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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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NATO to send more trainers to Afghanistan

BY JOHN VANDIVER AND TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

NATO allies agreed Thursday to send more troops to Afghanistan in hopes of aiding security forces stuck in a “stalemate” with Taliban insurgents, the alliance’s top official said.

“Today, I can confirm we will increase our presence in Afghanistan,” said NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

Stoltenberg, speaking at the start of a meeting of NATO defense ministers, said alliance authorities have requested “a few thousand more troops” for the Afghanistan mission, now in its 16th year. Allies want to work more closely with Afghan special operations forces, to develop the country’s fledgling air force and improve officer training, he said.

“We have to put this into context and understand this about training and assisting and advising Afghan forces,” Stoltenberg said. “What we do now is not conduct combat operations, but help Afghans fight.”

It wasn’t clear whether a final troop number would be decided among NATO members at Thursday’s meeting, although Stoltenberg said he expected some members to make specific pledges. NATO is awaiting a decision from the Trump administration, which is weighing a U.S. troop increase in Afghanistan. U.S. Gen. John Nicholson, the top commander in Afghanistan, has requested at least 3,000

more servicemembers.

NATO now has 13,500 troops in the country. Roughly half of those forces are American. The vast majority are tasked with training and advising the Afghan army and police.

In 2014, the U.S.-led coalition withdrew its combat forces — which at their peak numbered about 140,000 troops — from the country, citing significant progress in the war and insisting that the government’s security forces would be able to handle the insurgents with the aid of foreign advisers. Since then, however, the resurgent Taliban have seized the initiative, inflicting heavy casualties on government troops and seizing control of large parts of the countryside.

NATO said it has no plans to return to a combat mission in the country. Instead, the aim is to improve the quality of Afghan security forces as they attempt to “break the stalemate” and move toward a political peace deal, Stoltenberg said.

“It was not the wrong decision to end the NATO combat mission ... because in the long run, it is much more sustainable to have ... local forces stabilize their own country instead of having NATO troops do it,” he said.

“As long as the Taliban believe they can win the war, they will not negotiate,” he said.

Stoltenberg said 15 members of the 29-

nation NATO alliance have pledged troops to the expanded effort. However, defense officials were mum about their future role in a larger Afghan mission.

During a meeting between Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and his Polish counterpart, neither leader responded to a question about troop levels and commitments.

Norway’s defense minister, Ine Marie Eriksen Soreide, also declined to offer a specific troop contribution numbers for her country, saying allies also were waiting to learn more about America’s plans in Afghanistan.

“I expect that allies will continue to both contribute and also have their commitments very clear on Afghanistan. But I also expect that the new American strategy will not probably come until July sometime,” she said.

Still, Soreide said she was optimistic that allies would remain committed in Afghanistan.

Besides the Afghanistan mission, NATO leaders discussed ways to enhance NATO’s role in countering terrorism, an issue that has been a priority of the Trump administration.

NATO agreed Thursday to set up new “capability targets” designed to ensure that increased spending on defense is directed at areas of need, such as more heavy equipment, air-to-air refueling capabilities and forces ready to mobilize on short notice.

Pentagon says ISIS could be defeated in Mosul in days

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Iraqi forces who fled in droves three years ago amid Islamic State’s blitzkrieg across northern Iraq could declare victory within days in Mosul, once a stronghold for the terrorist group, a U.S. military official said Thursday.

Only a few hundred ISIS fighters remained in two tiny sections of West Mosul as Iraq’s elite Counter Terrorism Service captured the areas around the al-Nuri Mosque compound in Mosul’s Old City during a dawn push into the remaining 1 to 2 square kilometers that the terrorist

group still controls, said U.S. Army Col. Ryan Dillon, a spokesman for the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition.

The 845-year-old mosque, which ISIS destroyed last week, was the site where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS’ supreme leader, announced the formation of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria three years ago.

With the push into the last terrorist-controlled sections of Mosul, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said Thursday that ISIS’ days in Iraq were numbered.

“We are seeing the end of the fake [ISIS] state, the liberation of Mosul proves that,” he wrote on Twitter. “We will not relent, our brave forces will bring victory.”

As of Thursday afternoon, ISIS fighters still controlled a small section of the Old City and a hospital compound to the north, Dillon said.

But both remaining strongholds are surrounded and Iraqi forces have made steady advances in recent days.

As fighting continues, he said an announcement of the liberation of Iraq’s second-largest city from terrorists was “imminent.”

“They are closer to days versus weeks on an announcement,” Dillon told reporters at the Pentagon. “We look very much forward to that.”

Congress seeks boost in military spending

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The GOP-controlled Congress has taken the lead on one of President Donald Trump's key campaign promises, pressing for tens of billions of dollars more for active-duty troops, combat aircraft and ships that he didn't request.

The House and Senate will begin to consider defense budget blueprints crafted by their respective Armed Services committees after the July 4 recess. Both panels approved plans Wednesday for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1. The House committee calls for \$696 billion in defense spending for 2018, while its Senate counterpart demands \$700 billion.

Both committees described Trump's budget request, submitted to Congress last month, as insufficient to undo the damage caused by spending too little on a fighting force that's been at continuous combat for almost a decade and a half.

"For six years, we have been just getting by — cutting resources as the world becomes more dangerous, asking more and more of those who serve, and putting off the tough choices," said Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, the House committee's chairman.

But a frequently polarized Congress may be its own worst enemy when it comes to getting proposals for the extra money across the finish line. Lawmakers will have to agree to roll back a 2011 law that set strict limits on military spending. That's a tall order, said Rep. Adam Smith, of Washington, who noted that lifting the so-called budget caps would take 60 votes in the Senate.

"Right now, we're just hoping," said Smith, the top Democrat on the House panel. "We're doing the \$696 billion, and we're hoping that between now and Oct. 1, some path that at the moment is completely blocked and completely unforeseen is going to emerge."

While the House plan was publicly released earlier this week, the Senate committee's version was released Wednesday evening.

Approved by the committee 27-0, the Senate bill would provide \$640 billion for core Pentagon operations, such as buying weapons and paying the troops, and another \$60 billion for wartime missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. Trump's budget request sought \$603 billion for basic functions and \$65 billion for overseas missions.

The Senate panel authorized \$10.6 billion for 94 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft, which is two dozen more than Trump requested. The bill provides \$25 billion to pay for 13 ships, which is \$5 billion and five ships more than the Trump sought. That includes money for acquiring Arleigh Burke-class destroyers and Virginia-class nuclear submarines.

Troops would get a 2.1 percent pay raise under the Senate plan, which is less than what the House Armed Services Committee approved.

The Senate bill would add 5,000 active-duty troops to the Army, while the House seeks an increase of 10,000 soldiers. Those and other differences will have to be resolved as the legislation moves forward.

During the House committee's hours-long work on the bill, lawmakers narrowly

rejected a bid by Democrats to compel the Air Force to detail how much has been spent on trips that Trump has made to his Florida estate and other properties he owns.

Republicans denounced the amendment as "gotcha politics" and an attempt to litigate the 2016 election. But Democrats fired back, saying Trump has invited the scrutiny by refusing to divest himself from his business empire or release his taxes.

"This is different," said Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., "This is unprecedented."

The measure authored by Rep. Tom O'Halleran, D-Ariz., lost 31-31. Ties count as defeats. The amendment would have required the Air Force to regularly submit presidential travel expense reports to Congress. Each report would have included "costs incurred" for travel to a property owned or operated by Trump or his immediate family, according to the amendment.

Rep. Mike Conaway, R-Texas, said the committee had no business asking for the travel costs. Conaway is leading the House Intelligence Committee's probe of Russia's meddling in the 2016 election.

"This is the House Armed Services Committee," he said. "We don't oversee the federal bureau of ethics."

Conaway said the Defense Department can't audit its books and records as it is. Adding another requirement for detailed cost information would make the problem even worse.

"This will add one more straw to that camel," Conaway said.

Lawmakers work to protect foreign recruits

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Three lawmakers are pressing President Donald Trump and the Pentagon to intervene on a proposal to cancel enlistment contracts for 1,000 immigrant military recruits in a bid to shield them from deportation.

Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., planned to propose an amendment to constrain the Pentagon from eliminating those contracts in an appropriations committee markup Thursday after a report Mon-

day from The Washington Post about internal Defense Department recommendations to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

"For the Defense Department to even consider terminating these contracts is a betrayal of people who want to serve the United States," McCollum told The Post on Wednesday.

The foreign-born recruits enlisted in the military through the Pentagon's Military Accessions Vital to National Interest program, an initiative to harness medical and language skills in exchange for fast-

tracked citizenship.

The story provoked outrage from both chambers of Congress. Rep. Grace Meng, D-N.Y., demanded personal assurances from Trump to step into the fray and block any potential forced removals.

"I feel it is only right that we honor our contract with them, and that we allow these individuals to continue to live in America once their service has concluded," Meng said in a letter to Trump on Tuesday.

"These recruits deserve the chance to defend our freedom

instead of being put at risk for deportation. Anything else is a breach of contract," said Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., an Army veteran wounded in combat.

A Pentagon memo obtained by The Post said layers of additional security screenings and concerns over potential threats created a logjam of applicants, which overtasked resources and led personnel officials to recommend the cancellation of contracts for about 1,800 recruits waiting to train.

1st Marine Aircraft Wing gets new leader

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Brig. Gen. Thomas Weidley took command of III Marine Expeditionary Force's combat aviation element during a ceremony Thursday at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

Weidley, a decorated attack helicopter pilot and veteran of multiple conflicts, arrives at the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing after a stint as commander of Marine Corps Installations East and Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, N.C.

He replaces Maj. Gen. Russell Sanborn — one of more high-profile generals to be stationed in the region — who's moving to Stuttgart, Germany, to lead U.S. Marine Corps Forces Europe and U.S. Marine Corps Forces Africa.

"I'm looking forward to the opportunity to be a wing commander and to be back in this [area of operations]," Weidley told Stars and Stripes.

Weidley, a native of Lima, Pa., will command approximately 8,000 Marines spread across three islands that make up the air element of the region's Marine Air-Ground Task Force.

PACOM head: US-Australia ties key in fighting 'ISIS disease'

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

In his third trip to Australia in just over a half-year, the head of U.S. Pacific Command on Wednesday reiterated America's commitment to the longtime alliance between the two nations, describing it as key to preventing the spread of jihadi terrorist groups in the region.

"I assure you that we take this alliance very seriously, indeed," Adm. Harry Harris told an audience at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in Brisbane.

"Foreign fighters are passing their ideology, resources and methods to local, homegrown, next-generation radicals," Harris said of Islamic State fighters returning from Iraq and Syria, where they have been losing ground steadily.

"Only through multinational collaboration can we eradicate this ISIS disease before it spreads further in this region," he said.

Harris was in Australia to kick off the Talisman Saber exercise the following day, which will bring together more than 33,000 troops from both countries for training that will include two amphibious landings.

Harris is among a blitz of American officials who have visited this key Pacific ally with reassurances after a rocky start in January between newly inaugurated President Donald Trump and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

In a testy phone call that he reportedly cut short, Trump complained to Turnbull of an agreement brokered under former President Barack Obama for the U.S. to accept refugees from Australia, which the new president later tweeted was a "dumb deal."

Both leaders have downplayed the episode

since, but the new American president has left many Australians skeptical of their longtime ally.

A recent Lowy Institute Poll found that 60 percent of Australians said Trump caused them to have an unfavorable opinion of the U.S.

Harris underscored the importance of the U.S.-Australia alliance with a list of officials who have visited the country in recent months: Vice President Mike Pence in April and, earlier this month, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Sen. John McCain.

Harris also noted that an Australian army major general is U.S. Army Pacific's commanding general for operations.

Harris said the jihadi siege of a city in the southern Philippines should serve as a "wake-up call" for every nation in the region. Parts of the city of Marawi on the island of Mindanao have been held by ISIS-linked militant groups since late May.

Last year, ISIS declared Isnlon Hapilon, commander of Abu Sayyaf, to be "emir of Southeast Asia," Harris said.

Abu Sayyaf nearly had been eradicated by 2015 through a joint U.S.-Philippine military task force formed 13 years earlier.

"In just a matter of months, Hapilon started uniting elements of several violent extremist organizations — building a coalition under the ISIS black flag," Harris said. "These terrorists are using combat tactics that we've seen in the Middle East to kill in the city of Marawi in Mindanao — the first time ISIS-inspired forces have banded together to fight on this kind of scale in this region."

Senate bill targets 'burden' for vets accessing Tricare

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A bill was introduced in the Senate on Wednesday to end a practice that inadvertently penalizes some medically retired servicemembers by forcing them to pay higher Medicare rates in order to maintain their Tricare health coverage.

Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, a combat veteran, introduced the Health Equity and Access for Returning Troops and Servicemembers, or HEARTS,

Act. A House version of the legislation was introduced in April. Ernst's office called the practice of charging some veterans higher rates to keep their Tricare an "unintended burden" that's "plaguing wounded servicemembers."

"Our veterans deserve every opportunity for a smooth transition back into civilian life," Ernst said in a statement. "The HEARTS Act gives medically retired servicemembers returning to work access to the health benefits they were

originally entitled to, and have rightfully earned, after selflessly serving our country."

When servicemembers are injured and medically retired, they are eligible to enroll in the military's Tricare health plan.

If their injuries prevent them from working when they return home, veterans can receive Social Security disability payments. After two years of those payments, they become eligible for Medicare. At that point, they must enroll in Medicare Part B to keep their Tricare for

Life supplement.

Enrolling in Medicare means having to pay higher rates than they would with their traditional Tricare plan. Even if they start working again and stop their Social Security payments, veterans stay eligible for Medicare for another 8.5 years — meaning they have to pay the higher rates throughout that time.

The HEARTS Act would alter how Medicare and Tricare work with each other and would allow veterans to opt out of Medicare Part B.

US issues new travel limits

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is putting new criteria in place Thursday for visa applicants from six mostly Muslim nations and all refugees, requiring a close family or business tie to the United States. The move comes after the Supreme Court partially restored President Donald Trump's executive order that was widely criticized as a ban on Muslims.

Visas that have already been approved will not be revoked. That should help avoid the kind of chaos at airports around the world that surrounded the initial travel ban as travelers with previously approved visas were kept off flights or barred entry on arrival in the United States. Also, while the initial order took effect immediately, adding to the confusion, this one was delayed more than 72 hours after the court's ruling.

The new instructions issued by the State Department will affect new visa applicants from Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Iran and Yemen. They must prove a relationship with a parent, spouse, child, adult son or daughter, son-in-law, daughter-in-law or sibling already in the United States to be eligible. The same requirement, with some exceptions, holds for would-be refugees from all nations that are still awaiting approval for admission to the U.S.

Grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, fiancées or other extended family members are not considered to be close relations, according to the guidelines that were issued in a cable sent to all U.S. embassies and consulates late on Wednesday. The new rules take effect at 8 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on Thursday, according to the cable, which was obtained by The Associated Press.

He thought book would stop bullet, lead to web stardom; now he's dead

The Washington Post

Before Monday, before the 911 call and the police investigation, Pedro Ruiz III, an aspiring YouTube star in rural Minnesota, spent considerable time convincing his girlfriend to shoot a gun at his chest.

There would be a thick encyclopedia book between the barrel and his body, authorities said he told Monalisa Perez, 19. The pages, he reasoned, would stop the bullet.

He even had evidence that it had worked once before — a different book with an entrance hole but no exit.

So on Monday evening, the young couple positioned two cameras outside their home and prepared for their breakthrough stunt. They wanted fame, family said, and danger often brings it.

"Me and Pedro are probably going to shoot one of the most dangerous videos ever," Perez teased in a tweet at 5 p.m. "HIS idea not MINE."

It had been three months since the young couple added their vlog, La MonaLisa, to YouTube, where they posted clips of their daily lives and their 3-year-old daughter. They live in Halstad, Minn., a tiny town on the North Dakota border between Grand Forks and Fargo. Episodes featured shots from their home, the car or at the doctor's office, which is where Perez revealed in May that she was pregnant with a boy.

Their shtick, though, was pulling minor pranks: doughnuts with baby powder instead of powdered sugar, feigning paralysis from a grocery store wheelchair, hiding hot peppers on an egg salad sandwich. Just this week, Perez posted a video of Ruiz doing a handstand inside a rotating fun house tunnel at the county fair.

But the bullet-and-book stunt was supposed to be their breakthrough.

"I said, 'Don't do it. don't do it,'" Ruiz's aunt, Claudia Ruiz, told her nephew when he shared his idea, according to Valley

News Live. "Why are you going to use a gun? Why?"

His response, she said, was simple: "Because, we want more viewers."

With one camera attached to a ladder and the other propped on the back of a car, the couple staged their stunt, according to authorities. Ruiz held the book to his chest and Perez held the gun, a gold Desert Eagle .50 caliber pistol considered "one of the most powerful semiautomatic handguns in the world."

From a foot away, court documents say, Perez fired.

This time, the bullet didn't stop in the book but instead pierced Ruiz in the chest. Medics tried to revive him, authorities said, but he was declared dead at the house.

Neighbors told ABC affiliate WDAY-TV that they watched the scene unfold from afar.

"Everyone was crying," neighbor Wayne Cameron told the TV station. "I was standing behind that tree over there. And that was it. I just couldn't take it anymore so I had to go back home."

When Perez called 911 at 6:30 p.m., she told dispatchers the shooting was accidental and explained the YouTube plan. Later, according to court documents, she said that her boyfriend had been trying to persuade her to shoot the book "for awhile" and she finally relented. She told them about the other book Ruiz had shot, the one that blocked the bullet, and described the gun she fired.

A sheriff's deputy found it in the grass outside the home.

Perez was arrested Monday on a charge of reckless discharge of a gun. On Wednesday, that charge was upgraded to second-degree manslaughter. She was released on \$7,000 bail after her initial court appearance and was ordered to wear a GPS monitor and to stay away from firearms, reported KVRRTV. If convicted, she faces up to 10 years behind bars.

Dead Niagara daredevil may have had snake along

Associated Press

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y. — A daredevil who died after plunging over Niagara Falls in an apparent stunt with an inflatable ball might have brought a boa constrictor along for the ride.

After Kirk Jones' death, New York State Park Police found a website with a photo of him and the 7-foot snake named Misty previewing his plans and selling T-shirts and photos, the Niagara Gazette reported Wednesday.

"Believe in the Impossible Kirk Jones

+ Misty Conquer Niagara Falls NY 2017," read the site, which has since been taken down.

Jones' body was recovered from the water below the falls on June 2. Investigators believe he died April 19, the same day tourists spotted an 8-foot plastic ball, its zippered hatch clearly open, spinning in the Niagara River rapids before it went over the brink.

The snake hasn't been found, though an empty snake cage was found in Jones' van. Exotic-pet experts told police it wouldn't

have survived the cold water.

Footage from a crashed drone belonging to Jones, 53, found by a parks employee April 20, shows only rushing water.

Police began looking for Jones after the discovery of the ball and drone and after a call from Jones' wife telling them she feared her husband had gone over the falls. That led to the discovery of the website www.kirkjonesniagarafallsdaredevil.com.

"We were looking for him and a seven-foot boa constrictor," said Park Police Detective Sgt. Brian Nisbet.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Electrical malfunction blamed in vehicle fire

PA LANCASTER — Fire officials in Pennsylvania said an electrical malfunction in a Jeep Wrangler sparked a fire that destroyed it and another car.

Investigators said the owner of the Jeep awoke around 2 a.m. Monday to the sound of his car alarm and went outside his apartment in Lancaster to find the vehicle in a ball of flames.

It took crews nearly two hours to extinguish burning vehicles, with the fire being fed by leaking gasoline and burning magnesium parts within the engine.

Man given 30 years for 11th DWI conviction

TX SAN ANTONIO — A South Texas man has been sentenced to 30 years in prison for what prosecutors say was his 11th drunken driving conviction.

Jurors in San Antonio convicted San Juan Garcia, 57, of felony DWI in a January 2014 traffic accident.

A statement from the Bexar County District Attorney's Office says Garcia was driving drunk when his vehicle struck a motorcyclist. Toxicology tests indicated Garcia had a blood alcohol level more than twice the legal limit for driving in Texas.

Records show Garcia's first DWI arrest was in March 1982 and that he served time in prison for several of his later convictions. He was sentenced last week as a habitual offender.

Prehistoric fish trap found on Kodiak Island

AK KODIAK — A stone fish trap that dates to prehistoric times has been found on Alaska's Kodiak Island.

The Kodiak Daily Mirror reported Tuesday that archaeologists from a museum on the island made the discovery during a survey of Afognak Native Corp. land.

The trap is approximately 164 yards long and consists of one semi-rectangular and one u-shaped corral. It is positioned in the intertidal zone near the mouth of a salmon stream.

When the tide would come in, the trap would be submerged, allowing salmon to swim over. The water would eventually fall below the corrals at low tide, stranding fish inside.

6 teens are accused of burglary and theft

FL FORT PIERCE — Six Florida teens are accused of stealing a man's life savings and blowing it on jewelry, cars and even gold teeth.

A St. Lucie County Sheriff's report says the teens — ages 14 to 16 — were all in custody on other crimes when they were arrested Monday following a two-month investigation.

News outlets said Brett Browning reported a burglary April 27 after arriving home to find his garage door open and a 2014 Porsche Cayman, valued at \$50,000, missing. Inside the home, he saw that a safe containing \$200,000 also was missing along with guns and jewelry.

The teens face multiple charges, including grand theft.

Councilman barred from nightly playing of taps

PA GLEN ROCK — A Pennsylvania town councilman who broadcasts taps at his home through loudspeakers every night must limit the activity.

The Glen Rock Borough Council voted Wednesday to restrict Councilman Joshua

Corney's broadcast of the song to Sunday nights and to certain flag holidays like the Fourth of July, Memorial Day and Patriot's Day, The York Dispatch reported. Several people who live near Corney complained that the nightly broadcasts violate the borough's noise ordinance and create a disturbance, according to Councilwoman Victoria Ribeiro.

The Navy lieutenant commander who served in Iraq and Afghanistan said he plays the recording of the bugle call for "lights out" to honor those in the armed forces. He said he is willing to work the situation out.

Topless women march in protest for equality

WV CHARLESTON — Dozens of topless women silently marched through West Virginia's capital city last weekend to protest for topless equality and normalization of the female body.

The Charleston Gazette-Mail reported women, men and children marched through Charleston for the "Free the Nip Top Freedom Rally" on Saturday.

The marchers walked from Davis Park to Kanawha Boulevard. Some protesters went topless, while others were fully clothed. Spectators stood yards away and used their phones to film the women undressing.

Organizers moved the protest to 6:30 p.m. because a local arts nonprofit, called FestivalALL, had several kids' events planned on the same day.

Prosecutor halts prep school sex assault trial

NH BRENTWOOD—The sexual assault trial of a former student from an elite New Hampshire prep school who was encouraged to bake bread for his accuser as an act

of weekly "penance" has been called off by the prosecutor.

The Portsmouth Herald reported jury selection was scheduled Monday in the misdemeanor case of Chukwudi Ikpeazu, 19, of Parkland, Fla. A Phillips Exeter Academy classmate alleged he fondled her against her will in 2015.

Prosecutor Patricia LaFrance said the case has been dismissed with conditions, and that she was prohibited from discussing them. She said the female student was in agreement with the terms.

7 couples accused in unearned benefits case

NJ LAKEWOOD — Seven married couples face charges they misrepresented their income to get \$2 million in public welfare benefits they weren't entitled to.

Three couples were arrested Tuesday in Lakewood after four couples, including Rabbi Zalmen Sorotzkin, of Congregation Lutzkin, and his wife, Tzipporah, were arrested Monday. The three couples were Yitzchok and Sora Kanarek, Chaim and Liatt Ehrman, and William and Faigy Friedman. Prosecutors say they misrepresented their income and then collected more than \$674,000 in benefits.

The Sorotzkins were charged with collecting more than \$338,000 in benefits prosecutors say they weren't entitled to. They were charged in state court along with Mordechai and Jocheved Breskin, who prosecutors said collected more than \$585,000 in unearned benefits.

Zalmen Sorotzkin's brother, Mordechai, and his wife, Rachel, and Yocheved and Shimon Nussbaum were charged in separate federal complaints with conspiring to fraudulently obtain Medicaid benefits.

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Can anyone end Big 4's dominant run?

Associated Press

Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray have ruled Wimbledon for the past 14 years, combining to win the tournament every time in that span.

No real surprise, given the way that Big 4 dominates the sport of tennis. Still, at some point, that group's run of excellence at the All England Club must end.

It's just hard to find folks who think that'll happen this year, when play at the grass-court major begins Monday.

Somewhere, there is a man who one day will win Wimbledon — and other Grand Slam titles, too.

John McEnroe recalls knowing early on in the careers of players such as Nadal or Djokovic that they would break through. Lately, though, the seven-time major champion said, "I don't see that person right now that's got it all, where you're like, 'OK.'"

McEnroe's brother, Patrick, agreed the most likely winner will again be one of the usual quartet. And he went a step further.

"We're going to be likely talking about two of those four guys on 'championship Sunday,'" said Patrick, who joins John as an ESPN analyst during the fortnight.

If someone else is going to take home the title, here is a

look at some candidates:

Stan Wawrinka

Age: 32

Country: Switzerland

Why he could do it: He's won each of the other three major tournaments, so he knows how to grind through seven best-of-five-set matches. He also owns a superb one-handed backhand that can control a match.

Why he might not: He's never had much success at Wimbledon, going 18-12 with two quarterfinal appearances. His footwork on grass needs help; he could go to the net more.

What a championship would mean: Completing a career Grand Slam, something only eight other men have done (including Federer, Djokovic and Nadal).

Alexander Zverev

Age: 20

Country: Germany

Why he should be taken seriously: He is 6-foot-6, with big shots and tennis smarts. He recently beat Djokovic in the Italian Open final to become the youngest champion at a Masters event since — wait for it — Djokovic.

Why it's too soon to take him seriously: He's only 20, and never been past the third round at a major. Here is how John McEnroe put it: "I'm pretty sure he's going to win multiple

majors. He's about as close to [that] guy as I get. But ... he's a little frail."

What a championship would mean: The true arrival of a member of the next generation.

Milos Raonic

Age: 26

Country: Canada

Why last year should not be considered a fluke: His first run to a Grand Slam final, before losing to Murray, was not his only success at a major. He also reached the 2014 Wimbledon semifinals, and the 2016 Australian Open semifinals, and his serve is among the game's best.

Why last year might have been a fluke: His semifinal victory over Federer lost a little luster because of Federer's surgically repaired left knee. More cause for concern is that Raonic has shown little inclination to take another step forward over the past year.

What a championship would mean: It would be a first for Canada, but more importantly, it could signal that Raonic is ready to really flourish and unveil the promise he's long shown.

Nick Kyrgios

Age: 22

Country: Australia

Why fans and foes should keep an eye on him: He's got

as stylish and entertaining a brand of tennis as there is nowadays, full of big serves and forehands, trick shots, athleticism and more. He is capable of beating Nadal — as he already has at Wimbledon — or Federer or anyone, really, when he puts his mind to it.

Why it's OK to look away: He can lose his way suddenly in the course of a match, leaving fans frustrated.

What a championship would mean: A bright new face, a bold character, a brash champion, all rolled into one. He's young and charismatic and could rule the sport if he is able to pull together his game — and his mindset.

Marin Cilic

Age: 28

Country: Croatia

Why he should be included in the conversation: Like Wawrinka, he's an older member of this group who already knows what it takes to win a major (2014 U.S. Open). Unlike Wawrinka, he seems to have a style suited to grass.

Why perhaps he shouldn't: He's never been past the quarterfinals at Wimbledon, losing at that stage each of the last three years.

What a championship would mean: A second major and validation as no one-hit wonder.

Healing Kvitova favorite to win 3rd Wimbledon title

Associated Press

Petra Kvitova still has not regained full strength in her left hand, the one she uses to swing a tennis racket so well that she won Wimbledon twice — and the one that was stabbed by an intruder at her home in the Czech Republic late last year.

Just seven months after that attack, Kvitova somehow carries the status of the closest thing to a favorite at the All England Club, where play in the grass-court Grand Slam tournament begins Monday.

Not that she's all that concerned, understandably, with others' thoughts about whether she can add to the trophies she

clutched at Wimbledon in 2011 and 2014.

"I don't see it like that," Kvitova said in an email to The Associated Press.

"I am just happy to be back on the court and that's it," she said. "I will be focusing on myself and not thinking any further than my first match."

Simply competing these days is an accomplishment in itself for someone who initially was told there was a possibility it might never happen again. All five fingers on her left hand were injured in the late December knifing, and she needed surgery.

"There was definitely doubt in my mind that I would ever be able to play again, because that's what some of the doctors

were saying," Kvitova said. "But the more I heard people doubting if I could come back, the more it motivated me. I wanted to prove people wrong and I love challenges, so I think that's what kept me going through the recovery process."

The 27-year-old Kvitova, who has been ranked as high as No. 2 and is seeded 11th at Wimbledon, only began practicing a couple of weeks before the French Open started in May. She made a last-minute decision to enter the clay-court major and wound up winning her opening match, then losing her next.

Shattenkirk tops lean free-agent field

Associated Press

Steve Yzerman admits that July 1 is a difficult day for NHL general managers. They know they will have to overpay — in money and in years — to land free agents.

The veteran GM and Hall of Fame player said the sting is worse in years like this one, when “there aren’t a lot of players out there.”

That’s good news for defensemen Kevin Shattenkirk and Trevor Daley, forwards Alexander Radulov, Justin Williams and Nick Bonino, and goaltenders Brian Elliott and Jonathan Bernier.

They are going to get paid. The salary cap rising to \$75 million, holes to fill on teams around the league and a relatively shallow pool of talent pretty much guarantees it. And once free agency begins on Saturday, a few veterans could surprisingly be free to sign anywhere, too.

Not long ago, it seemed a sure thing that the Sharks would bring back Joe Thornton, the Coyotes would extend Shane Doan and the Panthers would re-sign Jaromir Jagr. Now all could be going elsewhere along with Patrick Marleau after 19 seasons in San Jose.

Greybeard defenseman Andrei Markov and winger Jarome Iginla are two big names worth watching along

with potential young bargain forwards like Sam Gagner and Jordan Weal.

Here are some things to watch when free agency begins:

Big money

Shattenkirk, 28, is looking at a long-term, lucrative deal after leading all pending unrestricted free agents with 56 points last season. Even an inconsistent postseason with the Capitals shouldn’t damage his value, though the New Rochelle, N.Y., native is looking to be a No. 1 defenseman and might also prioritize location.

If Montreal lets Radulov test the market following a 54-point season, the 30-year-old Russian will almost certainly get a raise from a \$5.75 million, one-year deal he signed to return to the NHL.

In a weak defenseman market, Daley is drawing significant interest and could get paid well even at 33 after contributing to back-to-back Stanley Cup titles with the Pittsburgh Penguins. On the younger side, Washington’s Karl Alzner (28), Buffalo’s Dmitry Kulikov (26) and Calgary’s Michael Stone (27) could be in the same spot with plenty of leverage.

And what about Williams? The 2014 playoff MVP had 100 points combined the past two seasons with Washington and wants to win the Cup for a

fourth time. Mr. Game 7’s value is still sky high despite being 7-1 now in Game 7 based on his career renaissance and reputation for scoring and contributing in important moments.

Old guard

Jagr would by far be the oldest free agent at 45, followed by Doan and Penguins center Matt Cullen at 40, Iginla at 39, Markov and Senators winger Chris Neil at 38, and Thornton and Marleau at 37. Hockey might be a young man’s game, but it would be surprising if several of those seasoned vets don’t get multiyear deals.

The oldest established goalie available is 36-year-old Ryan Miller, who could share starting duties somewhere, likely in the Western Conference.

Musical goalies

Trades over the past several weeks dried up what could’ve been an intriguing market as Calgary got Mike Smith, Arizona got Antti Raanta, Dallas got Ben Bishop, Carolina got Scott Darling and expansion Vegas got Marc-Andre Fleury. Philadelphia, Winnipeg and Buffalo are in the market for help, with Bernier, Elliott and former Flyers starter Steve Mason among the top options.

The Rangers, Bruins, Ducks, and Kings are looking for back-

ups, and the likes of Chad Johnson, Keith Kinkaid and Darcy Kuemper are out there.

Goalies won’t come cheap, considering the Ottawa Senators signed backup Mike Condon to a \$7.2 million, three-year deal that has an annual cap hit of \$2.4 million.

Bargains

A year ago, Florida signed Jonathan Marchessault to a \$1.5 million, two-year deal and the forward scored 30 goals. Columbus signed Sam Gagner for \$650,000 and he had 50 points. Arizona signed Radim Vrbata for \$1 million and he put up 55 points. Gagner and Vrbata are free agents once again and will be more expensive this time around.

This year’s bargain-basement favorites are Weal, fellow forwards Dennis Rasmussen, Beau Bennett and Brandon Pirri, and defensemen Nikita Nesterov and Jakub Kindl. Even Nail Yakupov, the top pick in 2012, and Mikhail Grigorenko could pay dividends at cheap prices as they’ll be just 24 next season.

Weal is an unrestricted free agent at 25, had eight goals in just 23 NHL games last season and was considered a potential top-six forward for the Flyers. Instead, he will likely test the market and fill a substantial role for another team.

Pacquiao keeps low profile while opponent gets louder

Associated Press

BRISBANE, Australia — Manny Pacquiao kept a low profile, apparently at the insistence of local police, leaving opponent Jeff Horn to entertain a bigger crowd at his downtown practice session than he’s attracted for previous fights.

Pacquiao, the 11-time world champion, is putting his WBO welterweight world title belt on the line on Sunday at Suncorp Stadium, where he’s a hot favorite to register his 60th pro-

fessional win.

On a previous visit to promote the “Battle of Brisbane,” Pacquiao was mobbed by adoring fans in an unexpected rush at an impromptu public appearance.

So local organizers said they took advice from Queensland state police to give the senator from the Philippines time off from promotional activities Thursday while Horn appeared for a light practice session in a makeshift ring near the Queens Street Mall, reveling in the at-

tention of hundreds of spectators enjoying a sunny lunch break.

“For safety purposes, Manny won’t be here today,” Duco Events director Dean Lonergan said. “We took that on advice from Queensland police.”

Pacquiao’s camp got his point across to local fans on Wednesday, anyway, when his legendary long-time trainer Freddie Roach predicted the fight would be “short and sweet” and that somebody would get knocked out.

Pacquiao (59-6-2) had the last of his 38 knockout wins in 2009, but he said he’s been working harder in preparation for this fight than he has in years. He has knocked down sparring partners, Roach said, and had to be forced to stop in some sessions because he was working too much.

The oddsmakers aren’t giving Horn, a 29-year-old former schoolteacher who is unbeaten in 17 professional fights, much of a chance against a seasoned, eight-division world champion.

Angels prevail on walk-off strikeout

BY GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Ben Revere reached base on an error, advanced on a wild pitch and then scored the winning run on a passed ball and a throwing error caused by Cameron Maybin's walk-off strikeout.

Yeah, Revere could scarcely believe it, either.

"That's the game of baseball, I guess?" the Los Angeles Angels outfielder said.

The latest chapter of the Freeway Faceoff ended in singularly weird fashion — and in 3-2 victory for the Angels over the Dodgers on Wednesday night.

Revere scored from second base when Yasmani Grandal — a hero moments earlier — lost control of Pedro Baez's third strike.

Grandal chased it to the backstop, but then put his throw to first over Chase Utley's head and into right field.

"It's a good thing we've got the speed here to cause havoc on the basepaths," Revere said.

Everything about Revere's extremely unearned run was weird — starting with the error by Chris Taylor, who was filling in for the injured Corey Seager at shortstop. Revere came home on a pitch that wasn't what the Dodgers had called, which was why Grandal mishandled it.

"We haven't lost any games like that," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "Unfortunately, things like that are going to happen. That's a tough way to lose."

The Angels have taken two of the first three games in the annual interleague rivalry series, which concludes Thursday in Anaheim.

After Grandal homered off Cam Bedrosian (2-0), the Angels rallied against Baez (2-1) to send the NL leaders to just their third loss in 20 games.

Grandal said he double-clutched his throw to first because he was worried about Revere's speed. The catcher went from hero to goat with similarly alarming speed, but he was sanguine about the weirdest ninth inning in a long while for the Dodgers.

"That's the beauty of this game: You've got to be three or four steps ahead," Grandal said. "I didn't see that scenario coming. I saw just about every other scenario coming. ... As a catcher, you need to be 20 steps ahead of everything. I guess today I was only 19."

Andrelton Simmons hit a two-run homer in the sixth for the Angels.

Trayce Thompson hit his first

homer since July 3, 2016, in the eighth inning, but the Dodgers were down to their final strike before Grandal dramatically tied it.

Big start: Alex Meyer pitched six innings of scoreless one-hit ball for the Angels, but was denied his fourth victory. Meyer walked five of the Dodgers' first 12 batters, but settled in after Grandal's single to open the fourth, retiring his final eight batters. He regretted his early control struggles, calling them "frustrating, but part of the process."

Resilient Ryu: Hyun-Jin Ryu yielded seven hits while pitching into the sixth inning of another solid start for the Dodgers. Ryu nearly came out of the game in the fourth when Simmons' liner hit him in the left foot. Ryu stayed in, but gave up five hits to his final eight batters.

Roundup

Reddick, Springer help power Astros past Athletics

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Houston manager A.J. Hinch didn't even take a second to think about it when he was asked about how well Josh Reddick has been playing lately.

"We should talk more about how good a baseball player Josh Reddick is," Hinch said. "He is really good at virtually everything ... he does something to help you win every night."

That was on display Wednesday night when Reddick and George Springer had three hits each and combined for five RBIs as the Astros used a five-run third inning to take the lead and hold on for an 11-8 victory over the Oakland Athletics.

Reddick has three doubles, one triple, two homers and seven RBIs in his last seven games since coming off the 7-day concussion list.

"He can flat-out play and I'm glad he's hitting behind us

and I'm glad he's on our team now," Springer said of Reddick, who spent five seasons with the Athletics.

Nationals 8, Cubs 4: Stephen Strasburg struck out 13 in seven innings, Bryce Harper had two doubles and two RBIs for host Washington.

Yankees 12, White Sox 3: Miguel Andujar had three hits and four RBIs in his major league debut, Aaron Judge added his major league-leading 27th homer and struggling New York pounded host Chicago.

Indians 5, Rangers 3: Trevor Bauer pitched into the seventh inning, Michael Brantley drove in two runs and host Cleveland got the win in manager Terry Francona's return to the team.

Mets 8, Marlins 0: Steven Matz pitched seven innings and two relievers completed a seven-hitter, helping visiting New York to the victory.

Reds 4, Brewers 3: Scooter

Gennett hit a two-run homer against the club that decided he no longer fit its rebuilding plans, and Billy Hamilton scored the tiebreaking run in the eighth inning for host Cincinnati.

Blue Jays 4, Orioles 0: Marcus Stroman pitched five-hit ball into the eighth inning for host Toronto, and Jose Bautista and Justin Smoak homered.

Twins 4, Red Sox 1: Adalberto Mejia pitched 5²/₃ innings in his second straight scoreless start, Max Kepler hit a two-run homer and Minnesota rebounded from two consecutive losses against host Boston.

Royals 8, Tigers 2: Salvador Perez and Mike Moustakas hit consecutive homers during visiting Kansas City's four-run fourth inning.

Pirates 6, Rays 2: Jose Osuna doubled twice and drove in two runs, rookie Josh Bell hit his 15th homer and host Pitts-

burgh jumped all over Tampa Bay's Blake Snell.

Cardinals 4, Diamondbacks 3: Adam Wainwright pitched into the seventh inning, Yadier Molina and Jedd Gyorko each drove in two runs and St. Louis held on to beat host Arizona.

Padres 7, Braves 4: Luis Perdomo pitched five scoreless innings and Hunter Renfroe and Cory Spangenberg contributed two RBIs apiece to lead host San Diego.

Phillies 5, Mariners 4: Tommy Joseph led off the ninth inning with his 13th homer and Andrew Knapp added a two-out RBI single, helping Philadelphia rally for the road win.

Giants 5, Rockies 3: Jae-Gyun Hwang homered in his major league debut, a tiebreaking drive in the sixth inning that helped host San Francisco extend Colorado's losing streak to a season-high eight games.