was the final home game of Ken “The Snake” Stabler’s career.

Favre, a New Orleans Saints fan, traveled the hour-or-so drive from home to the Superdome on that Sunday in 1984 with his father, older brother and uncle — and it was a thrill to watch a guy who electrified a stadium the way Favre himself would one day.

“All of a sudden, the crowd goes crazy, and it’s because Ken Stabler poked his head out of the locker room. He had hair like mine. His was just a lot longer, kind of aged and gray,” recounted Favre, wearing an all-black outfit and sporting a full white beard. “And I thought: Man, that’s cool. ... It’s got to be cool to be ‘The Snake.’ And then they lost. My dad was throwing popcorn and beer. ... I thought: Maybe it’s not so good to be ‘The Snake.’”

Favre and the late Stabler, a pair of kindred-spirit Super Bowl-winning QBs, entered the Pro Football Hall of Fame together on Saturday.

Also voted in for the class of 2016 a day before the Super Bowl were modern-day players Kevin Greene, Marvin Harrison and Orlando Pace, coach Tony Dungy, contributor Ed DeBartolo Jr., and senior selection Dick Stanfel.

The freewheeling Favre, as expected, was a first-ballot entry, a reward for a long and distinguished career, mostly with the Green Bay Packers, that included three consecutive NFL MVP awards from 1995-97 and a championship in the 1997 Super Bowl.

“As a kid, all I ever dreamed of was to play pro football, to be Roger Staubach or to be Archie Manning. That’s what I dreamed of. I hated Terry Bradshaw, which I told him,” Favre said with a smile.

Stabler, a left-hander who earned his nickname for his ability to slither past defenders, goes into the Hall as a senior selection about six months after dying of colon cancer at age 69 — and just days after researchers said his brain showed widespread signs of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

Stabler, the 1974 NFL MVP, was represented at Saturday’s announcement by two of his grandsons, 17-year-old twins Justin and Jack Moyes. Each brother wore one of Grandpa’s bling-filled rings: Justin’s was from the 1977 Super Bowl with the Oakland Raiders; Jack’s was from a college national championship with Alabama.

“One thing he didn’t really talk to us much about was the Hall of Fame. I know it would mean a lot to him if he got in, which he finally did,” Justin Moyes said. “I know he’s smiling right now.”

CTE is a disease linked to repeated brain trauma and associated with symptoms such as memory loss, depression and progressive dementia. It has been found in the brains of dozens of former football players, including one of last year’s Hall inductees, Junior Seau, who committed suicide in 2012 at 43.

Favre played for 20 seasons, eventually retiring — after famously vacillating about whether to walk away from the game — as the NFL’s career leader with 6,300 completions, 10,169 attempts, 71,838 yards and 508 TDs. He never met a pass he was afraid to throw, no matter how ill-advised it might have seemed, and wound up with a record 336 interceptions, the trade-off for his high-risk, high-reward, entertaining style.

Before Green Bay, he briefly was a member of the Atlanta Falcons. Afterward, he had short stints with the New York Jets and the Packers’ chief rivals, the Minnesota Vikings.

“It was awkward,” Favre said of going from the Packers

to the Vikings. “I had people tell me all the time, ‘You really divided my house.’ And I take pride in that, sort of.”

In discussing Stabler, Favre called him “crafty,” choosing a word plenty might use for No. 4 himself. Favre brought up the Holy Roller play from 1978, when Stabler fumbled the ball in the closing seconds, and it rolled forward into the end zone, where one of his Raiders teammates recovered it for the winning touchdown against the San Diego Chargers. It’s one of the most famous plays in NFL history — and one that would be illegal today.

“That was something I would have tried to pull off,” Favre said. “But I think that only he could get it done. I just think the good ones find ways to get it done, no matter what.”

Harrison, Peyton Manning’s top receiver while with the Indianapolis Colts from 1996-08, holds the record for most catches in a season: a hard-to-fathom 143 in 2002. At the time of his retirement, Harrison ranked second only to Hall of Famer Jerry Rice in NFL history with 1,102 catches and most consecutive games with a catch (190).

Harrison was not present at the announcement and engaged in an awkward conference call during the news conference for other inductees. Dungy called Harrison “the most artistic receiver I’ve ever been around.”

Dungy coached Manning, Harrison and the rest of the Colts to victory in the 2006 Super Bowl, becoming the first black head coach to win the championship. When he started out his coaching career, Dungy said, there were only a half-dozen or so other black assistants.

“It wasn’t a situation,” he said, “where you had a lot of role models.”

Newton wins MVP, offensive player of year

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Cam Newton is now a Super Bowl quarterback with an MVP award.

Offensive Player of the Year, too.

And his coach, Ron Rivera, owns a second NFL honor as well.

Newton, the Carolina Panthers star, won The Associated Press NFL Most Valuable Player and Offensive Player of the Year awards Saturday night.

“It means so much, but not just for myself,” Newton said in a video acceptance speech for the MVP award. “To be the first person in Panthers history to win it — that’s what I’m most proud about. I’ve received a lot of awards, but to be able to get this organization here, I’m really proud. We didn’t get in this position by happenstance. It took years of hard work and dedication, and now we are reaping the benefits.”

Newton was not on hand at NFL Honors because he is kind of busy preparing for a little game on Sunday against Denver. But just as he has for much of the week — for most of the season, really — Newton still was a dominant figure.

His father, mother and two brothers accepted the Offensive Player award.

“Cam took an unconventional journey to get here and we’re just so proud of what has happened, my family and I,” said Newton’s father Cecil. “So many thanks go out to so many people, from Pop Warner to the Panthers. I don’t have time to tell you all, ‘Thank you.’ You know who

you are. We know who you are.”

Newton was a landslide choice for MVP with 48 votes from a nationwide panel of 50 sports writers and broadcasters who regularly cover the NFL. Fellow QBs Tom Brady and Carson Palmer each received one vote.

Newton earned 18 votes for top offensive player. Steelers receiver Antonio Brown was next with 10.

The All-Pro quarterback set an NFL mark for the position with 45 touchdowns this season: 35 passing and 10 rushing. He also ranked sixth in passer rating (99.4), while throwing for 3,837 yards. His 636 yards on the ground easily led all QBs, and the 10 touchdowns rushing were more than All-Pro running back Doug Martin of Tampa Bay scored.

Rivera led the Panthers to an unprecedented third straight NFC South title and two playoff victories. In a season featuring several outstanding coaching jobs, Rivera easily outdistanced the field. He received 36½ votes, far in front of Kansas City’s Andy Reid with six votes.

Rivera also won the award two years ago. He dedicated this one to his brother Mickey, who died recently.

“It’s a tremendous award for the organization,” Rivera said. “It validates everything that we’ve done. And again, our success always starts at the top. I really do appreciate our owner, Mr. (Jerry) Richardson, for believing in me and giving me my opportunity. Dave Gettleman and Marty Hurney — the two general managers I’ve worked with — I thank them for

what they’ve done. Our coaching staff has been tremendous; our players have been outstanding.”

Another outstanding player, Houston end J.J. Watt won his third Defensive Player of the Award in five pro seasons. He also won it in 2012 and last year, when he was a unanimous choice.

This time, in tying Hall of Famer Lawrence Taylor as the only players to take the award three times, Watt earned 37 votes.

“It’s almost difficult to comprehend because I’ve only been in the league five years,” Watt said. “So to think about where I’ve come from and where I am now and what lies ahead, those type of things it almost doesn’t register because of the greatness of the guys that have come before me. So to even be considered amongst those guys is truly incredible. But I mean that’s what the goal is. The goal is to come out here and try to be one of the best ever.”

Watt spoke about playing football in the yard with his brothers while growing up in Wisconsin, pretending to be Packers stars Reggie White or Brett Favre.

“There might be kids out there pretending that they’re wearing No. 99 is literally one of the coolest things in the entire world,” Watt said. “I was a 2-star recruit ... going into college, and now I have three Defensive Player of the Year trophies, so [take that] all you guys who doubted me.”

Kansas City safety Eric Berry gave an emotionally charged speech while accepting Comeback Player of the Year. At

one point, his eyes welled with tears and he paused before accepting the award.

Berry missed 10 games the previous season battling lymphoma, then returned to the Chiefs to become an All-Pro. His inspirational story and superb performance on the field earned him 38 votes.

“Everybody, just live out your dreams. Don’t let anything come in between,” Berry said. “I’m truly honored, truly blessed, truly thankful to be standing here before you all. ... It was some tough times. It was some times where I felt like I couldn’t do it anymore. ... There was a lot of rough times, a lot of rough nights, a lot of lonely nights.”

His teammate, cornerback Marcus Peters, took Defensive Rookie of the Year. Peters tied for the league lead with eight interceptions in helping the Chiefs make the playoffs. He received 45 votes.

Rams running back Todd Gurley took Offensive Rookie with 27 votes, well ahead of the 17 for Buccaneers QB Jameis Winston, the first overall pick in last year’s draft. Gurley missed the first two games of 2015, then went on a tear that included four straight 100-yard rushing performances: 146, 159, 128 and 133 yards. He finished the season third in league rushing and scored 10 touchdowns.

Wade Phillips’ work in turning the Denver defense into the stingiest in the NFL got him the Assistant Coach of the Year award. San Francisco receiver Anquan Boldin received the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year award for his off-field work.



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K-State upsets No. 1 Oklahoma

Associated Press

MANHATTAN, Kan. — Wesley Iwundu scored 22 points, and Kansas State upset top-ranked Oklahoma 80-69 on Saturday night to shake up the Big 12 race once again.

Freshman reserve Dean Wade had 17 points for the Wildcats (14-9, 3-7), who snapped the Sooners' four-game win streak by holding in check player of the year front-runner Buddy Hield.

The high-scoring guard had 23 points, but a big chunk came in the final minutes, when the Sooners (19-3, 7-3) were desperately trying to rally against a team that wouldn't budge an inch.

It was Kansas State's first victory against a No. 1 team since topping Kansas on Feb. 11, 2011, and just the fifth time the program had knocked off the nation's best team.

Notre Dame 80, No. 2 North Carolina 76: Demetrius Jackson scored 19 points, helping host Notre Dame rally for the win.

It was the second straight loss for the Tar Heels (19-4, 8-2 Atlantic Coast Conference).

Bonzie Colson added 19 points and 10 rebounds for Notre Dame (16-7, 7-4).

No. 3 Villanova 72, No. 11 Providence 60: Darryl Reynolds had 19 points and 10 rebounds, and visiting Villanova avenged its only Big East loss of the season.

Ryan Arcidiacono scored 16 points to help the Wildcats (20-3, 10-1) to their 12th victory in 13 games.

Ben Bentil led Providence (18-6, 6-5) with 20 points.

No. 4 Maryland 72, No. 18 Purdue 61: Rasheed Sulaimon had 21 points and a career-high 10 rebounds, helping Maryland extend its home winning streak to 25 games.

Purdue led 51-47 with 5:58 left before Robert Carter Jr. hit a three-pointer to

spark a 9-0 run that put the Terrapins ahead for good.

No. 6 Xavier 90, Marquette 82: J.P. Macura scored a career-high 20 points and hit a pair of three-pointers down the stretch, rallying host Xavier to the win.

No. 7 Kansas 75, TCU 56: Perry Ellis had 23 points and 10 rebounds, and Kansas started the second half of its Big 12 Conference schedule with a victory at TCU.

No. 25 South Carolina 81, No. 8 Texas A&M 78: Sindarius Thornwell had 25 points and nine assists, helping South Carolina to the road win.

No. 9 Virginia 64, Pittsburgh 50: Malcolm Brogdon scored 21 points, and visiting Virginia earned its sixth consecutive victory.

No. 10 Michigan State 89, Michigan 73: Bryn Forbes scored 23 of his 29 points in the first half, part of an early barrage of three-pointers for visiting Michigan State.

No. 13 Iowa State 64, Oklahoma State 59: Georges Niang had 18 points and nine rebounds, helping visiting Iowa State to the win.

No. 14 West Virginia 80, No. 15 Baylor 69: Dexter Miles Jr. scored a season-high 20 points and host West Virginia grabbed sole possession of first place in the Big 12.

No. 19 Louisville 79, Boston College 47: Trey Lewis scored 16 points as host Louisville rolled to the easy win a day after the school imposed a postseason ban for recruiting violations.

No. 20 Kentucky 80, Florida 61: Jamal Murray scored a career-high 35 points, and host Kentucky ended a rare two-game losing streak.

Illinois State 58, No. 21 Wichita State 53: Paris Lee scored a career-high 19 points to help host Illinois State get the win.

Penn State 68, No. 22 Indiana 63: Brandon Taylor scored 24 points, powering Penn State to the home win.

No. 23 Arizona 77, Washington 72: Ryan Anderson had 22 points and 15 rebounds for visiting Arizona, and Kadeem Allen hit a three-pointer with 1:01 left as the shot clock expired.

No. 24 Dayton 98, George Mason 64: Charles Cooke scored 24 points to help visiting Dayton to its seventh straight win.

Loyola (Md.) 100, Army 99 (2OT): Andre Walker scored a career-high 31 points, including the winning free throws with four seconds left, and Loyola-Maryland defeated host Army in double overtime.

Dylan Cox, whose three-pointer with 1.6 seconds left in regulation tied the game, made two free throws to give Army the lead with 12 seconds remaining in the second overtime. But he fouled Walker who made both free throws before Army's Tanner Plomb missed a 27-footer at the buzzer.

Colgate 58, Navy 55: Jordan Swopshire scored 10 of his career-high 20 points in the second half, and Colgate led nearly the entire way and held on to beat host Navy to snap a three-game skid.

Jace Hogan and Tilman Dunbar had 13 points apiece to lead Navy (16-9, 7-5), which has lost four of its last five games.

Air Force 61, Boise State 53: CJ Siples had 25 points and seven rebounds and Hayden Graham hit a key three-pointer with 1:07 left as host Air Force stunned Boise State.

Graham's three came late in the shot clock and made it 60-53. The Falcons (12-12, 3-8 Mountain West) held on for their second straight win following an eight-game losing streak.

Caps rally late, beat Devils in SO

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — T.J. Oshie and Alex Ovechkin scored in the shootout after Washington tied the game late in the third period, and the Capitals beat the New Jersey Devils 3-2 on Saturday.

Paul Carey, called up from the minors Friday, tied the score in the third period with his first NHL goal.

Andre Burakovsky scored in his fifth straight game for Washington and Braden Holtby made 22 saves in winning his league-high 32nd game. He is 24-1-3 in his last 29 games.

Joseph Blandisi and Adam Henrique scored for the Devils, who have lost two straight games in shootouts.

Cory Schneider had 28 saves for the Devils, who are trying to get to the playoffs for the first time in four years.

Bruins 2, Sabres 1 (OT): Brad Marchand scored on a penalty shot midway through overtime to lift host Boston over Buffalo.

Marchand got the penalty shot after being grabbed by defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen while skating in alone 2:32 into overtime. The Bruins wing came in on goalie Robin Lehner, shifted to his backhand and slipped a shot inside the right post.

Penguins 3, Panthers 2 (OT): Kris Letang scored two goals, including the winner on a power play in overtime, to lift visiting Pittsburgh over Florida.

Sidney Crosby had a goal and two assists for the Penguins, and Jeff Zatkoff made 40 saves.

Rangers 3, Flyers 2 (SO): Mats Zuccarello and Derek Stepan scored during a shootout to lift New York to a comeback victory over host Philadelphia.

Keith Yandle tied it with 12.9 seconds left in regulation and Chris Kreider also scored in regulation for the Rangers, who won consecutive games for just the second time since Nov. 15.

Red Wings 5, Islanders 1: Dylan Larkin and Tomas Tatar each had a goal and an assist, and Detroit routed New York for its first home win of 2016, a game delayed 36 minutes by a malfunctioning Zamboni that chopped up a section of the ice.

Canadiens 5, Oilers 1: Tomas Plekanec had a goal and three assists, helping host Montreal end a four-game losing streak with a victory over Edmonton.

Montreal posted just its sixth win in 26 games since Dec. 3.

Senators 6, Maple Leafs 1: Curtis Lazar had the first two-goal game of his career, Erik Karlsson had four assists and Ottawa routed visiting Toronto to end a three-game skid.

Blues 4, Wild 1: Jori Lehtera had a goal and an assist, and Brian Elliott made 38 saves as host St. Louis beat Minnesota.

Vladimir Tarasenko, Paul Stastny and Troy Brouwer also scored for the Blues.

Predators 6, Sharks 2: Recent call-up Viktor Arvidsson scored twice, Filip Forsberg had a goal and two assists and host Nashville beat San Jose.

Pekka Rinne made 28 saves and James Neal, Calle Jarnkrok and Shea Weber also scored to help Nashville end a three-game home losing streak.

Blackhawks 5, Stars 1: Artem Anisimov had a short-handed goal and three assists, and Western Conference-leading Chicago beat host Dallas.

Flames 4, Canucks 1: Jonas Hiller made 34 saves, helping visiting Calgary past Vancouver.

Jets 4, Avalanche 2: Drew Stafford had two goals, including the go-ahead score, and Winnipeg beat host Colorado.

Warriors win 41st straight at home

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — With a Super Bowl-sized stage, a celebrity-filled crowd and two championship contenders on the floor, it felt more like late May in Oracle Arena than early February.

Stephen Curry was up to the task. Curry scored 26 points and keyed a strong closing stretch that sent the Golden State Warriors to their 41st straight regular-season home win, 116-108 over the Oklahoma City Thunder on Saturday night.

"This was very playoff-like for sure," Curry said. "The atmosphere, just the intensity, the adrenaline down the stretch. That's what you expect for sure. It was good to get that feeling and execute."

Curry scored three baskets and assisted on two more in a closing 12-4 run that gave the Warriors (46-4) their ninth straight win to match the 1966-67 Philadelphia 76ers for the best record ever after 50 games. Golden State moved within three wins of tying the Chicago Bulls (1995-96) for the longest home winning streak in NBA history.

Harrison Barnes added 19 points and Klay Thompson scored 18 for Golden State.

Kevin Durant had 40 points and 14 rebounds and Russell Westbrook added 27 points and 12 assists for the Thunder, who had won five straight and 12 of 13 but still trail Golden State and San Antonio in the Western Conference.

"Man we're not scared of either one of

these teams," Durant said. "We're going to play our game. Nobody in this locker room is scared. We have to play them. If we want to get to where we want to get to, we have to play them. We're not ducking anybody."

Curry helped the Warriors break out to a 20-point lead in the second quarter despite making just one three-pointer on the night.

Trail Blazers 96, Rockets 79: Damian Lillard had 21 points and 10 assists to lead a balanced scoring attack and the visiting Trail Blazers built a big lead early and rolled to an easy win.

Pacers 112, Pistons 104: Paul George scored 30 points to help the host Pacers hold on.

Indiana (27-24) nearly squandered a 20-point third quarter lead, but held on thanks to five missed free throws from Andre Drummond in the game's final 3:30.

Hornets 108, Wizards 104: Nicolas Batum had 26 points and 11 rebounds, and the host Hornets rallied in the second half to beat the Wizards.

Cavaliers 99, Pelicans 94: Kyrie Irving scored 29 points, LeBron James added 27 and host Cleveland bounced back from two straight losses.

Irving and James combined for 17 points in the fourth quarter.

76ers 103, Nets 98: Jahlil Okafor had 22 points and 17 rebounds and Nerlens Noel added 18 points, including a key dunk late in the fourth quarter, to lead the

host 76ers to a victory.

Rookie T.J. McConnell, filling in for injured point guard Ish Smith, tied his career-high with 17 points to go with six assists for the 76ers, who earned their eighth win of the season while snapping a four-game losing streak.

Timberwolves 112, Bulls 105: Andrew Wiggins scored six of his 21 points in the final 90 seconds to help the host Timberwolves surge past the Bulls.

Trailing by five with 2:30 to play, the Wolves closed the game with a 12-0 surge to win it. Wiggins scored the final six of the run.

Spurs 106, Lakers 102: LaMarcus Aldridge scored 26 points and the Spurs beat the Lakers to remain unbeaten at home.

Kawhi Leonard added 20 points and 13 rebounds to help the Spurs win their 28th straight home game to open the season. The Spurs' 37th straight home victory dating back to last season was surprisingly difficult.

Jazz 98, Suns 89: Rodney Hood scored 25 points, Gordon Hayward added 22 and the Jazz stretched their season-long winning streak to six games with a victory over the reeling hosts, who lost their seventh straight and are 2-22 in their last 24 games.

Mavericks 114, Grizzlies 110 (OT): Chandler Parsons scored 26 points, including a pair of three-pointers in overtime, to lead the visiting Mavericks.