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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Spike in Pentagon spending no sure thing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans control Congress so President Donald Trump's pledge to boost the Pentagon budget by tens of billions of dollars should be a sure bet.

It's not.

Trump faces skeptical Democrats whose support he'll need and resistance from fiscal conservatives opposed to repealing a 2011 law that set firm limits on military and domestic spending. Unless the president figures out a way to mollify the disparate camps, he'll have a tough time delivering on a signature campaign promise to rescue the armed forces from a festering financial crisis.

Senior U.S. commanders have flatly warned that the spending caps set by the Budget Control Act are squeezing the armed forces so hard that the num-

ber of ready-to-fight units is dwindling. That means beating powers such as Russia or China is tougher than it used to be as aging equipment stacks up, waiting to be repaired, and troops don't get enough training.

Gen. Daniel Allyn, the Army's vice chief of staff, startled many lawmakers when he testified recently that just three of the service's 58 active-duty and reserve brigade combat teams are ready to fight at a moment's notice.

Allyn and other four-star officers pleaded during separate hearings in the House and Senate for the spending limits to be repealed, clearing the way for the bigger budgets they say are needed to stop the military's readiness for combat from decaying further.

"We need to act now before it's too late," said Gen. Stephen

Wilson, the Air Force's vice chief of staff.

The average age of Air Force aircraft is 27 years, according to Wilson, who added that more than half of the service's inventory would qualify for antique vehicle license plates in Virginia. On top of that, the Air Force is short 1,500 pilots and 3,400 aircraft maintainers, he said.

The Navy and Marine Corps are experiencing the same turbulence.

Trump, speaking at a White House news conference on Wednesday, said he's ordered a plan for a "massive rebuilding" of the armed forces. He didn't disclose how much he expected his blueprint to cost.

National security hawks in Congress have suggested a defense budget of \$700 billion in 2018 — more than at any point during the wars in Iraq and

Afghanistan. The total, which includes \$60 billion for overseas combat operations, is \$91 billion over the mandatory spending cap. And that's just a down payment to begin digging out of a readiness problem the Pentagon's top brass says will take years to fix. GOP Sen. John McCain, of Arizona, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has envisioned annual increases of between 3 percent and 4 percent, culminating with an \$800 billion budget for the armed forces in 2022.

Securing these sizable and sustained increases will require repealing the Budget Control Act. Trump, however, has proposed to eliminate only the budget limit on defense.

That's a nonstarter for Democrats, who have long demanded parity between the two broad categories of federal spending.

Pence tells wary Europe of Trump's military demands

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

MUNICH — Vice President Mike Pence delivered a tough-love message to Europe on Saturday, saying the U.S. stands behind NATO, yet U.S. allies' failure to carry their share of the security burden will no longer be tolerated and threatens to damage the 68-year-old military alliance.

Pence, on his first trip to Europe as vice president to attend a major security conference in Munich, told German Chancellor Angela Merkel that U.S. military spending is set to rise and America's enhanced military presence in eastern Europe will continue, but Europe must contribute more.

"Europe's defense requires your commitment as much as

ours," Pence said. "Let me be clear on this point: The president of the United States expects our allies to keep their word. For most, that means the time has come to do more."

Inside the assembly hall of the Bayerischer Hof hotel, the applause was sparse as Pence laid bare President Donald Trump's insistence that money matters when it comes to strong defense. This position threatens to put the U.S. at odds with Germany, the main economic power in Europe and one of the nations that dedicates a small share of its budget to defense.

For Europeans, Pence's appearance was a chance to get a glimpse of how the U.S. policy toward the continent will evolve under Trump, whose "America first" slogan has shaken confidence over Washington's com-

mitment to NATO and support for the European Union.

While Pence delivered a stern message on defense spending, he also aimed to reassure nervous allies on Russia, saying Trump will "hold Russia accountable even as we look for common ground."

Trump's emphasis on seeking closer ties with Moscow has sparked concerns in parts of Europe, particularly among eastern nations worried about a more aggressive Russia.

"I bring you this assurance: The United States of America strongly supports NATO and will be unwavering in our commitment to this trans-Atlantic alliance," Pence said. "As you keep faith with us under President Trump, we will keep faith with you."

In Munich, the U.S. has

sought to deliver a message of solidarity, with Defense Secretary Jim Mattis speaking of the U.S. commitment to defending Europe. Still, there is lingering doubt about the credibility of those claims given the many contradictory statements by Trump.

In recent years, Russia has blasted U.S. policy toward Moscow at the Munich conference. This year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov changed his tone. While he complained about NATO's expansion since the end of the Cold War, Lavrov stopped short of issuing critical remarks against the new U.S. administration, leaving open the door to political and military cooperation.

"We are open for that in as much as the U.S. is open for that as well," Lavrov said.

White House says DHS Guard immigration proposal rejected

Associated Press

The White House distanced itself Friday from a Department of Homeland Security draft proposal to use the National Guard to round up unauthorized immigrants, but lawmakers said the document offers insight into the Trump administration's internal efforts to enact its promised crackdown on illegal immigration.

Administration officials said the proposal, which called for mobilizing up to 100,000 troops in 11 states, was rejected and would not be part of plans to carry out President Donald Trump's aggressive immigration policy.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said there was "no effort at all to utilize the National Guard to round up unauthorized immigrants." A DHS official described the document as a very early draft that was not seriously considered.

However, DHS staffers said Thursday they had been told by colleagues in two DHS departments the proposal was still being considered as recently as

Feb. 10.

The pushback from administration officials did little to quell outrage over the draft plan. Three Republican governors spoke out against the proposal, and numerous Democratic lawmakers denounced it as overly aggressive.

"Regardless of the White House's response, this document is an absolutely accurate description of the disturbing mindset that pervades the Trump administration when it comes to our nation's immigrants," said Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev.

Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson said he would have "concerns about the utilization of National Guard resources for immigration enforcement," believing it "would be too much of a strain on our National Guard personnel."

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert would have serious concerns about the constitutional implications and financial impact of activating the National Guard to round up unauthorized immigrants, the governor's office said in a statement.

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval questioned the legality of the plan and said it would be an inappropriate use of guard resources.

Governors would have had a choice whether to have their guard troops participate, according to the memo, which bears the name of Kelly, a retired four-star Marine general.

The memo was addressed to the then-acting heads of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

It would have served as guidance to implement the wide-ranging executive order on immigration and border security President Donald Trump signed Jan. 25. Such memos are routinely issued to supplement executive orders.

If implemented, the impact could have been significant. Nearly one-half of the 11.1 million people residing in the U.S. without authorization live in the 11 states, according to Pew Research Center estimates based on 2014 Census data.

Scott Pruitt is confirmed as EPA head

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Over the strong objections of environmental groups, the Senate confirmed Scott Pruitt to lead the Environmental Protection Agency on Friday, giving President Donald Trump an eager partner to fulfill his campaign pledge to increase the use of planet-warming fossil fuels.

Pruitt was sworn in later Friday by Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito.

In six years as Oklahoma's attorney general, Pruitt filed 14 lawsuits challenging EPA regulations that included limits on carbon emissions from coal-fired power plants. He also sued over the EPA's recent expansion of water bodies regulated under the Clean Water Act, a federal measure opposed by industries that would be forced to clean up polluted wastewater.

The vote was 52-46 as Republican leaders used their party's narrow Senate majority to push Pruitt's confirmation despite calls from top Democrats to delay the vote until requested emails are released next week.

Sen. Susan Collins, of Maine, was the lone Republican vote against Pruitt. Two Democrats from states with economies heavily dependent on fossil fuels supported Trump's pick, Sens. Joe Manchin, of West Virginia, and Heidi Heitkamp, of North Dakota.

During his Senate confirmation hearing last month, Pruitt said he disagreed with Trump's past statements that global warming is a hoax. However, Pruitt has previously expressed doubt about scientific evidence showing the planet is heating up and that humans are to blame.

Democrats boycotted a committee vote on Pruitt's nomination last month, citing his refusal to hand over thousands of emails that he exchanged with oil and gas executives. A state judge in Oklahoma on Thursday ordered him to release most of the emails by next week.

Trump back in campaign mode

Associated Press

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. — Hoping to shift attention from his troubled White House, President Donald Trump hit the road Friday to deliver a pep talk to American workers and the rest of the nation, resurrecting the jobs promises that powered his election victory and pledging in a rally to "unleash the power of the American spirit."

But he was only a few hours away from the turmoil he has stirred in Washington when he swerved from that message to escalate his complaints about news coverage of his administration.

"The FAKENEWS media ... is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!" he exclaimed on Twitter. His latest outburst came a day after he forcefully defended his administration in a marathon White House news conference, brushing aside the tumult, infighting among se-

nior staff and setbacks in courts and Congress.

He took a more upbeat tack in South Carolina. "We love our workers, and we are going to protect our workers," Trump declared at a Boeing plant where the company showed off its new 787-10 Dreamliner aircraft. "We are going to fight for jobs. We are going to fight for our families," he said in a reprise of the "America First" message from his campaign.

Trump was expected to stick to the theme Saturday when he was scheduled to hold a rally in central Florida, a change of scenery that marks an effort to galvanize a month-old White House that has been buffeted by crisis and paralyzed by dysfunction.

The new president toured a 787-10 still under construction and, before leaving, sat in the pilot's seat of a completed airplane painted in contrasting shades of blue that formed the backdrop for his remarks.

DOD: Islamic State leaders leaving Raqqa

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A months-long campaign to isolate and pressure the Islamic State group's self-declared capital of Raqqa, Syria, is paying off as the administrative backbone of the militant organization is beginning to crack, the Pentagon said Friday.

Islamic State leaders "are beginning the process of leaving Raqqa and moving their operations farther downriver," said Navy Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman. He said an unspecified number of Islamic State "bureaucrats" are heading east along the north bank of the Euphrates River toward Deir el-Zour, because they see "the end is near in Raqqa."

"We are seeing now an exodus of their leadership," Davis

said, adding: "This seems to be a very organized, orderly withdrawal of a lot of their noncombatant support people."

Davis did not predict an imminent collapse of the group, and analysts said they expect a tough fight for the Syrian city.

The U.S.-led coalition has been pounding the Raqqa area for months. On Thursday it conducted 17 strikes near the city, targeting two Islamic State military staging areas and a combat unit, according to the U.S. Central Command's daily airstrike tally.

It said the attacks destroyed four tunnels, three fighting positions, three Islamic State-held buildings, two weapons storage areas, two Islamic State headquarters, a bridge and other targets. The coalition also launched

11 airstrikes near Deir el-Zour, destroying 20 oil tanker trucks, six oil wellheads, two artillery systems, an oil storage tank and a crane.

"ISIL is going to have to think hard about where they go next. Do they have any place to go?" said Christine Wormuth, the Pentagon's top policy official from 2014 to 2016. Wormuth, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, said she expected some fighters would stay in Raqqa and fight.

"The whole point of the isolate mission is to try to squeeze them and get them to leave and flush them out into the open," she said.

Former President Barack Obama's strategy was to re-

cruit, organize and enable local Syrian Kurdish and Arab fighters to retake Raqqa, rather than put American combat forces in the lead. The Trump administration is now re-evaluating that approach and considering options that could include a more direct U.S. combat role.

At his confirmation hearing a month ago, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said the U.S. approach should be reviewed and "perhaps energized on a more aggressive timeline."

Last week, the top U.S. commander for the counter-Islamic State campaign in Iraq and Syria, Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, said forces leading the fights for Raqqa and the northern Iraqi city of Mosul should prevail within the next six months.

Pakistan shuts key border crossing in wake of attack

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — Pakistani authorities shut down a second key border crossing into Afghanistan, halting trade supplies to the neighboring landlocked country and increasing tensions between the two nations in the wake of a bloody suicide bombing at a beloved shrine in Pakistan, officials said Saturday.

The border closure at Chaman, in southwest Baluchistan province, came after an attack on a Sufi shrine in southern Pakistan on Thursday left 88 worshippers dead. The move was seen as an effort to pressure Kabul to take action against militants who Pakistan says have sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

Responsibility for the attack at the Lal Shahbaz Qalander shrine in Sehwan was claimed by the Islamic State group.

Pakistan security forces have launched nationwide operations that they say have left more than 100 "terrorists" dead.

Pakistan closed the border at Torkham hours after the bombing, and the Chaman border was shut late Friday, a senior army

official said.

A second official confirmed the details, saying trucks and shipping containers carrying trade supplies were parked miles away from the border crossings.

The Pakistani officials asked to remain anonymous because they are not authorized to brief the media on the record.

In Kabul, the Afghan government Saturday summoned Pakistan's ambassador to protest recent shelling in Afghanistan's eastern provinces. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned Ambassador Abrar Hussain in Kabul, where Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai sought an explanation from Hussain but also gave his condolences regarding recent suicide attacks in Pakistan.

Karzai expressed concern over the closure of the Torkham and Chaman border crossings and asked that the gates be reopened. Apart from disrupting trade, the border closure might also delay the repatriation of Afghan refugees by the refugee agency of the United Nations.

Fourth suspect nabbed in death of Kim's half brother

Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — At a hospital morgue in Malaysia's capital, the tightly guarded corpse of a middle-aged man has become the focus of a case of international intrigue involving five countries, combative North Korean diplomats and an apparently duped female assassin.

Investigators are still trying to piece together details of what appeared to be the brazen assassination of Kim Jong Nam, the half brother of North Korea's mercurial ruler and an exiled member of the country's elite. Malaysian police said Saturday that they had arrested a fourth suspect, a 46-year-old North Korean man.

Without citing much in the way of evidence, observers including South Korea pointed to the obvious culprit in Monday's attack: Kim's half brother, Kim Jong Un, who has executed or purged a slew of high-level officials since taking power in 2011.

As the rumor mill swirled, Malaysia arrested four people over the course of the week — including an Indonesian woman who told investigators she was

duped into thinking she was part of a comedy show prank.

Citing information received from Malaysian authorities, Indonesian police Chief Tito Karnavian said Siti Aisyah, 25, was paid to be involved in "Just for Laughs"-style pranks, a reference to a popular hidden-camera show. He said she and another woman performed stunts that involved convincing men to close their eyes and then spraying them with water.

"Such an action was done three or four times ... and with the last target, Kim Jong Nam, allegedly there were dangerous materials in the sprayer," Karnavian said. "She was not aware that it was an assassination attempt by alleged foreign agents."

Malaysia is seeking DNA samples from Kim Jong Nam's immediate family.

"If there is no claim by next-of-kin and upon exhausting all avenues (to obtain DNA), we will finally then hand over the body to the (North Korean) embassy," Adul Samah Mat, a senior Malaysian police official, said Friday.

2 killed as storm slams Calif.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A huge Pacific storm parked itself over Southern California and unloaded, ravaging roads, opening sinkholes and leading to the deaths of at least two people.

The storm, feeding on an atmospheric river of moisture stretching far out into the ocean, was at its most fierce late Friday afternoon, dropping over 8 inches of rain in one area, and was expected to last until Saturday afternoon.

The region appeared to dodge any major disasters, but in the desert town of Victorville, several cars were washed down a flooded street, and one man was found dead in a submerged vehicle after others were rescued, San Bernardino County fire spokesman Eric Sherwin said.

In the Sherman Oaks area of Los Angeles, a man was electrocuted when a tree falling in heavy rain downed power lines that hit his car.

Later, in the same neighborhood, a sinkhole swallowed two

cars — the second on live TV, as viewers watched it teeter on the edge before plunging in.

Firefighters rescued one person from the first car, and the driver got out of the second before it fell. No one was injured.

Inland, at Cajon Pass, the shoulder of Interstate 15 crumbled and sent a parked fire-truck spilling over the side, but no one was hurt.

There were several traffic deaths on slick and flooded roads, also, but it was difficult to say which were a direct result of the storm. Other forms of travel were tough, too. Amtrak canceled its rail trips for a long stretch of the state's southern and central coast, and more than 300 arriving and departing flights were delayed or canceled at Los Angeles International Airport.

Winds gusting to 70 mph or more lashed parts of the region. Heavy rains turned creeks and rivers into brown torrents and released slews of mud from hillsides burned barren by wildfires.

"At one point the wind was so

strong, I'm surprised it didn't blow my windows out," retiree Phoenix Hocking said from Carpinteria. "I now have a pond in my patio, and my dog is starting to grow flippers so he can go out and do his business."

Several stretches of freeways and highways were closed by flooding, including very busy arteries like Interstate 5 and Interstate 10.

In Los Angeles' Sun Valley, 10 cars were trapped in swift-moving water on a roadway, and 15 people had to be rescued, the fire department reported.

Using ropes and inflatable boats, firefighters rescued seven people and two dogs from the Sepulveda basin, a recreation and flood-control area along the Los Angeles River.

The storm took aim at Southern California but also spread precipitation north into the San Joaquin Valley and up to San Francisco. It was not expected to bring significant rain in the far north, where damage to spillways of the Lake Oroville dam forced the evacuation of about 188,000 people last weekend.

Florida man accused in plot to bomb Target stores

Associated Press

OCALA, Fla. — A Florida man is accused in a plot to blow up several Target stores along the East Coast in an attempt to acquire cheap stock if the company's stock value plunged after the explosions.

Mark Charles Barnett, 48, was charged Thursday with possession of a firearm affecting commerce by a previously convicted felon, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Florida's middle district. Barnett, a registered sex offender in Florida, faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted.

A team of federal, state and local officials arrested Barnett on Tuesday in a parking lot in Ocala. He was taken to the Marion County Jail, where he's still being held.

According to an affidavit, Barnett offered to pay another man \$10,000 to place at least 10 "improvised explosive bombs" disguised in food-item packaging on store shelves from New York to Florida.

The criminal complaint said Barnett delivered the items to the other man on Feb. 9. He also provided a bag of gloves, a mask and a license plate cover.

But the other man went to authorities and handed over 10 food boxes — for breakfast bars, stuffing and pasta — that contained black powder bombs, according to the Ocala Star-Banner.

Special Agent Dewane L. Krueger of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, told the newspaper that he and other ATF agents were told last month that Barnett wanted to recruit someone to deliver packages to multiple locations, including stores in Florida, Virginia and New York.

ATF officials said Barnett made statements about the stock market and said that he planned to make money from his investments. They said his plan was to buy stock at lower prices and resell it at a profit once prices rebounded after the explosions.

Milwaukee: Pokemon need park permit

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — "Pokemon Go" monsters can roam virtually wherever they please, but they'll need a permit to get into Milwaukee County parks.

At the height of the game's popularity last summer, the large crowds it attracted to one Milwaukee park left county officials at a loss for how to deal with the sudden influx of players and the trash they left behind. With more augmented-reality games in development, the permitting process Milwaukee County set up puts it at the forefront of an emerging challenge for government officials who want to regulate them.

Other places where officials are looking at how to handle such games include Illinois, where lawmakers are considering requiring companies to remove sites from games when they receive requests to do so. The bill pending in the Illinois Legislature is a response to heavy foot traffic at a suburban Chicago park with protected dunes.

Most people associate augmented-reality smartphone apps with "Pokemon Go," which allows players to catch monsters in the real world when they appear on their phones. But the number of games is growing. Other apps allow people to blast zombies on streets, to race cars around the

office, and to aim basketballs at virtual hoops.

Kate Edwards, the executive director of the International Game Developers Association, warned "legislation and regulation at this early stage of an emerging technology" can stifle its growth.

But County Supervisor Sheldon Wasserman, who wrote the proposal setting up the permitting process, said something needed to be done after months "of basically absolute hell" at a Milwaukee park along Lake Michigan. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of players came to Lake Park at all hours of the day, he said, leading to traffic congestion, overtime for sheriff's deputies providing security, overflowing bathrooms and so much trash that the county had minimum-security inmates help clean up.

The new ordinance requires that game developers get a permit like any other business or group that wants to host park events. The fees will be on a sliding scale — between \$100 and \$1,000, depending on how much of the park will be used and how many people are expected to be there, Wasserman said. The money will help with the park's upkeep, he said, and the permits will help the county prepare for the volume of people.

Wasserman said the county could pursue legal action if a company doesn't comply with a permit.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Airplanes clip wings while taxiing at airport

AZ PHOENIX — Two planes clipped wings while taxiing at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, delaying passengers but causing no injuries.

Airport officials say a departing Frontier Airlines flight and an arriving Southwest Airlines flight suffered a minor collision Thursday night. Frontier was headed to Denver and the Southwest flight was arriving from Oklahoma City.

Officials said the Frontier flight was pushing back from its gate when it made contact with the other plane. Airport crews say there was a fuel leak due to the collision.

The Frontier flight transferred passengers to another plane. Southwest officials helped passengers with connecting flights affected by the delay.

Circus agrees to pay \$25K in tent collapse

NH LANCASTER — A Florida-based circus operator has agreed to pay \$25,000 in fines to resolve criminal charges in New Hampshire following a tent collapse in 2015 that killed two people and injured dozens.

The Caledonian-Record reported a prosecutor said the plea agreement resolves eight charges, including operating without a license, and ensures the state will receive money from a defendant who has limited funds.

Sarasota-based Walker International Events initially faced more than \$200,000 in fines.

The agreement will need court approval. A March 8 hearing is scheduled.

Half-ton concrete bird snatched from farm

NC TAYLORSVILLE — Where do you hide a 1,000-pound chicken?

That's what sheriff's deputies in Alexander County, N.C., are trying to figure out as they search for the concrete statue that disappeared from a farm west of Taylorsville over the weekend.

While the chicken may be heavy, it's only 3 feet tall.

Deputies think the statue was taken sometime between 8 p.m. Saturday and 9 a.m. Sunday from the driveway of the farm.

Chief Deputy Tod Jones told the Hickory Daily Record the statue's base was found several miles away. Jones said the statue is valued at about \$1,100.

Change urged for dress code after suspension

MS GULFPORT — A high-school freshman who was suspended for pink hair has begun a petition drive to change a Gulfport School District dress code requirement for hair with natural-looking color.

Timothy Jenkins' hair is now back to black. WLOX-TV reported that 250 Gulfport High School students had already signed.

His mother, Sheryl Jenkins, said the policy infringes both on his rights and her right as a parent to decide what's best for her child.

A statement from the district said policies are reviewed annually by "action teams," and are handled openly in a process that includes business leaders, parents, students and educators.

He said he got multiple warnings before his suspension, and officials said they didn't want

the school represented by pink hair, and it distracted other students.

'Firefall' phenomenon wows Yosemite visitors

CA YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

— Mother Nature is again putting on a show at California's Yosemite National Park, where every February the setting sun draws a narrow sliver of light on a waterfall to make it glow like a cascade of molten lava.

The phenomenon known as "firefall" draws scores of photographers to a spot near Horsetail Fall, which flows down the granite face of the park's famed rock formation, El Capitan.

Capturing the sight is a challenge. Horsetail Fall only flows in the winter or spring, when there is enough rain and snow. The sun lights up the fall for only about two minutes at dusk for a few days in February.

Some photographers have had success this year as pictures of the glowing falls are showing up on social media.

Drug catapult found at US-Mexico border

AZ DOUGLAS — Border Patrol agents in southern Arizona say they've seized two bundles of marijuana that were catapulted across the border from Mexico.

While patrolling an area east of the Douglas Port of Entry earlier this month, agents noticed several people running from the border fence as they approached.

They reported finding a catapult system attached to the south side of the fence and two bundles of marijuana, weighing more than 47 pounds combined.

Agents dismantled the catapult, which was seized by Mexican authorities.

Stolen mortuary van returned with body

CA RIVERSIDE — A man was arrested after police say he stole a van from a Southern California mortuary with a dead body inside, returned it and then stole a different van from the same business.

Riverside Police Officer Ryan Railsback said a mortuary employee was nearly run over as he tried to stop the man as he drove away the second time Sunday.

Railsback said an officer investigating the theft of the first van chased the second van for more than two miles.

The suspect was arrested. Police didn't immediately release his name.

The Riverside Press-Enterprise newspaper reported that stealing a dead body isn't included in his list of charges because police believe he didn't mean to steal it.

Man caught driving 22 times without license

PA ERIE — A state court panel said a Pennsylvania man caught driving without a license 22 times got the punishment he deserved.

Randy Stallsmith had claimed that his 3-to 6-month prison term was excessive for driving offense No. 22 in 2015. He pleaded guilty to driving without a license.

Pennlive.com reported a state Superior Court panel upheld the sentence, saying the 49-year-old Erie County man's past behavior sank his appeal.

Stallsmith appealed to the Superior Court because a county judge wouldn't allow him to serve his time on work release.

From wire reports

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Westbrook, Durant are teammates again

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Russell Westbrook and Kevin Durant had plenty to say at their first NBA All-Star appearance since splitting up as teammates in Oklahoma City.

Just not about one another.

Reunited on the Western Conference All-Star team for this weekend's event, Westbrook and Durant will have to practice together on Saturday and play together on Sunday.

If either of them expects it to be awkward — particularly after the way they barked at one another in a recent regular-season game — they weren't discussing it on Friday.

Westbrook smirked and responded to questions about any potential awkward interaction with Durant, who left the Thunder over the summer

to join the Golden State Warriors, with thoughts on New York City's Fashion Week.

"Man, you know what? Fashion week has been great. You seen fashion week? You been paying attention to fashion week?" Westbrook responded to a question about Durant. "There's a lot of great-looking things at fashion week, man. I'm looking forward to new collections."

Later came another, more general question about playing with four members of Golden State on the West team — Durant, Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson and Draymond Green — and Westbrook shot back:

"What's your favorite fashion brand? What you like?"

For his part, Durant was curt, or vague or sometimes critical of the media for ob-

sessing over things that aren't important. Not to him anyway.

He used a total of five words to respond to his first question about the opportunity to play with Westbrook again:

"I'm excited to be here."

Later, Durant said more directly, "I don't want to talk about it."

At other times, he became philosophical, minimizing the significance of contract talks, trades or when stars change teams.

"It's not real-life problems," Durant said, so he prefers to "just block it out."

He added: "Stuff you guys may think is important, I don't really think is important at all, so when I look at it that way, it's pretty easy to me."

Ultimately, which five players are on the court at any given time will be up to West

coach Steve Kerr.

So far, Kerr has been coy about how he'll handle his rotations.

Of course, the Golden State coach used to work in TV, so he knows as well as anyone how to maintain intrigue.

"The only thing I want is for our players to enjoy the weekend," Kerr said. "It's a hectic weekend for all of them. It's a great honor to be here. I want everybody to be comfortable and happy. This should be an enjoyable time. So I don't want anybody to feel uncomfortable."

"I'm just going to try to create a very comfortable environment for the players and hope that everyone just relaxes and enjoys themselves — and I'm pretty confident that they will."

Murray, World beat US in Rising Star Challenge

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Jamal Murray and Buddy Hield each had moments when they caught the ball in the low post, only to dribble right out to the corner, turn and let fly a three-point shot.

Maybe not the most fundamental approach, but the way they were scoring in the Rising Stars Challenge, no one seemed to mind — certainly not the fans.

Murray had 36 points and 11 assists as the World squad beat the U.S. 150-141 on Friday night. Hield, a New Orleans Pelicans rookie, added 28 points to the delight of the locals who'll want to see more of that when the regular season resumes.

"I was feeling it. I was just playing within the game, and I wasn't trying to force it," Murray said. "You never know when I'm going to go off. ... The guys were telling me to shoot it. Fans were telling me to shoot it. Guys were trying to get me open, so I was just trying to

take advantage of that."

The game featuring top rookies and second-year pros is the main event on the first night of NBA All-Star weekend. While the final score demonstrated the sport's global gains, both teams had their fair share of highlights.

Murray, a Canadian and Denver Nuggets rookie out of Kentucky, went 9-for-14 on three-pointers and was voted the game's MVP.

"He got hot. Coach is like, 'Give Jamal the ball,'" Hield said. "When a guy is hot, you can't stop him from being hot. You can't be selfish and say, 'OK, I want to show out.' I want to show out and I want to get MVP, but he got hot, man. This wasn't my time. He deserved it. When a guy's hot, you got to give him the ball. I don't care who it is. Hats off to him."

Hield, a Bahamian, was 11-for-22 shooting overall, but just 3-for-12 from deep. Hield's regular-season high is 21 points, but he's averaged fewer than nine points in an inconsistent

first season out of Oklahoma.

Murray essentially sealed the game by hitting three threes in a span of 49 seconds late in the game.

World coach Mike Brown said he was going to call every play for Murray, "even though we didn't have any plays. But it was easy, because his teammates were yelling every time the other team scored it or we got a rebound, his teammates were yelling, 'Don't pass, Jamal! Don't pass!' So he took that to heart and he made some big shots for us."

Latvian Kristaps Porzingis of the New York Knicks added 24 points.

Frank Kaminsky of the Charlotte Hornets scored 33 for the U.S. team and Karl-Anthony Towns of Minnesota scored 24, highlighted by his dunk of Phoenix guard Devin Booker's half-court lob.

"We didn't come up with the win, but we had a good time out there. We had a lot of fun," said Booker, who had 17 points. "The weekend isn't over for me.

I still have the Skills Challenge (Saturday night), so I'm looking forward to that."

There wasn't a whole lot of defense. Both teams shot close to 60 percent and neither team was fouled enough to attempt double-digit free throws. When the teams didn't score, it was often because a brazen or flamboyant pass sailed wide of its target for a turnover.

The U.S. had 18 turnovers, the World squad 13.

Croatian Dario Saric of the Philadelphia 76ers added 17 points for the World, outscoring his American Sixers teammate Jahlil Okafor, who had 10 points. But Okafor, who's reportedly on the trade block, only played 14:34 — less than any other U.S. player — in the 40-minute contest and made the most of his shots, going 5-for-6.

Jonathon Simmons of the San Antonio Spurs scored 19 points for the U.S., throwing down several forceful dunks.

Strasburg put offseason focus on cardio

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — That Stephen Strasburg is at spring training with the Washington Nationals, ready from the get-go after missing the end of last season, does not necessarily excite him.

“I don’t think that’s been the issue in past years. Minus my Tommy John year, I’ve always been here Day 1,” Strasburg said. “Question is, I guess, Day 162 — or whatever it is, with those off days.”

The right-hander’s 2016 came to an early end because of an injury, the second time in his career that he has not participated in a Nationals postseason. Now Strasburg wants to be around come October, and is hoping a change in his offseason fitness regimen — running longer distances during the offseason — will help him make it through all of next season without a problem.

“It’s kind of corny, but they say the season’s not a sprint, it’s a marathon,” said Strasburg, who tried out all of his pitches during a 10-minute bullpen session on Thursday, the first workout day for Nationals pitchers and catchers.

He said he ran 6-7 miles every Sunday, and about 3-4 on Wednesday at home in

California, sometimes running on the sand, sometimes on a road that ran along the beach.

“For a guy my size, it takes three or four days to recover from it,” the 6-foot-4 pitcher said. “But I think as long as I was able to do it, but then once I started to get more into throwing every day, I tapered it down, so I did a little bit less — more sprint-type cardio, but on a daily basis.”

The No. 1 overall pick in the 2009 amateur draft had Tommy John surgery in August 2011, then was shut down by the Nationals late in 2012 to protect his repaired elbow. Last season, he started 13-0 with a 2.51 ERA, and in the midst of that stretch signed a \$175 million, seven-year contract that begins next year. He went on the DL with elbow soreness in August after allowing 19 earned runs in 11²/₃ innings over three outings, then left his first start back in the third inning and did not pitch again.

Strasburg’s final stats for 2016 were 15-4 with a 3.60 ERA and 183 strikeouts in only 147²/₃ innings.

As for his first time on a mound this spring?

“Strasburg looked very good. Good to see. We haven’t seen him on the bump since

September,” pitching coach Mike Maddux said. “It came out hot; free and easy.”

Derek Norris, who caught Strasburg’s session, assessed it this way: “Looked healthy, looked sharp, looked strong. Had good command of all four of his pitches.”

“I think he knows that injuries have kind of plagued him for a couple years,” Norris said, “and I think the one thing on his mind is taking it one step at a time and making sure he’s healthy.”

Notes: RHP Max Scherzer, who is not yet ready to take bullpen sessions as he recovers from a broken knuckle, threw long toss Friday, then pitched on flat ground on outfield grass for 12 minutes, occasionally flexing his right hand. About 15 minutes later, he chatted with GM Mike Rizzo. ... The first official full-squad workout is not scheduled until Sunday, but several players took infield grounders Friday, including 2B Daniel Murphy and SS Trea Turner, who is moving back to his natural position after time in CF in 2016. ... RF Bryce Harper arrived in the clubhouse wearing a backward-turned Dallas Cowboys hat. Asked his initial takeaway from seeing Harper, manager Dusty Baker said: “He looked strong. But he always looks strong. My first impression is he’s a Cowboys fan.”

Gonzalez taking break to heal tennis elbow

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Adrian Gonzalez is taking a two-week break from hitting to heal tendinitis in the Los Angeles Dodgers first baseman’s right elbow.

Gonzalez still hopes to play for Mexico in the World Baseball Classic next month, he said Friday after reporting to camp.

Gonzalez said he pursued his usual varied offseason workout program, including weightlifting and boxing exercises. It left him with a case of tennis elbow, or inflammation on the outside of the elbow after forearm tendons are overused.

“I don’t play tennis,” Gonzalez said with a laugh.

The hitting break is purely a precaution, and Gonzalez said the injury isn’t thought to be serious by the Dodgers. He initially felt the pain in December, but kept working

out until the brink of spring training.

“There’s no pain when I’m just doing normal things, but I just feel it when I squeeze something — the bat or the glove,” said Gonzalez, who throws with his left hand. “I’d say it’s about 90 percent (healthy), but you want to get that last 10 percent.”

The 34-year-old Gonzalez is already five days into his two-week hitting break, but he will test the elbow before getting back in the cage. He is running and doing core-building exercises in the meantime.

He remains optimistic about his chances to join Team Mexico, which will be managed by his brother, former big-leaguer Edgar Gonzalez. He is slated to play with Dodgers teammates Sergio Romo and Vidal Nuno on the Mexican team, which will be wildly popular if it can reach the tournament semifinals at Dodger Stadium.

Gonzalez is scheduled to

report to his brother’s team on March 4, shortly after the point at which he could begin swinging again.

“Hope so, but I don’t know,” he said. “These (injuries), they tell you when they’re ready.”

Gonzalez has been exceptionally durable in his big league career, making at least 600 plate appearances and appearing in at least 156 games in 11 consecutive seasons.

He batted .285 with 18 homers and 90 RBIs last season, and he played every postseason game during the Dodgers’ run to the NL Championship Series.

Scott Van Slyke, Chase Utley, Rob Segedin and even 21-year-old top prospect Cody Bellinger could appear at first base for the Dodgers in Gonzalez’s absence. Bellinger was invited to big-league camp for the second time this spring.

Notes: Darin Ruf is off the Dodgers’ 40-man roster after agreeing to a \$1.1 million, one-

year deal with the Samsung Lions of the Korean Baseball Organization. Ruf is likely to play mostly first base with the Lions. Los Angeles acquired him from Philadelphia in November along with Darnell Sweeney in a deal for Howie Kendrick. The Dodgers had to clear a spot on their roster before they can announce the re-signing of veteran Chase Utley, although president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman has already acknowledged Utley will return. ... Cuban infielder Jose Miguel Fernandez agreed to a minor-league contract and reported to camp as a non-roster invitee. The 28-year-old defected in late 2015 after playing several seasons in Cuba’s top league. He also played for Cuba in the 2013 World Baseball Classic. He resumed his career in the Dominican Winter League last fall, attracting the Dodgers’ interest.

Shiffrin adds another world slalom title

Associated Press

ST. MORITZ, Switzerland — Mikaela Shiffrin was in a world of her own on Saturday, extending her unbeaten record in slalom gold medal events.

The 2014 Olympic champion won her specialist event at a third straight ski world championships, and by a huge margin of 1.64 seconds.

Still aged just 21, the American star was nerveless, ruthless and stylish, turning a first-run lead of 0.38 over the home fans' favorite Wendy Holdener into a rout. Frida Hansdotter of Sweden was third, trailing by 1.75.

"It happened almost as perfect as it could have," Shiffrin said. "That was the way I imagined myself skiing the course."

On crossing the finish line, Shiffrin gazed up for several seconds at the giant screen and then gulped in air on finally

seeing the size of her victory.

"I didn't want to celebrate until I knew for certain I had won," she said. "But when I saw 1.6, I thought, 'Is the time wrong?' That was a really special moment."

Swiss fans, who had loudly supported Holdener two minutes earlier, duly acclaimed the unbeaten champion.

"I heard the crowd cheering so loud," Shiffrin recalled of her wait to start. "I was thinking, 'Oh that's cool, (Wendy) must be happy, but today is my day, not yours.'"

Minutes before her decisive run, Shiffrin was filmed keeping cool by sitting beneath an umbrella to find shade from the sunshine.

Her gold medal streak in slalom now includes each world championships she entered, and her only Winter Olympics.

Shiffrin's victory also gave

the United States its first world title at St. Moritz in the 10th of 11 medal events.

On a clear day and in perfect racing conditions, Shiffrin was 0.85 faster than any rival second time down.

Holdener added slalom silver to her gold medal in the combined event. Both her medals were won after Swiss star Lara Gut crashed out of the championships with a serious knee injury.

"It's crazy," Holdener said. "It wasn't always easy, the pressure is here. I'm proud of myself."

With Shiffrin also getting a silver medal in giant slalom, the U.S. team's tally is three. Lindsey Vonn took bronze in downhill.

"I'm really excited with the silver in GS and today's race is as good as it could be," said Shiffrin, who was congratu-

lated course-side by IOC President Thomas Bach.

Bach watched Shiffrin's second run from the same VIP seats where Roger Federer saw Vonn race last Sunday.

"I am her best mascot," Bach told The Associated Press. "Whenever I am at (ski) world championships, she is winning. So we were looking forward together for next year."

Given good health, Shiffrin should arrive in South Korea next year among the biggest favorites for Olympic gold at the Pyeongchang Games.

Another of the skiing's biggest honors is likely to be in Shiffrin's hands next month.

She is the clear leader and strong favorite, since Gut's injury, to claim her first giant crystal globe trophy — awarded to the best all-around skier in a grueling five-month World Cup season.

Jagr helps Panthers down Ducks, win third straight

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — If the Florida Panthers thrive on chaos — as interim head coach Tom Rowe described their recent penchant for high-scoring games — they are starting to learn how to channel it in the right way.

The Panthers delivered another offensive outburst in their 4-1 win over the Anaheim Ducks on Friday night. But this time it was fueled from their defense, with Jaromir Jagr scoring the go-ahead goal in the second period and James Reimer making 35 saves for their third consecutive win.

"We want to put up big numbers, but we're not going to do it at a cost of defense," Rowe said. "When you have a young group and they are trying to figure it out in this league, those are just lessons you learn as you go along."

Colton Sceviour had a goal, Aaron Ekblad scored on the power play and Derek MacKenzie added an empty-net goal, giving the Panthers six wins in

their last seven games. Florida now trails Toronto by one point for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

But after giving up 15 goals in their last three games, the Panthers were able to lock down on defense without sacrificing offense. In fact, it was a knack for heady, low-risk plays that kept the Panthers unbeaten on the third game of their West Coast road trip.

"Our offense came from smart plays," defenseman Keith Yandle said. "And we weren't high risk, we were just making the right play at the right time and I think when you do that, you'll be on the right side of things."

Jagr gave Florida a 2-1 lead with a moment of his ageless brilliance. He stole the puck from defenseman Josh Manson coming out from behind the Ducks' net and calmly used a series of dekes to leave John Gibson seated on his backside before pocketing his 760th career goal.

"We fed their offense with our inability to execute with

the puck," Ducks coach Randy Carlyle said. "They turned the game in their favor with us gifting the puck to them."

Rowe stressed a more controlled and focused approach to defense during the morning skate, and he used a timeout midway through third period to reinforce that lesson. Afterward, the Panthers were able to balance holding off the Ducks' late charge and still getting into the offensive zone.

"I think prior to that we were sitting back a little too much, giving them too much respect," Sceviour said. "We knew they were going to push. I think we started playing a little more in their end in the second 10 and that made it better for us."

Andrew Cogliano scored a short-handed goal and Gibson stopped 27 shots for the Ducks, who had picked up a point in 12 of their previous 14 home games.

Blue Jackets 2, Penguins 1 (OT): Brandon Dubinsky scored just over a minute into overtime as host Columbus beat Pittsburgh.

Dubinsky lifted a shot over Matt Murray as he skated into the slot to win it for the Blue Jackets. Sergei Bobrovsky had 38 saves, and Ryan Murray scored in the second period as Columbus moved within a point of Pittsburgh for second place in the rough Metropolitan Division.

Murray made 37 saves, and Ian Cole scored for the Penguins, who were playing the second game of a back-to-back. The Penguins lost for the first time in four games.

Avalanche 2, Hurricanes 1 (OT): Mikko Rantanen scored at 4:23 of overtime to give visiting Colorado a victory over Carolina to end its losing streak at five games.

Matt Duchene set up the goal on a 2-on-1 break.

Tyson Barrie also scored for Colorado, and Calvin Pickard made 28 saves. Last in the NHL at 16-38-2, the Avalanche are 6-2 in overtime.

Jeff Skinner scored his team-leading 19th goal of the season for the Hurricanes, who have lost three straight.