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CENTCOM: Russia, Iran threaten US' Mideast gains

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, warned a panel of lawmakers Tuesday that Russia and Iran are fueling new destabilization efforts in the Middle East that could impede U.S. gains in the region and against Islamic State.

Votel made the stern warning during a House Armed Services Committee hearing on terrorism and Iran and the remaining defense challenges in the Middle East.

The general said Russian support of Syrian President Bashar Assad has propped up his regime and complicated the defeat of ISIS. It has also fueled conflict among forces in the region, including the Syrian regime, the Syrian Democratic Forces, Iran, Turkey and U.S.-led coalition forces.

“Diplomatically and militarily, Moscow plays both arsonist and firefighter, fueling tensions in Syria ... then serving as an arbitrator to resolve disputes, attempting to undermine and weaken each party’s bargaining positions,” Votel said. “Despite the key role that our partners on the ground — the Syrian Democratic Forces and the coalition — have played in dealing defeat to ISIS, Russia has placed this progress at risk with their activities, which are not focused on defeating ISIS. ... It is clear that Russia’s interests in Syria are Russia’s interests and not those of the wider international community.”

The strong words come in the wake of a new National Defense Strategy last month that is shifting the military’s focus from the global fight against terrorism to a great rival power struggle with Russia and China.

Tensions with Russia continue to escalate in the region as media reports revealed that Russian

mercenaries attacked U.S. special operations forces in eastern Syria earlier this month.

“This was a very clear case of self-defense on our part,” Votel said of the U.S. response to the effort.

Even as the United Nations issued a new cease-fire resolution in Syria last weekend, it appeared to have little effect. Russia helped draft the directive, Votel noted.

“Russia has to admit it’s not capable or it does not want to play a role in ending the Syrian conflict here,” he said. “I think their role is incredibly destabilizing here.”

This comes as Iran also fuels a destabilizing influence in the region, Votel said. The region, site of a long history of proxy wars, has seen Lebanese Hezbollah forces operating in multiple countries and Iran-backed Shiite militia groups in Iraq and Syria. Iranian support has enabled the Houthis, an Islamic rebel movement, Votel said in prepared remarks. The convergence has fueled civil war in Yemen.

Even as much attention is focused on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, Iran’s weapons development remains a threat as U.S. leaders wrangle over the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement.

“Iran continues to develop advanced ballistic missile capabilities and also transfer them to the Houthis and to its Hezbollah proxies,” Votel said. “This will enable them to strike U.S. partners and allies, and the possibility Tehran will reinvigorate its nuclear program. ... Nuclear proliferation, combined with proxy warfare, increases opportunities for miscalculation and generates a serious threat to the region and the United States.”

Bill introduced in Senate addresses US Navy readiness

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Two key senators have introduced a measure that they say will restore Navy surface force readiness in the wake of a series of deadly crashes last year.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and a senior member of that committee, Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., said they introduced the Surface Warfare Enhancement Act of 2018 to address root causes of the Navy’s declining readiness.

“As we have seen too often in recent months, the significant shortcomings in our Navy’s readiness can have disastrous results,” McCain, who has been battling brain cancer from his home in Arizona since December, said in a statement. “The status quo is unacceptable. Congress must provide the funding and oversight required to keep our military safe in peace and effective in combat.”

The legislation is based on the Navy’s own recommendations from the service’s most recent strategic readiness review and another comprehensive review.

The effort will require the Navy to conduct a review of its organization and chains of command, put a senior Senate-confirmed Navy civilian in charge of ship maintenance, give the Navy more time and flexibility to spend maintenance funds and require the service to deliver realistic projections of sailors’ workloads and ship maintenance. The plan would also re-

quire Navy record-keeping on watch standing and training completed by surface warfare officers; set minimum at-sea and simulator-based training requirements to qualify for critical positions on the ships; and equalize staffing between ships overseas and at home.

The legislation follows a deadly year of naval crashes at sea. In 2017, the Navy lost 20 sailors in major incidents in the Pacific. Of those deaths, 17 were killed in crashes last summer involving the USS Fitzgerald and the USS John S. McCain. On June 17, the Fitzgerald crashed into a civilian merchant ship about 60 miles southwest of Yokosuka, Japan, killing seven sailors. On Aug. 21, the McCain collided with an oil tanker near Singapore, leaving 10 sailors dead.

Soon after those incidents, the Navy launched several investigations, including a comprehensive review probing contributing factors at tactical and operational levels and a strategic readiness review examining systemic issues.

The Navy released its findings late last year, issuing a series of recommendations that included improving seamanship training, navigational skills and equipment aboard ships as well as reducing fatigue and stress among sailors and officers. The investigations showed the crashes were due in large part to human error and failures of leadership. Several Navy leaders connected to the crashes have since been relieved of duty, and some of them are facing criminal charges.

Rare Naples snowstorm closes bases and schools

BY SCOTT WYLAND
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The worst snowstorm to hit this Mediterranean city in 60 years led to on-base school closings and most Navy personnel staying home Tuesday.

Only essential personnel went to work at Naval Support Activity Naples on Tuesday, though NATO Allied Joint Force Command remained fully operational.

Icy Siberian winds blew into Italy last week, kicking up snow flurries in Naples and Rome on Monday for the first time since 2012. Then a heavy snowstorm early Tuesday made many of Italy's winding roads treacherous to drive.

The snow did not cause problems for any ships in port, Navy officials said Tuesday.

Base officials planned to start the workday two hours late to allow ice on the roads to melt, but they gave most personnel the day off when snowfall turned out heavier than expected, said Lt. Pete Pagano, Naples base command spokesman. The Navy exchanges closed, though the main commissary and a minimart on base remained open.

Some residents said on social media they appreciated getting a snow day off but wished officials had informed them sooner. Many people didn't find out until they were driving to work in the storm and traffic, said Kehaulani Volhein, who's married to a civilian Navy firefighter.

Snow wreaked havoc with Neapolitan motorists ill-equipped and unaccustomed to driving in it, according to local news reports. By afternoon, the snow was melting, but weather forecasts warned that the runoff could freeze later and create icy roads.

Navy commanders' hearings delayed to give defense time

BY DIANNA CAHN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Hearings to determine whether the commanders of two Navy destroyers that collided with commercial vessels in the Pacific last year should face criminal charges that include negligent homicide have been postponed after defense attorneys asked for more time, according to a Navy spokesman.

Cmdr. Bryce Benson, who commanded the USS Fitzgerald, and Cmdr. Alfredo Sanchez, former skipper of the USS John S. McCain, were slated for Article 32 hearings at the Navy Yard in Washington on March 6-8, along with three other Fitzgerald sailors.

Seven sailors died June 17 after the Fitzgerald crashed into a civilian merchant ship about 60 miles southwest of Yo-

kosuka Naval Base, Japan. Just two months later, 10 sailors were killed when the McCain collided with an oil tanker near Singapore.

Navy investigations found that the collisions were "avoidable" and caused by failures in planning, training, procedures and operations. Part of that, the Navy found, was caused by the intense operational pace the fleet has been maintaining in recent years.

The devastating collisions so close to each other left the Navy's Pacific Fleet reeling and led to firings, forced retirements and nonjudicial punishments conducted by Adm. Frank Caldwell, who was tapped in October to oversee disciplinary actions for the accidents.

The Navy relieved the commanders of both ships last year, along with the head of 7th Fleet

and leaders of Task Force 70 and Destroyer Squadron 15, which oversee the fleet's destroyers and cruisers. The service also said it conducted a comprehensive review of incidents to ensure systemic problems are fixed.

Pacific Fleet Commander Adm. Scott Swift announced his retirement in September, and Vice Adm. Thomas Rowden, the former Surface Warfare head, retired in January ahead of schedule after the recommendation of disciplinary actions against him.

The Article 32 hearings for former commanders Benson and Sanchez will determine the most serious charges of negligent homicide, along with hazarding a ship and dereliction of duty. Lt. Cmdr. Daniel Day, a Navy spokesman, did not specify the length of the continuance. He said a new hearing date would be announced later.

Report: Rising sea levels threaten military

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon needs to begin war-gaming responses to environmental catastrophes and work to make its military installations more resilient as rising sea levels threaten them, a new report warns.

The Defense Department should factor climate change into its long-term basing strategy, a panel of retired generals and admirals wrote in a report for the Washington-based The Center for Climate and Security.

"Given that around 10 percent of U.S. military installations and training grounds are located along low-lying and exposed coastlines, the long-term effects in terms of flooding will be significant," said the report,

titled "Sea Level Rise and the U.S. Military's Mission."

More than 200 military installations that took part in a recent vulnerability assessment have been affected by storm surge, and by the end of the 21st century, coastlines where the U.S. military operates will likely be very different, the report stated.

Rising sea levels in the Pacific and in Asia, along with increasingly severe tropical storms, "could pose enormous problems" for many coastal bases, the report said.

Among those installations is a ballistic missile site in the Marshall Islands billed by the report as "a pillar of U.S. Strategic Command" and a "bulwark" against China. "This strategic asset is under consid-

erable risk," the report stated.

The center conducted case studies on numerous bases, stretching from the Florida Keys to Maine on the east coast and California to Washington on the Pacific coast.

In the decades to come, flooding and storm surges could leave army airfields, naval shipyards and Marine training grounds exposed.

For example, a Navy nuclear submarine base at Kings Bay, Ga., is likely to face a spike in tidal flooding in the coming decades, making operations there vulnerable.

"This portends potential catastrophic impacts to the readiness and responsiveness of our strategic nuclear submarine force," the report said.

President says he's willing to buck NRA

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump declared Monday he's willing to take on the National Rifle Association over gun legislation, but Republicans who control Congress aren't so sure. They prefer to consider only modest changes to firearms limits in response to the mass shooting at a Florida high school.

Congress returned to work Monday without following Trump's lead on any of the major initiatives he has tossed into the debate since the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Despite public calls for stricter gun laws, Republican leaders have largely kept quiet since the shooting, which left 17 dead and ushered in another phase in the gun debate, prompted in large part by the activism of the young survivors. Some students visited with lawmakers Monday.

Over the weekend, Trump spent time talking to Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, of Wisconsin, and the White House is inviting lawmakers from both parties for meetings this week. But Trump's ideas to arm many teachers, lift the

Suspect's hearing canceled

Associated Press

PARKLAND, Fla. — A Tuesday morning hearing in the criminal case against the suspect accused in the Florida high school shooting has been canceled.

Prosecutors are seeking to obtain hair samples, fingerprints, DNA and photographs of Nikolas Cruz, 19. The hearing was removed from the court docket, and no explanation was immediately available.

Cruz, who has been charged with 17 counts of murder, was not expected to appear in court because he waived his right to attend

the hearing. He is being held without bail at the Broward County Jail.

In a separate court matter, Cruz's lawyers are seeking to disqualify a judge from presiding over the case. The defense says in court papers that Circuit Court Judge Elizabeth Scherer is biased in favor of prosecutors, threatening Cruz's right to a fair trial.

Cruz signed an affidavit in a barely legible printed scrawl that resembled the writing of a young child.

Students were scheduled to return to school Wednesday for the first time since the Feb. 14 shooting.

minimum age for purchasing assault rifles to 21 and impose stricter background checks were falling flat.

"You guys, half of you are so afraid of the NRA," the president said Monday at a meeting with the nation's governors. "There's nothing to be afraid of. And you know what? If they're

not with you, we have to fight them every once in a while. That's OK."

He later added that the NRA is "on our side."

Senate Republicans are hoping to consider more modest legislation from Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Chris Murphy, D-Conn., to strength-

en the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. The "Fix NICS" bill, similar to one approved last year in the House, would penalize federal agencies that don't properly report required records used to determine whether someone can legally buy a gun.

Cornyn, the Senate's No. 2 Republican, questioned Trump's proposal to raise the age limit for assault weapons, noting that the minimum age to enlist in the military is 18. "I'm not sure I understand the 21 age. I think there are better ways to address it than just an arbitrary age increase," he told The Washington Times.

Trump insisted Monday that sometimes political leaders need to buck the NRA, which builds its political power by major campaign spending and motivating gun rights supporters to vote. Though he did not mention increasing the minimum age for rifle purchases, he wants to toughen the Cornyn bill with stricter background checks, a change the NRA has opposed.

"We're going to strengthen it," Trump said. "We're going to make it more pertinent to what we're discussing."

Japan considers anti-ship missiles on Okinawa

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND HANA KUSUMOTO

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Japan may deploy surface-to-ship missiles to Okinawa's main island in response to Chinese maritime aggression, according to local media reports.

Japan is already moving forward with plans for anti-ship missiles on Miyako and Ishigaki islands, which are part of Okinawa prefecture, as well as Amami Island in Kagoshima Prefecture.

There have been calls in Tokyo to install the missiles in response to China's navy transiting the 180-mile strait

between Okinawa and Miyako in the East China Sea. Chinese warships first entered the strait in November 2008. Since then, there has been a steady stream of repeat visits. The incidents haven't infringed Japanese sovereignty but have led to military sorties and diplomatic protests.

In January, for example, Japanese officials complained to China's ambassador after a Chinese nuclear submarine and frigate were spotted near Miyako and the Senkaku Islands.

On Tuesday, Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera denied the reports published by the Asahi newspaper and Kyodo news service about placing missiles on Okinawa.

"Nothing has been decided on the specific direction of the deployment," Onodera said, according to a Defense Ministry spokesman.

The anti-ship missiles slated for Miyako have a range of about 125 miles. The same type would be stationed on Okinawa if the plan is ultimately approved, Asahi reported.

This would allow for complete coverage of the seas between Miyako and Okinawa, Kyodo reported.

The Japanese government has budgeted for the Miyako deployment; however, the first missiles won't arrive until March 2020, a spokesman from Japan's Ministry of Defense said.

No details or timeline have been provided for the Ishigaki and Amami deployments, the spokesman added.

All of the islands are near the Senkakus, which China calls Diaoyu and also claims. The area surrounding the islands has been the scene of numerous confrontations and disputes in recent years.

Missile deployments to Okinawa's main island could anger locals. The prefecture hosts more than half of the approximately 50,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan. A small but passionate protest movement has been fighting for decades to reduce the military presence on the island.

Expansion of mental health care sought

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Amid the outcry over the Florida school shootings, the Trump administration said it is “actively exploring” ways to help states expand inpatient mental health treatment using Medicaid funds.

President Donald Trump again brought up the issue of mental hospitals in a meeting with governors Monday, invoking a time when states maintained facilities for mentally ill and developmentally disabled people.

“In the old days, you would put him into a mental institution,” Trump said, apparently referring to alleged shooter Nikolas Cruz, whose troubling behavior prompted people close to him to plead for help from authorities, without success. “We’re going to have to start talking about mental institutions. ... We have nothing between a prison and leaving him at his house, which we can’t do anymore.”

Organizations representing state officials and people with mental illness say no one wants to go back to warehousing patients. But they also say federal action is needed to reverse a decades-old law known as the “IMD exclusion,” which bars Medicaid from paying for treatment in mental health facilities with more than 16 beds. IMD stands for “institution for mental diseases.”

Last year, the Trump administration opened the way for states to seek waivers from the policy in cases involving treatment for substance abuse. On Monday a spokesman said states are pressing the administration for similar waivers for mental health care, and officials are looking for ways to address those requests.

“We’ve continued to receive ... proposals and strong interest from states to allow similar demonstrations for individuals with serious mental illness,” Johnathan Monroe, a spokesman for the Centers for Medicare and

Medicaid Services, said in a statement. “We are actively exploring how best to provide states with new opportunities to improve their mental health delivery systems.”

There’s no telling if a more robust mental health care system would have saved the 17 lives lost in Parkland, Fla., as well as other victims of mass shootings that have become tragically commonplace. Democrats say it’s no substitute for stronger gun control laws.

But state officials would welcome a change to Medicaid’s exclusionary rule, said Matt Salo, head of the nonpartisan National Association of Medicaid Directors, which supports full repeal of the policy and, short of that, expanded waivers.

“There is a need for a spectrum of services for people suffering from mental illness and substance abuse,” Salo said. “That spectrum should include everything from community-based resources as well as more structured institutional care.”

Saudi military leaders replaced amid Yemen war

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia replaced its military chief of staff and other defense officials Tuesday in a shake-up apparently aimed at overhauling its Defense Ministry during the stalemated and ruinous war in Yemen.

The kingdom also announced a new female deputy minister of labor and social development as it tries to broaden the role of women in the workplace.

Saudi Arabia made the announcement in a flurry of royal decrees carried by the state-run Saudi Press Agency. As with many announcements in the ultraconservative Sunni kingdom, it was short on details.

King Salman “approved the document on developing the Ministry of Defense, including the vision and strategy of the ministry’s developing program, the operational pattern targeting its development, the organizational structure, governance and human resources requirements,” one statement said.

Prominent among the personnel changes was the firing of military chief of staff Gen.

Abdulrahman bin Saleh al-Bunyan. Another announcement said the general would become a consultant to the royal court.

Al-Bunyan was replaced by Gen. Fayyadh bin Hamid al-Rwaili, who once had been the commander of the Royal Saudi Air Force, among the nation’s premier military forces.

Also appointed as an assistant defense minister was Khaled bin Hussain al-Biyari, the CEO of the publicly traded mobile phone and internet service provider Saudi Telecom Co.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the heir to the throne after his father, King Salman, is the Saudi defense minister and architect of the Yemen war.

The overhaul in the Saudi defense forces should not be seen only as a reaction to the Yemen war, said Becca Wasser, a Washington-based RAND Corp. analyst specializing in Gulf security who has traveled to Saudi Arabia in the past.

The war in Yemen functions “to push these reforms forward, but it’s not the driver,” Wasser told The Associated Press.

Report: Kerner inequality concerns still remain

Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Barriers to equality are posing threats to democracy in the U.S. as the country remains segregated along racial lines and child poverty worsens, says a study examining the nation 50 years after the release of the landmark 1968 Kerner Report.

The new report released Tuesday blames U.S. policy-makers and elected officials, saying they’re not doing enough to heed the warning on deepening poverty and inequality as highlighted by the Kerner Commission a half-century ago, and it lists a number of areas where the country has seen “a lack of or reversal of progress.”

“Racial and ethnic inequality is growing worse. We’re resegregating our housing and schools again,” said former U.S. Sen. Fred Harris, of Oklahoma, a co-editor of the new report and last surviving member of the original Kerner Commission created by President Lyndon Johnson in 1967. “There are a few more people who are poor now than was true 50 years ago. Inequality of

income is worse.”

The new study titled “Healing Our Divided Society: Investing in America Fifty Years After the Kerner Report” says the percentage of people living in deep poverty — less than half of the federal poverty level — has increased since 1975. About 46 percent of people living in poverty in 2016 were classified as living in deep poverty — 16 percentage points higher than in 1975.

The new report calls on the federal government and states to push for more spending on early childhood education and a \$15 minimum wage by 2024.

It also demands more regulatory oversight over mortgage lenders to prevent predatory lending, community policing that works with nonprofits in minority neighborhoods and more job training programs in an era of automation and emerging technologies.

Johnson formed the original 11-member Kerner Commission as Detroit was engulfed in a raging riot in July 1967. That summer, more than 150 cases of civil unrest erupted across the U.S.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man held without bail in library stabbing

MA WOBURN — A Massachusetts man charged with fatally stabbing a woman at a library during what prosecutors called an unprovoked attack has been held without bail.

Not-guilty pleas to charges including murder were entered on behalf of Jeffrey Yao, 23, at his arraignment Monday.

Authorities said Yao stabbed Deane Stryker, 22, 20 times with a 10-inch hunting knife at the Winchester Public Library on Saturday. A prosecutor called it a “vicious, unprovoked attack.”

Yao’s lawyer said his client has “severe mental illness,” which includes multiple hospitalizations.

Stryker was a student at the University of New England’s College of Osteopathic Medicine who had hoped to become a doctor.

Plane passenger opens emergency exit, slides

NJ NEWARK — Authorities said a passenger who had just boarded a plane at a New Jersey airport opened the emergency exit and went down the slide.

Port Authority of New York and New Jersey police said Troy Fattun, 25, was detained by airline staff and police moments after he reached the tarmac at Newark Liberty International airport.

The incident occurred about 10 p.m. Sunday on a United Airlines flight that was headed from Newark to Tampa, Fla. The flight was delayed for several hours, and passengers eventually were put on another plane.

It wasn’t immediately clear why Fattun opened the emergency exit.

Man shot, son killed while working on home

SC NORTH CHARLESTON — Authorities said a man was fatally shot and his father was wounded while they worked on a South Carolina home.

The Post and Courier of Charleston reported that Michael Bryan Cooke, 41, and Charles Michael Cooke, 64, were shot Friday while refurbishing a family’s home near North Charleston.

A Charleston County Sheriff’s Office statement says Michael Bryan Cooke was pronounced dead at the scene. An affidavit says Charles Michael Cooke had been hospitalized with “life-threatening” injuries but was in stable condition Saturday evening.

The affidavit says sheriff’s detectives went to a nearby high school to ask if any students were absent or late. The sheriff’s office said Aaron Jordan White and Daquintez Jermont Gadsden, both 18, were arrested on charges including murder and burglary.

Bicyclist blames Waze for trip into tunnel

NY NEW YORK — A New York City bicyclist delivering Chinese food is blaming the Waze navigation app for directing him into the busy Lincoln Tunnel, where bikes are banned.

A Port Authority of New York and New Jersey spokesman said Bruce Lee, 19, was stopped Tuesday evening after he peddled into the tunnel, which connects Manhattan and New Jersey.

The Staten Island man told police he was directed into the tunnel under the Hudson River by the Waze app on his phone.

He was arrested on charges of trespass and criminal posses-

sion of a weapon after a dagger was found in his possession.

Driver rams car into barricades, arrested

MS JACKSON — The driver in a social media video showing a car ramming into barricades at a Mississippi Walmart has been arrested.

Jackson police spokesman Sgt. Roderick Holmes said the owner of the vehicle wants it back.

According to police, the car was reportedly given to the driver days before the parking lot incident.

Holmes said the driver was arrested and had prior fines, but he wasn’t sure what the driver was charged with.

Naked man on ATV leads police on chase

MO KANSAS CITY — Authorities said a naked man was arrested in Missouri after fleeing on an all-terrain vehicle and driving the wrong way on an interstate.

Police said the man is suspected of being under the influence of drugs during the Sunday afternoon chase in northern Kansas City.

The chase began with the man eluding officers in a field. After finding a break in a fence, the man made his way onto Interstate 435, where he occasionally drove into oncoming traffic. He was captured after exiting the interstate.

One witness told KMBC-TV that she thought she was “dreaming” when she saw the spectacle unfold while returning from a basketball tournament with two boys in her car.

Capt. Will Akin, of the Clay County Sheriff’s Office, acknowledged it “might be comical” but stressed it was a “very dangerous” incident.

Pilot dies in crash of ‘trike aircraft’

FL EUSTIS — Authorities said a 47-year-old man died after crashing a red-and-white “trike aircraft” near the runway of a general aviation airport in Florida.

The Orlando Sentinel reported Sunday that Lake County Sheriff’s Office Sgt. Fred Jones said a witness, Russell Smith, told deputies he saw the ultralight plane doing “bunny hops,” bouncing up and down off the runway.

“Smith advised that the pilot fly south before making a final approach,” Jones said. “At this time, the aircraft went beyond the trees and he (Smith) could hear a loud crash.”

Patrons from a nearby church went to the witness’ aid, lifted the plane off the man, and removed him from the cockpit.

The pilot was identified as John Farmer.

Police take in boy, 11, after car theft

MI PONTIAC — Authorities said an 11-year-old boy was taken into custody after allegedly stealing a rental car in suburban Detroit.

The Oakland County Sheriff’s Office said a person reported that the keys might have been left in the vehicle Feb. 20. Later, the vehicle was spotted at an apartment complex in Pontiac.

The car was blocked in a parking space and the boy fled on foot before deputies arrived. Deputies tracked down the boy following a foot chase.

The department said in a statement Sunday that the vehicle was damaged during the theft. The Pontiac boy was taken in for questioning.

From wire reports

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No. 7 Gonzaga defies low expectations

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Coming off a loss in the NCAA championship game, Gonzaga began this season with a bit of an edge. Not for that 71-65 defeat by North Carolina, but because coaches in the West Coast Conference predicted the Zags would finish second in the league this year.

Coach Mark Few said his staff didn't care about the diminished expectations.

"But I think the kids did," he said.

Picked to wind up behind St. Mary's, the Zags are No. 7 and rising. They've won their sixth consecutive title and are seeded No. 1 heading into the WCC tournament in Las Vegas, with their first game on Saturday.

Gonzaga has won 11 consecutive games since losing to now-No. 22 Saint Mary's at home. Always in the March mix, Few's team seems to be peaking at the right time.

The program lost four key players from last season's team, accounting for 62 percent of the scoring, and experts wondered if this might be a down year for the Zags.

That didn't sit well with the players.

"I have never heard of a team coming off the national championship game getting picked second in its league," senior guard Silas Melson said after Gonzaga beat BYU to wrap up the league title on Saturday.

"I just know we had pieces back ... that contributed to last year's team," guard Josh Perkins said. "I just felt we deserved

to be picked to win it."

"We weren't, which is fine," Perkins said. "Pick who you want, but at the end of the day, you'll see who the No. 1 seed is in Vegas."

A conference title seemed iffy on Jan. 18, when Saint Mary's came to the McCarthey Athletic Center and inflicted a rare home loss on the Zags, 74-71, to take sole possession of first place.

But the Zags haven't lost since. They won at Saint Mary's, 78-65, in the rematch, and survived close games in many of their other contests.

They kept finding ways to win.

A recent game against Pepperdine was a good example. The Waves closed within 66-64 with 7½ minutes left in the game, and seemed to have the momentum. But Gonzaga outscored them 15-3 the rest of the way to seal the win.

"We needed to win this game," said senior Johnathan Williams, who had 18 points and 12 rebounds, including two dunks in the closing stretch. "And basically we started getting stops and rebounds."

The win broke a three-year streak of losing in the home finale, also known as Senior Night.

Pepperdine coach Marty Wilson was impressed.

"I'm blown away and tip my hat to Mark and what he's done," Wilson said. "It's re-

markable, not just to have the success, but to sustain it in domination form."

Afterward, Few took some time to focus on the importance of reaching 25 wins for the 11th consecutive season. Only Kansas, at 12, has a longer streak.

"Those are hard to come by, man," Few said. "Really hard to come by in college basketball."

"I don't take them for granted. Staff doesn't and nor do our players, because they're the ones out there fighting and making the plays to get it done," he said.

Indeed, Gonzaga's most singular achievement is to sustain a Top 25 program for two decades.

Gonzaga has won at least 25 games for 18 of the past 20 seasons. It has produced 21 straight 20-win seasons, and 19 consecutive trips to the NCAA Tournament.

The Zags have won or shared 16 of the past 17 conference regular-season titles. This season, they have six players averaging at least 9.9 points per game, making life difficult for opposing defenses.

Few said the balanced scoring is a sign of a special team. Seven different players have scored at least 20 points in a game this season.

"That shows character and a winning spirit, when there's a lot of selfish spirits out there in the world of basketball right now," Few said.

College basketball roundup

Unranked Virginia Tech surprises No. 5 Duke

Associated Press

BLACKSBURG, Va. — Nick-eil Alexander-Walker's emotions changed in a heartbeat — not once, but twice.

The freshman guard at Virginia Tech took what he thought would be the game-winning shot. Then he saw it sail over the rim entirely. Then he saw teammate Chris Clarke collect the rebound and lay it back in, giving the Hokies a stunning 64-63 comeback victory over No. 5 Duke.

"It was in the air, I was like, 'Oh my God. I'm about to hit it,'" Alexander-Walker said. Then? "Ooooooh, and then, yeah!"

Clarke's mind was working overtime, too, as he grabbed the rebound.

"Definitely you can't miss

that layup or it looks really bad," he said of the putback with 4 seconds left, which gave Virginia Tech its first lead since the opening minutes. "I wouldn't say nerve-wracking. I just knew I had to make it."

Because he did, the Hokies gained another signature victory to enhance their NCAA Tournament credentials. Clarke said they haven't talked about that as a team, even with pundits seeming very much on the fence as to whether they have done enough.

"We know we're not done yet," Clarke said. "But we know it's a booster."

The Hokies (21-9, 10-7 Atlantic Coast Conference) also have home wins against No. 9 North Carolina and No. 18 Clemson, and a road victory at top-

ranked Virginia. They got this one by holding Duke without a field goal for the final seven minutes of the game, snapping the Blue Devils' five-game winning streak.

No. 6 Kansas 80, Texas 70: Svi Mykhailiuk had 17 points, Devonte Graham added 10 and 11 assists and the host Jayhawks beat the Longhorns.

Kansas (24-6, 13-4 Big 12) used a strong night from seniors Mykhailiuk and Graham in what was the pair and walk-on Clay Young's senior night and final game in Allen Fieldhouse. The Jayhawks' powerful start helped them control the game early, forcing Texas (17-13, 7-10 Big 12) to burn four timeouts in the first half.

Kerwin Roach II led the way for Texas, scoring 18 points

and dishing out eight assists just days after hitting the game winner against Oklahoma State. Jacob Young posted 14 points and five rebounds.

No. 20 West Virginia 84, No. 12 Texas Tech 74: Jevon Carter scored 21 points and Daxter Miles Jr. added 18 in their final home game, and the host Mountaineers rode a hot start to beat the Red Raiders.

West Virginia (22-8, 11-6 Big 12) broke a second-place tie with Texas Tech (22-8, 10-7) and moved closer to earning the No. 2 seed in the Big 12 tournament with one game left.

Sagaba Konate added 16 points, Esa Ahmad had 11 points and 11 rebounds, and James "Beetle" Bolden scored 10 for the Mountaineers, who have won three straight.

NHL roundup

Point lifts Lightning over Leafs in SO

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Brayden Point is about as reliable as they come in a shootout.

The second-year center scored the deciding goal in a tiebreaker for the second consecutive game, lifting the Tampa Bay Lightning to a 4-3 victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday night.

Point improved to 8-for-13 in career shootout attempts and scored the winner for the fifth time.

“A lot of times he just goes down there and shoots the puck in the net,” Tampa Bay coach Jon Cooper said. “That’s what you are supposed to do.”

Tyler Johnson, Chris Kunitz and Adam Erne scored in regulation for the NHL-leading Lightning, who played most of the game without Nikita Kucherov after the league’s top scorer was injured.

James van Riemsdyk, Mitch Marner and Tyler Bozak had the goals for Toronto, which

played without injured star Auston Matthews. Frederik Andersen stopped 39 shots.

Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 27 saves for Tampa Bay. He denied Marner on a penalty shot with 6:02 left in the third period to keep the score tied.

Kucherov exited with 5:41 left in the first and did not return. The team announced he sustained an upper-body injury, but Cooper didn’t have an update following the game or offer any indication on how much time Kucherov could miss. The two-time All-Star has 82 points in 63 games.

Kings 3, Golden Knights 2 (OT): Anze Kopitar tied the game with 10.8 seconds left in the third period and Dustin Brown scored a power-play goal 3:14 into overtime, rallying host Los Angeles past Vegas.

Jeff Carter, in his second game back after missing 55 with a cut tendon, scored the Kings’ first goal on a power play at 12:28 of the third. Jonathan Quick stopped 37 shots.

Erik Haula and Reilly Smith scored for Vegas. Marc-Andre Fleury made 41 saves.

Blue Jackets 5, Capitals 1: Seth Jones and Cam Atkinson each had a goal and two assists as host Columbus routed Washington.

Columbus scored four goals in the first period — two on power plays — in winning its second game in three days and first in four tries against the Capitals this season. Artemi Panarin had a goal and an assist, and Sonny Milano and Mark Letestu — acquired in a trade Sunday — also scored.

Sergei Bobrovsky made 25 saves for the Blue Jackets, who held onto the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference with a knot of teams still in contention.

Flyers 1, Canadiens 0 (SO): Sean Couturier scored in the sixth round of the shootout and visiting Philadelphia edged Montreal for its season-best sixth straight victory.

Petr Mrazek, making his

third straight start for the streaking Flyers, stopped 28 shots in his fourth shutout this season. Mrazek is 3-0-0 since being acquired from Detroit last Monday.

Philadelphia passed Washington for first place in the Metropolitan Division. The Flyers have earned at least one point in 12 straight games (10-0-2).

Avalanche 3, Canucks 1: Nathan MacKinnon had two goals and an assist, and Mikko Rantanen added a goal and an assist in host Colorado’s victory over Vancouver.

Semyon Varlamov made 31 saves and came within 1:16 of his third shutout this season. The Avalanche won for the 11th time in 12 home games and moved within two points of idle Calgary for the second wild card in the Western Conference.

Daniel Sedin scored and Jacob Markstrom stopped 25 shots for the Canucks

Contending teams pay steep price at trade deadline

Associated Press

Red Wings general manager Ken Holland has suddenly come to appreciate how valuable first-round draft picks are when a team’s not in playoff contention at the NHL trade deadline.

“I’ve been on that on the other side,” Holland said, recalling Detroit’s heydays in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the Red Wings were competing with Dallas, Colorado and New Jersey in vying to add top talent to strengthen their playoff run. “When those teams made a move, we were aware of it.”

The Red Wings were far from that position, sitting in a tie for 12th and five points out of contention, when the trade deadline struck on Monday afternoon. Though Holland wasn’t

discounting Detroit’s chances of making a late-season push, he wasn’t exactly dealing from a position of strength.

Rather than adding a player, the Red Wings subtracted. They traded established forward Tomas Tatar to the Western Conference-leading Vegas Golden Knights for three draft picks, including a first-round selection.

The Golden Knights weren’t the only contender giving up high draft picks on a day 18 trades were completed.

Six first-round selections — two of them conditional — were dealt Monday, the most to move on the final day of NHL trading since at least 2008, according to league figures. And no first-rounders had moved on each of the previous two trade-deadline days.

San Jose Sharks general manager Doug Wilson attributed the amount of first-rounders dealt to how tight the playoff races are, particularly in the Western Conference. Before games on Monday, six points separated the Sharks, who sit second in the Pacific Division standings, and Colorado, which was 11th in the West.

“It’s supply and demand of those players that can make a difference,” Wilson said after trading a conditional 2019 first-round pick to acquire Buffalo’s Evander Kane. “Some people would say pricey, but it almost always is pricey at this time of year when you have competitive juices flowing.”

The East-leading Tampa Bay Lightning traded a 2018 first-round pick, a conditional 2019 first-rounder and three play-

ers to acquire Rangers captain Ryan McDonagh and J.T. Miller, New York’s second-leading scorer.

The Winnipeg Jets gave up a first-round pick to add even more offense to the NHL’s fourth-best scoring team in acquiring Paul Stastny from St. Louis.

Nashville parted ways with a first-round pick to land forward Ryan Hartman from Chicago.

Those deals don’t include the first-round pick the Rangers acquired as part of the trade that sent Rick Nash to Boston on Sunday. And Pittsburgh gave up a first-round pick last week as part of a three-team trade to add Ottawa’s Derick Brassard.

The Rangers now have three first-round picks and seven over the first three rounds.

NBA roundup

Davis' 53 points carry Pelicans over Suns

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Anthony Davis' authoritative put-back dunk in the final minutes summed up a night on which his relentless play around the basket forced Phoenix's three tallest players to foul out.

Davis scored a season-high 53 points, grabbed 18 rebounds and blocked five shots, and the New Orleans Pelicans extended their winning streak to six with a 125-116 victory over the hapless Phoenix Suns on Monday night.

"Thank, you Anthony, for carrying us," Pelicans guard Jrue Holiday said. "Look at his numbers, man. He's something else."

Davis has scored no fewer than 27 points in a game during New Orleans' streak, scoring at least 38 five times and more than 40 four times.

After the 6-foot-10 Davis hit his 21st free throw, the Suns had to guard the Pelicans' All-Star power forward with 6-foot-8 small forward Josh Jackson because 7-footers Dragan Bender and Alex Len and 6-foot-10 Marquese Chriss had all fouled out with nearly five minutes still to play.

"A lot of their bigs were in foul trouble. I just wanted to hang around the rim as much as possible, knowing I had the size advantage," Davis said. "We'll take any type of win, any type of way we can get it."

Holiday scored 20 points for the Pelicans, whose season-best unbeaten run has pulled them into a tie with Portland for fifth place in the Western Conference despite being without All-Star DeMarcus Cousins, who was lost for the season Jan. 26 with a torn Achilles.

Warriors 125, Knicks 111: Klay Thompson had 26 points and Stephen Curry scored 14 of his 21 in the third quarter, when visiting Golden State ran another opponent off the floor.

Kevin Durant added 22 points and nine rebounds for Golden State, which trailed by one at halftime before outscoring New York 39-18 in the third.

Rockets 96, Jazz 85: James Harden had 26 points and Luc Mbah a Moute scored 15 of his 17 in the fourth quarter to send Houston past host Utah for its 13th straight victory.

Raptors 123, Pistons 94: DeMar DeRozan and Kyle Lowry each scored 20 points, Serge Ibaka had 19 and host Toronto routed Detroit for its seventh win in eight games.

Celtics 109, Grizzlies 98: Kyrie Irving scored 25 points

in three quarters of work and host Boston beat Memphis.

Nets 104, Bulls 87: Alan Crabbe scored 21 points and host Brooklyn snapped an eight-game losing streak with a win over Chicago.

Lakers 123, Hawks 104: Brandon Ingram had 21 points and 10 rebounds, leading eight teammates in double figures, and Los Angeles beat host Atlanta for its third straight win.

Thunder 112, Magic 105: Paul George scored 26 points to help host Oklahoma City.

Mavericks 109, Pacers 103: Harrison Barnes scored 21 points, J.J. Barea added 19 and host Dallas beat Indiana.

Timberwolves 118, Kings 100: Karl-Anthony Towns had 26 points and 17 rebounds, and Minnesota pulled away in the second half to beat host Sacramento.

Ohtani debuts at plate with walks, RBI single

Associated Press

PEORIA, Ariz. — Two-way star Shohei Ohtani had a much better big league debut as a hitter than he did as a pitcher.

After patiently drawing walks in his first two plate appearances, Ohtani hit a sharp RBI single up the middle in his first spring training start as a designated hitter for the Los Angeles Angels on Monday.

"I was happy to get that first hit out of the way but I was also happy with my first two at-bats," the 23-year-old said through a translator after getting on base three times against three different San Diego Padres pitchers. "I got to see a lot of pitches and I got to face a righty and a lefty. I felt like I put together pretty good at-bats the first two walks."

That's why the lefty-hitting phenom was able to be aggressive in his third at-bat, when he hit the first pitch he saw from righty Michael Mariot for a single that brought in Eric Young Jr., who had doubled with one out.

"One of the reasons why I was able to see so many pitches in the first two at-bats was I just wanted to feel the difference in the strike zones between Japan and the

States," Ohtani said. "I felt like I kind of accomplished that plus I just wanted to be aggressive on the first pitch."

After his single, Ohtani was lifted for a pinch-runner and received a nice round of applause from the fans at Peoria Stadium, which was less than half full.

Ohtani saw 11 pitches his first two times up and swung at only two.

Batting second, he fell behind 0-2 against right-hander Jordan Lyles before drawing four straight balls in the first inning. He advanced on David Fletcher's single and was erased on Martin Maldonado's inning-ending double play.

Ohtani walked again in the third against lefty Buddy Bauman and took second on a wild pitch, beating the throw with an awkward slide.

The Angels lost 10-4 as the Padres hit five home runs, including an inside-the-parker by Franchy Cordero.

Ohtani's first Cactus League at-bats came two days after his first start on the mound. The Japanese newcomer allowed a home run and didn't make it through his scheduled two innings against Milwaukee.

Ohtani said he wasn't nervous.

"Actually, it felt really natural going into

my first at-bat. I was able to see the ball really well," he said.

"I was able to see a lot of pitches, so that was really good. I just want to keep it going. I'm seeing the ball pretty well so hopefully I can have better at-bats tomorrow."

Ohtani is trying to become the first player in nearly 100 years to play regularly as a pitcher and hitter.

Asked if hitting is ahead of his pitching, he said: "I think this goes for almost any player, I think my hitting is always ahead of my pitching at this point of the year, just like any other year."

Ohtani spent five seasons with the Nippon Ham Fighters before signing with the Angels as an international free agent on Dec. 10. The Angels paid a \$20 million posting fee to the Ham Fighters. Ohtani, who will be under the Angels' contractual control for six years, signed a minor league contract and can receive up to \$2,315,000 in international bonus money from the Angels.

Ohtani likely could have received a deal worth more than \$100 million if he had waited two years to move stateside, but he wasn't interested in delaying his progress for money.