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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Panel to probe Fort Hood command climate

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — An independent panel will review the command climate and culture of Fort Hood, Texas, in the wake of the killing of Spc. Vanessa Guillen, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy announced Friday.

The announcement followed a meeting between McCarthy, Rep. Sylvia Garcia, D-Texas, and leaders from the League of United Latin American Citizens. The congresswoman from Houston and LULAC have worked with the Guillen family, who also are from Houston, to raise awareness about the soldier's disappearance and death and to help communicate with the Army throughout the investigation.

"I am directing an independent [and] comprehensive review of the command climate and culture. We have to listen

in order to create enduring change," McCarthy wrote on Twitter immediately following the meeting.

The review is to determine whether the command climate and culture at Fort Hood, and the surrounding military community, reflects Army values, including respect, inclusiveness, and workplaces free from sexual harassment, according to a news release.

Guillen, 20, went missing from Fort Hood on April 22 while working in an arms room with the 3rd Cavalry Regiment's Engineer Squadron. Her remains were found June 30 near a river about 30 miles from the base.

Spc. Aaron Robinson, another soldier in Guillen's squadron, hit and killed her with a hammer, then moved her body, according to federal court documents. A second suspect, Cecily Aguilar, is in federal custody and accused of conspiracy to

tamper with evidence. Robinson shot himself dead June 30 when approached by civilian law enforcement in Killeen, the town just outside Fort Hood.

Following the confirmation that the human remains found were Guillen, members of Congress and organizations outside the federal government began sending letters to Defense Department leaders asking for various reviews or investigations into the soldier's disappearance and death, and the Army's investigation into locating her. They've also called for an investigation and overhaul of the military's program to prevent and report sexual assault and harassment in its ranks.

The independent review arose from the questions and concerns voiced by family members, Congress, and various Hispanic advocacy groups during the investigation, according to the release.

McCarthy will recommend the Pentagon's inspector general also conduct a review to focus more on the sexual harassment program, Garcia said Friday during a news conference with LULAC leaders on Capitol Hill following the meeting. She said the independent review panel is "a great step" and she was assured it would be transparent and its findings would be given to Congress.

James McPherson, undersecretary of the Army, and Gen. Joseph Martin, Army vice chief of staff, will be co-chairmen of an implementation team, which will consider every recommendation from the panel and make changes as appropriate, according to the release.

McCarthy asked LULAC leaders during the meeting to recommend Hispanic men and women who could serve on the panel, said Domingo Garcia, national president of LULAC.

US commander: 'Disarray' in Iran after Soleimani death

Bloomberg

The top American commander in the Middle East says he sees Iran's decision-making abilities in "disarray" after a U.S. drone strike killed a senior Iranian commander in January, but he doesn't expect the lull to last.

After a surge in tensions earlier this year following the killing of Quds force commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq, and additional damage done to the Islamic Republic from the COVID-19 pandemic, Marine General Kenneth McKenzie said he expects the Islamic Republic's military to regroup and focus on trying to drive U.S. troops out of the region. Just not yet.

"Iran recognizes that we have the capability in the theater to make it very painful for them to launch a direct or indirect attack against either us or one of our partners or allies," McKenzie, who heads U.S.

Central Command, said in a telephone interview Thursday. "Right now, it is kind of quiet, but I think part of that is they're still on their heels a little bit from January and I think they're still sorting themselves out and what they want to do."

McKenzie oversees American forces in a region President Donald Trump has long said he wants U.S. forces to leave. But Trump has also bolstered the American presence there at times to help defend a key ally — Saudi Arabia — and heighten pressure on Iran after quitting the 2015 nuclear accord with the country.

McKenzie said Iran felt it had momentum in its efforts to bolster influence over neighboring Iraq at America's expense, until the unexpected U.S. attack on Soleimani — a commander who was lionized in Iranian society but accused of being behind conflicts from Lebanon to Yemen — disrupted their efforts.

Yet short-term setbacks won't distract the Iranian regime from its ultimate goal of ejecting the U.S. and all Western allies from the region, he said.

"I remember well the lesson of last fall where we were in a relative period of quiet and, bang, they attacked Aramco," McKenzie said, referring to the mid-September drone and cruise missile attack on Saudi oil facilities that the U.S. says was directed by Tehran.

Iran's government rejects that charge. The United Nations has said the weapons used in the Aramco strike were of Iranian origin, without directly saying Tehran was responsible.

"I draw no confidence from periods of quiet," McKenzie added. "That's when I actually begin to look very hard at what the Iranians might be up to because I think they have long-term goals to eject us."

SOUTHCOM seizes large quantity of drugs

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Three months into an increased effort to combat drug traffickers in South and Central America, the U.S. military has captured more than 120 metric tons of cocaine and 18,000 pounds of marijuana headed for U.S. shores, top American officials said Friday.

The Pentagon has flooded

waters in U.S. Southern Command's area of operations off South and Central America with a 75% increase in surveillance aircraft and 65% more ships than usual as part of the operation launched April 1, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said. The Pentagon's top official said the new operations had "shown great success" already, cutting into an estimated \$90 billion drug-trafficking operation that benefits "bad actors,"

including Mexican cartels and Venezuela's embattled leader President Nicolas Maduro, who the United States has labeled illegitimate.

"Transnational criminal organizations have destroyed far too many American lives by smuggling heroin, cocaine, fentanyl and methamphetamines into our country, leading to drug overdoses and addiction in our communities," Esper said Friday during a visit to

SOUTHCOM's Miami headquarters alongside President Donald Trump.

In brief remarks, Trump announced Coast Guard forces in May had found and halted three cartel submarines carrying "thousands of pounds" of narcotics. He warned the drug traffickers that they would be caught, saying the United States has apprehended about 1,000 suspected traffickers since April 1.

Top Russian diplomat dismisses bounty intel

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia's top diplomat on Friday dismissed U.S. intelligence information alleging that Moscow offered bounties to the Taliban for killing American soldiers as a product of election year politics in Washington.

U.S. intelligence officials said information about Russia's alleged bounties on the heads of troops in Afghanistan was in-

cluded in an intelligence brief for President Donald Trump in late February. The White House has denied Trump received the information at that time, arguing that the intelligence wasn't credible enough to bring to the president's attention.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed the intelligence claims as a sham.

"I can only say that the entire thing has hinged on unscrupulous speculations, and no con-

crete facts have been presented whatsoever," Lavrov said during a videoconference on foreign policy issues.

He charged that the intelligence claims were floated to hurt the Trump administration before the U.S. presidential election in November.

"The entire story looks like it has been written and designed specifically for the purpose of the domestic political struggle in the run-up to the election,"

he said. "Once again, they're trying to attack the incumbent administration and discredit everything it's doing, especially on the Russian track."

Lavrov noted that Russia welcomed a February peace deal between the U.S. and the Taliban aimed at ending the protracted war in Afghanistan.

"We have provided assistance via our channels to help this agreement work," the Russian foreign minister said.

Deployment inspires song about Afghan love

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

An American folk/country song about two young lovers on the run is a tale as old as time. But this one's got a twist: It's set in Afghanistan.

"Lailly and Abdullah" is about Afghan youth in conflict with tradition and features a musician from Alabama singing "Allahu Akbar."

The unique melding of Americana and Afghanistan comes from Maj. Pierce Pettis, a National Guardsman who wrote the song after being inspired by one of his deployments overseas.

Pettis said he hopes his song

gets people to think about the lives of the people of Afghanistan, which he said remains mostly unknown to Americans even after 20 years of U.S. troops deploying there.

"Humans care about each other once we know each other," Pettis said in a recent phone interview about the song, recently featured on Grammy Award winner Margo Price's livestream. It has drawn hundreds of views on YouTube.

Pettis — who uses his middle name, Rayvon, while performing — deployed to northern Afghanistan in 2010 with the now disbanded 900th Maintenance Company out of Alabama.

He returned from deploy-

ment and begin a music career, interrupted briefly by another deployment in 2013.

As a young logistics officer, Pettis tried his hand at civil affairs missions such as building schools and tried to leave base as much as possible to speak with the people of Balkh province.

"He was always trying to learn about Afghan culture from the locals," said Dave Abdullah Ali, an Afghan-American who served as an interpreter alongside Pettis.

The song comes from his experiences while deployed, but it's not about a soldier.

Pettis said the song was inspired by an intel brief he

heard about two young people unable to marry because they were from different tribes.

They were then were killed by their families when they tried to elope, he recalled.

The main characters of Pettis' song are similarly from different backgrounds.

But Pettis adds another twist: a happy ending. While his original version ended sadly, Pettis said he reworked it after remembering conversations with Afghan friends about how too many stories about Afghanistan end badly.

So Abdullah survives and the young couple escape to start a happy life.

Trump commutes Roger Stone's prison sentence

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump commuted the sentence of his longtime political confidant Roger Stone, intervening in extraordinary fashion in a criminal case that was central to the Russia investigation and that concerned the president's own conduct.

The move came Saturday, just days before Stone was to begin serving a 40-month prison sentence for lying to Congress, witness tampering and obstructing the House investigation into whether Trump's campaign colluded with Russia to win the 2016 election.

The action, which Trump had foreshadowed in recent days, underscores the president's lingering rage over special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation and is part of a continuing effort by the president and his administration to rewrite the narrative of a probe that has shadowed the White House from the outset. Democrats, already alarmed by the Justice Department's earlier dismissal of the case against Trump's first national security adviser, Michael Flynn, denounced the president as further undermining the rule of law.

Stone, 67, had been set to report to prison Tuesday after a federal appeals court rejected his bid to postpone his surrender date. But he told The Associated Press that Trump called him Friday evening to tell him he was off the hook.

Although a commutation does not nullify Stone's felony convictions, it protects him from serving prison time as a result.

The move marks another extraordinary intervention by Trump in the nation's justice system and underscores anew

his willingness to flout the norms and standards that have governed presidential conduct for decades. As Trump stares down a coronavirus pandemic that has worsened his chances for reelection, he has been more willing than ever to test the limits of his power.

Democrats denounced Trump's action. House Intelligence Committee Chair Adam Schiff called it "offensive to the rule of law and principles of justice. Democratic National Committee Chair Tom Perez asked, "Is there any power Trump won't abuse?"

Trump, who had made clear in recent days that he was inching closer to acting, had repeatedly publicly inserted himself into Stone's case, including just before Stone's sentencing.

That earned a public rebuke from his own attorney general, William Barr, who said the president's comments were "making it impossible" for him to do his job. Barr was so incensed that he told people he was considering resigning over the matter.

"With this commutation, Trump makes clear that there are two systems of justice in America: one for his criminal friends, and one for everyone else," Schiff said. "Donald Trump, Bill Barr, and all those who enable them pose the gravest of threats to the rule of law."

Prosecutors had originally recommended Stone serve seven to nine years in prison. But in a highly unusual move, Barr reversed that decision after a Trump tweet and recommended a more lenient punishment, prompting a mini-revolt inside the Justice Department, with the entire prosecution team resigning from the case.

Over 150 Minneapolis cops seek disability

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — More than 150 Minneapolis police officers are filing work-related disability claims after the death of George Floyd and ensuing unrest, with about three-quarters citing post-traumatic stress disorder as the reason for their planned departures, according to an attorney representing the officers.

Their duty disability claims, which will take months to process, come as the city is seeing an increase in violent crime and while city leaders push a proposal to replace the Minneapolis Police Department with a new agency that they say would have a more holistic approach.

While Floyd's death in May and the unrest that followed are not the direct cause of many of the disability requests, attorney Ron Meuser said, those events and what Meuser called a lack of support from city leadership were a breaking point for many

who had been struggling with PTSD from years on the job. Duty disability means the officer was disabled while engaged in inherently dangerous acts specific to the job.

"Following the George Floyd incident, unfortunately, it became too much and as a result, they were unable to, and are unable to, continue on and move forward," Meuser said. "They feel totally and utterly abandoned."

Meuser said in recent weeks, 150 officers have retained his office for help in filing for duty disability benefits through the state's Public Employment Retirement Association, or PERA. So far, 75 of them have already left the job, he said.

Police spokesman John Elder questioned Meuser's figure of 150, though he does expect an increase in departures. The department currently has about 850 officers and will adjust staffing to ensure it can do its job, he said.

Texas Rep. Dan Crenshaw questions senator's values

The Washington Post

Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, suggested to an online audience this week that Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., agreed with "the destruction of America," adding his voice to a chorus of Republicans who have questioned the Democrat's values since she suggested that protesters who opposed monuments to some of the Founding Fathers should be listened to.

"I think a general message that the left stands for the destruction of America, and the right doesn't, probably works pretty well with veterans, even liberal ones," Crenshaw said in a Wednesday night "MAGA meetup" organized by the Trump campaign. "Because even liberal veterans probably don't agree with that, unless you're Tammy Duckworth."

In a statement, Crenshaw, a former Navy SEAL officer who lost his right eye to an explosive attack while serving in Afghanistan, defended his remarks, saying his disagreement with the U.S. senator was political and not personal. Duckworth, in a Sunday interview with CNN, had said Americans needed to "have a national dialogue" about whether statues of George Washington should come down, kicking off days of criticism from Republicans.

Duckworth's office said in a statement that the senator "appreciates Congressman Crenshaw's service to our nation and will continue defending his First Amendment right to say whatever he wants, including that he believes dialogues are 'worthy of criticism' in a country founded on the right to free speech."

Many countries underscore disparity of care

Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG — South Africa's confirmed coronavirus cases have doubled in just two weeks to a quarter-million, and India on Saturday saw its biggest daily spike as its infections passed 800,000. The surging cases are raising sharp concerns about unequal treatment during the pandemic, as the wealthy hoard medical equipment and use private hospitals and the poor crowd into overwhelmed public facilities.

Globally more than 12.5 million people have been infected by the virus and over 560,000 have died, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. Experts say the pandemic's true toll is much higher

due to testing shortages, poor data collection in some nations and other issues.

Some of the worst-affected countries are among the world's most unequal. South Africa leads them all on that measure, with the pandemic exposing the gap in care.

In Johannesburg, the epicenter of South Africa's outbreak, badly needed oxygen concentrators that help people with COVID-19 struggling to breathe are hard to find as private businesses and individuals are buying them up, a public health specialist volunteering at a field hospital, Lynne Wilkinson, told The Associated Press.

Meanwhile, South Africa's public hospitals are short on medical oxygen — and they are now seeing a higher proportion of

deaths than private ones, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases says.

South Africa now has more than 250,000 confirmed coronavirus cases, including more than 3,800 deaths. To complicate matters, the country's troubled power utility has announced new electricity cuts in the dead of winter as a cold front brings freezing weather. Many of the country's urban poor live in shacks of scrap metal and wood.

And in Kenya, some have been outraged by a local newspaper report that says several governors have installed intensive care unit equipment in their homes. The country lost its first doctor to COVID-19 this week.

Trump again ramps up his attacks on health experts

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House seating chart spoke volumes.

When the president convened a roundtable this week on how to safely reopen schools with coronavirus cases rising, the seats surrounding him were filled with parents, teachers and top White House officials, including the first and second ladies.

But the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, usually the leader of disease-fighting efforts, was relegated to secondary seating in the back with the children of parents who had been invited to speak.

Intentional or not, it was a telling indication of the regard that President Donald Trump has for the government's top health professionals as he pushes the country to move past the coronavirus. Whatever they

say, he's determined to revive the battered economy and resuscitate his reelection chances, even as U.S. hospitalizations and deaths keep climbing.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases in the U.S. hit the 3 million mark this week, with over 130,000 deaths now recorded. The surge has led to new equipment shortages as well as long lines at testing sites and delayed results.

States are responding.

At midnight Friday, Nevada was to enforce new restrictions on bars and restaurants in several areas including Las Vegas and Reno after a spike in cases. And New Mexico's Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said her state was halting indoor restaurant service, closing state parks to nonresidents and suspending autumn contact sports at schools in response to surging infections within its boundaries and neighboring Texas and Arizona.

Yet Trump paints a rosy picture of progress and ramps up his attacks on his government's own public health officials, challenging the CDC's school-reopening guidelines and publicly undermining the nation's top infectious-diseases expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci.

"Dr. Fauci is a nice man, but he's made a lot of mistakes," Trump told Fox News Channel host Sean Hannity in a call-in interview Thursday, pointing, in part, to changes in guidance on mask-wearing over time.

In his latest beef with the CDC, the president accused the Atlanta-based federal agency of "asking schools to do very impractical things" in order to reopen. The recommended measures include spacing students' desks 6 feet apart, staggering start and arrival times, and teaching kids effective hygiene measures to prevent infections.

No guarantee of workers' comp for front-line workers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lauded for their service and hailed as everyday heroes, essential workers who get the coronavirus on the job have no guarantee in most states they'll qualify for workers' compensation to cover lost wages and medical care.

Fewer than one-third of the states have enacted policies that shift the burden of proof for coverage of job-related COVID-19 so workers like first responders and nurses don't have to show they got sick by reporting for a risky assignment.

Debate over workers' comp in the states is part of a much larger national discussion about liability for virus exposure, with Republicans in Congress seeking a broad shield for businesses in the next coronavirus relief bill.

And for most employees going back to job sites as the economy reopens, there's even less protection than for essential workers. In nearly all states, they have to prove they got the virus on the job to qualify for workers' comp.

Nurse Dori Harrington of Manchester, Conn., said she got COVID-19 caring for

infected patients at a nursing home, with limited protective gear. Harrington was severely ill and missed five weeks of work, yet her workers' comp claim was initially denied on grounds that her disease was "not distinctively associated with, nor peculiar" to her job.

"It's great to be appreciated, but we need to be taken care of, too," said Harrington, who eventually won her claim with union help. "Nobody should have to fight to be taken care of when they were simply doing their job taking care of other people. It's obnoxious to me."

Ga. governor hikes hospital bed capacity

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Gov. Brian Kemp announced Friday that Georgia would increase hospital bed capacity as COVID-19 hospitalizations surged, the state set a new single-day record for coronavirus infections and he clashed anew with Atlanta's mayor.

Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms told residents of the state's largest city to stay home except for essential trips and for restaurants to limit themselves to takeout, but the Republican Kemp has barred local officials from taking actions stronger than his statewide mandates. Bottoms on Wednesday ordered people to wear masks, another move Kemp says is legally void.

"Mayor Bottoms' action today is merely guidance — both non-binding and legally unenforceable," Kemp said in a statement. "As clearly stated in the governor's executive order, no local action can be more or less restrictive, and that rule applies statewide."

The state will contract for 100 new hospital beds at an unnamed Atlanta-area hospital and will reactivate an overflow hospital at the mammoth state-owned convention center in downtown Atlanta, Kemp's office announced Friday.

California

SACRAMENTO — Crossroads Community Church Senior Pastor Jim Clark wants to keep his 1,500 parishioners safe during the coronavirus pandemic but he's drawing the line at a new California ban on singing or chanting at religious services.

"I said enough's enough," Clark said. "We will be singing and praising the Lord. ... We don't chant, but if we did chant, we'd be chanting, too."

The California ban was one of a number of restrictions on indoor businesses and gatherings put in place last week by Gov. Gavin Newsom amid fast-rising virus cases and hospitalizations. It's unclear if any similar prohibition on singing exists in

the United States, though there is one in England.

The virus is more easily transmitted indoors and singing releases minuscule droplets that can carry the disease. The ban may well end up in court as there are differing opinions on its legality, with some groups arguing it infringes on religious freedom while others believe it's constitutional, especially during a pandemic.

Iowa

RIPPEY — A west-central Iowa woman has been sentenced to one year of probation for holding a large party in May during a government-order ban on gatherings of 10 or more people.

Charity Snavelly, 38, of Rippey, was also sentenced earlier this month to 10 days in jail, but that sentence was suspended, television station WOI reported Friday.

Snavelly pleaded guilty to a public health violation stemming from a May 23 party at her Rippey home in which police said she served 13 minors alcohol. At the time, Gov. Kim Reynolds had ordered a ban on such gatherings in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Kansas

TOPEKA — Kansas has not contained a resurgence in coronavirus cases, raising questions about whether Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly and the Republican-controlled Legislature erred in allowing local officials to set rules for businesses and public gatherings.

State Department of Health and Environment figures show that Kansas experienced its worst spike in confirmed new cases since the pandemic began in the two-week period ending Friday, with an average of 362 a day. It was also the fourth consecutive health department report within eight days showing a new record.

The department on Friday reported 993 confirmed new coronavirus cases over the previous two days, bringing

the state's pandemic total to 18,611.

Maine

PORTLAND — Maine's casinos are emerging from a COVID-19 closure.

Hollywood Slots opened Friday, a day after the opening of the Oxford Casino. Both have limits on capacity and strict rules for disinfecting to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus.

The openings come after the office of Maine Gov. Janet Mills released safety protocols for casinos and short-term rentals that want to participate in the state's latest phase of reopening.

Mills, a Democrat, released "COVID-19 prevention checklists" for businesses on Thursday. Her office also released updated safety guidelines for nail salons, community sports, day camps and overnight summer camps. The state is in the midst of its third stage of reopening its economy.

Michigan

LANSING — Gov. Gretchen Whitmer on Friday toughened a requirement to wear masks during the coronavirus pandemic, mandating that businesses open to the public deny service or entry to customers who refuse to wear one.

The governor also expanded where people must have a face-covering beyond indoor public spaces. Starting immediately, they have to wear one outdoors if they cannot consistently keep 6 feet from non-household members, and while using public transportation, a taxi or a ride-sharing vehicle — with some exceptions.

In a change, violators will now be subject to a misdemeanor or fine but will continue to face no jail time.

"No shirts, no shoes, no mask — no service," Whitmer wrote in an order.

Businesses must comply beginning Monday or risk losing their license.

Pennsylvania

HARRISBURG — New confirmed coronavirus infections in Pennsylvania hit their highest one-day mark since May on Friday, with state officials blaming the rising numbers on crowded bars where people aren't wearing masks and on out-of-state travel to virus hot spots.

Pennsylvania reported more than 1,000 new coronavirus infections for the first time since May 10. That's partly due to a reporting delay because about 175 of those cases arose from private lab results reported together in one batch, according to the state Health Department.

Health officials reported another 32 coronavirus-related deaths, raising the statewide toll to 6,880.

State health officials warned in a health alert to hospitals, doctors' offices and other health care providers that increasing numbers of young people are contracting the virus. The Health Department also said that local outbreaks are being traced to out-of-state travel and to parties, restaurants, bars and other social gatherings.

South Carolina

COLUMBIA — In an effort to stem South Carolina's raging coronavirus outbreak, particularly among young adults he says are gathering in unsafe groupings, Gov. Henry McMaster is shutting off the late-night sale of alcohol at bars and restaurants across the state.

McMaster on Friday said that, starting on Saturday, the 8,000 bars and restaurants across the state-licensed to sell alcoholic beverages would have to shut off those sales at 11 p.m. each night.

"We are saying emphatically, it's time for our younger adults to behave like mature adults," McMaster said, noting that, while younger people may not get seriously ill from the virus, they could spread it to more vulnerable, older adults. "This is very serious. Wear your mask. Keep that distance."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police say woman hit, killed by semi-trailer

MO KANSAS CITY — Police in Kansas City are investigating the death of a woman who was reportedly standing on an interstate on-ramp when she was hit by a semi-trailer.

The driver of the semi reported that he was on the ramp to get onto I-435 and had looked over his shoulder to check for traffic as he merged onto the interstate, police said. When he looked forward again, a woman was in the roadway directly in front of the semi and he was unable to avoid hitting her, he told police.

Boy hurt when explosive device blows up in hand

PA PHILADELPHIA — A boy holding an explosive device he had lit was seriously injured when it exploded in his hand on a Philadelphia street, authorities said.

The 12-year-old was with a friend when the accident occurred. The boy had been trying to hold on to the device as long as possible before letting go, authorities said.

City police in the area heard the blast and found the injured boy, who was running toward his home. They then took him and his mother to a hospital, where he underwent surgery.

Inmate sentenced in drug ring run from jail

RI PROVIDENCE — A Rhode Island man convicted of continuing to run a crack cocaine trafficking ring while an inmate at the state prison with the help of his mother was sentenced to more than six years in a federal prison, prosecutors said.

Fellow inmates provided James Gomes, 33, of Pawtucket with prospective buyers outside of prison and their contact information, according to the U.S. attorney's office in Rhode Island.

Gomes often passed the information through his 51-year-old mother to two other men, who delivered the drugs to Gomes' customers.

Gomes frequently called his mother directing her to establish conference calls with the other two men and directing them to sell crack to others, according to a federal investigation.

Officials threaten arrests over fireworks

NE LAS VEGAS — Nye County officials are threatening citations and arrests for illegal fireworks that led to some fires across metro Las Vegas.

The county Sheriff's Office made an online plea for people to stop using aerial fireworks.

Pahrump Valley firefighters had to respond to calls about fires at homes and desert brush areas.

Sheriff's officials said deputies will be searching and citing or arresting anyone found launching aerial fireworks.

Video shows girls hitting another on school field

NY NORTH TONAWANDA — Authorities are looking into a video posted on social media that showed a group of girls attacking another girl on a school athletic field in western New York.

Local media reported the clip was shared in a Facebook group but has since been removed. It showed several girls repeatedly hitting and push-

ing another girl to the ground. All appear to be in their young teens.

Police said those involved will be charged and referred to family court.

University denies PETA's request to retire mascot

AL FLORENCE — The University of North Alabama said the school will keep its lion mascot following a request by an animal rights group that the lion be transferred to a sanctuary.

"Our UNA community has enjoyed visiting our lions on campus, and our lions have a special place in our University traditions," the school said in a statement reported by WHNT-TV.

The university received the request from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals after the lion's sister, Una, died in June. Una and her brother, Leo III, had lived in a campus habitat, where Una died, since 2003, officials said.

Sergeant arrested in dispute over refund

MD BALTIMORE — A Baltimore city police sergeant is facing accusations of kidnapping and extortion after demanding a refund in connection with a home improvement project.

James Lloyd, 45, was arrested after Baltimore County police detectives received information about a dispute between Lloyd and the victim doing the home improvement project, the Baltimore County Police Department said in a news release.

The dispute began when Lloyd became dissatisfied with the victim's work and demanded the refund, the department said.

Three other detectives in Lloyd's homicide unit have had their police powers suspended in connection with the incident,

Man broke into clinic to escape storms, left note

NE LINCOLN — A man accused of breaking into a Lincoln medical clinic to escape strong thunderstorms wasn't hard to track down, police said, because he left a note on the door.

Officers were called to the MedExpress Urgent Care for a burglar alarm as storms raged in the area, the Lincoln Journal Star reported. Arriving officers found a front window smashed and a Post-it note adhered to the clinic door that read, "Exam Room 2, Ronnie."

The 23-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of trespassing, criminal mischief and drug possession counts for an amphetamine-loaded syringe and a marijuana pipe found in his backpack.

Loon hatches for first time in a century

MA FALL RIVER — A loon has hatched for the first time in more than a century in southeastern Massachusetts thanks to a long-term effort to restore the traditional nesting grounds for the aquatic birds, wildlife officials said.

The chick hatched this spring in Fall River, according to the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and Biodiversity Research Institute, a Portland, Maine-based group.

Biodiversity Research Institute relocated loon chicks from Maine and New York to the Lakeville, Mass.-area in 2015 in the hopes of reestablishing breeding and nesting patterns.

From wire reports

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Short season will affect MLB statistics

Associated Press

Cody Bellinger was well on his way to becoming the National League MVP only 60 games into last season for the Los Angeles Dodgers, already with 20 homers in that stretch before his 24th birthday.

Over that same span for the Houston Astros last summer, Justin Verlander won nine games and struck out 103 batters on the way to his second AL Cy Young Award. The veteran right-hander had more wins and strikeouts through the first 60 games for the American League champions than he did just over one-third of the way into the 2011 season for the Detroit Tigers, when he finished 24-5 and was also the AL MVP.

After 60 games this year, it will already be time to determine who wins those awards. There will be no more games to be played in a regular season that's set to begin July 23 and is 102 games shorter than usual because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Bellinger was only the fifth MVP from either league over the past 20 seasons to have 20 homers in his team's first 60 games — Barry Bonds did it twice, and the last to do it had been Bryce Harper with the

Washington Nationals in 2015. The Dodgers were 41-19 and already with a big lead in the NL West, with Bellinger hitting .376 with 52 RBIs. He finished at .305 with 47 homers and 115 RBIs two years after being the NL Rookie of the Year.

When Bonds set the single-season record with 73 homers in 2001, the first of his four consecutive MVP seasons, baseball's home run king also had the best 60-game start in the majors over the past 100 years with 32. The best such start for an active hitter was the 25 for three-time NL MVP Albert Pujols in 2006, though Ryan Howard won the MVP that season.

Only one Cy Young winner over the past 20 seasons has had more than the nine wins Verlander had after 60 games last year. Randy Johnson was 10-1 with 139 strikeouts through his first 13 starts over Arizona's first 60 games in 2000, when he won the second of his four consecutive NL Cy Young Awards.

No losses: Only three Cy Young winners since 2000 have gotten through their team's first 60 games, generally 12 or 13 starts, without losing a game. The last was Max Scherzer for the Tigers in 2013, when he was 8-0 with a 3.24 ERA and 100

strikeouts through 12 starts. He finished 21-3, matching the fewest losses overall for any Cy Young winner in that stretch.

Brandon Webb was 8-0 through 13 starts for Arizona on way to being the 2006 NL Cy Young winner.

Varying Twins: Justin Morneau likely wouldn't have been the 2006 AL MVP if that season had ended after 60 games, when he was hitting .240 with 13 homers and 43 RBIs. That included his two homers and five RBIs in Minnesota's 60th game, the first of five consecutive multi-hit games to start a tear when he hit .364 the rest of the season to finish at .321 with 34 homers and 130 RBIs.

Three years later, Twins teammate Joe Mauer was hitting .415 through 60 games in his MVP season, when the Twins again had a losing record at that point before winning another AL Central title. Mauer ended at .365 with 28 homers and 96 RBIs.

Mauer and Morneau have the highest and lowest batting averages for any MVP through 60 games since 2000.

When Rod Carew was the AL MVP in 1977 with the Twins, the Hall of Fame left-handed hitter finished with a career-best .388. That was also his

exact average after 60 games, though he peaked at .411 between then and the end of the season.

Chasing .400: Tony Gwynn would have been a .400 hitter had the 1997 season ended after the San Diego Padres played their 60th game, when he was at .403 — he finished with a .372 average. When the Hall of Fame outfielder and 15-time All-Star hit a career-best .394 in 1994, he was at .378 through 60 games.

In 2008, nine years after Chipper Jones was the NL MVP, he was hitting .409 through Atlanta's first 60 games. The Hall of Fame third baseman hit a majors-best and career-high .364 that season.

Gwynn and George Brett are the only players who have finished within 10 points of a .400 season since Ted Williams had the last one in 1941. Williams hit .406, only one point lower than he was through Boston's first 60 games that season.

Brett was at .337 through 54 games for the Kansas City Royals in 1980 before missing a month because of an ankle injury. He returned to hit .421 over the last half of the season, and was at .400 overall on Sept. 19 before finishing at .390 for the AL champions.

Sounders, Earthquakes draw in MLS tournament

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Seattle goalkeeper Stefan Frei made eight saves, including a diving stop on a deflected shot in the 70th minute, and the Sounders and San Jose played to a 0-0 draw in the MLS is Back tournament Friday night.

The West Coast squads seemed to wilt in the heat and humidity of Central Florida as they combined for 28 total shots but could not beat either goalkeeper.

"You saw a team with soul, a team with chances," San Jose coach Matias Almeyda said. "I'm really happy with the game my team played."

Frei had the more highlight-worthy saves, the best coming off Jackson Yueill's deflected shot. But San Jose goalkeeper Daniel Vega was his equal.

Vega stopped Cristian Roldan on a clear chance in the first half. Vega then made a pair of key saves late in the match. He denied Raul Ruidiaz inside the penalty area in the 84th minute.

Vega finished with six stops. "In the end, obviously sloppy play for the first game in three months, whatever, it was probably going to be summed up like that," Roldan said. "But if we had taken care of one or two opportunities we would be happy with the result."

It was the first match of the revamped Group B that lost FC Dallas when it was removed from the tournament after 10 players tested positive for COVID-19. Nashville was later removed after an outbreak of positive tests and Chicago was moved from Group A to Group B to fill out the tournament with six groups of four teams.

San Jose has been in Florida longer than any other MLS team. It was not permitted to practice in its home market prior to the start of the tournament and arrived in Florida 16 days before Friday's first match.

"Ever since I came to this team Matias really put that in us that we had to do our best," Vega said through an interpreter. "I think tonight's result shows that and we're happy that we're back."

The Earthquakes started the season with a draw against Toronto before losing to Minnesota United in the final match before the league came to a stop in mid-March.

Seattle opened the season with a win over Chicago and a draw against Columbus. The Sounders are now unbeaten in their last nine MLS matches dating to a Sept. 22, 2019, loss to D.C. United.

Pac-12 eliminates nonconference games

Associated Press

The Big Ten and Pac-12 became the first Power Five leagues to shift to an all-conference fall schedule as college sports face a dramatically different landscape due to the coronavirus pandemic. In football alone, 73 games were scrapped in two days, from marquee matchups like Oregon-Ohio State to storied rivalries like USC-Notre Dame.

All eyes are now on the Atlantic Coast, Southeastern and Big 12 conferences to see if more games will be shelved in what is already shaping up as a college football season like no other. Hundreds of games have already been canceled, suspended or pushed to the spring semester at the lowest tiers of college football.

Most of the canceled football games in the Pac-12 and Big Ten are less glamorous matchups against small schools counting on big payouts to keep their athletic budgets afloat when they are already facing ugly bottom lines. Saving that money is crucial for the power conference schools — and a tremendous blow to their

opponents.

“It’s significant, to say the least,” Northern Arizona athletic director Mike Marlow said Friday after the Pac-12 announcement. “We’re fortunate in the state of Arizona to have both (Arizona State) and (Arizona) here and we have one or the other scheduled through 2029. That’s a significant part of our budget.”

The Big Ten announced Thursday it will eliminate all nonconference games in football and several other sports amid rising COVID-19 concerns. The Pac-12 followed suit a day later, announcing it was eliminating all nonconference games from its fall schedules for football, men’s and women’s soccer and women’s volleyball. The Ivy League has called off all fall sports.

A conference-only schedule also allows schools to cut down on travel and other expenses at a time when athletic departments are facing massive budget constraints.

The cancellation of the NCAA Tournament left the NCAA \$375 million short in revenue scheduled to be paid to its member schools, and the

pandemic has continued to exacerbate financial shortcomings with many schools facing a drop in tuition revenue and lower attendance. Stanford has already announced plans to eliminate 11 of its 36 varsity sports next year to help shore up some of a projected \$25 million budget shortfall, and at least 171 sports programs at four-year schools have been cut during the pandemic.

The Big Ten’s decision wipes out 33 nonconference football games against non-Power Five programs — nine more against Power Five opponents, including two against Pac-12 foes — with payouts ranging in the six figures to more than \$1 million to smaller schools.

Non-Power Five schools will collectively lose at least \$110 million — possibly up to \$150 million — in revenue from guaranteed payments by Power Five schools in a conference-only model, according to Patrick Rishe, director of the sports business program at Washington University in St. Louis.

“I expect every conference will at least move towards fewer games ... and likely a confer-

ence-only model,” Rishe said. “If you reduce beyond that, what’s the point of conducting the sport in the fall? You’d be better off giving the spring a try and craft a conference-only spring schedule which can be contested in less time, less travel, etc.”

Some schools could lose more than 5% of their entire athletic budgets if guarantee games are wiped off their schedules.

Most guarantee game contracts have so-called act of God clauses, providing some compensation when an uncontrollable event causes a cancellation. The clauses vary by each contract, and schools are already sorting through those in case guarantee games — or the entire season — are wiped out.

“I don’t think we know what the financial impact is,” MAC Commissioner Jon Steinbrecher acknowledged in a telephone interview Thursday. “Those schools will have to work through how you disassemble that contract and put it back together. We’ll all act accordingly, and we’ll see over the next two to three weeks what the season looks like if we’re able to have a season at all.”

NHL, union OK to resume season, extend CBA

Associated Press

Hockey became the latest sport to finalize a return during a global pandemic after NHL owners and players approved an agreement Friday to resume the season — and with it an assurance of labor peace through September 2026.

Games are scheduled to begin Aug. 1 in Toronto and Edmonton, Alberta, with coronavirus cases in the U.S. pushing the league into Canada for the summer and fall until the Stanley Cup is awarded in late September or early October.

Training camps open across North America on Monday, which is also the deadline for players to opt out of participating with no penalty. Minneso-

ta’s Zach Parise said earlier this week he doesn’t think a lot of players will choose not to play, but the NHL already has one example.

Hours after the agreement was reached, Calgary defenseman Travis Hamonic became the first to publicly opt out, citing family reasons. Hamonic’s daughter was hospitalized last year with a respiratory illness.

“I wish I could lace up my skates and be out there battling, blocking a shot and helping my team win, but my family has and always will come first,” Hamonic said. “Being my little kids’ dad every day is the most important job I have.”

Flames general manager Brad Treliving said, “While we will miss Travis in our lineup,

we understand and respect his decision.”

The return-to-play plan, tentatively approved by the NHL and NHL Players’ Association on Monday, was ratified by the league’s board of governors and with majority approval from players following a three-day voting period, ending Friday. Along with it, the two sides also formally approved a four-year extension of the collective bargaining agreement.

“This agreement is a meaningful step forward for the players and owners, and for our game, in a difficult and uncertain time,” NHLPA executive director Don Fehr said. “We are pleased to be able to bring NHL hockey back to the fans.”

The CBA extension includes

an agreement to send players to the Olympics in 2022 and 2026 — pending an agreement with the International Olympic Committee and International Ice Hockey Federation — and includes some salary deferrals that allow both sides to bear the brunt of losses from the COVID-19 pandemic and share in the benefits of an upcoming U.S. TV rights contract.

“All we know is we will be playing hockey; there will be labor peace so long as this thing gets ratified for another four years, six years maybe,” Carolina veteran Justin Williams said. “That’s good for the fan, that’s good for the TV audience, that’s good for the players; it’s good for everybody.”