

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

US rejects request for troop removal

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraq's caretaker prime minister asked Washington to start working out a road map for an American troop withdrawal, but the U.S. State Department on Friday bluntly rejected the request, saying the sides should instead talk about how to "recommit" to their partnership.

Thousands of anti-government protesters gathered in the capital and southern Iraq, many calling on both Iran and America to leave Iraq, reflecting anger and frustration over the two rivals — both Baghdad's allies — trading blows on Iraqi soil.

The request from Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi pointed to his determination to push ahead with demands for U.S. troops to leave Iraq, stoked by the American drone strike on Jan. 3 that killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani. In a phone call Thursday night, he told U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that recent U.S. strikes in Iraq were an unacceptable breach of Iraqi sovereignty and a violation of their security agreements, his office said.

He asked Pompeo to "send delegates to Iraq to prepare a mechanism" to carry out the

Iraqi Parliament's resolution on withdrawing foreign troops, according to the statement.

"The prime minister said American forces had entered Iraq and drones are flying in its airspace without permission from Iraqi authorities, and this was a violation of the bilateral agreements," the statement added.

Abdul-Mahdi signaled he was standing by the push for the American forces to go despite recent signs of de-escalation between Tehran and Washington after Iran retaliated for Soleimani's death with a barrage of missiles that hit two Iraqi bases where U.S. troops are based but caused no casualties.

Iraqis have felt furious and helpless at being caught in the middle of fighting between Baghdad's two closest allies. Abdul-Mahdi has said he rejects all violations of Iraqi sovereignty, including both the Iranian and U.S. strikes.

On Friday, the U.S. State Department flatly dismissed the request. It said the presence of U.S. troops was crucial for the fight against the Islamic State group and it would not discuss removing them.

"Any delegation sent to Iraq would be dedicated to discussing how to best recommit to

our strategic partnership — not to discuss troop withdrawal, but our right, appropriate force posture in the Middle East," said spokesperson Morgan Ortagus.

"We want to be a friend and partner to a sovereign, prosperous, and stable Iraq," she added.

Iraqi lawmakers passed a resolution Sunday to oust U.S. troops, following the Jan. 3 U.S. drone strike that killed Soleimani and senior Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis at Baghdad's airport. The nonbinding vote put the responsibility on the government to formally request a withdrawal. Abdul-Mahdi, addressing lawmakers at the time, called for "urgent measures" to ensure the removal of the troops.

Speaking to Pompeo, Abdul-Mahdi stopped short of requesting an immediate withdrawal and appeared to give the U.S. time to draw up a strategy and timeline for departure.

In its initial readout of the call, the State Department made no mention of Abdul-Mahdi's request on the troops. It said Pompeo initiated the call and reiterated the U.S. condemnation of the Iranian missile strikes on the two bases, underscoring that President

Donald Trump "has said the United States will do whatever it takes to protect the American and Iraqi people and defend our collective interests."

There are some 5,200 U.S. troops in Iraq assisting and providing training to Iraqi security counter-parts to fight the Islamic State group. An American pullout could deeply set back efforts to crush remnants of the group amid concerns of a resurgence amid the political turmoil.

Ortagus also said the State Department was in talks with NATO to increase its role in Iraq. Trump has invited NATO to play a larger role in the Middle East.

Still, the demand for withdrawal is not universal. Sunni and Kurdish lawmakers oppose the Parliament resolution. The Sunnis see the U.S. presence as a bulwark against domination by the majority Shiites and Iran, while the Kurdish security forces had benefited from American training and aid.

The latest escalation between Tehran and Washington on Iraqi soil was set off when a rocket attack blamed on the Iranian-backed militia group Kataeb Hezbollah caused the death of an American contractor at a base in Kirkuk province in late December.

US sets new sanctions on Iran after missile strikes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration on Friday announced a new wave of sanctions on Iran following this week's missile strikes by the Islamic Republic on U.S. bases in Iraq.

Secretary of State Mike Pom-

peo and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the new sanctions will target eight senior Iranian officials involved in "destabilizing" activities in the Middle East as well as Tuesday's missile strike, which came in retaliation for the U.S. killing of a senior Iranian general in a drone strike.

Mnuchin said President Donald Trump will issue an executive order imposing sanctions on anyone involved in the Iranian textile, construction, manufacturing or mining sectors. They will also impose separate sanctions against the steel and iron sectors.

"As a result of these actions

we will cut off billions of dollars of support to the Iranian regime," Mnuchin said.

The administration has already reinstated all the U.S. sanctions that were eased under the 2015 nuclear deal, which has caused significant economic hardship in Iran.

AFRICOM orders officers to Kenya to probe attack

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. Africa Command's Gen. Stephen Townsend has dispatched a team to Kenya to investigate the terrorist attack that left one soldier and two American contractors dead.

"I want ground truth to assess the situation and hear from the troops to ensure they have what they need to accomplish their mission," Townsend said in a statement.

Senior U.S. Africa Command officials on Thursday visited Camp Simba and the nearby Manda Bay Airfield, which was the scene of Sunday's assault by al-Shabab militants. AFRICOM sent a quick-reaction force out of Djibouti to Kenya in the wake of the attack to bolster security.

The AFRICOM contingent that Townsend sent to Kenya includes Maj. Gen. Michael Turello, who leads the Djibouti-based Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, and AFRICOM's head of logistics, Brig. Gen. Leonard Kosinski. AFRICOM's acting senior enlisted leader Master Chief Ryan Burton and an investigating officer also are part of the team, AFRICOM said.

The military sites in coastal Kenya support U.S. operations in Somalia, where al-Shabab fighters have waged an insurgency for more than a decade. While the al-Qaida-aligned militants have most often attacked Somalia's government and military, they occasionally launch high-profile assaults in neighboring countries, including Kenya.

On Sunday, insurgents overran the Kenyan military's Manda Bay Airfield used by U.S. forces, AFRICOM said.

Kenyan and U.S. troops eventually repelled the militants, but Army Spc. Henry Mayfield Jr., 23, was killed during the clash. Also killed was Defense Department contractor Dustin Johnson, a pilot, and another contractor whose name has not been made public.

"Their sacrifices will never be forgotten," Townsend said.

Five U.S. aircraft were destroyed and one was damaged during the attack. Six contractor-operated civilian aircraft were also damaged, AFRICOM said.

Townsend is slated to testify this month before Congress about the security situation in Africa. He will likely face tough questions about the Kenya battle. In October 2017, the death of four U.S. soldiers in Niger also prompted investigations and questions from Congress about the role of American troops in Africa.

US targeted Iranian in Yemen on day they killed Soleimani

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — On the day the U.S. military killed a top Iranian commander in Baghdad, U.S. forces carried out another top secret mission against a senior Iranian military official in Yemen, according to U.S. officials.

The strike targeting Abdul Reza Shahlai, a financier and key commander of Iran's elite Quds Force who has been active in Yemen, did not result in his death, according to four U.S. officials familiar with the matter.

The unsuccessful operation may indicate that the Trump administration's killing of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani last week was part of a broader operation than previously explained, raising questions about whether the mission was designed to cripple the leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or solely to prevent an imminent attack on Americans as originally stated.

U.S. military operations in Yemen, where a civil war has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, are shrouded in secrecy. U.S. officials said the operation against Shahlai remains highly classified, and many declined to offer details other than to say it was not successful.

Officials at the Pentagon and in Florida were monitoring both strikes and had discussed announcing them together, had they gone well, officials said.

"If we had killed him, we'd be bragging about it that same night," a senior U.S. official said, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a classified military operation.

Another senior official said the two strikes were authorized around the same time and that the U.S. did not disclose the Shahlai mission because it did not go according to plan. The official said Shahlai could be targeted in the future, though both countries have signaled an interest in de-escalating the crisis.

The rationale for the Trump administration's decision to kill Soleimani has come under scrutiny in Congress, with House lawmakers approving a resolution Thursday to restrict the president's authority to strike Iran without congressional approval.

Defense and State Department officials said the strike against Soleimani saved "dozens" if not "hundreds" of American lives under imminent threat. The strike against Shahlai potentially complicates

that argument.

"This suggests a mission with a longer planning horizon and a larger objective, and it really does call into question why there was an attempt to explain this publicly on the basis of an imminent threat," said Suzanne Maloney, an Iran scholar at the Brookings Institution.

The Trump administration views Shahlai as a particularly potent adversary.

The State Department offered a \$15 million reward last month for information leading to Shahlai and the disruption of the IRGC's financial mechanisms. The announcement said that Shahlai is based in Yemen and has a "long history of involvement in attacks targeting the U.S. and our allies, including in the 2011 plot against the Saudi ambassador" at an Italian restaurant in Washington.

U.S. officials have alleged Shahlai, born around 1957, is linked to attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq, including a sophisticated 2007 raid in which Iranian-backed militiamen abducted and killed five American troops in Karbala.

In a news conference last year, Brian Hook, the special representative for Iran, said the U.S. remains "gravely concerned by his presence in Yemen and potential role in providing advanced weaponry of the kind we have interdicted to the Houthis," who continue to battle a Saudi-led coalition for control of Yemen.

Iran has provided support and training to the Houthi rebels in their battle against a coalition backed by Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional foe.

U.S. officials believe that Iran has steadily expanded its support to the Houthis, placing what they say is a small number of Iranian operatives in Yemen to advise the rebel campaign. Experts say a larger number of Lebanese Hezbollah personnel are also helping the rebels.

It is unclear why the Shahlai operation did not succeed. The Pentagon, State Department and White House declined to comment.

The killing of Soleimani, the first U.S. targeted killing of a senior member of a foreign military since World War II, prompted Iran to retaliate early Wednesday in Iraq by firing ballistic missiles at U.S. locations there, though no casualties were reported.

Following the strike, President Donald Trump said the U.S. would respond by imposing economic sanctions on Iran, and noted that the "United States is ready to embrace peace with all who seek it."

Papers: Workers hid 737 Max problems from regulators

Associated Press

Boeing employees raised doubts among themselves about the safety of the 737 Max, apparently tried to hide problems from federal regulators and ridiculed those responsible for designing and overseeing the jetliner, according to a batch of emails and texts released nearly a year after the aircraft was grounded over two catastrophic crashes.

The documents, made public Thursday by congressional investigators, are likely to fuel allegations that the vaunted aircraft manufacturer put speed and cost savings ahead of safety in rolling out the Max. Boeing has been wracked by turmoil since the twin disasters and is still struggling to get the plane back in the air. Last month, it fired its CEO, Dennis Muilenburg.

In the internal messages, Boeing employees talked about misleading regulators about problems with the company's flight simulators, which are used to develop aircraft and

train pilots. In one exchange, an employee told a colleague he or she wouldn't let family members ride on a 737 Max.

Employees also groused about Boeing's senior management, the company's selection of low-cost suppliers, wasting money, and the Max.

"This airplane is designed by clowns who in turn are supervised by monkeys," one employee wrote.

The names of the employees who wrote the messages were redacted.

Boeing said the conversations "raise questions about Boeing's interactions with the FAA" in getting the simulators qualified. But it said the company is confident the machines work properly.

It said it is considering disciplinary action against some employees: "These communications do not reflect the company we are and need to be, and they are completely unacceptable."

The Max has been grounded worldwide since March, after two crashes five months apart

— one involving Indonesia's Lion Air, the other an Ethiopian Airlines flight — killed 346 people. Investigators believe the crashes were caused when the jetliners' brand-new automated flight-control software mistakenly pushed down the planes' noses.

Boeing is still working to fix the flight-control software and other systems on the Max to persuade regulators to let it fly again. The work has taken much longer than Boeing expected, and it is unclear when it will return to the skies.

A lawmaker leading one of the congressional investigations into Boeing called the messages "incredibly damning."

"They paint a deeply disturbing picture of the lengths Boeing was apparently willing to go to in order to evade scrutiny from regulators, flight crews and the flying public, even as its own employees were sounding alarms internally," said Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., chairman of the House Transportation Committee.

2 fired from major USMC recruiting post in Ohio

BY IMMANUEL JOHNSON
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — The command group of a major Marine recruiting station have been fired for not fulfilling their mission, a spokesman for the Marine Corps said Friday.

The commander of Recruiting Station Cleveland in Ohio, Maj. Brandon Currie, Sgt. Maj. Christopher Lillie and the operations officer, whom officials declined to name, were fired last week by Col. Robert Clark, commanding officer of the 4th Marine Corps district.

"They were relieved of their duties due to a loss of trust and confidence in their ability to lead and failing to meet recruitment standards," said Marine Corps spokesman Capt. Ryan Lowcher.

"The supervision of recruiting efforts in this unit resulted in substandard performance," said Clark. "Personnel directly involved in the recruitment process, like every mission, are responsible for the performance of the unit. In this instance, that performance led to a loss of trust and confidence in their continuing to execute those responsibilities."

Recruiting Station Cleveland covers most of northern and eastern Ohio and the northern tip of West Virginia.

Maj. Currie took command at the recruiting station in 2018. Previously, he was stationed at Quantico, Va., where he attended the command and staff college, an online biography says.

Sgt. Maj. Lillie was previously assigned to the 31st Marine Expeditionary Force as a weapons company first sergeant in 2016 before assuming the recruiting station sergeant major role in July 2017.

The new commanding officer of Recruiting Station Cleveland is Maj. Thomas Abbott, Lowcher said.

Marine sergeant to serve as new senior enlisted leader of AFRICOM

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Richard D. Thresher has been tapped to serve as the next senior enlisted leader of U.S. Africa Command, the military announced Thursday.

Thresher will replace Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Ramon Colon-Lopez, who took on a new job in December as senior enlisted adviser to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley.

He will take over his new po-

sition at AFRICOM's headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, at a time when top officials at the command are investigating the circumstances surrounding the deaths of three Americans killed in Sunday's attack on a military compound in Kenya by terrorists.

On Thursday, AFRICOM's Gen. Stephen Townsend sent command leaders, including acting senior enlisted leader Master Chief Ryan Burton, to Kenya to get the "ground truth" from troops about the attack by al-Shabab fighters on a military site on the East African

country's coast. When he steps into his new job in Stuttgart, Thresher will likely be part of that investigative effort.

During his 30-year career, Thresher has deployed numerous times, including multiple tours in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom, according to his official Marine biography.

Thresher, who enlisted in the Corps in 1990, is moving to AFRICOM from Camp Lejeune, N.C., where he has served as sergeant major of the II Marine Expeditionary Force since December 2016.

Courts rule for public, private border walls

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Crews could start building a private border wall in South Texas within the coming days following a federal judge's ruling Thursday that lifted a restraining order against the project.

U.S. District Judge Randy Crane's order was the second federal ruling in two days in favor of border barriers. On Wednesday, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals lifted a lower court's stay that had prevented President Donald Trump's administration from diverting \$3.6 billion from military construction projects to fund 175 miles of border wall.

While the White House on Thursday celebrated the appeals court's ruling, saying it rightfully lifted an "illegitimate nationwide injunction," Crane's ruling actually went against the U.S. government's position.

Fisher Industries, a North Dakota-based

construction firm, wants to install 3 miles of steel posts about 35 feet from the U.S. bank of the Rio Grande, the river that forms the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas. The company's president, Tommy Fisher, wants to spend \$40 million on the private border wall — originally promoted by a pro-Trump online fundraising group — to prove that his company can build barriers more effectively.

The U.S. government sued to stop Fisher on the grounds that building so close to the Rio Grande risked changing the flow of the river and potentially pushing floodwaters into Mexico, in violation of treaty obligations. The U.S. attorney's office argued the project could shift the river and the international boundary, which violated the president's authority "to conduct the foreign relations of the United States."

Existing segments of fencing and the

small sections that the government is currently building typically run along the Rio Grande levee or through property a significant distance away from the river. The U.S. is working to seize private land to build more sections of wall in Texas.

Crane issued a restraining order in December, but lifted that order Thursday. He also declined to grant a restraining order at the request of the National Butterfly Center, a nonprofit located next to the South Texas construction site. The butterfly center and environmentalists warn building a border barrier so close to the river could worsen erosion and potentially damage other land.

Fisher Industries has submitted documents to the government that argue installing fence posts and clearing and grading the land will reduce flooding, though environmentalists disagree with that claim.

Impeachment goes to Senate next week, Pelosi says

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Friday the House will take steps next week to send articles of impeachment to the Senate ending Democrats' blockade of President Donald Trump's Senate trial.

In a letter to her Democratic colleagues, Pelosi said she was proud of their "courage and patriotism" and warned that senators now have a choice as they consider the charges of abuse and obstruction against the president.

"In an impeachment trial, every Senator takes an oath to do impartial justice according to the Constitution and laws," Pelosi wrote. "Every Senator now faces a

choice: to be loyal to the President or the Constitution."

Pelosi has been in a standoff with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell that has consumed Capitol Hill and scrambled the political dynamic more than three weeks after the House impeached Trump.

She said she has asked House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler to be prepared to bring to the floor next week a resolution to appoint managers and transmit the articles of impeachment to the Senate.

"I will be consulting with you at our Tuesday House Democratic Caucus meeting on how we proceed further," Pelosi

wrote. She did not announce a date for the House vote.

The protracted showdown has scrambled the politics of impeachment and the congressional calendar three weeks after the House Democrats impeached Trump on charges of abuse and obstruction over his actions toward Ukraine.

Transmittal of the documents and naming of House impeachment managers are the next steps needed to start the Senate trial.

McConnell wants to launch a speedy trial without new witnesses.

The Senate trial would be just the third impeachment trial in the nation's history.

Iran denies downing Ukrainian jet, calls for evidence

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran on Friday denied Western allegations that one of its own missiles downed a Ukrainian jetliner that crashed outside Tehran, and called on the U.S. and Canada to share any information they have on the crash, which killed all 176 people on board.

Western leaders said the plane appeared to have been unintentionally hit by a surface-to-air missile just hours after Iran launched around a dozen ballistic missiles at two U.S. bases in Iraq to avenge the killing of its top general in an American air-

strike last week.

In Washington, the U.S. promised "appropriate action" in response to its assessment that an Iranian missile was responsible for downing a Ukrainian jetliner.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became the highest-level U.S. official to directly pin the blame on Iran on Friday, after Canadian, Australian and British leaders announced similar intelligence conclusions Thursday. "We do believe it is likely that that plane was shot down by an Iranian missile," he said.

In Tehran, Ali Abedzadeh, head of Iran's national aviation department, told a press

conference, "What is obvious for us, and what we can say with certainty, is that no missile hit the plane."

He added, "If they are really sure, they should come and show their findings to the world" in accordance with international standards.

Hassan Rezaeifar, the head of the Iranian investigation team, said recovering data from the black box flight recorders could take more than a month and that the entire investigation could stretch into next year. He also said Iran may request help from international experts if it is not able to extract the flight recordings.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Complaint about smell leads to assault

TX WICHITA FALLS — A Texas man accused of choking and headbutting his girlfriend because she complained about the smell of his flatulence has been jailed on an assault charge, police said.

Officers in Wichita Falls, Texas, responded to a home on Sunday afternoon following a report that Christopher Ragsdale had assaulted his girlfriend, police said in a probable cause affidavit.

“She told Christopher that his fart smelled horrible and he got mad and grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to the ground,” the affidavit said, adding that the woman told police that Ragsdale choked and headbutted her. The incident occurred at a friend’s house, and that friend called police, the affidavit said.

Police: Pantless prowler has been arrested

NC CLAYTON — Police in North Carolina say they’ve arrested a man who they say had been walking through people’s yards without any pants on.

WRAL reported Thursday that Carlos Antonio Soto, 18, was arrested in Clayton County, which is outside of Raleigh. He was charged with indecent exposure.

Police said social media helped them identify Soto. Clayton Police Chief Blair Myhand said he appreciated the community’s help “in bringing this disturbing case to close.”

Residents in one neighborhood began to complain about the sightings of the alleged prowler in early December.

Clayton police said the prowler was seen “walking directly across driveways near front doors.” In some security cam-

era footage, police said the man “is clearly not wearing shorts and can be seen crouching down near a backyard grill.”

Man gets jail for pot delivery to inmate

NE LINCOLN — An Omaha man has been sentenced for smuggling marijuana to an inmate at the Nebraska State Penitentiary in Lincoln.

Robert Trelles, 48, was sentenced Monday to six months in jail. He’d pleaded no contest to conveyance of an article to an inmate. Prosecutors had lowered the charge in exchange for Trelles’ plea.

In 2017 Trelles went on trial for the June 5, 2015, incident, which was caught on security video during visiting hours. The Lincoln Journal Star reported that he was granted a mistrial because the prosecutor hadn’t disclosed information about prison staffers being alerted that Trelles needed to be watched during the visit.

\$10K reward offered in cattle starving deaths

NV LAS VEGAS — Lincoln County authorities have announced that a reward is being offered for information surrounding the starvation and death of a herd of cattle in Nevada.

The county’s sheriff’s office announced the \$10,000 reward Monday after the herd of six were locked into a corral in rural south Nevada, officials said.

Authorities believe at least one person intentionally isolated the herd in a corral where all but one cow starved to death.

The herd was in Tule Spring about 30 miles north of Mesquite when weather made travel to the area difficult, Sheriff Kerry Lee said. The rancher

who owns the cattle last saw them alive the first week of December before the weather cleared and he returned to his cattle, authorities said.

Students accused of bringing guns to school

FL NORTH MIAMI — Two Florida middle school students are accused of bringing an unloaded handgun and BB gun to campus on the first day back from winter break, an official for the North Miami district said.

A Miami-Dade County Public Schools principal saw the Benjamin Franklin K-8 Center students at a park next door to the school rummaging through their backpacks on Monday, spokeswoman Jackie Calzadilla told news outlets. Hallman asked police on campus to search the two students before class started, she said.

The first student was found with the unloaded handgun. The second student tried to stash the unloaded BB gun somewhere on campus before being caught, Calzadilla confirmed. Miami-Dade Schools police arrested the two and charged them with felonies; exact charges weren’t given.

Group makes pyramid out of toilet paper rolls

MI MIDLAND — It’s not what the Egyptians had in mind but it worked: A group of Michigan high school students made a pyramid out of toilet paper — 27,434 rolls.

It took 16 hours for students to assemble the pyramid at Bullock Creek High School in Midland County. They are hoping to be recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records and sell the toilet paper as a fundraiser for the 20-member robotics team.

Christmas trees given to repair sand dunes

NJ SEASIDE PARK — Over 2,000 discarded Christmas trees were donated to New Jersey environmental officials to reinforce sand dunes at Island Beach State Park.

The state’s Department of Environmental Protection posted on Twitter on Monday to say the response from the public far exceeded their original goal to collect 200 Christmas trees over the weekend.

Christmas trees are often used to repair damage to sand dunes, which provide a habitat for many types of birds and about 400 plant species. Department officials are now seeking volunteers to help move the trees into specific areas, the Asbury Park Press reported.

20 cats, owner found living in storage unit

VA VIRGINIA BEACH — A Virginia animal shelter took in 20 cats after they were found living in a storage unit with their owner who had recently lost her home, the adoption center said in a social media post.

The woman and the felines were found living in a Virginia Beach self-storage unit this week, the city’s Animal Care and Adoption Center said Tuesday. The city doesn’t have a limit on how many cats residents can own, Animal Control Supervisor Meghan Conti told The Virginian-Pilot.

The adoption center said the cats were “understandably scared,” but are otherwise in good health. They’re being housed together and awaiting adoption. The shelter didn’t say how long the cats and their owner had been living in the storage unit or what happened with the woman.

From wire reports

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Vikings' Cook may be problem for 49ers

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The San Francisco 49ers defense features a fearsome pass rush, a shut-down cornerback in Richard Sherman and a group of safeties and linebackers that excel in pass coverage.

So it's no surprise that teams look to the run when they attack it.

That figures to be the case Saturday when the Niners must deal with one of the game's most dangerous backs in Dalvin Cook as they host the Minnesota Vikings in a divisional-round playoff game.

"Coming into this game, throughout the year, obviously against the run hasn't been our strong suit throughout the year. I know they're definitely going to challenge us in the run game early," defensive tackle DeForest Buckner said. "Especially with Dalvin Cook back there, he's one of the best in the league. We've just got to do a really good job with shutting that down early."

Stopping the run has been

one of the few weaknesses all season for the 49ers (13-3), who used one of the league's stingiest defenses to earn the top seed in the NFC playoffs for the first time since 1997.

San Francisco allowed only 169.2 yards passing per game this season, the fewest in the league in 10 years. That success was fueled by a pass rush that aligned the defensive ends out wide to create better angles to rush the quarterback but also left some holes in the middle for runs.

That could be a problem against an offense that relies so heavily on the run, thanks to Cook and backup Alexander Mattison.

"They run the football really well," linebacker Fred Warner said. "Very effective at it. It's going to be a grimy game for sure. ... We know what they trying to do. It's going to be grimy. We're going to have to get after it."

The Vikings ran the ball at the third-highest rate in the league, with their 49.1% frequency trailing only Baltimore

and San Francisco.

Cook is the workhorse in the backfield and the entire offense feeds off his running, which helps set up the deep play-action shots for Kirk Cousins.

Cook ranked seventh in the league with 81.1 yards rushing per game despite being limited at times by injuries. He topped 100 yards on the ground in five of the first seven games before slowing down a bit in the second half.

But he rested up the final two weeks of the regular season and had 130 yards from scrimmage and two TDs in last week's win at New Orleans.

"I've been watching him since Florida State," rookie defensive end Nick Bosa said. "He's really good. Not many people could just maintain the speed that he maintains through contact. He just makes cuts and never slows down. He's physical. They've got two of them, so it's going to be a challenge. We've played some good backs, but we haven't played him. We just got to bring it."

The Niners were in the

middle of the pack defensively against the run, but much of the damage against them was done by teams that featured running quarterbacks like Arizona's Kyler Murray and Baltimore's Lamar Jackson.

Only two running backs reached 100 yards rushing in a game, with Kenyan Drake doing it for the Cardinals and Carolina's Christian McCaffrey gaining 77 of his 117 yards on two long runs.

The Vikings are counting on Cook being able to do that to spark the play-action passing game that has helped Cousins have success in an offense that harkens back to the days when 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan's father, Mike, was winning back-to-back Super Bowls in the 1990s with the Broncos.

"It is more of old school, grind-it-out offense," defensive coordinator Robert Saleh said, "when you look at the Shanahan system and the zone scheme, going way back to the Denver days with Terrell Davis and all that. They're a very physical bunch. They really are."

NFL's No. 6 playoff seeds continue to make an impact

Associated Press

There's strength at six.

Both No. 6 seeds advanced to the divisional round of the playoffs for the second year in a row, marking the first time that's happened in consecutive seasons since the NFL instituted the current 12-team format in 1990.

First, the Tennessee Titans (10-7) sent the New England Patriots (12-5) to their earliest exit in a decade. Then, the Minnesota Vikings (11-6) knocked off the New Orleans Saints (12-5).

Last year, the Indianapolis Colts and Philadelphia Eagles won wild-card games as No. 6 seeds. Both teams lost in the divisional round.

Since 2013, No. 6 seeds are 10-4 in the wild-card round. But those teams were 0-12 the following week. The last time

a No. 6 seed reached the conference championship was the 2010 season, when the New York Jets and Green Bay Packers did it. The Packers went on to win the Super Bowl.

The Vikings and Titans aim to upset No. 1 seeds on Saturday. Minnesota visits the San Francisco 49ers (13-3) in the early game and Tennessee faces the Baltimore Ravens (14-2) in the nightcap.

The 2005 Steelers are the only other No. 6 seed to win a Super Bowl. The 2008 Ravens and 2008 Eagles also reached conference title games as No. 6 seeds before losing.

You like that: Kirk Cousins was 0-15 in his career against teams with a .700 winning percentage before leading Minnesota to an overtime victory against the Saints. With the Vikings, he had been 0-10 against 10-win teams, 2-10 against play-

off teams and 3-11-1 against teams with a winning record.

Old school football: Derrick Henry set a postseason franchise record with 182 yards rushing in Tennessee's victory at New England. Titans quarterback Ryan Tannehill completed only eight passes against the Patriots, the same number of passes Nick Foles completed on the go-ahead touchdown drive when the Patriots had previously lost a playoff game, Super Bowl 52 against Philadelphia.

Old school football II: The Titans-Ravens matchup features two of the top three rushing teams in the league. The Ravens set an NFL record with 3,296 yards rushing and the Titans had 2,223.

Henry led the league with 1,540 yards rushing while Baltimore got 1,206 from quarterback Lamar Jackson and 1,018 from Mark Ingram.

This will be the fourth time the team with the top rushing offense met the team with the league's leading rusher in the playoffs during the Super Bowl era. The team with the leading rusher won the first three.

Young guns: When the Texans (11-6) visit the Chiefs (12-4) on Sunday, it'll be the third time two quarterbacks under age 25 face off in the divisional round of the playoffs since 1967. Houston's Deshaun Watson (born Sept. 14, 1995) is three days older than Kansas City's Patrick Mahomes.

Chasing greats: Aaron Rodgers enters Green Bay's game against Seattle with 36 TD passes in the playoffs, fifth-most in league history. Tom Brady is first with 73, Joe Montana had 45, Brett Favre had 44 and Peyton Manning 40.

College basketball roundup

Gonzaga has easy time with San Diego

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The top-ranked Gonzaga Bulldogs had their swagger back after looking flat during the opening weekend of West Coast Conference play.

That meant the outmanned San Diego Toreros didn't stand a chance.

Joel Ayayi scored 20 points and Filip Petrusev had 17 for Gonzaga, which sprinted past San Diego 94-50 on Thursday night in a laughter after playing two close WCC games.

With a smothering defense opening the way for a high-powered offensive show, the Zags raced to a 53-16 halftime lead.

"That was probably as good as our attention to detail has been with our scouting plan and reports and what we're trying to do defensively, so the guys deserve a lot of credit," coach Mark Few said.

"It's important. When you're carrying that kind of ranking and that kind of whatever, you have to bring it. I don't necessarily think we did the first weekend of league, so they did a much better job of mentally

preparing and going out and sticking with the plan."

Admon Gilder scored 12 points and Corey Kispert had 10 for Gonzaga (17-1, 3-0), which won its ninth straight game since its only loss, to Michigan on Nov. 29 in the Battle 4 Atlantis in the Bahamas. Killian Tillie had 10 rebounds.

The Zags continued to dominate the series against the Toreros (7-11, 0-3), beating them for the 11th straight time, the 22nd time in the last 23 games and for the 44th time in 47.

No. 8 Michigan State 74, Minnesota 58: Cassius Winston scored 18 of his 27 points in the second half while Xavier Tillman finished with 19 points and a career-high 16 rebounds, leading the host Spartans past the Golden Gophers.

Michigan State (13-3, 5-0 Big Ten) led by just four points at halftime before pulling away for its eighth straight victory, staying atop the Big Ten standings as the only team without a conference loss.

Minnesota (8-7, 2-3) was competitive in the first half, which saw five lead changes and five ties, but couldn't slow

down Winston after halftime.

Minnesota's Daniel Oturu had 22 points on 9-for-19 shooting, 10 rebounds, two blocks and a steal. Marcus Carr scored 11 points and Alihan Demir added 10 points for the Gophers.

No. 9 Oregon 74, No. 24 Arizona 73 (OT): Will Richardson scored 21 points, including seven of his team's eight points in overtime, as the host Ducks held off the Wildcats.

Oregon (13-3, 2-1 Pac-12) rallied to tie the game late in regulation and went ahead for good on Richardson's jumper with 17 seconds left in overtime.

Payton Pritchard, who played all 45 minutes, finished with 18 points, seven rebounds and six assists for the Ducks.

Nico Mannion led Arizona (11-4, 4-1) with 20 points and Josh Green scored 18. Zeke Naji had 11 points and 14 rebounds.

No. 19 Michigan 84, Purdue 78 (20T): Zavier Simpson scored 22 points, Jon Teske added 18 and the Wolverines' seniors made big shots late to outlast the visiting Boilermakers.

Freshman Franz Wagner had 15 points for Michigan (11-4, 2-2 Big Ten), which avoided a

third straight Big Ten loss.

Purdue sophomore Trevion Williams had career highs with 36 points and 20 rebounds but missed a shot to win at the regulation buzzer.

In the first overtime, Eric Hunter Jr. missed a contested jump shot for Purdue (9-7, 2-3), and Simpson's desperation three-pointer on the run also missed for Michigan at the buzzer.

Michigan left little to chance in the second overtime, scoring the first nine points of the session. Teske had a three-point play, followed by three-pointers from Simpson and Wagner.

No. 23 Wichita State 76, No. 21 Memphis 67: Jamarious Burton scored 16 points to lead the host Shockers past the Tigers.

Erik Stevenson had 12 points for Wichita State (14-1, 2-0 American Athletic Conference), and Tyson Etienne scored 11.

Precious Achiuwa had 22 points and 12 rebounds for Memphis (12-3, 1-1). Achiuwa was 8-for-11 from the floor. Freshman reserve Tyler Harris scored 17 points for the Tigers.

Mississippi State hires Washington State's Leach

Associated Press

The pirate is heading to Starkvegas.

Mississippi State hired Washington State's Mike Leach as its new head coach Thursday, bringing one of the nation's quirkiest and most successful coaches from the Pac-12 to the Southeastern Conference.

Leach will replace Joe Moorhead, who was fired last week after two seasons. Mississippi State announced it hired Leach with a social-media hype video that included its new coach bellyflopping into a pool.

College football in the state of Mississippi has gotten a lot more interesting over the past

month, with Leach joining new Ole Miss coach Lane Kiffin.

The post-bowl game firing by Mississippi State was unusual, but the Bulldogs now have a coach with a long track record of winning at programs that have historically struggled. In 18 years at Texas Tech and Washington State, Leach is 139-90, using his Air Raid offense to set records and consistently reach the postseason.

At Washington State, Leach took over a program that had been mired in the Pac-12 basement and went to five consecutive bowl games, including a school-record 11 victories in 2018.

He finished 55-47 in eight seasons with the Cougars. He produced a similar turnaround at Texas Tech, taking the Red Raiders to bowl games in all 10 seasons.

His style is anything but typical. Leach gets a lot of attention for his news conferences, where he has been known to dole out wedding advice, once pondered which Pac-12 mascots would survive a fight and told tales about his passion for pirates. He taught a class at Washington State last year about football and combat.

It has not all been fun and games, though.

Leach was fired by Texas

Tech after being accused of mistreating a player, Adam James — the son of former ESPN announcer and NFL player Craig James — who had suffered a concussion. He then clashed with his bosses, and sued Texas Tech for wrongful termination. The school was protected by state law, but Leach is still trying to fight that case. He also filed a lawsuit against ESPN and Craig James that was later dismissed.

When his teams have struggled, his news conferences have been far less amusing. Leach has not been shy about calling players soft and making other disparaging remarks.

NHL roundup

Goalie Rinne scores in Predators' win

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Pekka Rinne grinned and grinned and grinned.

John Hynes got his first win with Nashville and Colin Blackwell scored his first NHL goal, but the game belonged to Rinne after one historic shot.

Rinne became the 12th goaltender in NHL history to score when he converted an empty-netter with 22 seconds left, punctuating the Predators' 5-2 victory over the sloppy Chicago Blackhawks on Thursday night.

Rinne was mobbed by his teammates after the first goal for an NHL goaltender since Mike Smith accomplished the feat for the Coyotes on Oct. 19, 2013, against Detroit. Rinne became the second-oldest goaltender to score in a regular-season game, trailing only Martin Brodeur.

Matt Duchene and Viktor Arvidsson also scored for Nashville (20-16-7), which had dropped five of six. Nick Bonino also had an empty-net goal before Rinne got his 14th career point.

Bruins 5, Jets 4: David Pastrnak had a hat trick to extend his point streak to 12 games and

Jake DeBrusk added two goals, including the go-ahead score in the third period, as host Boston beat Winnipeg.

It was Pastrnak's third hat trick this season and eighth of his career. He has nine goals and 10 assists during his current point streak, and his 35 goals overall lead the NHL.

Oilers 4, Canadiens 2: Alex Chiasson scored the go-ahead goal in the third period and visiting Edmonton extended its winning streak to three games, rallying to beat Montreal.

Riley Sheahan, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Josh Archibald also scored for the Oilers, who overcame a two-goal deficit by scoring four unanswered goals, including three in the third period. Mike Smith had 35 saves in his fourth consecutive start.

Rangers 6, Devils 3: Tony DeAngelo recorded his first career hat trick and added two assists as host New York beat New Jersey.

Artemi Panarin had a goal and two assists, and Jesper Fast and Chris Kreider also scored for New York.

Panthers 5, Canucks 2: Noel Acciari scored two goals and Sergei Bobrovsky made 30 saves in his first start in three games to lift host Florida over

Vancouver.

Mike Hoffman, Evgenii Dadonov and Mark Pysyk also scored for Florida. Jonathan Huberdeau had two assists to move within one point of tying Olli Jokinen for the most in Panthers franchise history (419).

Lightning 4, Coyotes 0: Nikita Kucherov had two goals, Andrei Vasilevskiy made 25 saves and host Tampa Bay beat Arizona for its ninth consecutive victory.

Alex Killorn and Mikhail Sergachev also scored for the Lightning, who are one win from tying the franchise record of 10 straight set in February 2019.

Blues 5, Sabres 1: Robert Thomas and Tyler Bozak each had a goal and two assists, and host St. Louis beat Buffalo.

Alexander Steen had two goals and an assist and David Perron also scored for the Blues, who won their eighth straight against the Sabres on home ice. Jordan Binnington made 18 saves, running his record to 21-7-4.

Flames 2, Wild 1: Johnny Gaudreau's second-period goal was the winner as host Calgary beat Minnesota.

Derek Ryan also scored for

the Flames, who won their fourth straight. Cam Talbot made 42 saves and picked up back-to-back wins.

Stars 3, Ducks 0: Ben Bishop made 27 saves in his 33rd career shutout, and Roope Hintz had a goal and an assist in visiting Dallas' sixth straight victory.

Denis Gurianov and Alexander Radulov scored power-play goals for the Stars, who completed a sweep of back-to-back games in Southern California.

Kings 5, Golden Knights 2: Adrian Kempe scored two goals and visiting Los Angeles surprised Vegas.

The Kings, who entered the game in last place in the Western Conference, used four first-period goals to set the tone. Goaltender Jack Campbell held off the Pacific Division co-leading Golden Knights by stopping 44 of the 46 shots he faced.

Sharks 3, Blue Jackets 1: Joe Thornton scored and moved into a tie for 11th place on the NHL's career list for games played as host San Jose defeated Columbus.

Thornton, who notched his second goal of the season, appeared in his 1,612th NHL game — tying him with Ray Bourque.

NBA roundup

Thunder spoil Westbrook's return to Oklahoma City

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — The Oklahoma City Thunder spoiled Russell Westbrook's return.

Westbrook scored 34 points, but the Thunder beat the Houston Rockets 113-92 on Thursday night.

Westbrook was a league MVP and two-time scoring champ for the Thunder before being traded to the Rockets last summer for Chris Paul and draft picks. Westbrook was the last remaining player from

the team that began playing in Oklahoma City in 2008 after leaving Seattle.

Danilo Gallinari led the Thunder with 23 points and 11 rebounds and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 20 points.

Houston's James Harden was held to 17 points on 5-for-17 shooting.

76ers 109, Celtics 98: Josh Richardson scored 29 points, Ben Simmons had 19 and host Philadelphia won without injured center Joel Embiid, beating Boston.

Embiid, averaging 23.4 points and 12.3 rebounds in 31 games this season, tore the radial collateral ligament in the ring finger Monday night in a victory over Oklahoma City.

Cavaliers 115, Pistons 112 (OT): Kevin Love made a tie-breaking three-pointer with 37.9 seconds left in overtime and visiting Cleveland snapped a five-game losing streak.

On a tumultuous day for the Cleveland organization, the Cavaliers rallied from a 13-point third-quarter deficit

and outlasted Detroit at the end. Tristan Thompson had 35 points and 14 rebounds for the Cavaliers.

Timberwolves 116, Trail Blazers 102: Andrewiggins scored 23 points, Gorgui Dieng had 12 points and 10 rebounds and host Minnesota beat Portland.

The Timberwolves held Portland to 13 points on 6-for-22 shooting in the second quarter, the fewest points the Blazers have scored in a quarter this year.