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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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CENTCOM: Fight against ISIS not over

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The head of U.S. Central Command told senators Tuesday that Islamic State will be defeated in Syria and the terrorist group will not be capable of a resurgence after U.S. troops leave the country. But he also said the fight is not yet over.

Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of CENTCOM, made the comments before a Senate panel following weeks of controversial and conflicting plans from top officials from President Donald Trump's administration on how U.S. troops will leave Syria. Votel, who has had a 38-year career in the military, is due to leave his post at the end of next month.

"The fight against ISIS

and violent extremists is not over and our mission has not changed" in Syria, Votel told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "The [U.S.-led] coalition's hard-won battlefield gains can only be secured by maintaining a vigilant offensive against a now largely dispersed ISIS."

Votel, in an exchange with Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the committee, said the Syria withdrawal instructions entail "a very, deliberate approach to how we depart." Votel also confirmed to committee members that he believes the remaining ISIS stronghold in Syria will be eliminated by the time of the U.S. troops' drawdown.

Votel said between 20,000 and 30,000 ISIS fighters are left in the region, most of whom are

underground or dispersed. He said one remaining ISIS stronghold of about 1,000 fighters remains within a 20-square-mile area near the southern Euphrates River and the Iraqi border.

However, a government watchdog report released Monday suggested ISIS in Syria could resurge within six to 12 months and regain territory in the Middle Euphrates River Valley without sustained counterterrorism pressure. Of the territories ISIS controlled two years ago, more than 99 percent has been returned to Syrians, military officials have said.

"We are in a very deliberate planning process for how we will work with the international community, with our partners on the ground and with the rest of the coalition to ensure we can keep pressure on this orga-

nization," Votel said.

The general also stopped short Tuesday of saying the U.S. withdrawal from Syria was time- or conditions-based and postponed many responses to a closed hearing with committee members later Tuesday.

In December, President Donald Trump stunned Capitol Hill and the Pentagon with plans that the roughly 2,000 U.S. troops fighting ISIS in Syria would withdraw from the country within 30 days. Since the Dec. 19 announcement, then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis resigned and was replaced by his then-deputy Pat Shanahan in an acting capacity.

Shanahan said the military was in the early stages of the process. He estimated ISIS would lose all of its Syrian territory in the next two weeks.

DOD studies gap in civilian death reports from US strikes

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has launched a major examination of civilian deaths in military operations, responding to criticism it has failed to protect innocent bystanders in counterterrorism wars worldwide.

The far-reaching initiative to create the military's first-ever policy on civilian casualties, which senior Pentagon officials began last year, seeks to answer a central question: Why is the military's estimate of civilian deaths so much smaller than outside tallies?

Last week, the Pentagon reported 1,190 civilians had been killed by American strikes in Iraq and Syria since the beginning of the campaign against Islamic State in 2014. Airwars, a respected monitoring group, put the figure at a minimum of

7,438 dead, more than six times higher.

The effort is underway as the Pentagon races to conclude its campaign against the militant group, unleashing a torrent of airstrikes ahead of President Donald Trump's ordered withdrawal from Syria. While officials have described the strikes against ISIS as the most precise in history, a high civilian death toll has fueled questions about whether the president's bare-knuckled approach has resulted in greater loss of life.

During the past year, officials from across the military have reviewed the way the Pentagon plans and conducts airstrikes, its procedures for handling allegations of civilian deaths and decisions about when to acknowledge errant strikes. The assessment, which includes a classified study commissioned by Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr.,

chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, comes as lawmakers press the military to improve its handling of noncombatant deaths.

That study, whose existence and findings have not previously been made public, recommends a more open, standardized investigations process but does not seek to determine the root cause of a spike in casualties during the peak of the operation against ISIS.

Watchdog and advocacy groups see the effort as a hopeful sign but remain concerned it could reaffirm existing problems or fall short of the substantial change Pentagon leaders say they want.

"After two years of watching the death toll grow, it's really tempting to be satisfied that such a study took place," said Daniel Mahanty, director of the U.S. Program at the Center for Civilians in Conflict, or CIVIC,

an advocacy group. "While we're happy that Pentagon leaders saw this as an important issue, our focus now is to make sure it results in meaningful changes to prevent casualties and ensure those who have been killed get the acknowledgment they deserve."

The attempt to determine a more accurate picture of the impact of operations on civilians and to codify steps to prevent deaths in the first place, nonetheless, represents a milestone close to two decades after the U.S. launched its global counterterrorism wars in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

"This is a massive undertaking, and it's about freaking time," said one former official familiar with the initiative who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal discussions. "This should have happened in 2002."

Border wall could put Europe projects at risk

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Congress is bracing for President Donald Trump to target the nation's military construction budget to build his U.S.-Mexico border wall, including money aimed at bolstering European defenses overseas against Russian aggression.

That money would become available to Trump if he declares a national emergency to circumvent a gridlocked Congress and uses the military to build his wall. An emergency declaration, which the president has hinted at repeatedly in recent days, would give him authority to tap some \$20 billion from a wide array of military construction projects approved by Congress but not yet underway.

Hundreds of projects could be at risk of losing their funding to Trump's wall — including a \$60 million aircraft maintenance hangar at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in North Carolina; a \$105 million command-and-control facility at Fort Shafter in Hawaii; and a \$32 million vehicle maintenance shop at Fort Campbell in Kentucky.

Lawmakers have begun raising alarms about their home-state projects getting targeted. In a news release Monday, Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, D-N.Y., complained about the potential for projects at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, including a \$95 million engineering center, to end up on Trump's hit list.

"It doesn't matter if you support building a wall or not," Maloney said. "We can't steal funding from the next generation of military leaders to do it."

This type of domestic blowback, which could surface in numerous states, including

some critical to Trump's 2020 re-election prospects, has led to expectations among congressional aides in both parties that Trump could go after overseas construction projects first. A significant portion of that money is dedicated to projects that are part of the European Deterrence Initiative, an effort to help U.S. allies in Europe shore up their defenses against Russia.

The military construction budget dedicates about \$800 million in the 2019 budget year toward the initiative, which was created after Russia's invasion of Ukraine to bolster the U.S. presence in Eastern Europe. The money pays for projects such as staging areas, refueling stations and other efforts aimed at helping NATO allies defend against encroaching Russian threats, and it is considered a crucial part of the security alliance that Trump has often jeered as he suggests partner nations have not contributed enough to cooperative defense.

"For him to suggest that a border wall, where there is not an emergency, not a crisis, is more important to fund — and steal money from an account where there is certainly a crisis because Russian aggression in Europe has been absolutely over the top — it just shows how dramatically out of touch the president is," said Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Fla., who chairs the House Appropriations subcommittee that deals with military construction. "He has no understanding or interest in our national security interests."

Any move by Trump to dip into those overseas funds or domestic spending in the military construction budget is sure to get a hard look from Congress, lawmakers said Monday.

"The concern is," said Sen. Dan Sullivan,

R-Alaska, who chairs the Armed Services subcommittee that oversees military construction, "we are all trying — the White House, the Congress — to rebuild our military, and that is an area that, depending on where it came from, could undermine that goal."

"It's going to be a lot of tough questions by Armed Services (Committee) members about where's the money coming from, what projects is it coming out of," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., a committee member. "If he goes the MilCon (military construction) route, the money that he's taking is money for which there really is a need."

Trump is pushing Congress to give him \$5.7 billion in U.S. taxpayer funds to build more than 200 new miles of walls along the southern border, despite his repeated promise that Mexico would pay for the wall. Democrats oppose his request, a dispute that led to a 35-day partial government shutdown that ended Jan. 25 when Trump signed a short-term spending bill containing no money for his wall.

The stopgap bill expires Feb. 15, leaving Congress less than two weeks to come up with a solution that could satisfy both the president and his Democratic antagonists.

A bipartisan committee of House and Senate lawmakers is working behind the scenes toward that goal, but it's unclear if it'll be able to reach an agreement. Trump has repeatedly dismissed its efforts as a "waste of time" because he doesn't think the lawmakers will agree to give him the money he wants for his wall, and he's suggested that he could end up declaring a national emergency instead.

USAF ends promotion tests for senior NCOs

BY BRIAN FERGUSON

Stars and Stripes

Airmen eligible for promotion to master sergeant, senior master sergeant or chief master sergeant will no longer be required to pass tests to earn those ranks.

Promotion to the highest three Air Force enlisted ranks will now only include a promotion board score that looks at the last five years' worth of evaluations and takes all awards and decorations under consideration, according to an Air Force statement released Monday. The changes are scheduled to take effect this September.

"We found that removing the testing portion will eliminate any possibility that

Airmen without the strongest leadership potential might test into promotion, while also ensuring that our strongest performers continue to earn the promotion they deserve," Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright said in a statement.

Every year, airmen spend hundreds of hours studying promotion material. Some questions include military history and other facts that, if ever necessary to learn, could be found through internet searches.

"As an added benefit, we will give SNCOs more control over their time," Wright stated.

"This is time that our enlisted leaders can use to focus on getting after the mission, leading their teams, caring for

their families and building self and team resilience."

In the past year or so, the Air Force has seen policy changes come from the Pentagon every few months, and Wright has been the catalyst for many of the changes.

Those changes include the new Operational Camouflage Pattern uniform, fewer Air Force regulations, reduced training and additional duties and the elimination of enlisted performance reports for airmen first class.

Air Force officials also have discussed re-evaluating indefinite re-enlistments, joint custody assignments, nonchargeable bereavement leave and the service's fitness uniform.

Answers sought in Navy linguist's death

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A group of key congressional members are demanding top military officials explain how they will update a series of medical rules and a failed waiver process that led to the deployment of a Navy linguist killed in Syria.

Navy Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent, 35, a mother of two, was killed last month by a suicide bomber at a restaurant in the Syrian city of Manbij. She was on her fifth combat tour.

Last fall, Kent was to attend a clinical psychology doctoral program in lieu of the deployment. But the Navy reversed the move because she previously had cancer and rejected her waiver applications; instead, she received orders to deploy to Syria. She was killed less than two months later.

"It is difficult to understand why the department would require a long, drawn-out waiver process when she was cancer-free and in remission," the lawmakers who represent Kent's home states of New York and Maryland said in a letter to Acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan and Navy Secretary Richard Spencer. "If CPO Kent was fit to deploy to a war zone, we believe she was fit to serve her country as a clinical psychologist."

The letter, dated Friday, was signed by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., Sens. Ben Cardin, D-Md., Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., and Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and House Reps. Walter Jones, R-N.C., Anthony Brown, D-Md., and Dutch Ruppersberger, D-Md.

Kent, along with 18 others, including another U.S. servicemember, a Defense Intelligence Agency civilian and a Defense Department contractor, were killed Jan. 16 in Syria. Kent was the first female U.S. servicemember killed in Syria since the U.S.-led coalition's campaign against Islamic State began there in late 2014.

A private memorial service for Kent is planned for Friday.

The Pine Plains, N.Y., native enlisted in the military in December 2003 shortly after high school, fueled by the 9/11 attacks and her service-oriented family. She spoke seven languages, including four dialects of Arabic.

Last year, Kent was slated to attend the Navy's psychology doctorate program at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md. After the Navy blocked the move, she lobbied lawmakers on Capitol Hill for change, but her efforts to alter the rule stalled. Now, her family wants to finish Kent's fight.

"The regulation still hasn't been fixed and that's something

we're working on now," Joe Kent, 38, her widower and father of their two children, said last week. "We'd like to change it in her honor."

Shannon Kent wanted to attend the psychology program so she could help servicemembers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Joe Kent has said. With that, she also could have been closer to her children because there would have been less chance that she would deploy into combat zones.

She got initial Navy clearance to attend the program in early February 2018, but they reversed plans by the end of the month.

The Navy said Kent had to meet higher medical standards reserved for joining the service than the requirements for remaining an active servicemember, ruling her out because of the previous cancer.

A regulation contained within several sections of Chapter 15 of the Navy's Manual of Medical Department, which covers physical standards for medical examinations, lists several health conditions, including cancer, that can disqualify servicemembers from receiving commissions.

"The causes for rejection," reads section 15-34 of the chapter, which goes on to list several health conditions, including "tumor of thyroid or other struc-

tures of the neck."

Jones, a longtime vocal opponent of the post-9/11 wars who is now in hospice care battling his own health issues, had asked Spencer last year to revise the Department of Defense rule that led to Kent's deployment.

"I am writing to ask for consideration of a potential policy change about the use of 'initial entry' medical standards as opposed to 'retention' medical standards in respect to officer accessions," he wrote in the Aug. 17 letter to Spencer. "I think these practices may be discriminatory while prohibiting upward mobility and advancement opportunities."

Spencer responded to Jones on Sept. 20, writing the Navy could not change a DOD rule, entitled Medical Standards for Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction into the Military Services" but could address the waiver process that also stopped Kent's request. Lawmakers on Friday also referenced the exchange in their letter to Shanahan and Spencer.

"To our knowledge, the status of her waiver application was unresolved at the time of her death in Syria," the lawmakers wrote. "When servicemembers like CPO Kent seek to continue their service but require a waiver to do so, providing efficient and thoughtful consideration of their requests is essential."

Judge: SEAL's re-enlistment next to ISIS corpse not a crime

The San Diego Union-Tribune

A judge has dropped two of the charges against a Navy SEAL who is facing a high-profile war crimes prosecution.

Navy Capt. Aaron Rugh, the judge in the court-martial of Chief Petty Officer Edward R. Gallagher, 39, stripped away two of the charges against the SEAL — one related to his re-enlistment next to the body of a slain teenage Islamic State fighter and another related to him allegedly operating a drone over the corpse.

The other charges stand.

Gallagher is still charged with premeditated murder for

allegedly stabbing to death the previously wounded teenage fighter and with aggravated assault for allegedly shooting at civilians during a 2017 deployment to Iraq.

The chief special warfare operator also still faces an allegation he posed for photos with the young fighter's body and charges he allegedly obstructed justice by attempting to discourage members of his platoon from reporting him and then allegedly retaliated against subordinates who did.

Colby Vokey, one of Gallagher's attorneys, said in an email Monday that the ruling dismiss-

ing two charges exposes weaknesses in the government's case.

"We are grateful that these two character-smearing accusations won't be a part of the trial," he said. "There has to be a limit on what kind of accusations can be brought against our warriors fighting ISIS in a combat zone."

Brian O'Rourke, a Navy spokesman, said the ruling does not affect the rest of the case against Gallagher. As of Monday, the text of the ruling had not been released.

The judge's ruling could have ramifications outside of

Gallagher's case.

Gallagher's platoon commander, Lt. Jacob Portier, also faces court-martial for charges that he was aware of complaints against Gallagher but did not report them. Portier also has been charged with conduct unbecoming an officer for conducting Gallagher's re-enlistment ceremony.

Jeremiah Sullivan, Portier's attorney, said he is confident the judge's ruling will help his client's case.

"I've been saying all along, it's not a crime to conduct a re-enlistment ceremony on the battlefield," Sullivan said.

Subpoena seeks inaugural committee info

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A federal subpoena seeking documents from Donald Trump's inaugural committee is part of "a hysteria" over the fact that he's president, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said on Tuesday.

Federal prosecutors in New York issued the subpoena on Monday, furthering a federal inquiry into a fund that has faced mounting scrutiny into how it raised and spent its money.

Inaugural committee spokeswoman Kristin Celauro told The Associated Press that the committee had received the subpoena and was still reviewing it. "It is our intention to cooperate with the inquiry," she said.

The investigation is the latest in a series of criminal inquiries into Trump's campaign and presidency.

"Actually, I think the common thread is a hysteria over the fact that this president became president," Sanders said in response to a CNN question. "The common thread is that there is so much hatred out there that they will look for anything to try to create and tie problems to this president."

Later, Sanders reiterated to reporters that the investigation "has nothing to do with the White House."

"I think the biggest focus and the thing that most Americans care about has nothing to do with the inaugural and it has everything to do with what the path forward looks like," she said.

The Wall Street Journal, citing a copy of the subpoena, reported that prosecutors asked for "all documents" related to the committee's donors and vendors, as well as records relating to "benefits" donors received after making contributions.

The newspaper reported late last year that federal prosecutors are investigating whether committee donors made contributions in exchange for political favors — a potential violation of federal corruption laws.

It said the inquiry also was focused on whether the inauguration misspent the \$107 million it raised to stage events celebrating Trump's inauguration.

The subpoena also requested documents relating to donations "made by or on behalf of foreign nationals, including but not limited to any communica-

tions regarding or relating to the possibility of donations by foreign nationals," the Journal reported.

The New York Times reported late last year that federal prosecutors are examining whether anyone from Qatar, Saudi Arabia or other Middle Eastern countries made illegal payments to the committee and a pro-Trump super political action committee. Foreign contributions to inaugural funds and PACs are prohibited under federal law.

The head of the inaugural committee, Tom Barrack, confirmed to The Associated Press that he was questioned by special counsel Robert Mueller in 2017. He told the AP he was not a target of the Mueller investigation.

S. Korea and US agree 'in principle' on cost-sharing

By KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — The United States and South Korea have agreed "in principle" on a military cost-sharing deal, the State Department said Tuesday, in a move that would settle a key dispute between the longtime allies amid sensitive nuclear talks with North Korea.

The announcement comes more than a month after the previous pact, known as the Special Measures Agreement, expired. The two sides sparred over Washington's demand that Seoul pay "significantly more" for the daily maintenance of some 28,500 U.S. servicemembers, their dependents and other Americans supporting the mission.

"The United States and the Republic of Korea have reached an agreement in principle on a new Special Measures Agreement," the State Department said. "Both sides are committed to working out remaining technical issues as quickly as possible."

The statement added that the U.S. "appreciates the considerable resources" that South Korea provides to support the alliance, which was forged when the two countries fought together against the communist-backed North in the 1950-53 Korean War.

The State Department didn't provide details. The Trump administration has not publicly stated its new price tag, but officials from both countries have been quoted as saying that Washington wanted Seoul to more than double its annual payment of about \$850 million per year. Diplomats were eager to resolve the issue amid a new push to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un are widely expected to hold a second summit in coming weeks.

CNN quoted an unnamed State Department official as saying Monday that South Korea had agreed to boost its contribution to nearly \$1 billion according to the revised pact.

Sledding in Seattle: Winter storm hits Pacific Northwest

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Winter weather pounded a swath of the U.S. West on Monday, closing schools, delaying flights and turning streets into sledding hills in coastal cities like Seattle that rarely get much snow.

Parts of California and Montana braced for the threat of mudslides and avalanches this week, while the Midwest warmed up from a dangerous blast of cold last week that is linked to at least 30 deaths in several states.

The Pacific Northwest's first major winter snowstorm hit western Washington hardest, closing numerous schools in Seattle and its suburbs, canceling ferry service and causing car crashes but no major injuries. Some areas north and east of Seattle got 8 to 10 inches of snow. Temperatures were expected to be 15 degrees below normal this week, with lows in the teens, the National Weather Service said.

More than 200 flights at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport were canceled and over 450 delayed.

Chris Allahyar, of Edgewood, Wash., told Seattle news station KOMO-TV that he was trying to make a flight but his car got stuck on an icy road.

"Everything was fine until I got off the freeway and everything turned to ice. Couldn't even make it off the road. I'm just stuck right now," Allahyar said. "I really underestimated the temperature."

Communities on the northern Oregon coast got several inches of unusual snow, and it was falling steadily in Portland. A cold spell in Portland was expected to last 10 days, with overnight temperatures well below freezing and more snow to come.

The storm system lingering over the Northwest has sent waves of snow into the Northern Rocky Mountains, where it mixed with a blast of frigid arctic air and gusting winds to create hazardous driving conditions and wind chills 40 degrees below zero and lower. Much of western and northern Montana will likely see subzero temperatures until at least Wednesday, weather service meteorologist Cody Moldan said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Real pic in fake profile leads to man's arrest

KS HUTCHINSON — Authorities said a Hutchinson man was arrested on suspicion of using counterfeit bills to purchase electronics because the fake Facebook profile he's accused of using to arrange the transactions included a real picture.

The Hutchinson News reported that the man was arrested last week and booked into jail on suspicion of counterfeiting, theft and drug charges. Police said that last month, he used a counterfeit \$100 bill to purchase a computer and five fake \$20 bills to buy an iPhone 6.

Minutes after the photo from the suspect's fake Facebook profile was posted online, a parole officer called to say the man was a client.

Fight in Walmart escalates outside

AL ADAMSVILLE — Police said a fight inside a Walmart in Alabama escalated into gunfire outside the store.

Adamsville police Chief Warren Cotton told AL.com that two men were arrested in the fight Saturday night. He said no one was injured after the altercation was taken to the parking lot and at least one gunshot was fired.

Cotton said a police lieutenant shopping when the fight and shooting happened was able to help apprehend the men quickly.

Annual ice-out contest is launched on lake

VT NEWPORT — Vermont officials launched their annual contest to guess how long the ice will last on Lake Memphremagog.

The Caledonian Record re-

ported that for its "Ice Out" contest, Newport Parks and Recreation put a large drawing of a bottle of vanilla extract on a platform attached to a clock. It will record when the facade, called "Vanilla Ice," drops into the water.

The person who predicts the closest time will win 50 percent of the contest pool, which usually totals around \$500.

The rest of the proceeds will benefit the Gardner Memorial Park Playground and Splashpad project.

The deadline to submit guesses for this year is April 1.

Boy, 4, suspended for school year for gun

NC MOUNT GILEAD — A 4-year-old boy who authorities in North Carolina said showed off a loaded gun to his prekindergarten classmates was suspended for the rest of the school year.

News outlets cited a Mount Gilead police statement, saying a teacher confiscated a book bag holding the 9 mm Smith & Wesson handgun Jan. 31. Officers responding to Mount Gilead Elementary School found it contained a fully loaded magazine.

The weapon was turned over to the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office.

Reports indicated the boy's mother would be charged.

Man arrested during post-Bowl revelry

MA BOSTON — Boston police said they arrested one person during postgame celebrations after the New England Patriots 13-3 Super Bowl victory over the Los Angeles Rams.

Police said Vincent Bredice, 21, of Los Angeles, was charged after scaling a tree on Boston

Common at 11:30 p.m. Sunday with an alcoholic beverage, kicking off several branches, refusing orders to climb down and making an obscene gesture at officers.

He was charged with malicious destruction of property, disturbing the peace and drinking in public.

Students evacuate bus before explosion

NC WILSON — Dozens of athletes from a Virginia college were able to evacuate a charter bus before it exploded in North Carolina.

News outlets cited a statement from Wilson County Emergency Management that said 41 track-and-field athletes from Hampton University were traveling home Saturday night from a meet at the University of South Carolina when the bus went up in flames.

The release said the bus driver "did an excellent job" evacuating the students before the bus exploded.

The students were taken to a high school, where they waited for a different bus.

Stun gun used on man sets clothes on fire

PA PHILADELPHIA — Authorities said a man's clothes burst into flames on a Philadelphia street after a security guard stunned him with a stun-gun-style device.

The incident that occurred early Saturday outside Jim's Steaks was captured on video. It shows the man appearing to grapple with one security guard, then falling after a second guard fires the device at him. The flames appear to extinguish by themselves after several seconds, and it's not known if the man was injured.

It wasn't clear what

sparked the incident or if the guards were employed by the restaurant.

Sun returns to US' northernmost town

AK UTQIAGVIK — Sunshine has returned to the country's northernmost town in Alaska following about two months of the sun staying hidden below the horizon.

Alaska's Energy Desk reported the first sunrise of the year for Utqiagvik marks the point when winter starts turning toward spring.

The Chukchi Sea community formerly known as Barrow is gaining minutes of sunlight each day.

The town will hit the other extreme by May, with 24 hours of daylight that lasts until August.

Mystery noise caused by plant maintenance

RI JOHNSTON — Police solved the mystery of a strange, loud noise that baffled residents of two Rhode Island towns over the weekend.

WJAR-TV reported that Cranston and Johnston residents were awakened at about 5:40 a.m. Saturday by a sustained noise that shook their homes. It sounded like a roar of wind and was described as a passing plane, wind turbines, a steam release or even aliens.

It lasted about three minutes, paused for a few seconds, then continued for three more minutes.

Cranston police Maj. Todd Patalano said Sunday that the roaring came from a Johnston power plant. He said the plant's manager confirmed that during maintenance, there was an electrical issue that generated loud roars and booms.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Vonn crashes out of penultimate race

Associated Press

ARE, Sweden — One of the hallmarks of Lindsey Vonn's career has been the way she bounces back from major crashes time and time again.

So perhaps it's fitting that the most successful female skier of all time will enter her last race before retiring following yet another tumble into the safety netting.

Vonn straddled a gate mid-air during the super-G at the world championships Tuesday and ended up sliding down the hill face first.

"I've got a bit of a shiner. I feel like I've been hit by an 18-wheeler, but other than that I'm great," Vonn said with a laugh. "My knees are the same as they were before the race. I think my neck's going to be sore. I got the wind knocked out of me, my ribs are oddly sore. It'll be fine. Sunday will be great."

Vonn quickly got up after the fall and skied down the hill under her own power after being tended to by medical personnel. Then she sat and happily answered reporters' questions during a news conference.

The 34-year-old Vonn, the all-time leader in women's World

Cup wins, announced last week that she will retire after racing the super-G and downhill at the worlds — meaning that Sunday's downhill is her final race.

"Don't count me out," Vonn said. "I've got one more chance. Maybe I'll pull off a miracle, maybe I won't. ... I'm going to try my hardest. Just because I get knocked down, it doesn't mean I don't get back up."

Vonn's long history of crashes has included frightful falls at the 2006 Turin Olympics and 2013 worlds. Her legs are so battered that she will have knee surgery for the seventh time soon after she retires — to repair the left knee ligament she tore during training in November.

"I need complete reconstruction. That will be fun. Hopefully my last surgery," Vonn said.

Vonn was planning on retiring in December but moved up her last race upon realizing last month after failing to finish a super-G in Italy that her knees just can't handle any more pounding. She has discussed the long-term health risks for her body with her doctors.

"I'm screwed. I've known that for three years now," Vonn said. "It's only a matter of time.

The analogy I was given was, I only have a certain amount of steps left. And I've run out of steps at this point. I know I'll have pain for the rest of my life but I wouldn't change it. ... I got no cartilage, no meniscus, I got rods and plates and screws. There's a lot going on. My head is still good, that's all I need."

It didn't take Vonn long to process on why she crashed. When she barreled through a gate, the panel fitted between the two poles detached and got stuck on her boots. When she hit the ground she slid downhill face first, using her hands to keep her head from hitting the snow, then came to a stop in the netting.

"I had the right line coming in, that roll or jump had kind of a crown, it wasn't exactly smooth and I think one of my skis hooked up and sent me into the panel," she said. "The header into the fence wasn't the best.

"My immediate thought was 'What the hell? Why am I in the fence again?' It was like, 'Why am I here? I'm too old for this.'"

Vonn was wearing a safety air bag device under her racing suit, which inflated as she

tumbled over and softened the impact when she hit the safety nets.

On a highly technical course, many other skiers also failed to finish their runs. American teammate Laurenne Ross also crashed and of the 43 starters, 14 failed to finish.

Mikaela Shiffrin won the race despite nearly making a similar error to Vonn toward the end of her run, correcting her direction in mid-air as she, too, was heading directly into a gate.

"I just squeaked by," the American said. "That's the sport. It's such a fine line between the risk you have to take in order to win and then the risk where you take it's just a little bit too much."

Upon seeing Vonn's crash, Shiffrin looked away from the big video screen in the finish area. Sofia Goggia, who took silver, clasped her helmet with both hands, and the crowd gasped. One American fan appeared to be crying.

"That's Lindsey. She (goes) 100 percent or nothing," said Austrian racer Nicole Schmidhofer, who finished 11th. "That's why she has won so many races and why she's an Olympic champion."

Briefly

Refs train on VAR for Women's World Cup

Associated Press

Women's World Cup referees are undergoing training with VARs in matches over the next two weeks, The Associated Press has learned, paving the way for the FIFA council to approve the use of video reviews at the tournament in France.

FIFA has faced criticism for not committing to using video assistant referees at the June 7-July 7 Women's World Cup just as they were for the men's tournament for the first time in Russia last year.

Amid growing demands for

clarity on the deployment of VAR, United States women's team coach Jill Ellis said it would be "insulting" if female players didn't have an equal right to have decisions reviewed by video at their biggest tournament. England counterpart Phil Neville has also criticized the standard of refereeing in the women's game and the lack of technology that could reduce mistakes.

FIFA only gave the first indication on Monday that it does plan to use the technology in France after the AP discovered previously undisclosed

training with VARs was taking place in seminars and matches in Qatar.

"The final decision if VAR will be used at the Women's World Cup will be taken by the FIFA council," FIFA told The Associated Press on Monday.

Coroner: Foul ball caused woman's death

LOS ANGELES — A woman died as a result of being struck in the head by a foul ball at Dodger Stadium last August, according to a coroner's report obtained by ESPN.

Linda Goldbloom was celebrating her 79th birthday and 59th wedding anniversary at a game Aug. 25 when a ball hit by a San Diego Padres player traveled over an area protected by netting and struck Goldbloom in the head. She died four days later at L.A. County-USC Medical Center.

The Los Angeles County coroner's report said trauma from the batted ball was the cause of death.

The Dodgers said in a statement that the "matter has been resolved between the Dodgers and the Goldbloom family."

NASCAR says it will DQ cheating winners

Associated Press

CONCORD, N.C. — NASCAR announced Monday that it will disqualify race-winning cars that break the rules this season, confronting its long-time culture of cheating with a stringent new penalty system.

"If you are illegal, you don't win the race," said Steve O'Donnell, NASCAR's chief racing development officer. "We cannot allow inspection and penalties to continue to be a prolonged storyline. Race vehicles are expected to adhere to the rule book from the opening of the garage to the checkered flag."

The new approach is a seismic shift for NASCAR because it traditionally wanted fans to leave the event knowing who won the race. If a car failed inspection, either at the track or in a more thorough secondary teardown at NASCAR's Research and Development Center in the days following the race, driver and team were usually docked points, fined or in some cases had crew members suspended.

The penalties were typically not announced until several days after the race.

Inspections will now be completed at the track, a process that should take about 90

minutes, and the winning team will lose its victory if it fails. Disqualified cars will now lose points, purse money and even the trophy.

Kevin Harvick's race-winning car failed inspection twice last season and both instances led to fines, suspensions and the loss of points. He won at Texas Motor Speedway in November to earn an automatic berth into the championship finale, but that was stripped when his car failed the R&D inspection days after the race.

Under the new system, the runner-up will be declared the winner and the team with the illegal car will receive only one championship point.

"We're really looking at a total culture change," O'Donnell said.

The last driver believed to have been stripped outright of a national series victory was Dale Jarrett following a 1995 race in NASCAR's second-tier series at Michigan. He was dropped to 42nd when his Ford was found to have an illegally modified intake manifold two hours after the race.

NASCAR will also change its process for cars that fail inspection prior to qualifying and the race.

It had devolved into comedy at times last season as teams

used multiple attempts to get through inspection. NASCAR said it will now eject team members, dock practice time and, in an enhanced penalty, bar a car from trying to qualify for the race if it fails three times. A car that twice fails pre-race inspection will be sent to the back of the field at the start; a third failure will require a pass-through penalty at the start.

"We've been through a deterrence model where we've really worked with the race teams at the track and probably been more lenient than we should in terms of the number of times teams can go through inspection and pass, fail and there's almost incentive to try to get something by NASCAR, so we want to really reverse that trend," O'Donnell said. "We're going to put it on the teams to bring their equipment right. When they come to the track, we'll be much less lenient as they go through technical inspection with stiffer penalties in terms of qualifying, and then ultimately during the race, obviously we want everyone to be racing straight up."

Qualifying: NASCAR will not go to a single-car qualifying format this season despite a new racing rules package that will likely bunch the field into

a pack. NASCAR even took a step toward ensuring the qualifying sessions are entertaining by shortening the first round at short tracks and intermediate speedways from 15 minutes to 10. That will force drivers to get on the track and make their qualifying attempt rather than idling on pit road and trying to nail a fast lap as the clock expired. The break between rounds will be trimmed from seven minutes to five.

Qualifying at superspeedways will remain two untimed rounds of single-lap qualifying. Road-course qualifying will continue to be two rounds at 25 minutes followed by a 10-minute final round.

New car: The seventh-generation stock car is on schedule to compete in 2021. A key goal in development is to strengthen the correlation between race cars and the model available to customers. NASCAR is courting additional manufacturers to join the sport and the Gen-7 car will aim to increase brand identity. NASCAR said it was near certain the new car will have a composite body.

"I think you will see a new NASCAR in terms of what you may see on the track and what you may see under the hood," O'Donnell said.

College basketball roundup

McMahon, No. 16 Louisville down No. 11 Virginia Tech

Associated Press

BLACKSBURG, Va. — Ryan McMahon knows No. 16 Louisville's offense is likely to change, and quickly, when he makes a three-pointer.

How quickly?

"The next possession," he said Monday night after scoring 12 points in a span of 83 seconds in the second half as the Cardinals used a 14-3 run to pull away and beat No. 11 Virginia Tech 72-64 on Monday night. "(Christen Cunningham) and (Dwayne Sutton), they do

a great job just when I hit one they keep going back to me until the well is dry."

McMahon had just three points before he made three free throws with 11:53 to play. He then added three three-pointers, the last with 10:30 left, to bolster the Cardinals (17-6, 8-2 Atlantic Coast Conference). It is Louisville's 15th consecutive victory in the series.

No. 17 Iowa State 75, Oklahoma 74: Lindell Wigginton scored 17 points to help lead the visiting Cyclones to a victory over the Sooners.

Marial Shayok added 16 points, 10 in the final eight minutes, including a crucial off-balance three-pointer as the shot clock expired with 1:19 remaining, for Iowa State (18-5, 7-3 Big 12). Shayok, who shot just 2-for-7 for six points through the first 32-plus minutes, also had eight rebounds and five assists as the Cyclones won their fourth straight.

Kristian Doolittle had 19 points and nine rebounds, while Brady Manek scored 16 for Oklahoma (15-8, 3-7), which has lost three in a row.

No. 18 Texas Tech 81, West Virginia 50: Brandone Francis scored a season-high 16 points and the host Red Raiders overwhelmed the Mountaineers.

Texas Tech (18-5, 6-4 Big 12), which lost four of its previous five Big 12 games, took control with a 13-0 run midway through the first half. That was part of a stretch during which West Virginia missed 11 consecutive shots in a span of more than 15 minutes.

West Virginia (10-13, 2-8) finished 9-for-39 shooting overall.

NBA roundup

Harden tops 40 again in Rockets' win

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Another 40-point game for James Harden. That makes 20 of them this season.

The reigning MVP scored 44 points and the Houston Rockets beat Phoenix 118-110 on Monday night to hand the Suns their season-worst 11th straight loss.

Harden joined Wilt Chamberlain, Michael Jordan and Rick Barry as the only players with 20 games of at least 40 points in the first 50 of a season.

Harden, who also had eight rebounds and six assists, extended his streak of games with at least 30 points to 27, third-longest in NBA history. The only longer streaks are 65 and 31 games, both by Chamberlain.

"I'm just trying to keep going. Nothing can slow me down," Harden said. "Nothing can stop me. I'm trying to give that same motivation to my teammates and it's not about scoring, it's about attacking the game, being aggressive with the game of basketball — defensively, offensively. That's all

I can give to them."

Chris Paul scored 18 and Kenneth Faried had 17 points and 14 rebounds for the Rockets, who were without two starters.

Josh Jackson scored 25 points, Kelly Oubre Jr. 23 and Devin Booker 19 for the Suns. Deandre Ayton added 15 points and 11 boards. Booker left in the fourth quarter with a tight hamstring.

The Suns never led but stayed close through the first half before falling behind by 20 in the third quarter.

The Suns tried a new defensive strategy on Harden and, overall results notwithstanding, it worked pretty well some of the time.

"James forces teams to do a coverage that you usually don't do," Booker said.

Bucks 113, Nets 94: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 30 points, 15 rebounds and nine assists, and visiting Milwaukee beat cold-shooting Brooklyn.

The injury-depleted Nets missed 19 of their first 20

three-point attempts, making it another easy night for the team with the NBA's best record. Brooklyn finished 5-for-42 (11.9 percent) behind the arc.

Pistons 129, Nuggets 103: Andre Drummond scored 14 of his season-high 27 points in the third quarter and host Detroit snapped Denver's six-game winning streak.

Detroit blew a 25-point lead in a loss to the Los Angeles Clippers on Saturday, but the Pistons poured it on this time. Blake Griffin added 17 points for Detroit, and Reggie Jackson scored 14.

Kings 127, Spurs 112: Rookie forward Marvin Bagley III had a career-high 24 points and 12 rebounds for his third straight double-double, leading host Sacramento past San Antonio for its seventh straight home win.

De'Aaron Fox added 20 points and Buddy Hield scored 18 to extend Sacramento's longest home winning streak since a 14-gamer in 2005-06. That was the last time the Kings

made the playoffs, but Sacramento (28-25) is positioned to make a run at a postseason spot this season.

Hawks 137, Wizards 129: Taurean Prince scored 12 of his 21 points in the fourth quarter and hit five of Atlanta's 20 three-pointers against host Washington.

Rookie guard Kevin Huerter added 19 points and also hit five threes in his return to the region where he played college ball at Maryland. Two of those threes came during an early 16-2 run that put the Hawks up 28-16 late in the first quarter.

Pacers 109, Pelicans 107: Darren Collison capped a 22-point performance with a three-pointer, a 20-foot jumper with the shot clock winding down and a free throw during the final two minutes as Indiana held off depleted host New Orleans.

Domantas Sabonis had 16 points and 13 rebounds, and Myles Turner added 15 points and nine rebounds for the Pacers.

NHL roundup

Hart's 41 saves help Philadelphia win eighth in a row

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Carter Hart made 41 saves, Sean Couturier and Jakub Voracek scored, and the Philadelphia Flyers beat the Vancouver Canucks 2-1 on Monday night for their eighth straight victory.

The Flyers pulled within five points of a playoff spot after having the NHL's worst record on Jan. 9 — they were 14 points out of a postseason berth during the All-Star break just over a week ago. Philadelphia also became the first NHL expansion club to reach 2,000 victories.

Hart, Philadelphia's 20-year-old rookie, won his seventh straight start with another solid

game. His best stop came with 5½ minutes left when he dived with his right arm to deny Nikolay Goldobin from a sharp angle on a power play.

Brock Boeser scored for Vancouver, which was playing the first of three games in four nights.

The game was delayed for several minutes midway through the third period after Vancouver's Alexander Edler went down with a scary-looking injury. Edler's skate got caught in Voracek's stick, causing Edler to land face-first on the ice. With a bloodied face and dazed look, a conscious Edler was wheeled off on a stretcher while sitting upright.

Kings 4, Rangers 3 (OT): Tyler Toffoli scored 25 seconds into overtime and visiting Los Angeles rallied to beat New York.

Toffoli's ninth goal of the season came moments after the Rangers' Mika Zibanejad rang the puck off the post behind Kings goaltender Jonathan Quick.

Toffoli was mobbed by his teammates as Rangers netminder Henrik Lundqvist skated away in disgust.

Maple Leafs 6, Ducks 1: Andreas Johnsson had two goals and two assists, Jake Muzzin added a goal and two assists and host Toronto routed Anaheim.

William Nylander and John Tavares each had a goal and an assist, and Connor Brown also scored for Toronto, which has won three in a row at Scotiabank Arena after dropping six of its previous seven home games.

Stars 5, Coyotes 4: Tyler Seguin scored a tiebreaking goal with 7:32 to play, and host Dallas scored four goals in a wild third period on the way to a victory over Arizona.

Roope Hintz, John Klingberg, Radek Faksa and Matias Janmark also scored for the Stars. Ben Bishop made 39 saves as Dallas extended its winning streak to a season-best five games.