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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Navy fleet rebuilding in budget spotlight

BY DIANNA CAHN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Less than a week into his presidency, Donald Trump on Friday signed an executive order promising “to begin a great rebuilding of the armed services of the United States — developing a plan for new planes, new ships, new resources and new tools for our men and women in uniform.”

It was welcome news for the military, but especially for the Navy. Experts and officials believe that, based on emerging global threats and Trump’s vision, this could be the time for the Navy’s comeback.

“If you consider the Navy is like a corporate entity, it’s the entity that has the right product for the time,” said retired Vice Adm. Peter Daly, chief executive officer of the U.S. Naval Institute. Trump “explicitly or implicitly values many of the qualities that the Navy brings and that puts the Navy in a positive position,” he said.

Trump pledged during the

campaign to create a 350-ship Navy — almost matching the service’s own assessment. A year ago, the chief of naval operations tasked Navy staff with assessing what commanders need from their forces. In November, they concluded that today’s 274-ship Navy needs to grow to 355 to meet its mission around the world.

While Trump made clear he has no appetite for a large-scale ground incursion, he wants to make a show of power, Daly said. The Navy, with its freedom on the open seas and its ability to serve as a deterrent — without permission from another nation or the need for an on-the-ground presence — offers a viable answer to emergent threats.

“Immediately following 9/11, the Army was priority, and that was understood,” Daly said. “Now, under projected strategic challenges we have and the current strategy in place ... this could be an important time for the maritime side, with Navy and afloat ships being highly valued.”

The Navy has reassessed its priorities, determining that it needs to restore its readiness before it looks to build a bigger, broader fleet.

The high tempo of operations since the 9/11 attacks, combined with the budget wrangling that has deadlocked Washington in recent years, has eroded Navy readiness. The worn-down fleet is unable to keep up with its deployment and maintenance schedules; sailors have not been able to get enough training to build on their skills; and the service has hobbled from temporary budget to temporary budget without critical, long-term planning — consequences Navy officials warned about years ago and now say have come to fruition.

Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Bill Moran said in a recent speech that the operational tempo hasn’t slowed in the past 10 years, even while the ship count dropped from 316 after 9/11 to today’s 274 and the fleet has 90,000 fewer sailors. The recent budget shortfalls

have forced the Navy to defer maintenance and cut back on steaming and flying hours for training — things that come with a much costlier price tag when delayed, he said.

At the same time, the Navy was down to one operable carrier in December and January, leaving a gap in the Middle East while the aircraft carrier USS George W. Bush sat in Norfolk, Va., delayed because of maintenance issues.

In January, the Navy drew up a list for the new administration of immediate, unfunded priorities for 2017. The list — supplemental to its Unfunded Priorities List of February 2016 — was obtained by Stars and Stripes after the U.S. Naval Institute reported on its content. It includes some big-ticket items — 24 new F/A-18 Super Hornets, four to six F-35 C Joint Strike Fighters and an amphibious warship — as well as some weaponry. But it focuses mostly on \$2 billion needed for shortfalls in ship maintenance and fleet operations.

Pentagon IDs Navy SEAL killed in Yemen

The Washington Post

The name of the first U.S. servicemember killed in combat under the Trump administration was announced by the Pentagon on Monday.

Chief Special Warfare Operator William “Ryan” Owens, 36, of Peoria, Ill., died after he was wounded during a nighttime raid on an al-Qaida-held village in southwestern Yemen on Saturday.

Three other members of Owens’ unit were wounded in the ensuing gunbattle, and an additional three servicemembers were injured when their

transport aircraft crashed nearby.

In a statement, the Pentagon said Owens was assigned to an “East Coast based Special Warfare unit,” a turn of phrase for the elite Navy SEALs, including Naval Special Warfare Development Group or SEAL Team 6.

“Ryan gave his full measure for our nation, and in performing his duty, he upheld the noblest standard of military service,” Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis said in a statement. “The United States would not long exist were it not for the selfless commitment of such warriors.”

The Pentagon billed Satur-

day’s raid as an intelligence-gathering mission against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, a group the United States has targeted since 2002. While the last U.S.-led ground operation against the militants was in 2014, the Obama administration has sporadically targeted the group with airstrikes in the years since.

Local reports said that more than a dozen civilians were also slain in the battle, including the daughter of the late radical Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in 2011 in a U.S. drone strike. On Monday, the Pentagon said it

was assessing the civilian casualty claims.

Owens enlisted in the Navy in 1998, serving his first enlistment with naval intelligence before volunteering for the SEALs in the months prior to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, according to a limited service record provided by the Navy. He finished basic SEAL training in 2002 and was sent to his first unit, located on the West Coast, in 2003.

Owens was previously awarded two Bronze Stars with Valor and had eight Sea Service Deployment ribbons.

He will be posthumously awarded the Purple Heart.

The significance of Mattis' trip to Asia

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — President Donald Trump hasn't said much about North Korea since his inauguration. But his new defense secretary is making South Korea and Japan his first stops overseas in his new role, signaling strong concern over Pyongyang's growing nuclear weapons threat.

Jim Mattis' debut trip abroad as Pentagon chief comes amid strong fears that North Korea may be preparing for another missile test following a declaration by the country's leader that it is in the "final stages" of developing an intercontinental ballistic missile.

In a phone call Tuesday, Mattis and his South Korean counterpart, Han Min-koo, agreed to strengthen the countries' longstanding alliance "to defend against the evolving North Korean threat," the Pentagon said.

Mattis also vowed that "the U.S. will stand shoulder to shoulder" with South Korean forces.

South Korea's Defense Ministry said they also agreed to deploy an advanced U.S. anti-missile battery on the peninsula as scheduled despite Chinese objections and to maintain readiness in case of aggression by the North.

Mattis was scheduled to meet with South Korean acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn and National Security chief Kim Kwan-jin on Thursday, then meet with Han on Friday at the ministry's headquarters in Seoul

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before flying to Japan.

"Mattis' decision to visit Seoul for his first overseas trip after being appointed as defense secretary will deliver a very timely and stern message to North Korea," Han said in the statement.

Seeking reassurance

Such reassurances are likely to be a major topic in Mattis' meetings, amid worries over comments made by Trump during the presidential campaign calling for the U.S. allies to pay more for their defense.

Trump also reiterated an "ironclad commitment" to defending South Korea and Japan in separate phone calls with leaders of the allied nations this week. Japan and South Korea will be looking for proof that he will stick to that promise, analysts said.

"So far it looks like business as usual," said Robert Kelly, a political science professor at Pusan National University in South Korea. "My biggest concern is does Trump really mean it. He's made it very clear that he sees America's allies in transactional terms."

Analysts said Mattis' visit would also be a show of force to make sure the North Koreans know that the untested U.S. administration won't waver.

"I think he's going to want to project strength about the North Korean problem," said Jeffrey Lewis, of the Middlebury Insti-

tute of International Studies in Monterey, Calif.

That was likely to include a reiteration of plans to conduct annual war games with South Korean forces in the spring despite calls by the North to cancel them, Lewis said.

Seoul and Washington insist the joint exercises are defensive in nature, but Pyongyang considers them a rehearsal for an invasion and frequently retaliates with a form of provocation.

Japan also has taken strides to maintain the alliance. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became the first foreign head of state to meet with Trump after his election in November, and the leaders plan to meet again on Feb. 10 in Washington.

"Disarray in the Japan-U.S. alliance could invite dangerous provocative actions from China and North Korea," the Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper said in an editorial on Monday.

Japan also will have no choice but to show the Trump administration it's willing to step up its financial commitment as well, said Toshiyuki Shikata, a defense expert and retired Japanese officer.

The nuclear threat

It's unclear how true Kim Jong Un's claim was in his New Year's speech that North Korea was in the "final stages" of developing an ICBM, which would put his regime closer to its stated goal of targeting the U.S. mainland with a nuclear-tipped missile.

But Pyongyang showed clear

technical progress last year with two underground nuclear explosions and some two dozen tests of short- to mid-range missiles, including one that flew successfully from a submarine. Those could potentially be used against South Korea and U.S. bases elsewhere in the region.

Satellite imagery from Jan. 22 also indicates that North Korea has restarted a reactor used to produce plutonium for its nuclear weapons program, according to the 38 North website that monitors the country's activities.

Operations at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center could be running at a "considerable" level, said the website run by the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University.

The China factor

Trump's administration has gotten off to a rocky start in its relationship with Beijing by saying its traditional "One China" policy by which it doesn't challenge the communist country's claim over the self-ruled island of Taiwan is negotiable.

China and the U.S. also feuded over the disputed South China Sea during President Barack Obama's tenure.

Trump also has mainly focused on the threat from Islamic extremists in his executive orders and rhetoric since his Jan. 20 inauguration. But analysts said the visit by Mattis is a clear sign that Trump is committed to Asia.

Trump: Lockheed Martin cut \$600M from F-35 program

The Washington Post

President Donald Trump said Monday that Lockheed Martin has cut \$600 million from its next lot of 90 F-35 Joint Strike Fighter planes, capping weeks of private meetings with Lockheed Martin chief executive Marillyn Hewson and public criticisms of the program's cost.

He specified that the cost savings would apply to the company's next lot of 90 planes, but offered few details on how the program or contract would change as a result. Lockheed Martin did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"What's happening with Lockheed, number one, we're cutting the price of their planes

by a lot but they're also expanding and that's going to be a good thing. Ultimately, they're going to be better off," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office.

The president's public back-and-forth with Lockheed began in late December when he took to Twitter to criticize the program for cost overruns. At the time he asked aerospace company Boeing to "price out

a comparable F-18 Super Hornet," suggesting he would substitute Boeing's cheaper plane for Lockheed's.

The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter currently costs about \$100 million per plane, though the company says it already expects the cost of the plane to drop to \$85 million as the company ramps up its volume of production.

Veteran lawmakers ask Trump to exempt Iraqi allies from ban

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Four Iraq War veterans in the House are asking President Donald Trump to exempt Iraqis who assisted the U.S. military from his temporary ban on refugees and immigrants.

The three Republicans and one Democrat, including longtime Trump ally Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., said they are concerned Iraqi allies who have risked their lives and are now seeking a safe haven in the United States could be overlooked under the controversial ban.

Three other congressmen who served as officers in Operation Iraqi Freedom — Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill., a major in the Air National Guard; Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., a former Marine infantry officer; and Rep. Steve Stivers, R-Ohio, a colonel in the Ohio National Guard — also signed the letter sent to Trump on Monday.

“These allies risked their own lives, as well as the well-being of their families, to advance America’s security interests in a region where their skill sets and willingness to confront extremism have been invaluable to mission success,” the congressmen wrote in the letter.

Hunter spokesman Joe Kasper said Tuesday morning that his office had not received a response yet from the White House.

Trump’s immigration order caused confusion and protests at airports over the weekend and sparked an effort Monday by Senate Democrats to derail it. It also triggered outcry from veterans who fear it could dissuade Iraqis and other allies from assisting in the fight against the Islamic State group.

The order, signed Friday, is aimed at stopping potential terrorists and others who do not

share American values from entering the United States. It bars refugees in general for four months and those from war-torn Syria indefinitely, and suspends for three months visits by citizens from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

“In order to protect Americans, the United States must ensure that those admitted to this country do not bear hostile attitudes toward it and its founding principles,” the order stated.

U.S. forces have relied on Iraqis for their language skills and local knowledge during the past 14 years, and a special visa program was created in 2008 to allow them to immigrate.

The Pentagon said Monday it is compiling a list of Iraqi interpreters and others who partnered with the United States and who it thinks should be exempted from Trump’s order.

Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis gave no timeline for the completion of the list but said it could be used to influence the Trump administration’s implementation of the immigration order.

“We are ensuring those who have demonstrated their commitment tangibly to fight alongside us and support us, that those names are known in whatever process there is going forward,” Davis said.

The group Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said Monday that the order damages the United States’ ability to fight terrorism abroad and puts troops at immediate risk.

“The White House just sent a message to interpreters and other allies around the world: If you stand up to fight alongside Americans, there’s no promise of protection later,” Paul Rieckhoff, the CEO of IAVA, said in a released statement.

Trump fires acting AG who questioned immigration order

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In an extraordinary public showdown, President Donald Trump fired the acting attorney general of the United States after she publicly questioned the constitutionality of his refugee and immigration ban and refused to defend it in court.

The clash Monday night between Trump and Sally Yates, a career prosecutor and Democratic appointee, laid bare the growing discord and dissent surrounding an executive order that halted the entire U.S. refugee program and banned all entries from seven Muslim-majority nations for 90 days. The firing, in a written statement released just hours after Yates went public with her concerns, also served as a warning to other administration officials that Trump is prepared to terminate those who refuse to carry out his orders.

Yates’ refusal to defend the executive order was largely symbolic given that Sen. Jeff Sessions, Trump’s pick for attorney general, will almost certainly defend the policy once he’s sworn in. He was expected to be confirmed Tuesday by the Senate Judiciary Committee and could be approved within days by the full Senate.

Yet the firing reflected the mounting conflict over the executive order, as administration officials have moved to distance themselves from the policy.

As protests erupted at airports across the globe, and as legal challenges piled up in courthouses, Yates directed agency attorneys not to defend the executive order. She said in a memo Monday she was not convinced it was lawful or consistent with the agency’s obligation “to stand for what is right.”

Trump’s press secretary,

Sean Spicer, soon followed with a statement accusing Yates of having “betrayed the Department of Justice by refusing to enforce a legal order designed to protect the citizens of the United States.” Trump named longtime federal prosecutor Dana Boente, the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, as Yates’ replacement.

A large group of career diplomats circulated several drafts of a memo arguing that the order Trump signed last week will not make the U.S. safe, saying it runs counter to American values and will fuel anti-American sentiment around the world.

Spicer challenged those opposed to the measure to resign. “They should either get with the program or they can go,” he said.

The chain of events bore echoes of the Nixon-era “Saturday Night Massacre,” when the attorney general and deputy attorney general resigned rather than follow an order to fire a special prosecutor investigating the Watergate scandal. The prosecutor, Archibald Cox, was fired by the solicitor general.

Yates, a holdover from the Obama administration who was the top federal prosecutor in Atlanta and later became Loretta Lynch’s deputy, was not alone in her misgivings.

At least three top national security officials — Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly and Rex Tillerson, who is awaiting confirmation to lead the State Department — have told associates they were not aware of details of the directive until about the time Trump signed it. Leading intelligence officials were also left largely in the dark, according to U.S. officials.

Dems block votes on 2 Cabinet picks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats blocked planned Senate committee votes on President Donald Trump's picks to be health and treasury secretaries on Tuesday, boycotting the session and demanding more information on the two nominees' past financial behavior.

The extraordinary and abrupt postponement came as congressional Democrats, in a confrontational mood over Trump administration actions, also used lengthy speeches at a Senate Judiciary Committee meeting considering Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., to be attorney general.

At another committee, lawmakers voted to send Trump's pick to head the Education Department, Betsy DeVos, to the

full Senate for a vote.

In a hastily called briefing for reporters, Democrats on the Senate Finance Committee said they would not attend the panel's planned votes until they could ask more questions about Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., the health and human services nominee, and Steve Mnuchin, Trump's Treasury selection, who they said had misled Congress about their backgrounds.

The Democrats' action prevented the Finance panel from acting because under committee rules, 13 of its members — including at least one Democrat — must be present for votes.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said the men would hold positions "that directly affect peoples' lives every day. The truth matters."

Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, accused Democrats of "a lack of desire to fulfill their constitutional responsibilities."

"They ought to stop posturing and acting like idiots," he said.

Republicans were trying to help Trump staff his Cabinet in the second week of an administration that has ignited fights on multiple fronts.

Democrats forcing the delay of Finance committee votes cited one report in The Wall Street Journal that Price received a special, discounted offer to buy stock in a biomedical company, which contradicted his testimony to Congress.

They said another report in The Columbus Dispatch showed documents revealing

that Mnuchin had not been truthful with the Senate in comments about how his bank OneWest had handled home foreclosures.

Republicans have supported both men, and both have strongly defended their actions.

Democrats have opposed Price, a seven-term congressional veteran, for his staunch backing of his party's drive to scuttle the health care law and to reshape Medicare and Medicaid, which help older and low-income people afford medical care. They have criticized Mnuchin for not initially revealing nearly \$100 million in assets, and were expected to vote against both nominees. They've also accused him of failing to protect homeowners from foreclosures.

In change, Boy Scouts OKs transgender membership

Associated Press

DALLAS — A New Jersey woman whose son was asked to leave his Boy Scouts troop after leaders found out he is transgender said she has mixed emotions about the organization's decision to allow transgender children who identify as boys to enroll in its boys-only programs.

The Boy Scouts of America announced Monday that enrollment in its boys-only programs will now be based on the gender a child or parent lists on his application to become a Scout rather than the gender listed on the child's birth certificate.

Joe Maldonado, 8, was asked to leave his Scout troop in Secaucus, N.J., last fall after parents and leaders found out he is transgender. The organization's statement did not specifically mention Joe's case, but said it changed the policy because of the larger conversation about gender identity taking place around the country.

"For more than 100 years, the Boy Scouts of America, along with schools, youth sports

and other youth organizations, have ultimately deferred to the information on an individual's birth certificate to determine eligibility for our single-gender programs," the statement said. "However, that approach is no longer sufficient as communities and state laws are interpreting gender identity differently, and these laws vary widely from state to state."

Kristie Maldonado, Joe's mother, said she had mixed emotions Monday night when a Boy Scouts representative called to tell her the organization would allow her son to re-enroll in his troop. Maldonado said she would like her son to re-join, but only if the Scout leader who threw him out leaves.

She said Joe, who will turn 9 on Wednesday, has spoken publicly about the incident.

Maldonado said the decision to remove her son from the troop made him feel different, and she wanted to make sure he knew the troop made a mistake.

The Boy Scouts said the enrollment decision goes into effect immediately.

US: Iran ballistic missile test may violate resolution

Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Iranian government carried out a medium-range ballistic missile test Sunday that may be a violation of a U.N. Security Council resolution, U.S. officials said.

The launch, which took place at a site more than 130 miles east of Tehran, is Iran's first real test of the Trump administration.

The missile was tracked flying southward 650 miles before exploding when its re-entry vehicle failed, according to officials who weren't authorized to speak publicly on intelligence.

The missile has been tested before, officials said, most recently in July.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer told reporters Monday that the administration was aware the test took place, but wouldn't provide additional information.

"We're looking into that," he said. "We're aware that Iran fired that missile. We're looking into the exact nature of it,

and I'll try to have more for you later."

Iran was among the seven predominantly Muslim countries targeted in President Donald Trump's controversial executive action signed Friday that blocked its citizens from entering the United States.

Christopher Harmer, a military analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, a nonpartisan public policy group in Washington, said it's impossible to know if Tehran conducted the test as a response to the president's action, but that the test also serves as propaganda.

"Iran is always working on every aspect of its missile program: better guidance, more payload capacity and better reliability," he said. "They test often so it's difficult to say for sure whether this is a response to the travel ban, but the timing is suspect."

Trump, as a presidential candidate, was deeply critical of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, calling it "the worst deal ever negotiated."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police seek person who set woman's hair on fire

DC WASHINGTON — District of Columbia police are searching for a suspect they say set a woman's hair on fire on Inauguration Day.

WRC-TV reported that the suspect, a woman, went up to another woman in the 700 block of Pennsylvania Avenue NW and set her hair aflame with a cigarette lighter about 2 p.m. on Jan. 20.

Police said the victim was not injured.

Police are asking for the public's help in identifying the suspect.

Police say weapons stolen from gun show

NC GREENSBORO — Greensboro police said more than 50 guns were stolen from a gun show.

Police said in a news release Monday that security guards reported the theft Sunday before the Greensboro Gun and Knife Show opened.

Police spokeswoman Susan Danielsen told the Greensboro News & Record that officers have identified 23 of the stolen guns, but they believe roughly 30 more were taken. The identified weapons have been entered into a national database.

Police said two rifles and a shotgun were found outside the Greensboro Coliseum on Sunday, the show's last day.

Woman charged after throwing child on tracks

NJ BURLINGTON — A woman who allegedly threw a 5-year-old girl onto the tracks as a train was approaching has been charged with attempted murder.

Burlington police went to the light rail platform Friday evening after a New Jersey Transit bus driver told authorities that he saw a woman acting suspiciously in the area.

As officers walked onto the platform to approach Autumn Maticchiera, 20, the Hainesport woman allegedly grabbed the girl, who was standing with her mother and the mother's boyfriend, and threw her onto the tracks.

The boyfriend quickly got the girl to safety as police jumped in front of the train to signal it to stop. Maticchiera was soon subdued and taken to a hospital for a mental health evaluation.

The child was treated for a facial cut and some bruising.

ROTC unit may move from BYU to state school

UT PROVO — An Air Force ROTC detachment at Brigham Young University may move several miles away to state-run Utah Valley University because the unit's non-Mormon commander isn't willing to abide by BYU's honor code.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints owns BYU. The Salt Lake Tribune reported that Col. Timothy Hogan balked at signing the code.

The code's provisions include prohibitions against alcohol, drugs, coffee and other activities, and Hogan said BYU wouldn't waive the Honor Code requirements so he can be a faculty member. BYU spokesman Layton Shumway said there has been discussion about moving the detachment to UVU in nearby Orem.

UVU and BYU already share the detachment, which includes students from both schools.

Hogan arrived at BYU last summer.

Park officials throw bash for state's hippo

FL HOMOSASSA — A more than 6,000-pound hippo got a birthday bash courtesy of Florida park officials.

Visitors and employees at Homosassa Springs state park Thursday celebrated the 57th birthday of Lu, the hippo, with two parties. Students from several day care centers joined park staff in singing a birthday song for the hippo. Lu was also given a bread birthday cake made specifically for a hippo.

Lu, an African hippopotamus, was born at the San Diego Zoo in 1960 and has appeared in movies and television shows. He's been a fixture at Homosassa Springs since 1964, when the property was in private ownership.

Florida acquired the park site in 1989 and initially intended to move the hippo. Public support led state officials to allow the hippo to remain.

7 overdose on drugs in 2 hours in single county

MD WESTMINSTER — Officials in Carroll County are raising concerns after a slew of drug overdoses in the area.

Local news media outlets report that at least seven people overdosed on drugs in the county between 10 a.m. and noon last Friday. The overdoses prompted officials to issue a community alert warning residents about the presence of extra potent drugs in the area.

County Health Officer Ed Singer tells The Baltimore Sun that it's the first time he remembers "having seven people show up to the hospital in such a short period of time."

Linda Auerback, substance abuse supervisor for the Carroll County Health Depart-

ment, told The Baltimore Sun that as of Friday afternoon, no one had died as a result of the overdoses.

Sinking skyscraper is called safe to occupy

CA SAN FRANCISCO — San Francisco inspectors say the sinking Millennium Tower is safe to occupy, despite strain on its foundation and electrical systems.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported that an inspection report concluded there was no evidence of "life-safety concerns" at the Millennium Tower.

That's based on city inspections made on Dec. 2 and Jan. 11.

The 58-story downtown building has settled about 16 inches into landfill and is tilting about 2 inches. Homeowners in the 419-unit tower have filed multiple lawsuits against the developer and the city.

State employee finds a bat in statehouse

VT MONTPELIER — A bat has joined lawmakers at the Vermont Statehouse for the governor's upcoming budget address.

A state employee spotted the bat perched high on a wall outside the House chamber on Tuesday and tweeted a photo of it.

The Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department said it's likely a big brown bat that has been hibernating somewhere in the building.

The state's bat biologist said a bat hanging on the wall or ceiling or flying around is normal behavior and it should be left alone.

She said the bat will likely return to an attic space in a day or two.

From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES

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Absurdity rules at Super Bowl opening night

Associated Press

HOUSTON — A man traipsing around Monday's Super Bowl opening night in a full-length gown declaring himself "The Empress of Austria, Elizabeth I" was the most outrageous guest at what was a rather tame media night compared to the circus it has been in the past.

The Empress, otherwise known as Julian Kurzwernhart, who said he'd been covering the Super Bowl for a television station in Austria for the past six years, spent more time being interviewed in his crazy getup than actually conducting interviews with the players from the Atlanta Falcons and New England Patriots.

"Why outfits? Oh yeah, that's funny questions because we want to spread some Austrian flavor every year here and spread some Austrian charm and you guys have something to love," he said. "It's a crazy event and you have to dress up."

The event, which is the first availability with the teams during Super Bowl week, was held at Minute Maid Park, where the Houston Astros play.

While media mingled with players on the field, 10,204 fans filled the stands to get a glimpse of their favorite players.

There were a handful of other strange getups, such as a man from a television station who wore a long blonde wig and a jersey which was half that of Atlanta quarterback Matt Ryan and half New England tight end Rob Gronkowski.

A reporter from a local television station sported an oversized red foam cowboy hat and asked everyone who spoke to him if they'd like to try on the matching blue one he held.

He handed the hat to Atlanta receiver Julio Jones who thanked him and placed it beside him on the podium next to his seat.

When the reporter informed him that he wanted him to try it on and not keep it and then tried to ask another question Jones jokingly snapped at him.

"Next question, I ain't messing with you," he said before cracking up.

Jones embraced the silliness of the night and said he couldn't think of a question he wouldn't answer.

"We have a lot of fans from everywhere, Australia, Mexico ... and everyone wants answers and I'm going to answer them to the best of my ability," he said. "It hasn't been too crazy for me."

Guillermo Rodriguez, a talk show personality on ABC's

"Jimmy Kimmel Live", asked the players to sign what he called a football, which was actually a soccer ball.

He asked questions like: "Do you think Nick will find love on 'The Bachelor?'," to Atlanta coach Dan Quinn and "What do you like pizza or pineapple?" to Falcons running back Devonta Freeman.

His fun didn't stop with the Falcons and he was even able to get a smile out of notoriously gruff New England coach Bill Belichick.

Rodriguez pronounced the coach's name "belly check" and told him: "You know you are much prettier when you smile."

He wasn't able to get an autograph from the coach though.

"No," Belichick told him. "Because it's not a football."

He eased up a second later telling him he might sign it later.

Rodriguez also had an extended exchange with Patriots quarterback Tom Brady where he told him his teammates said he smelled like flowers and asked him if his wife, supermodel Gisele Bundchen had a sister he could date.

"No," Brady said simply.

Rodriguez followed up with: "I thought she had a twin."

Brady then explained: "She

does but she's married," which drew boos from Rodriguez. "I know. Too bad."

Working alongside the traditional media on Monday night were a handful of people who are normally the ones fielding questions from reporters.

Gymnast Simone Biles, who won four gold medals at the Rio Olympics, worked as a correspondent for "Inside Edition", Houston Rockets power forward Kyle Wiltjer, reported as what he called an unpaid intern for NFL Network. And Houston Astros pitcher Lance McCullers asked questions recorded by the team's social media department.

Wiltjer, who is a huge NFL fan, had a little fun with some of his questions. He opened with a serious query to Quinn about the importance of special teams before hitting him with a more entertaining one.

"I'm 6-foot-10 with a 7-1 wingspan, you think I can I block some kicks for you?" Wiltjer said raising one of his long arms skyward.

That drew a big smile from the coach.

"There's no question you could," he said. "So let's talk afterward."

Kraft says controversies galvanized Pats

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Robert Kraft is pulling his punches over "Deflategate."

Well, some of them.

While the New England Patriots owner and once close confidant of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell wants to celebrate yet another trip to the Super Bowl this week, he also couldn't back down from a challenge Monday night to address the whole mess. So Kraft took a couple of shots during the Patriots' availability, yet also made sure not to temper the festive mood.

"Everybody wants to protect their family," Kraft said when asked about the aftermath of the deflated footballs case from the 2014 AFC championship game that resulted in Tom Brady's four-game suspension, a \$1 million fine for the franchise and the

loss of its first-round draft pick in 2016.

"I think our family was involved, or accused of being involved, in something that was mishandled and became inappropriate. Sometimes in a complicated situation in business, people start pointing fingers, and we want to assure everyone that we are together."

Kraft then cited a Hebrew saying from the Old Testament.

"When tough times come," he translated, "there's nothing bad that happens that doesn't have good associated with it."

"In a way, that galvanized our team."

Sure looks that way considering the Patriots (16-2) had the NFL's best record this season, eased to the conference title with lopsided wins over Houston and Pittsburgh and are 3-point favorites for Sunday's Super

Bowl against Atlanta (13-5).

He's in Houston with his team now, and Kraft tried to stick to the business at hand, not carrying out any vendetta.

"I feel privileged to be here in the Super Bowl city," he said. "There's a time and a place to talk about problems. I'm going to stay focused on being here."

Kraft is such a veteran of Super Bowls, having also been to one in 1997 with Bill Parcells as his coach, that he gets calls from other owners about how to handle the week. So it was no surprise when he revealed that Falcons boss Arthur Blank called him.

"Arthur asked me for some advice about being in [the Super Bowl]," Kraft said. "I told him, 'Don't let anyone ruin these two weeks for you. Focus on how lucky we are to be here.'"

After break, stretch runs starts in NHL

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Sidney Crosby and Alex Ovechkin were linemates. Connor McDavid scored on a pass from Ryan Kesler. Wayne Simmonds was the shooting star of the show.

The dreamlike quality of the NHL All-Star Game was particularly pronounced on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Hollywood. After all, just about every All-Star got to meet his hockey heroes when most of the game's greatest living players performed the ceremonial opening faceoff with them.

"I was pretty star-struck," Montreal goalie Carey Price said.

But when the league revved up again Tuesday, another dream came into focus. Only 40 percent of the regular season remains, and there's a Stanley Cup to chase.

Few teams are out of the post-season race, and nearly every club is about to begin 10 weeks of high-stakes play. Most teams reported back to work Monday morning, and the league schedule resumed Tuesday with 28 of the 30 teams in action.

Nobody is an overwhelming title favorite yet. The Canadiens' seven-point lead in the Atlantic is the biggest edge in a division race, and the competition for the Presidents' Trophy is still wide-open as well: There are 10 teams within nine points

of Washington's league-leading 72 in the chase for home-ice advantage in the postseason.

Here's a quick preview of the four divisional races and what's coming up in the NHL's home stretch:

Pacific

The race out West is particularly enticing: San Jose, Anaheim and upstart Edmonton are separated by one point atop the division.

McDavid and the Oilers have hung in with the division's three California powers all winter, capped by back-to-back road victories over the Ducks and Sharks to close out the first half.

"We've put ourselves in a good position, and we're happy about that," McDavid said. "We realize how much work we have left to do, because this is a long season. None of it means very much if you don't finish out the way you started."

The Golden State's trio of contenders isn't about to give up.

The Ducks have won four straight Pacific titles, and they're hoping coach Randy Carlyle can inspire postseason success that Bruce Boudreau couldn't. The Sharks look easily capable of defending their Western Conference title, and the Los Angeles Kings should get star goalie Jonathan Quick

back from injury shortly before the postseason.

Central

The Minnesota Wild and the Chicago Blackhawks are in tight competition atop the division. Boudreau got the Wild off to their best start to a season in franchise history, and All-Star goalie Devan Dubnyk is having another standout season. This could be the year Minnesota reaches its first Stanley Cup Final, or at least wins two playoff rounds for the first time since 2003.

Of course, the team that beat them in the second round twice in the past three years is right behind them in the Central standings — and it just happens to be the best playoff team of this era.

Chicago returns with three of the 100 greatest players in NHL history in its lineup. Captain Jonathan Toews admits he isn't having a great season, but he has plenty of time to ramp up for another playoff run with Patrick Kane and Duncan Keith.

Metropolitan

The best divisional race might be among the stars who won the four-division, 3-on-3 tournament at the All-Star Game. A four-team competition has swung back and forth in the Metropolitan, with Co-

lumbus streaking in front on its 16-game winning streak, only to be passed by Washington two weeks ago.

The Capitals' fretful fans might think they've peaked too soon yet again, but nobody gets comfortable with Crosby's Penguins lurking behind them. The defending Stanley Cup champions begin the second half in third place, just seven points back.

Atlantic

The Canadiens have bounced back smartly from last season's second-half collapse without the injured Price, and Les Habitants' nearest competitors all have problems: Ottawa's goal-scoring woes, Boston's inconsistent play and powerful Tampa Bay's major injuries have all put a cushion underneath the Canadiens.

But that cushion isn't as big as it looks. The Senators have three games in hand on Montreal, and the Lightning hope to get Steven Stamkos back for the late playoff push.

And the Toronto Maple Leafs? They've got problems, as you'd expect for a team that's made the postseason once since 2004. They've also got All-Star Auston Matthews, fellow high-scoring youngsters Mitchell Marner and William Nylander, and more than enough talent to be dangerous down the stretch.

Cardinals give Astros top two picks, \$2M for hacking

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The St. Louis Cardinals were stripped of their top two picks in this year's amateur draft Monday and ordered to give them to Houston along with \$2 million as compensation for hacking the Astros' email system and scouting database, the final and unprecedented step in an unusual case of cybercrime involving two Major League Baseball teams.

Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred also banned former

St. Louis executive Christopher Correa for life as he ruled the Cardinals must give the 56th and 75th draft choices in June to Houston. They must pay the Astros the money within 30 days.

Correa, the Cardinals' director of baseball development until July 2015, pleaded guilty in federal court last year to five counts of unauthorized access of a protected computer. He was sentenced to 46 months in prison and ordered to pay the Astros \$279,039 in restitution.

"Although Mr. Correa's conduct was not authorized by the Cardinals, as a matter of MLB policy I am holding the Cardinals responsible for his conduct," Manfred wrote. "A club suffers material harm when an employee of another club illegally accesses its confidential and proprietary information, particularly intrusions of the nature and scope present here. In addition, as a result of Mr. Correa's conduct, the Astros suffered substantial negative publicity and had to endure the

time, expense and distraction of both a lengthy government investigation and an MLB investigation."

Cardinals chairman Bill DeWitt Jr. said in a statement the "findings are fully consistent with our own investigation's conclusion that this activity was isolated to a single individual."

Houston said "this unprecedented award by the commissioner's office sends a clear message of the severity of these actions."

Duke wins second road game in 3 days

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — It's been a bumpy ride for No. 21 Duke the past month. Now, interim coach Jeff Capel thinks the Blue Devils are coming together.

Jayson Tatum had 19 points and a career-high 14 rebounds, Grayson Allen scored 21 points and Duke won on the road for the second time in three days, beating No. 20 Notre Dame 84-74 on Monday night.

The Blue Devils hadn't strung together consecutive wins since the first week of January, and just last week were banned from their locker room by coach Mike Krzyzewski after a disappointing loss to North Carolina State.

"I think we're growing up, I think we're becoming tougher," said Capel, now 3-3 subbing for Krzyzewski, who is still recovering following back surgery. "To be able to go on the road the past three days in two sold-out, hostile environments and to be able to get wins speaks volumes about our guys."

Luke Kennard and Matt Jones each added 16 points for the Blue Devils (17-5, 5-4 Atlantic Coast Conference), who leaned heavily on their starting five, getting all but six points from that group. Kennard and Amile Jefferson both fouled out, and the teams combined for 48 fouls and 52 free throws.

V.J. Beachem scored 20 points and Bonzie Colson had 17 points and nine rebounds for

Notre Dame (17-6, 6-4), which has lost three straight.

After the Irish cut Duke's lead to six, Jones responded with a three-point play and scored five of the next seven points to push Duke ahead 63-50 with 9:34 left.

"I thought we showed resiliency throughout this whole game," Capel said. "Every time they made a run, we stepped up."

The Irish weren't done yet, reeling off 12 straight points to cut the lead to 63-62 with 6:25 to go, but again the Devils responded, with Allen hitting a three-pointer and a pull-up jumper from atop the key.

Big picture

Duke: The Blue Devils picked

up just their second win against the Irish in the seven games they've played since Notre Dame joined the ACC. They have won three of four overall, including a win at Wake Forest on Saturday.

"I thought our game plan was really good," Capel said. "We played great at the end of the Wake Forest game, and I thought we had some carryover."

Notre Dame: After opening ACC play with five straight wins, the Irish are struggling, losing four of their last five, including a buzzer-beater at Georgia Tech on Saturday.

"We are getting smacked hard right now," Irish coach Mike Brey said. "But we're getting smacked together."

D-League call-up helps lead Mavericks past Cavaliers

Associated Press

DALLAS — Yogi Ferrell was hours away from playing in an NBA Development League game when he got a call that Dallas wanted to sign him.

Three days, two games and about 1,500 miles later, Cleveland stars LeBron James and Kyrie Irving, along with the defending champion Cavaliers, know a little more about the rookie guard from Mavericks owner Mark Cuban's alma mater.

Ferrell scored a career-high 19 points while helping cool off Irving, and the last-place Mavericks knocked off a title contender for the second straight night in a 104-97 win Monday over the Cavaliers, who were missing Kevin Love because of recurring back spasms.

Ferrell, the former Indiana player with the given first name of Kevin, outscored Irving in the second game of a 10-day contract, a night after hitting clinching free throws in the final seconds of a win at San Antonio.

"Was it in Erie or Buffalo?" Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle asked while trying to remem-

ber where the Long Island Ducks were playing when Ferrell got the call because of Dallas' injury issues at point guard. "I don't know. Nobody knows. Nobody knows where he came from."

It was Erie, and Ferrell helped limit Irving to 7-for-21 shooting to end a six-game streak of at least 20 points during which the Cavs All-Star averaged 30 points.

"I am living the dream right now," said the 23-year-old Ferrell, who spent four seasons with the Hoosiers, went undrafted and played 10 games for the Brooklyn Nets before getting waived in December.

James led the Cavaliers with 23 points, but combined with Irving for just one point in the fourth quarter, 2-for-14 shooting from three-point range and 11 of their team's 17 turnovers. Dallas had just nine turnovers.

Harrison Barnes led Dallas with 24 points and a season-high 11 rebounds for his second double-double of the season. Wesley Matthews scored 21 points.

Celtics 113, Pistons 109: Isaiah Thomas scored 24 of his 41 points in the fourth quarter

to help the host Celtics extend their winning streak to four games.

Jae Crowder added 21 points and Al Horford scored 13 for Boston, which had to rally after Detroit surged midway through the fourth quarter and the teams traded the lead.

Andre Drummond had 28 points and pulled down 22 rebounds for the Pistons, who outscored Boston 60-38 in the paint and led the Celtics on rebounds 51-44. Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 18 points for Detroit, which lost its third straight.

Heat 104, Nets 96: Goran Dragic scored 20 points and Dion Waiters added 19 as the host Heat pushed the NBA's longest current winning streak to eight games.

James Johnson had 17, Rodney McGruder 13 and Hassan Whiteside 12 for Miami. Waiters and Dragic combined to hand out 17 assists for the Heat, who took the lead for good with a 17-0 run late in the first half.

76ers 122, Kings 119: Robert Covington had 23 points and 10 rebounds to rally host Philadelphia to the victory.

The Sixers overcame 46

points from DeMarcus Cousins and won again without injured center Joel Embiid, who sat out with a left knee contusion. He also will not travel with the Sixers for road games later this week against Dallas and San Antonio. The Sixers officially listed Embiid as doubtful for those two games.

Grizzlies 115, Suns 96: Mike Conley scored a career-high 38 points and Memphis just missed a franchise record with 16 three-pointers as the Grizzlies rolled past host Phoenix.

Conley matched his career best with seven threes (in 10 attempts) and made 12 of 18 shots overall in his fourth 30-point game of the season, having had only five of those in the rest of his career.

Timberwolves 111, Magic 105 (OT): Andrew Wiggins scored 27 points and Ricky Rubio made a career-high six three-pointers to lead host Minnesota.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 23 points and 12 rebounds, Rubio added 22 points, eight rebounds and eight assists, and Wiggins forced overtime with a jumper with 10 seconds to play.