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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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S. Korea seeks talks with North on Olympics

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea on Tuesday offered high-level talks with North Korea to find ways to cooperate on next month's Winter Olympics in the South. Seoul's quick proposal following a rare rapprochement overture from the North on Monday offers the possibility of better ties after a year in which a nuclear stand-off increased fear of war on the Korean Peninsula.

In a closely watched New Year's address, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said Monday that he was willing to send a delegation to the Olympics, although he also repeated fiery nuclear threats against the United States. Analysts say

Kim might be trying to drive a wedge between Seoul and its ally Washington in a bid to reduce international isolation and sanctions against North Korea.

Kim's overture was welcome news for a South Korean government led by liberal President Moon Jae-in, who favors dialogue to ease the North's nuclear threats and wants to use the Pyeongchang Olympics as a chance to improve inter-Korean ties.

Moon's unification minister, Cho Myoung-gyon, proposed in a nationally televised news conference that the Koreas meet Jan. 9 at the shared border village of Panmunjom to discuss Olympic cooperation and how to improve overall ties.

Earlier Tuesday, Moon spoke

of what he described as Kim's positive response to his earlier dialogue overtures and ordered officials to study how to restore talks with North Korea and get the North to participate in the Olympics.

North Korea did not immediately react. If there are talks, they would be the first formal dialogue between the Koreas since December 2015. Relations between the Koreas have plunged as North Korea has expanded its weapons programs amid a hard-line stance by Moon's conservative predecessors.

Last year, North Korea conducted its sixth and most powerful nuclear test and test-launched three intercontinental ballistic missiles as part of

its push to possess a nuclear missile capable of reaching anywhere in the United States. The North was subsequently hit with toughened U.N. sanctions, and Kim and President Donald Trump exchanged warlike rhetoric and crude personal insults against each other.

Kim said in his speech Monday that North Korea last year achieved the historic feat of "completing" its nuclear forces. Outside experts say that it's only a matter of time before the North acquires the ability to hurl nuclear weapons at the mainland U.S., but that the country still has a few technologies to master, such as a warhead's ability to survive atmospheric re-entry.

Afghans praise Trump's tweet on Pakistan

BY CHAD GARLAND
AND ZUBAIR BABAKARKHAIL
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghans welcomed President Donald Trump's accusation on Twitter that Pakistan offers only "lies & deceit" in return for U.S. aid, saying that the statement builds on what some see as positive momentum in America's 16-year struggle to defeat the Taliban.

Early Monday, Trump wrote in his first tweet of the year that the United States had "foolishly given" more than \$33 billion in aid over the past 15 years to Pakistan, which returned the favor with "nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools.

"They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!"

The tweet, which underscores

the administration's frustrations with Islamabad, was happy news for Afghans, said Javed Hamim Kakar, senior editor at Pajhwok Afghan News in Kabul. A local TV news channel hailed it as Afghans' favorite Trump tweet.

U.S. and Afghan officials have long accused Pakistan of sheltering Taliban commanders and fighters in border areas, where the insurgents can rest, rearm and regroup.

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, writing on Twitter, greeted Trump's remarks as "vindication that the war on terror is not in bombing Afghan villages and homes but in the sanctuaries beyond Afghanistan."

Karzai proposed forming a regional coalition to pressure Pakistan "to bring peace to — the entire region."

While U.S. officials have said cooperation with Pakistan is

critical to efforts in the region, the relationship has chilled since May 2011, when al-Qaida founder Osama bin Laden was found living near a major military facility in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad where he had apparently enjoyed sanctuary for years.

A pillar of Trump's new regional strategy calls for greater pressure on Islamabad to eliminate such havens. Pakistan "has much to lose by continuing to harbor criminals and terrorists," the president said when announcing his strategy in August.

In a sign of that pressure, White House spokesman Raj Shah said Monday that the administration does not plan to spend \$255 million in fiscal 2016 aid to Pakistan, CNN reported. The money has been held back since August, pend-

ing greater action by Islamabad to fight terrorism.

In July, the Pentagon also withheld \$50 million in aid after Defense Secretary Jim Mattis declined to certify that Pakistan had done enough to fight the Taliban's brutal Haqqani network, which officials say also enjoys sanctuary in that country.

Pakistani officials have responded harshly to Trump's tweet, with Foreign Minister Khwaja Mohammad Asif saying it was a sign that the president was disappointed in the U.S. "defeat in Afghanistan" and that the apparent threat of cutting aid was meaningless.

He also rejected the idea that the U.S. had given more than \$33 billion in aid to the country since 2002, saying the U.S. had reimbursed Pakistan for use of its land, roads and railroads.

Navy honors tradition with sub burials

The (Norfolk, Va.) Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK, Va. — The Navy is a tradition-bound military service, and few traditions are as important as burials at sea.

Perhaps the most unique services in the fleet occur aboard submarines that spend the majority of their time under water. Submarine Force Atlantic said it is preparing for burials at sea on several Norfolk-based subs in the next few months.

One of those burials will be for World War II submarine veteran Marcus White, who served on seven war patrols in the Pacific theater during World War II and the Korean War and was awarded the Bronze Star medal with the “V” device for valor, signifying it was earned in combat.

White died in June at 95. The USS Newport News will commit him and his wife, Mary Miles White, who died seven years earlier, to the sea sometime this year. White’s son, Marcus White Jr., lives in Chesapeake, Va., and said his father loved being a submariner, and that he’s fulfilling his father’s wishes. The Navy allows active-duty sailors, veterans and their family members to be buried at sea.

The chaplain for the Navy’s Norfolk-based submarine squadron, Lt. Cmdr. Richard Smothers, spoke with *The Virginian-Pilot* about what makes burial ceremonies aboard subs unique and special for those who choose them.

Releasing of cremains

Unlike larger ships such as aircraft carriers that can accommodate caskets, all submarine burials at sea involve cremains. They also must occur at least 3 miles from shore.

Smothers said burials at sea aboard a sub primarily occur in two ways. If the weather is nice, a sub will surface, stop moving and conduct a ceremony topside that involves raising a flag the family can

keep, reading any scriptures the family requests and firing a 21-gun salute with seven rifles. A member of the crew will then pour the ashes overboard. Chaplains don’t serve aboard subs, and the service is usually led by a lay leader on the boat.

Smothers said the sub’s commanding officer will usually address the crew from an on-board communications system so everyone can learn about the person who was committed to the deep.

If the weather isn’t good enough to allow for a full topside ceremony, the cremains can be poured overboard in a smaller ceremony from a ship’s sail, the tall structure found on the top-side of the sub.

The other option involves releasing ashes underwater through a torpedo tube while the sub is still moving. Smothers said this is a popular option among those who served as torpedomen.

“I know it sounds amazing or strange, but it does happen, and it can be done very honorably, very respectfully,” he said.

Smothers said the crew will clean the torpedo tube’s surface and place the cremains inside. After the burial, the family will usually receive a letter of condolence and appreciation from the sub’s commanding officer and a chart showing the GPS coordinates where the cremains were released.

Custody of the fallen

The Navy accommodates requests for burials at sea when it can, but it’s not always a speedy process. A ship’s operational schedule takes priority, and it can be months between the time a request is made and the time the burial occurs. In White’s case, that also allowed for a traditional memorial service long before his cremains were set to sail from Norfolk.

For a burial at sea aboard a Norfolk-based sub, Smothers said a family will first provide their loved one’s cremains to

Naval Medical Center Portsmouth. A religious program specialist in the submarine force will then take custody of the cremains and examine sub schedules to find the best fit.

If former submariners spent most of their time in a certain homeport such as Groton, Conn., or Kings Bay, Ga., they’ll try to find a sub based there. Otherwise, they’ll find the best available schedule. Sometimes family members will be allowed onto Naval Station Norfolk or another base to watch the sub carrying their loved one’s remains depart, which is a rare occurrence for an outsider to know when a sub is departing.

Smothers said a religious program specialist will go aboard the sub with the cremains and transfer it to either the executive officer or chief of the boat, where they will be safely locked away in a state room until the burial. Smothers said the Norfolk squadron typically performs about a dozen burials at sea a year.

Crew connection

The submarine force is a small, tight-knit, all-volunteer community that places a premium on valuing tradition and respecting their forerunners. In some cases, subs will perform a burial at sea where a sub sank so a former submariner can be committed to the deep with some of his former crewmembers or the sub where he served.

Smothers also said it’s not uncommon for family members to request that someone who holds the same job their loved one did participate in the ceremony.

“I think burials at sea, that’s one of the ways we not only just honor those families and their service, but we reactivate our commitment and our appreciation for serving,” Smothers said. “It’s a real privilege to be a part of. ... Every sub that’s ever been part of a burial at sea has thanked us and said, ‘Hey,

we appreciate being able to do this.’ It’s an honor.”

About Marcus White

White served on the USS Scamp in World War II and transferred to another submarine shortly before it was sunk by Japanese enemy bombs in 1944 on its eighth combat patrol. Before that, the Scamp sank six ships and damaged eight. White was one of the last living crewmembers who served aboard the Scamp.

His son, Marcus White Jr., said he learned from his sister at his father’s funeral that he had long suffered from survivor’s guilt. He said his father had always been a proud submariner and was active in the submariner veterans community even after becoming a science teacher, but he didn’t often talk about his time during the war.

White said he wasn’t sure why his father was awarded the Bronze Star but said it may relate to one of the few stories his father told him after he asked about a flimsy rain coat he found. He said his father told him that after the Scamp sank a Japanese ship, the commanding officer needed someone to swim out to the wreckage and look for survivors in a lifeboat. His father volunteered. He didn’t find any survivors, but he found a package wrapped in a raincoat on the lifeboat. He said it contained Japanese code books, which were taken back to Pearl Harbor; his father kept the raincoat.

“My dad absolutely loved the Navy and he loved the submarine force and would have been a career submariner had it not been for meeting my mom and deciding that he felt raising a family that he needed to be there most of the time,” White said. “His ashes are with my mom’s ashes getting ready to go out to sea for the last time. It’ll be the first ride on a sub for my mom.”

AF lets colonels at 30-year mark stay in service 3 years

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — The Air Force has given a late Christmas present to colonels approaching the 30-year mandatory retirement mark.

The service announced late last week that selected colonels nearing mandatory retirement may voluntarily choose to remain on active duty for three additional years.

The move is one of several measures the Air Force has taken in recent months to deal with a shortage of field-grade officers — majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels — and pilots.

A sweeping promotion change that went into effect last month allowed captains to advance to the rank of major as long as they were recommended for promotion and had an unblemished conduct record.

The Air Force's latest at-

tempt to retain field-grade officers currently affects 50 colonels who are line officers and who face mandatory retirement between Feb. 1, 2018, and Feb. 1, 2019, the Air Force said in a statement.

Across all the military services, most colonels not selected for promotion to one star must retire after 30 years of active commissioned service.

The Air Force will convene a continuation board this month to assess the records of the 50 line officer colonels who would otherwise be forced to retire.

All eligible officers will be offered the opportunity to remain on active duty for an additional three years, the Air Force said.

The officer's chain of command will notify those selected for continuation. Eligible officers were to be notified by Dec. 31, the Air Force said.

"It can take 21 years to develop a line officer to become a colonel who may then serve

up to 30 years," Col. Jeff O'Donnell, Air Force Colonels Group director, said in a statement. "And as the Air Force is growing end strength, we need experienced leaders to serve and lead across the Department of Defense."

Just under 1 in 10 Air Force jobs for field-grade officers — whose main job involves commanding troops — are vacant, while about 1 in 4 nonrated field-grade officer jobs are unfilled, the Air Force said in September, when it announced 100 percent promotion rates for eligible captains.

The Air Force is also facing a shortage of about 2,000 pilots. It is trying various incentives, such as bonuses and the promise of less non-flying-related administrative tasks, to entice pilots to remain on active duty rather than take jobs in commercial aviation, which typically offers higher pay for fewer hours.

US general warns that ISIS is still a danger

Bloomberg

The U.S. general commanding forces against Islamic State said it has lost 98 percent of the land it claimed and 7.7 million people have been liberated from its control, but he warned the group could continue as a shadow terrorism outfit operating without a base.

Army Lt. Gen. Paul Funk, commanding general of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, said a coalition that has grown to 74 nations reclaimed 25,096 square miles of land from ISIS, also known as Daesh, in 2017. Yet he warned the allies can't let up.

"Their repressive ideology continues," Funk said in a New Year's message posted to the coalition Facebook page. "The conditions remain present for Daesh to return, and only through coalition and international efforts can the defeat become permanent."

President Donald Trump, in a New Year's Eve video posted to his official Twitter account that highlighted his first year in office, included an excerpt from a speech in which he vowed to "defeat radical Islamic terrorism" and "not allow it to take root in our country."

Last week, the group claimed responsibility for three suicide attacks in Kabul, Afghanistan, that killed as many as 41 people and wounded 80 at the Afghan Voice Agency and Shiite-run Tebyan cultural center. That followed a November strike against a Kabul television station that killed two guards and wounded 20, as well as an October attack on a mosque that killed more than 30 worshippers.

Syrian Democratic Forces are in the final stages of liberating the middle Euphrates Valley from ISIS, and Iraq is rebuilding after fully expelling Daesh, according to a coalition statement announcing the video.

US servicemember killed in Afghan combat

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — A U.S. servicemember was killed and four were wounded Monday in combat in eastern Nangarhar province, military officials said.

Two of the servicemembers injured in the incident, which occurred in Achin district, were being treated at a nearby hospital and were in stable condition, the military said in a statement Tuesday. The two others have returned to duty.

"We are deeply saddened by the loss of one of our own," said Gen. John Nicholson, commander of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. "Our heartfelt sym-

pathies go out to the families and friends of our fallen and wounded brothers."

The slain servicemember, the first U.S. combat fatality this year, was not identified. The Pentagon does not release the names of deceased servicemembers until next of kin have been notified.

U.S. forces have been backing the Afghan military in its fight against an Islamic State affiliate that has gained a foothold in eastern Afghanistan. U.S. officials had hoped by the end of last year to defeat the group, known as ISIS-Khorasan province, or ISIS-K. But the organization has proved to be a stubborn adversary.

Officials estimated in March

that about 700 ISIS-K members remained in Afghanistan, but in late November Nicholson said 1,600 fighters had been eliminated. In early December, officials estimated about 1,000 fighters were still operating throughout Afghanistan.

U.S. support to the Afghan forces fighting ISIS-K is separate from its participation in the U.S.-led NATO Resolute Support mission, which turned 3 years old on Monday. That train-advise-assist mission began after the withdrawal of most combat forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2014.

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Frigid temps break century-old records

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — The bone-chilling cold gripping much of the U.S. is breaking century-old records and is being blamed for several deaths.

The National Weather Ser-

vice issued wind chill advisories and freeze warnings Tuesday covering a vast area from South Texas to Canada and from Montana through New England.

Authorities opened warming shelters in the South as temper-

atures dipped notably close to zero in Alabama and Georgia.

In Aberdeen, S.D., the mercury dropped to a record-breaking minus 32 degrees Fahrenheit.

The city's previous New Year's Day record had stood for

99 years.

It's even cold in the Deep South, as temperatures plummeted early Tuesday to 14 degrees in Atlanta and 26 degrees as far south as New Orleans.

The cold is blamed in at least nine deaths in the past week.

Number of Chicago homicides falls in 2017

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Chicago ended 2017 with fewer homicides than the year before, but gang violence in the city's most dangerous neighborhoods kept the total number of killings above the 600 mark for only the second time in more than a decade.

The Chicago Police Department released statistics Monday that show the number of homicides fell from 771 in 2016 to 650 last year. The number of shootings dropped from 3,550 to 2,785 during the same period.

Although the drops were significant, the homicide total in a repeat of 2016 eclipsed the number of killings in New York City and Los Angeles combined.

"You still have to start with the fact that 600 people dead in Chicago is a hell of a lot of people to be dead in one year," said the Rev. Marshall Hatch, whose church is in one of the most violent neighborhoods on the city's West Side.

Still, the drops — and the reasons behind the lower numbers — have police and others optimistic that some of their efforts will lead to more declines over the next year. Chief among those efforts will be the expansion of the high-tech strategies and equipment to fight crime, including devices that pinpoint where gunshots are fired.

"I am proud of the progress our officers made in reducing

gun violence all across the city in 2017," Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson said in a statement. "In 2018, we are going to work to build on the progress we made last year — to reduce gun violence to save lives and to find justice for victims."

Police have been particularly encouraged by the results of setting up Strategic Decision Support Centers in six of the city's 22 police districts, including those in the most violent pockets of the city. The centers are equipped with sound-detection technology that enables the department to instantly know where the sound of gunfire is coming from and to alert officers through computer

screens in their squad cars and smartphones.

One of the first districts where a center was set up was in Englewood, a neighborhood on Chicago's South Side that has long been known as one of the city's most violent.

Englewood had seen 48 homicides as of late December, compared to 86 during the same period in 2016. Police hope the trend continues in the neighborhood. They plan to roll out centers in six more police districts this year.

There were reminders in 2017, though, that gang violence continues to rage in the city and take lives no matter what strategies police try to implement.

Khamenei says 'enemies of Iran' meddling in affairs

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Clashes overnight between protesters and security forces in Iran killed nine people, state television reported Tuesday, including some rioters who tried to storm a police station to steal weapons.

The demonstrations, the largest to strike Iran since its disputed 2009 presidential election, have seen six days of unrest across the country and a death toll of at least 20. Offering his first comments since they began, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Tuesday accused the "enemies of Iran" of meddling in the country's affairs.

The protests began last Thursday in Mashhad over Iran's

weak economy and a jump in food prices and have expanded to several cities, with some protesters chanting against the government and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Hundreds of people have been arrested, and a prominent judge on Tuesday warned that some could face death penalty trials.

State TV reported that six people were killed during an attack on a police station in the town of Qahdarijan. It reported that clashes were sparked by rioters who tried to steal guns from the police station.

State TV also said an 11-year-old boy and a 20-year-old man were killed in the town of Khomeinishahr, while a member of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard was killed in

the town of Najafabad. It said all three were shot by hunting rifles, which are common in the Iranian countryside.

The towns are all in Iran's central Isfahan province, some 215 miles south of Tehran.

It wasn't immediately clear if the Revolutionary Guard member was the same fatality reported late Monday night by Iran's semi-official Mehr news agency. Mehr had said an assailant using a hunting rifle killed a policeman and wounded three others in Najafabad.

Monday marked the first night to see a fatality among Iran's security forces.

President Hassan Rouhani has acknowledged the public's anger over the Islamic Republic's flagging economy, though

he and others warned that the government wouldn't hesitate to crack down on those it considers lawbreakers. All the protest rallies so far haven't received prior permission from the Interior Ministry, making them illegal under Iranian law.

In comments posted to his official website, Khamenei appeared to blame foreign nations for at least exacerbating the unrest gripping Iran.

"In the recent days' incidents, enemies of Iran utilized various means — including money, weapon, politics and intelligence apparatuses — to create problems for the Islamic system," he said.

Khamenei said he would elaborate further in the coming days.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Workers find child in only a diaper in cold

MA MONSON — Utility workers found a 2-year-old girl wearing only a diaper wandering into traffic on a frigid day in Massachusetts.

Comcast Technicians Shawn Bronson and Michael Payne told The Boston Herald they were restoring service to customers on Thursday when they spotted the child heading toward the middle of the road.

The workers scooped up the child and took her to a store, where they waited for police to arrive. She was taken to a hospital to be evaluated.

Police said the child's unidentified father was unaware she had wandered off. They said charges of reckless endangerment of a child are pending.

Woman charged with DUI while riding horse

FL BARTOW — A judge said a Florida sheriff's office must retain custody of a horse whose owner was charged with drunken driving while riding the animal.

In a report by The Ledger, Polk County Judge Sharon Franklin said Donna Byrne, 53, was unfit to care for the horse. Franklin also said Byrne must complete treatment for alcohol addiction.

Byrne was arrested Nov. 2 after riding her horse down a highway. Police said her breath samples registered a blood-alcohol level twice Florida's legal limit.

Officer rescues owl from prison wire

PA HUNTINGDON — A resourceful wildlife conservation officer helped engineer a daring prison escape for a snowy owl that had become

trapped between barbed wire in a perimeter fence at the Smithfield prison in Huntingdon.

Pennsylvania Game Commission officer Amanda Isett used a crate, a net and an Army blanket to coax the bird out.

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported the bird escaped with only some minor skin tears and a few missing feathers. The juvenile male is being treated at Centre Wildlife Care in Port Matilda and is expected to make a full recovery.

Police: Drunken driver rear-ends cruiser

MA RANDOLPH — Officials said a police cruiser was hit by an impaired driver, sending the trooper to the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries.

Massachusetts State Police said the cruiser was hit early Saturday as troopers were responding to another crash scene.

Police said the trooper was at the merge between Interstate 93 and Route 24 to slow traffic as other officers responded to a crash. Police said the trooper's emergency lights were on when the cruiser was rear-ended by a woman who was found to be under the influence of alcohol.

The woman was arrested, but police did not identify her.

Police: Couple used drone to deliver drugs

CA RIVERSIDE — Authorities said a Southern California couple used a drone to deliver illegal drugs to their customers.

Benjamin Baldassarre and Ashley Carroll, of Riverside, were charged Dec. 26 with possessing controlled substances for sale and child endangerment. Police arrested the couple Dec. 21 after neighbors suspected

they were selling drugs.

Authorities said a drone delivered drugs to customers at a nearby parking lot. The customers then would drive by the couple's home and throw their payments onto the lawn.

The child endangerment charges were filed because Baldassarre's 9-year-old daughter lived in the home, where police say they found syringes and drugs believed to include methamphetamine, LSD-laced candy and powdered fentanyl.

Nightclub allowed to reopen until hearing

RI PROVIDENCE — A Providence nightclub described as a "drain on police resources" has been allowed to reopen for now.

The state's Department of Business Regulation said Friday that The Vault Lounge can reopen pending a full hearing expected early this year.

Police Sgt. David Tejada said the club "has been a continual drain on police resources" since it opened. Attorneys for the city cite incidents of people urinating and defecating outside the club. Attorneys for the club have said that they aren't being treated fairly.

Deputies: Man left 3 kids on 'dark' highway

FL PLANT CITY — A baby sitter faces desertion charges after deputies say he abandoned three children near a busy Florida road following a Christmas crash.

The Tampa Bay Times reported James Mack Williams, 54, was watching the children for their parents for a short time Christmas night. About 9:30 p.m. Williams was involved in a traffic crash; deputies said he left the children alone.

An arrest affidavit says Hillsborough County Sheriff's

deputies found the children a short distance from the car on a "dark" and busy road. They were "distraught and in a state of panic." Investigators did not say how old the children are.

Williams was arrested about a mile from the scene.

Man charged over foul liquid at supermarket

SC CHARLESTON — A man who authorities said sprayed a foul-smelling, brown liquid onto produce at a South Carolina grocery store now faces federal charges.

Charleston Police said Pau Hang, 41, was arrested Oct. 15 after a manager saw him empty a bottle of liquid with a bad odor like feces onto the produce and other items at a Harris Teeter store in Charleston.

A police report suggested Hang was a contractor and was angry because he thought the store owed him money.

A federal grand jury indicted Hang last month on charges of attempting to tamper with a consumer product and tainting a consumer product to cause commercial harm.

Zoo welcomes 2 aging Malayan sun bears

KS TOPEKA — The Topeka Zoo is the new home of an aging bear couple named HoHo and Cupcake.

The zoo welcomed the two Malayan sun bears recently. But they will be under quarantine for 30 days and construction might prevent them from being on display for a few months.

HoHo, a male, and Cupcake, a female, are both 28. The city says they'll live in a space formerly occupied by Tiffany the gorilla, who died in August.

From wire reports

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Georgia wins wild Rose in second OT

Associated Press

PASADENA, Calif. — After ending the first overtime Rose Bowl, one of the greatest Granddaddies of Them All, Sony Michel was swarmed by Georgia teammates as he broke down in tears.

The senior tailback had gone from possible goat to all-time hero for Georgia, sending the Bulldogs to the national championship game with one last burst in a game full of them.

Michel raced 27 yards for a touchdown in the second overtime to give No. 3 Georgia a 54-48 victory against No. 2 Oklahoma in the College Football Playoff semifinal Monday night.

Michel, who had a fumble in the fourth quarter returned for a go-ahead Oklahoma touchdown, ran for 181 yards and three scores for the Bulldogs (13-1), but none bigger than the last one.

"I made plays. I gave up plays. My team just had faith

in me," said Michel, who did all that damage on just 11 carries and got a hug from former Bulldogs great tailback Garrison Hearst after scoring the winning TD. "That's what this team is all about. They showed true character today."

In the final game of his great career, Oklahoma's Baker Mayfield threw for 287 yards and two touchdowns, and caught a touchdown pass that gave the Sooners a 17-point lead with 6 seconds left in the first half.

But the Heisman Trophy winner could not get the Sooners (12-2) into the end zone in the first overtime when a touchdown would have ended the game.

"It's tough to describe right now," Oklahoma coach Lincoln Riley said of the loss. "It's a hell of a college football game. You know, an epic Rose Bowl game."

The Bulldogs will play Alabama on Jan. 8 in an all-Southeastern Conference national championship game at

Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, about 70 miles from their campus. After Georgia made its first trip to the Rose Bowl since 1943 a heart-stopping success, the Bulldogs will play for their first national title since 1980.

"We got to get back to work. It's not done," Michel said. "Now we got to finish. Let's just finish this season off right."

The 104th Rose Bowl was also the highest-scoring, surpassing last year's 52-49 USC victory against Penn State. There was a lot more on the line in this one, the first CFP game to go to overtime as well.

After an offside penalty on Georgia gave Oklahoma a first down on third-and-five in the second OT possession, the Sooners stalled again and Austin Seibert came out for a 27-yard field goal. Leaping through the line, Lorenzo Carter got his outstretched hand on the kick and the ball fluttered down short of the uprights.

Any score would have ended it for the Bulldogs, and on the

second play Michel slipped one tackle and was home free. The Bulldogs sprinted off the sideline and toward the corner of the end zone to mob Michel. Confetti rained down. Meanwhile, Mayfield stood motionless on the sideline for several seconds, bent over with his hands on his knees and head down.

Michel and his roommate and running mate Nick Chubb were awesome for Georgia. Chubb ran for 145 yards and two touchdowns, including a 2-yarder on a direct snap with 55 seconds left in regulation to tie it. The Sooners had taken a 45-38 lead when Steven Parker returned Michel's fumble for a TD with 6:52 left in the fourth.

"I told him that he had to keep running and trying to hit the corner," Chubb said. "We had a long game and after the fumble, we went down and he made up for it with that run to win the game."

Both teams settled for field goals in the first overtime.

Tide smothers Clemson's bid for title repeat

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Nick Saban is back in his comfort zone.

Let others run up the points. He'll take a defensive slugfest every time.

Especially when it gives Alabama another shot at a national title.

In a game where every yard was a struggle, the Crimson Tide defenders took matters into their own hands. They accounted for a pair of touchdowns just 13 seconds apart in the third quarter to turn an offensive slog into a 24-6 rout of defending national champion Clemson in the Sugar Bowl semifinal game Monday night.

"This game was about our identity as a team," Saban said. "I don't think anybody would doubt our relentless attitude out there. We had a warrior-like mentality."

He was clearly pleased.

Sure, it was quite a contrast to the first two meetings in the Alabama-Clemson trilogy, both high-scoring classics with the national title on the line, not to mention the Rose Bowl semifinal that preceded it. Georgia knocked off Oklahoma 54-48 in a double-overtime thriller that wasn't decided until the Alabama was on its second

possession in the Big Easy.

There would be no drama in the nightcap. With Deshaun Watson off to the NFL, top-ranked Clemson (12-2) simply had no answer for the Tide's latest group of defensive standouts, setting up an all-Southeastern Conference showdown for the national title — with Saban matched against his former defensive coordinator, Georgia coach Kirby Smart.

Leading only 10-6 after a turnover to start the second half handed Clemson a field goal, the fourth-ranked Tide (12-1) quickly snuffed out any thoughts of a repeat title for the Tigers.

It began with 308-pound defensive tackle Da'Ron Payne picking off a wobbly pass after besieged Clemson quarterback Kelly Bryant was hit as he threw. Payne rumbled 21 yards on the return, shedding one would-be tackler with a deft open-field move and drawing a 15-yard personal foul penalty when he was finally dragged down with a horse collar tackle.

After Alabama drove to a first down at the Clemson 1, Payne re-entered the game — presumably to add another big body for blocking purposes. Instead, he slipped

open near the right pylon on a play fake and hauled in a touchdown pass, even managing to get both feet down before the celebration commenced beyond the sideline.

"I've got gold hands," quipped Payne, who was picked as the game's defensive MVP.

A bit shell-shocked by that turn of events, Clemson was thoroughly demoralized after its next offensive play. Bryant's pass deflected off the hands of Deon Cain and was intercepted by linebacker Mack Wilson, who returned it 18 yards for another TD.

They could've called it right then.

"Just incredibly disappointed in our performance," Clemson coach Dabo Swinney said. "But congratulations to Alabama. They were the better team today. No doubt about it."

The Tide, which began the season in Atlanta beating Florida State, will return to Mercedes-Benz Stadium next Monday night to face No. 3 Georgia and give Saban a shot at his sixth title, which would match Bear Bryant.

Saban has four championships in the last eight years at Alabama, along with a BCS title at LSU during the 2003 season.

Milton lifts UCF to Peach win

Associated Press

ATLANTA — McKenzie Milton wanted to throw a blanket of 13 wins and no losses over the College Football Playoff.

After Milton and Central Florida capped a perfect season, he suggested it was time to respect the Knights, even if they weren't invited to the playoff.

Milton threw two touchdown passes and ran for 116 yards and a touchdown, leading No. 10 UCF to a 34-27 Peach Bowl win over No. 7 Auburn on Monday.

Then it was time to boast.

"I said on the podium you can go ahead and cancel the playoffs," Milton said. "I'm not changing my mind."

UCF (13-0) led 34-20 before having to stop a late Auburn comeback. Antwan Collier's interception in the end zone with 24 seconds remaining clinched the win.

The UCF players launched a joyous postgame celebration, rolling around in confetti on the field while wearing T-shirts that read "Champions."

The Knights won in their

final game with coach Scott Frost, who stayed with the team through the bowl game after accepting an offer to become the new coach at Nebraska, his alma mater. Frost will bring most of his UCF assistants to Nebraska.

"It was the right thing to do to come coach these guys," Frost said, holding the game ball. "I'm not happy for me. I'm so happy for these guys."

The Knights thought they deserved a higher ranking after winning the American Athletic Conference and leading the nation in scoring. They made a strong statement by beating Auburn (10-4).

Frost said "it wasn't right" for UCF to not receive more consideration for the four-team playoff.

"They deserve more credit from the committee than they got," he said.

Auburn was held to 90 yards rushing on 44 carries.

"That was probably the main stat that was disappointing for me," Tigers coach Gus Malzahn said.

More dominance: The

Knights sacked Jarrett Stidham six times. Auburn had only one sack.

After Auburn took a 20-13 lead in the third quarter on a 4-yard run by Kerryon Johnson, Milton threw a 12-yard touchdown pass to Otis Anderson to tie the game. Milton, under pressure, zipped an 8-yard scoring pass to Dredrick Snellson early in the fourth to give the Knights the lead.

Chequan Burkett's 45-yard interception return for a touchdown pushed the lead to 14 points.

Auburn suffered its second straight loss at Mercedes-Benz Stadium, where it was beaten by Georgia in the Southeastern Conference championship game one month ago.

Johnson, who said he was almost fully recovered from a late-season shoulder injury, ran for 71 yards.

UCF led 13-6 at halftime despite being held under 14 points at the break for the first time this season.

QB Bentley sparks rally

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Will Muschamp envisions championships in South Carolina's future.

Lots of them.

"We don't have all the trophies and the tradition and history but we have some grit," the coach said after the Gamecocks rallied from a 16-point second-half deficit to beat Michigan 26-19 in Monday's Outback Bowl.

"We've got some toughness and resolve. You saw us down 19-3 and not a lot of good things happening for us," Muschamp added. "All the arrows are pointing up for us. We're going to have those trophies."

Jake Bentley threw for 239 yards and two touchdowns to pace the win, which gave the Gamecocks (9-4) at least nine wins in a season for just the seventh time.

Bentley shrugged off a slow start to toss scoring passes of 21 yards to Bryan Edwards and 53 yards to Shi Smith, the latter giving his team a 23-19 lead early in the fourth quarter.

The sophomore said once the Gamecocks began to have some success, the offense's confidence grew.

"It's just we started to execute well. The excitement, I think, is contagious to the whole team," Bentley, voted the game's most valuable player, said. "You see where we went from there."

Michigan (8-5) finished with its first three-game losing streak under coach Jim Harbaugh. The Wolverines turned the ball over five times after halftime, including an end zone interception that denied them an opportunity to regain the lead with just under eight minutes to go.

The loss also cost the Big Ten a clean sweep of bowl games involving conference members. The league entered 7-0, looking to go unbeaten in postseason play for the first time since 1998 when it went 5-0.

"We kind of let them hang around and they took advantage of it," Harbaugh said. "They got better as the game went on. We didn't get the knockout punch when we needed it."

Boykin, Notre Dame get by LSU

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Notre Dame receiver Miles Boykin lived up to Brian Kelly's expectations.

The Fighting Irish's head coach told the junior during a practice leading up to Monday's Citrus Bowl game against LSU that Boykin was going to win the MVP trophy.

Boykin made not only one of the top plays of this bowl season but one of the more memorable catches in Notre Dame bowl history. He made a dynamic one-handed grab and raced down the sideline for a 55-yard touchdown with 1:28 remaining to give the 14th-ranked Fighting Irish a 21-17 victory over No. 16 LSU.

The win by Notre Dame (10-3) is its first in a New Year's Day bowl since the 1994 Cotton Bowl against Texas A&M and snaps a nine-game skid in January games.

"He looked at me like I had two heads. But I felt like he had a chance," said Kelly about his prediction. "He's got the ability, if we could get him the football. And Ian [Book] got him the football and Miles made a great individual play and, lo and behold, I've got the MVP sitting next to me."

Boykin had only nine catches for 151 yards and a TD coming into the game, but he got his

first start after starters Chase Claypool (shoulder injury) and Kevin Stephenson (suspension) were ruled out.

Boykin showed off his wide-catch radius on what proved to be the game-winning play. On first-and-10 from the Irish 45, Ian Book lofted a pass up the right sideline that Boykin was able to snag with his right hand at the LSU 33, eluding corner Donte Jackson. Boykin then broke a tackle attempt by Donte Jackson at the LSU 26 before finding a clear path to the end zone.

"Ian put it in place where only I could reach it," said Boykin, who finished with three receptions for 102 yards and a touchdown. "It was a great pass and I was just lucky enough to pull it down on one hand. I've got pretty big hands."

LSU coach Ed Orgeron said that Boykin made a great grab but lamented his defense's other struggles on the play.

"We had our best cover guy on him (Jackson) but he's a big receiver," he said after the Tigers finished the season 9-4. "We had two guys on him and missed the tackle. That's what I'm mostly disappointed with."

Book entered the game in the second quarter after Brandon Wimbush struggled. The sophomore was 14-for-19 for 164 yards with two TDs.

Lions and Bears fire head coaches

Associated Press

The Lions and Bears showed their coaches the door. Bruce Arians of the Cardinals found it himself. And Vance Joseph of the Broncos remained gainfully employed despite enduring the sort of season that doesn't go down well in Denver.

What is traditionally the NFL's biggest day for firings, "Black Monday," started with a flurry when Detroit canned Jim Caldwell and Chicago did the same to John Fox, both before noon.

"Today is the tough part of our results-oriented business," said Fox, whose teams went 14-34 and finished last in all three of his seasons in Chicago.

While Fox was let go, general manager Ryan Pace got a contract extension through the 2021 season.

Fox and Caldwell, who went 36-28 in four seasons but didn't win a playoff game, joined Jack Del Rio of the Raiders and Chuck Pagano of the Colts, whose owners didn't even wait until the calendar turned, choosing to sack them.

Arians, who has been dealing with health problems, including a bout with kidney cancer, announced he was leaving Arizona, though that was widely expected.

In a teary news conference, the 65-year-old Arians called his stay in Arizona, which included 49 victories over five seasons "a great ride." Sporting his trademark cap and toying with his grey goatee, Arians said an eye opener came over the summer when his wife told him his son, Jake, was soon to turn 40.

"It hit me like a ton of bricks, that I missed all that time," Arians said. "That's the culture. I probably wouldn't change anything."

Joseph, a rookie head coach who oversaw a 5-11 season that included an eight-game losing streak, was on the hot seat. But

his boss, John Elway, slept on it and decided to keep Joseph and not begin a search for the team's fourth coach in five years.

"We believe in Vance as our head coach," Elway tweeted. "Together, we'll put in the work to improve in all areas and win in 2018."

The Marvin Lewis situation in Cincinnati — well, it's complicated. Lewis completed his 15th season with the Bengals, and conventional wisdom held that he might not be asked to return. He met with owner Mike Brown on Monday, but no conclusions were reached. Lewis said the decision was more complicated than management simply asking him back, and that the owner and the front office need to be on the same page.

The five vacancies (six counting the Giants, who fired Bob McAdoo earlier in December) naturally triggered a flurry of speculation about which assistant coaches might be moving on to take over the teams.

Panthers defensive coordinator Steve Wilks confirmed that the Colts, Lions and Giants had asked him to interview. Patriots coordinators Josh McDaniels and Matt Patricia were, as usual, on a number of lists, and Eagles defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz was considered one of New York's top candidates.

Maybe most intriguing was the prospect of Jon Gruden leaving the broadcasting booth and returning to the Raiders. ESPN reported that Raiders owner Mark Davis was trying to lure Gruden back to the sideline with an offer that could include an ownership stake.

In Houston, Texans general manager Rick Smith said he would leave the team for at least a year while his wife, Tiffany, fights breast cancer. There had been speculation that coach Bill O'Brien might lose his job, though it appeared O'Brien would stay on.

NBA roundup

DeRozan nets 52 in Raptors' OT win

Associated Press

TORONTO — DeMar DeRozan scored a franchise-record 52 points, and the Toronto Raptors beat the Milwaukee Bucks 131-127 in overtime on Monday night, matching the team record with their 12th consecutive home victory.

DeRozan is the third player in Raptors history to score 50 or more in a single game. The others are Vince Carter and Terrence Ross, who each had 51.

"I for sure wanted to beat T-Ross," DeRozan joked about eclipsing his former teammate.

DeRozan scored the first nine points of the game and had 21 in the first, the most by a Raptors player in a single quarter this season.

"He was playing with a lot of juice," coach Dwane Casey said. "You could see the bounce in his step. Tonight, DeMar DeRozan played like a superstar."

Kyle Lowry had 26 points and Serge Ibaka added 11 for the Raptors.

DeRozan made 17 of 29 field-goal attempts and shot 13-for-

13 at the free-throw line.

Eric Bledsoe scored 29 points and Giannis Antetokounmpo had 26 for the Bucks, who had won their previous two.

Trail Blazers 124, Bulls 120 (OT): At Chicago, Portland guard C.J. McCollum scored 25 of his 32 points after halftime, including the tiebreaking basket with 56.5 seconds remaining in overtime.

Al-Farouq Aminu added a season-high 24 points and Evan Turner also had his season best with 22 for Portland.

Timberwolves 114, Lakers 96: Jimmy Butler scored 28 points, and host Minnesota won for the seventh time in eight games.

Karl-Anthony Towns recorded his 30th double-double of the season with 16 points and 13 rebounds for the Timberwolves.

Nets 98, Magic 95: Rookie Jarrett Allen had a career-high 16 points for host Brooklyn, and Allen Crabbe added 15 points and blocked a potential tying shot.

Rangers win outdoors in OT

Associated Press

NEW YORK — J.T. Miller was in the perfect spot in front of the goal to take advantage of a rebound in overtime and keep the New York Rangers perfect in four outdoor games.

Miller scored a power-play goal 2:43 into the extra period to lift the Rangers to a 3-2 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Monday in the NHL's 10th Winter Classic at Citi Field.

The Rangers went on the power play 2:15 into overtime when Jacob Josefson was whistled for tripping Jimmy Vesey. On the winner, Kevin Shattankirk fired a shot that rebounded right to Miller, who put it in.

"Fortunate to get a good shot

to the net," Miller said. "Not too often they come right on the stick like that."

Paul Carey and Michael Grabner scored in the first period for the Rangers, who improved to a league-best 4-0 in outdoor games during the season. Henrik Lundqvist stopped 31 shots to help New York improve to 6-2-3 in its past 11 overall.

"We talked about going into this game there's no way you're going to look back at this as a great memory if you don't win," said Lundqvist, who is 4-0-0 with a 1.98 goals-against average outdoors. "Now we got a big win and we can always look back at this game as a great experience."