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US-Taliban peace talks progressing

BY J.P. LAWRENCE
AND PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — If peace talks between the United States and the Taliban continue to progress, Afghans and Westerners alike will have to come to terms with a group whose societal views and bloody tactics have clashed diametrically with their own for decades.

While top U.S. negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad has publicly announced “significant progress on vital issues” and the Taliban also spoke of making headway at the end of six days of talks on Saturday, the details of troop exits, power-sharing and other points have both sides simultaneously expressing caution.

Power-sharing would require

Afghans to make undetermined concessions to the Taliban, which had previously banned music and dancing, as well as radio, television, movies, the internet and a host of other things under their interpretation of Islam.

Some in Kabul who have grown used to their freedoms say they are ready to compromise.

“People who have more cosmopolitan views realize that they have a choice between a bad and a worse situation,” said Intizar Khadim, an independent political analyst in Kabul. “They are very happy if there are no nightclubs in Kabul in exchange for it being safe.”

Intellectuals like Khadim, small business owners and women in urban areas have seen significant advances since the Taliban was overthrown in

2001. However, Khadim and two others here who spoke with Stars and Stripes agreed that the Taliban in government didn’t worry them because they don’t believe it would lead to a loss of their fundamental rights.

It’s unknown whether the Taliban would renounce a power-sharing agreement and attempt a takeover if given the opportunity. Afghanistan’s record of maintaining peace following the end of civil and international wars is poor. Nearly every government leader in the 20th century was either killed or exiled, the last of which fled from the Taliban following their takeover in 1996.

But at least one female Afghan lawmaker said the Taliban wouldn’t have enough public support. The group’s overall appeal remains relatively weak,

said Shenkai Zaheen Karokhil, a member of Afghanistan’s parliament and former ambassador to Canada. Their presence in Kabul would likely have no major impact on the lifestyles to which many Afghans have grown accustomed, she said.

However, she emphasized that any peace deal allowing their return would have to be approved by the Afghan government and not the U.S. alone. “We all support peace, but Afghans should take part in every part of the peacemaking effort. Otherwise, it is a concern,” Karokhil said.

The U.S. has repeatedly voiced similar sentiments, which highlights another sticking point of the preliminary negotiations: getting the insurgents to hold direct discussions with the government in Kabul — which they have long refused.

Navy destroyer, refueler sail through Taiwan Strait

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

A pair of Navy ships sailed through the Taiwan Strait on Thursday, about a week after a top Chinese military leader warned the United States against meddling in its relations with Taiwan.

The destroyer USS McCampbell and fleet replenishment oiler USNS Walter S. Diehl sailed through the strait “in accordance with international law,” Pacific Fleet spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Tim Gorman said Friday.

“The ships’ transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific,” he added. “The U.S. Navy will continue to fly, sail and operate anywhere international law allows.”

The action came a week after Gen. Li Zuocheng, chief of the Chinese military’s Joint Staff Department, warned the U.S. during a meeting with the U.S. Navy’s top officer not to support an independent Taiwan, according to the South China Morning Post.

“If anyone wants to separate Taiwan from China, the Chinese military will safeguard the national unity at all costs so as to protect China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity,” Li said in a Jan. 15 meeting with Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson in Beijing, according to the newspaper.

Three days later, Richardson told reporters in Tokyo that he “reiterated very clearly (to Li) that the United States is committed to the One China policy” that acknowledges Tai-

wan as part of China.

“We remain opposed to any sort of unilateral action on either side of the strait to change that status quo,” he said.

Both China and Taiwan have made military gestures in the past two weeks. Tuesday, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army flew military aircraft close to the island itself and through the channel separating the Philippines and Taiwan’s Orchid Island, according to a report Thursday on The Diplomat website.

A Chinese jet fighter and reconnaissance plane, along with other unspecified aircraft, flew through the channel, according to the report.

That demonstration by the Chinese came a week after the Taiwanese military held a large-scale, live-fire drill, ex-

ercising its ability to deter a potential Chinese invasion, the news site reported.

Such exercises and Chinese patrol flights are regular occurrences, The Diplomat reported.

The Navy’s mission Thursday was the first time its vessels have transited the Taiwan Strait this year. In 2018, the U.S. sent warships through the strait in July, November and December.

Before July 2018, a year had passed since a U.S. warship was sent through the strait.

After the Navy’s November passage through the strait, China “expressed concern” to the U.S., according to a translated transcript of a press conference with Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

South Korean president denies Trump gave a cost-sharing price

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean President Moon Jae-in on Friday dismissed reports that President Donald Trump named a specific price for maintaining U.S. troops on the divided peninsula.

Moon's comments came after the South Korean daily newspaper JoongAng Ilbo cited an unnamed source as saying Trump demanded \$1.2 billion during their summit on the sidelines of the G20 summit in November.

Moon said that Trump sometimes raises the bilateral free trade agreement and defense cost-sharing during their talks — but never specific conditions or amounts.

“Not just President Trump but no leader of any country in the world speaks in such a manner,” Moon said, according to a transcript from his office. “Such reports can be an insult to President Trump.”

Reports about the amount demanded by the United States have varied widely as senior diplomats from both sides held 10 rounds of talks last year, trying to narrow the gap.

But Trump, who is known for his unpredictable leadership style and seemingly off-the-cuff remarks and tweets, has made clear that he wants more.

The dispute threatens the foundation of the decades-old alliance between the two countries at a sensitive time since

Washington needs Seoul's help in its efforts to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons.

Many experts believe the president may use the standoff as an excuse to put troop numbers on the table during his expected summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un next month.

Moon, who has played mediator in the parallel nuclear talks, has dismissed that suggestion as well.

About 28,500 U.S. service-members are stationed in South Korea, which remains technically at war with the North after their 1950-53 conflict ended in an armistice instead of a peace treaty.

2 Guam airmen face trial on separate sex offense cases

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A pair of airmen assigned to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam face separate courts-martial there in the coming weeks for sexual and related offenses.

A trial is expected to start Feb. 11 for Tech. Sgt. Donald Frierson Jr. for the alleged 2017 sexual assault of a child in Germany, according to the Air Force court docket and a copy of his charge sheet.

In an unrelated case, Tech. Sgt. Jacory Royster is due in court Monday to start trial on charges of aggravated sexual assault, indecent language and solicitation, according to the docket and his charge sheet.

Both airmen are charged under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Trial for each man could last a week.

In Frierson's case, prosecutors allege he touched the buttocks of a 12-year-old girl through her clothing, kissed her back and touched her upper thighs.

The incidents allegedly took place between June and September 2017 at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

Frierson is attached to the 36th Communications Squadron.

In Royster's case, prosecutors allege he touched a woman's back and buttocks with his hand, through her clothes and without her consent. He also allegedly touched the woman's leg with his leg, also without her consent.

According to the charge sheet, Royster did so with “intent to gratify his sexual desire, by causing bodily harm to her.”

Royster also allegedly made sexually graphic remarks about the woman.

That incident allegedly occurred July 14 in Dededo, Guam.

NATO to boost presence in Albania

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

NATO is set to boost its presence in the western Balkans — where the West and Russia have been locked in a struggle for influence — as Albania prepares to host the alliance's first military base in the region in coming years.

U.S. and Albanian military officers on Thursday marked the first phase of the \$58 million project to modernize Kucova Air Base in central Albania and bring its facilities in line with NATO-approved standards, alliance officials said.

Serving in his role as NATO's allied air commander, Gen. Tod Wolters, who also leads U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa, attended the groundbreaking ceremony in Tirana at the Albanian Defense Ministry, where he spoke alongside Olta Xhaka, the country's de-

fense minister.

“What we anticipate over the course of the next months and years is the continuing improvement of the infrastructure and what will ultimately happen is there will be an aircraft haven at Kucova,” Wolters said in an Allied Air Command statement.

Planned improvements to the base — built with Soviet assistance in the early 1950s — include runway restoration, control tower upgrades, construction of a fighter ramp, fuel and ammunitions storage facilities, and a new crash and fire station, the statement said.

The work will support NATO air transport, logistics, air policing and training, Albanian officials have said.

The Albanian air force no longer operates fixed-wing aircraft. Since 2009, when the former communist country joined the alliance, NATO neighbors

Italy and Greece have been providing air policing over Albania.

NATO's investment in Albania comes on the heels of Xhaka's trip last spring to Washington. While meeting with then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, she said Albania wanted to host a U.S. or NATO presence to counter Russian efforts to expand its influence, as well as to balance growing interest in the region from countries such as China and Iran.

“I believe that a very strong message needs to be sent, that the Western Balkans is a Western-oriented region,” she said, according to the Pentagon's transcript of her remarks.

The region has been the scene of a battle for influence between the West and Russia, which has criticized moves to expand NATO membership in the area, claiming it threatens regional security.

Shutdown shows reliance on government

The Washington Post

President Donald Trump has repeatedly proposed gutting the federal bureaucracy, privatizing the air traffic control system and shrinking the federal workforce.

But by leading the country through the longest government shutdown in American history, he inadvertently revealed how intertwined the government is with millions of households, businesses and the entire U.S. economy.

The sharp rebuke he received from the public — and his decision Friday to reopen the government without winning concessions — could refresh a debate about the size and scale of government that has begun to frame the 2020 election.

The severe economic strain caused by the five-week shutdown forced small-government conservatives to break from Trump in a way they hadn't before. They were overwhelmed with pleas from businesses and families caught in the middle of the shutdown, far beyond just the 800,000 fed-

eral employees who hadn't been paid in a month.

The air travel system bogged down. Tax refunds appeared in jeopardy. Parts of the federal court system were preparing to close. Food stamp benefits neared expiration, and the government was running out of money to pay rent for its own agencies, let alone low-income families who receive housing benefits.

Even though the shutdown affected less than a quarter of the government's budget, White House officials said they believed it could have stalled the entire economy if it continued for much longer.

The U.S. government is projected to spend roughly \$4.5 trillion this year, a figure that represents 21 percent of the overall economy. The funding lapse affected just a small segment of that budget, and even though it broke the previous record for a funding lapse, it still lasted only 35 days.

While 800,000 federal employees weren't paid for the month, they represent a tiny fraction of the overall workforce. But their

role in the government proved integral enough to cause panic among major U.S. businesses and industries, who pleaded with policymakers in recent days to back down.

Both political parties are in the midst of a fierce debate about the proper size and scale of government. Trump has proposed deep cuts to agency budgets, particularly at agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, but he has actually expanded the government's budget markedly in the past two years.

Democrats, meanwhile, are wrestling with how much bigger they want the government to grow. Some have called for dramatically expanding access to federal health care, college assistance programs and other benefits in a way that expands government spending even more.

The debates in both parties had been mostly theoretical and were expected to intensify during political campaigns next year, but that could change if the public views the role of government differently after the shutdown.

Dozen immigrant workers at Trump golf course fired

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A dozen immigrant workers at one of President Donald Trump's golf clubs in New York who are in the U.S. illegally were fired this month even though managers had known about their legal status for years, a lawyer for the workers said Saturday.

As the president railed during the partial government shutdown against immigrants coming into the country illegally, a manager at the Trump National Golf Club in Westchester County called a dozen immigrant workers into a room one by one Jan. 18 and fired them, said lawyer Anibal Romero.

Many of them had worked at the club for a dozen or more years, he said, and managers knew they had submitted phony documents but looked the other way.

The firings come after workers at another Trump club in New Jersey came forward last month to say managers there had hired them knowing they

were in the country illegally, and had even helped one obtain phony documents.

The crackdown at the New York club was first reported by *The Washington Post*.

The Associated Press left messages with The Trump Organization seeking comment. Eric Trump depicted the firings to the Post as a normal course of business.

"We are making a broad effort to identify any employee who has given false and fraudulent documents to unlawfully gain employment," he said.

Trump turned over day-to-day management of his business to Eric and his other adult son, Donald Jr., when he took the oath of office two years ago. The Trump Organization owns or manages 17 golf clubs around the world.

Romero, who also represents immigrant workers at Trump's golf course in Bedminster, N.J., said he has called New York state authorities and the FBI to look into hiring practices at the New York club.

Suspect in Louisiana deaths caught in Va.

Associated Press

WARSAW, Va. — A man suspected of killing his parents and three other people — including a girl he was dating — was arrested Sunday when he showed up at his grandmother's house in Virginia, a sheriff there said.

On Saturday, Dakota Theriot, 21, allegedly shot and killed three people — the woman believed to be his girlfriend, her brother and her father — in Louisiana's Livingston Parish before taking her father's truck, driving to neighboring Ascension Parish and shooting his parents, authorities said.

Theriot's grandmother, who lives in Warsaw, Va., had checked into a hotel Saturday because she feared he might show up at her house, Richmond County Sheriff Stephan B. Smith said in a phone interview. The woman asked authorities to check her home Sunday to make sure it was safe before she returned.

While deputies were there,

Smith said, Theriot drove up. He had a gun on him but he dropped it and was taken into custody without incident, Smith said.

Authorities identified the victims in Livingston Parish as Billy Ernest, 43; Tanner Ernest, 17; and Summer Ernest, 20. Livingston Parish Sheriff Jason Ard said Summer Ernest and Theriot were in a relationship.

Authorities earlier identified the other two victims as Theriot's parents — Keith Theriot, 50, and Elizabeth Theriot, also 50, of Gonzales.

They were shot in their trailer on Saturday morning.

"The father was gravely injured at the time we found him and has since passed away," Ascension Parish Sheriff Bobby Webre said late Saturday. But before he died, Webre said authorities were able to get a "dying declaration from him, and only enough information to let us know that it was his son that committed this act."

Amid tensions, world remembers 1.1M killed at WWII death camp

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — The world marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day on Sunday amid a revival of hate-inspired violence and signs that younger generations know less and less about the genocide of Jews, Roma and others during World War II.

In Poland, which was under Nazi German occupation during the war, a far-right activist who has been imprisoned for burning the effigy of a Jew gathered with other nationalists Sunday outside the former death camp of Auschwitz ahead of official ceremonies remembering the 1.1 million people murdered there.

Since last year's observances, a French Holocaust survivor, Mireille Knoll, 85, was fatally stabbed in Paris and 11 Jews were gunned down in a Pittsburgh synagogue during Shabbat services, the deadliest attack on Jews in U.S. history.

Human Rights First, a U.S. organization, recalled those

killings and warned that "today's threats do not come solely from the fringe."

"In places such as Hungary and Poland, once proudly democratic nations, government leaders are traveling the road to authoritarianism," said Ira Forman, the group's senior adviser for combating anti-Semitism. "As they do so, they are distorting history to spin a fable about their nations and the Holocaust."

Polish nationalist Piotr Rybak said his group was protesting the official observances at Auschwitz, claiming they remember only murdered Jews and not murdered Poles.

That accusation is incorrect. The observances at the state-run memorial site pay homage each Jan. 27 to all of the camp's victims, both Jews and gentiles.

Counterprotesters at Auschwitz on Sunday held up a "Fascism Stop" sign and an Israeli flag, while police kept the two groups apart.

Former Auschwitz prisoners placed flowers Sunday at an execution wall at Auschwitz. They wore striped scarves that recalled their uniforms, some with the red letter "P," the symbol the Germans used to mark them as Poles.

In Germany, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warned in an op-ed in the weekly *Welt am Sonntag* that across Europe populists are propagating nationalism and "far-right provocateurs are trying to downplay the Holocaust."

"We shall never forget. We shall never be indifferent. We must stand up for our liberal democracy," Maas wrote.

Over the past year, Germany has seen a rising number of often violent attacks against Jews carried out by neo-Nazis and Muslims, prompting the government to appoint a commissioner against anti-Semitism and to start funding a national registration office for anti-Semitic hate crimes.

Philippine cathedral bombing kills at least 20

Associated Press

JOLO, Philippines — Two bombs that exploded minutes apart tore through a Roman Catholic cathedral on a southern Philippine island where Muslim militants are active, killing at least 20 people and wounding 111 others during a Sunday Mass, officials said.

Witnesses said the first blast inside the Jolo cathedral in the provincial capital sent churchgoers, some of them wounded, to stampede out the main door. Army troops and police posted outside were rushing in when the second bomb went off about a minute later near the main entrance, causing more deaths and injuries. The military was checking a report that the second explosive device may have been attached to a parked motorcycle.

The initial explosion scattered the wooden pews inside the main hall and blasted window glass panels, and the second bomb hurled human remains and debris across a town square fronting the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, witnesses said. Cellphone signals were cut off in the first hours after the attack.

Police said at least 20 people died and 111 were wounded, correcting an earlier toll due to double counting. The fatalities included 15 civilians and five soldiers.

Troops in armored carriers sealed off the main road leading to the church while vehicles transported the dead and wounded to the town hospital. Some casualties were evacuated by air to nearby Zamboanga city.

"We will pursue to the ends of the earth the ruthless perpetrators behind this dastardly crime until every killer is brought to justice and put behind bars. The law will give them no mercy," the office of President Rodrigo Duterte said in Manila.

US diplomats allowed to remain in Venezuela

Associated Press

Venezuela defused a potential showdown with the United States, suspending a demand that U.S. diplomats leave the country as Washington called on the world to "pick a side" in the South American nation's fast-moving crisis.

Socialist President Nicolas Maduro broke relations with the United States on Wednesday after the Trump administration and many other nations in the region recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as Venezuela's interim president, a move that Maduro called a coup attempt.

Maduro gave U.S. diplomats three days to leave the country, but the Trump administration said it wouldn't obey, arguing that Maduro is no longer

Venezuela's legitimate president. That set the stage for a showdown at the hilltop U.S. Embassy compound Saturday night, when the deadline was to expire.

But as the sun set on Venezuela's capital, the Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying Maduro's government was suspending the expulsion to provide a 30-day window for negotiating with U.S. officials about setting up a "U.S. interests office" in Venezuela and a similar Venezuelan office in the United States.

The State Department did not confirm the Venezuelan government's account, reiterating only that its priority remains the safety of its personnel and that it has no plans to close the embassy.

In the Security Council

meeting, critics and supporters of Maduro's government faced off in a reflection of the world's deep divisions over Venezuela, which is mired in political confrontation as well as an economic collapse that has caused millions to flee the country.

During the debate, which was requested by the U.S., Pompeo urged all nations to end Venezuela's "nightmare" and support Guaido.

Russian Ambassador Vasily Nebenzia charged that the Trump administration is trying "to engineer a coup" against Maduro. He said Venezuela doesn't threaten international peace and security, and he accused "extremist opponents" of Maduro's government of choosing "maximum confrontation," including the artificial creation of a parallel government.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Grizzly bites Denver Zoo employee's finger

CO DENVER — An employee at the Denver Zoo was treated at a hospital after a grizzly bear bit his finger.

Zoo spokesman Jake Kubie told The Denver Post the “bear keeper” was bitten Friday afternoon while the grizzly was in a secure and enclosed area.

The zoo has two rescued grizzly bears, Tundra and Kootenai. Kubie could not say which bear bit the keeper.

Tree falls on mother during trip to LA Zoo

CA LOS ANGELES — A woman is recovering from a broken rib after she was struck and trapped by a falling tree during her family's trip to the Los Angeles Zoo.

It happened Tuesday at a time when gusty winds were knocking down trees throughout the Los Angeles area.

Maria Martinez, of Huntington Park, told KNBC-TV she took her three kids to the zoo because she had a day off and there was a teachers' strike. The falling pine tree briefly knocked her unconscious.

Her 11-year-old son and two other people were treated for less serious injuries.

Cruise ship freed from beneath rail bridge

NY TROY — An unoccupied Hudson River cruise ship that broke loose from its moorings amid rising water and ice jams has been freed from beneath a rail bridge in Albany.

The four-deck Captain J.P. III cruise ship and six other vessels drifted downriver from Troy toward Albany early Fri-

day, temporarily closing five vehicle bridges during morning rush hour.

The 300-foot cruise vessel was stuck for hours beneath a railroad bridge connecting Albany and Rensselaer, prompting Amtrak to reduce speeds over the span. Two Coast Guard ice-breaking cutters and two commercial tug boats worked to pull it free.

Teen shares peanut butter with workers

VA WOODBRIDGE — A Virginia teen with autism shared his supply of peanut butter with federal workers who are furloughed like his father.

The Washington Post reported that Eric McKay, 15, and his family gave away several peanut butter jars Wednesday.

Food sensitivity isn't uncommon for people with autism. Eric's preferences include peanut butter and English muffins. His mother, Tracy McKay, said he goes through a jar every three days.

Lidl bestowed a lifetime supply of their store-branded peanut butter on the teen when he met the company's challenge to get 72,000 retweets.

Inauguration cannon fire causes uproar

ID BOISE — Idaho National Guard's commanding officer said he will look into 19 startlingly loud ceremonial cannon blasts that were part of Gov. Brad Little's inauguration.

The cannon fire on Jan. 4 set off car alarms in downtown Boise and scattered Canada geese into the air as smoke billowed around soldiers. Some of the several thousand people attending flinched in surprise.

Magician charged with assaulting students

MA WEYMOUTH — Massachusetts State Police arrested a magician they said inappropriately touched three students during magic classes.

The Plymouth district attorney's office said David Hussey, 52, was arrested at his Weymouth home Wednesday and charged with indecent assault and battery. Hussey, who uses the stage name David Oliver, pleaded not guilty.

Prosecutors allege Hussey assaulted the young victims during magic classes at his Rockland home in the early 2000s while he was a member of the Society of Young Magicians.

Steer sets record at stock show auction

CO DENVER — Officials said a prize-winning steer was auctioned for a record-setting amount at the National Western Stock Show in Denver.

Ames Construction Co. made a winning bid of \$150,000 for the Grand Champion Steer at Friday night's auction of junior competitors' livestock. Kutter Bland, 17, from Slanton, Texas, showed the 1,339-pound steer, named Bob. The auction sales of eight champion animals totaled \$480,000.

Police: Driver drunk on vanilla extract

CT NEW CANAAN — Police said a woman charged with driving under the influence was drunk on vanilla extract, which contains a significant amount of alcohol.

Hearst Connecticut Media reported that New Canaan police

found Stefanie Warner-Grise, 50, sitting in a car at an intersection with her eyes closed about 4:45 p.m. Wednesday.

Officers said they found several bottles of pure vanilla extract inside her vehicle. They said they detected an odor of vanilla on her breath, her speech was slurred and she was unable to answer basic questions.

Clabber Girl sign back after paint job

IN TERRE HAUTE — A Clabber Girl baking powder billboard that's been a western Indiana landmark since the 1930s is shining again following a restoration.

Crews installed the 80-year-old billboard's freshly painted yellow and red panels Jan. 21 along U.S. 40 on Terre Haute's east side.

The billboard still lacks trim work and its electric clock, but they'll be reinstalled soon following their own restoration work.

Bill introduced to ban dwarf-tossing

WA OLYMPIA — Bars and strip clubs in Washington state would be barred from holding dwarf-tossing contests under a bill introduced by a Spokane Valley legislator.

The Spokesman-Review reported the Deja Vu Showgirls strip club in the Spokane Valley and a Seattle club sponsored such events last year.

Republican Sen. Mike Padden brought the bill after he was contacted by a medical student who has dwarfism about the potential harm the contests can cause. Under the bill, a bar or strip club that allows such a contest could lose its business license and face a \$1,000 fine.

From wire reports

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Rams' Gurley doesn't care about touches

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Todd Gurley is a serious sports fan who loves going to the Super Bowl each winter, attending all of the decadent parties and soaking up the game-day atmosphere.

The Los Angeles Rams' superstar running back will miss out on most of those wild parties this year in Atlanta, but he doesn't mind too much.

"I'm used to going to the Super Bowl, being with my boys, hanging out," Gurley said. "But we actually get a chance to play in it this year, so it's cool, man. It's a great feeling. We're all happy. I'm happy. It's no better feeling than how we're feeling right now."

The Rams (15-3) want Gurley to be more than a spectator against the New England Patriots, and they'll probably need much more from the 2017 Offensive Player of the Year than he was able to provide in his unusually quiet NFC championship game.

Gurley is not a boastful person in most public settings, but

he is confident in his ability to finish the season with a bang. He also insists he doesn't mind if C.J. Anderson or somebody else does his job, as long as the Rams are all getting rings.

"We're all going to have our downs, but you enjoy it even more when you do something great, or you have that success," Gurley said. "I know who I am. I'm comfortable with myself. I'm the best. I'm the best at my position. I've been that way all my whole life, so it's like I'm going to keep striving. I know what I can do."

Nobody saw it in New Orleans, where Gurley made almost no impact on the Rams' 26-23 overtime victory. The highest-paid running back in NFL history touched the ball only five times, albeit scoring a TD on one of those touches, rushing just four times and failing to catch two of the three passes intended for him.

He was mostly a spectator down the stretch while watching Anderson, the veteran running back acquired by Los Angeles to fill in while Gurley missed the final two games of

the regular season with a knee injury.

Unlike some elite running backs, Gurley has repeatedly said he doesn't care how many touches he gets as long as the Rams are winning. He appears to have a harmonious vibe with Anderson, who predicts a bounce-back performance by Gurley in the Super Bowl.

He also still remembers the Rams' miserable 4-12 season in 2016, when his ability was widely questioned. Being one part of a winning team is infinitely more appealing than being a star on a loser.

"This whole game is bigger than me," Gurley said. "It's not just about me. Why is Todd not getting the ball? Why is that? Because there's only one football and there's 11 guys."

Still, Gurley is a major reason why the Rams were in position to reach the Super Bowl in the first place, thanks to his latest outstanding regular season. He finished third in the league with 1,251 yards rushing and racked up an NFL-best 21 touchdowns, excelling as a runner and a receiver for the

second straight year in Sean McVay's offense.

But Gurley's up-and-down form and usage since early December has been surprising and potentially troublesome for the Rams.

Although he was effective as a receiver, Gurley managed just 76 combined yards rushing in his final two regular-season games in early December before sitting out the Rams' last two games. He returned with a 115-yard rushing game against Dallas in the divisional playoff round, but Anderson put up 123 yards — and then Gurley barely factored in the Rams' game plan in New Orleans.

McVay has attempted to take the blame for this series of quiet performances by his franchise running back.

"Any time that you have a player like Todd Gurley on your team, I've got to do a better job of getting him involved and getting him into the flow of the game," McVay said this week, lamenting Gurley's lack of touches against the Saints. "That's something that I have to be accountable for."

Pats controlling clock, third downs in playoffs

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Throughout the Patriots' run of playoff success under Bill Belichick, one of his best-known attributes has been his ability to craft game plans that have stumped their opponents.

He's at it again.

This postseason New England's best offensive weapon has been finding ways to keep the ball out of the hands of its opponents.

In wins over the Kansas City Chiefs and Los Angeles Chargers, the Patriots used a commitment to the run game and efficiency on third down to dominate time of possession.

The Patriots held a nearly 17-minute advantage in their divisional-round win over the Chargers, while going 7 of 14 on third down and racking up 155 yards rushing. It was more of the same in the AFC championship game against the Chiefs, with New England possessing the ball more than 23 minutes longer than KC, going 13 of 19 on third down (68 percent) and rushing for 176

yards.

Rookie Sony Michel shined in both games, rushing for 129 yards and three touchdowns against Los Angeles and 113 yards and two scores against the Chiefs.

"You have got to try to keep them off balance and got to make them think it is one thing and try to do something else, it is even hard then," Belichick said of the approach against Kansas City. "You cannot sit there and do the same thing all night."

The result in both games was fewer possessions for Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers and Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, forcing both to play hurry-up in the second half as they tried to erase early deficits.

The Patriots opened the game against the Chargers with a 14-play, 83-yard drive that ate up more than seven minutes and ended with a touchdown. New England would go on to score on each of its first four possessions to build a 35-7 halftime lead. It put Los Angeles in scramble mode for the rest of the game.

New England made Kansas City pay for deferring the opening kickoff in the AFC championship game, opening the game with a 15-play, 80-yard drive and touchdown. It took 8 minutes, 5 seconds off the clock, making it the Patriots' longest opening drive in the playoffs under Belichick.

Tom Brady said it was the perfect equalizer to the hostile environment of Arrowhead Stadium.

"You play on the road, it is going to be tough. What travels is running the ball and playing tough," he said. "That is good in any weather, any condition, any environment and any stadium."

The 37-31 overtime win over the Chiefs was just the third road victory for Brady in the conference title game in six tries. While the Super Bowl will be played on a neutral field, the Patriots are hoping to duplicate that formula against Jared Goff and the Rams. Los Angeles averaged 32.9 points per game during the regular season and held the ball an average of 30 minutes, 42 seconds per game.

Djokovic routs Nadal for Aussie title

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Novak Djokovic was so good, so relentless, so flawless, that Rafael Nadal never stood a chance.

Djokovic reduced one of the greats of the game to merely another outclassed opponent — just a guy, really — and one so out of sorts that Nadal even whiffed on one of his famous forehands entirely.

In a breathtakingly mistake-free performance that yielded a remarkably lopsided result, the No. 1-ranked Djokovic overwhelmed Nadal 6-3, 6-2, 6-3 on Sunday night to win a record seventh Australian Open championship and a third consecutive Grand Slam title, raising his count to 15 overall.

“Under the circumstances,” Djokovic said, “it was truly a perfect match.”

No one who saw it would disagree.

Djokovic’s coach, Marian Vajda, said: “I would describe it as dominance.”

Nadal’s take? “An amazing level of tennis.”

“Unbelievable,” said Nadal’s

coach, Carlos Moya. “Novak probably could have won, no matter who the opponent was.”

That Djokovic would produce 34 winners and only nine unforced errors was impressive enough. That it came against Nadal — who is ranked No. 2, owns 17 major trophies himself and hadn’t dropped a set in the tournament — was hard to comprehend.

Djokovic left Nadal smirking or gritting his teeth or punching his racket strings, unable to compete at all.

Here’s how Nadal explained it: To have a chance when Djokovic plays that well, something extra is required. Given that he’s coming off a series of injuries, given that he hadn’t played since the U.S. Open last September, Nadal couldn’t raise his game.

Then again, Nadal conceded, “When the player did almost everything better than you, you can’t complain much.”

So Djokovic added to previous triumphs in Melbourne in 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016, along with four titles at Wimbledon, three at the U.S. Open and

one at the French Open.

He broke his tie with Roger Federer and Roy Emerson for most Australian Open men’s titles. He also broke a tie with his idol, Pete Sampras, for third-most Grand Slam trophies; Djokovic now only trails Federer, with 20, and Nadal.

And he is gaining on them.

Then there’s this tidbit: Djokovic is the only man in tennis history to have a trio of three-straight-Slam streaks.

So let the talk begin about four majors in a row over two seasons, something Djokovic already managed to do from 2015-16. And, what’s more, about a true Grand Slam, winning all four majors in one calendar year, which only has been done by two men, Donald Budge in 1938 and Rod Laver in 1962 and 1969.

“I am aware that making history of the sport that I truly love is something special,” the 31-year-old Serb said. “Of course, it motivates me.”

He surprised even himself with the way he recovered after problems with his right elbow derailed him.

Djokovic sat out the last half of 2017. He tried to come back at the start of 2018 but was hampered by the elbow and lost in the fourth round in Melbourne. Soon after, he decided to have surgery.

All that is in the past.

He is again at an elite level. If anything, the gap between him and the rest is growing right now.

A year ago, could he have envisioned being here now?

“Not impossible, but highly unlikely. I don’t want to sound arrogant, but I always believe in myself,” Djokovic said. “I think that’s probably the biggest secret of my success.”

Djokovic and Nadal know each other, their styles and their patterns all too well. This was their 53rd meeting — more than any other pair of men in the half-century professional era — and record-equaling 15th at a Grand Slam tournament. It was also their eighth matchup in a major final.

Nadal could make no headway on this day. Djokovic won each of the initial 16 points he served and 25 of the first 26.

Crosby, Lundqvist lead team to All-Star win

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Sidney Crosby now has one more reason to have good memories of the Shark Tank.

Crosby had two goals and three assists to win the All-Star MVP, and Henrik Lundqvist pitched a first-half shutout to lead the Metropolitan Division to a 10-5 victory over the Central Division in the championship round of the NHL All-Star game Saturday night.

Crosby finished the night with four goals and four assists in two games on the same ice where he won the Conn Smythe Trophy and Stanley Cup three years ago for Pittsburgh.

“I have some great memories here for sure,” he said. “It’s always been a tough place to play.

Obviously, when you win in a rink and have those memories, it’s something you think about every time you go there. Being in that dressing room, it’s automatic to bring you back to some of those moments.”

The memories aren’t nearly as sweet for the Sharks fans, who booed Crosby when he won the award, joining Wayne Gretzky, Mario Lemieux, Bobby Orr, Joe Sakic and Jean Beliveau as the only players to win the Conn Smyth, the Hart Trophy and All-Star MVP.

“It’s cool,” Crosby said. “You play and you watch as a kid growing up and you see that presentation so it’s pretty cool. I had a lot of fun today.”

Lundqvist stopped 11 of 13 shots in his two games to give the Metropolitan Division its

second title in four years of the three-on-three All-Star format and the \$1 million prize shared by the winners of the four-team divisional tournament.

Mathew Barzal of the New York Islanders added two goals and three assists in the final game.

Mikko Rantanen had two goals and Colorado teammate Gabriel Landeskog added one for the Central. Landeskog finished with four goals and three assists, while Rantanen had four goals and two assists.

“There’s more pace obviously when it’s the final and there’s a million dollars on the line. A lot of guys were going a little bit harder but it’s good for the fans,” Rantanen said. “Just too bad that we were not that ready to play.”

Crosby assisted on Barzal’s goal against Devan Dubnyk just 22 seconds into the championship game and then made it 5-0 in the closing seconds of the first half off a pass from Barzal. Crosby also assisted on Pittsburgh teammate Kris Letang’s goal in the first half and then helped seal the game with a goal in the second half that made it 6-2.

Lundqvist made big saves against Landeskog and Claude Giroux in the period one night after winning the save streak competition in the skills challenge.

“It was good defense, good structure,” Lundqvist said. “That helps, especially three on three.”

College basketball roundup

Kentucky rolls past Kansas

Associated Press

LEXINGTON, Ky. — PJ Washington and No. 8 Kentucky hit the glass hard against No. 9 Kansas.

It worked.

Washington scored 14 of his 20 points in the second half, and the Wildcats beat the Jayhawks 71-63 on Saturday in the SEC-Big 12 Challenge.

Washington, Reid Travis and Keldon Johnson powered Kentucky to a 49-36 rebounding advantage. Washington grabbed 13 boards, Travis had 18 points and 12 rebounds, and Johnson also posted a double-double with 15 points and 10 rebounds.

Illinois 78, No. 13 Maryland 67: Ayo Dosunmu scored 20 points, Tevian Jones had 18 and Illinois beat Maryland at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Andres Feliz had 15 points for the Fighting Illini (6-14, 2-7 Big Ten), who snapped a two-game skid by handing the Terrapins their second straight conference loss.

Bruno Fernando led Maryland (16-5, 7-3) with 19 points and 10 rebounds. Anthony Cowan Jr. had 18 points and Jalen Smith finished with 11.

No. 25 LSU 86, Missouri 80 (OT): Skylar Mays scored 11 of his 24 points in the last three minutes of regulation, and LSU overcame a 14-point deficit in the final 2:08 to force overtime in a win at Missouri.

Ja'Vonte Smart made two three-pointers in OT and scored 14 points for LSU (16-3, 6-0 Southeastern Conference). Naz Reid also had 14 points.

No. 22 Mississippi State 92, No. 16 Auburn 84: Quindary Weatherspoon scored 27 points, leading host Mississippi State.

The Tigers and the Bulldogs (15-4, 3-3 Southeastern Conference) were locked in a tight game for much of the second half before Mississippi State broke a 70-70 tie with Weatherspoon's three-pointer and Reggie Perry's dunk in quick

succession.

No. 10 Virginia Tech 78, Syracuse 56: Justin Robinson scored 24 of his career-high 35 points in the first half, powering the host Hokies.

Virginia Tech (16-3, 5-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) used a 20-5 run to open a 34-16 lead. Robinson had 12 points in the surge as the Hokies led by as many as 22 on their way to a 43-24 halftime lead.

No. 1 Tennessee 83, West Virginia 66: Lamonte' Turner had 23 points and the host Volunteers held the Mountaineers scoreless for a 9 ½-minute stretch.

Tennessee (18-1) erased its first double-digit deficit of the season and took command by ending the first half on a 24-2 run and scoring the first four points of the second half. That put the Volunteers on track for their 14th consecutive victory in the school's longest win streak since it opened the 1922-23 season with 14 straight wins.

No. 2 Duke 66, Georgia Tech 53: RJ Barrett had 24 points and 11 rebounds, and the host Blue Devils pulled away for the victory.

Zion Williamson added 22 points to help Duke (17-2, 6-1 Atlantic Coast Conference) win its 12th in a row in the series with the Yellow Jackets.

The Blue Devils finished a season-worst 2-for-21 from three-point range but hit 52 percent from the field in the second half to win their lowest-scoring game of the year.

No. 3 Virginia 82, Notre Dame 55: De'Andre Hunter scored 19 points to lead the Cavaliers to the road win.

Virginia shot 52.2 from the field in its second straight victory since a 72-70 loss at Duke on Jan. 19. Kyle Guy, Indiana's 2016 Mr. Basketball at Lawrence Central near Indianapolis, had 15 points. Ty Jerome added 13 points, and Kihei Clark finished with 12.

The Cavs (18-1, 6-1 Atlantic

Coast Conference) dominated the boards 45-33 and committed just two turnovers.

No. 21 North Carolina State 69, Clemson 67: Braxton Beverly hit a buzzer-beating three-pointer to lift the Wolfpack to a dramatic home win.

North Carolina State (16-4, 4-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) trailed by six with 26.5 seconds left, but the Tigers missed four straight free throws to keep the door ajar.

No. 12 Marquette 87, Xavier 82: Markus Howard scored 19 of his 31 points down the stretch to help the Golden Eagles rally on the road for their seventh consecutive win.

Joey Hauser added 21 points for Marquette (18-3, 7-1 Big East).

No. 14 Texas Tech 67, Arkansas 64: Davide Moretti had 21 points, and the Red Raiders stopped a three-game slide.

Moretti's two free throws with five seconds left sealed the SEC/Big 12 Challenge game for the Texas Tech (16-4) after its double-digit lead was trimmed to two with a minute left. The Red Raiders didn't make another field goal after Norense Odiase's dunk made it 60-48 with 7:41 left.

No. 24 Iowa State 87, No. 20 Mississippi 73: Talen Horton-Tucker scored 23 points and Lindell Wigginton had 18, leading the Cyclones to a road win in the SEC/Big 12 Challenge.

Iowa State (15-5) put on an offensive show, making 13 straight shots during the second half to turn a tight game into a relatively easy victory. The Cyclones shot 69.1 percent from the field, including nearly 77 percent in the second half.

No. 23 Louisville 66, Pittsburgh 51: Jordan Nwora scored 17 points to help the host Cardinals avenge their only conference loss this season.

Louisville (15-5, 6-1 Atlantic Coast Conference) shot just 39 percent, but its strong defense shut down the Panthers (12-8, 2-5) in the second half.

NBA Roundup

Warriors win 10th straight

Associated Press

BOSTON — Kevin Durant had 33 points and nine rebounds, Stephen Curry scored 24 points and Klay Thompson had 21, including two key free throws for Golden State on Saturday night to beat the Boston Celtics 115-111 and give the Warriors their 10th win in a row.

Kyrie Irving scored 32 points with 10 assists and Al Horford had 22 points and 13 rebounds for Boston, which had won five straight and 10 in a row at home.

In a game that featured 21 lead changes, the Warriors took a 113-111 lead with 47 seconds left on Thompson's only free throws of the game.

Spurs 126, Pelicans 114: LaMarcus Aldridge played through a sore left wrist and finished with 28 points and 12 rebounds, leading visiting San Antonio over depleted New Orleans.

Rudy Gay had 22 points, including 11 in the third quarter, and 11 rebounds to help San Antonio snap a two-game skid.

Grizzlies 106, Pacers 103: Mike Conley had 22 points and 11 assists, Jaren Jackson Jr. added 20 points and host Memphis beat Indiana to end an eight-game losing streak. Marc Gasol added 18 points for Memphis, which had lost 14 of its last 15 games.

Nuggets 126, 76ers 110: Nikola Jokic posted his seventh triple-double of the season in his return from a one-game suspension and host Denver beat the short-handed Philadelphia. Jokic finished with 32 points, 18 rebounds and 10 assists.

Trail Blazers 120, Hawks 111: CJ McCollum had 28 points, 10 assists and 10 rebounds for his first career triple-double, leading Portland past visiting Atlanta.