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Official: Trump invasion talk stunned aides

Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia — As a meeting last August in the Oval Office to discuss sanctions on Venezuela was concluding, President Donald Trump turned to his top aides and asked an unsettling question: With a fast unraveling Venezuela threatening regional security, why can't the U.S. just simply invade the troubled country?

The suggestion stunned those present at the meeting, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and national security adviser H.R. McMaster, both of whom have since left the administration. This account of the previously undisclosed conversation comes from a senior administration official familiar with what was said.

In an exchange that lasted around five minutes, McMaster and others took turns explaining to Trump how military action could backfire and risk losing hard-won support among Latin American governments to punish President Nicolas Maduro

for taking Venezuela down the path of dictatorship, according to the official. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the discussions.

But Trump pushed back. Although he gave no indication he was about to order up military plans, he pointed to what he considered past cases of successful gunboat diplomacy in the region, according to the official, like the invasions of Panama and Grenada in the 1980s.

The idea, despite his aides' best attempts to shoot it down, would nonetheless persist in the president's head.

The next day, Aug. 11, Trump alarmed friends and foes alike with talk of a "military option" to remove Maduro from power. The public remarks were initially dismissed in U.S. policy circles as the sort of martial bluster people have come to expect from the reality TV star-turned-commander in chief.

But shortly afterward, he raised the issue with Colombian

President Juan Manuel Santos, according to the U.S. official. Two high-ranking Colombian officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid antagonizing Trump confirmed the report.

Then in September, on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly, Trump discussed it again, this time at greater length, in a private dinner with leaders from four Latin American allies that included Santos, the same three people said and Politico reported in February.

The U.S. official said Trump was specifically briefed not to raise the issue and told it wouldn't play well, but the first thing the president said at the dinner was, "My staff told me not to say this."

Trump then went around asking each leader if they were sure they didn't want a military solution, according to the official, who added that each leader told Trump in clear terms they were sure. Eventually, McMaster would pull aside the president and walk him through the dan-

gers of an invasion.

Taken together, the behind-the-scenes talks, the extent and details of which have not been previously reported, highlight how Venezuela's political and economic crisis has received top attention under Trump in a way that was unimaginable in the Obama administration. But critics say it also underscores how his "America First" foreign policy at times can seem outright reckless, providing ammunition to America's adversaries.

The White House declined to comment on the private conversations. But a National Security Council spokesman reiterated that the U.S. will consider all options at its disposal to help restore Venezuela's democracy and bring stability.

Under Trump's leadership, the U.S., Canada and European Union have levied sanctions on dozens of top Venezuelan officials, including Maduro, over allegations of corruption, drug trafficking and human rights abuses.

NATO allies reject US criticism on spending

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO allies are pushing back against U.S. criticism that they are not spending enough on defense as President Donald Trump ratchets up pressure ahead of a summit next week.

In the weeks leading up to NATO's July 11-12 summit in Brussels, Trump sent letters to the governments of Norway, other European allies and Canada demanding that they boost their defense spending.

After Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, NATO allies agreed to stop cutting defense budgets,

to start spending more as their economies grew and to move toward a goal of devoting 2 percent of GDP to defense within a decade.

In an email Tuesday to The Associated Press, Norwegian Defense Minister Frank Bakke-Jensen said "Norway stands by its decision of the NATO Summit in 2014 and is following up on this." Norway has spent "far beyond" NATO's target on new military equipment, he added.

In Germany, "we stand by the 2 percent goal we've set," Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said Tuesday. "We're on the path there. And we're prepared ... to take substan-

tial responsibility within the alliance."

When faced with the suggestion that the German government's explanations might not impress Trump, von der Leyen retorted, "We don't want to impress anyone."

In the letter to Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, dated June 19, Trump wrote that despite her country's important role in the alliance Norway "remains the only NATO ally sharing a border with Russia that lacks a credible plan to spend 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense."

The stance was repeated in a similar letter to Belgium, where

Trump said it will "become increasingly difficult to justify to American citizens why some countries continue to fail to meet our shared collective security commitments."

Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel played down the importance of the letter he received, saying it was "typical" of things sent ahead of meetings like the NATO summit.

Despite the political rhetoric from the Trump administration, the 2 percent figure does not concern spending on NATO and no one owes the alliance or any ally money. It is about the size of national defense budgets only.

Vet fights big bill amid Choice woes

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Bob Hart, a 73-year-old farmer in central Illinois, always pays his bills. But that changed when the Vietnam War veteran was informed he owed \$30,000 for medical treatment he thought the Department of Veterans Affairs covered.

“I got a call from my hospital saying I owed them, or they’d take the money out of my bank account,” Hart said. “I just thought, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’”

Hart uses the VA Choice program to get treatment at his local hospital in Jacksonville, Ill., where he receives biweekly injections of anti-inflammatory medication for a condition linked to exposure to the chemical herbicide Agent Orange.

The Choice program allows veterans who can’t get a VA appointment or who live in rural areas — such as Hart — to get treatment at private medical providers paid for by the VA. Hart has used the program to go to Passavant Area Hospital for nearly two years but administrators there told him the VA

hasn’t paid them for his treatment since December.

Since he was informed of the bill, Hart has continued to go to the hospital for his injections feeling concerned about whether he will receive treatment. Hart got his injection Tuesday with no troubles. His next is scheduled for July 17.

Passavant is part of the Memorial Health System. A communications official there was reached by phone last week but did not respond to questions about Hart’s bill or about troubles with the hospital getting paid by the VA.

VA Press Secretary Curt Cashour said Tuesday the agency was looking into Hart’s situation. He also said Hart would encounter no interruptions in treatment and his credit wouldn’t be affected.

Cashour said the VA contacted TriWest, the third-party administrator that the government uses to pay private providers through the Choice program, to inquire about payments for Hart’s care.

The slow reimbursement of private-sector hospitals has been a chief complaint about the Choice program, which is

often criticized as complex and bureaucratic.

Since the Choice program was created in 2014, some private medical facilities have experienced delays getting paid by the VA. When payments are stalled, veterans’ medical bills can be sent to debt collectors and their credit reports damaged.

The VA established a toll-free number, 877-881-7618, for veterans to call when facing billing issues through the Choice program.

According to a letter sent last year by 40 lawmakers to the VA about the issue, the agency received more than 57,000 calls between the program’s launch in late 2014 and May 2017 from veterans facing adverse credit reports.

Elected officials have previously tried to step in. The House Financial Services Committee advanced a bill three months ago that would protect veterans’ credit scores when the VA is slow to reimburse private-sector doctors for their medical care. The bill has not been scheduled for a vote on the House floor.

A massive VA reform bill passed last month by Congress aims to finally fix the problem.

Flight tests halted after A-29 crash

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force has ended the flying portion of an experiment to test the merits of light-attack aircraft following the crash of an A-29 Super Tucano in New Mexico that killed a Navy test pilot, officials announced Tuesday.

However, the service has not canceled the program completely. Lt. Gen. Arnie Bunch, the Air Force’s top general for acquisition told reporters at the Pentagon. It will continue collecting data about the A-29 and the AT-6B Wolverine — a turbo-prop, light-attack aircraft that it has been testing — as officials determine whether the service should add one of those models to its inventory.

“Right now we have not made that decision,” Bunch said. “Right now all the indications are that [the planes are] performing as we expected the platforms to perform.”

The Air Force is considering purchasing hundreds of light-attack planes as it looks for a cheaper, less-sophisticated alternative to using its advanced fourth- and fifth-generation fighter jets for bombing missions in areas where major air defenses do not exist, such as Afghanistan. It would allow the service to focus its fighter pilots on preparing for a potential war with a near-peer adversary, such as China, Russia or North Korea, Bunch said.

If senior Air Force officials choose to purchase the light-attack aircraft, the service intends to seek bids by December, Bunch said.

The Air Force had already spent months testing Textron Aviation’s AT-6B Wolverine and the A-29 Super Tucano, a joint product of the Sierra Nevada Corp. and Embraer Defense & Security, before the June 22 crash at Red Rio Bombing Range that killed Navy Lt. Christopher Carey Short.

US troops mark July 4th in Kabul

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — American flags could be seen in all corners of NATO’s Resolute Support headquarter in Kabul on Wednesday as U.S. servicemembers celebrated Independence Day.

Gen. John Nicholson, the U.S.’ top commander in Afghanistan, spoke during a lunchtime ceremony at the base to mark the holiday.

“For American servicemen and women who are deployed overseas, this day holds a very special significance, and it reminds us of the tremendous sacrifices made by previous generations of patriots in all of

America’s wars in defense of liberty at home and abroad,” Nicholson said.

He added that lessons learned during the U.S.’ push for freedom more than 240 years ago could be applied to Afghanistan today, highlighting the once-acrimonious relationship between the U.S. and U.K. “We hope Afghans will remember this, that reconciliation is possible between rivals,” Nicholson said.

It’s widely agreed that a political solution between the Afghan government and the Taliban is the only way to end the 16-year conflict, America’s longest war.

Nicholson also praised the sacrifices of those attending Wednesday’s ceremony, which included troops and civilian

contractors from the U.S. and coalition countries. U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass was also present.

U.S. troops who spoke to Stars and Stripes said they were happy to be celebrating Independence Day in Afghanistan.

“It’s an important holiday because we fight for it,” said Army Cpl. Ruby Cruz, of the 191st Regional Support Group Forward from Fort Allen, Puerto Rico.

Cruz said she missed the celebrations back home, which are sometimes planned a month in advance. “But we have fun here, too,” she said, smiling. “So it’s not too bad.”

The Independence Day ceremony was to be followed by a barbecue dinner in the evening.

Trump talks to possible high court picks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump spoke with three more potential Supreme Court candidates on Tuesday as a key senator privately aired concerns about one of the contenders.

As Trump weighs his options, he has heard from Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who has expressed reservations about one top potential nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, according to a person familiar with the call but not authorized to publicly disclose details of it. The activity around Kavanaugh was an early glimpse of the frenzied jockeying around the short list of candidates in the run-up to Trump's planned Monday announcement.

With a narrow 51-49 GOP majority in the Senate, losing any Republican senator could begin to doom a nominee. Paul's objections echo those made by outside conservative groups over Kavanaugh, who is seen as a top contender for the vacancy but who activists warn is too much of an establishment-aligned choice.

Trump has said he'll choose his nominee from a list of 25 candidates vetted by con-

servative groups. Top contenders include federal appeals judges Kavanaugh, Raymond Kethledge, Amul Thapar and Amy Coney Barrett — all of whom spoke with Trump on Monday.

The White House says Trump has spoken to seven candidates. There were the four interviews Monday, as well as a conversation with Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, who is not regarded as a top contender but who is being pushed by key conservatives.

Trump has also spoken with Thomas Hardiman, who has served with Trump's sister on the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia, according to a person familiar with the conversation who also was not authorized to publicly discuss it.

Another candidate considered a top contender is Joan Larsen, who serves on the federal appeals court in Cincinnati.

Trump's choice to replace Kennedy — a swing vote on the nine-member court — has the potential to remake the court for a generation as part of precedent-shattering decisions on abortion, health care, gay marriage and other issues. Recognizing

the stakes, many Democrats have lined up in opposition to any Trump pick, and Republicans lawmakers and activists are seeking to shape the president's decision.

For his part, Trump has sought advice from White House counsel Don McGahn and outside advisers like Leonard Leo, on leave from the Federalist Society, and has been making calls to lawmakers, including Paul.

Paul has told colleagues that he may not vote for Kavanaugh if the judge is nominated, citing Kavanaugh's role during the Bush administration on cases involving executive privilege and the disclosure of documents to Congress, said the person familiar with Paul's conversations who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The senator has more than once threatened to withhold his vote on key Trump priorities citing ideological disagreements. But Paul has repeatedly yielded to Trump's personal lobbying to back his nominees and legislation, often citing unspecified concessions from the president. Paul's office did not respond to requests for comment.

Wildfires derail holiday plans

Associated Press

DENVER — A growing wildfire destroyed more than 100 homes in the Colorado mountains, while other blazes across the parched U.S. West kept hundreds of other homes under evacuation orders and derailed holiday plans.

Authorities announced late Monday that a fire near Fort Garland, about 205 miles southwest of Denver, had destroyed 104 homes in a mountain housing development started by multimillionaire publisher Malcolm Forbes in the 1970s. The damage toll could rise because the burn area is still being surveyed.

Tamara Estes' family cabin, which her parents had built in 1963 using wood and rocks from the land, was among the homes destroyed. "I think it's sinking in more now. But we're just crying," she said. "It was a sacred place to us."

The blaze, labeled the Spring Fire, is one of six large wildfires burning in Colorado and is the largest, at 123 square miles — about five times the size of Manhattan. While investigators believe it was started by a spark from a fire pit, other fires, like one that began burning in wilderness near Fairplay, were started by lightning.

Nearly 60 large, active blazes are burning across the West, including nine in New

Mexico and six each in Utah and California, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

In Utah, authorities have evacuated 200 to 300 homes because of a growing wildfire near a popular fishing reservoir southeast of Salt Lake City amid hot temperatures and high winds. Several structures have been lost since the fire started Sunday, but it's unclear how many, said Jason Curry, of the Utah Division of Forest, Fire and State Lands.

Darren Lewis and his extended family planned to spend the Fourth of July at a cabin built nearly 50 years ago by his father and uncle in a wilderness area nestled between canyons and near a mountain river. Instead, Lewis and his family will spend the holiday nervously waiting to hear if a half-century of family memories go up in smoke because of the fire, which has grown to 47 square miles.

Meanwhile, a wind-fueled wildfire in Northern California that continues to send a thick layer of smoke and ash south of San Francisco was threatening more than 900 buildings.

The massive blaze was choking skies with ash and smoke, prompting some officials to cancel Fourth of July fireworks shows and urge people to stay indoors to protect themselves from the unhealthy air.

Sunscreens banned to aid Hawaii coral

Associated Press

HONOLULU — Hawaii Gov. David Ige on Tuesday signed legislation that will ban the sale of sunscreens containing two chemicals believed to harm coral reefs.

The move makes Hawaii the first U.S. state to enact a ban on oxybenzone and octinoxate.

"This is just one small step toward protecting and restoring the resiliency of Hawaii's reefs," Ige said at a signing ceremony for the bill, which takes effect in 2021.

Ige said the state would also need to continue other efforts to protect coral, including fighting invasive species, pollution from land runoff and climate change.

Sunscreen containing oxybenzone and octinoxate will be available only to those with a prescription from a physician. Others will have to buy sunscreens without those chemicals or bring their own sunscreen with them to Hawaii.

Scientists have found the two substances can be toxic to coral reefs, which are a vital part of the ocean ecosystem and a popular draw for tourists.

Critics say there aren't enough independent scientific studies supporting the assertion that the chemicals harm coral reefs.

Boys look healthy in Thailand cave video

Associated Press

MAE SAI, Thailand — Their skinny faces illuminated by a flashlight, the Thai soccer teammates stranded more than a week in a partly flooded cave said they were healthy on a video released Wednesday as heavy rains forecast for later this week could complicate plans to safely extract them.

The 12 boys and their coach are seen sitting with Thai navy SEALs in the dark cave. The boys, many wrapped in foil warming blankets, take turns introducing themselves, folding their hands together in a traditional greeting and saying their names and that they are healthy.

The video lasting about a minute was recorded sometime Tuesday and was posted on the navy SEAL Facebook page Wednesday morning. The navy later released two more videos of the boys.

The boys, aged 11-16, and

their 25-year-old coach disappeared after they went exploring in the Tham Luang Nang Non cave in northern Chiang Rai province after a soccer game June 23. The teammates, who were trapped inside when heavy rains flooded the cave, were found by rescue divers late Monday night during a desperate search that drew assistance from experts around the globe.

Authorities said the boys, who had also been shown Tuesday in a video shot by the British diver who discovered them, were being looked after by seven members of the Thai navy SEALs, including medics, who were staying with them inside the cave. They were mostly in stable condition and have received high-protein drinks.

In all of the videos the boys have appeared in good spirits. In the most recent videos a navy SEAL is shown treating minor cuts on the feet and legs of the boys with antibiotic ointment. Several of the boys

are seen smiling as they interact with the navy SEAL, who cracks jokes.

Seeing the boys has boosted the mood of relatives, and officials are working to install an internet cable to the cave so that parents can talk to their children.

Kian Kamluang, whose 16-year-old son Pornchai is inside, said she had thought it was a 50 percent chance that her son would be found.

“It’s like he has been given a new life,” she said, adding that she’ll never let her son go into a cave or near water again.

SEAL commander Rear Adm. Arpakorn Yookongkaew said Tuesday that there was no rush to bring the group out of the cave, since they’re safe where they are. The current flooding situation means the boys would have to dive, which rescue experts have said could be extremely dangerous.

While efforts to pump out floodwaters are continuing,

some Thai officials have indicated that heavy rains forecast for this weekend could force them to decide the boys should swim and dive out using the same complicated route of narrow passageways through which their rescuers entered.

Chiang Rai provincial Gov. Narongsak Osatanakorn said Wednesday that the boys have been practicing wearing diving masks and breathing, but he doesn’t believe they have attempted any practice dives.

He said it is unknown when an extraction could be attempted, but it was unlikely to be Wednesday.

“If it’s risky or not safe, we will not proceed yet,” Narongsak said. “It has to be 100 percent safe.”

Authorities said they were still exploring other options, such as scouring the mountainside for other ways into the cave and finding faster ways to pump water from the cave.

Lawsuits loom in Calif. warehouse fire

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Relatives of people killed in a 2016 California warehouse fire say others besides the two men who agreed to plea deals are responsible for their losses.

They are suing the city of Oakland, the building’s owner and Pacific Gas & Electric Co., alleging issues related to inspections and maintenance.

Derick Almena and Max Harris each pleaded no contest Tuesday to 36 counts of involuntary manslaughter in connection with the December 2016 fire at the illegally converted Oakland warehouse dubbed the Ghost Ship.

Prosecutors say Almena rented the warehouse and illegally converted it into a residence and entertainment venue. Almena hired Harris to help collect rent and schedule concerts.

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearm investigators said they were unable to determine a

cause of the blaze.

In court Tuesday, the judge read the name of each victim aloud at an emotional hearing, bringing tears from loved ones in the Oakland courtroom.

Prosecutors say the two defendants turned the warehouse into a “death trap” by cluttering it with highly flammable knick knacks and blocking the few exits in the poorly lit building.

Under terms of a plea agreement, Almena could be sentenced to nine years in prison and Harris could face a six-year term when a judge sentences them next month. The men could have faced life in prison if convicted at a trial. Now, with good behavior, they are expected to serve half their sentences after spending a year in jail.

David Gregory, whose daughter, Michela Gregory, 20, was among the victims, said hearing the defendants say no contest was “some small sense of justice” but he was dissatisfied with the outcome. “That’s 36

lives, you know,” he said outside court. “We wanted fair justice, and we didn’t get it.”

Parents and lawyers allege in the lawsuits that the Oakland Fire Department failed to inspect the warehouse annually as required. The lawsuit says inspectors would have discovered the illegal conversions.

Alex Katz, a spokesman for the Oakland city attorney, declined to comment, citing ongoing litigation.

Warehouse owner Chor Ng, who has never been charged, did not return a phone message Tuesday.

The lawsuits claim PG&E failed to properly monitor, inspect and repair electrical equipment that provided power to the warehouse.

PG&E said in a statement that it cooperated with the investigation and that a review of its record found no electrical problems at the warehouse in the 10 years before the fire.

Son of ISIS leader is reported killed

BEIRUT — Islamic State says the son of its leader has been killed fighting Syrian government forces.

The announcement of the death of the young son of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared on the group’s social media accounts late Tuesday. It included a picture of a young boy carrying a rifle and identified him as Huthaifa al-Badri.

The statement, dated this month, said he was an elite fighter, known as an “inghimasi,” who was killed while fighting Syrian and Russia troops at a power station in the central Homs province. It did not specify when he was killed.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitoring group, said the most recent ISIS operations in the area were in the first two weeks of June.

From The Associated Press

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Truck wrecks, spills animal carcass load

NC GASTONIA — A wreck involving a truck carrying partially decomposed animal carcasses left a smelly mess on a North Carolina highway.

The Gaston Gazette reported the wreck happened about 10:15 a.m. Monday on U.S. 74 in Gastonia.

The newspaper reported an 18-wheeler from Valley Proteins Inc. in Gastonia collided with a stopped car and dumped part of its cargo on the highway.

Crews from the North Carolina Department of Transportation and the fire department worked to clean up the mess before a company that specializes in highway cleanup arrived to finish the work.

Angered priest boots funeral from church

MD CHARLOTTE HALL — A Maryland priest was placed on administrative leave after he booted mourners from a church where they were to hold a funeral.

The Archdiocese of Washington said Tuesday that the Rev. Michael Briese is on leave pending the outcome of an investigation.

On June 27, before a funeral for Agnes Hicks could begin at St. Mary Catholic Church in Charlotte Hall, WTTG-TV reported a guest knocked over a chalice, damaging it and angering the priest. Hicks' daughter, Shanice Chisley, said Briese ordered everyone out and disrespected her deceased mother, saying "get this thing out of my church!"

Briese apologized in a letter to the editor in *The Enterprise*, saying anger "was the most inappropriate response."

Margarita-loving bear takes a dip in hot tub

CA ALTADENA — Mark Hough had barely taken a sip of his Friday afternoon margarita when he heard twigs snapping and leaves rustling in his lush Altadena backyard.

"So I got up, looked over in the bushes and, lo and behold, there's a bear climbing up over my fence," Hough said Monday.

The sighting was the first of many encounters Hough would have with the bear that particularly hot Friday afternoon. Over the course of a few hours, the bear availed itself of Hough's backyard, his hot tub and the cocktail he left behind to retreat inside.

Group pushes train to free trapped woman

MA BOSTON — A group of commuters banded together to help free a woman whose leg became trapped between a subway train and platform in Boston.

The woman, 45, told police she slipped as she was getting off the train at the Massachusetts Avenue Station about 5:30 p.m. Friday, and her leg became stuck in the gap.

Video released by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority Monday shows a group of passengers rushing to her aid and pushing the train away from the platform until she was free.

Couple charged with locking puppy in trunk

FL PANAMA CITY — Authorities said a Mississippi couple locked a puppy in the trunk of their car while they went shopping at a Florida mall.

The Panama City News Herald reported that Maurice Sanders and Keshanna Thompson, both 30, were arrested Sunday and charged with aggravated animal cruelty.

Police received a call about the puppy Sunday afternoon. A witness said he saw Sanders lock the dog away before walking into Dillard's.

Officers reported hearing the puppy panting in the trunk. They broke a window and accessed the trunk through the car's back seat. Police said it was extremely hot, and there was no water.

Sanders later told officers he put the dog in the trunk because he didn't want it to make a mess in the car.

The puppy was taken to animal control.

Husky helps rescue woman on hiking trail

AK ANCHORAGE — A 7-year-old Alaskan husky is credited with helping rescue an injured woman hiking a trail east of Anchorage.

The Alaska Star reported that the dog, named Nanook, helped Amelia Milling, 21, after she fell while crossing the Eagle River last month.

Milling, a college student from Tennessee, was hiking the Crow Pass Trail and was injured early in the planned three-day hike. S

he said the white dog found her after she tumbled down a slope.

She said Nanook guided her back to the trail and later helped her out of the water when she struggled in the swift river. He stayed with her until rescuers arrived.

Police: Pair kidnapped and tormented victim

MT GREAT FALLS — Great Falls authori-

ties said a man and a woman kidnapped a man they claimed stole their property, then assaulted and tormented him.

The Great Falls Tribune reported that Jared Neal Mell and Courtney Cain-Howell were charged Monday with aggravated kidnapping and assault with a weapon.

Court documents say Mell and Cain-Howell forced the victim to put on women's underwear, then beat and dumped trash on him.

The pair are also accused of burning and urinating on him and injecting Cain-Howell's blood into him after telling him she has HIV and cancer.

The victim escaped when the couple forced him to wear a harness made of straps and walk across a bridge.

Camera explosion thwarts upskirt plan

WI MADISON — Police in Wisconsin said a man's plan to take videos up the skirts of women was thwarted when his shoe camera exploded.

Madison police Chief Mike Koval said in his daily blog that the man, 32, wanted to turn himself in to police on Tuesday. But the man wasn't arrested because he hadn't taken any videos before the camera's battery fizzled.

Koval wrote that the man's foot was injured when the battery exploded.

The chief added that the man was "counseled on his actions" and released because no video had been taken.

A police spokesman said authorities don't know why the man wanted to turn himself in.

From wire reports

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Flashy Brazil strives for balance in Russia

Associated Press

SAMARA, Russia — While the focus is on Neymar's flashy scoring ability and his other antics in Russia, Brazil's steady progression at the World Cup has solidified the team's status among the favorites left in the tournament.

Nemesis Germany is gone. So are Lionel Messi and Argentina. Cristiano Ronaldo and Portugal are out.

But for Brazil, the word favorite — "favorito" in Portuguese — is taboo.

"We feel confident but not like the favorites because we know that there are other quality teams that have great potential. The favoritism comes from the press and the fans," winger Willian said. "We want to remain firm in our goal, which is to move step by step and reach the final."

The five-time World Cup champions opened the knockout round on Monday in Samara by beating Mexico 2-0 for their third straight shutout. Neymar scored his second goal

of the tournament in the 51st minute, and substitute Roberto Firmino scored in the 88th.

Neymar again grabbed attention for his theatrics after he tangled up with Mexico's Miguel Layun, who stepped on the Paris Saint-Germain star's right ankle. Neymar writhed on the field in apparent agony before popping back up and finishing the match.

Brazil goes on to face Belgium in the quarterfinals on Friday in Kazan. The Belgians are coming off a 3-2 comeback win against Japan in Rostov-on-Don.

Brazil was ranked second by FIFA upon arrival in Russia, but the team opened with a lackluster 1-1 draw against Switzerland. Since then, Brazil hasn't conceded a goal, winning three successive games 2-0.

Neymar, who had been recovering in previous months from a broken foot, gave the world-class performance that everyone hoped for on Monday. He has two goals and an assist in the tournament, giving him six career World Cup goals.

Other players have risen to the occasion, too. In the group stage, Philippe Coutinho had two goals and an assist and earned Man of the Match honors twice. Against Mexico, it was Willian who showed flashes of brilliance.

Additionally, the defense has been steady throughout, anchored by captain Thiago Silva and goalkeeper Alisson. The only other team remaining that has conceded just one goal is Uruguay.

Brazil has allowed just five shots on target at this World Cup, fewest of any team.

"It's a huge joy to be doing an excellent Cup and to be growing with every game," Silva said. "I hope that in the next game of quarterfinals, we can even be better prepared because with the victories the trust automatically grows."

Defender Miranda echoed that sentiment: "We're growing in the tournament. We hope to continue this way. We need to grow even more."

Coach Tite has put an emphasis on balance since the South

American qualifiers, and Brazil was the first team to earn its way to Russia. Brazil has yet to lose in eight matches this year.

Of course, the ultimate goal is to erase some of the disappointment of the last World Cup, when Brazil was embarrassed on home soil by Germany in a 7-1 semifinal loss.

"People have asked us a lot about Germany. I don't think we should worry about Germany and about what happened. Soccer is to play it, not to speak about it," Silva said. "We no longer need to focus on Germany because we don't have a way to change that story. We only need to think ahead now, game by game, and seize our opportunities."

Perhaps that approach will give Brazil a sixth star over its crest.

"I hope. I hope," Willian said about a sixth title. "It's going to be difficult. And like I said before, we have to continue this way, work hard and continue to improve ourselves."

England breaks penalty kicks curse to advance

Associated Press

MOSCOW — After three haunting failures, England finally won a penalty shootout at the World Cup.

And it happened under a coach who for 22 years has taken the blame for a previous shootout loss at a major tournament.

England advanced to the World Cup quarterfinals by beating Colombia 4-3 in a shootout following a 1-1 draw Tuesday, sending Gareth Southgate running onto the field to celebrate the end of the national team's years of misfortune.

"It will never be off my back, sadly. That's something that will live with me forever," Southgate said of his 1996 shootout failure. "But today is a special moment for this team. I hope it will give belief to generations of players that follow,

because they can see what is possible in life."

England will next play Sweden on Saturday in Samara. The 1966 champions have reached the World Cup quarterfinals for the first time since the David Beckham era, when a golden generation exited in the last eight in 2002 and 2006.

"We have to see what is possible and not be hindered by history or the expectations," Southgate said. "I think these young players are showing that."

Eric Dier scored the decisive kick after a scrappy game went through 30 minutes of extra time, denying Colombia a second consecutive trip to the quarterfinals.

Colombia had 23 fouls and six yellow cards while England had 13 fouls and two yellows.

Harry Kane scored his tour-

namment-leading sixth goal to give England the lead with a penalty kick in the 57th minute. Colombia scrambled for an equalizer and finally got it when Yerry Mina headed in a corner in the third minute of stoppage time.

"To get knocked down at the end like we did at the end, it's difficult to come back from that," Dier said. "But we were ready for that. We were calm. We stuck to our plan."

England trailed 3-2 in the penalty shootout after Jordan Henderson's shot was saved by David Ospina, but Mateus Uribe hit the bar and England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford then stopped Carlos Bacca's kick.

"I did a whole bunch of research," Pickford said. "Falcao is the only one who didn't go his way. I don't care if I'm not the

biggest keeper in the world. I have the power and agility."

Pickford succeeded where Peter Shilton, David Seaman and Paul Robinson failed as the 1990, 1998 and 2006 World Cups ended in shootout losses. On top of that, England was knocked out of the 1996 European Championship semifinals and the quarterfinals in 2004 and 2012 on penalties. The country's only shootout success came earlier at Euro '96.

Southgate's penalty in the 1996 shootout at Wembley against Germany was stopped, a failure he has lived with for 22 years.

"Penalty shootouts are lot about mentality and obviously we know England in the past haven't done great," Kane said. "So, it's nice to get that one off our back and we'll have huge belief moving forward."

Federer, Serena cruise into third round

Associated Press

LONDON — Roger Federer won 35 straight points on his own serve en route to beating Lukas Lacko of Slovakia 6-4, 6-4, 6-1 in the second round of Wimbledon.

Federer didn't drop a point on his serve in the entire second set and kept that streak going until he was 30-0 up at 4-1 in the third, when Lacko sent a backhand winner down the line.

In total, the eight-time champion lost just nine of 61 points on his serve and broke Lacko five times, including with a forehand winner to close out the match.

Serena Williams continued her return by moving into the third round with an emphatic 6-1, 6-4 win over Viktoriya Tomova.

The seven-time champion lost just five of 32 points on her first serve as she took a little over an hour to triumph against her 135th-ranked opponent.

Williams was unable to defend her 2016 title last year because she was pregnant.

Despite her ranking having fallen to 181, Williams is seeded 25th this year.

The 36-year-old American next faces

German Tatjana Maria or Kristina Mladenovic of France.

Gael Monfils overcame Paolo Lorenzi 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (5), 7-6 (3) to set up a third-round meeting with 2017 semifinalist Sam Querrey.

After hitting just four winners in the opening set, the 44th-ranked Monfils improved to a total of 49 for the match and reached the third round at the All England Club for the seventh time in his career.

The Frenchman has never been beyond that stage and to do so will have to defeat 11th-seeded Querrey.

Querrey earlier eased past Ukrainian Sergiy Stakhovsky 7-6 (4), 6-3, 6-3 to advance to the third round for a third successive year.

Lucas Pouille became the latest seeded player to exit the men's draw after a 6-4, 6-2, 6-7 (8), 3-6, 6-2 defeat to Austrian qualifier Dennis Novak.

The 17th-seeded Pouille saved two match points in the third-set tiebreaker before eventually forcing a fifth set, but Novak regrouped to reach the third round of a Grand Slam for the first time.

In other women's matches, five-time champion Venus Williams once again dropped the opening set, and once again dominated the rest of the way to win.

The No. 9 seed, at 38 the oldest woman in the draw, came back to beat 141st-ranked qualifier Alexandra Dulgheru of Romania 4-6, 6-0, 6-1 to reach the third round.

Williams was broken in the first game and did not recover in the opening set, in which she made 12 unforced errors, twice as many as Dulgheru. Nine of those were errant forehands.

But the American, the runner-up at Wimbledon a year ago, then won seven games in a row.

Karolina Pliskova advanced to the third round for the first time with a 6-3, 6-3 victory over Victoria Azarenka.

Seventh-seeded Pliskova didn't face a break point as she cruised through a meeting of the two former No.1-ranked players on Centre Court.

It was the sixth time in seven main draw appearances at Wimbledon that 2016 U.S. Open runner-up Pliskova had advanced to the second round.

Stanley Cup-winning Caps haven't made many changes

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — Next season's defending champion Washington Capitals will look a lot like the group that won the Stanley Cup last month.

They re-signed defensemen John Carlson and Michal Kempny and forward Devante Smith-Pelly and have so far only lost fourth-line center Jay Beagle and backup goaltender Philipp Grubauer from their title-winning roster.

Yet the few changes could be substantial for the Capitals, most notably new coach Todd Reirden taking over for Barry Trotz with a roster that is so similar that the expectation will be another deep playoff run.

"There's going to be many things that stay the same, but there's gonna be some things that I think I have to be cognizant of," Reirden said as he was introduced Tuesday. "I want to create an environment where players are going to continue to be challenged with new ideas and new ways to improve their

games."

Based on the continuity of promoting a four-year assistant, general manager Brian MacLellan and Reirden expect this to be a "seamless transition." Set aside the awkward circumstances of Trotz's departure and the Capitals had been grooming Reirden for a head coaching job somewhere in the NHL for some time now.

Reirden was the finalist for Calgary's job two years ago and in retrospect is glad that didn't work out. His first NHL head coaching job happens to be this one, as just the fourth coach in the past 30 years to assume control of a Cup champion.

With the vast majority of the roster back, Alex Ovechkin coming off a playoff MVP performance and almost the entire defense he helped develop back to try to repeat, the pressure is on.

"Todd's at that point in his career where he's earned a head coaching job," MacLellan said. "He's put in all the work. He's got all the experience. It's

just a matter of seeing him take control. I have all the faith in the world that he can accomplish it. He's just ready to do it right now."

Beagle signed a four-year, \$12 million contract with the Canucks, and the Capitals traded Grubauer and defenseman Brooks Orpik to the Avalanche to clear the cap space they needed to ink Carlson to a \$64 million, eight-year deal. Orpik could still return after Colorado bought him out and made him a free agent, which could mean 18 of 19 players who skated in the Cup-winning Game 5 against Vegas are on the roster to begin next season.

"It's one of those offseasons where you're not trying to make a change because you like what you have culturally," MacLellan said. "This group really seems to like playing together and there's a good chemistry there, so I think it was our decision to try to [keep] as much as we could."

That did not extend to Trotz, who wanted to be paid closer

to market value for a Cup-winning coach than the automatic extension that kicked in with a small raise from his previous salary. MacLellan believes Reirden can build on what Trotz started, and the 47-year-old new Capitals coach is confident in his abilities because of how much responsibility he had the past two seasons as associate coach.

"We all had input in it in what our decisions were made," Reirden said. "I feel strongly about the direction of our team and the style that we played during the year that it wasn't necessarily just one person's idea, but it was our whole staff that had large input into how our team was going to play."

The Capitals will need one assistant coach to replace Trotz choice Lane Lambert, but will keep the rest of the staff intact. They'll look to Travis Boyd or recently signed Nic Dowd to replace Beagle. And if they can't bring back Orpik, they'll likely find a veteran defenseman to play on the third pair.

LeBlanc helps M's win eighth straight

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Wade LeBlanc is a journeyman. His 10-year career has featured stops with seven different organizations and even one in Japan, where he thought he was finished.

In the left-hander's second stint with Seattle, it appears he's finally found a home.

LeBlanc (4-0) allowed one run over seven innings after inking a contract extension with the Mariners earlier in the day, and Seattle beat the Los Angeles Angels 4-1 on Tuesday night for its eighth straight victory.

The Angels' Shohei Ohtani was activated from the 10-day disabled list and went 0-for-4 with two strikeouts in his return. He had been sidelined since June 8 with a Grade 2 ulnar collateral ligament sprain.

"I think it was huge that I got all those

at-bats in the simulated games," Ohtani said through an interpreter. "It's a different game up here in the big leagues. Maybe still not quite there yet, but just keep on working hard, come back tomorrow."

The Mariners announced they signed LeBlanc (4-0) to the extension before his start and the soft-tossing left-hander showed them they made a good decision. LeBlanc allowed three hits, struck out four and retired his final 11 batters.

"It's huge," LeBlanc said. "It's life-changing money, obviously, but for me, I've never been the kind of guy to know where my family and I are going to be the next year this early."

LeBlanc's contract reportedly extends him through the 2019 season, with a base salary of \$2.75 million and incentives that could raise that to \$4.75 next season, and

contains club options valued at \$5 million with a \$450,000 buyout the three following seasons.

It rewards LeBlanc after he's provided an unexpected source of stability to the Mariners' rotation. Seattle is 9-3 in games he's started and he boasts a 2.90 ERA since moving to the rotation on May 3.

"It's good to feel wanted," Mariners manager Scott Servais said. "I know Wade's been everywhere in his career, but we're definitely seeing the best of Wade LeBlanc right now. I'm looking forward to having him in the future. He's done an unbelievable job for us."

"The best part about these deals with a guy like that that's bounced around, is that he's earned it. And that's really what makes you feel good and allows you to sleep at night."

MLB roundup

Red Sox rough up Roark, sink Nats to .500

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Boston's big hitters have consistently done the job this year, helping the Red Sox post the best record in the majors.

It's been a very different story for the Washington Nationals, and that's been abundantly clear through the first two games of their interleague series.

Xander Bogaerts hit a three-run homer during a six-run fifth inning, J.D. Martinez and Eduardo Nunez also went deep, and Boston beat Washington 11-4 in sweltering conditions Tuesday.

"A lot of guys stepped up," Bogaerts said. "The weather's not the best. It's hot. It's better than cold. A lot of guys swung at good pitches and had good at-bats."

Martinez drove in four and leads the majors with 26 homers and 71 RBIs. Boston has won 17 of its last 19 interleague games, including 11 of its last 12.

Washington has lost four straight and 16 of 21 to fall to 42-42, its first time at .500 since it was 17-17.

"It's hard to play from behind," Washington manager Dave Martinez said. "Our starting pitching right now is not giv-

ing the offense a chance. When we do try and make a run and come back, we got to have shut-out innings. It's not happening."

Red Sox starter Brian Johnson allowed two runs in 4²/₃ innings. Brandon Workman (1-0) pitched a perfect seventh.

Boston scored first, opening the second with consecutive singles before Nunez homered into the left field bullpen off starter Tanner Roark (3-10). Mark Reynolds and Roark had RBI singles in the fourth to pull the Nationals within 3-2.

The Red Sox responded in the fifth, collecting five consecutive singles before Bogaerts ripped Roark's fastball to center to make it 9-2.

"We did a good job today against Roark," Nunez said. "I think he made a lot of mistakes up with the sinker and we took advantage."

Roark allowed a career-high nine runs in seven innings.

Yankees 8, Braves 5: Giancarlo Stanton, Aaron Hicks and Kyle Higashioka each homered and host New York went ahead early and hung on.

Dodgers 8, Pirates 3: Clayton Kershaw (2-4) earned his first win in 2½ months, five of

his teammates homered — including Max Muncy with a pair — and host Los Angeles beat Pittsburgh.

Diamondbacks 4, Cardinals 2: Paul Goldschmidt hit a three-run homer, Zack Greinke (9-5) pitched effectively into the seventh inning and host Arizona ended a four-game losing streak.

Indians 6, Royals 4: Yan Gomes hit a sixth-inning grand slam as visiting Cleveland rallied to beat Kansas City.

Phillies 3, Orioles 2: Zach Eflin (7-2) pitched seven strong innings for his sixth straight victory and Andrew Knapp had the winning hit for host Philadelphia.

Cubs 5, Tigers 3: Anthony Rizzo drove in his second run of the game in the seventh inning to snap a tie, Kyle Schwarber followed with a solo homer in the eighth and host Chicago rebounded from an early three-run deficit to edge Detroit.

Brewers 2, Twins 0: Eric Thames hit a two-run homer and three pitchers combined on a two-hit shutout as host Milwaukee beat Minnesota.

Blue Jays 8, Mets 6: Lourdes Gurriel Jr. hit a tiebreaking

two-run home run in the eighth inning and host Toronto rallied from a five-run deficit.

Rockies 8, Giants 1: Antonio Senzatela (3-1) pitched seven scoreless innings in his first start of the season, Nolan Arenado hit his NL-leading 22nd home run and host Colorado beat San Francisco.

Astros 5, Rangers 3: Josh Reddick and Tony Kemp homered, Dallas Keuchel (5-8) worked seven solid innings to win for only the second time in his last nine starts and visiting Houston beat Texas.

Athletics 6, Padres 2: Jed Lowrie hit a bases-loaded, bases-clearing double in the decisive sixth, Mark Canha added a solo homer that inning, and host Oakland rallied.

White Sox 12, Reds 8: Daniel Palka and Avisail Garcia each homered twice, and Yoan Moncada tripled with the bases loaded in the 12th inning as visiting Chicago pulled off its biggest comeback of the season.

Rays 9, Marlins 6 (16): Jake Bauers hit a tiebreaking two-out, two-run double in the 16th, ending his team's 13-inning scoreless streak and lifting visiting Tampa Bay over Miami.