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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Super Tucanos boost Afghan air force

BY SLOBODAN LEKIC

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghan leaders and U.S. military commanders are hailing the arrival of the Afghan air force's first four light-attack aircraft as a major boost to the nation's military capabilities.

"Today, one of Afghanistan's wishes has been fulfilled," President Ashraf Ghani said Thursday during a ceremony to mark the rollout of the Embraer/SNC A-29 Super Tucano. "The first phase of rebuilding the Afghan air force has now been completed."

The Super Tucanos will be the first Afghan warplanes capable of delivering 250- and 500-pound free-fall and laser-guided precision bombs, a vital requirement in interdicting and defeating the Taliban guerrillas.

The A-29 is also armed with two wing-mounted, .50-caliber machine guns. In addition to the bombs, it can carry pods equipped with two more machine guns, a 20 mm automatic cannon or air-to-ground rockets.

The planes are scheduled to go into action in late March or early April, when four more will be delivered. In all, 20 aircraft are on order under a U.S.-funded \$427 million con-

tract and are to be delivered by 2018.

Defense Minister Masoom Stanikzai said the planes are likely to be used first in southern Helmand, the opium-rich province where the Taliban have taken large swaths of territory from overwhelmed government forces, and in the eastern province of Nangarhar, where Islamic State militants have been trying to establish a foothold.

With the formal end of the NATO combat mission at the end of 2014, most allied air assets were pulled out, and the new rules of engagement for the smaller train-and-advise Resolute Support mission limit what coalition aircraft can do.

That has left many of the missions they performed to the Afghan air force, a service re-established as part of the armed forces in 2008.

Casualty evacuations and the ferrying of troops, ammunition and supplies have fallen to the fledgling Afghan air force and its fleet of helicopters, light transports and freighters.

Although the air force also operates four Mil Mi-35 Krokodyl helicopter gunships and 28 MD-530 close-air attack choppers, military commanders have complained that they lacked an aircraft able to drop heavy bombs onto guerrillas hidden in strong points or other hardened shelters.

That's where the new Super Tucanos are expected to excel. The tandem-seat turboprops are optimized for ground-attack missions in Afghanistan's hot, high, dusty environment. The planes are equipped with sophisticated avionics, including head-up displays, computer-controlled all-glass cockpits and infrared thermal-imaging devices that help pilots detect objects on the ground at night or in fog. They can also carry a large bomb load and can loiter for long periods over potential targets.

"Looking at Afghanistan's military situation now, these planes can play a very big role in the fight," air force spokesman Mohammad Bahadur said, adding that they represented a "huge boost" to overall military capabilities.

The first Super Tucanos to arrive were accompanied by their four pilots, who trained at Moody Air Force Base, Ga., for the past year, and by a group of maintainers who spent nine months at the base. Plans call for a total of 30 pilots and 90 maintainers to be trained at Moody by 2018.

The Afghan fliers were accompanied back to Afghanistan by American pilots and mechanics from the 81st Fighter Squadron, a training unit based at Moody.

Campbell confident in Afghanistan's military

BY SLOBODAN LEKIC

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The outgoing commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan said Saturday he is confident that Afghan security forces can deal successfully with the current Taliban offensive and urged the insurgents to join the peace process as their best chance for having a role in the country's future.

"The future of the Taliban is exactly what (Afghan) President Ashraf Ghani has asked them to do, which is to become part of the political process," U.S. Army Gen. John Campbell told reporters Saturday.

He also said that the Islamic State group in Afghanistan remained relatively small and was under continuing attack by U.S. and Afghan government forces and even the Taliban.

"The Taliban are the main danger to the national government, not Daesh," he said using the Arabic acronym for the extremist group.

Campbell, who has served as commander of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan for the past 18 months, is due to be replaced in early March by Lt. Gen. John "Mick" Nicholson.

Speaking at what he said was likely his last news conference as commander, Campbell urged the Taliban to join peace

talks. The so-called Quadrilateral Group of diplomats from the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China have held a series of meetings to hash out a road map for peace talks with the Taliban. The next meeting is scheduled for Feb. 23 in Kabul. The Taliban have been invited to attend but have not responded.

Campbell said that in order to improve, the government's security forces need to promote younger and more capable officers. They also need to end the practice of manning hundreds of checkpoints, which makes them vulnerable to attack and depletes manpower needed to deal with Taliban offensives.

Ghani's government has replaced 92 army generals during the past two months due to incompetence or concerns about corruption.

Campbell has overseen the transition of the NATO-led coalition, which formally ended its combat role at the end of 2014, reducing to a much smaller mission of training, advising and assisting. Since then, Afghan army and police have had sole responsibility for the country's security. They have struggled in the face of a virulent Taliban offensive on multiple fronts that has not abated with the onset of winter.

Kerry criticizes Russia in Syria

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

MUNICH — Prospects for advancing a cessation of hostilities in Syria appeared bleak on Saturday as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart traded accusations and cast doubt on the likelihood that any pause in fighting can hold.

Kerry, speaking at the three-day, annual Munich Security Conference, criticized the Russian bombing campaign in Syria, saying, “in our opinion, those attacks have been against legitimate opposition groups.”

Russia’s targeting must change, Kerry said, in order to adhere to an agreement he and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced on Friday to work toward a cessation of hostilities within a week.

However, Kerry held out hope that the agreement will enable the flow of humanitarian aid beginning this weekend and could presage a wider deal.

In contrast, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev spoke of the West sparking a new “Cold War” with Russia and said the West’s description of its role in Syria was a fabrication.

Opposing views of Syrian

President Bashar Assad’s regime and its role in Syria are likely to challenge any attempt at a political deal or cessation of violence and bombing.

“You shouldn’t demonize Assad. You should only demonize terrorists,” Lavrov said at a later panel discussion.

Lavrov, said he was doubtful that a deal for a cessation to the violence could be reached, given competing agendas. Asked about the prospects of being able to declare success a week from now, Lavrov said “49 percent.”

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Shiite cleric calling for Iraq reform

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraq’s influential Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr called for government reform Saturday, demanding greater accountability and threatening to withdraw from the political process if the government does not show results within a year.

Al-Sadr’s comments follow a slew of similar demands from Iraq’s political and religious elite after months of stalled progress on a reform package that Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi proposed last summer.

Among a series of economic and political reforms, al-Sadr called for Iraq’s powerful Shiite militias to be formally incorporated into Iraq’s existing security forces. This would also include Sadr’s own militia, Saraya al-Salam, which formed following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State group in 2014.

Al-Sadr also echoed al-Abadi’s call last week for a Cabinet reshuffle. Al-Abadi proposed the reforms following widespread protests in Iraq last summer demanding better services and an end to corruption.

Iraq is engaged in a humanitarian and security crisis that erupted as the Islamic State group swept across the country. It is also battling a crippling economic crisis that threatens to further choke the government’s ability to provide basic domestic services.

Once considered an indispensable power broker in Iraq, al-Sadr’s political clout has waned recently as other Shiite militia leaders with closer links to Iran have grown in prominence following the collapse of the Iraqi security forces.

As the Islamic State group has pushed toward Baghdad, Shiite militias have filled the vacuum and have grown more powerful than the country’s own security forces.

US deploys more missiles to S. Korea

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The United States temporarily deployed an additional Patriot missile battery in South Korea in response to North Korea’s nuclear test and a long-range rocket launch and ahead of talks this week to set up an even more sophisticated U.S. missile defense.

The new tough stance follows South Korea’s decision to shut down an inter-Korean factory park that had been the

rival Koreans’ last major symbol of cooperation but that Seoul said had been used by North Korea to fund its nuclear and missile programs. North Korea responded by deporting South Korean citizens, seizing South Korean assets and vowing to militarize the park.

South Korea announced that its planned talks with the United States on deploying the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, one of the most advanced missile defense systems in the world, could

start this week.

In the meantime, the U.S. military command in South Korea said Saturday that an air defense battery unit from Fort Bliss, Texas, has been conducting ballistic missile training using the Patriot system at Osan Air Base near Seoul.

Lt. Gen. Thomas Vandal, commander of the U.S. Eighth Army, said “exercises like this ensure we are always ready to defend against an attack from North Korea.”

Pope Francis kicks off first visit to Mexico

Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — Pope Francis kicks off his first trip to Mexico on Saturday with speeches to the country’s political and ecclesial elites, riding in the wake of his historic meeting with the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

During a stop in Havana on Friday, Francis embraced Patriarch Kirill and took a step toward closing a nearly 1,000-year schism in Christianity.

The two religious leaders signed a 30-point joint decla-

ration of religious unity that committed their churches to overcoming their differences.

Francis and Kirill also called for political leaders to act on the plight of Christians in Iraq and Syria who are being killed and driven from their homes by the Islamic State group.

Later aboard his plane, Francis said the declaration was not a political statement, but rather a pastoral one. It came from “two bishops who met and discussed their pastoral concerns,” he said.

The focus quickly shifted to

Francis’ five-day Mexico visit.

Francis arrived in Mexico’s capital to crowds waving yellow handkerchiefs. Mariachis serenaded as his plane pulled to a stop.

Faithful lined up along the route to the Vatican ambassador’s residence to catch a glimpse of the pope.

On Saturday, Francis began his visit by meeting with Mexican officials and foreign ambassadors at the National Palace. He then planned to speak to Mexico’s bishops at the Cathedral of the Assumption.

Mets' Mejia gets lifetime ban

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Mets reliever Jenrry Mejia became the first player to receive a lifetime ban under Major League Baseball's drug agreement after testing positive for a performance-enhancing substance for the third time.

The commissioner's office said Friday that Mejia tested positive for the anabolic steroid Boldenone, which athletes have used to increase muscle mass and once was popular for use in horse racing.

The 26-year-old right-hander was the Mets' closer in 2014, then was suspended for 80 games last April 11 following a positive test for Stanozolol, a drug popular among bodybuilders. At the time, he said, "I can honestly say I have no idea how a banned substance ended up in my system."

Mejia returned July 12, appeared in seven games for New York, then was banned for 162 games on July 28 after a positive test for Stanozolol and Boldenone.

"I think not surprisingly there's a tremendous amount of disappointment, I think to some extent, anger, to some extent, amazement that this could happen so soon after a previous suspension was completed," Mets general manager

Sandy Alderson said then. "This is the consequence of making bad choices."

The Mets said Friday they "were deeply disappointed." The Major League Baseball Players Association declined comment, and a spokesman for Mejia's agents said the pitcher had no comment.

Under pressure from Congress to toughen their drug program, major league players and teams agreed in November 2005 that a third positive test for PEDs would result in a lifetime ban. His 162-game suspension had matched the longest under the big league program, a year-long ban served by the Yankees' Alex Rodriguez in 2014 that originally was 211 games before an arbitrator reduced it.

Mejia may apply one year from now to baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred for reinstatement, and Manfred at his discretion has the power to let Mejia back in baseball — but no earlier than for the 2018 season. If an application is made and denied, Mejia could ask baseball's arbitrator to end the ban, claiming the penalty is without "just cause." The arbitrator cannot reduce the ban to less than two years.

Outfielder Josh Hamilton, then in the minor leagues, was suspended several times for drugs of abuse from 2003-05 but was allowed to return each time. During

a time when there was not a drug agreement, Steve Howe was suspended for life by Commissioner Fay Vincent in 1992 after the pitcher's seventh drug- or alcohol-related incident. Arbitrator George Nicolau said doctors concluded Howe suffered from Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and cut the suspension to time served, which was 119 days.

No players have been banned for life under the minor league drug program.

A Dominican signed by the Mets in 2007, Mejia reached the major leagues in 2010 and became their closer in 2014, when he had 28 saves in 31 chances. He is 9-14 with a 3.68 ERA in 18 starts and 95 relief appearances.

Mejia began last year as the Mets' closer, but couldn't get loose while warming up on opening day at Washington and went on the disabled list with elbow inflammation.

Because of the suspensions, Mejia received just \$496,311 of his \$2,595,000 salary last year. He will receive none of his \$2.47 million salary this year.

In Mejia's absence, Jeurys Familia became New York's closer, and the Mets went on to reach the World Series for the first time since 2000. New York lost the World Series to Kansas City in five games.

LaVine brightest rising star

Associated Press

TORONTO — Zach LaVine hoisted the MVP trophy above his head, laughing along with Minnesota Timberwolves teammates Andrew Wiggins and Karl-Anthony Towns as he stood on the podium.

One win down at All-Star weekend. One to go.

LaVine had 30 points and seven rebounds and the United States team beat the World team 157-154 in the Rising Stars Challenge on Friday night to kick off the weekend festivities.

In the game featuring some of the best rookies and sophomores in the league, LaVine geared up to defend his slam dunk title on Saturday night by making 13 of 20 shots to beat Wiggins, who took home MVP honors last year in Brooklyn.

"I'm excited for tomorrow," said LaVine, who revived interest in the dunk contest with an electrifying performance last year. "I'm ready to put on a show."

Kristaps Porzingis scored 30 points, and Emmanuel Mudiay had 30 points and 10 assists for the World team. Wiggins scored 29 points while playing in front of his hometown fans.

Los Angeles Lakers sophomore Jordan Clarkson added 25 for the Americans.

The Rising Stars game can sometimes take on the feel of a sideshow, something that forces the next generation into a spotlight that they aren't always ready for. But the court was loaded with talent on Friday night in Toronto, players like Wiggins, Porzingis, Karl-Anthony Towns, Elfrid Payton and Jabari Parker.

The influx of talent has given several long-suffering franchises — the Timberwolves, Knicks, Bucks — hope that better days are arriving soon.

For most fans in attendance, Wiggins was the star attraction. He has been churning out highlight reels since he was 14 years old, was drafted No. 1 overall last season and won the rookie of the year award. The locals have called him "Maple Jordan" and openly pine for him to one day come home and play for the Raptors.

"It felt great," Wiggins said. "I got to play in front of a lot of people I haven't seen in a long time. My family, friends got to watch it. It was great being back home and playing in front of my hometown."

Wiggins has stated time and again that he loves it in Minnesota and envisions a long and bright future with Towns, LaVine and the rest of the Timberwolves' promising young core. But he has never shied away from his love of Toronto and he said he was looking forward to being back in Canada for an extended stretch this weekend while the rest of the basketball world finally trained its focus on his hometown.

Wiggins received a thunderous ovation upon introduction in the starting lineup and was serenaded with chants of "M-V-P! M-V-P!" late in the game.

"He's a rock star in his hometown," LaVine said.

NBA All-Star Game all about Bryant

Associated Press

TORONTO — Kobe Bryant answered questions in Spanish and Italian, raved about Canadian hospitality, showed off knowledge of both Greek basketball and English soccer. He announced plans to go to the Philippines and Taiwan, thanked fans from Japan and even asked a reporter how to say a phrase in Mandarin.

It all made perfect sense.

The basketball world belongs to Bryant, at least for one more weekend.

About 750 million people around the globe are expected to follow Sunday's NBA All-Star Game in one form or another, and it's a safe guess most will do so to keep a keen eye on Bryant's final appearance in the league's midseason showcase. His farewell season now officially starting to wind down, the Los Angeles Lakers' star was the center of attraction at media day Friday — and seemed most appreciative.

"I just feel very blessed to be able to play so many years, man," Bryant said. "Twenty years is a long time, so I feel very good about it."

Bryant was the leading vote-getter in the fan balloting that chose the starting lineup for Sunday's game, a lifetime achievement award more than anything related to his play this season. At 37 years old, he's obviously not the same player he was when he was helping the Lakers win five championships, though during the season he's shown flashes of what made him one of the game's all-time elite.

Bryant said he'd be fine playing 10 minutes Sunday.

Oklahoma City's Kevin Durant isn't buying that one.

"We definitely want to send him off on a good note," Durant said. "We know he's going to be super competitive."

It is a festive sendoff, for certain.

Dozens of media members staked out space around Bryant's podium long before he started speaking Friday, though some just wanted to take selfies with him in the background. Bryant was a featured panelist at the NBA's technology summit earlier in the morning to share ideas with league executives and others, and has his wife and their two daughters in Toronto so the whole family can bask in the celebrations.

"This is pretty cool," Bryant said. "I'm looking around the room and I'm seeing guys that I'm playing with that are tearing the league up that were like 4 for my first All-Star Game. ... How many players can say they played 20 years and actually have seen the game go through three, four generations? It's not sad at all. I'm really happy and honored to be here and see this."

So were his All-Star peers.

Cleveland's LeBron James still might be the best player in the world, Miami's Dwyane Wade has more championship rings than any other All-Star this year besides Bryant, Toronto's Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan are getting the hometown support and Golden State's Stephen Curry is the reigning MVP for a team that won last year's title.

But they all know the spotlight is going to be on No. 24.

"I think it's going to be special," said

James, who got Bryant's sneakers autographed after the Lakers visited Cleveland earlier this week for his own trophy case. "Not only for myself, but for the fans here and for all of Kobe's fans."

And Bryant's career-best 81-point game against the Raptors might be a sore subject in Toronto, but it still stands out to Curry as the quintessential Kobe moment.

"I've been hot before and made every shot I threw up there and got on a little streak in a game," said Curry, the game's premier sharpshooter. "But to score 81 points, so many things have to go right and the situation has to be just perfect for it and you have to have a special talent level like Kobe to do it."

"Just watching the game, it still doesn't make sense. How did he do it?"

Bryant made the decision early this season that he would retire, then announced it weeks ago not because he wanted a farewell tour — he originally wasn't keen on that idea, though has been moved by the tributes that have come as he's visited NBA cities as an opponent for the last time — but because he wanted to start the process of moving on for both himself and the Lakers.

As far as All-Star selections, only Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has more than Bryant's 18.

"I know it will kind of be bittersweet for a lot of people, but it should be celebrated like it will be," said Miami's Chris Bosh, who was slated to play in the All-Star Game but withdrew Friday afternoon with a calf injury. "He's the legal voting age in All-Star years. That's crazy."



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Pearson's OT goal lifts Kings

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Los Angeles Kings often work overtime. And it's paying off for them in a big way.

Tanner Pearson's goal with 1:50 left in the extra period powered the Kings to a 5-4 win over the New York Rangers on Friday night.

Anze Kopitar recorded a hat trick and Marian Gaborik added a goal for Pacific Division-leading Los Angeles, which has won three of its last five. The Kings (33-18-3) are 8-1 in the NHL's newfangled 3-on-3 overtime format, and 2-2 in shootouts.

"We've had good luck 3-on-3," Los Angeles coach Darryl Sutter said. "Our record is right there and that is probably why we are in a playoff spot."

Peter Budaj made 24 saves in his season debut start. Budaj, who spent the season with the Kings' AHL farm team in Ontario, Calif., last played in the NHL on May 17, 2014, when he replaced injured Montreal Canadiens starting goaltender Carey Price in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals. Budaj allowed three goals on eight shots in that one, a 7-2 Rangers win.

"It was very nice to come back," Budaj said of his call-up. "I was very excited. I don't think it could be better than that."

Kevin Hayes and Mats Zuccarello each finished with a goal and an assist for New York, which lost for the first time since Feb. 2. Viktor Stalberg and Derek Stepan also scored for the Rangers. Antti Raanta stopped 29 of 34 shots in his first start since Jan. 17.

"I was really nervous the first couple

periods," said Raanta, who allowed three goals on 21 shots in the first two periods before making 11 saves in the third and overtime. "I couldn't play my own game. I was moving too much so I wasn't set any time the shot was coming."

Pearson's off-wing goal capped a wild game in which the teams traded the lead throughout.

Trailing 4-3 with 30 seconds left in regulation, Kopitar completed his third NHL hat trick by whipping a shot from the right side which ricocheted off of Kevin Klein.

Kopitar's third goal was a gut punch for the Rangers, who appeared headed for their fifth straight win.

Sabres 6, Canadiens 4: Marcus Foligno scored twice, including once on a penalty shot, and host Buffalo hung on to snap a four-game skid by beating Montreal.

Foligno also had an assist for a career-best three points. Evander Kane scored twice, including an empty-netter with 55 seconds left, while Josh Gorges and David Legwand also scored for Buffalo. The Sabres nearly squandered a 4-1 lead, but won at home for just the second time in their past 11 (2-7-2).

Penguins 2, Hurricanes 1 (SO): Kris Letang scored on the final shot of a shootout, Marc-Andre Fleury made 29 saves and visiting Pittsburgh beat Carolina.

The win was Pittsburgh's eighth in 10 games and gave the Penguins a 2-1-1 lead in the season series.

Andrej Nestrasil scored late in the third period for the Hurricanes to send the game to the extra period.

Avalanche 3, Red Wings 2 (SO): Semyon Varlamov made 43 saves and Blake Comeau scored in both the third period and the shootout to lift visiting Colorado Avalanche over Detroit.

Matt Duchene also scored for the Avalanche, who won despite being outshot 45-21. Colorado has won nine of its last 12 road games.

Lightning 4, Predators 3 (OT): Steven Stamkos scored the tying goal late in the third period, Tyler Johnson won it 1:04 into overtime and host Tampa Bay beat Nashville for its ninth straight home win.

J.T. Brown and Nikita Kucherov also scored for the Lightning. Ben Bishop made 27 saves to give him a victory over all 30 NHL teams.

Blues 5, Panthers 3: David Backes, Jaden Schwartz and Robby Fabbri scored in the first period and visiting St. Louis cruised to a win over Florida.

Vladimir Tarasenko and Alexander Steen also scored for the Blues, and Colton Parayko had two assists. Brian Elliott made his 13th straight start in place of top goalie Jake Allen and had 29 saves for St. Louis.

Coyotes 4, Flames 1: Shane Doan had two goals and an assist to become the franchise leader with 931 career points and host Arizona beat Calgary to snap a season-worst five-game losing streak.

Doan's 4-on-4 goal 3:31 in tied him with Hall of Famer Dale Hawerchuk on the team list. Near the end of the game, a scoring change gave Doan an assist on Oliver Ekman-Larsson's second-period goal.

Dayton survives upset bid

Associated Press

KINGSTON, R.I. — Darrell Davis made a go-ahead three-pointer from the corner with 21.1 seconds left and No. 19 Dayton beat Rhode Island 68-66 on Friday night.

Rhode Island's Four McGlynn missed a three-pointer with 4 seconds left. Dayton got the rebound, and Steve McElvene made one of two free throws for the Flyers with 0.3 seconds to go.

Dyshawn Pierre led Dayton (21-3, 11-1 Atlantic 10) with 17 points and also had nine rebounds. Scoochie Smith added 16 points, and Davis finished with eight.

The Flyers won their ninth straight game and ended a six-game losing streak in Kingston.

McGlynn had 19 points for Rhode Island (14-11, 6-6). Hassan Martin added 15 points and 10 rebounds.

There were 17 lead changes, three in the final 55 seconds.

Pierre made two free throws with 55 seconds left to give the Flyers a one-point lead. Martin countered for the Rams with a three-point play 40 seconds left.

No. 17 Arizona 81, UCLA 75: Allonzo Trier scored 15 of his 18 points in the second half, Parker Jackson-Cartwright added 16 points and the host Wildcats held off the Bruins.

Arizona (20-5, 8-4 Pac-12) stumbled through a lackluster first half at both ends to trail by 10. The Wildcats tightened up defensively in the second and took advantage of UCLA's foul trouble to wear down the Bruins.

UCLA (13-11, 4-7) had centers Thomas Welsh and Tony Parker foul out in a span of 42 seconds late in the second half and Arizona took advantage by pounding the ball inside.

Kaleb Tarczewski and Ryan Anderson combined for 27 rebounds, and Arizona made 29 of 45 free throws in the foul-filled game.

Isaac Hamilton scored 24 points and Bryce Alford had 17 for UCLA.

Arizona State 74, No. 23 USC 67: Tra Holder scored 20 points, Savon Goodman added 17 and the host Sun Devils knocked off the Trojans.

Nikola Jovanovic had 25 points and 15 rebounds for USC (18-6, 8-4 Pac-12), which would have been within a half-game of first-place Oregon in the Pac-12 with a victory. Gerry Blakes added 14 for Arizona State.

The Sun Devils (14-11, 4-8) have won two conference games in a row for the first time this season.

Arizona State took the lead with a 10-2 run to start the second half and never trailed again.

Yale 75, Dartmouth 65: Makai Mason scored 25 points and Justin Sears had 21 with 13 rebounds to lead the visiting Bulldogs past the Big Green for their 11th-straight victory.

Princeton 85, Cornell 56: Henry Caruso and Amir Bell had 13 points each and the visiting Tigers beat the Big Red for their third straight win.

Columbia 63, Pennsylvania 53: Maodo Lo scored 21 points and had five rebounds and Grant Mullins added 11 points and six steals to lead the host Lions past the Quakers.

Harvard 79, Brown 73: Agunwa Okolie and Corbin Miller led a balanced Crimson attack with 14 points apiece to hold off the visiting Bears.

Ethics committee hands Valcke ban

Associated Press

GENEVA — Jerome Valcke, Sepp Blatter's long-time right-hand man, was banned from all soccer-related activity for 12 years Friday for misconduct during his term as FIFA secretary general.

Valcke was found guilty by FIFA's ethics committee of wide-ranging offenses, including taking private jets for personal use, destroying evidence and trying to force through an undervalued sale of 2018 and 2022 World Cup television rights for the Caribbean.

"Mr. Valcke acted against FIFA's best interests and caused considerable financial damage to FIFA, while his private and personal interests detracted him from his ability to properly perform his duties," the ethics committee said in a statement.

Valcke's ban is four years longer than the eight-year sanctions handed down to FIFA President Blatter and UEFA President Michel Platini in December for a financial conflict of interest.

The ethics judges said Valcke violated seven sections of FIFA's code of ethics, compared to four each by Blatter and Platini, and also fined him 100,000 Swiss francs (\$102,500).

The ban is likely not the end of Valcke's legal troubles. He is expected to be asked to give evidence to American and Swiss federal prosecutors investigating widespread corruption in international soccer.

His soccer ban comes one month after the 55-year-old Frenchman was fired by FIFA for a second time in a colorful career. The former television presenter and marketing executive had been suspended last September. The firing was based on an internal report about his conduct, including use of expenses and private jets.

FIFA commissioned that report last year

before a 2014 World Cup ticket agent alleged that Valcke sought to profit from a black market deal which later fell through. That allegation, made by ticket agent Benny Alon, prompted Valcke's suspension and the ethics case to be opened.

"During the course of the investigations, several other acts of potential misconduct arose," the ethics judges said.

"By travelling at FIFA's expense purely for sightseeing reasons as well as repeatedly choosing private flights for his trips over commercial flights without any business rationale for doing so, Mr. Valcke gained an advantage for himself and relatives," the statement said.

"It was found that Mr. Valcke attempted to grant the TV and media rights for the 2018 and 2022 FIFA World Cups to a third party for a fee far below their actual market value and had taken concrete preparatory action in this regard."

The ethics panel added: "Mr. Valcke deliberately tried to obstruct the ongoing proceedings against him by attempting to delete or deleting several files and folders relevant to the investigation."

Valcke has consistently denied wrongdoing, and can appeal to FIFA and later to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

"With today's decision, the FIFA ethics committee has shown that it is not a credible, independent or objective decision-making body," Valcke's U.S.-based lawyer Barry Berke said in a statement, criticizing an "unjust and politically motivated decision."

"Mr. Valcke is confident that when all the facts come out, it will be clear that he did absolutely nothing wrong in carrying out his duties for the good of FIFA and the sport," Berke said.

Valcke was picked by Blatter as secretary general in 2007, with the main task of overseeing World Cup preparations,

months after being fired as marketing director for misconduct in sponsorship negotiations.

A civil suit brought in federal court in Manhattan by MasterCard — which was ousted as a World Cup sponsor when FIFA signed instead with Visa — cost the scandal-hit soccer body \$90 million to settle in 2006.

In Brooklyn, the U.S. Attorney's office is leading an investigation of racketeering linked to senior soccer officials that has implicated Valcke in an alleged World Cup bidding bribery conspiracy.

In 2008, Valcke was asked to sign off on payments totaling \$10 million from a FIFA account of money which belonged to South African organizers of the 2010 World Cup.

South African officials asked FIFA to transfer money to the control of then-FIFA vice president Jack Warner of Trinidad and Tobago. American prosecutors allege the money was a bribe to three FIFA voters to support South Africa's bid in 2004, and not — as now claimed — to create a legacy fund supporting the African diaspora in the Caribbean.

Switzerland's attorney general is investigating financial mismanagement at FIFA, including during Valcke's tenure, and suspected money laundering during the 2018 and 2022 World Cup bidding contests.

Criminal proceedings have been opened against Blatter over his approval of a \$2 million payment to Platini in 2011, and the undervalued sale of Caribbean TV rights for the 2010 and 2014 World Cup to Warner.

A spokesman for attorney general Michael Lauber said last month that a whistleblower had helped with the case, and charges could be brought against Blatter within a year.