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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Gilday outlines assault ship damages

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Firefighters combating the blaze aboard the USS Bonhomme Richard faced zero visibility and the threat of explosions as the fire spread through nearly all of the ship's decks, Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, described in an email to senior naval leaders.

The fire, which began July 12 and burned for four days, caused extensive damage to the amphibious assault ship now based at Naval Base San Diego, where it was nearing the end of a maintenance period.

Gilday visited the ship Friday and described his observations and discussions with firefighters in an email Wednesday addressed to admirals and master chiefs and obtained by Stars and Stripes.

The ship has sustained fire and water damage on 11 of its 14 decks, Gilday wrote. He was able to walk throughout sections of the ship five decks below the flight deck and examine the superstructure, where

the bridge is located. The superstructure "is nearly gutted," he wrote, as are sections of some of the decks below. He also wrote the Naval Sea Systems Command's assessment of the damage is still ongoing.

"Sections of the flight deck are warped/bulging," Gilday wrote. "The fire started in the lower vehicle storage area — six decks below the flight deck and near the middle of the ship — spreading aft, forward, and up."

Gilday also repeated his public statements from Friday that wind and explosions aboard the ship allowed the fire to spread and become intense. Wind fueled the fire "as the vehicle storage area leads to the well deck, which opens to the air at the stern gate," he wrote.

The intensity and uncertainty of the explosions aboard made it difficult to get the fire under control sooner. The fire was able to spread "quickly up elevator shafts, engine exhaust stacks, and through berthing and other compartments where combustible material was present," Gilday wrote.

It took more than 400 sailors from 12

nearby ships and thousands of water bucket drops from helicopters to put out the blaze. During the effort to extinguish the multiple fires, 40 sailors and 23 civilians were treated for minor injuries.

Gilday praised the work of sailors to fight the fire, some of whom went aboard the ship eight times.

"They had experienced the intense, inferno-like heat, the dark smoke that obscured view of teammates by their side, and the explosions — the latter had to be like a mine field ... unknown when and where, and how severe, those blasts might be. Some had been knocked down by these blasts — some, more than once — but they got up, refocused, and reattacked."

The Navy is conducting three investigations into the fire to determine how it started, the response to fight it, and lessons learned, Gilday said Friday. The Navy is also assessing the ship's future and whether it will return to sea.

Gilday wrote the Navy is committed to "thoroughly look into and learn from the fire."

House, Senate pass bills to study cancers in pilots

McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Department of Defense would be required to identify how many of its current or former aviators have been diagnosed with cancer in bills passed by the House and Senate this week, a study long sought by military pilots who have questioned why there are so many serious illnesses in their community.

The legislation was included in both chambers' versions of the \$740 billion fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act following a series of stories by McClatchy on the alarming clusters of cancer among current or former military aviators, including four commanding officers at a premier Navy weapons testing base in

California who have died of cancer since 2015.

The two versions of the 2021 spending bill will now go to House and Senate negotiators to iron out differences before being sent to President Donald Trump to be signed into law.

Betty Seaman, the wife of one of the four commanding officers at Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake who died of cancer, welcomed the important milestone.

"Since losing my husband, I have met too many other families on the same unwanted journey. We all share a universal prayer, that no other family will have to go through a similar loss. Today brings us one step closer to that realization," Seaman said in an email to McClatchy.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., introduced the Military Aviators Cancer Incidence Study Act after McClatchy reported that military aviators may be at higher risk of developing certain cancers, according to a statement Thursday on the Senate passage of the defense bill, which was co-sponsored by Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

"Our service members deserve a full study on any possible link between their duties and an elevated risk of cancer. I look forward to working with my colleagues to make sure this bill is included in the final version of the NDAA," Feinstein said in a news release on the bill's passage.

The Senate version requires the Defense Department, with-

in 60 days of passage, to enter into an agreement with the National Institutes of Health, the National Cancer Institute and the Department of Veterans Affairs to create what would be the most comprehensive database of cancers in the aviation community.

The House version, introduced by Rep. Elaine Luria, D-Va., passed earlier this week. The House provision would require the Defense Department to contract with the National Academy of Sciences within six months of the bill's passage to determine the "incidence of cancer diagnosis mortality among members, and former members, of the Armed Forces who serve as pilots" based on gender, age, flying hours and type of aircraft.

US fighter jet intercepts Iranian airliner

The Washington Post

BEIRUT — American fighter aircraft approached an Iranian passenger plane over Syria on Thursday, a U.S. military official said, an incident that Iranian media said prompted the pilot to abruptly drop altitude and triggered panic aboard.

Iran's Fars News and the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency reported that the Iranian Mahan Air plane was flying above the Tanf area of eastern Syria, where a U.S. military base is located, when two jets approached, identifying themselves by radio as American. The pilot responded by dropping the aircraft to avoid collision, the official Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting news agency said.

Videos circulating on social media showed Arabic and Farsi speakers aboard the plane, some of them suffering injuries. One video showed the plane seemingly suddenly dropping as women screamed in the background. Another featured a Farsi-

speaking man who suffered a head injury that marked his face with a thin line of blood.

Capt. Bill Urban, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command, said that an American F-15 jet was on a "routine air mission" near the Tanf garrison, an isolated outpost, when it "conducted a standard visual inspection of a Mahan Air passenger airliner at a safe distance of approximately 1,000 meters from the airliner."

"Once the F-15 pilot identified the aircraft as a Mahan Air passenger plane, the F-15 safely opened distance from the aircraft. The professional intercept was conducted in accordance with international standards," Urban said in a statement.

A defense official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive incident, said a second U.S. aircraft was also in the vicinity. The official said it was possible that the proximity of the U.S. jet, while far enough away for its pilot to freely maneuver around the slower commer-

cial aircraft, may have triggered an audio collision alarm in the passenger plane's cockpit.

The plane, bound from Tehran to the Lebanese capital of Beirut, landed at its destination. The Lebanese Red Cross told The Washington Post it had reported to the scene but had not yet evacuated anyone who was injured.

An Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting reporter, who appeared to have been aboard the flight, said from Beirut that three passengers were injured during the fighter jets' "intentional move."

In another video that appears online, a woman filmed the plane aisle, the floor strewn with papers and packaged items, with passengers sporting bright yellow life vests. One child had gauze wrapped around his head. "I'm filming what happened, yeah, in case we die," she said in Arabic.

Fars News later reported that the plane was back in Iran, apparently without any more incidents.

Senate's 2021 defense bill passes amid veto threat

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly passed their version of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act with a provision to strip 10 Army posts of Confederate-linked names, setting up a veto showdown with President Donald Trump who has objected to such name changes.

The 86-14 passage of the \$740.5 billion bill that sets annual Pentagon spending and policy priorities comes just two days after the House easily passed its version of the NDAA, which also would force name changes of Army installations named for Confederate generals from the Civil War. The White House on Tuesday, hours before the House passed the measure, issued a 13-page statement objecting to several provisions within the bill, but primarily the issue of Confed-

erate names.

Senate leaders praised the bill as a step forward for the U.S. military, providing it critical funding to modernize its force as it eyes potential conflict with near peer rivals, such as China and Russia. "By fully investing in our military growth and modernization, we're restoring deterrence so no country wants to challenge us. I don't want a fair fight out there, I want to be superior — and this bill does that," said Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The two chambers now must conference to reconcile differences in their versions of the legislation, an effort that traditionally takes months.

Both chambers passed their versions of the NDAA with more than a two-thirds majority, which would be needed for each body to override a presidential veto and make the bill a law without Trump's signature.

Russia accused of testing an anti-satellite weapon

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States accused Russia on Thursday of conducting a test of an anti-satellite weapon in space, asserting that it exposed Moscow's intent to deploy weapons that threaten U.S. and allied satellites.

In Moscow, the Defense Ministry said the July 15 event involved "a small space vehicle" that "inspected one of the national satellites from a close distance using special equipment."

It added that the inspection "provided valuable information about the object that was inspected, which was transmitted to the ground-based control facilities."

The U.S., however, said the Russian actions were inconsistent with the stated mission of an inspector satellite.

"The Russian satellite system used to conduct this on-orbit weapons test is the same satellite system that we raised

concerns about earlier this year when Russia maneuvered near a U.S. government satellite," said Gen. John W. Raymond, commander of Space Command and the head of U.S. Space Force. "This is further evidence of Russia's continuing efforts to develop and test space-based systems, and consistent with the Kremlin's published military doctrine to employ weapons that hold U.S. and allied space assets at risk."

In a space strategy document published last month, the Pentagon asserted that "China and Russia present the greatest strategic threat due to their development, testing, and deployment of counterspace capabilities and their associated military doctrine for employment in conflict extending to space."

It added, "China and Russia each have weaponized space as a means to reduce U.S. and allied military effectiveness and challenge our freedom of operation in space."

Marines on Okinawa report 41 new coronavirus cases

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The Marine Corps on Okinawa reported 41 new coronavirus cases Friday, bringing to 196 the total from two clusters discovered after Fourth of July weekend.

The latest infections were discovered “within the last 24 hours” through the Marine Corps’ trace-and-test process and involve personnel attached to Marine Corps Installations Pacific and III Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa, spokesman Maj. Ken Kunze wrote Friday in an emailed statement to Stars and Stripes.

He did not specify whether the individuals were Marines, civilian employees, contractors or family members.

Twenty-seven of the 41 cases stem from a cluster outbreak at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma; the remaining 14 are at Camp Hansen, the site of another outbreak.

The 18th Wing at Kadena Air Base also announced a new positive case Friday, according to a post on the base Facebook page. The individual tested positive before leaving the 14-day quarantine period mandated upon arrival on Okinawa and had no contact with anyone on or off base, the message said.

The Kadena case was identified through a “recently implemented” mandate to test all service members, civilian em-

ployees, contractors and family members before they are permitted to exit quarantine, according to the wing statement on Facebook. The wing also completed contact tracing for that individual.

On Friday, U.S. Forces Japan announced a new policy requiring anyone in the mandated quarantine period to test negative for the coronavirus before they’re permitted to leave quarantine. That policy applies to all U.S. bases in Japan.

Of the 41 Marines, some have been in quarantine since July 12, but most have been restricted since July 18, the Marine Corps statement said. They have been moved into isolation.

“All of those individuals were from batch testing that has been pending, one as far back as 12 July,” Kunze wrote. “With the high volume of test results that have been pending since last week, this wasn’t a surprise.”

Kunze said restrictions under Health Protection Condition-Charlie will remain in place through the weekend as part of the service’s “aggressive containment effort.” Charlie represents a substantial risk of coronavirus transmission.

Another five Marines infected during the outbreak were released from isolation, according to the Marines on Friday. They join 27 others released earlier in the week.

Stars and Stripes reporter Hana Kusumoto contributed to this report.

Berger says USMC’s parental leave rules need improvement

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps needs to improve its parental leave options quickly if the service wants to retain its best Marines, as unexpected hurdles have delayed changes, the service’s top general said Thursday.

“We have to extend maternity leave, we have to be a lot more flexible than we are right now. But we have to stay within Department of Defense policy as well, so I’m working in a box,” Gen. David Berger, the commandant of the Marine Corps, said during an interview with Stars and Stripes.

Berger released guidance in July 2019 shortly after he became the commandant that stated the service should not ask Marines to choose between being the best parent or the best in their military career.

“Our parental/maternity leave policies are inadequate and have failed to keep pace with societal norms and modern talent management practices. We fully support the growth of our Marine families, and will do everything possible

to provide parents with opportunities to remain with their newborns for extended periods of time,” the guidance stated.

The guidance also stated the Marine Corps would consider up to one-year leaves of absence for mothers to be with their children before returning to finish their service obligations.

In the year since the guidance was issued, Berger said he has found updating the parental leave policy more complicated than he anticipated.

“It’s taken longer than I had hoped for. But I didn’t realize, I think to the extent I should have maybe last summer, that this would require coordination with the rest of the services and secretary of defense and all to make sure that we had a policy that was executable, supportable,” he said.

Like the other services, the Marine Corps adheres to the Defense Department’s Military Parental Leave Program. A birth parent can now take 42 days — 6 weeks — of maternity convalescent leave to recover medically from the birth, starting the day after they are released from the hospital or facility where they gave birth.

Taliban say they are ready to begin talks after holiday

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — The Taliban say they are ready for talks with Afghanistan’s political leadership after the Muslim holiday of Eid ul Adha at the end of July, offering to hand over the last of the government prisoners in a week’s time, providing the government frees the last of its Taliban prisoners.

The offer made by Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen in a tweet late Thursday follows one of the most signifi-

cant shakeups in the Taliban in years. The group appointed the son of the movement’s fearsome founder to head its military wing and powerful leadership council members to its negotiation team.

In Kabul on Friday, the High Council for National Reconciliation, which was created in May to manage peace efforts with the Taliban, said it was still working through the Taliban’s prisoner list.

Javed Faisal, spokesman for the Afghan national security

adviser’s office, previously said nearly 600 Taliban prisoners whose release is being sought have been convicted of serious crimes. The government is reluctant to set them free, he said.

It seemed unlikely the government would free the remaining Taliban prisoners before the Muslim holiday.

The release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by the government and 1,000 government personnel and security officials in Taliban custody is laid out in

a U.S. deal with the Taliban aimed at ending Afghanistan’s relentless wars.

According to the deal, the prisoner exchange is to take place ahead of talks between Kabul and the Taliban, seen as perhaps the most critical part of the deal.

Shaheen’s tweet was the first offer at a timeline for the negotiations, however he demanded the prisoner release be completed first and refused any substitutes to the list of prisoners submitted by the Taliban.

Law enforcement at protests to be probed

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Two federal inspectors general announced Thursday that they will investigate how Justice Department and Homeland Security agents used force, detained people and conducted themselves at high-profile clashes with protesters in Portland, Ore., and Washington.

Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz will investigate how U.S. marshals have used force in Portland, and how other parts of the Justice Department — such as the FBI; Drug Enforcement Administration; and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives — were used to quell unrest in the nation's capital.

The Department of Homeland Security inspector general, Joseph Cuffari, said in a letter to lawmakers that he opened an

investigation into allegations that Customs and Border Protection agents “improperly detained and transported protesters” in Portland and that he would review the deployment there of DHS personnel in recent weeks.

The inspector general investigations add to a growing list of inquiries into events in Portland and Washington, where local officials have criticized federal agencies for what they have called heavy-handed aggression toward peaceful protesters.

The Democratic leaders of three congressional panels — Reps. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., of the Judiciary Committee; Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., of the Oversight and Reform Committee; and Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., of the Homeland Security Committee — said in a joint statement that

the investigations are “critically important” because the Trump administration has pledged to send federal agents to more cities.

Lawmakers had pressed Horowitz in recent weeks to investigate whether the Trump administration was misusing federal law enforcement resources, particularly when it came to rules of engagement, and the use of tear gas and less-lethal munitions.

As part of those reviews, the inspector general will examine what federal law enforcement did in Lafayette Square near the White House on June 1, when protesters were forcibly cleared from the area just before President Donald Trump walked to a nearby church and held up a Bible in front of photographers.

Air Force Academy student body to return to campus

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Air Force Academy will return its entire 4,000-cadet student body to its Colorado Springs, Colo., campus by July 31 in preparation to begin fall classes in mid-August amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, academy officials announced Thursday.

Some 3,000 sophomore, junior and senior cadets will join the 1,145 freshmen who arrived on campus June 25 to begin basic cadet training, academy officials said in a statement. It will mark the first time that returning cadets come to the campus after they were sent home in mid-March over concerns about the fast-spreading virus.

“The safety of cadets, staff and the entire [U.S. Air Force Academy] community, as well as the Colorado Springs community, remains our number one priority,” according to the statement, which boasted the recall of students would make the academy among the first American universities with its full student body on campus.

The Air Force Academy will take a variety of precautions aimed at ensuring safety and mitigating any potential spread of the coronavirus among its student body, including social distancing on campus, the use of online and in-person classes, and a testing program aimed at rooting out asymptomatic carriers of the virus. It will also house 400 of its cadets in off-campus hotels to

ensure it has enough space to isolate and quarantine individuals who contract or are exposed to the coronavirus, officials said.

“The select group of healthy cadets living off-base will be subject to the same stringent military training and academic standards, and safety protocols as the cadets remaining on base,” according to the academy statement.

The decision to recall the cadets to school comes as universities and other schools wrestle with the prospects of returning students to classrooms amid the pandemic that is surging in some areas of the country, especially in several southeastern states, Texas, and California, according to Johns Hopkins University statistics.

2 Columbus statues removed from parks in Chicago

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Two statues of Christopher Columbus that stood in Chicago parks were taken down early Friday at the direction of Mayor Lori Lightfoot, a week after protesters trying to topple one of the monuments to the Italian explorer clashed with police.

Crews used a large crane to remove the statue in downtown Chicago's Grant Park from its pedestal. A small crowd cheered and passing cars honked as the

statue came down about 3 a.m. The second statue was removed about 5:30 a.m. Friday from Arrigo Park in Chicago's Little Italy neighborhood.

In a statement issued after the statues were taken down, the Democratic mayor's office said they were being “temporarily removed ... until further notice.” It said the removals were “in response to demonstrations that became unsafe for both protesters and police, as well as efforts by individuals to independently pull the

Grant Park statue down in an extremely dangerous manner.”

“This step is about an effort to protect public safety and to preserve a safe space for an inclusive and democratic public dialogue about our city's symbols,” the mayor's office said in the statement, which also noted the statues were removed following “consultation with various stakeholders.”

“This statue coming down is because of the effort of Black and Indigenous activists who know the true history of Colum-

bus and what he represents,” Stefan Cuevas-Caizaguano, a resident watching the removal, told the Chicago Sun-Times.

Both the Grant Park and Arrigo Park statues were vandalized last month. Statues of Columbus have also been toppled or vandalized in other U.S. cities as protesters have called for the removal of statues of Columbus, saying that he is responsible for the genocide and exploitation of native peoples in the Americas.

China orders US to close its consulate

Associated Press

BEIJING — China ordered the United States on Friday to close its consulate in the western city of Chengdu, ratcheting up a diplomatic conflict at a time when relations have sunk to their lowest level in decades.

The move was a response to the Trump administration's order this week for Beijing to close its consulate in Houston after Washington accused Chinese agents of trying to steal medical and other research in Texas.

The Chinese foreign ministry appealed to Washington to reverse its "wrong decision."

Chinese-U.S. relations have soured amid a mounting array of conflicts including trade, the

handling of the coronavirus pandemic, technology, spying accusations, Hong Kong and allegations of abuses against Chinese Muslims.

"The measure taken by China is a legitimate and necessary response to the unjustified act by the United States," said a foreign ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin.

"The current situation in Chinese-U.S. relations is not what China desires to see. The United States is responsible for all this," Wang said. "We once again urge the United States to immediately retract its wrong decision and create necessary conditions for bringing the bilateral relationship back on track."

Wang said some consulate

personnel "interfered in China's internal affairs and harmed China's security interests" but gave no details. He said Beijing complained "many times" to Washington about that.

Also Friday, the U.S. State Department sent out a notice warning Americans in China of a "heightened risk of arbitrary detention."

"U.S. citizens may be subjected to prolonged interrogations and extended detention for reasons related to 'state security,'" the notice said.

Americans may be detained or deported for "sending private electronic messages critical" of the Chinese government, it said. The notice gave no indication of what prompted the warning.

On Tuesday, the Trump administration ordered the Houston consulate closed within 72 hours. It alleged Chinese agents tried to steal data from facilities including the Texas A&M medical system.

The ministry on Thursday rejected the allegations as "malicious slander." It warned the Houston consulate's closure was "breaking down the bridge of friendship" between the two countries.

The United States has an embassy in Beijing and consulates in five other mainland cities — Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Shenyang and Wuhan. It also has a consulate in Hong Kong, a Chinese territory.

DOJ: Calif. consulate has scientist who lied on visa

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Chinese consulate in San Francisco is harboring a Chinese researcher who lied about her military background, the Justice Department said Thursday as it announced charges against that scientist and three others accused of concealing their government ties.

The four researchers are ac-

cused of lying on applications to work in the United States about their status as members of China's People's Liberation Army. All are charged with visa fraud.

The FBI, meanwhile, has interviewed visa holders in more than 25 American cities who are suspected of concealing their ties to the Chinese military. The DOJ believes that the deception is part of an ongoing,

government-sponsored effort to steal research and innovation from American universities for Beijing's economic gain.

"This is another part of the Chinese Communist Party's plan to take advantage of our open society and exploit academic institutions," John Demers, the DOJ's top national security official, said in a statement.

Three of the four defendants

have been arrested. The FBI believes that the fourth, Tang Juan, has been harbored for weeks in the Chinese consulate in San Francisco. The DOJ says the scientist, who is listed in some court filings as Juan Tang, lied about her military affiliation in a visa application in October as she made plans to work at the University of California, Davis and again in an FBI interview months later.

Judge orders Cohen's release, citing 'retaliatory purpose'

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A judge on Thursday ordered the release of President Donald Trump's former personal lawyer from prison, saying the government retaliated against him for planning to release a book critical of Trump before November's election.

Michael Cohen's First Amendment rights were violated when he was ordered back to prison on July 9 after probation authorities said he refused to sign a form banning him from

publishing the book or communicating publicly in other manners, U.S. District Judge Alvin K. Hellerstein said during a telephone conference.

Hellerstein ordered Michael Cohen released from prison to home confinement by 2 p.m. on Friday.

"How can I take any other inference than that it's retaliatory?" Hellerstein asked prosecutors, who insisted in court papers and again Thursday that Probation Department officers did not know about the book when they wrote a provi-

sion of home confinement that severely restricted Cohen's public communications.

"I've never seen such a clause in 21 years of being a judge and sentencing people and looking at terms of supervised release," the judge said. "Why would the Bureau of Prisons ask for something like this ... unless there was a retaliatory purpose?"

In his ruling, Hellerstein said he made the "finding that the purpose of transferring Mr. Cohen from furlough and home confinement to jail is retaliatory." He added: "And it's retal-

iatory for his desire to exercise his First Amendment rights to publish the book."

Cohen, 53, sued federal prison officials and Attorney General William Barr on Monday, saying he was ordered back to prison because he was writing his book.

The Bureau of Prisons issued a spirited defense of its intentions after the ruling Thursday. It said the terms of his home confinement were determined by the U.S. Probation Office, which is run by the courts, rather than the bureau.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman attacked by rabid fox on her bed

NC GREENSBORO — A North Carolina woman said she was attacked on her bed by a rabid fox who entered her home through a dog door.

The animal came into Julie Loflin's bedroom in Greensboro, jumped on her bed, bit her finger, and grabbed her ankle by its mouth, she told WGHP-TV. "I was praying that I would live," she said.

Loflin grabbed the animal, holding it down by its neck for more than 12 minutes as she waited for police to arrive. "I don't know what else you could do," she said.

Once authorities arrived, they pulled the fox away from her, the news outlet reported.

She was injured on her finger and ankle, and has since been given a rabies vaccine. The fox that attacked her tested positive for the virus Wednesday, the news outlet reported.

Gender-neutral driver license option available

PA HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania as of Thursday is offering driver licenses and identification cards with a gender-neutral designation for people who do not want to be identified as either male or female.

The state Department of Transportation said that people can now choose that option in addition to the "male" or "female" designation. It will let motorists and those needing a state-issued identification card to use "X" as a third option to indicate gender.

In a statement, PennDOT Secretary Yassmin Gramian said it is critical to have an accurate identification card for access to employment, health care, housing and more.

Historic church getting renovation for birthday

AK KENAI — The Holy Assumption of the Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Church in Kenai, Alaska, will undergo a major renovation for its 125th birthday.

The church, which was erected in 1896, will get a new roof, cupolas and crosses. Construction began Monday and is estimated to last until September, the Peninsula Clarion reported Tuesday.

The Russian Orthodox Sacred Sites in Alaska group dedicated to preserving the state's Russian Orthodox monuments is donating \$170,000 for the renovations in conjunction with other individuals and organizations.

Chase involving stolen SUV ends in crash

PA LIGONIER — A man driving a stolen SUV led police on a high-speed chase through two counties in western Pennsylvania before crashing into cars parked at a restaurant, authorities said.

Gary Austin Blough, 18, of Johnstown, faces numerous counts including unlawful restraint, reckless endangerment and drug possession.

The chase began around 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, when state police were notified that the stolen SUV was on Route 30 in Jenner. Troopers soon stopped the vehicle, but authorities say Blough sped away, spurring a chase that saw the SUV reach speeds of up to 120 mph.

The chase ended about 10 minutes later, when the SUV hit a guardrail and crashed into at least two cars parked at the restaurant in Ligonier. Blough ran away from the crash scene but was soon captured, authorities said.

Two people, including a ju-

venile, were in the SUV with Blough, but it wasn't clear if they would face any charges.

Coast Guard rescues 3 boaters off coast

FL CLEARWATER — The U.S. Coast Guard rescued three people from Tennessee after their boat capsized Wednesday some 15 miles off Florida's Gulf Coast.

The agency said in a news release that the boaters called at 2:09 p.m., saying their flat bottom fishing boat was taking on water and they needed assistance.

A Jayhawk helicopter crew located the men wearing life jackets and clinging to the capsized boat. They rescued Karim Odeh, Mark LaRoche and Kevin LaRoche, all of Cookeville, Tenn.

The crew hoisted them into the helicopter and took them to Tampa General Hospital for further evaluation. They had been in the water for about an hour. There was no additional update on their conditions.

Zoo searching for missing red panda

OH POWELL — Staff at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium were searching dense vegetation within the complex for a red panda that disappeared from its habitat.

The small nocturnal mammal, which is about the size of a raccoon, was last seen in her Asia Quest habitat on Tuesday evening.

"Red pandas are excellent climbers and live in trees," the zoo said in a statement on Facebook. Following strong overnight storms, the search had centered on bent or broken tree branches leading to public pathways.

The zoo said the red panda does not pose a threat to the

public, but other animals living nearby were brought indoors as a precaution to aid in the search.

Authorities investigate collection box thefts

DE DOVER — Authorities in Delaware are investigating several thefts from U.S. Postal Service mail collection boxes.

Dover Police on Thursday reported at least eight cases in the past three weeks in which thieves have removed mail from mailboxes and stolen checks and other valuables from inside envelopes. Investigators said the suspects have altered checks to receive the money themselves, including one case for \$40,000.

Special hikes to discuss diversity and racism

TN GATLINBURG — Great Smoky Mountains National Park Superintendent Cassius Cash has developed a new program that seeks to unite conversations about diversity and racism with the beauty of the mountains.

The goal of Smokies Hikes for Healing is to provide "a safe space for individuals of all backgrounds and ethnicities to begin difficult conversations that can lead to change," according to a news release from the park. Eight guided hikes with Cash will be held August through December in different locations across the park on the Tennessee-North Carolina border.

During the hikes, a facilitator will lead each group in a thought-provoking discussion around race, according to the release.

Hikers can also coordinate their own groups using Smokies Hikes for Healing materials.

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MLB playoffs will expand to 16 teams

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Major League Baseball and the players' union agreed Thursday to expand the playoffs from 10 teams to 16 for the pandemic-delayed season, a decision that makes it likely teams with losing records will reach the postseason.

The agreement was reached hours before the season opener between the New York Yankees and World Series champion the Washington Nationals. The deal applied only for 2020 and included a surprise benefiting the Yankees the most: Collection of baseball's luxury tax will be suspended this year, a person familiar with the details told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because no announcement was made.

Sixteen of the 30 teams will advance to a best-of-three first round: the first- and second-place teams in every division and the next two clubs by winning percentage in each league. Those winners move on to the best-of-five Division Series, where the usual format resumes. The final four teams are in best-of-seven League Championship Series, and the pennant winners meet in the best-of-seven World Series.

"It's such a unique season, why not try a little something different and make it as exciting as possible?" said Colorado shortstop Trevor Story, whose team has never won a World Series title. "I know it's going to be such a sprint with the 60-game season; adding more playoff teams will just add to the fire and the excitement and the fandom around the game. Anything can happen in a 60-game season. I'm all for it."

In each league, the division winners will be seeded 1-3, the second-place teams 4-6 and the teams with the next two best records 7-8, which means up to four teams in one division could be in the postseason. The first-round pairings will be 1 vs. 8, 2-7, 3-6 and 4-5.

MLB roundup

Yanks top Nats in six innings

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The coronavirus-shortened Major League Baseball season finally started amid the pandemic Thursday night with plenty of unusual elements — zero fans, umpires wearing masks, Washington star Juan Soto sidelined by COVID-19, and all Nationals and Yankees kneeling together before the national anthem.

"It's hard to describe. That's 2020 in a nutshell," said Nationals pitcher Sean Doolittle, who was supposed to catch Dr. Anthony Fauci's way-off-the-mark ceremonial first pitch. "Very emotional day. Very, very emotional day."

And there was plenty that actually made it all seem something resembling normal: Ger-

rit Cole's five terrific innings, big hits from Giancarlo Stanton and Aaron Judge and a 4-1 storm-halted victory for the big-name Yankees over the defending champion Nationals.

"It was a lot of fun. No one could have envisioned the type of year we're having this year, but within those parameters, it exceeded every mark," said Cole, who allowed only Adam Eaton's first-inning homer and joked about recording a complete game. "I just had a blast."

Max Scherzer, who struck out 11 but gave up all of New York's runs, chose to look at the bright side, saying: "I'd rather be playing baseball than not. That's the way I look at it. All the things we can get negative about and cry about— I'm just not going to do it."

What began as a muggy evening turned into a dark, windy downpour, replete with rumblings of thunder and flashes of lightning, prompting a delay in the top of the sixth inning.

After waiting 1 hour, 58 minutes — 15 minutes more than were played — the game was called off and went into the books as a win for New York.

Dodgers 8, Giants 1: Kike Hernandez homered and drove in five runs as host Los Angeles beat the rival San Francisco in a fan-less ballpark.

Mookie Betts, who took a knee during the national anthem, went 1-for-5 in his Dodgers debut. Betts struck out swinging in his first at-bat a day after signing a \$365 million deal over 12 years.

Sports briefs

Source: Displaced Blue Jays to play home games in Buffalo

Associated Press

TORONTO — The displaced Toronto Blue Jays will play in Buffalo, N.Y., this year amid the pandemic.

An official familiar with the matter told The Associated Press on Friday that the Blue Jays will play at Sahlen Field. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly ahead of an announcement.

The park is where the team's Triple-A affiliate plays.

Seattle NHL team dubbed 'Kraken'

SEATTLE — The name Seattle Kraken seems to have had an air of inevitability around it even during the earliest days of the NHL expansion franchise.

"The first time in our office, there's only 10 of us in our office, and we put up our NHL Seattle sign on the front door. And the very next morning there was a Post-it on the door that said, 'Release the Kraken,'" Heidi Dettmer, the franchise's vice president of marketing, said. "So it's definitely something that we've heard almost as a rallying cry."

The franchise revealed Thursday the team would, indeed, be called the Kraken.

"The Kraken is a name born of the fans. It was suggested and championed by the fans," Seattle

CEO Tod Leiweke said.

Washington puts off decision

The NFL team formerly known as the Redskins will go by the Washington Football Team for at least the 2020 season, giving the organization time to choose a new, full-time name.

With training camp opening next week, the process begins of scrubbing the old name and logo from everything at the team's headquarters in Ashburn, Va., to FedEx Field in Landover, Md.

Executive vice president and chief marketing officer Terry Bateman, hired Monday, expects that process to be completed by the start of the season.

Sources: Irish could join ACC

The Atlantic Coast Conference and Notre Dame are considering whether the Fighting Irish will give up their treasured football independence to play as a member of the league for the 2020 season that has been thrown into question by the coronavirus pandemic.

Two people involved in the ACC's discussions about scheduling for the upcoming season told The Associated Press on Friday the ACC is looking at an 11-game schedule that would include 10 conference games and start Sept. 12.

What will become of college bowl games?

Associated Press

College football leaders are in the process of piecing together plans for a regular season during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If it is possible to play, everyone anticipates there will be disruptions, added expenses and loads of stress just to get through it.

So how motivated will schools be to tack on a postseason game after all that? Especially one that doesn't determine a national title?

"You've got to think there'll be such a heightened sensitivity to adding another opportunity that doesn't contribute to something else," Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick said. "I imagine the top bowls will want to try and still do it. But you've got to wonder if the schools will be willing to play. You made it through the regular season and now you're going to add another event that adds complexity and cost."

There are more bowl games scheduled for the coming season than ever before in major college football: 42, not including the College Football Playoff

championship. Less than five months away from bowl season, most of them don't even have a date locked in yet. If the regular season can be saved, can the postseason be salvaged, too?

"I have yet to hear one thought on the part of any of the conferences that they would have a regular season and not have a postseason," said Nick Carparelli, the new executive director of the Football Bowl Association.

At the top of the postseason hierarchy is the playoff. The semifinals are scheduled to be played Jan. 1 at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif., and the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. The championship game is set for Jan. 11 at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Fla.

As of now, none of that has changed, CFP executive director Bill Hancock said.

"This is an event you can't just pick up and easily move to a different time window," Hancock said.

Then there are the other New Year's Six games. The Cotton Bowl in Arlington, Texas, is scheduled for Dec. 30. The Peach Bowl in Atlanta is set

for early afternoon New Year's Day, leading into the semifinal games. The Fiesta Bowl in Glendale, Ariz., and Orange Bowl in South Florida are scheduled for Jan. 2.

Those games, along with the semifinals, are part of 12-year, \$5.6 billion media rights deal with ESPN that pays about \$470 million annually. Most of the money ends up with the Power Five conferences, though some trickles down to FCS.

"We're going to be as flexible as they need us to be," Peach Bowl chief executive officer Gary Stokan said. "If they need us to move back two weeks, we'll move back two weeks."

Fiesta Bowl CEO Mike Nealy said bowls of all shapes and sizes will need to be flexible this year.

"From our standpoint, we know that dates could change," said Nealy, whose organizing group also runs the Cactus Bowl played at Chase Field in Phoenix.

According to the website FB-Schedules.com, dates and times have not been locked in yet for 31 major-college bowl games.

Those could start falling

into place soon with conferences expected to roll out new regular-season schedules as soon as next week. The Big Ten and Pac-12 have already said they will play only conference games.

The other Power Five conferences appear to be moving toward playing mostly conference games. That causes issues with the bowl selection process from the CFP down to the Cure Bowl, which matches Group of Five teams in Orlando, Fla.

Fewer nonconference games will make it more challenging for the playoff selection committee to pick a four-team field and rank teams to create the other New Year's Six bowl matchups.

"The committee's job fundamentally hasn't changed," Hancock said.

As for the rest of the bowls, if teams are mostly playing within their conferences, with fewer opportunities to pad records against lesser competition, it will make it more difficult for 84 teams to finish the season with at least a .500 record, the minimum for bowl eligibility.

Hamlin holds off Keselowski for fifth Cup Series win

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — Three straight finishes outside the top 10 for Denny Hamlin these days counts as a rough patch.

He was once again smooth as they get Thursday night.

Hamlin hung around the front of the pack all night, avoiding trouble that cost several playoff contenders in the final stage, then breezed past Kevin Harvick for the lead in the closing laps. Hamlin then held off charging Brad Keselowski for his NASCAR Cup Series-leading fifth victory of the season and 42nd overall. He also won for the second straight time at Kansas Speedway.

"I don't know we had the best car. We definitely had a top-three car all day," Hamlin said

after his burnout in front of the empty grandstands. "We just went for it there at the end. The pit crew did an amazing job getting us out there in front."

Hamlin had struggled the past three weeks, failing to finish better than 12th. But after showing good speed early, his Joe Gibbs Racing team made all the right calls during a crash-filled final stage. Keselowski finished second and Martin Truex Jr. came across third. Harvick wound up sliding to fourth and Erik Jones capped a big day for the Gibbs boys in fifth.

William Byron led the race as he chased his first career win, but he slid backward after a late caution and wound up finishing 10th. Alex Bowman also made a charge to the lead but

finished behind Aric Almirola and Cole Custer in eighth.

The youngsters wound up leaving it to the veterans to battle it out over the final laps.

"We got to the lead but we just went dead sideways after about four or five laps," said Harvick, who had been tied with Hamlin with four wins. "We were just holding on hoping for another restart, because we could hang for a couple laps."

Truex may have had the fastest car on the track by the end of the night, which began with temperatures in the mid-90s and a heat index approaching triple digits. But he ran out of time trying chase down his teammate.

"It would have been difficult to pass him," Truex said about Hamlin. "It was a battle all

night just to get track position. These things are so difficult in traffic. You lose a few more spots than you hope on a restart and you just have to dig."

It would have been an exciting show for fans if there was any. After about 20,000 wore masks and braved stifling heat in Texas, the grandstands were again empty at Kansas. Soaring numbers of positive COVID-19 tests forced speedway officials to run this weekend — including upcoming races in the Xfinity, Truck and ARCA series — without any fans.

The next race at New Hampshire can have about 19,000 fans. The following doubleheader at Michigan will not have any.

Kyle Busch held off Hamlin and Truex to win his first stage this year.